

**“The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me”**

***Margaret —***

***Trailblazer***

***for the***

***Poor***

Front Cover

**“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME” Luke: 4:18**

*Story and Symbolism*

This silk painting is my attempt to encapsulate the essence and charism of MARGARET MARY HEALY - MURPHY - foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate, San Antonio, Texas:

The central figure represents Margaret Mary herself. She stands tall, strong and grounded.

The Holy Spirit pervades - permeating and blessing the Universe, the Earth, the Whole of creation. As the Spirit descends upon the figure of Margaret Mary, she is inspired and empowered to begin the work she knows she must do - to educate and minister to those deprived respect for their basic human dignity.

There is dual symbolism present in the group of figures that her arms encircle: Not only do they represent the generations of women who flowed from that beginning but also those who experienced the care and compassion offered to all in need. This care and compassion, still so evident in the work of the sisters today, is at the heart Margaret Mary's mission.

The spiral 'ribbon-of-life' emanating from the Holy Spirit also has many layers of meaning as it encircles and unites all those in its path. Symbolism includes:

- Spiritual Energy
  - Life
  - Love
  - Freedom
  - Justice
  - Renewal
- The many Gifts of the Holy Spirit
- The many cultures represented in the membership of the Congregation

The color and movement in the image also symbolize the life and action of the Spirit in the story of this great woman: Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy and in the lives of all the wonderful women who have followed and still follow in her footsteps.

***-by artist Gail Donovan, Adelaide, South Australia, May 2003***



Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy  
1833-1907

*"Delphine, this will be my work some day; it is the great need of this time. The Holy Spirit has helped me to make this decision."*

*“When one finds a worthy wife,  
her value is far beyond pearls.  
Her husband, entrusting his heart to her  
has an unfailing prize...  
She picks out a field to purchase...  
She reaches out her hands to the poor,  
and extends her arms to the needy.  
She opens her mouth in wisdom,  
and on her tongue is kindly counsel.”*

— Proverbs 31:10, 11. 20, 26

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# The Dream Takes Shape!

Little did Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy know how many lives would be affected by the dream that was taking shape in her mind as she spoke these words to her companion on the way home from church, on Sunday, May 29, 1887: *"Delphine, this will be my work some day; it is the great need of this time. The Holy Spirit has helped me to make this decision."* The dream had been germinating for a long time but it received confirmation on Pentecost Sunday, when Rev. John Maloney, OMI read a letter from the Bishops of the United States asking for the pastoral care and education of Black people. The Bishops at their Councils in Baltimore in 1866 and again in 1884, had appealed for expansion of the Church's ministry to African Americans.

Care for the needy of whatever color was not new to Margaret Mary; neither was care for the Black people of Texas new to her. She had had first-hand experience with serving people in need during most of her 54 years.

## **BEGINNINGS**

She was born, Margaret Mary, to Richard and Jane Healy in Cahersiveen, County Kerry, Ireland on May 4, 1833, the oldest of four children. Two were boys, Richard and Thomas; the youngest, a girl, was named Jeannie after her mother. Her father was the local doctor who tended patients impoverished in a pre-famine Ireland. Her mother cared for the family as well as she could on her husband's meager income. Tragedy struck the family at the death of Mrs. Healy when Margaret Mary was only five years old.

To ease Dr. Healy's family responsibilities and to make his practice available to the poor around Cahersiveen, the Barry family, maternal cousins of the Healys, welcomed the baby, Jeannie, into their home where she grew up as one of the family.

Although she was only six, the family wanted Margaret Mary to go with her little sister, however, nothing would move her from her father's side. Consequently, she was enrolled in the local school and spent the next several years getting the kind of education that would serve her so well. She mastered the "three R's" along with knitting, embroidery, and lace making. As she worked with her father in his ministrations to his patients she also learned care and concern for the sick and the destitute.

Economic conditions in Ireland worsened with the passage of time. The potato blight hit Ireland around this time. It was a fungus that devastated potato crops in Ireland and throughout Europe. Starvation became rampant while food in abundance was shipped from Ireland to distant lands. More and more people were exchanging the misery of oppression and despair in their homeland for the misery of emigrant ships. It is not surprising that the two maternal aunts, Mary and Johanna Murphy, like thousands of other Irish people, decided to emigrate. They sailed for America with two of Margaret Mary's maternal uncles on May 4, 1839. They also brought Margaret Mary's two brothers, Richard and Thomas Healy with them.

Dr. Healy finally gave up the struggle and offered his services as a physician on a vessel leaving Ireland. The twelve-year-old Margaret Mary again refused to be separated from her father, so she joined him on an ill-equipped emigrant ship bound for Virginia in 1845. After an exhausting voyage and a mercifully short stay in the port town of Freeport, Virginia, they reunited with their family.

## **AMERICA**

The family remained only a short period in Virginia but it was a time of great significance in Margaret Mary's future. Her father's health had been noticeably deteriorating since the voyage to America. This was a matter that caused her serious concern.

Prior to 1870, education in Virginia was considered to be a family responsibility and not a responsibility of government. Therefore, whatever schools existed were privately owned and operated. Margaret Mary, her aunts and several other Irish and German immigrants in the area established a non-sectarian Sunday school. Children of all levels as well as adults attended classes in religion. Many of the inhabitants of the area were Blacks who worked on the plantations and Margaret Mary became aware of their plight through personal experience. Details about her activities are sketchy, but suffice it to say that her work on their behalf met with the disapproval of the local authorities and she had some of her first encounters with racial bigotry.

Despite what appeared to be fairly satisfactory living conditions, Virginia lacked a dimension deemed essential among many of the immigrants: there wasn't a Catholic Church and, consequently, no opportunity to practice the faith that was so vital in their lives. New Orleans, on the other hand, was known to be a location where the Church was flourishing, so they decided to move there. Once they arrived Margaret Mary's family rented a house on the corner of Camp and Julia Streets. There Dr. Healy's health took a turn for the worse and despite all the medical care he received, he did not recover. The priests at St. Patrick's Church ministered to him during his last illness and it was from that church that he was finally laid to rest.

## **THE JOURNEY CONTINUES**

While the Catholics had their religious needs adequately met in New Orleans, the city had very few amenities for poor Irish immigrants in the 1840's. Women and girls could look forward, at best, to domestic service in the homes of the rich. Slaves were costly; they had to be bought and paid for on the open market. Men and boy immigrants, therefore were the cheapest labor available and only two options were open to them: they

could be "employed" on public projects for the city, or they could enlist in the military. At the time New Orleans was one of the major recruiting centers for General Zachary Taylor whose forces were getting ready to invade Mexico to settle the boundary dispute that had erupted between the U.S. and its southern neighbor.

