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## TWO CATHOLIC DOCTORS AND A GREAT WORK

By SISTER M. ANGELICA

Great works rarely mature over night. The germ of the idea lies deep in the heart of man, often for years, until Providence deems the time ripe for its appearance. Sometimes the seed seems to die only to bring forth more fruit. So it was with the Catholic Medical Mission movement of the twentieth century. The seed was planted by a woman doctor, Agnes McLaren, who although she did not become a Catholic until she was past sixty years of age in 1898, yet the inspiration for Sister-doctors in the missions was born of her spirit in 1910. She died in 1913 but the idea was kept alive by another Catholic doctor, Anna Dengel, who founded the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries in 1925. In 1936 the movement took firm root when an instruction from Rome extended the benefits of Dr. McLaren's dream to the whole Christian world of missions.

Agnes McLaren was born in Edinburgh, Scotland on July 4, 1837. Hers was a happy and stimulating childhood under the guidance of her father, a well-to-do, public spirited, strict, but warmhearted, business man; and a kindly, well-educated Quaker stepmother. Agnes grew up a lively, charming girl full of love for all that was beautiful. She was affectionate, devoted to her family, and possessed of the rare power of sharing in the joys and

sorrows of all who came in contact with her. Her outstanding characteristics, even as a young woman, were her faith in God's Providence, her wide interest and true charity for all who were suffering or oppressed.

It was after years spent in working for the poor and in advancing the woman's suffrage movement that she finally decided to become a doctor, believing that this was pleasing to Christ, the Divine Physician, and desiring to make "medicine serve not only the healing of bodies but also the betterment of souls." Back in the seventies for a woman to secure a medical education was a matter of extreme difficulty. With the simplicity and directness that always characterized her, she went for help and advice to Cardinal Manning. He advised her to apply at the University of Montpellier and aided her by introductions. Miss McLaren was the first woman to attend the medical school of Montpellier and as such her position must have been a bit trying, but she bears witness to the kindness and courtesy with which professors and students treated her. The students liked to call her "Miss Medicine," not out of disdain, however, but because of the singularity of the case.

In Montpellier Dr. McLaren lived with the Franciscan Hospital Sisters and for the first time came into contact with Catholic

ceremonies and practices. The depth and beauty of her spiritual life may be gauged by the fact that for twenty years she made an annual retreat under the guidance of a Catholic priest of Lyons, despite the fact that she was still a Presbyterian.

Finally at the age of sixty, without any outside influence, she resolved to become a Catholic. This grace seemed to all who knew her the natural consequence of her good and holy life spent in charity towards the sick poor in Cannes, the city of her adoption, where she practiced medicine for many years. Some years later she became a Dominican Tertiary which she remained for the rest of her life.

For many years Dr. McLaren had been interested in medical work for the women of India. In that country the Mohammedan and high caste Hindu women live a rigidly secluded existence and are debarred from professional medical aid, except that given by women. Protestant missionaries had related heart-rending stories to her of the unrelieved sufferings of these "purdah" women. Naturally, as soon as Dr. McLaren became a Catholic she inquired about the number of Catholic women doctors working in India, and could not find one!

At about the same time she came in contact with Msgr. Dominic Wagner of Mill Hill. He had been Prefect Apostolic in Rawalpindi, North India, for twenty-six years and had never seen the

face of a Mohammedan woman. "The Catholic Faith will spread in India only when there are women doctors to reach the women," Msgr. Wagner told her. To India she then went, at the age of seventy-two, to verify his words with her own eyes. She visited missions and hospitals up and down India and the result of her fatiguing journeys was the foundation of a small hospital for women and children in Rawalpindi in 1910.

Unable to carry on the work herself, she searched Europe for a woman doctor to take charge of the hospital. To her far-seeing mind it seemed the most advantageous and successful solution would be to have Sisters study medicine for this work. They at least would provide the necessary spirit of perseverance and self-sacrifice. Did she realize what a novel venture this was? Did she foresee the difficulties? With her characteristic determination she set about the task of interviewing superiors of various communities as to the possibility of sisters studying medicine. Many Mothers General held up their hands in horror at the very idea of a Sister becoming a doctor. Others were willing to try it if Rome would give approbation. Dr. McLaren's last years on earth were spent in five journeys to Rome, begging and pleading with Pope and Cardinals to allow Sisters to study medicine. All of these petitions, although received in a friendly manner, led to no immediate results.



