

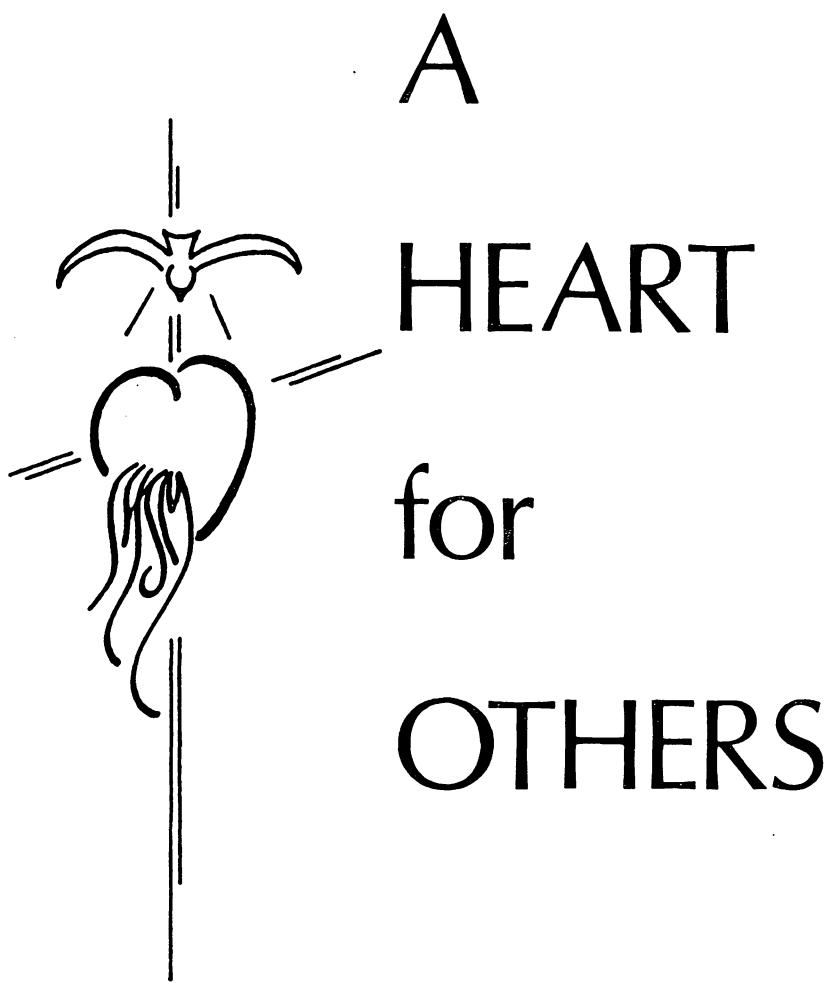


Rosemary Clerkin
SHJM

A HEART FOR OTHERS



FATHER PETER VICTOR BRAUN
1825 – 1882



A
HEART

for

OTHERS

ROSEMARY CLERKIN, SHJM

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FOREWORD

This year we celebrate the centenary of the death of our founder, Reverend Father Victor Braun. Many celebrations of a spiritual nature will commemorate this year which is of special significance to our congregation. When the year is over, and so that we do not forget the many valuable insights we have received about our founder, it was thought appropriate to update the history of our congregation. To see its growth and development since Chigwell and LIKE TO A GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED were written, Sister Rosemary Clerkin did a monumental task of research to find the necessary data. She travelled far and wide, both to interview people and to peruse the many manuscripts which yielded a wealth of relevant information.

A HEART FOR OTHERS, is the history of our Sisters' labour of love, spanning one hundred and sixteen years. They were years of devoted service to humanity, to the Church and to God, by dedicated women. The Sister Servants of the Sacred Heart was the name by which our first Sisters in England were known for thirty-three years. We are their direct descendants, now bearing the title, Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, familiarly known as the Chigwell Sisters.

Vatican II challenged religious to return to the Gospel and to the charism of their founder. In the intervening years since the Council, many members of our congregation have discovered, anew, the relevance of the ideas and the ideals of Father Braun to today's world. From a wealth of other quotations, the following illustrate this point. In a letter written by Father Victor Braun on September 18, 1872, he states:

What, indeed, can you do for the material needs of those suffering distress? What do you bring to those who are hungry or thirsty? Very little, because you are necessarily restricted by the limits of your own means. But if it is a matter of offering spiritual charity, your treasure is limitless because it is the mercy of God, himself, that you bring, drawn from the so very rich Heart of Jesus and you will never have to stint yourselves there.

Surely there is a strong similarity between that statement and the

following extract from Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter, ON THE MERCY OF GOD, where we read in chapter seven:

The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy – the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer – and when she brings people to the Source of the Saviour's mercy, of which she is the trustee and the dispenser.

In this the last quarter of the twentieth century, our founder, Father Victor Braun, and our holy Father, Pope John Paul II, challenge us to bear witness to God's mercy and love for all men, by our lives of loving dedication to the People of God. To achieve this, we draw closer to Christ in the mystery of his Heart, and so show forth in our lives God's great love for each person. I hope this history of our congregation will be enjoyed by all, and that we may come to appreciate anew our congregation and our courageous forebears. It is with genuine pleasure that I write this foreword to A HEART FOR OTHERS.

Sister Oliver Kinane

Chigwell Convent

September 24th 1982.

INTRODUCTION

In this brief account of the history of our congregation, I have tried to weave together the many strands that give shape to the "Chigwell Story". I am aware that much research and development of various themes still remains to be done. But we have begun.

I wish to thank all those who helped me to complete this short work. I thank Sister Oliver Kinane for her gracious support and encouragement at each successive stage. Father Justin McLoughlin O.F.M. The Friary, Stratford, East London, helped me to set about the project and gave me invaluable support. I am very grateful to him. During the spring of 1982, I visited most of our convents in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The sisters welcomed me warmly and gave me every possible assistance. I have been enriched by their kindness and friendship. I am deeply grateful to Mr. F. Sainsbury, former deputy librarian West Ham Central Library, Stratford, for giving me so generously of his time and knowledge of the history of Stratford and its environs. I thank Miss Marion Lister, also of West Ham Central Library, for her courtesy and co-operation. I am indebted also to the Brothers and staff of the Catholic Central Library, for their unfailing support and courtesy during my many visits to their library. I thank Mr. B. Baker, "The Universe", Bowling Green Lane, for his generous assistance when I was working on their premises. Fr. Howard Docherty O.F.M., The Friary, Woodford Green, gave me much valuable information on many aspects of Catholic life in England in recent centuries. I thank him now sincerely. Father Victor Braun received warm hospitality from the Marist Fathers, Underwood Road, London E.1., immediately after his arrival from war-torn Paris in 1870. I thank Fr. J. Greystone S.M. for allowing me to use the archives of the Marist Fathers at St. Ann's. I thank Sister John Baptist, Chigwell, Fr. J. Wooloughan C.C. Willesden Green, Ciaran, my brother, Wanstead, for their practical help on a number of occasions. I am grateful to Miss I. Talbot, Chideock, Mr. D. Taylor, Carlisle, Mr. A. Butler, Rothesay, Isle of Bute, for showing me around relevant sites in their home areas and giving me valuable information.

Elsewhere I have acknowledged written accounts kindly supplied to me by several sisters of our congregation. Other sisters gave me much-valued oral information and particular support: Sister Mary Etheldreda, Sacred Heart Convent, Cardiff, gave me generously of her time and her personal experience of the congregation especially from 1965 to 1978. Sisters Rosamunde (Cork), Barbara (Roscrea), and Helena (Old Colwyn), enlivened me with their earliest memories spanning nearly two centuries between them! I am indebted to them for the profiles they helped me to form of some of our pioneer sisters e.g. Mothers Winefride, Ethelburga, Arsène. I thank each of the following sisters who shared with me their memories of individual foundations: Sisters Denise, Patrick (Sacred Heart Convent, Cardiff), Sisters Maurice, Modesta (St. Winifred's, Cardiff), Sister Finola (Old Colwyn), Sisters Jane Frances, Angela Long (Roscrea), Sisters Ailbe, Andrew, Anthony (Carlisle), Sister Theodora (Homerton), Sisters Irene, Cornelius, Murita, Sylvester (Hambledon), Sisters Gonzaga, Mary Teresa Cronin (Liverpool), Sisters Joseph, Catherine McLoughlin (Ormskirk), Sisters Marguerite, Attracta, Celsus (Barrhead), Sister Joachim (Loughton) Sisters Sarto (Cork), Sisters Bede, Emerita, Mary David (Chigwell). My mother, and all my family gave me much encouragement and support. I thank them, too.

I am deeply grateful to Sister Mary Kelly for many kindnesses and for her patience. Sister Anne Savage and Sister Mary Laura read the M.S. and offered many helpful suggestions. I thank them now. Father Paul Leonard S.J., Irish Messenger Publications, Dublin, gave me practical help and continual support and I am very grateful to him. Sisters Edmund Campion (Lwitikila), Eileen MacLoughlin (Loughton) and Miss M.J. Thompson (Farnham) gave their typing services readily. My thanks go to each. Much of the book was written in the summer of 1982 in St. Teresa's Dockenfield. I thank Sisters Anthony, Leo and Colombière for their unfailing kindness to me during that period.

Lastly, I thank Sister Mary Matthew (Chigwell) without whom this book would not have seen the light of day.

St. Teresa's Convent,
Dockenfield.
September 9th, 1982.



(John 7:13)

CHAPTER 1

A Priest Forever

Peter Victor Braun was born on June 5th 1825. That same year the last of the Bourbon Kings was crowned at Rheims. Afterwards the new King processed through the streets of Paris dressed in violet coloured priestly vestments and carrying in his hand a lighted candle. For, foolish man that he was, Charles X still believed in the divine right of kings. Vainly he believed that by restoring to the church some of her former power and privileges, he would recover for the monarchy its one-time absolute power. However, during his five-year reign, the church did enjoy a measure of freedom for once again religious orders were allowed to make foundations and bishops were permitted to open seminaries.

The earliest recorded member of the Braun family settled in France in the seventeenth century. Doctor Bernard Braun, a medical officer in the army of Duke Charles of Lorraine, came to the province with the imperial troops in 1642. The Duke's army encamped in the village of St. Avold, even then of strategic importance owing to its situation at an important junction for trade and troop movements. The village had its origins way back in the sixth century when a group of Irish missionaries, led by St. Fridolin, chose this sequestered vale as the site for their Benedictine abbey which they dedicated to an early martyr, St. Narbold. Over the centuries the small town developed and, when the French railway system came into being in the mid-nineteenth century, St. Avold's military importance was heightened because the village was on the direct railway line between Paris and the fortress town of Metz.

Bernard Braun, a native of the Austrian Tyrol, was a devout Catholic, and a man of singular Christian charity, much esteemed by the inhabitants of his adopted village. Successive generations of Brauns preserved his strong Catholic devotion. During the French Revolution, one of his descendants risked her life and incurred the wrath of a blasphemous mob by rescuing the venerated statue of Our Lady of Good Help which the revolutionaries had flung into the local river. Undaunted, Madame Braun restored the precious image to its hallowed place in the nearby church of Valmont, always a place of pilgrimage for the Braun family.

Nicholas Anthony Braun and his wife Marie Gabrielle, (1) lived on the Rue Hambourg, now the Rue Poincaré. Victor was the ninth in a

family of eleven children. Madame Braun was lighthearted and devoted to her children. She herself was of devout Catholic parentage; four of her uncles were priests, two belonged to the secular clergy and two were Franciscan friars. All had died in exile because they refused to take the civil oath. An aunt was a canoness at Augsburg.

Nicholas Braun was a wine merchant, specializing also in woollens and spices. His fortunes fluctuated according to the current economic situation in France which was unstable because of the recurring revolutions of the period. In 1830, Charles X was replaced by the 'Citizen King', Louis Philippe. At that time France was going through the first stages of the industrial revolution when fast-growing towns such as Lille, Lyons and Nancy, provided ample employment, especially for workers in the textile trades. But in 1845 and 1846 there were bad harvests and soaring food prices, both in the cities and towns, which brought bankruptcy to the doors of many French business men. The Braun family was not exempt.

From birth, Peter Victor was a delicate boy. Surrounded by several older brothers and sisters who were inclined to spoil this younger, ailing child, he grew up in a contented home, enjoying those distinctive benefits which village life always affords, far removed from the harshness and deprivations then experienced by many town and city children. The atmosphere in his home was devoutly Christian. The daily life centred around a regular pattern of Catholic practice. Each evening the complete household came together for family prayer, consisting of the rosary, followed by a reading from the lives of the saints and ending with an extract from the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith (2). This was a golden age of exploration and missionary activity; perhaps it was to be expected that after the horrors of the revolution, French traders, travellers and priests, would look beyond a Europe, still in ferment, towards those distant lands of Africa and China, in search of new conquests for God and man.

Many missionary vocations owed their first stirrings to these readings from the annals. Anthony Braun, ten years older than Victor, decided at an early age to become a missionary. He entered the diocesan junior seminary in Metz which had been established not long before by the bishop of Metz, Mgr. Paul Dupont des Loges. A brilliant student, but a sickly one, he was educated at St. Sulpice in Paris. While there he became a close friend of the Jewish convert, Francis Libermann. Mgr. des Loges became bishop of Metz in 1843. His episcopate was destined to be long and arduous. In his first pastoral letter, the new bishop drew the attention of his people to the marvellous apostolate of the Propagation of the Faith. He then went on to make a strong plea for the

conversion of England, saying: "Do not merely content yourself with the reading of this pastoral but accompany it with some words of your own calculated to explain to your parishioners the situation in England and how great would be the gain to the glory of God and the salvation of souls if that country could be brought back to the faith."

On the completion of his studies in Metz, Anthony Braun remained on in the seminary as a junior professor, while awaiting his admission to the Belgian Jesuit Novitiate in Tronchienne. When ordained, he was destined for the Canadian mission. It was while this older brother was still in Metz, that Victor decided he, too, wanted to become a missionary. In 1838, he was admitted to the seminary. Very soon, the rigours of student-life weakened his already delicate health. Always over-sensitive and over-eager in his approach to his studies, the young Victor found seminary life difficult right from the beginning. In 1839, Anthony left for Belgium. His brother felt the parting keenly. The smoke-filled air of Metz, steadily becoming yet another built-up factory town, was in sharp contrast to the wooded hills and open spaces of the countryside around St. Avold. Victor was inclined to be solitary because of his inability to join in robust games, and he greatly missed the secure presence of his older brother. His exactitude and concern about his progress, reduced him to such a state of nervous exhaustion, that the staff suggested a break away from seminary life. Disappointed, the young seminarian returned home, where, surrounded by the attention of his parents, brothers and sisters, he eventually regained sufficient composure to enable him to return to Metz, a year later.

The months at home had not been time lost. Writing in April 1840 to her brother Alexis who was six years older than Victor, Jeanne Braun had this to say about their younger brother's progress:

"This morning we received Victor's report card: it is very satisfactory in every respect, from the point of view of behaviour as well as study. He has grown a great deal. You would hardly recognise him I hope that you will both be able to get together for a few weeks during the long summer holiday. His personality has changed as much as his appearance. He is so sensible, so poised, so kindly, that he seems to have grown up already. I think you would be envious of him if you were to see him."

In 1843, at the age of eighteen, Victor entered the major seminary at Metz to begin his theology course. Another breakdown in health interrupted his studies a year later and again he returned to his family at St. Avold. This time the local curates offered to coach him so that he did not fall too far behind in his studies. Nevertheless, his continuing over-anxiety about the future only accentuated his already

tense temperament and slowed down his recovery. He revealed these fears to Anthony. Now in Laval, this favourite brother wrote encouragingly:

"My Dear Victor,

I firmly trust that the good God is not going to leave you midway on the road. He will give you the strength necessary to complete your studies. However, there is no need to be in such a hurry. If your health demands some rest, take a full year of relaxation so as to recover completely. You are not twenty yet; it is not absolutely necessary for you to reach the priesthood just at the age of twenty-five. I think your philosophy course is a little weak, your studies have been interrupted so often; but with a little courage you will come out alright."

Heartened by this advice and strengthened by another prolonged convalescence at home, Victor once again returned to the seminary. His mother worried about him, realising that he would never be able for the rigours of missionary life.

On February 23rd 1850, he received Minor Orders. Shortly afterwards, Bishop des Loges interviewed the prospective candidates for ordination. He hesitated to ordain this young man because of his indifferent health and his course of studies which had been marked with several interruptions. Yet the bishop felt a certain empathy with this eager young man from Lorraine. The Bishop himself had not enjoyed good health as a student but he was a man of considerable private means and there was no fear of his becoming a financial burden on the diocese. Finally, Mgr. Dupont des Loges agreed to ordain the young man on two conditions:— 1. That his family guarantee to provide for him should ill health prevent him from carrying out his priestly ministry. 2. That he present himself regularly for further examinations in theology. M. Braun arrived immediately from St. Avold to give his ready consent to the former condition. The ordination day was arranged for June 15th, 1851, just a year away. Absolutely delighted, Victor wrote to his mother on May 18th, 1850:

"My Dear Mother,

I hasten to tell you the good news you are awaiting. A week from today, at the very time that I am writing to you, I shall be a sub-deacon. Yesterday at noon I passed my examination before Mgr. Beauvallet, the vicar general. He seemed very satisfied with my answers. Under God, I owe this success to the good people who have obtained this grace for me by their prayers. I thank them and I shall pay them back, especially on the day of my ordination. So now the day is approaching which you desire so ardently and which you feared you would never see, the day when the Lord will be my inheritance and I shall solemnly swear to

devote my heart to him and love him alone. I hope, my dear mother, that you will come with my sisters. Father wishes me to invite you . . .”

On December 22nd 1850, Victor Braun received the diaconate. At midnight Mass on Christmas Eve he was privileged to sing the gospel in his parish church. No doubt, for him it was of particular significance that year. Shortly before his ordination he wrote to his parents. His letter reveals that note of uncertainty which the circumstances of his life had up till now taught him to expect. It shows, too, that exceptional singlemindedness — simplicity of heart — with which he approached each further stage in his priestly life:

“My dear Parents,

The great day is approaching when I shall hear addressed to me: “Thou art a priest for ever”. It seems a dream to me and yet it is an unfathomable reality which makes me tremble and at the same time overwhelms me with joy. Here I am arriving at the point to which the fatherly providence of God willed to conduct me by a path which was strewn with difficulties and obstacles. I should be most guilty if I were one day to forget so many benefits, if I were to become lukewarm in his service instead of responding to the graces I have received so abundantly and which I still hope for in the future from his bounty. I ask my dear little sister Mary (then seven years old) to bring a candle to the shrine of Our Lady of Valmont and to pray for me very much there before the Blessed Virgin.”