By now the family learned of the empresarios, James McGloin and John McMullen who had a contract with Coahuila y Tejas for land. Since they had an office in Matamoros, Mexico, the Healys and Murphys decided to travel there in the company of Taylor's forces.



*Margaret Mary as a young woman*

Upon arrival, they opened a hotel in that town, the Healy Hotel, and were soon operating a thriving business, counting among their friends both the McGloin and McMullen families.



With the settlement of the border dispute and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the army left the Matamoros area. This brought an end to prosperity but an increase in unemployment.

## J.B. MURPHY

Among those who befriended the family at that tragic time was a young entrepreneur named John Bernard Murphy. He was born in County Cork, Ireland and, like the Healys, had immigrated to America in 1845. He became a merchant and the editor and publisher of *The Gazette*, in the city of Monterrey, Mexico. In 1848 he sold his interests in *The Gazette* and moved to Fort Brown (Brownsville), Texas where he made the acquaintance of Margaret Mary Healy and her aunts. On May 4, 1849 Margaret Mary was married to John B. Murphy in the Cathedral of Matamoros. It was her sixteenth birthday.



*John Bernard and Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy*

Rumors of a gold rush in California prompted Margaret Mary's two brothers, Richard, and Thomas, and her uncle Walter to join the many young men who decided to "go for the gold." In the course of time word reached Matamoros that Walter had died of yellow fever on the way. In later years Thomas returned to south Texas and lived close to Margaret

Mary. He then went to New York and died in a mining accident. What happened to Richard is unknown. To add to her suffering, on the porch of her home, Margaret Mary witnessed a shooting by desperados of her only remaining uncle. The great loss of the bereaved family was shared by many friends including the McGloins and McMullens.

In 1852, Margaret Mary bought a small ranch near Nuecestown. Ranch life in the 1850's was not without its difficulties however. The days of open range were vanishing and crop raising, especially cotton, replaced the wild South Texas grasses. Yellow fever was quite common and roving Comanches as well as Mexican bandits, who had been victimized by their recent defeat in the Mexican American war, occasionally wrought havoc on the settlers.

Eventually, John Bernard became a land speculator and lawyer. By 1860, the Murphys were living in San Patricio. Many of the other settlers in the area were of Irish origin and soon the Murphys had many friends. Most were Catholics whose faith was nourished in a growing Church. At the same time their economic status, as well as their social and cultural environment were thriving. The McGloins, Captain Mifflin Kenedy and Mr. Staples, were frequent guests in the Murphy's new home. Margaret Mary became an accomplished hostess and revived her considerable skill at the piano.

The experience that Margaret Mary had as a young girl in caring for the sick was invaluable to those who fell victim to the fever and to the rampages on the ranches. It was common to see her riding her horse to visit the sick in the homes of both the rich and the poor, or taking the 35-mile trek to the nearest drugstore in Corpus Christi to get medicine, or to bring food and clothing to the needy. She learned quickly to vary her routes to avoid danger. Even in those days, defenseless women and children were sometimes the victims of agents of destruction. Her home also became the overnight rest stop for traveling missionaries. She regularly visited the homes of ranch-hands and worked with women sewing, crocheting,

knitting and embroidery, as well as preserving meat and other perishables and making candles and soap. She organized classes to teach them their religion and prepared them to celebrate the sacraments when the priest came to minister to them.

One Sunday morning on her way home from Church, Margaret Mary encountered a little Spanish-speaking girl, wandering as though she were lost. The child could give her no information about family or parents but the girl's need for food and rest was easily apparent. Margaret Mary took her home and cared for her. No one ever came to claim the child in spite of numerous attempts to locate the family. Thus, she made her home with the Murphys for a while. Later, she became a trusted friend of Margaret Mary. It was she, Delphine, to whom Margaret Mary first confided her decision to work with the Black people in San Antonio many years later.

In the troubled years just prior to the Civil War, conditions on the ranches began to deteriorate. Ranches were frequently plundered, thousands of cattle were stolen and homes were often ransacked and even destroyed. The Murphys decided to move to Corpus Christi in 1861. Inevitably, the war came and inflicted its horrors on the people and the land. An excerpt from a letter written by a contemporary, Mrs. Young, describes Margaret Mary at that time:

*"Those hands which once played the piano so skillfully, she resolved would never make music again ... When she saw the ravages of the Civil War, her home severely broken, her piano battered, her furniture and silverware taken or destroyed, she was dismayed. But far from seeking sympathy or indulging in self-pity, she immediately helped the ranch hands by personal service. She milked cows, carried the milk-pails and distributed the dairy products to the stricken victims of war, just as she had earlier made substantial soup and carried it to the soldiers."*

The end of the war did not bring relief to the poor. Margaret Mary opened a miniature clinic and managed a soup kitchen on the grounds of her home. J.B. Murphy's law practice had expanded enormously and he had long since given over the day-to-day operation of the ranch to a trusted care-taker. After the Civil War the Murphys moved into their new home on the corner of William and Water Streets in Corpus Christi.

As she had done before, Margaret Mary soon found herself working tirelessly to assist the needy. To add to the misery, the city experienced an outbreak of yellow fever in 1867. She became a willing minister to the victims alongside the pastor of St. Patrick's Church, Fr. John Gonnard, who himself succumbed to the disease.

Among her yellow fever patients was Mrs. Delaney, who before she died of the fever, entrusted her daughter, Minnie, into the care of Margaret Mary. Thus did Margaret Mary, who had no children of her own, acquire a daughter. The Murphys sent Minnie to a school in Lockport, New York, operated by the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur. When Minnie grew up she entered the Congregation of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament in Victoria, taking the religious name Bernard after her adopted father. She died in 1928 at the age of 67.

The Murphys experience of sending Minnie to boarding school in New York for a quality education made them keenly aware of the dearth of similar facilities in Texas. They suggested to Bishop Dubuis of Galveston that a request for Sisters should be sent to the Superior General of the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur in Belgium. The Bishop followed their advice and the Murphys personally undertook responsibility for pleading the case of the young Texas church with the Belgian Superior. The outcome was the arrival, in September 1873, of three Sisters of St. Mary of Namur in Waco, Texas. One of the three was none other than Sr. Mary Angela Healy, Margaret Mary's now grown sister, Jeannie! The Murphys

were overjoyed because, not only could Margaret Mary become reacquainted with her, but also because a new Religious Congregation would now begin educating the Catholic children of Texas.