Dr. McLaren was planning another visit to Rome in the Spring of 1913 in the hope of obtaining a favorable reply to the question of sisters studying medicine, when she was attacked by her last illness. In spite of her great desire to go to God, her Creator, she would willingly have gone on living in order to realize at last her great plans for the sick and poor in India whom she knew were so abandoned and, above all, without spiritual aid. She died a very holy death in great peace on April 17, 1913.

But God's work goes on. Before her death she inspired a young Tyrolese girl to study medicine for the express purpose of devoting her profession to the care of women and children in India. When Miss Anna Dengel was about to begin her medical studies in 1913 Dr. McLaren had been called to her reward. Her work was finished; another was to take her place. Dr. Dengel obtained her medical degree at the University of Cork in 1918 and subsequently went to India to take charge of the hospital founded by Dr. McLaren ten years before.

During the four years spent there Dr. Dengel became convinced that a great field for spiritual and corporal works of mercy awaited Catholic medical women in India. Medical aid had to be brought to women by women. The majority of women were utterly helpless and inaccessible to the missionary priests. Dr. Dengel realized that not one woman doctor

and a few nurses were needed to help the millions of Indian women, but a "whole army," a religious family to develop and stabilize the whole idea. With this end in view the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries was founded in 1925 by Mother Anna Dengel, M.D., and the hospital begun by Dr. McLaren formed the nucleus of the Society's first hospital in Rawalpindi. In 1930 the Medical Mission Sisters began their work in Dacca, Bengal, and in 1939 they founded a new mission hospital in Patna on the Ganges River.

On February 11, 1936 the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome issued an instruction of far-reaching importance in the matter of professional care of the sick, especially for maternity and child welfare work, in the missions. Dr. McLaren's petition has been granted in a measure far beyond her hopes. The Holy See not only gives permission for Sisters to study medicine and do obstetrical and all other medical work, but urges them to do so. The decree states in part: "It has always been the practice of this Congregation to have the methods of the apostolate conform to the varying needs of time and place. . . . This Sacred Congregation would like to see new religious institutes founded (for women) who will dedicate themselves principally to health work, making due provision for necessary safeguards. . . .

"These new duties demand a

proper technical and spiritual preparation. The sisters should obtain certificates as doctors and nurses. . . . The Religious should see a noble expression of Christian charity in this delicate service, a charitable work destined to ease bodily misery and to open the way for the grace of the Redemption. . . ."

There are now about eighteen Sister-doctors of different communities in the foreign mission field, all sharing in the far-reaching results of Dr. McLaren's courage, perseverance and charity. Her work lives on in them and more especially in the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, Fox Chase, Philadelphia, Pa.

## MANY CREEDS BENEFIT BY HOLY FAMILY HOSPITAL, RAWALPINDI, INDIA

According to the annual report, thousands of patients of many creeds benefitted in the past year by the medical facilities of Holy Family Hospital, Rawalpindi, India, conducted by the Medical Mission Sisters of Fox Chase, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

### ONLY CATHOLIC HOSPITAL IN PUNJAB

The hospital, which is the only Catholic hospital in the Punjab, a region of 28,000,000 people, and which provides special accommodation for caste and purdah patients, reported that Hindus, Mohammedans, Sikhs, native Christians, Eurasians, Europeans and even Americans from the nearby colony of oil drillers, availed themselves of the medical care of the Sisters, both doctors and nurses.

During the year 1942, Holy Family Hospital cared for 2,038 in-patients, and 31,926 out-pa-

tients. The Hindus far outnumber the Moslem patients in the hospital although the Punjab is a predominantly Mohammedan province. The reason is that many of the latter still adhere to the custom of secluding their women.

### SISTERS PERFORM OPERATIONS

That confidence in Western medicine is growing each year is shown by the number of operations performed by the Sisters last year: 134 major and 648 minor. 542 babies were born in the hospital. Sister Alma Lalinsky, M.D., a graduate of Woman's Medical College, Philadelphia, is the resident physician in charge of the hospital, assisted by Sister Leonie Tummers, M.D., a graduate of George Washington University, Washington, D. C.

Overcrowded as the hospital is, there is always a waiting list for operations. Apropos of this, the