On June 14th 1851, feast of the Holy Trinity. Victor Braun was ordained priest by Bishop des Loges in the magnificent twelfth-century gothic cathedral in Metz, dedicated to St. Etienne. The next day he said his first Mass in the parish church of St. Avold in the presence of his delighted family, with the exception of his oldest brother. Just a few days before, Father Anthony Braun, S.J. left for Canada to begin his missionary life. This generation of the Brauns now had two priests in the family. For them it was a moment of great rejoicing but not without its tinge of sadness.

Notes

- (1) Madame Braun's maiden name was Richard.
- (2) The Society for the Propagation of the Faith was founded by Pauline Jaricot in Lyons, France in 1821.

CHAPTER 2

Small Beginnings

The summer months of 1851 Father Victor Braun spent with his family. Early in September he received his first diocesan appointment. It came as a surprise. The Falloux Law of 1850 had restored to the church freedom to set up schools for secondary education and to teach in the universities. This law drew away from the state-lycées many middle class students who were in danger of becoming immersed in the spirit of atheism which was then gaining hold in Paris largely through the writings of Georges Sand, Dumas and Renan. Bishop Dupont des Loges quickly set about establishing secondary schools in his diocese. One of them, St. Augustine's Academy in Metz, was under the headship of Fr. Eugene Braun, cousin of Father Victor. The newly-ordained priest was appointed deputy head. For the next two years he devoted himself to teaching and during this time he acquired educational skills that were to hold him in good stead in later years as he guided the newly-founded congregation.

For some years, Father Eugene Braun had been petitioning his bishop for permission to join the Jesuits. In 1853, this permission was granted and he resigned his post as headmaster at the end of the academic year. At the same time, Bishop Dupont des Loges invited the Jesuit Fathers to take over responsibility for running St. Augustine's Academy. This they agreed to do on condition that they discontinue the junior school because the numbers in the upper school had risen steadily. This decision meant that Fr. Braun was redundant; but not for long. The summer holidays he spent at home where he greatly missed his mother who had died on May 1st of that year.

At the beginning of the autumn term 1854, Father Braun was appointed principal of the newly-built Our Lady's Academy, also in Metz. The school flourished but, due to lack of funds, it was forced to close after only two years. In the nearby parish of Flavigny, not far from Nancy, the parish priest decided to open a parish school and he invited Father Braun to take charge of it. In 1857, Father Braun was appointed curate of Flavigny and during this time he involved himself very much with youth work in the parish. However, within a year he felt the old stirrings to become a missionary. He sought permission and was admitted to the Brothers of Mercy, a group of secular priests living in community. In Metz, they had opened two houses. Once again, his health broke down and shortly afterwards he left the society.

His next appointment was to a parish in the industrial town of Nancy, about two hundred miles south-east of Paris. The town was a thriving centre for the textile trades, especially for the manufacture of cotton goods. Many of the workers had formerly worked hand-looms in their own homes, but the invention of machines had quickly thrown them out of business. Necessity drove them to the new towns where they eked out an existence and lived in miserable hovels. In 1859, there was an outbreak of typhoid in Nancy which further reduced the living conditions of the workers. That year, Mgr. Georges Darboy was consecrated bishop of Nancy and he soon became known as a zealous pastor, devoted to his people. In 1863, following his appointment as Archbishop of Paris, Bishop Darboy was succeeded by Bishop Charles Lavigerie founder of the White Fathers. His missionary labours earned for him the title, "Apostle of Africa".

There was still a restlessness in Father Braun and, after a few years, he moved on to Paris where he became chaplain to a tough, approved school for girls. This is how he remembered the time he spent in this specialized apostolate:

"On my arrival in Paris I was sent to direct the delinquent girls in a house maintained by the Sisters of Mary and Joseph, 86 Vaugirard Street. These convicts ranged in age from ten to twenty-one years; but people were careful not to tell me what kind of girls they were. I gave them an instruction each morning. The first time I stood up to preach in a large hall. It had formerly been a Carmelite convent, and they were behind the grille. I said to them quite simply: "Children, they tell me that you are unruly but that you are good at heart. We can do something with people like that." They looked at one another.

At first I did not understand the glances that passed between those misses in their prison garb. I went on to say, "When I learn that you have not been behaving properly, I shall not tell you a story before or after the instruction." That was the only penance I gave them, for I was in the habit of telling them a story. As you see, it was all very innocent for convict women. Well, it worked very well. When I had omitted telling a story, the next time I would see tears in the eyes of a great number. They were cross with the sister and said to her: "It is your fault Father didn't tell us a story. You were the one who told him what we did this week."

However, they promised themselves that they would be deserving a story the next week. The sisters, seeing that I was succeeding, asked, "But how did you manage it? Here is what happened before you came. (Then it was that I learned what sort of girls they were). There have been three chaplains who were never able to do anything with them.

They were constantly reminding them of what they were and forever reproaching them." Those girls were embittered, and when the priest stood up to speak, they turned their back on him and began to talk out loud, or else they sang in the chapel — something other than hymns! The poor sisters were in despair. They resorted to the strait jackets and solitary confinement as punishments. When I saw that I was succeeding, I realized why. It was no use reminding these girls what they were. The experience taught me a lesson for later on.

I admit that the most satisfying moments of my life have not been those I have spent in the midst of you, good novices; rather it was there, with those poor girls, that I experienced the greatest spiritual consolations. There were a large number who without being urged to do so went to Holy Communion every month, indeed every Sunday. In short, I had great consolations, but why? Because I didn't say harsh or offensive things to them calculated to irritate them. That sort of people do not like to be told what they are."

Apart from his chaplaincy work, Father Braun helped out with other parish duties. Not surprisingly, he had another bout of ill health and in the spring of 1859 he was seriously ill. Once again, his family came to his rescue. By now both his parents had died; on August 3rd 1858, M. Braun had died peacefully. Only his sisters Jeanne, Thérèse and Christine, were left at home but they continued to carry out those works of mercy that had been handed down from generation to generation in the Braun family. After a period of convalescence, Father Braun took up light duties in the nearby parish of Durtchthal.

It was after this lengthy stay at St. Avoid that Father Braun decided to have another try at joining a religious community. This time he chose the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul. This society was founded by a layman, Leon Jean le Prevost. Born in Normandy in 1801, M. le Prevost was for some years a professor in Lisieux. While in Paris, he met the famous preacher Lacordaire at Notre Dame and, under his influence, became a fervent Catholic. In 1833, he met Frederic Ozanam and became very involved in his works of mercy. M. le Prevost came to the conclusion that, on his own, the priest is powerless "to lead workers into the faith." He decided to form a society of priests, entirely consecrated to the care of the thousands of workers throughout France, who had no one to lead them. They would, he said, "look like men of the world but they will fulfil, nevertheless, all the duties of the religious. These will be the monks of the nineteenth century."

By one of those remarkable coincidences of providence, at the very hour when M. le Prevost and his companions were consecrating themselves before the shrine of Our Lady in Chartres cathedral to work

for the poor, the appearances at La Salette in southern France, were taking place. Our Lady's message on the mountain to the two visionaries was a plea for France to repent and turn back to God. That is why devotion to Our Lady under the title of La Salette became the principal devotion of this new religious society. When his wife died in 1859, Leon le Prevost was ordained priest in the chapel of Our Lady of La Salette in Vaugirard, Paris, not far from the approved school where Father Braun had laboured so fruitfully.

Father Braun's first assignment as a Brother of Charity was to the working class district of Grenelle in Paris. This was an area of Paris where there were innumerable salt and mustard factories, sugar refineries, dye works, distilleries. There was a vast apostolate among the hundreds of immigrant workers from Germany. A son of Lorraine, Father Braun was ideally suited to this work, because German was his second language. In addition, many of the factory workers came from his own province of France.

In 1863 there was a sudden influx of workers to the area, many of whom came from Alsace Lorraine. Uneducated, they did not speak French so Father Braun decided to set up a mission for them in the Rue Fondary. He rented a private house to use as a chapel, and then a large hall which he named St. Joseph's. Here again he organized evening classes, a savings bank and lending library. In no time at all, the mission was thriving and indeed the centre still prospered in 1913. At this time Father Braun developed a strong devotion to Our Lady. It was in the church of Our Lady of Victories that the archconfraternity of Our Lady (1) had been established.

Despite the demands made on him by the intensity of the work of the German mission, (2) Father Braun found this work challenging and satisfying. About this time he toned down his style of preaching. Some years later he described what led to this decision:

"Yes, I remember I changed my method. As a young priest and when I was a teacher, I preached beautiful sermons with all the trimmings. Every noun was qualified by its adjective; if necessary I looked one up in the dictionary. Then the sermon was carefully learned by heart and delivered in the same way. Ah yes, those were very fine sermons indeed. But I retraced my steps the day I read the life of the Curé of Ars. I learned that it was not beautiful sermons that convert souls and that simple words make more of an impression."

Many were the industrial and economic improvements that marked the reign of the Emperor Napoleon III, yet by 1863 his popularity was beginning to wane. Wishing to emulate his uncle, Napoleon I, in his patronage of public buildings, Napoleon III set out to beautify

Paris and other French cities. There was great splendour at the royal court of St. Cloud which encouraged luxurious living among the upper classes. Moral standards declined; the hopelessness of the poorer classes led to a growing alienation between them and the privileged few who revelled in a standard of living unimagined by the growing mass of working class people. The second half of the nineteenth century produced, indeed, many Frenchmen of culture and learning; in science there was Pasteur, in engineering de Lesseps, in music Offenbach and in literature Baudelaire and Flaubert. But apart from Ozanam and his companions, together with a growing number of founders of active religious institutes, little interest was taken in the plight of the underprivileged and the downtrodden.

Hoping to gain the continued support of the workers, Napoleon III had granted the trade unions the right to strike, in 1860. The Crimean War had been expensive for France in both lives and money yet still Napoleon's ambitious foreign policies led to further wars, with Denmark and Austria. The rise of the Prussian empire increased tension during the mid sixties. Higher taxes and soaring costs led to unrest in the factories. This situation brought havoc to the lives of many of the German working girls whose only point of contact was the Grenelle German mission. Daily, the numbers of unemployed rose; unable to pay their rents, many girls were driven to a life of crime on the streets of Paris, then known as the "pleasure capital of Europe". Father Braun did what he could to help but, single-handed, he was powerless to organize any reasonable or permanent form of support.

In the summer of 1864, Father Braun attended the German Catholic Congress, held that year at Wurzburg. One of the conferences, "On devotion to the Sacred Heart", had a profound effect on him. Afterwards he wrote of the occasion:

"I admit to my shame that I spent many years of priestly life before grasping this beautiful and consoling devotion. It was at Wurzburg that I was struck for the first time by the conference of a holy priest, Baron Herkampf." At the closing of the congress, leaflets containing the promises made to St. Margaret Mary, were distributed among the delegates. Shortly after his return from Germany, Father Braun received a similar leaflet from his cousin, now Fr. Eugene Braun, S.J. He himself noticed the coincidence, too special to be merely accidental.

With renewed confidence and trust in the Sacred Heart, he tackled the problem of establishing some sort of refuge for the increasing number of unemployed German girls who looked to him for practical support. He approached a few religious congregations of

women hoping they would support him. Some promised help. others admitted that they were already overburdened with their own particular apostolates. At a time of mounting anti-German feeling in France, there was little hope of any French group putting German interests before the pressing weight of their own needs. Father Braun consulted with his superior general, Father le Prevost, and another of his confrères, Father Lantiez, and viewed the options open to him. By now he was beginning to realize that if you want to get something done, you have to somehow do it yourself.

With the approval of Father le Prevost and trusting in the Sacred Heart to guide his efforts, he prayed and reflected before arriving at a final decision. He decided to form a pious association of women who would devote themselves to the care of the unemployed German working girls of Grenelle. Three of the women who came to him for spiritual direction in the church of Our Lady of Victories formed the original group. One of them had already belonged to a religious congregation for over ten years. She was Sister Odile Berger. (3) Anna Catherine Berger, was born in 1823 in the town of Regan in Bavaria. Educated at the Ursuline Convent in Straubbing, she joined the congregation of the Poor Franciscans of the Holy Family at Pirmasenz, near the French border with Germany. Founded by a Father Nardini, for the care of orphans, and the sick in their homes, the infant congregation was extremely poor. In 1864, Sister Odile, accompanied by Sister Mary Alberta, received permission from their founder to come to Paris in order to solicit alms for their works of mercy. They rented a two-roomed flat in the Rue D'Ulm in Paris and attended Mass at the church of Our Lady of Victories. Fr. Braun was their confessor and spiritual director.

Sister Odile was greatly interested in the proposed hostel for the care of the German working girls. She wrote to Fr. Huth, who had succeeded Fr. Nardini, to ask if their congregation could take on this new work. On receiving a negative reply, and with the approval of her spiritual director, Sister Odile applied for a dispensation from her own congregation in order to devote herself to this new apostolate. It was in her flat, in the Rue D'Ulm, that the little group first met and were joined shortly afterwards by a fourth member. When Father Braun realized that other ladies were keen to join the society he rented larger premises in the Rue Humboldt. It was there, on the feast of St. Margaret Mary, October 17th 1866, that he dedicated this first community to the Sacred Heart. He gave them a simple rule of life: daily recitation of the Little Office of Our Lady, daily recitation of the rosary in common, meditation, daily spiritual reading. They decided

on a uniform dress — black, with a cape and white collar, a bonnet with fluted white ruching and a crucifix attached to a cord worn round the neck. They retained their baptismal names but were addressed as Sister. Father Braun appointed Mother Odile, superior of the community. She was then aged forty-three, and he forty-one. Mother Odile was a woman of deep compassion, practical-minded and warm-hearted. She shared Father Braun's enthusiastic devotion to the Sacred Heart and his determination to improve the lot of the German working girls. Such then was the humble beginning of the congregation founded by Father Victor Braun.

Notes

- (1) Abbé Theodore Ratisbonne, a convert from Judaism and a native of Alsace, founded this confraternity around 1840. He later founded the congregation of Our Lady of Sion.
- (2) On May 4th 1913, the golden jubilee of the German Mission was celebrated. The festivities were organised by the director, Father Helmig. Six Servants of the Sacred Heart from Versailles attended the Solemn High Mass which was the highlight of the celebrations.
- (3) Mother Odile later founded, in St. Louis, Missouri, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Mary of the Third Order. The sisters undertake the apostolate of nursing in many parts of the United States and in Brazil. Mother Odile died on October 17, 1880.

CHAPTER 3

Jesus Christ and the Poor

The apostolate of this pious association flourished. The number of girls searching for temporary accommodation increased daily. Father Braun continued to live at the priest's house attached to the church in the Rue Fondary. Daily he visited the sisters and gave them instruction on some aspect of the religious life. The girls were taught the rudiments of good housekeeping, dressmaking and laundry work. Very soon they were much sought after as maids by Parisian matrons who quickly realized their worth. Each day a sister made her way to the Gare De L'Est eager to prevent unsuspecting young girls, newly-arrived in the city, from accepting dubious accommodation offered by unauthorized persons. Not surprisingly, finance was always a problem. The sisters pooled what they had and in due time Father Braun once again called on his family to come to his financial aid. Nonetheless, the poverty experienced by the sisters and girls was extreme.

One day a plea for help came from a woman who was seriously ill in her home, not far from the Rue Humboldt. Father Braun was reluctant to allow anyone to visit her, saying, "Our sisters are not nurses", but he soon relented and, not long afterwards, the care of the sick in their homes was added to the original work. This was soon to be followed by a third. A workman in the area fell from a scaffolding and was killed. His distraught widow appealed to the sisters to look after her two youngest daughters while she went out to work. Such was the origin of the work of caring for orphan children.

Within six months, the community numbered fifteen sisters. They were responsible for the care and protection of two hundred girls. They also had about twenty orphans to provide for. Moreover, the care of the sick in their homes called for the constant attention of several of the sisters. The small flat on the Rue Humboldt, together with the premises attached to the German mission which served as a hostel, were woefully inadequate. Father Braun rented a large shed, or barracks, on the Boulevard de Grenelle and the transfer was made mostly on foot. A small cart carried the heavy furniture and slowly the straggling caravan wended its way, much to the puzzlement of an astonished street crowd. Some years later, Father Braun wrote his memories of those humble beginnings:

"In the beginning the convent was a large barracks on the Rue de Grenelle. One can say this, for it was a real barracks. The sisters,

the girls, the children, all were living together in one hall in whose centre there was a sort of small cooking stove. That hall was also at the same time the community hall in which your Father gave his instructions and conferences, seated on a sack of potatoes. The sisters were seated on the floor. The room had for decoration nails all round the walls on which were hung the shoes of the children. In the morning, while the sisters attended Mass with the children, we cleared up and in three quarters of an hour the work and community hall was put in order."

It is difficult for us to imagine in these days of stringent fire precautions, bed-sitting room accommodation and high food costs, how such a small band of devoted women managed to contain, much less train, such numbers of children and young adults. Very early each morning two sisters set out for the vegetable stalls and the meat market waiting for the call announcing cut-down prices and hoping for end cuts and scraps of meat. The people of Grenelle gave generously because they realized the good work being done by so few for so many.

However, this day-to-day existence soon became ever more precarious. One day, all available sources having been tapped, the only option left was to solicit alms publicly. Mother Odile applied for permission from the civil authorities to collect for the needs of the "Sacred Heart Shelter". It was sometime in October 1867, just one year after the founding of the association. When notice of this action came to the ears of Father Braun, he was furious. Always, it had been his firmly held belief that providence would provide for the many needs of the sisters and children. He denounced Mother Odile, accused her of a plot to undermine his authority and dismissed her from the congregation. It would appear that Mother Odile, together with a Sister Magdalena Fuerst and two sisters who came from Alsace, remained on in the Sacred Heart Shelter with the approval of Archbishop Darboy of Paris. Father Braun moved the rest of the community and the orphans to Sèvres, where a lady had offered him a large furnished house.