When Minnie first entered the convent, J.B. and Margaret Mary felt her absence very keenly. So, when Margaret Mary's godchild lost her mother, the Murphys offered to adopt their niece and see to it that she received a good education. Lizzie, as she was affectionately called, was sent to boarding school in Waco with the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur. After graduation, she too entered the convent of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word in Corpus Christi and was professed at their Motherhouse in 1885, taking the religious name Agnes. Sr. Mary Agnes was a missionary for many years in Puebla, Mexico and, during that time she was instrumental in sending some young Mexican women as candidates for the congregation that was later founded by her adopted mother.

In 1874, a major hurricane almost devastated Corpus Christi. The Murphy residence was not spared but the damage it sustained was minor by comparison with surrounding homes. Once again, Margaret Mary ministered to the needy and the homeless. In addition, her enormous concern for the sailors, who often arrived at the port of Corpus Christi stricken with fever, prompted her to provide accommodations for them. She bought a piece of property and opened a Marine Hospital. She remodeled three houses that were already on the site, one each for the care of disadvantaged Anglo, Hispanic and African American people. Due to racial prejudice, (nothing new to Margaret Mary) and the lack of outside support, the hospital endeavor was not successful. She leased the property but retained the family residence. This allowed her more time to visit the poor and give lessons to those who needed them. This experience was to be very worthwhile in Margaret Mary's future.

Meanwhile, J.B. Murphy was elected as a delegate from Nueces Co. to the Second Constitutional Convention for

Texas, held in Austin in 1875. His wife was delighted knowing that he would work for legislation to benefit the needy. He was well aware that the State had not yet recovered from the Civil War. Money was scarce. The State was young and struggling, and debts and droughts did nothing to help. The convention closed on November 24, 1875 and J. B. gladly returned home. His reputation had reached a peak, and he was persuaded to run for mayor of Corpus Christi. He was elected to that position in 1880 and served until ill health forced him to resign. The City Council accepted his resignation with reluctance and with a resolution that formal and public regret at his resignation would be expressed at their next regular meeting which was to be held on July 4, 1884. It was that very night that Judge Murphy died. The funeral was held at St. Patrick's Church and he was laid to rest in Holy Cross Cemetery. Within the week, Margaret Mary's aunt Johanna also died. Soon afterwards, her other aunt, who had married James McGloin, the empresario, died. All were buried in Holy Cross Cemetery. Thus, except for her sister, Sr. Angela in Waco, Margaret Mary was left totally alone.

After the Hurricane of 1874, many people lost their homes and livelihood in the City of Corpus Christi. To provide care for them she decided to purchase some property on what was then known as 'the bluff'. In 1885, after Margaret Mary's husband's death, she opened another hospital for the indigent and those with consumption and other diseases. This facility was known as "Mrs. Murphy's hospital for the poor." The facility was also used by sailors who arrived in ill health.

Later that year Margaret Mary bought Mt. Echo Ranch in Live Oak County. It had been built and owned by Patrick Murphy, John Bernard's brother. Patrick's wife, Elizabeth, had died and Margaret Mary became the guardian of his two children, Lizzie and Frank Murphy.



*The ranch house at Echo, near Mathis, Texas*

## **REACHING OUT AND TOUCHING**

Margaret Mary didn't have long to dwell on her losses. She received an invitation from the resident pastor in Temple, Texas, to come and begin a school for the education of Black children in that town. Encouraged by her friends and her spiritual director, Margaret Mary accepted. Accompanied by Delphine and another volunteer, she set out for Temple without delay. There were likely numerous reasons for the failure of her first mission, including indifference and inattentiveness. However, Margaret Mary made every effort she could, but soon left and came to San Antonio.

Could she have known that through her efforts at "Mrs. Murphy's Hospital for the poor", her loss of so many loved ones through death, and her most recent failure in Temple, that God was preparing her for something far greater, far more demanding? We have no answer to that question. All we know is that she became set in her determination to concentrate her

future efforts in meeting educational and other needs of the poor. The very poorest seemed to be African Americans and there was a large population in San Antonio.

By 1887, Margaret Mary had moved to the Alamo City and lived at 215 Blum St. near the present location of the Rivercenter Mall. It was to her Blum St. residence she was returning from Sunday Mass on the day our story began.

## **CORNER OF LIVE OAK AND NOLAN STREETS, SAN ANTONIO**

On Pentecost Sunday 1887, at old St. Mary's Church, as Margaret Mary listened to the priest who read a letter from the Plenary Council of Baltimore, something stirred in her. The bishops spoke of the lack of Catholic education for "Colored People and Indians". A very close friend accounted that,

*The Holy Ghost, her loved One, was beginning to knock at and touch her heart. But as she said to me, "I rebelled at His insistence ... any work but that". She could not espouse the cause of the Negro race. But the pleading and the knocking continued.*

The failure of her Temple mission burned in her and she was afraid the African American Community would not accept her help. The friend continued,

*She was stirred but still reluctant. As she left St. Mary's Church that day, a small Negro child caught her by the skirt and looked up into her face. She was overcome. Her mind was made up. No more hesitation. She would give the remainder of her life for the salvation of the Negro and so now we read of the wonders of her work.*

Shortly after she listened to the priest's words, Margaret Mary spoke to Bishop Neraz about the call she was experiencing to give some of her resources to care for the Black population in San Antonio. The Bishop heartily endorsed her idea. In fact,



her proposal was perceived by him as sent by God in response to a critical pastoral need of which he was keenly aware although he had, so far, found no way to respond to it out of the meager resources of his young diocese. Her ministry would be a fulfillment of his own desire to comply with the mandate of the Council of Baltimore which had been held three years earlier.

Armed with the Bishop's approval and enthusiasm, Margaret Mary began the search for suitable property on which to build a school for the African American people. She settled on a site east of the San Antonio River, at the corner of Live Oak and Nolan Streets. She sold a portion of her ranch in San Patricio for \$4,500 and paid \$2,800 for the site on October 14, 1887.