After a frantic search for a permanent abode, Father Braun found a dilapidated house on the Rue de Troyon where twenty sisters and the same number of orphans could be housed. During the day the largest room served as dining room, workshop and oratory while at night it took on the appearance of a communal dormitory, just as was the custom in the earlier days at Grenelle. Further accommodation was found in a former printing-house known as the Caderoussel where a few sisters and children lived with but minimum protection from the cold and rain. The windows were without glass and there was scarcely any furniture.

One day, noticing a young sister shiver and look around in dismay at the bleakness of it all, Father Braun encouraged her thus: "Cheer up! The good God is with us. He knows that we have nothing and that we are working only for his glory." Cold comfort, however, for a beginner and great faith was necessary to persevere under such extreme conditions. He himself was a man of great faith, undaunted in the face of deprivation, careful only to provide for those whose plight was desperate and acute. Besides, he did not have to spend his nights there. Years later, in one of the many letters he wrote to the sisters, he reminded them of the extreme poverty of Caderoussel.

God, however, never to be outdone in rewarding generosity, bestowed unthought-of blessings on the unsung labours of the sisters in Sèvres. Father Braun had formed a friendship with Canon Codant, chaplain to the Dominican sisters in the nearby convent. Well known throughout France as an orator, Canon Codant had considerable influence with the local bishop, Mgr. Mabile of Versailles. The canon spoke with enthusiasm of Father Braun and his association of pious women. The three works undertaken by the sisters were making a valuable contribution to the pastoral needs of the diocese of Versailles:

1. The care of the sick in their homes.
2. The care of orphans.
3. The hostel for unemployed servant girls.

At the request of Canon Codant, Mgr. Mabile recognized the society as an episcopal institute. The sisters were to be known henceforth as the Servants of the Sacred Heart. The first clothing ceremony was arranged for February 28th 1868 and was to take place in the chapel of the Dominican convent. Fifteen postulants received the habit on that day. The Dominican sisters made the first habits, replicas of their own but black instead of white. The Servants of the Sacred Heart wore a purple cord in honour of St. Francis de Sales whom Father Braun had chosen as one of the principal patrons of the congregation. The bishop performed the ceremony, assisted by the canon, in the presence of the founder, Father Braun.

The next step was to define the purpose and spirit of the institute. The charism of any religious congregation is a particular way of reproducing the mystery of Christ and of living out the gospel message. Numerous were the active religious congregations of women which took root in the nineteenth century. Each is characterized by these distinctive features:-

1. A deep attachment to the person of Christ in his compassion for the multitude.

2. Outstanding devotion to Our Lady.
3. Devotion to the Eucharist especially to the presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

Such congregations were founded in England, France, Belgium and Ireland. They grew up in local areas and, in most cases, reflected the pastoral needs of the people.

Although initially he chose the Rule of St. Ignatius for his congregation, Father Braun finally adopted the fourth century rule of St. Augustine for the Servants of the Sacred Heart. The spirit of the institute was to be that which pervaded the life of St. Francis de Sales whom Father Braun held to be the "real founder". This is what he wrote in 1869:

"When St. Francis de Sales first conceived the idea of the Visitation Order, he did not visualize the institute as it exists today. The congregation which he dreamed of was neither to be cloistered nor to be separated from the world as it is today. He gave the sisters as an exercise of charity the visitation of the poor and the sick. Things turned out otherwise than he had planned and there is certainly no room for regretting this fact. However, it would seem that the idea of the holy founder has not yet been realized. That is why, in spite of our unworthiness and inadequacy, we have attempted to take up the second part of the plan of the holy bishop of Geneva; to go back to the origin of the idea and transplant the Visitation into the world itself. It is that spirit of St. Francis de Sales, the spirit of the Visitation, which the Servants of the Sacred Heart must strive to acquire. It is meditation on his virtues, his humility, his great gentleness, his lovable simplicity, combined with his tender zeal for the salvation of souls, especially the poor and great sinners, which will initiate the sisters into the heart of this great saint and make them sharers in his spirit."

For the next six years (1868–1872) the founder applied himself to the onerous task of drawing up the constitutions and developing his ideas into a cohesive form. On January 15th 1869, he wrote to the sisters:

"Seek to be the first only when it is a matter of offering and sacrifice. Be humble of heart, plain and modest in your dress and in your whole conduct. Love the poor, and know how to understand their needs and their suffering. There are only two things in this world: Jesus Christ and the poor. You must certainly serve also those who are wealthy, but only to share the reward of your sacrifice and your love with the poor Be proud to be the servants of his divine heart; entrust to him your worries, your distress, your struggles. Be encouraged by this

magnificent promise of our divine redeemer:

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart and you shall find rest for your souls." There is already a reward down here and how beautiful will be the reward up yonder."

On a later occasion he wrote:

"You are not a contemplative order, although you are obliged to contemplate daily, above all, the heart of Christ; nor are you a penitential order, although you are obliged every day to do penance for your own sins and the sins of others; you are a legion of devoted women who in sanctifying yourselves ought to go into the world among the sick, young girls exposed to danger or already fallen, to spread abroad everywhere the example of Jesus Christ and bring back souls to him by your kindness and gentleness, making them love the good God and your own apparent holiness. That is the only sermon that most of the people in the world understand."

Father Braun frequently visited the communities in Sèvres and asked Canon Codant to do the same. The canon was heard to remark that he "kept one eye on the whites and one eye on the blacks." On October 2nd 1868, a second clothing ceremony was held in the Dominican chapel. Nine postulants received the habit on this occasion. Once again it was necessary to move to larger premises and Fr. Braun was heartened when Canon Codant offered him the use of premises adjoining the Dominican convent. Part of the building was a laundry while the other part was a public house known, ironically, as "The Pioneer." It was hoped that the tenants would vacate the premises in a few months but they did not and much unpleasantness was caused by their continuing presence. Moreover, the building proved to be unhealthy and several sisters fell seriously ill with typhoid.

Six months later, Father Braun received a sizeable bill for rent arrears from the Dominican sisters. Dismayed and astounded, he wrote immediately to the canon:

"Permit me to reply to your letter, simply and with openness. It was on our account, you say, that the house was bought. I cannot deny your statement but it is not for us. These Dominican sisters have kept a considerable part for themselves, the publican another part, and we have the rest. We cannot sign a lease of which some clauses are out of the question. What is the use of taking upon ourselves the rent of 5500 francs (6500 including taxes) which we could not pay? It would not be honest. Besides we are not allowed the use of the chapel and we are not welcome in the parish church. What conclusion can we come to except to withdraw?"

Throughout this affair, my sisters and I have always had but once concern, to avoid being troublesome to you — you who have been so extraordinarily kind to us. It is to your powerful protection that the Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus owe the happiness of being a congregation We do not know where we shall go; never has our situation been so precarious but if we are to remain faithful to God, we do not think he will forsake us."

In this letter, with its touch of Micawber, Father Braun gave the canon notice of his intending, though reluctant, departure. He managed to find a pleasant country house at St. Cloud, a suburb of Paris, high on a hill overlooking the Seine River. The royal chateau, country home of the French Kings, occupied part of the magnificent park around St. Cloud. It was here that Charles X had abdicated and from this royal residence Napoleon III rode at the head of his army to lead the war with Prussia which was to cost him his empire. The house rented by Fr. Braun was not spacious enough to accommodate everyone and this time their burden was eased when a lady from Argenteuil made a request for a group of sisters to come to her parish in order to nurse the sick in their homes. The convent, formerly the local workhouse, was at 2 Boulevard Heloise. A small ancient town, six miles north-west of Paris, Argenteuil is remembered as the town to which Heloise retired in 1120. At one time the holy shroud of Turin was housed in a monastery there.

Not long afterwards, a small chapel was added to the house of St. Cloud. Father Braun rented a cottage close by so that the sisters could have daily Mass. This convent became the first novitiate house of the congregation and in 1869 twenty-one postulants received the habit in the convent chapel on the Rue Montretout. There were now forty-five sisters in the congregation. About this time, the founder drew up the final draft of the constitutions. When the new decade opened in 1870 there were three houses in existence:—

1. Grenelle: The Sacred Heart Hostel for working girls.
2. St. Cloud: from here the sisters nursed the sick in their homes.
3. Argenteuil: The Orphanage.

Soon afterwards a fourth work was added: The Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul appealed for sisters to staff the linen room of their orphanage on the Rue de Vaugirard, Paris. Reluctantly Father Braun acceded to this request, only because it came from the members of his own society.

CHAPTER 4

Only What God Wills

In January 1870, the congregation of the Servants of the Sacred Heart numbered more than fifty sisters. As yet, no sister had been permitted to make religious profession. A regular pattern of spirituality, enthusiastic and genuine, was apparent in each house of the congregation. Yet, even at this early stage, the founder deemed it necessary to warn against the danger of becoming too comfortable. He wrote:

"Beware, lest you depart from the poverty which has been up to now your strength and your merit before God. Recall your indigence when you were at Grenelle and especially at Sèvres in that famous castle of Caderoussel. You were more fervent then than in your charming villa at St. Cloud or your house at Argenteuil. Fear to hold off the divine blessing from your community by seeking after too much comfort."

Mid-way through July 1870 when the French summer holiday was at its height, an event took place, destined to change both the course of French history and the future development of the Servants of the Sacred Heart. The up-and-coming German foreign minister, Count Otto von Bismark, ever keen to extend the boundaries of the Prussian empire, gained Spanish approval to have a prince of the German house of Hohenzollern accepted as a candidate for the vacant Spanish throne. This proposal angered the ageing and ailing French emperor. He demanded the withdrawal of Prince Leopold's claim and demanded an assurance that such a proposal would never be repeated.

King William, Emperor of Prussia, subsequently met the French foreign minister, Count Benedotti, to discuss the whole matter. Afterwards, reporting on the meeting, Bismark insinuated that during the meeting his emperor had been insulted by the French. This so enraged Napoleon III that, without consultation or hesitation, he declared war on Germany. The French army, poorly equipped and ill-prepared for war was vastly outnumbered by the Prussian troops. In addition, the French troops were slow to mobilise. Secretly, the German army had been preparing for three years to invade France. They had carefully mapped out the roads and estimated the carrying capacity of the railways which at that time were a new and important means of military transportation. The French greeted the news of the outbreak of war with mixed reactions.

In Paris, the Servants of the Sacred Heart were aghast. Some of the sisters were German and, immediately following the declaration of war, all German nationals were ordered to return to their homeland. This caused a depletion in the community, at Grenelle especially. Within a short time, the sisters vacated the convent and went to nearby Vaugirard where they lived in the basement of the orphanage.

The French clergy, secular and regular, at once offered themselves to the military authorities to serve as chaplains to the troops, most of whom were nominally Catholic. Sadly, due to indifference or jealousy, only the secular clergy were accepted to serve. The rest were only permitted to serve as chaplains in the many ambulances set up at various points in Paris. The Lazarists, Marists and Jesuits worked heroically during the hot months of July, August and September. The secular clergy and those belonging to communities of priests, promptly volunteered to go to the front where very soon the numbers of wounded and dying were beyond imagining.

Father Braun hurried to his native Lorraine, knowing that St. Avold would once again witness a further scene of battle and carnage. At the outset of the war, two battles were lost to the French, one in Alsace and another in Lorraine. Early in August, the German army attempted to blow up the railway line between the two important military stations at Bitche and St. Avold. (1) After a series of struggles between the French and German troops, the third French army, under Marshal Bazaine, took refuge in the fortress of Metz, not far from St. Avold. It was in this largely obsolete fortress that the marshal was beleaguered by the Germans, he and the 170,000 soldiers under his command. Leaving a force to invade the fortress, the rest of the German army turned in pursuit of the other half of Napoleon's troops, under Marshal McMahon, surrounding them at Sedan, near the Belgian border. There a decisive battle was fought on September 1st which resulted in the surrender of the whole French army with Napoleon III himself signing the surrender document in person. So ended the reign of the last French emperor. Shortly afterwards, Napoleon III with his Empress Eugenie (2) and their son Louis, found refuge in England.

The horrors and scenes of carnage reported daily in the English and French press, told of huge numbers of wounded soldiers, some of whom lay stricken on the field of battle for twenty-four hours before aid came to them. In the Jesuit college of Metz, where once Father Braun had taught, five hundred soldiers lay wounded. A young sister of Charity was shot dead as she ministered to a young soldier shot down in battle. During the two months he spent in St. Avold, the founder wrote regularly to the sisters left behind in Paris. Many of them

nursed the wounded in the ambulances that were hurriedly set up in Paris. Father Braun wrote from the home which once again he was sharing with his sisters:

"If Father le Prevost has not taken over direction of the four houses of St. Cloud and Argenteuil the sisters will put themselves under the direction of their respective parish priests. It is impossible to describe to you what is happening at this very moment before my eyes. Across the breadth of our streets soldiers have been passing by since eleven o'clock without interruption. General Frossard, to whom I addressed my request for the establishment of an ambulance, received a sudden order to depart yesterday with sixty thousand men; the same evening Marshal Bazaine replaced him with sixty thousand other soldiers."

Father Braun continued daily to write to the sisters, keeping them informed of events. Some of his letters probably never arrived. As the weeks went by, he wrote with growing feelings of isolation and powerlessness. He was undecided whether to remain at St. Avold or somehow to make his way back to Paris. The letters that did arrive reveal his future plans for the congregation. He envisaged a novitiate where the sisters, whose initial formation had been scant, could return for a time when the days of war were over. During these weeks of separation and growing insecurity, his devotion to the Sacred Heart deepened. He read widely, as is evident from the copious quotations contained in his letters. He copied out lengthy passages from the writings of St. Francis de Sales, St. Bernard, St. Ignatius, quoting also from the writings of Father Gustav Ravignan S.J. and Mgr. de Segur, both well-known spiritual writers of the day.

Not surprisingly, worn out by constant ministering to the hundreds of wounded soldiers and wearied by the constant barrage of gun battle, Father Braun became quite ill. Weakened by a chronic chest ailment, he found difficulty in breathing. Gone now was the quiet peace of the once restful St. Avold; now it was haunted by the cries of the wounded and the heavy poundings of military transport. As always, compassion for those in need took precedence over his own well-being. Saddened as he watched some of the soldiers pass the church without entering, he wrote of how much they missed by not going within to pray where "they would find consolation for their sorry plight, far from their homeland, their family."

As the weeks passed and the atmosphere around him became even more fraught with uncertainty and danger, the founder's fears increased for his own safety and that of his faraway sisters. He now began to question the wisdom of forming a religious congregation, when so soon afterwards he was separated from those who relied so

much on his support and guidance. On September 3rd 1870, he wrote to the sisters, now dispersed all over Paris, revealing his growing fears for their safety, his own powerlessness in the face of the present situation, his mounting depression at the prospect of what lay ahead. However, towards the end of the letter, regaining his fervent trust in the Sacred Heart, he ended with this apt quotation from St. Francis de Sales:

“What is going to happen tomorrow? Nothing but that which God wills. He will not ask for anything but what is to his greater glory.”

Unknown to Father Braun, on the very day on which he penned these words, God was guiding his congregation in a hitherto unthought of direction.

Notes

- (1) The Tablet, July 30th 1870.
- (2) Napoleon III and Empress Eugenie settle in Chislehurst, Kent.
- (3) Empress Eugenie built and endowed Farnborough Abbey, Surrey, in memory of her husband and son. She herself is buried there. The abbey is not far from St. Teresa's Convent, Dockenfield.
- (4) Father Baumont was one of the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul. He served in the German Church, Adler Street, London E.1 from 1870–1871. He may have accompanied Father Braun to London. He was present at the ceremonies of clothing and profession held in St. Vincent de Paul's Stratford on May 4th, 1871.
- (5) Father Planchat was also a confrère of Father Braun. He was martyred during the Paris commune on May 26th, 1871. See “Le Pere Planchat un Pretre des Faubourgs” par Victor Dugast 1962.
- (6) Father Ravignan assisted Father, later Cardinal Manning, at his first Mass which was celebrated in the Jesuit Church, Farm Street, London.

CHAPTER 5

Exile in England

The horror of the war in France aroused an immense wave of sympathy across the channel, both in England and in Ireland. Queen Victoria's visit to Paris during the Great Exhibition of 1851 had strengthened the ties between England and France. In 1870, the International Red Cross (1) was founded in London to aid the wounded soldiers, irrespective of nationality. Workers of all classes of society banded together to collect food parcels, bandages and medicines to ship across to France for the relief of the wounded. Many Irish and English girls joined the International Red Cross Society. A relief fund was set up at the Mansion House in London under the presidency of the Archbishop of Paris. Cardinal Manning was invited to sit on the committee of the London branch. Later, during the terrible days of the Paris commune, when Archbishop Darboy was taken hostage, the Cardinal (2) took over the presidency of the fund. His appeals to the people of London for contributions to the fund met with an amazing response.

As the care of the wounded and homeless in time of war was not guaranteed by the state, it was left to private organisations to provide for them. Throughout the month of August, the exodus from Paris continued. An ever-mounting stream of fleeing people flocked to the shores of France, en route for refuge in England, on whatever craft was available by night or day. They included families from the French capital, religious communities, members of the aristocracy, English men and women who had set up home in Paris. The crowded trains to Boulogne were a nightmare but those who managed to secure a place on one were thankful to be moving away from the horror of Paris.

During the months of war, the Servants of the Sacred Heart devoted their days and nights to nursing the hundreds of wounded soldiers in various parts of Paris. (3) The sisters of St. Cloud were invited by Mgr. Mabile to care for the wounded in the ambulance established at the royal chateau there. The bridge across the Seine at Argenteuil was blown up forcing the sisters there to leave, barely in time to catch the last train for Paris where they found their way to the Sacred Heart Shelter in Grenelle, vacant because the German girls had by now left France. Those still in the orphanage at Vaugirard spent most of their time in the basement of the building, grateful for the safety it provided.

As the month of August came to its close, it was obvious that conditions in Paris would worsen. An Irish postulant, Josephine Gibson, managed to obtain a passport to England. It is reasonable to suppose that she first came into contact with the Servants of the Sacred Heart as a Red Cross worker in one of the Paris ambulances. On August 26th 1870, supplied with an arm-band of the Red Cross, this brave girl crossed the channel taking with her three Servants of the Sacred Heart. Thus did the first dazed members of the congregation arrive in London. Next day, Sister Josephine was received at Archbishop's House by Cardinal Manning. Ever ready to come to the aid of anyone in distress, the archbishop listened with compassion as she related to him the plight of the sisters in France. Readily he gave her permission to accompany another group of sisters to London. He gave her a crucifix as a gift for Father Braun, at the same time warmly welcoming the displaced founder to London.

Overjoyed by this unexpected turn of events, Sister Josephine returned to Paris. The other three sisters were welcomed and given a home by the kindly Sisters of Nazareth, in Hammersmith, West London. (4) Arrived back in Paris, Sister Josephine related to Father le Prevost all that had happened since she left Paris in August, and, with his permission, she returned to London with five sisters from the Vaugirard orphanage. They arrived in London on September 3rd, the day on which Father Braun had written with such anguish about the future of his congregation. Three of the sisters were again welcomed into the community at Hammersmith while two received a warm welcome from the Mercy Sisters at Bermondsey.

Undaunted, Sister Josephine made a third trip across the channel, this time in search of Father Braun, in company with a Sister Augusta. They travelled by train across Belgium and Luxembourg, arriving at St. Avold, now under German occupation, as evening approached. Answering a knock at the door, Jeanne Braun was astounded to see on her doorstep two travel-stained ladies in the company of two German soldiers, who had kindly conducted the travellers from the railway station to the Rue Hambourg and carried their baggage. Just at that moment, the founder was writing another of his letters to the Servants of the Sacred Heart, when he was interrupted so surprisingly and with so much delight. He had just written:

"St. Delphine (5) wrote to her husband, St. Eleazar, (6) complaining that he left her without news during a long absence. The saint replied to her "If you seek me, if you sigh after my return, you shall find me in the wound of the Heart of Jesus. It is there that I dwell and that you can meet me." May I say the same to you. Meanwhile, I bless you."

Great was their joy as founder and sisters related their many adventures and experiences over the past few months. Next day with a total disregard for ecclesiastical protocol, Father Braun gave the habit to Josephine Gibson, from now on to be known as Sister Mary of Jesus. (7) Next morning, all three left St. Avold on the first stage of the journey back. Imagine their astonishment, when passing through the small town of Saarbrucken they met one of their sisters making her way to Cologne. It was in this town that the German sisters had taken refuge following the law ordering all German nationals to leave France. Here, in embryo, the three future provinces of the congregation, French, German, English, met on this small town street. Together they travelled to Cologne where they were received with delight by the twenty sisters already established there.

Continuing by train across Belgium, and then from Boulogne to Dover by boat, the weary travellers arrived in London on September 20th 1870. Father Braun was warmly received by the Marist Fathers in Underwood Road, East London. The superior, Father Stephen Chaurin, S.M., (8) was French as were most of the Fathers. Next day the founder was received by Cardinal Manning at Archbishop's House. He gave Father Braun permission to open houses anywhere in the archdiocese and, giving him a sum of money to cover immediate expenses, he left him with these words, "Go and work like a good soldier of Christ."

Henry Edward Manning was born in Totteridge, Hertfordshire, in 1808. In 1832 he was ordained for the Anglican ministry. He married Caroline Sargent, daughter of his first rector, but she died of tuberculosis only four years later. In 1851, the year of Father Braun's ordination, Henry Edward Manning was received into the church and shortly afterwards he left England to study for the priesthood in Rome. In 1865 he succeeded Cardinal Wiseman as Archbishop of Westminster and immediately he committed himself to providing Catholic Education for the 20,000 Catholic children of his archdiocese. During 1866, he issued three pastoral letters on the needs of the children of the poor:—to provide schools for them, to rescue them from the workhouses and the Poor Law schools and to provide orphanages for those who were homeless. "Anywhere, at any time", wrote an observer, "Cardinal Manning sought to relieve distress, to lighten the burden of poverty, to show compassion to the huge mass of suffering humanity who struggled to exist in Catholic London."

Anyone who offered to alleviate the distress and shame of the new class of society, produced by the industrial revolution, was welcomed and beloved by London's archbishop. Anyone, who had a cause, except the suffragettes, gained his wholehearted support. Father

Braun, then, was a man after the archbishop's heart.

The first convent of the Servants of the Sacred Heart in England was a rented house, 2 Eden Villas, The Grove, Stratford. Adjoining the newly-built church of St. Vincent de Paul, this first convent was small and unpretentious. Moreover, it was unfurnished when the sisters took up residence there at the end of September. Sister Mary of Jesus, with her incredible versatility, soon remedied this state of affairs. It is difficult for us today to imagine that, little over a century ago, market gardening was still carried on in this part of London. Potatoes and turnips were grown in large quantities and until 1855, casual workers from Bristol, the Midlands and parts of Ireland, still made their way annually to Stratford in search of seasonal work.

However, the industrial revolution changed, almost overnight, the face of this once pleasant town of Stratford which grew up, like St. Avoind, around an abbey church. Stratford Langthorne was founded by William de Montfichet in 1135. The coming of the railway system in the mid-nineteenth century further increased the importance of the town of Stratford as an industrial centre. In 1839, the Eastern Counties Railway was opened between Mile End and Romford, calling at Angel Lane, Stratford and Ilford. In 1870, Maryland Station was opened and the same year saw the inauguration of the North Metropolitan Tramways with a line running from Stratford to Mile End.

The quality of life in Victorian England depended very much on whether you were rich or poor. For those with money, life was more comfortable and enjoyable than at any time in the past. But, for the majority of the poor, it was little more than a slow death. Most of Stratford's poor were huddled together down narrow back alleys, unlit and without sanitation. In 1845, Parliament passed a law forbidding the erection of new factories for the purpose of carrying on "offensive trades", around the London area. Stratford, unfortunately was just beyond that boundary. So factories for oil-boiling, varnish-making, printers' ink works, soap and naptha making, each emitting noxious fumes, mushroomed all over Stratford.

The consequent, fast-rising, population-development was too much for the parish council to cope with. A local surgeon had complained in 1849, that much death and disease was caused by the fumes which daily poured from the factory chimneys. The only water supply for the tenants who lived in the several housing estates, was from the ditch or from rainfall. Although there were several pumps in some of the courts, these were usually out of order. In one of the poorest streets, Well Street, the cost of medical care was greater than the total costing of any one house. A group of ratepayers petitioned the board

of Health for an inquiry. Alfred Dickens, younger brother of the novelist, was appointed government inspector and in his report of 1855, he dwelt at length on the alarming state of the public health in the area. He summed up his findings thus: "The parish is unhealthy by reason of the many open ditches, the establishment of a number of offensive trades, the majority of unpaved courts and alleys, insufficient scavenging or street-cleaning."

Although steps were taken to remedy the seriousness of the situation, Stratford in 1870 was overcrowded, over-industrialized and polluted. Not all the residents were poor; the improved rail and road transport services attracted many white collar workers to the town who commuted to the city. But the majority of the people lived below the poverty line. Down Angel Lane, behind the High Street, there were little courts embedded together and overcrowded with half starved, ill-clothed families. Where the station now stands, there were many other similar homes. Daily, the households made their way very early to the factory where they earned a pittance, working in sub-human conditions. (9)

The Servants of the Sacred Heart, remote from the sound and horror of war, but no doubt wearied by it, quickly adapted themselves to their familiar work of relieving distress. One of their first, sad duties was to help prepare for burial the body of Father James McQuoin, (10) their parish priest who died in September, at his sister's convent in Douglas, Isle of Man. Worn out by ill-health and debts, he had made a short stay in the convent in Douglas on his way to Ireland where he had hoped to have a well-earned holiday and to regain his strength. Born in London in May 1825, Father James McQuoin was the same age as Father Braun and, like him, a man of deep compassion. He was ordained in St. Edmund's College, Ware in 1848. He built the church of St. Vincent de Paul in Stratford in 1868. It was he who invited the Ursuline Sisters to London and helped them set up their well-known school of St. Angela's, where he taught religious education for a time. He founded the first Catholic mission in Bromley and built the original church of St. Margaret in Canning Town. His funeral in Stratford, where he was beloved by all who knew him, was one of the largest ecumenical gatherings witnessed in that part of London.

The care of the sick in their homes was the first apostolate undertaken by the Servants of the Sacred Heart in London. A year after their arrival, there was an outbreak of smallpox in the area and the sisters were called upon frequently to come to the aid of the sick and the dying. The results of the 1871 census show that already there were fifteen sisters residing at the convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart

in the Grove. The occupation of each is described as a "sister for the sick". The ages ranged from nineteen to forty years. Two sisters came from London, one from Limerick and the rest from Germany and France. Father Braun remained in London until November of 1870. He said Mass on some days in the German Church of St. Boniface in Adler Street, East London, in addition to assisting at funerals in St. Patrick's cemetery, Leytonstone on six separate dates in October 1870.

In November, an appeal came for sisters to go to Darmstadt to nurse the wounded in an ambulance established there by Princess Alice, wife of Prince Louis of Hesse. Their royal palace was in Darmstadt. Princess Alice was the third child of Queen Victoria and she had been introduced to the sisters by her sister, the Queen of Denmark. Father Braun left London immediately, taking with him three of the Stratford community, and he reached Darmstadt by way of Cologne on November 12th. While in Cologne, he held the fifth ceremony of clothing. Father Dominic Devas in his book "Chigwell" (1929) comments on this "astonishing disregard for correct canonical procedure," but adds cryptically, "but what could one do? It was war time," and this was the truth of it.

On his return from Germany, the founder spent some days with the sisters in Versailles, who were still toiling under war conditions. On September 19th, the Prussians had invaded Versailles. From that day onwards the regular postal service with Paris had been suspended. The city's only means of communication with the outside world was by balloon and carrier-pigeon. The Parisians, determined to fight on, had ignored the unholy truce and were prepared for a long and desperate siege. Parks and squares were filled with cattle. All women and children were advised to leave the city; on the other hand, hundreds of country folk sought refuge within the city walls. Food cards were eventually distributed. All roads in and out of Paris were blocked. The twenty-one forts surrounding the city were fortified by the Prussians. One of these, at St. Cloud, was near to the spot where the French had set up an ambulance. The Servants of the Sacred Heart were advised to leave because they were in danger so they went to Versailles to help with the ambulance, organized by Bishop Mabile.

The sisters in Versailles had given up all hope of ever seeing their founder again. When finally he did arrive, they were overjoyed. There was so much to be discussed, explained and reflected on. Not until the siege was over on March 18th 1871, was Father Braun able to reach the sisters in Grenelle and Vaugirard. Many were the horrors and humiliations bravely borne throughout those desperate months by the

priests, religious and citizens of Paris. The awful Paris commune, which eventually brought the siege to an end, was fierce and bloody. Archbishop Darboy was taken hostage and later shot, despite the personal intervention of the British prime minister and Cardinal Manning. Finally, peace came on April 2nd. The houses at Grenelle and Argenteuil still stood, but the convent at St. Cloud was destroyed.

Notes

- (1) Archives of the society are at the National Training Centre, Barnett Hill, Womersley, Surrey.
- (2) In 1871 the people of Paris presented Cardinal Manning with a specially struck bronze medal in recognition of his services to the Mansion House Fund.
- (3) The Servants of the Sacred Heart served the wounded in ambulances set up in Versailles, Orleans, Beaugency, Vendôme, Pithiviers, Cologne, Darmstadt and even in Switzerland.
- (4) For further reference see The Tablet July, 1870.
- (5) Born Provence, France 1283, she became a Franciscan tertiary. On the death of her much-loved husband, she lived a life of absolute poverty.
- (6) Born Ansons, France 1286. Counsellor to Duke Charles of Catalina. Canonized by Pope Urban I as the apostle of Christian charity.
- (7) Professed on June 12th 1874 in the church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Homerton, in the presence of M. Francis de Sales and Father Akers.
- (8) Present at profession ceremony in the convent chapel, Homerton on August 13th 1877 and on subsequent occasions until 1883.
- (9) For much of this information I am indebted to Mr. F. Sainsbury, former librarian, West Ham Central Library, Stratford, London E.11.
- (10) "Centre of a Great Centenary" by Father Justin McLoughlin OFM Essex Recusant Vol. 18.

CHAPTER 6

Servants of the Sacred Heart

In April 1871, Father Braun was once again in London. He remained there until the middle of June. On April 30th he assisted at the burial of ten people in St. Patrick's Cemetery and on one day, June 11th, he officiated at twenty funerals. It was then that the outbreak of typhoid was at its highest. On May 4th of that year, seven postulants received the habit in the parish church of St. Vincent de Paul. Father David Mitchell, the Dublin-born parish priest, performed the ceremony in the presence of Father Braun. On June 18th another clothing ceremony was held. Two postulants, Rebecca Walker from London and Mary A. Madigan from Limerick, received the names of Sister Marie Auxiliatrice and Sister John Baptist, respectively.

The following year, Father Braun received permission from Cardinal Manning to hold the first ceremony of profession in the congregation. Hurriedly, the founder wrote to the superiors of the French houses to come to Stratford to prepare to make their first profession. The ceremony was held in the convent chapel on the feast of St. Francis de Sales, January 29th 1872. Thirteen sisters made their first profession; among them were Sister Francis de Sales, superior at Stratford and Sister Gertrude who had worked so valiantly during the Franco-Prussian War. Both subsequently became superiors general in the congregation. The group also included the superiors of the houses at Vaugirard, Argenteuil, St. Cloud and Pithiviers. Two postulants received the habit on that day.

Despite the increase in the number of sisters in the community, the Stratford foundation found the struggle for survival a heavy burden, as the following printed appeal suggests:-

The superior of the house, as well as the Marquis of Lothian, 15 Bruton Street, Berkley Square and the Marquis of Londonderry, 37 Grosvenor Square, W. London, who have willingly become patrons of the work, accept with thanks the most modest gift offered them.

N.B. The convent receives and accepts all the help with food, nearly new clothing, old linen, old furniture etc.

(History of the congregation of the Servants of the Sacred Heart: Thevenot p.87).

The sisters took on the added work of catechizing. The construction of the Royal Victoria Dock in 1850 led to a great increase in the number of ships entering the port of London. Many young girls,

temporarily out of work, were tempted into a life on the streets and made their way to houses of ill-fame down by the dockside.

Across the road from the Convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, the Jesus and Mary Sisters lived. Their convent in 2 Forest Lane, was also extremely poor. They had opened a small boarding school after their arrival in 1867; one or two sisters were French. Several of them died prematurely due to the polluted air and the extreme poverty of their life-style.

Early in 1873, Father George Akers, (1) who had set up the new mission in Homerton, a poor district in the extreme north east of London, invited Mother Francis de Sales to help him serve the many needs of his newly-founded parish. This is how Father Akers remembered those early days:

"Shortly after my arrival in Homerton, I looked around for someone who would help me raise the standard of the Cross in this mission. I was recommended to speak to Mother Francis de Sales, superior of the convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Stratford. Readily she agreed to help me and, daily, with a few sisters, Mother Francis de Sales set off for Homerton, visiting the sick and poor in their homes."

In June of that year, Cardinal Manning invited the Franciscan Friars from West Gorton in Manchester to take charge of the house adjoining the church which was, after all, diocesan property. Father Akers had just been given a plot of ground on which to build a church, presbytery and school in Homerton, and he was keen to have the sisters in his parish. Mother Francis de Sales bought the old manor house known as Sidney House in Sidney Road and on September 29th 1872, the Servants of the Sacred Heart moved to their new convent, though they continued to do parish visiting in Stratford until 1912.

By this time, the congregation, though still only in its seventh year, had taken root in three countries. It was becoming clear to the founder that the erection of separate provinces would be beneficial even at this early stage. In 1873 a house was opened in Vienna. An Austrian doctor who had seen the good work done by the sisters in the ambulance of St. Cloud, invited them to staff the famous Rudolf Hospital there. Later that year, Mother Mary Teresa of Jesus was named provincial of the Austrian province. Mother Gertrude was named provincial of the French houses and Mother Francis de Sales of the English province, still in its infancy.

Around this time, the founder completed the drawing up of the Constitutions which he had begun during his days as a military chaplain in St. Avold. On September 15th 1873, he wrote to the sisters

throughout the congregation:

“In a few days you will receive the Rule of St. Augustine and your constitutions. You will find therein nothing that you do not already know, which you have not practised every day during many years I thank the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the zeal which has led you to ask for them We wish we had more time and good advice to perfect them before submitting them to the Holy See, without the approbation of which even the most beautiful works become sterile.”

Earlier in the month of September, the English national pilgrimage (2) to Paray-le-Monial left Victoria for Newhaven, following Mass in Warwick Street Church. The pilgrimage marked the bi-centenary of the apparitions of Our Lord to St. Margaret Mary. Father Braun, accompanied by three sisters each representing the three provinces of the congregation, joined the pilgrims in London. During the stop-over in Paris, next day, the little group rededicated themselves to the Sacred Heart in the church of Our Lady of Victories, where the founder had so often said Mass and heard confessions. During one of the days of the pilgrimage, Father Braun “placed upon the relics of Blessed Margaret Mary, a golden heart enclosing the names of all the sisters of the congregation”. From this hallowed shrine he wrote a circular letter reminding the sisters of his purpose in founding the congregation:—

“To give glory to the Heart of Christ”.

“Without this special purpose, the congregation would have no reason for its existence. Other congregations carry out as you do, and perhaps better than you, works of mercy towards the poor. Your special mission is devotion to the Heart of Christ, in particular by making reparation for the sins of the world.”

On his return from Paray-le-Monial, Father Braun visited the convent at Argenteuil, which afterwards he designated the mother house of the congregation, and which from then onwards he made his own residence. From here he visited the houses in France and Germany, continuing at the same time to instruct the members of the congregation by means of written conferences and letters. In one of these conferences written during this period, 1873, he wrote:—

“Christ rebuked Martha not because she was active but he said only that she was too anxious. He did not blame her, but he forbade her to be anxious.” Why the anxiety? The good Lord looks after everything in the world. He clothes the beautiful lily, in which the eye rejoices, and the flowers of the field, with magnificent colours. He supplies the birds with the necessary nourishment; they do not starve. And we, who are destined to enter heaven, should we worry so much about nourishment? Jesus Christ says: “Seek ye first the Kingdom of heaven and its justice and all these things will be given to you.” (Letters p.58)

Meanwhile, the Homerton Mission continued to flourish though the scant resources made it necessary for the sisters to request permission from Cardinal Manning to solicit alms. By now the number of orphans had risen and extra accommodation for them became a pressing need. On the feast of the Sacred Heart, June 12th, 1874, a ceremony of clothing and profession was held in the recently-opened parish church in Homerton, dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Nine postulants received the habit and five novices were professed. Father Braun was present at this ceremony which was conducted by Father Akers. (3).