Both she and the bishop were convinced that the most urgent need of the African American community at the time was education. The 14th Amendment, at least in theory, had made the slaves citizens. In practice, however, the abolition of slavery, and the abuses of Reconstruction had created an incredible amount of emotional tension in the South. It was clear that a long unremitting struggle with ignorance, poverty, homelessness and misery was imminent. The color lines were already rigidly drawn to keep the African American people "in their place" and to prevent them from attaining any kind of social, economic or political equality. Klan violence, Jim Crow laws and countless acts of racial discrimination countered any civil or political rights granted by the 13th Amendment. Black illiteracy was higher than 80% and the construction of schools was obstructed by the legal requirement of educating the races separately. Yet, the critical, basic stepping stone out of this maze of obstacles was education.

Rumors of the construction of the "colored" school and Catholic church were greeted enthusiastically in the Black community. But the project met with intense disapproval from other fronts. Various regulations and ordinances were invoked causing work stoppages in the construction of the project, which made this endeavor burdensome for Margaret Mary. At

least once during the process, a massive wave of bigotry hit the construction of the school. This time it took the form of complaints about the quality of the materials being used in the construction. Opponents of the project were demanding that the building be made of brick with a minimum of wood in compliance with an obsolete city ordinance. Margaret Mary's attorney had to petition the City Council and the Commissioners finally agreed to permit the construction to continue. An article in the San Antonio Express News, August 11, 1888 read in part,

*"Mrs. M. M. Murphy is making commendable efforts to help the colored people on the east side of town. She has recently erected a neat brick church and clergy house on Nolan Street, and yesterday, obtained a permit to erect a brick building for a free school for colored children... The new building will be of brick and will cost seven hundred dollars... "*

The facilities were finally completed and were dedicated by Bishop Neraz on Sunday, September 16, 1888. These facilities were the first Catholic church and the second free school for Black people in the State of Texas. They were appropriately named after St. Peter Claver, the Jesuit saint who spent his life working to alleviate the suffering of African slaves on board Spanish slave ships, and who had been canonized just a week earlier.

### **ST. PETER CLAVER SCHOOL**

On Monday, September 17, 1888, the first students were admitted to the new school, which was staffed by three lay teachers. Within a short time, boarding students were accepted along with the day students. As enrollment increased, additional teachers had to be hired. On that front, at least, things were going very well.



### *St. Peter Claver Church and Convent*

On other fronts, however, time brought pain and distress. Margaret Mary had to endure storms of prejudice and discrimination almost on a daily basis. Opponents attempted incessantly to arouse trouble and discord for her school and its clientele. The endurance of the teachers was taxed to the limit and their work in the school was jeopardized. This soon led to a high turnover rate among the staff who were unable to cope with the disharmony and the tension of the situation. In addition, Margaret Mary had to find ways to feed, clothe and house the boarding students. Many of her wealthy friends abandoned her because they did not approve of the work to which she was devoting her energies and resources. At the end of the third school year, things had reached a critical stage so she turned in her distress to her advocate and supporter, Bishop Neraz.

The Bishop advised her to seek Sisters as teachers for her school. She approached several Congregations but their Sisters were too few and their work was overwhelming. Margaret Mary asked the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur in Waco where Mother Angela, her own sister, was the superior but even she could not help with supplying teachers. When Margaret Mary asked, "What am I to do?" Her sister replied, "Why not think about starting a Congregation of Sisters yourself? That is the only solution to your problem." Later, in a visit with Bishop Neraz, he told her to try to find some teachers or companions who might be willing to give their lives to the work that she had begun and having succeeded in finding them, to form the nucleus of a Religious Congregation.

## NEW CONGREGATION

Following the Bishop's advice, she found three women who were eager to join her, not only in her work with the Black people, but also in Religious Life. The school re-opened in the Fall of 1891 to admit 178 students and the three new teachers who were on hand to greet them. During that year Margaret Mary and these three ladies spent all the time available from their teaching duties preparing themselves for the moment of their own total dedication to God in Religious Life. In June 1892, they were received by Bishop Neraz into a Religious Congregation to be known as the Sisters of the Holy Ghost. One year later, on June 9, 1893, the first four Sisters of the Holy Ghost, including Sr. Margaret Mary Healy Murphy, pronounced their first vows in the chapel of Our Lady of Light, 203 Nolan Street.

During that same year her friend and supporter, Rev. John Maloney, OMI, was appointed pastor of St. Peter Claver Mission (Church) which she had earlier donated to the diocese of San Antonio. To the casual observer it would appear that Mother Margaret Mary Healy-Murphy was now at the apex of her career. She had fulfilled her life-long dream of helping the

unfortunate through the unique modality of a privately owned, free educational institution for the African American people. She had founded the first Religious Congregation in the state of Texas. She had her dear friend, Father Maloney as pastor of the Church she had built, and she had the unswerving support of Bishop Neraz. What was not so obvious, however, were the goals she still wished to achieve and the difficulties that would thwart her every effort. Even as she began her Religious Life, several major concerns were confronting her.

## DIFFICULTIES

By 1892, Mother Margaret had expended upwards of \$10,000 (over \$300,000 in today's money) of her personal fortune on the construction of the church, the residence and the school at Nolan Street. Her resources were diminishing rapidly. There was no fee for attending the school yet boarding students had to be housed, fed and clothed. The buildings had to be maintained and teachers' salaries had to be found. She received \$900 from Katharine Drexel's Commission in Baltimore (now the Black and Native American collection) through Bishop Neraz. She borrowed money from a friend who loaned it to her interest free and other generous persons who appreciated her work began to help out. In addition, the neighboring parishes of St. Joseph, St. Mary and the San Fernando Cathedral began to organize fund-raisers to ensure the continuance of St. Peter Claver School. She gained valuable "press" through the editors of the *Southern Messenger* and the *San Antonio Express News*, who had come to esteem and support her work.

All these loyal friends, however, were unable to offset the hostility and malevolence of those who were opposed to her mission by reason of their prejudice and disdain for the Black people. Some of her former influential friends refused to help her. One bank manager went so far as to say to her, "Mrs. Murphy, for your senseless Negro venture I will give you not a penny, but if you assure me that you will exclude Negroes, I

will gladly erect an entire new school."

In addition to the racial prejudice, and following the death of Fr. Maloney, she suffered greatly from others within the Church who, for reasons that are no longer clear, attempted to take her property from her, make her school a parish school, and use the services of the Sisters as teachers.

One pastor who was assigned to the Church she had built even went so far as to publicly thank Mrs. Murphy and her Sisters of the Holy Ghost very kindly for their services to the school and to announce, on November 15, 1894, that beginning the following day, another order of Sisters would "take charge" of St. Peter Claver School! One week earlier events had become so tense that Margaret Mary had withdrawn her Sisters and took refuge at the Mt. Echo Ranch. Several of her letters from that period have been preserved, especially those appealing to Bishop Neraz for resolution of her problems. Unfortunately, the Bishop was very ill and he died on the very same day that the above announcement was made.

Upon hearing of the death of the Bishop, the pastor of St. Joseph Church sent a message to her at her ranch advising her to return to San Antonio with all haste, go to the Chancery Office and reclaim her official papers from the Administrator, Rev. Stephen Buffard. The documents were restored to her and St. Peter Claver School re-opened under her direction on January 2, 1895. It was not, however, until Bishop Forest was ordained as Bishop of San Antonio in August of that year, that this painful issue was finally resolved in her favor.

Although the ranch was her safe refuge and Mr. Jim Hart was a loyal friend and excellent manager, Mother Margaret could never totally relinquish responsibility for what occurred there. She had to contend with diseases among the cattle, losses from rustlers and thieves and countless other problems that confronted any large landowner of that time. In addition, she had to maintain the ranch house, which she and the Sisters, as well as the Sisters of other Congregations used, from time to time, for vacation and rest. Margaret Mary also used it for

Retreats and brought young women from Ireland to help them acclimate to the heat of Texas. She had to travel frequently from San Antonio to Mt. Echo to ensure that all was properly administered there.

## **JOURNEYINGS**

In spite of the difficulties and the stress of trying to juggle so many responsibilities, the school and the church were growing very quickly. Sunday Liturgies and other services were attracting more people and the records show that many were baptized and continued to live out their faith in their new parish. The number of students in the school increased with each passing year. But lack of teachers was a continuous problem. Teachers willing to commit themselves for long periods of time to the kind of ministry that Mother Margaret dreamed of were rare, and vocations to her young Congregation were not increasing. The prejudices she encountered, the problems created by those who would try to evict her from her own property, and the difficulties of the ranch paled beside this threat to her life's dream.

In her desperation, she talked with Bishop Forest about going to Ireland to recruit women for her Congregation who might be willing to devote themselves to the fulfillment of her dream. He encouraged her to go. On July 20, 1896, more than fifty years after she had first set foot in the United States, Mother Margaret made the first of four voyages to Ireland. She returned that autumn with three young women who were professed in 1899. She went back that year and also in 1902 and 1906. Each time she found women who wanted to devote their lives to the work she had begun.

### **1896**

The year 1896, must have been one of the high points of her life. During that year in addition to her trip to Ireland, she

made several other decisions that cemented her future endeavors. She recognized that she could not continue to manage the ranch, so she gave Mr. Hart complete responsibility for it during her absences, which alleviated some of her worries. But most importantly for the future security of her life work, Margaret Mary and her three companions made their first public profession of Perpetual Vows in the presence of Bishop Forest, many clergy and friends. At that ceremony, the newly professed Sisters were given the silver cross that is still worn today by every Sister of the Holy Spirit.



*This cross is unique to the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate. The letters at the top of the cross are the initials for Sisters of the Holy Spirit. The center of the cross has the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom, Intelligence, Strength, Fear of the Lord, Science, Piety and Advice. In the center of the cross is the dove, which represents the Holy Spirit. The rays symbolize the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit descending on the Heart of Christ united with our human hearts to bring his compassion to the world. The scroll reads, "I to my Beloved & My Beloved to Me." [Christ is our beloved and we commit our lives to him.] Mary Immaculate stands at the bottom of the cross. The Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate are the patrons of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate.*

## **EXPANSION**

In January 1898, Mother Margaret received an invitation to open a school for the Black children in the city of Victoria. By this time, she had a few Sisters so she consulted Bishop Forest about her decision. He heartily approved and also suggested that she begin the work immediately because the need in Victoria was very grave. She traveled to Victoria, found a lot that she liked on the corner of Convent and Leon



Streets on which there was a house. She purchased the lot for \$4,500 from the owners, the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament (the same congregation that Margaret Mary's adopted daughter, Minnie Delaney, had entered so many years before). The house was renovated immediately and was named St. John Baptist Academy. Three Sisters were sent to teach there and the school opened for students in February 1898. It was the first branch house of the young congregation.

Mother Margaret herself spent about two months of the spring semester in Victoria personally supervising and sharing in the work of getting a new foundation started. After her return from Ireland in the Fall of 1899, she returned to visit Victoria where things were not going well. Although the Sisters were making every effort to have the children attend school, the hostile attitude of a number of local residents defeated their purpose. There were many who bitterly resented the fact that the Sisters were teaching "those" children and who tried to prevent the children from getting to school. The Sisters were equally determined to continue to operate. Things seemed to quiet down while Margaret Mary was there but her duties called her back to San Antonio. Following her visit and during the next few years things did not improve. Consequently, in May 1901, after a valiant effort, she was forced to close the school in Victoria permanently.

This failure must have reminded her of her earlier attempt to minister in Temple and must have been painful for her. By now, she had developed enormous trust in Divine Providence that she shared with all who knew her and that she bequeathed to her Congregation. She knew that God had always provided for her before, so God would bring good out of her failure. Her faith was rewarded. Mother Margaret received an appeal from Bishop Gillow of Oaxaca, Mexico, to send some Sisters to take charge of an orphanage and to establish a school in that city. As usual, before making her decision, she consulted Bishop Forest. At first, he was reluctant to see her go so far away and advised her against it. However, when the second

appeal came from Bishop Gillow and the sisters who had been released from ministry as a result of the closing of the mission in Victoria were available, he gave her his blessing and encouraged her to take the risk.