In 1875, the national press gave wide coverage to the wrongful arrest in Derby of two sisters from Homerton who were collecting alms in the town. Despite having relevant documents signed by Archbishop Manning and the Bishop of Nottingham, they were taken into custody. The document signed by Cardinal Manning declared:-

"An appeal to the charity of Christian and generous souls for the orphan and destitute children in the north and east of London. The sisters, Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, have established a home of their order at Homerton. Finding many children deprived of their parents or abandoned by them in the neighbourhood mentioned, the sisters have determined to add a new work of charity to those in which they are already engaged. They desire to undertake the training of young women. They nurse the sick poor of whatever religion." But the conduct of the Derby magistrate only did a service in making the home at Homerton more publicly known and thus gaining for it an increase of support.

Notes

- (1) See Random Recollections of Homerton Mission by Canon Langton George Vere, 1912
- (2) See The Tablet June 28th, July 12th, September 6th, 1873
- (3) George Akers was born on December 18th 1837. In 1868 he was received into the Catholic Church and then went to study at the English College in Rome. Ordained on October 9th, 1870, he was appointed curate at St. John the Baptist, Hackney. From there he began the Homerton Mission. In 1880 he was appointed president of St. Edmund's College, Ware, a post he soon resigned to start the Mission at Hampton Wick. He died on August 14th, 1899.

CHAPTER 7

Love One Another

In the spring of 1875 Father Braun appointed Mother Gertrude Schocke first superior general of the order. Though only twenty-nine when she took up this daunting appointment, Mother Gertrude was much loved throughout the congregation. During the war of 1870, she had endured much hardship. Shortly after her appointment, Mother Gertrude wrote to the sisters in the three provinces:—

My Sisters,

You will have learned, through our venerated Father Superior, the heavy and painful burden that he has placed on my weak shoulders, by naming me your Mother General. I had hoped, at the end of my three years as superior of the house in Argenteuil, to return to the ranks and to take up again the first charge I received when I entered the community. If I had ever thought of canvassing for the position of superior I should have been well punished for it now. God and my superior know how much this great responsibility for souls, with my little experience and my faults which you know, have made me tremble.

The sufferings that I have experienced are known to God alone and to our good Father whose encouragement has always supported me, especially at this moment when a new and heavier charge has been placed upon me.

It is consoling to be strengthened by Him whom we all love, and I must work entirely for Him, with the little span of life, which still remains to me; to serve and to sanctify this humble family, that I have always loved more than my life; I must confess that obedience alone has enabled me to bow my head and accept a charge that I have, for many months, tried by every means to ward off. Having found my only consolation up to now in obedience to our venerated Father, I hope, as he promises to do that he will guide me in this difficult and dangerous position; it will always be he who will command you and him whom you will be obeying.

Be that as it may, the time has come for us to repeat, with more humility and confidence than ever, the Fiat. "May your Will be done." The heart of Jesus will find the secret of how to make this grace flow in abundance, at the very time when weakness and peril abound

I trust in your good prayers
Mother Gertrude.



*Chigwell Convent, Woodford Bridge, Essex
Mother House, Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary*



MOTHER
BERNADETTE FLAVIN
1963–1965



SISTER
ETHELDREDA GLEESON
1966–1978



SISTER OLIVER KINANE
1978–



*First missionaries to California pictured with Bishop Beck of Brentwood
and Mother Antonia Philipps, August 1953*

Front row (seated) Mother Leontia Collins (R.I.P.)

Second row (left to right)

Sisters Gerard Dooher, Oliver Kinane, Ann Savage, Winifred Stordy



Missionaries in Chilonga, Zambia, Africa 1959

Front row (left to right) Sisters Kieran Marie, Mary of La Salette

Second row (left to right)

Sisters Mary of the Sacred Heart, Josephine, John Baptist



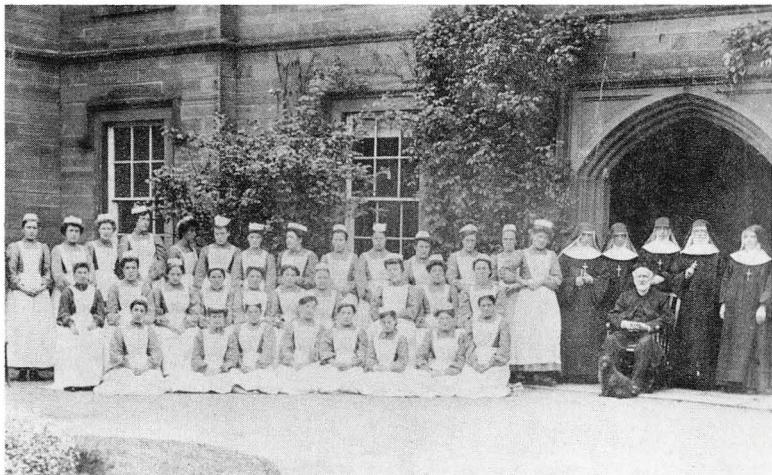
"With one heart and one soul"
Sister Clare Sadlier, professed 1912, died 1982
with Sister Ann Griffin, professed 1980



Kelton, Liverpool, Founded in 1897



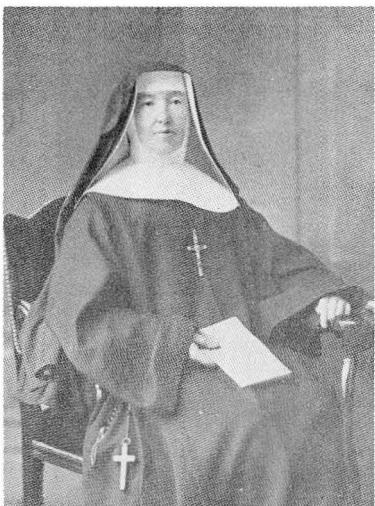
*Sacred Heart Adoption Society, Cork, Ireland
Sisters Mary Sarto and Adèle with adopting family and baby*



*The Community and Residents
Sacred Heart Convent, Durran Hill, Carlisle 1905
Canon Waterton P.P. is seated in front of Mother Ethelburga Ring*



*First Hospital in Cardiff, Glenrhondda Street 1912
Sisters Agatha and Flora with their patients*



MOTHER SYLVESTER HALPIN
1908–1927



MOTHER LAURENCE DALY
1927–1941



MOTHER ANTONIA PHILIPPS
1945–1963



MOTHER GERTRUDE
First Superior General
Servants of the Sacred Heart
1875–1881



MOTHER FRANCIS DE SALES
First Provincial, English Province
1873–1881
Superior General 1881–1887



MOTHER WINEFRIDE TYRELL
First Superior General
Sisters of the Sacred Hearts
of Jesus and Mary 1903–1908

Early in 1878 the new superior general came to London and in company with Mother Francis de Sales she visited the convents in England and Wales. Canon Thevenot in his History of the Congregation refers to her as possessing "exquisite tact and good sense, which helped her to restore the balance and give helpful direction to all."

A document, preserved in the archives of the mother house of the Servants of the Sacred Heart, Versailles, published on December 10th 1877 and bearing the founder's signature, indicates the remarkable expansion of the English Province throughout four dioceses, over a short span of seven years.

ARCHDIOCESE OF WESTMINSTER

Homerton Noviciate, Hassett Road.

Homerton Orphanage, Sidney Terrace.

- (1) Homerton School and caring for the sick in need, Balance Road.
Poplar School and 'patronage'.
(2) Mile End (Guardian Angels') and Shelter.
Leicester Square, School, Shelter and French 'colony', 5 Leicester
Place.
Hospital and French Clinic, 40a Lister Street.

DIOCESE OF NOTTINGHAM

Boston, Lincolnshire. Work with poor.

DIOCESE OF PLYMOUTH

- (3) Chideock, Dorset. Elementary school. Work with poor and shelter.

DIOCESE OF NEWPORT AND MENEVIA

(later changed to separate Dioceses of Cardiff and Menevia)

- (After change to separate District of Gwent and Monmouth.)

(4) Aberdare School, hospital and dispensary, care of sick and
 Hirwaun School poor.
 Mountain Ash School and the Catholic Church Centre.
 Raglan School

On the feast of the Sacred Heart 1857, Archbishop Manning had issued his famous Education Pastoral which resulted in the inauguration of the Westminster Education Fund. Within the space of a year, the indomitable archbishop had collected sufficient funds to build twenty Catholic primary schools in London. The Education Act of 1870 which went through parliament while the bishops were attending the Vatican Council in Rome, made primary education compulsory for all children of school age. Board schools were to be set up all over the country but no distinctive religious doctrine was to be taught in them. This clause shocked the Catholic conscience but at the same time placed an enormous burden on the Catholic population. The archbishop

redoubled his efforts to hasten the day when a Catholic education would be available for all Catholic children. Steadily the schools were built; the apostolate of teaching was regarded as the primary pastoral need of the day and all who aided him in his efforts to attain his heartfelt desire, were deeply appreciated by Cardinal Manning.

Although this particular apostolate was not until now carried on in the congregation, Mother Francis de Sales did not hesitate to give permission for the sisters to teach in the parochial schools. She was, writes Canon Thevenot, “reproached by Father Braun” for her action but the Canon remarks how the founder himself “failed to provide an example in this instance.” Indeed, by helping to further Catholic education especially among the poor in England, Wales and, later, in Scotland, another aspect of the charism was being recognised, namely “to do work not done by others.”

By the end of the century the Servants of the Sacred Heart were teaching in elementary parish schools in:—

ENGLAND

Kirtling Tower, Cambridgeshire (1878)

Bridport, Dorset (1878)

Blackmore Park, Upton-on-Severn

Worcestershire (1879)

- (5) Kingsland, 164 Culford Road, Kingsland, N. London, middle class boarding school (1884)

SCOTLAND

Nairn, Fifeshire (1889)

- (6) Oban Choir School, founded by 3rd Marquess of Bute, (1892)

- (7) Rothesay (1890)

Primary school teaching towards the end of the last century differed greatly from what it is now. In the infants' classes school monitors held up cards bearing letters or words and the class chanted appropriate responses. Most learning was done by rote, choral repetition. This included: tables, names of kings and queens, towns, rivers, mountains and lakes, spellings and poetry, much of it with a moral tale. Classes were large, children were ragged. The girls did much practical work, sewing their own pinafores, petticoats and samplers, knitting stockings for themselves and the boys. There was one “reader” annually. Writing was copper-plate and entailed endless copying out of moral maxims. Drawing and painting was mostly “object” drawing and music lessons were given over to the singing of scales.

Meanwhile, in France, much to the alarm of Father Braun and indeed the whole congregation, the health of Mother Gertrude rapidly

deteriorated at the beginning of January 1881. Finally, on January 17th, at the early age of thirty-five, she died peacefully in the mother house at Argenteuil and was buried in the cemetery adjoining the parish church. The founder missed her greatly; to her he had confided his deepest personal hopes and fears. Aware that his own health was failing, he had hoped that she would have lived long enough to give stability to the rapidly expanding congregation. A few days later, Father Braun wrote to the grieving sisters throughout the three provinces:—

“My Daughters,

You have been waiting for eight days, with understandable impatience, for me to send you the edifying details of the death and of the life of our much loved Mother Gertrude.

The heartbreak of your poor Father in the face of it, even though we had warning for a long time, prevented me from writing, and the deep emotion which grows greater rather than lessening, will not yet let me write about her even today. I will do it later, more fully and extensively, when I shall have received from you any documents you possess written by her, and those memories which you yourselves recall of this good and much lamented Mother.

It is unnecessary to ask you to pray much for her soul; it is your prayers that have prolonged, for some years, her life, so filled with labours and sufferings, all offered to the heart of Jesus for her beloved spiritual family. Your hearts, grateful for all the good she has done for you, will make the work of praying for her soul, sweet and easy.

One of her frequent pleas was that you would pray much for her after her death. But, while continuing to pray for our dear deceased and for all our sisters who have left us to enter into the great community of heaven, we must think of the future of our Congregation. All of you are now aware how important it is to implore Almighty God to give us the light we need to discern who is the most worthy and the best-fitted to govern, with your Father, this congregation sprung from the Heart of Jesus.

It is a question this time of placing at your head a superior general with a general council to govern the whole institute now divided into three provinces. You know that in addition to the general qualities which a superior must possess and which are enumerated in your constitutions, she will have to have them all in a special degree.

If, unhappily, which I do not expect, there were schemes or cliques, you would have to inform your founder immediately. The choice is even more important because the health of your father

declines and he must hasten to complete the organisation of your congregation, so as to ask for the Holy See's approbation as soon as possible.

It has thus been decided that when you receive this letter, besides the prayers, communions and good works that you will offer for the above intention, you will recite in each house of the institute, after the midday Angelus and up until the nomination of the Superior General and of the Council: the hymn *Veni Creator* and the anthem *Salve Regina*, with the invocations to your holy patrons.

Written at Argenteuil, Motherhouse, 2 Boulevard Heloise, 28th January 1881, the eve of the feast of St. Francis de Sales."

Victor Braun,
Superior General

In 1881, there were nearly four hundred sisters in the dioceses of Versailles, Paris, Autun, Nancy, Orleans, Evreux, Saint-Dié, Cambrai. There were seven houses in Austria and one in Germany. The English province, though materially poor, was far-flung and flourishing. Already, thirty-three sisters of the congregation had died; others had joined and left.

With the passing of time, old friends, closely associated with the early beginnings, died one after the other. Mgr. Mabile died in Rome in 1881 and shortly afterwards he was followed by Canon Codant. Father Braun's favourite sister, Jeanne, also died that year. Always she had been a steady support to her brother and indeed often welcomed many of his congregation to relax and recuperate in the family home at St. Avold. Father Braun felt these partings keenly.

Mother Francis de Sales was elected superior general in March 1881. Her presence was greatly missed in the provincial house in Homerton where she was much loved and valued. She left immediately for Argenteuil and then began a visitation of the convents in France. At the same time, Father Braun went to Vienna. On August 15th, the Superior General was present at a clothing ceremony in Homerton during which five postulants were received. On her return to France, Mother Francis was saddened by news of the founder's illness during his visit to Vienna. However, he was well enough to attend a carnival-type welcome which he much enjoyed following his return to Argenteuil on November 15th, 1881.

The beginning of the New Year brought no improvement in his condition. In February he wrote his last circular letter in which he spoke with gratitude of the apostolic blessing he had just received from Pope Leo XIII. Always, he had a particular attachment and deep loyalty to the Vicar of Christ. He ended his brief letter thus:—

“You will experience a holy pride and deep gratitude on learning that the hand of the Vicar of Christ has been raised to bless you all; it will be an ample recompense for all your sacrifices, a pledge of hope for the success of your works. This signal favour leaves you with the obligation of redoubling your prayers for the triumph of holy Church.”

Your father in the Sacred Heart of Jesus,

Victor Braun.

Almost every day throughout the months of March and April, the health of Father Braun weakened a little. He never left the mother house except to walk in the garden where he was gladdened by the sound of children's voices as they played close by. He had a particular fondness for these orphan children. Yet during these months, the founder maintained a close interest in the expanding works of his congregation. The original apostolate of 1866 had been to provide accommodation for unemployed working girls, to rehabilitate and find new employment for them, at the same time giving them suitable religious instruction and moral guidance.

Such an apostolate was long overdue in England. The Victorian Age, often referred to as a golden one, was an era of widely contrasting life-styles, ideologies and bewildering attitudes. The tremendous increase in the nation's industrial products and the wide expansion of her merchant navy, earned for England the title of “world's workshop”. Most of the country's wealth was in the hands of the shipping agents, factory owners and merchants. The wealth of the merchants was considered to be socially inferior to that of the rich landlords because it had been accumulated by dealings in the trade business. Nevertheless, such middle class families were rich enough to live in sumptuous houses, well away from the smoke and grime that produced their wealth.

Both the middle class merchants and, of course, the landed gentry, employed a vast array of servants. Carefully trained and supervised, they saw to the smooth-running of the household whilst their owner and his family occupied their ample leisure time in the many newly-found, Victorian forms of entertainment. In 1880 there were over eight million domestic servants in Britain. When a servant girl was dismissed from her post, either because of poor performance or moral disgrace, she had nowhere to go. Most of the girls were the

daughters of agricultural labourers or factory workers. The 1879 harvest was the worst of the century. It affected the whole of the country, varying in degree from county to county. Many reasons were put forward for the steady rise in the cost of living; the weather, high rents, insufficient capital for land development. By 1882, food prices had risen alarmingly. This decade also introduced the American grain and meat markets to Britain, and such foreign competition played havoc with the already depressed state of British agriculture.

Unemployment in the towns and cities was on the increase too. The new unions regularly called lightning strikes in order to gain their immediate objectives. Alas, such sudden decisions brought havoc to the large force of female factory workers. Without their meagre weekly wage packet, they were truly destitute, homeless amid a sea of strangers. Little was done to alleviate the distress of these hundreds of girls who were so often forced into a life of crime on the streets by these awful circumstances. Only two societies existed in London to rescue destitute women:

The London Preventive and Reformatory Institution was founded in 1851 with these objectives: to seek the fallen; to provide a Christian and industrial home for those rescued; above all to seek the spiritual reform of those rehabilitated and return them to suitable employment or their family. This institute at 200 Euston Road, accommodated 200 girls in four houses. A similar one, the Stranger's Home for Polynesians, Orientals and Africans was founded in Limehouse in 1871. Nothing was done to provide for Catholic girls similarly situated.

When, towards the last months of Father Braun's life, Cardinal Manning requested Mother Imelda, provincial at Homerton, to open a rescue home in his archdiocese, she readily accepted the offer. It was a work dear to the heart of the dying founder. The house, in the south-east London area of Rotherhithe, 645 Rotherhithe Road, was the property of the archdiocese. The house was opposite a timber wharf on the Surrey Docks. Standing between the gas works and a huge oil storage, no site could have been more inflammable. This was the first of a number of diocesan rescue homes set up throughout the London area in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. To give employment to the girls and supply a regular source of income, a laundry was set up. Laundry work was collected by a horse-drawn van, from private homes as far afield as Wimbledon. The girls were also taught needlework and cookery, and such skills were a useful asset when the time came for them to re-enter the world of work.

As the month of May approached so the shadow of approaching death seemed to make its presence felt, certainly in the mind of Father Braun. One day, having been to confession to the chaplain at Argenteuil he remarked to him when about to leave the sick room:

"Sometimes the good God gives us presentiments. Well, I have had one: that I am nearing my death. I shall not be here for long. As I shall not be able to return to Paris, I have chosen you for my confessor and director. Do not let me die without the sacraments."

On May 2nd he visited the novitiate for the last time. He did not leave his room again. One of his last acts was to complete the legal arrangements between the congregation and the Marquess and Marchioness of Bute for the establishment of an orphanage for girls on Rothesay, Isle of Bute.

John Patrick Crichton Stuart, third Marquess of Bute, succeeded to the title when only a baby of six months, in 1847. Educated at Harrow and Oxford, the young marquess created a stir in aristocratic circles by his reception into the Catholic church on December 8th, 1868. Four years later, he married the Hon. Gwendoline Mary Ann, daughter of Lord Howard of Glossop. There were four children of the marriage. Lord Ninian Edward, their second son, was killed in action in France in 1912. Lord Bute owned extensive estates in Syria, Palestine, Turkey and Egypt, as well as two castles in Wales. His ancestral home was Mount Stuart House, Rothesay, Isle of Bute. A shy retiring gentleman, a lover of solitude and learning, he was outstanding for his christian piety and charity. He and his wife committed themselves to alleviating many of the uncared for social needs of his day. He built hospitals, schools, orphanages and restored an old Franciscan Church in Eglin. The untimely death in 1900 of this renowned Catholic scholar and benefactor was a great grief for his family and his households who revered him as a trusted friend. His wife, the Dowager Lady Bute, continued to found and support similar institutions until her death in 1832.

Cotton mills were introduced to the Isle of Bute in 1778 and for the next thirty years, they employed 14% of the people of Rothesay town. By the middle of the nineteenth century the shift from water to rail transport throughout Britain had an adverse effect on the industry which led to its decline. The bad harvests of the 1880's and the growth of mainland towns such as Glasgow and Paisley, brought added stress to the islanders and their families. In 1882, Lord and Lady Bute built the orphanage in Baronne Road, Rothesay, and they invited the Servants of the Sacred Heart to take over the running of it. Only three sisters were requested, who were also expected to visit the

poor and to nurse the sick in their homes. Not long afterwards, they opened an evening class for adults. For each sister, the congregation received an annual sum of £30. The sisters were to be provided with gas and coal by the founders (8) of the orphanage but they had to provide their own food and clothing. The founders had the right to ask for the transfer of a member of the community and the superior general could change one provided she notified the founders one month in advance.

Towards the end of the second week in May, Mother Francis de Sales wrote to the provincials of the Austrian and English provinces, telling them of the serious illness of Father Braun. By May 14th, despite expert medical attention, it was obvious that death must be expected. The founder himself appears to have been the only one reconciled to this fact. He was well prepared for death — indeed he welcomed it. For days the sisters kept constant vigil by his bedside. On the eve of Ascension Thursday, May 17th 1882, with great effort he spoke his last words to his spiritual daughters, who were kneeling, grief-stricken around him. "Love one another", he said. The chaplain asked him, "To whom are you saying these words?" Father Braun made a slight gesture with his hand towards the sisters, thus indicating that he was addressing the sisters. This was his final command — indeed it was not his for "it is the command of the Lord!" Always, the founder claimed nothing for himself.

At one o'clock on the afternoon of Ascension Day, Father Peter Victor Braun died peacefully, surrounded by those he loved best. The following day, the provincial in Homerton received this letter written on behalf of Mother Francis de Sales:—

"Dear Sister Imelda,

Our dear Rev. Mother being overpowered with work and in deepest sorrow as you will see by my letter, has desired me to inform you of this very sad news, which will grieve you all very much. It is the death of our dearly beloved founder and father who breathed his last today at one o'clock. He had been confined to his bed for about a fortnight. At first the doctors said his illness was not serious but a few days afterwards they said that he had an attack of paralysis in the brain and congestion of the lungs. Two other doctors being consulted were of the same opinion and declared that his malady was mortal. We commenced a pilgrimage to Montmartre last Friday in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to ask for the restoration of his health through the intercession of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. Also we asked the prayers of all the sisters in the congregation, those of several other religious communities and priests. Our poor orphans prayed so fervently that they hoped with us against all hope that the Sacred Heart would spare him to us for a few years to guide and direct us. But God

had willed otherwise. His agony commenced yesterday about two o'clock. During it he looked at us once and smiled amiably, and gave us his blessing for the last time in this vale of tears. But we earnestly hope that he will continue to watch over our dear congregation with fatherly care from his heavenly home where we sincerely trust he is now enjoying the reward of his indefatigable labours for the glory of the Sacred Heart. He often spoke of the welfare of his spiritual children; indeed he gave his life for us.

Our Rev. Father is laid out in the parlour which is transformed into a chapel. He is shrouded in his best vestments. The funeral will take place next Saturday."

Peter Victor Braun died in his fifty eighth year. He had been a priest for thirty one years.

Notes

- (1) Thevenot: p.185
- (2) Headmistress Infant's School – Sister Maria Goretti Burke (1982)
Junior School – Sister Dominica Smith (1982)
- (3) Convent closed 1962.
- (4) Closed 1908. Site of school close to the Weld estate. The convent was situated opposite the parish church. It has since been divided to form three cottages.
- (5) School closed 1901.
- (6) Sister Cyprian Madden's mother was a day pupil.
- (7) Archbishop McIntosh of Argyll and the Isles was a pupil.
- (8) Orphanage closed 1930. Now home of Bute Fabrics Ltd.
- (9) The original agreement is in the Chigwell archives.

CHAPTER 8

Difficult Developments

The death of the founder, less than sixteen years after the founding of the congregation, was a great loss to the sisters in the three separate provinces of the congregation. He was buried in the cemetery at Argenteuil, not far from the grave of Mother Gertrude. Father Braun had spent most of his life in the service of others, irrespective of creed, class or nationality. A man of deep compassion, he was totally committed to the care of the sick, the poor, the unwanted, the downtrodden. Such a life of dedicated service was the fruit of his love of God which found its fullest expression in his great love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He did not arrive at the sanctity which marked his closing years, by an easy path. He himself was the first to speak and write of his own personal short-comings. Single-minded, unpretentious and without complication, he abhorred flattery, insincerity, any form of outward show or ostentation. For him there were two important things in life: "Jesus Christ and the poor". He wrote to the sisters in September 1872:-

"You do not possess enough to satisfy the requirements of so many poor, but their material sufferings are frequently their least worries. This old man who has lost his family, this child who has lost his father, no doubt they are suffering hunger and cold; but this may be alleviated by public charity. But what casts them down more is that they cannot hold a friend's hand, that they know of no heart which will open up for them.

You, servants of the most Sacred Heart of Jesus, visitors of the poor, nurses of the poor, shall make it your task to alleviate this suffering. You are going to the poor not only with food or with an article of clothing which you have produced yourselves, but you are going, joined to the Heart of Jesus, with love, which you have drawn from the Heart of the divine Master, and you give them words of consolation, in this way you help the poor more than by simply pitying them. You do not restrict yourselves to a hurried entry into his dwelling, you sit down and you listen to the stories of the fate of this unfortunate one. You help him to unburden himself of certain secrets which oppress him. You mix your tears with his and by patience and loving relationships you will revive love in these dried-up hearts.

What indeed can you do for the material needs of those suffering distress? What do you bring him to satisfy his hunger, his thirst?

Very little! Because you are necessarily restricted by the limits of your own means. But if it is a matter of proferring spiritual charity, your treasure is without limit because it is the mercy of God himself, drawn from the so very rich Heart of Jesus, and you will never believe that you have to stint yourselves there."

Father Braun was, above all, an ardent apostle of the Sacred Heart. He himself had a heart brimming over with compassion. He was strong-willed. Once he had set his mind on a particular course of action he was not easily deterred by the suggestions put forward by others. This is evident in his relations with Mother Odile Berger and Canon Codant. One of the early sisters wrote this memory of him: "His great charity caused him to love everybody but especially the working people whom he helped in their difficulties, and the poor always found in him a ready listener in all their miseries and misfortunes. He accomplished by prayer things which would otherwise have been impossible, for his greatest aim in relieving the body was to do good to their souls and to win them for God. He loved that amiable virtue of simplicity which tends to God alone. He was an enemy to all haste and bustle. He received without distinction all who wished to speak to him, never making them feel their importunity. Not that he always gave them what they asked for. When he could not do otherwise, he knew how to refuse without wounding anyone's feelings. He could not bear to see a sad face, saying, as did St. Francis de Sales, "a sad saint is a sorry saint".

He was indeed a man of God, human but holy. A true son of Lorraine, with all the doggedness of that much-tried province, he achieved in a fairly short life-time what others merely dream of. His spiritual testament is contained in these words which he wrote in March 1869:

"The Heart of our divine master is the centre where everything of the Old and New Testaments meets, the column which supports everything, the sun of the Church, the soul of our souls and the Lord of our love, the cradle of our sacred religion, the source of our mysteries, the origin of our sacraments, the pledge of our atonement, the salvation of the world, the remedy for all evil and the refuge of Christians. This is the way I understand devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, it comprises everything, corresponds to everything."

(Letters of Father Braun p.12 March 3rd 1869)

The government of the congregation now fell totally on the shoulders of Mother Francis de Sales. During the lifetime of the founder he had retained for himself most of the decision making in matters of importance. Despite the sudden heavy burden of her office,

Mother Francis de Sales immediately addressed a circular letter to the sisters in the three provinces of the congregation. She wrote feelingly of the untiring devotion of the founder to his sisters, his great love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Then she went on to say that the highest monument they could raise to his memory was to allow themselves to be continually inspired by the life and example of Father Braun, their now deceased founder.

The superior general immediately turned her attention to two unfulfilled desires of the founder; the retreat for superiors and the replacement of the already inadequate motherhouse at Argenteuil. The property there, which belonged to the town council, was in a bad state of repair; besides the lease was due to run out in 1883. Father Eugene Braun S.J., then resident at Lille, preached the retreat. Like the founder, Mother Francis de Sales believed that "good superiors make good communities". The second Project was not so easily accomplished. Finding a suitable house became impossible and in the end Mother Francis de Sales discovered that an excellent, though expensive site was available on the Avenue de Paris, Versailles. On June 15th 1883, she informed her council of this and with the permission of the bishop of Versailles, Mgr. Goux, building began. The foundation stone of the chapel was laid on the feast of St. Margaret Mary that year. On the following Christmas Eve the sisters took possession of their new convent, delighted with its spaciousness and its well laid-out gardens.

But the joy of the sisters was to be short-lived; as so often happens with building projects, this one far exceeded initial costs. Besides, most of the money was promised but not in hand, as the creditors wished. The bishop became alarmed — he did not want the diocese to be left with an unpaid-for building. In the end, Mother Francis de Sales was left alone to take responsibility for what was indeed the result of her own far-sightedness and unshakeable confidence in providence. The present mother house of the Servants of the Sacred Heart speaks even today of her wonderful trust, which was so evident in the life of the founder she had known so well. Amid all this anxiety over finance, the first ceremony of final profession was held in the new convent chapel. Twelve sisters made their final vows on August 28th 1883. The next four years were difficult for the superior general but she carried her heavy burden with that spirit of self sacrifice and humility which was so evident during her time as provincial of the English province and which had so endeared her to the sisters there.

At the general chapter held in 1887, Mother Francis de Sales was elected to a second term of office. Her appointment was immediately vetoed by the bishop of Versailles who maintained that due to the imprudence she showed in handling the financial affairs of the congregation, Mother Francis de Sales was unsuitable to govern. Mother Martha, Superior of the house at Cherbourg, was appointed in her place. Known for her carefulness in money matters, she was entrusted with the task of putting the financial affairs of the congregation in order. In the alarm over the outstanding costs of the mother house, the qualities which had so marked the government of Mother Francis de Sales, now faded. Some months later the new provincials were chosen by the superior general and her council. The Austrian province refused to accept theirs; with the approval of the Archbishop of Vienna, the sister chosen by the chaplain to the provincial house in Vienna, was named instead. The reaction was the same in England; some sisters had hoped that Mother Francis de Sales would be re-appointed to the office which she had carried out so well, before her recall to France in 1881.

A few months after the chapter, Mother Martha visited the English province. She was accompanied by Mother Alix, a member of the general council. (1) They were coldly received by a group of sisters in Homerton. Mother Martha informed the ageing Cardinal Manning of the situation and he ordered a canonical inquiry to be held. Those responsible were then told that they would be expelled from the congregation if they did not amend their ways. (As yet no sisters in the English province had made final profession). In spite of these internal wranglings, the apostolates of the congregation continued to flourish. In 1883, the Marquess of Bute had built and endowed a cottage hospital in the mining town of Cumnock, (2) in Ayrshire, Scotland. On January 27th of that year the first patient was admitted; he was six year old Robert Farrol. In time the sisters there came to be affectionately known as the Ladies from the Bute.

The same year a second home for destitute women was opened in the Limehouse dock area of south east London. Many years later, Mother Amabilis Keogh (3) who was superior of the convent there, wrote a brief memoir which is printed below:—

“This house was opened at the request of the great Archbishop Manning in a small house in Limehouse. The number of girls wandering the streets of London was increasing so rapidly that the sisters were obliged to take a larger house which, fortunately, was available at 2 Church Lane, Limehouse. There, for many years, the work of rescue was carried out under the most trying circumstances and with great self-

sacrifice. To recount the many conversions and happy deaths which took place there would fill a volume. Suffice to add, that women were taken from their abodes of sin, looked after by careful nursing and died, thank God, holy and happy deaths."

Strangely, there was no corresponding improvement in the internal affairs of the province. The general chapter of 1892 elected Mother Martha to a second term of office. At this chapter also, the Austrian and English provinces were represented only by their respective provincials. Yet the number of capitular sisters present was twenty-two which, of course, included the superior general and her council. The outcome of this was the separation of the Austrian province on the advice of the Archbishop of Vienna. From then on a separate congregation developed under his jurisdiction. Again, Mother Martha made a visit to Homerton after the chapter. She was grieved to discover that circular letters sent out from the mother house had neither been translated nor distributed. There was a lack of stability in the novitiate due to the fact that in six years there had been five mistresses of novices. The provincial there had the right to admit postulants and novices to profession but such admissions had then to be approved by the superior general in Versailles.

The last days of Cardinal Manning drew gently to a close on January 14th 1892. He had been a true friend to Father Braun and indeed to other founders and foundresses who offered to help him build up Catholicism in his archdiocese. During his long and able episcopate, the church had made great strides forward. As Pope John Paul II said, in his address to religious men and women at Roehampton on the morning of May 19th 1982:-

"The last century saw an amazing rebirth of religious life. Hundreds of religious houses, orphanages and other social services were established." The Servants of the Sacred Heart deserve to be included among this valiant band of women of the nineteenth century.

The new archbishop of Westminster was Herbert Vaughan. He came from one of the oldest English catholic families and was born in Gloucester in 1832. After his ordination in Rome at the early age of twenty two, he was appointed vice-rector of St. Edmund's College, Ware. In 1866 he, too, founded a religious congregation — the missionaries of St. Joseph, at Mill Hill, London. Six years later he was made bishop of Salford. The results of a religious census which Archbishop Vaughan ordered to be taken two years after he came to Westminster, showed that much of the "leakage" in the church stemmed from problems resulting from destitution. As a follow-up from this discovery, he set up the Catholic Crusade of Rescue whereby he committed

himself to finding a Catholic home for every homeless Catholic child. The outstanding features of the episcopate of Cardinal Vaughan were his keen interest in Catholic education, his care for deprived children and the building of Westminster Cathedral.

It is quite possible that the Servants of the Sacred Heart in England, were known to the cardinal before he came to Westminster. He was closely related to the Weld family, who lived at Chideock, Dorset, where the sisters had been teaching in the parish school since 1877. His uncle, William Vaughan, was bishop of Plymouth from 1855 – 1886. As a young priest, the cardinal had visited him there. In 1895, the archbishop made his first visitation in the provincial house at Homerton. He expressed surprise that as yet no sisters in the English province had made final vows. He also objected to the custom of sisters going to France to prepare for profession; such journeying was costly and besides, the sisters had to follow a retreat in a foreign tongue. As a result, Mother Martha arranged for the first ceremony of final profession to take place in the convent chapel at Homerton. Among the thirty-six sisters professed were:— Sisters Sylvester Halpin, Ethelbert Thompson, Timothy Stafford and Winefride Tyrell.

In the spring of 1896, a valuable freehold property appeared on the market. It was known as the Manor House, Chigwell, which is a small village in Essex. The house had the unusual distinction of being approached by two parallel tree-lined avenues and was situated a little further along the road from the King's Head Inn, immortalised in Dickens' Barnaby Rudge. It had been vacant since the death of the previous owner, Mrs. Gallibrand, in the November of 1895. Cardinal Vaughan would likely have known of the sale through his friend the dowager Duchess of Newcastle. This generous benefactor of the church had, in 1894, invited the Franciscan friars to Woodford and, with the Cardinal's permission, had built them a church and friary on the High Road at Woodford Wells. Cardinal Vaughan presided at the laying of the foundation stone of the church on May 18th 1895, just thirteen years after the death of Father Braun. Mother Sylvester Halpin, provincial at Homerton, was anxious to transfer the rescue home at Limehouse to a more pleasant environment and the property at Chigwell, with the adjoining eighteen acres of land, seemed an excellent choice. The Woodford friars were willing to serve as chaplains.

At a meeting of the provincial council in October 1895, presided over by the superior general, it had been announced that in future all extraordinary expenditure in the province had to receive the sanction of the general council in Versailles. In accordance with this rule, Mother Sylvester wrote for permission to raise the necessary loan in order to

purchase the Chigwell property. When no reply was forthcoming, she sent a prepaid telegram. As this failed to elicit a response, on the advice of Cardinal Vaughan, she went ahead and bought the property.