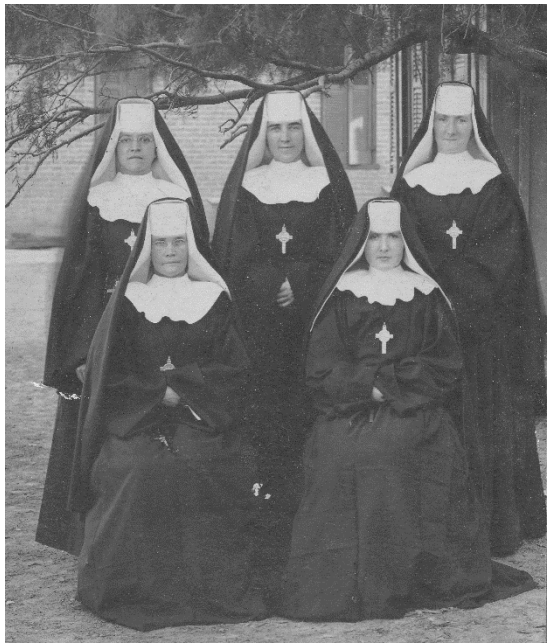
The outcome was the assignment of five Sisters to Oaxaca in December 1901. They were graciously received at the Casa De Cuna as the facility was called. The work of the Sisters was blessed and was greatly appreciated by the people. The work, both in the school and in the orphanage, continued until the Sisters were forced to leave Mexico because of the Mexican Revolution, in 1910. The government persecuted the Catholic Church, so the Sisters did not return to Oaxaca until the 1970's. Upon their return, they engaged in pastoral ministry in one of the city parishes as well as in the ranchos. They also cared for indigenous people in several of the mountain villages outside the city. They ministered in prisons and developed practices in natural medicine. During the years they were absent, their memory was kept alive in the form of an oil painting that still hangs in the entrance foyer at the Casa. The painting depicts four women, one of whom is reading a letter while holding a baby. The letter had been written to the Sisters by a young woman requesting them to care for the baby whom she abandoned at the Casa. The painting is titled simply, *Las Irlandesas*.



*Painting hanging in the foyer at Casa de Cuna—“Las Irlandesas”*

While the Sisters served in Oaxaca, the pastor of St. Peter Claver Church opened a home for the aged Black people who lived on the east side of San Antonio. The home was called the Charity Institute of the Divine Redeemer. When Mother Margaret returned from Oaxaca in 1903, he asked her to send some Sisters to open a school near the home for the Black children of that area. In September of that year two Sisters began to live and to hold classes at the home itself. It was totally unsuitable and inadequate but it was intended to be temporary. Because of his pastoral responsibilities not only in St. Peter Claver, but also in missions as far away as Cotulla, the pastor was seldom in residence at the home. Money simply was not available and the needed renovations were not done. It proved to be an impossible situation, and the Sisters did not return there in September 1904.

Instead, at the request of Bishop Verdaguer, Vicar Apostolic of Brownsville, Margaret Mary sent three Sisters to Laredo where they started a day and boarding school for Mexican-American students. Within two years, Our Lady of Guadalupe School was thriving with about 200 pupils, 25 of whom were boarding students.



*Our Lady of Guadalupe School, Laredo, TX. 1902  
Front: Sisters Joseph and Stanislaus. Back: Sisters Michael, Francis and Genevieve*

While all this expansion was occurring, San Antonio was not without its problems. The visits to Ireland to recruit young members for the Congregation had been fairly successful but not all the new recruits remained to attain full membership. Although she was saddened by the departure of some of those on whom she was counting to continue her mission, we have no indication that Margaret Mary became discouraged. Sadder for her in those early days was the loss of two young members who died of yellow fever in the Fall of 1903.

Margaret Mary foresaw the need to provide for future expansion and the future security of the Sisters. She had mortgaged her land in Victoria to pay for her 1902 recruitment trip to Ireland. In 1904 she had further depleted her financial resources in order to pay for the construction of a novitiate at the Nolan Street site which was completed the following year. One of the happiest events for her life during that time was that the Josephite Fathers of Baltimore, a Congregation devoted to the pastoral care of the Black people, took charge of St. Peter Claver Church.

In 1906, she was forced to make the very difficult decision to sell her ranch in Echo in order to finance her final recruitment trip to Ireland that year. Shortly thereafter, in January 1907, she purchased a small ranch in Seguin, in the hopes of expanding her mission. With all of this complete Margaret Mary had done all that she could do to provide for the financial and pastoral future of her mission.

Around 1900, her health had begun to deteriorate. She spent some time in the Santa Rosa Infirmary in 1903, and although she recovered, she never again regained her former vitality completely. The strain of her many obligations and her extensive travel was very evident to all who knew her, particularly after her return from her final recruiting trip to Ireland in 1906. She mustered sufficient strength for one last visit to Laredo and Oaxaca in the spring of 1907. In August of that year she became critically ill and she died peacefully



in the convent at Nolan Street on August 25. She was 74 years old. The eulogy at her funeral described her work as "destined to bring forth glorious fruits under the pains and self-sacrificing zeal of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost". At the request of her nephew, Frank, she was buried with her husband in Holy Cross Cemetery in Corpus Christi.



She left behind a thriving community of 15 Sisters and two postulants. Five Sisters were in San Antonio, five in Laredo and five in Oaxaca. Her ministry to the Black community had taken root; so had her ministry to Mexican-Americans. She had expended not only her substantial financial resources and her position in society, but her very life, in the care of those whom she knew to be most in need wherever she found them regardless of the color of their skin, the language they spoke or the desperation of their circumstances. In spite of hostility, failure, disdain and abuse of every kind; in spite of those people, and there were many, who believed that a woman hadn't

any business owning, much less managing either land or property, in spite of the failures of some of her efforts, in spite of the disloyalty of many whom she thought to be her friends, this woman never lost hope but persisted in following her vision.

Generations of minorities "have called her blessed." Her vision and her spirit live on in her Sisters who continued to serve "the marginalized, oppressed, economically poor people." (Mission Statement of the Sisters of the Holy Spirit).

At the present time, the Sisters are engaged in ministries that serve "the least, the lost, the last, the lonely and the left out" (Congregation Direction Statement 2019). In addition to the ministry of prayer at the Motherhouse, the Sisters work in education at Healy Murphy Center (formerly St. Peter Claver School), in Parish Ministry, in Ministry to Migrants and in visitation to the elderly. The Sisters are engaged in the ministry of presence and in community organizing. In 1988, 100 years after Mother Margaret opened her school on the corner of Live Oak and Nolan Streets in San Antonio, the Sisters began ministering in the Western Province of Zambia where they care for orphans and the elderly and are involved in education and parish ministry.