An interesting letter, written in 1905 by Mother Ethelburga Ring (4) then superior of the rescue home in Lochwinnock, Scotland, and later assistant superior general of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary, sheds some light on the early days of Chigwell Convent:-

"Some eight or ten years ago, the Manor House, Chigwell, was purchased for a penitents' home in order that the sisters could be properly trained before being sent out to the various homes. The canons-members of Westminster Committee heard of this. They appealed to the late cardinal against it. They said the place would ruin the diocesan homes. The sisters would take no interest in the homes if they had a place of their own. It cost £5,000. They had actually taken in some girls and gone to some expense setting up a laundry. They had to give up the work. The place was on the sisters' hands for some time. Then the Cardinal proposed turning it into an ophthalmic home for boys."

Thus the Manor House, Chigwell, was destined to become the first Catholic special school of its kind in the country. It was towards the end of Cardinal Manning's life that the first signs of special education were appearing in England. Provision for mentally and physically handicapped children was slow to come as the community did not realise the need for classification in education. It is true that a school for the blind had been opened in Liverpool as far back as 1841, but not until the close of the century was anything established for any other form of handicap. Then in 1895, the authorities decided to isolate from the healthy, those children suffering from a specific handicap. In future they were to be educated in schools specially equipped and staffed. A long list of handicaps was drawn up but only two were to be catered for initially, these were ophthalmic and scalp diseases. Therefore, if the church did not provide her own schools for children suffering from either of these diseases, they would have to attend the Metropolitan Board Schools.

The opening of the new school in Chigwell marked the entry of the province into another specialised apostolate. But, sadly, the occasion was clouded over by the silence of the motherhouse, concerning the purchase of Chigwell Manor House.

However pressing were the needs of the homeless and wayward women of the Victorian age, those of the unmarried mother and her baby were still more distressing. Victorian morality, with its false outward show of respectability, branded these mothers as outcasts of

society. They were deemed untouchable and no organization would support them lest by coming to their aid they might seem to be condoning their state. The chances for survival of the illegitimate baby were slight, the suicide rate among the mothers was high. Often the bodies of new-born babies were found in ash-pits or left-luggage offices. In London alone three hundred such discoveries were made every year. General Booth once described these babies as damned into the world rather than born into it. The only charitable foundation that existed at this time to help was the London Foundling Hospital (1739) but a mother accepted such help at a great price as she never saw her baby after it was born; the only alternative was the workhouse.

The Westminster diocese founded St. Pelagia's Home (5) in 1890 as a refuge for the unmarried mother and her baby. The Servants of the Sacred Heart were invited to take charge of the home. Two houses were purchased at 27 Bickerton Road, Highgate, (6) N. London, where mother and baby found a refuge. The mothers remained there for a year. Besides caring for her baby, each mother was taught dressmaking and cookery, skills that would stand her in good stead when she was able to re-enter the world of work. At the end of the year, the children were sent to a nursery, also under the charge of the sisters, in Chadwell Heath, until they were either fostered or old enough to be admitted to a Catholic orphanage.

Then, in 1897, Mgr. James Nugent (7) of Liverpool, although in his seventies, decided that the time was overdue for such a home to be opened in his native city. All his priestly life had been spent alleviating the distress of the poor and rejected in Liverpool. He had opened schools, night shelters, initiated the Catholic Emigration Scheme to Canada, designed to find a home and work for boys leaving Industrial Schools who had no prospect of finding either in their own country. Now, when others would have retired to a well-earned rest, this indefatigable friend and befriender of the poor turned his remaining energies to the urgent problem of the unmarried mother and her baby.

Mgr. Nugent managed to secure a rented house, large and airy, overlooking the Mersey in the south area of Liverpool. The agreement signed by Mother Martha and the Monseignor states that "only mothers and their babies could be admitted and their other children up to the age of five years". The home was to be non-denominational. Its only support was the laundry work which came from the ships docked in the busy port of Liverpool. The first superior was Mother Ethelbert Thompson who for many years guided and encouraged the sisters in this difficult but praiseworthy work of mercy. Reading the report on the anniversary of the opening of the home the medical officer Dr. W. McMahon said:-

"There is one thing that has struck me and that is the great improvement which takes place in the little ones only a short time after their admission. The same applies to the mothers. This I attribute to the great care and skill of the sisters and I cannot speak too highly of their devotion, loving-kindness and interest in all the inmates."

There is no doubt that this praiseworthy, humble apostolate which was pioneered in England, and later in Ireland, by the two congregations who look to Father Braun as their founder, would have been dear to his heart. On January 25th 1869, he had written to the first sisters:-

"Seek to be first only when it is a matter of offering and sacrifice. Be humble of heart, simple and modest in your dress and in your whole conduct. Love the poor and know how to understand their needs and their suffering. There are only two things in life; Jesus Christ and the poor."

From January 16th to 24th 1897, Cardinal Vaughan carried out a detailed visitation in Homerton. Some of the sisters complained that they had no involvement in the active works of the congregation. The Cardinal said this situation was to be remedied and apostolic work, suitable to the capabilities of each sister, was to be assigned to each. In March 1898, Mother Martha made her last visitation in the English province. The following month, the Servants of the Sacred Heart took charge of the convalescent home for French people living in London — a follow-up to the nursing care given in the French Hospital, Shaftesbury Avenue. Situated in Brighton, over-looking the sea-front, the home was the product of the unceasing labours, for French exiles in London, of Dr. Achille Ventras. The Brighton home was the last foundation to be made in England during Mother Martha's twelve year term of office.

On March 24th 1898, Mother Francis de Sales died, after a short illness, at the convent in Charolles where she had been assigned after the chapter of 1887. The convent in this pleasant small town, not far from Paray le Monial, had been founded during the founder's lifetime. It was in the Urbanist convent here that St. Margaret Mary prepared for her first Holy Communion. During the time he was rector of the Jesuit house at Paray le Monial, Fr. Claude de la Colombiere was extraordinary confessor to the Urbanist nuns and when he was chaplain to the Duchess of York at the court of St. James, he also directed several English girls to the same convent, who had come to him seeking advice on which contemplative order they might join.

Mother Francis de Sales was born Rosa Grathwohl at Beuzingen, near Stuttgart, Germany, on September 29th 1827. She was among

the first sisters who received the habit in the Dominican convent at Sèvres on February 28th 1868. On the feast of St. Francis de Sales, 1872, she made her first profession in the convent chapel Stratford, London, in the presence of Father Braun and the parish priest of Stratford, Dublin-born Fr. David Mitchell. Appointed first superior of the Stratford community, she accepted Father Akers' invitation to help him build up the mission he was about to start in Homerton, a few miles away. In 1875, Father Braun appointed her provincial of the newly-formed English province and during the next six years, the province spread rapidly even to Wales and Scotland. During the first election held in the congregation to appoint a superior general, Mother Francis de Sales, was elected, in her absence, to fill this important office. At the requiem Mass celebrated in the convent at Homerton, for the repose of her soul, Canon Akers preached the panegyric, during which he said:—

“Hers was a spirit of humility, simplicity, generosity, self-sacrifice in fact there was no self there at all. She it was who imbibed that spirit which your founder desired you to have and which may still be found among the first sisters who lived and worked with her. It is always the spirit of the first sisters which gives an institute its distinctive character and I believe I may say that the spirit of the Servants of the Sacred Heart is one of humility, simplicity, generosity, love of work and self-sacrifice, even to the point of imprudence. Good Mother Francis de Sales was called away from here to fill the office of superior general and when circumstances obliged her to retire, she did so in that same spirit and lived and died as a simple religious in absolute obscurity.”

The name of Mother Francis de Sales is remembered today with love and gratitude by the Chigwell sisters. It was she who planted the seed which has since taken root and spread throughout these islands and beyond, to distant Australia, Africa and America. Her love of the Sacred Heart was genuine and deeply-rooted. Her humility was practical in a way that could never be forgotten. Sister Finola, (Colwyn Bay 1982), remembered Mother Arsene Murphy speaking of her days as a young sister in Charolles and recalling how Mother Francis de Sales would bathe the tired feet of the sisters when they returned to the convent after visiting the sick and poor in their homes. In 1973 Sister Etheldreda Gleeson, at that time superior general, and her assistant, Sister Celestine Leonard, visited the grave of Mother Francis de Sales in the cemetery at Charolles. With gratitude and love, they laid thereon a red rose of fine porcelain, asking her continued protection and guidance on the sisters in the country she had loved and served with such devotion.

Notes

- (1) Mother Alix; Margaret Hassett. She received the habit on April 20th 1873 in St. Vincent de Paul's, Stratford. Professed on August 7th 1876 in the presence of the founder.
- (2) Hospital closed 1950. Convent closed 1976.
- (3) Mother Amabilis; Kate Keogh. She received the habit on August 25th 1881. Professed August 28th 1883. Aunt of Sister Tarcisius Keogh, Lewisham 1982.
- (4) Assistant general from 1920 until her sudden death in hospital March 23rd 1922.
- (5) The directress appears to have been a Miss Gee.
- (6) In 1919 the home moved to West Hill, Highgate. Convent closed in 1971.
- (7) Given special mention by Pope John Paul II in his address at Speke Airport, Liverpool on May 30th 1982.

CHAPTER 9

Two roads diverge

The last chapter to be held in the nineteenth century, took place in March 1899 in the mother house of the Servants of the Sacred Heart at Versailles. The English province was represented by four delegates, the provincial, Mother Sylvester Halpin, and Mothers Tobias Dunphy, Winefride Tyrell and Celine. Mother Camille, superior of the house at St. Cloud, was elected fourth superior general of the congregation. Two months later, the Decree of Praise — the first step on the way to papal approbation — was received from Rome. Accompanying the decree was a letter from Father Tezza, asking for the six testimonials, which had been requested in 1894, from those English and Scots bishops in whose dioceses the Servants of the Sacred Heart carried out their various apostolates. Without these documents no further progress could be made.

While warmly commending the apostolic labours of the sisters, the decree called attention to the following points:—

1. Final vows to be made after a five year period of temporary profession.
2. The fourth vow of consecration to the Sacred Heart to be dropped.
3. Chapter delegation to be composed of the superior general and her council, the econome, the general secretary and four sisters from each province.

Mother Camille wrote at once to the sisters telling them the good news. Then in August the new provincial appointments were made. Mother Winefride Tyrell was appointed superior of the English province. Her predecessor, Mother Sylvester, went to Rothesay as superior.

The twentieth century dawned over an England in sharp contrast to that ushered in by the previous century. The industrial age had changed the face of rural England. A new class of society had emerged — the working class. They looked forward to a better standard of living in which they, too, could enjoy the many comforts that went with the new Edwardian age. Not least was their hope of having a fairer time for leisure. There were great hopes for this new century; the gathering clouds of the next decade had not yet appeared. In a letter to the congregation, the new superior general spoke, too, of her hopes for the future. Her sentiments echo the last words of the founder:—

"What shall I wish you at the opening of the new century and the new year. I cannot do better than remind you of Our Lord's own precept on charity; "My little children, love one another, as I have loved you".

Charity flows in full measure from the Sacred Heart of Jesus and we would not be true Servants of the Sacred Heart if we do not practise charity in our lives. True charity shows itself in action, and it is this which inspires us to true love of our neighbour, even to the point of sacrifice. Sometimes we find it hard to put up with the faults and weaknesses of our sisters but we should remember that we, too, have our faults which others have to put up with and God will be merciful to us only in the measure with which we show mercy to our sisters. Charity is the most important point in the common life. It will not be enough to have deep piety, great faith, to be observant, active, faithful. We must also be pleasant, kind, humble, avoid ill-humour In one word, let us show in our whole manner, that holy charity which our founder has so strongly recommended and which should distinguish each Servant of the Sacred Heart."

Most of September and October 1900, Mother Winefride spent in visiting the convents throughout the province. At the beginning of the century, the Servants of the Sacred Heart were scattered over a wide area which demanded tedious and lengthy journeys by land and sea. The Catholic Directory (1900) lists the following houses of the province:-

Westminster:	Hassett Road, Homerton French Hospital, Shaftesbury Avenue 2 Church Row, Commercial Road 27 Bickerton Road, Highgate 684 High Road, Tottenham Manor House, Chigwell
Liverpool:	West Dingle
Northampton:	Sudbury
Newport:	Aberdare, Wales
Plymouth:	Chideock, Lyme Regis
Southwark:	Rotherhithe, Brighton
St. Andrew's	
Scotland:	Liberton, Edinburgh
Argyll:	Oban, Rothesay, Daliburgh
Galloway:	Cumnock, Ayr (orphanage for boys)

From 1900 onwards, it appears that relations between the mother house and the English province, particularly in Homerton, were on the downward trend. It now seemed inevitable that only in separation could the problems that had beset the province over a long period, finally be

solved. The founder had decided to separate the congregation into provinces in 1873. He did this, writes Father Frodl S.J., because he was "fully aware of all the disadvantages which might result from the diversity of nationalities. For this reason he resolved to establish as many provinces as there were nationalities and to give to his congregation a business-like form of organization". (Frodl; Life of Father Braun Ch. VII p.87). Now in 1902 it seemed that the development of this notion would result in each province becoming a separate congregation. Nonetheless, events leading up to the separation, although not recorded at the time, left behind painful and wounding hurts on both sides, which only in God's time were healed.

It does appear, however, that a meeting which took place in Homerton of the provincial council, presided over by the superior general, led to the final stage in the rift between Versailles and Homerton. On October 27th 1901, following the meeting, Mother Winefride made her last entry in the annals of the Servants of the Sacred Heart. The result of the meeting showed that the names of two other sisters proposed by the superior general, were added to the provincial bank account. The name of another member of the provincial council was added to the deeds of the Hillingdon property. Mother Winefride said that such action would be against the express wishes of Cardinal Vaughan.

In February of the following year, Mother Camille was once again in Homerton. The following circular addressed to the sisters in the English province, states the purpose of her visit. It is dated February 12th:

"I am here for the past eight days, called by the sisters — many of you know the reason why.

I saw the cardinal today and after having expressed to him the object of my visit — that some of the sisters in the province desire a separation, while others will remain faithful to the mother house and to the constitutions, I asked him to give me a line of conduct. His reply was this:-

As there are religious who wish to remain faithful to the mother house and to the constitutions, such as they are, and some who wish to form a branch, let every sister in the whole province, send her name separately to me, within a week, and independently of any superior (even the major superiors) stating: I will remain attached to the mother house and the constitutions such as they are, or, I will branch off, so that in this way the liberty of each sister may be safeguarded."

His Eminence said further that those who remain attached to the mother house will continue to work in his diocese.

1. Let it be understood that this must be done notwithstanding anything that may have been done in the past and signed heretofore in connection with this matter, and sent direct to:—

The Cardinal, Archbishop's House,
Westminster — London S.W.

2. Let it be understood what is meant by branching off — it means taking a new title, a different habit and new constitutions.

3. Let it be further understood that I do not, by these remarks wish to influence anyone, but simply that she may know what she is doing.

4. The local superiors will provide each sister with paper, envelope and stamp. I recommend myself to your prayers and

remain my dear daughters,

Yours entirely devoted in the Sacred Heart,

Mère Camille.

Now that matters were out in the open and could be discussed, there must have been a feeling of general relief in the province. Two days after the circular was written, Mother Winefride ceased to act as provincial of the Servants of the Sacred Heart. Mother Alexis was named superior in her place. On February 28th, Mother Winefride, accompanied by Sisters Amabilis Keogh and Laurence, had a meeting with Cardinal Vaughan at his residence. The cardinal told them that the separation from the mother house was now "an accomplished fact". That evening Mother Winefride wrote an account of the meeting:—

"I will not go into the causes which led up to it (the separation). Nor will I relate any of the painful trials which we have gone through especially since the beginning of the year in the provincial house. The cardinal said that a provisional arrangement had been made whereby His Eminence wished us to go to Chigwell and make it our principal house until matters were finally settled in Rome.

I asked His Eminence if we may take anything with us, as I fear the sisters in Chigwell are not prepared to receive us. The reply was, "No, Take the novices with you, where they can look out and let them have their exercises and take care not to do anything that would draw censure on yourself." I thanked the cardinal and said, "There is no chapel at Chigwell, only a small oratory," and he said, "You will get one."

On March 5th Mother Winefride, accompanied by Sisters John Baptist Madigan and Christina, made the last painful journey from Homerton to Chigwell. They were warmly received by Mother Osmund Keogh, superior, and the rest of the community, numbering nineteen sisters.

The outcome of the letters received by Cardinal Vaughan following the circular from Mother Camille showed that:

97 professed sisters joined the group who chose separation. There were also eight novices and one postulant (Kate Murphy; Sister Fidelis). Chigwell now had seventeen other houses affiliated to it. Three houses, Homerton, the convent attached to the French Hospital in Shaftesbury Avenue and the recent Brighton foundation, chose to remain attached to the mother house in Versailles. Those immediately affected by the separation were the sisters who taught in Mile End and Stepney; they had lived in Homerton up till now and so they had to move to Limehouse, already overcrowded — until a convent could be found for them nearer to the schools.

On March 28th 1902, Canon Surmont Edmund at that time professor of dogmatic theology and canon law at St. Thomas' Seminary, Hammersmith, was appointed ecclesiastical superior to the sisters. He had, for a short time, been curate in Stratford. A native of Belgium, he was ordained for the English mission in 1869. In a letter to Mother Winefride (May 20th 1902) he recalls how he came to know Father Braun:—

“Many thanks for your kind letter. I knew, indeed, Father Braun very well. We used to have a good talk together at night during the summer that the first sisters came over from France and it is very strange, indeed, that after some thirty years I should have to deal with the difficulties in which his children find themselves.”

For the next three years, Canon Surmont proved himself to be guide, counsellor and, at times, self-appointed administrator of the “Chigwell” sisters. He wrote frequently to Mother Winefride and his letters, preserved in the archives at Chigwell, show what a detailed interest he took in all that pertained to the regulating of the future congregation. Cardinal Vaughan had applied to Rome for the Decree recognising the group as a separate congregation. As usual, the wait was long and tedious. There was much to be done in the interlude. In some houses, replacements had to be made to fill the vacancies caused by the sisters who chose to remain attached to Versailles. There were many practical affairs needing immediate attention. A number of children and women of all ages were now under the care of the sisters. Mother Winefride began with a modest bank account of £269. The Servants of the Sacred Heart had always collected alms in the eastern part of the archdiocese of Westminster. At the beginning of April, the Chigwell sisters were allowed to collect in the West End of London and the western suburbs. Sister Simplicienne, the oldest sister in the Chigwell community, volunteered for this humble duty.