## **ROLE MODEL**

Margaret Mary Healy Murphy's story speaks to women on a much broader scale today than merely to the Sisters who have followed in her footsteps. Her life remains both an invitation and a challenge to a wide spectrum of women of our own time. Throughout most of her life she was an outstanding Catholic lay woman who never hesitated to respond to the needs of her Church and who, in her own needs, sought the advice of her pastors and bishops. Yet she is a model for women who struggle for their rights within their church and who, out of both love and justice, call their church to both when the need arises.

She lived in an era, not unlike our own, when many believed that women were incapable of managing anything

outside a home.

She proved that she could be an astute business woman, owning and managing a ranch, buying and selling large tracts of land, planning and overseeing the construction of buildings, taking advantage of the public media available to her, soliciting advice but wisely making her own decisions, and achieving her goals against great odds.

Socially she managed throughout her life to maintain accessibility to the mighty and the lowly. She was as comfortable at the social gatherings of politicians and powerbrokers as she was in the hovels of the poor and the outcasts. Her life was like a linchpin in the social milieu of South Texas of the 19th century. To the poor she was a symbol of security, hope, help and a better future; to the wealthy, she was a summons and a challenge to set priorities and make decisions about the use of their resources that would reflect the Gospel they professed.

She brought to reality her vision of a better world for those entrapped by unjust systems, by the color of their skin and by the language they spoke. She manifested admirable courage and resourcefulness in the founding of a Religious Congregation during a period of her life when some today would be planning for their retirement.

Although she was loved, respected and admired by many as a capable, and courageous woman, she was at the same time, the victim of rage, hostility and the vilest of prejudice. Her genuine charm and her caring manner endeared her to many, but it was without doubt her resilience, her persistence and above all, her faith in Divine Providence that led her to hold fast to her vision. Little wonder her Sisters have adopted the following as their mission:

*"We believe that we are called by God to be women of faith and trust who live together in simplicity, humility and love to manifest the compassion of Jesus to the poor, especially those who are denied respect for their human dignity".*

[Constitutions Article 2]

## **HEALY MURPHY CENTER TODAY**

By 1970 many schools had become integrated and there was less need for St. Peter Claver School. However, there were many youth, especially the poor, who were falling between the cracks and not able to complete their high school. The Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate looked at the signs of the time and opened what was the first alternative school in the state of Texas. The Sisters changed the name to: HEALY MURPHY CENTER. The mission of the Center is to provide compassionate service to youth-in-crisis by focusing on individualized education in a non-traditional setting, early childhood development and essential support services. The campus has been completely renovated over the last ten years.



*Mother Margaret Mary*  
**Healy Murphy Center**



In 2020, a brand new Child Development Center, with a capacity for 135 children from infants to age five, was completed.



## Healy Murphy Child Development Center



## CANONIZATION

In recent years, Mother Margaret's story has begun to radiate with new light as the shadows of racism, poverty, and marginalization have grown increasingly dark over our already troubled world. Recently, the Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate initiated the process of Mother Margaret's canonization. Although she has been dead for over a century, her saintly courage and faith are a timely antidote to the weariness of mind and heart that is inflicting our times. It is hoped that the same example that fueled the ministry of Margaret's own Congregation since 1893, can now reach a wider audience who hunger to be attentive to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to serve the underserved.

An intercessory prayer to Mother Margaret Mary Healy Murphy is found on the next page.

*Because*  
Someone We Love  
Is In Heaven...  
*there's a little bit of*  
**HEAVEN**  
*in our home*  


## *Prayer for the Canonization of Mother Margaret*

Compassionate God, your wisdom is in all creation, and your grace is revealed in the lives of holy people who inspire us to serve others more generously.

Through the Holy Spirit, you blessed the life and work of your servant,

**Margaret Mary Healy Murphy,**

who, despite suffering, persecution, criticism and prejudice, remained faithful and sought always to do your will. Strengthen us through her intercession when discouragement, loneliness and prejudice oppress us.

We humbly ask that you glorify your servant, Mother Margaret Mary on earth according to the design of your holy will.

Through her intercession, grant the favor I now present (*here make your request*).

Through your Son,

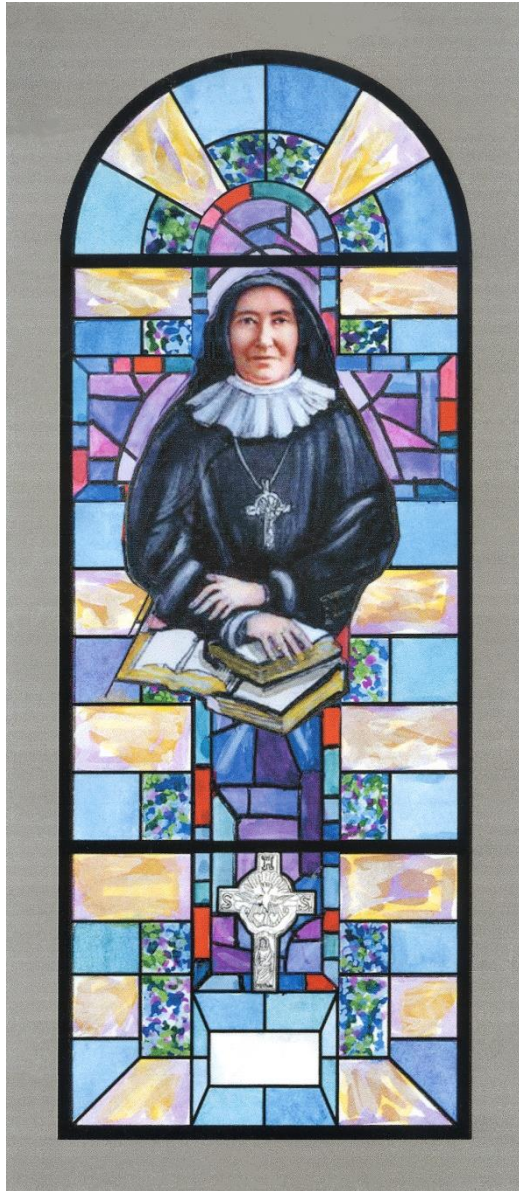
Jesus Christ Our Lord, who with you, lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

**If God chooses to answer your prayers through Mother Margaret's intercession, please notify the Sisters of this wonderful blessing at [holyspirit@shsp.org](mailto:holyspirit@shsp.org) or at the address below.**



Requests for additional copies of the prayer card and this booklet can be made at: [mmcanonization@gmail.com](mailto:mmcanonization@gmail.com)

or at: Holy Spirit Convent, 300 Yucca Street, San Antonio, Texas 78203



*Stained Glass Window with Mother Margaret Mary Healy Murphy in St. Peter the Apostle Church, Pascagoula, Mississippi*



## HISTORICAL MARKERS

Two Texas Historical Markers were unveiled by the Nueces County Historical Commission honoring John Bernard Murphy and Mother Margaret Mary Healy Murphy in Corpus Christi on Upper Broadway Street on November 22, 2019.

### MOTHER MARGARET MARY HEALY MURPHY

BORN IN CAHERSIVEEN, COUNTY KERRY, IRELAND, ON MAY 4, 1833, MARGARET MARY HEALY IMMIGRATED TO THE UNITED STATES IN 1845 WITH HER PHYSICIAN FATHER, RICHARD HEALY. AFTER STAYING WITH HER BROTHERS, UNCLAS AND AUNTS, THEY MADE THEIR WAY TO MATAMOROS BY WAY OF NEW ORLEANS. HER FATHER PASSED AWAY UPON REACHING NEW ORLEANS. IN MATAMOROS, THE FAMILY OWNED AND OPERATED A HOTEL. DURING THIS TIME, MARGARET MET AND MARRIED JOHN BERNARD MURPHY IN 1849. THE COUPLE MOVED TO CORPUS CHRISTI, WHERE MURPHY STUDIED LAW, BEGAN HIS POLITICAL CAREER AND LATER BECAME MAYOR (1880-1884).

THROUGH THE YEARS, MARGARET MARY HELPED THE SICK DURING THE YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMIC AND LATER OPENED THREE SEPARATE HOSPITALS. THE COUPLE HELPED BRING THE SISTERS OF ST. MARY NAMUR FROM NEW YORK TO TEXAS WHERE THE SISTERS OPENED THE STATE'S FIRST CATHOLIC BOARDING SCHOOL. AFTER JOHN BERNARD'S DEATH IN 1884, MARGARET MARY PURCHASED ECHO RANCH FROM HER BROTHER-IN-LAW, PATRICK MURPHY, AND ESTABLISHED ST. STEPHEN CHAPEL TO SERVE THE LOCAL POPULATION. SHE THEN MOVED TO SAN ANTONIO WHERE IN 1888 SHE BUILT A FREE SCHOOL AND ST. PETER CLAVER CHURCH FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS. TO HELP FIND ENOUGH TEACHERS TO SUPPORT THE SCHOOL, MARGARET MARY DECIDED TO START HER OWN CONGREGATION OF SISTERS FORMED IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE WITH THE SISTERS OF ST. MARY NAMUR. SHE BECAME MOTHER SUPERIOR FOR THE SISTERS OF THE HOLY GHOST, NOW KNOWN AS SISTERS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MARY IMMACULATE. SHE RECRUITED YOUNG WOMEN FROM IRELAND TO BECOME MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION. AFTER SPENDING HER LIFE HEALING PEOPLE AND EDUCATING THE POOR, MARGARET MARY DIED ON AUGUST 25, 1907, AND IS BURIED ALONG WITH HER HUSBAND, JOHN BERNARD MURPHY, IN HOLY CROSS CATHOLIC CEMETERY.

(2018)

MARKER IS PROPERTY OF THE STATE OF TEXAS



### JOHN BERNARD MURPHY

BORN IN 1821, IN MALLOW, COUNTY CORK, IRELAND, JOHN BERNARD MURPHY IMMIGRATED TO THE UNITED STATES IN 1845. UPON ARRIVING IN NEW ORLEANS, MURPHY JOINED THE UNITED STATES ARMY AS A STAFF REPORTER UNDER GENERAL ZACHARY TAYLOR AT THE ONSET OF WAR WITH MEXICO. MURPHY EARNED THE RANK OF CAPTAIN BEFORE BEING DISCHARGED ON OCTOBER 4, 1846. MURPHY BEGAN STUDYING LAW WHEN HE MARRIED MARGARET MARY HEALY ON MAY 4, 1849, NEAR MATAMOROS. SHORTLY AFTER, THE COUPLE RELOCATED TO THE IRISH SETTLEMENT OF SAN PATRICIO.


MURPHY SERVED TERMS AS CHIEF JUSTICE AND DISTRICT ATTORNEY IN BOTH SAN PATRICIO AND NUECES COUNTIES. HE HELD MANY POSITIONS OF TRUST DURING HIS LEGAL AND POLITICAL CAREER, ONE BEING A DELEGATE REPRESENTING NUECES COUNTY, THIRTEENTH DISTRICT, TO THE 1875 TEXAS CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION WHICH WROTE A NEW CONSTITUTION AFTER RECONSTRUCTION. FIRST ELECTED IN 1880, MURPHY BECAME MAYOR OF CORPUS CHRISTI. ACCORDING TO CITY RECORDS, AS MAYOR BEGAN HIS TERM AS MAYOR, THE CITY WAS HEAVILY IN DEBT WITH AN EMPTY TREASURY. BY THE END OF HIS TERM, THE CITY'S CREDIT WAS RESTORED AND DEBT REPaid.

DUE TO ILLNESS, JOHN BERNARD MURPHY DIED A FEW WEEKS AFTER HIS RESIGNATION, ON JULY 4, 1884. DURING MURPHY'S TENURE AS MAYOR, THE CITY ERECTED STREETLIGHTS, DUG TRENCHES TO DIVERT WATER, PROVIDED MEANS TO HELP THE POOR AND SERVED TO PRESERVE LAW AND ORDER. AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH, CORPUS CHRISTI BOASTED SEVERAL SCHOOLS, A TELEPHONE EXCHANGE, AN OPERA HOUSE, AND A MINERAL WELL PROVIDING CLEAN DRINKING WATER, ALONG WITH BEACHES, HOTELS, SAILING AND FISHING FOR TOURISTS. JOHN AND MARGARET ADOPTED TWO ORPHANS AND WERE ACTIVE IN CHARITY WORK AS WELL AS CHARTER MEMBERS OF THE FIRST CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CORPUS CHRISTI. THE MURPHYS ARE BURIED IN HOLY CROSS CATHOLIC CEMETERY.

MARKER IS PROPERTY OF THE STATE OF TEXAS

(2017)





“Why should we fear!  
Our treasury is Divine  
Providence  
which  
supplies the whole  
Universe  
and is never  
exhausted!”

—Margaret Mary Healy Murphy





## Motherhouse

Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate  
San Antonio, Texas