The Servants of the Sacred Heart were anxious to retain possession of the Hillingdon property, so recently purchased by their congregation, but, after an inquiry, Canon Surmont declared that the Hillingdon and the Chigwell properties were both recognised now as church properties.

On March 19th 1903, the long-awaited decree, recognising the branch as a separate congregation, was received from Rome. There was great rejoicing. Dated March 5th, the decree stated that the new institute would be known as the congregation of the sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The next few weeks were a flurry of excitement. Canon Surmont remained steadily at the centre of all this. He chose the design for the ring, gave Mother Winefride the title of Mother General, but he did allow her to help him decide on the design for the habit. On the Feast of the Sacred Heart, 1903, the sisters changed to the new habit. The happy occasion was tinged with sadness when the news came that evening of the death of Cardinal Vaughan. Always he had shown himself a true friend, especially in times of difficulty, to the two congregations who looked to Father Braun as their father and founder. Mother Winefride missed him greatly but no doubt she was comforted to know that she now had another advocate in heaven.

That she was a woman of faith is evident from the courage shown by Mother Winefride throughout all these traumatic events. It was in the same spirit of faith that she accepted the charge of the orphanage for boys at North Hyde in Middlesex. On January 6th, the late Cardinal had asked her to undertake this work but, as she herself wrote, "we did not accept at the time". The orphanage, founded by Dr. Wiseman in 1847 when he was vicar apostolic, catered for, at times, six hundred boys, many of them almost twenty years old. There was a school, where the sisters taught, and a number of workshops — tailoring, joinery, boot-making as well as gardening, laundry; and a brass band, well-known and remembered years afterwards. The Sisters of Mercy were giving up the work because of other commitments and Archbishop Bourne was anxious for another congregation to carry on the work. The first superior was Mother Laurence Daly, who was destined to spend many years in the exacting work which she grew to love and where she came to be greatly respected and loved by sisters and boys alike.

The first ceremony of profession and clothing was held in the oratory at Chigwell on August 28th, 1903. Nineteen sisters made final vows, seven made first profession and one postulant was received. The opening of the novitiate on March 4th, 1904, was another step forward for the new congregation. Two postulants were received: Miss Stewart,

Sister Mary Gertrude, who always delighted in the fact that she led the new generation, and Miss Sullivan, Sister Domenica. A few months later, Mother Winefride had a well-earned rest with her family in Monasterevan, Co. Kildare, Ireland.

Notes

1. Original letter in the Chigwell archives
2. Copy in the Chigwell archives
3. Sister of Mother Amabilis Keogh
4. Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Westminster from 1909 until his death in 1932. Born in Belgium, ordained on May 22nd 1809. Cardinal Bourne wrote of him: "He possessed a well-furnished mind, wrote French, Latin and English with equal readiness; in all matters concerned with theology and canon law his knowledge was prompt and accurate. Of all his gifts, he gave without stint to the service of God and the Church, and especially to the diocese of Westminster".
5. She was professed in Stratford the same day as Mother Francis de Sales, January 29th, 1872.

CHAPTER 10

Spreading our wings

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a great deal of interest in child psychology both in England and France. In 1880, a number of teachers in London complained that their classrooms "were crammed with a horde of difficult youngsters, urchins who could not be taught, ruffians who could not be controlled." The Education Act of 1889 authorised local education authorities to provide special schools for mentally defective children. Newly-developed methods of testing intelligence, devised by the Psychologists Galton, Binet and later Cyril Burt, were used to identify those children who fitted into this category of special education. Once more, the Catholic hierarchy looked to the religious orders to help them implement the new educational policy.

It was in this specialized field that the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary were destined to make their strongest contribution to Catholic education in England. Indeed, the Servants of the Sacred Heart had already pioneered this type of education when in 1901 they accepted an invitation from Cardinal Vaughan to open a school for mentally defective children. For this purpose, the Congregation purchased Pield Heath House, Hillingdon, Middlesex, and in July 1902 the school was approved by the Board of Guardians.

In June 1901, Dr. Alice Johnson addressed a meeting held in Westminster Hall, under the presidency of the Bishop of Northampton. The Universe, June 8th, 1901, reported that "in an earnest speech Dr. Johnson called for a rectification of the present system of casting adrift mentally defective scholars as soon as they had left school at sixteen." The meeting also expressed concern at the lack of legislation for the control of such girls who were often ready targets for exploitation by irresponsible members of the public. Later that year, the rescue home at The Croft, Sudbury, Suffolk, which had been founded in 1885, was registered as a home for mentally defective women over the age of sixteen. This delightful house, with two acres of land adjoining, had been presented to the Servants of the Sacred Heart by a Mr. Kelly, who, in 1913, died in Chigwell convent following a long illness during which he was nursed by the sisters.

It will be remembered that the first apostolate undertaken by the Servants of the Sacred Heart in Grenelle, Paris, was the care and protection of unemployed German girls. This work of rescue, as it came

to be known in England, was foremost among the apostolates engaged in by the Chigwell sisters. So far, the work was carried on in properties which did not belong to the congregation. This situation imposed considerable limitations on the day to day running of the homes. Mother Winefride was anxious, therefore, to establish a rescue home which would remain free of any legal agreement with a second party.

In October 1905, the Dowager Marchioness of Bute wrote to the superior general seeking her co-operation in establishing a rescue home in Carlisle, on the Scottish border. Mother Winefride expressed her interest in such a foundation, at the same time making it clear that the congregation intended to purchase the necessary property, even if this entailed payment by instalment. Lady Bute agreed to this condition. Mother Winefride next wrote to Bishop Collins of Hexham and Newcastle asking permission to make a foundation in his diocese. The bishop refused; subsequent correspondence between the bishop and the superior general reveals that his lordship did not wish to become in any way financially responsible for such a venture. Moreover, the Bishop had written to Canon Surmont on receipt of Mother Winefride's letter, asking the Canon's advice on the matter. The Canon's reply expressed surprise at the superior general's desire to "spread her wings so far" when she was already committed to the same apostolate in the Westminster Archdiocese. However, the refusal was not taken as final.

Canon Waterton, parish priest of Carlisle, strongly supported the sisters. A lineal descendant of St. Thomas More and a nephew of the famous naturalist, Charles Waterton, Canon George Waterton was a man of considerable private means, ever ready to build up the church in practical and spiritual ways. He was aware that at that time, there was a suitable property on the market. Durran Hill House, just outside Carlisle, had recently been willed by its deceased owner, Miss Mary Ann Lowery, to Mr. P.C. Howard of nearby Corby Castle. Miss Lowery, always a generous benefactor of the church, had left instructions that her house be used "for religious purposes". A distant heir-in-law, Mr. R.B. Briscoe, contested her will in the High Court and was successful; whereupon the new owner placed the house on the property market and sailed for Canada.

Interesting correspondence concerning the Carlisle foundation has been graciously presented to the Chigwell archives by Bishop Foley of Lancaster. Below is a letter written to Canon Waterton by Mother Ethelburga Ring at that time superior of the rescue home at Braehead, Lochwinnoch, Ayrshire. (1) It is dated December 8th, 1905.

Very Reverend & Dear Canon,
I told the superior of Liberton that for some unknown reason, Bishop

Collins was reluctant to give us permission to open a home at Carlisle.

If you think it would be any use to send Archbishop's Smith's letter (enclosed) may I trouble you to do so. If His Lordship would like to write to His Grace confidentially, he can do so. We have the school and hospital at Aberdare, South Wales. The sisters visit the industrial school and hospital at Aberdare, also the poor and sick of the parish. We are well known to Bishop Hedley. I sincerely hope, dear Canon, you are feeling better today. You are very much in our poor prayers here. I feel sure Our Blessed Lady will obtain all our requests today — if they are pleasing to God. With best and most grateful wishes

On receipt of this letter, Canon Waterton wrote to his bishop:— My Dear Lord, what a nuisance you will consider me but I want to do all I can on this feast of Our Lady Immaculate for the poor nuns who are so anxious to work in this diocese. I shall consider it a great personal favour if you would kindly give this matter your most careful consideration. I feel sure you will forgive me for being so importunate on a matter which is so important.

Respectfully yours

Our Lady did obtain the request so ardently hoped and prayed for. The bishop eventually relented and on March 6th, 1906, this charming house, built in imitation manor style, re-opened as the "House of Providence, Durran Hill, for rescue work or shelter for poor unprotected girls, supported by laundry work.

Principal: Sister Ethelburga, assisted by six sisters."

(*Kelly's Directories*, 1907)

A few years later, when his health failed, Canon Waterton retired to the convent where he was nursed by the sisters until his death there on February 6th, 1911. Mother Ethelburga Ring is still remembered by a few remaining girls still resident in Durran Hill Convent and by the townspeople who recall her charity to the poor, the imprisoned and the homeless.

Not surprisingly, all these proceedings took a heavy toll of the health of the superior general. Mother Winefride became quite ill, but later that month, March 1906, she was much heartened to learn that the constitutions had received the approval of Cardinal Bourne. They had been written by Canon Surmont with the valuable assistance of Father Thaddeus Hermans OFM of the friary at Woodford, Essex. A native of Belgium and a close friend of the cautious canon, Father Thaddeus began the long and grace-filled association that exists to this day between the Franciscan friars and the Chigwell sisters.

In May 1908, Mother Sylvester Halpin was named superior general at the first chapter to be held in Chigwell Convent. A former

provincial of the English province of the Servants of the Sacred Heart, Mother Sylvester was at the time superior of the Scottish house at Oban. Mother Winefride, the outgoing superior general, was appointed superior of the house at Hillingdon. A month later, Cardinal Bourne paid an official visit to Chigwell and expressed his gratitude to all the sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary who were engaged in various apostolates throughout his archdiocese.

The decision to designate Chigwell as the mother house of the congregation, was taken in October of that year. As a result, plans were drawn up to build a new wing in the grounds of the Manor House, large enough to accommodate the increasing number of boys in the ophthalmic school. This building was blessed on June 10th 1910, by Canon Surmont, assisted once again by Father Thaddeus, OFM.

During the lifetime of Father Braun, providence placed in his path at various times, a valuable friend and guide ready to assist him in his works of mercy. Such a guide sometimes appeared in the guise of a clerical canon. Similar canons reappear in the history of the congregation. Among them must be included Canon T.P. O'Reilly, parish priest of St. Alphonsus Church, Glasgow. He was also prominent in civic affairs for many years. In July 1910, due to the untiring efforts of Canon O'Reilly, the sisters were able to transfer their rescue home from a sordid tenement in Gallowgate, to more spacious and airy premises in the pleasant village of Barrhead. It was here in St. Mary's Home, formerly the residence of the Shanks family, that Canon O'Reilly suffered the fatal heart attack from which he died a few days later on May 10th, 1930. He is buried behind the high altar of the convent chapel which he had helped to build through his endless fund-raising activities and the constant encouragement he gave to the Barrhead community.

On the feast of St. Augustine, August 28th, 1911, the long-awaited opening of the convent chapel, Chigwell, took place. Cardinal Bourne blessed the striking new edifice and celebrated the first Solemn High Mass. The day was one of great rejoicing and marked the end of many years of careful planning and quiet money-saving.

For some years, Archbishop Whiteside of Liverpool had been asking Mother Sylvester to open a residential school for mentally defective children in the archdiocese. In 1910, a number of properties were viewed and on October 5th of that year, a property belonging to the Garsides, at Ormskirk, Lancashire, was bought by the congregation for a modest sum. A new wing was added soon afterwards and on Easter Sunday 1912, Archbishop Whiteside performed the opening ceremony of Pontville School. Forty boys from Pield Heath House

in Hillingdon formed the nucleus of this latest special school to be established in the congregation.

Despite the difficulties imposed by the war situation, four other foundations were made in the period 1910–1918. Archbishop White-side was delighted with the progress of the special school in Ormskirk, which by now was having to accept girls. In 1915, he pleaded with Mother Sylvester to open a second school for girls only. Hearing of a suitable property for sale, the superior general travelled north to view the house. But the taxi-man took her by mistake to what turned out to be a property of even more generous proportions. Situated at the end of a winding, wooded avenue and bordering the village of Woolton, Allerton Priory was built on a splendid site, with a fine view of the Mersey and the Welsh hills. Mother Sylvester spent six weeks in Liverpool helping to prepare for the opening of the school in September. Fifteen girls from the school in Ormskirk were the first pupils.

The same year, (1915) a permanent home was bought to replace the rented accommodation in Woodford Bridge. Bigod's Hall, Dunmow, in Essex, was purchased from a Mr. Fowler and the boys moved from Thurlby House shortly afterwards to enjoy and explore the sprawling house with its 130 acres of land. Father Dominic Devas in his book "Chigwell" (1929) describes the Hall as being "the most inaccessible spot in the world, a veritable oasis of muddy fields and even more muddy lanes." However, he clearly remembers today his 1929 visit to Dunmow, though memories of more salubrious sites have by now completely faded.

On November 20th, 1916, Mother Winefride Tyrell died in Hillingdon where she had gone after laying down the burden of high office which she had held, in Homerton and in Chigwell from 1899 to 1908. As Bridget Tyrell she received the habit of the Servants of the Sacred Heart in the convent chapel, Homerton, on December 8th, 1878. On January 8th, 1881, Sister Winefride Tyrell was professed alone in Homerton. On August 22nd, 1895 she made her final profession, along with thirty-five other sisters, in a ceremony attended by Mother Sylvester Halpin, provincial of the English province. Appointed head-teacher of Guardian Angels' School in Mile End, she was elected provincial of the English province in 1899. Mother Helena McCarty (Old Colwyn 1982) recalls how, when a postulant, she was one of the many who lined the Chigwell Avenue on the sad day when the remains of the late Mother Winefride returned to rest overnight in the convent chapel. The courage shown by Mother Winefride as she persevered in her efforts to discern the will of God for herself and those under her

care, points to her complete trust and confidence in the Sacred Heart. A woman of integrity, single-minded, uncompromising, she was deserving of the great confidence placed in her by the first Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. We look to her as co-foundress of our Congregation.

The demand for residential places for severely mentally handicapped boys was so great, that a second home was established two years later (1918) at Hillside, Buntingford, in Hertfordshire, not far from the country retreat of the Archbishop of Westminster. It was no uncommon sight to see Cardinal Bourne arrive at the door of St. Francis' on a summer's evening, accompanied by his secretary, Mgr. Elwes. Shortly afterwards, Mgr. would bid a hasty retreat from the parlour and say to the sister on duty in the boys' washroom, "You go and talk to his Eminence and let me get on with the washing of the feet".

Needless to say the numbers of women uprooted and disturbed by the events and effects of war increased tremendously between the years 1914–1918. Another rescue home was urgently needed in the London area. The Bishop of Southwark this time made the request for a home in his diocese. In 1918, "The Cedars", a fine house standing at the top of Belmont Hill in Lewisham, S.E. London was purchased and very soon the work of rescue was under way. Belmont Hill is situated between the genteel village of Blackheath and the swarming suburb of Lewisham. There was plenty of laundry work available to help support the home and at the same time give employment to the girls and women.

The proclamation of the Irish Free State took place in 1922. Immediately the government set about organizing various governmental departments to deal with the affairs of the new state. One of the urgent social problems facing the newly-formed Department of Health was the plight of the unmarried mother and her baby. (3) In 1889, the only society existing in Ireland to help these mothers was a Protestant proselytizing society. An unmarried mother could find refuge in one of their homes but her baby was at once taken from her and reared in the Protestant faith, either in one of the orphanages owned by the society, or in the home of a Protestant family. The mother was then free to return to her place of work. Many were employed as domestic servants in the homes of the Protestant land-owners. They received board and lodging in return for their services but they had no wage. Therefore, they were seldom in a position to improve their lot.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Catholic Women's Aid Society was founded by a Mrs. Neville of Cork, in collaboration with the Sisters of Mercy in St. Finbarr's Hospital, Cork. Accompanied

by one of the sisters, Mrs. Neville trudged around the countryside in search of a Catholic family willing to employ a homeless mother and at the same time give a home to her baby. These "boarded out children" were paid for by the County Council (a shilling a week) but they had no legal status. They were "Nobody's Children". Mrs. Neville was a relative of a Mr. Sugrue who was very much involved in the Highgate mother and baby home, then under the care of the Chigwell sisters. Having heard of this praiseworthy work of mercy, Mrs. Neville was very keen to invite the sisters to Cork to open a similar home. With this in mind, Mr. Sugrue approached Cardinal Bourne and the Cardinal graciously offered to purchase a large property at Blackrock, Cork, which was up for sale. Overlooking the River Lee, in a secluded site, it was ideally suited for this purpose. The estate included 210 acres of land besides a number of farm buildings.

On February 1st, 1922, the Sacred Heart Home was opened, the first of its kind in all Ireland. The Department of Health invited the sisters to accept the Cork Workhouse children, whose condition was pitiable and who had, until then, little hope of receiving any regular form of infant training, much less affection. Two years later, the Bishop of Cork proposed that expectant mothers should also be admitted and, to accommodate them, the extensive stable premises were adapted for use as a maternity unit. From the beginning, the well-cultivated farm was the main source of income for both community and girls. Vegetables and fruit were grown, cows pastured for milking purposes and butter and cheese were also made. But there can be no doubt that the production of so much food demanded continual manual work and we can only admire those sisters and their charges who laboured together in harmony to support both themselves and their young infants and children over a long number of years and under very trying conditions.

In 1927, Mother Sylvester's long term of office (1908–1927) came to an end. At the general chapter, presided over by Bishop Doubleday of Brentwood, Mother Laurence Daly, superior of St. Mary's School, North Hyde, was elected superior general. The election took place on September 22nd and four days later the new superior general accompanied by her assistant, Mother Antonia Philipps, was received by Cardinal Gasquet (4) Cardinal Protector, at his residence in Dorking. During Mother Laurence's term of office, the period of expansion continued and it is said that she opened a new house for each year she held office. In the next few years, extensions were added to the houses at Chigwell, Lewisham and Highgate. This last named, in Bickerton Road, had been sold in 1908 when the home was transferred

to ideal surroundings at Highgate West Hill. In March 1928, Father Dominic Devas OFM, (5) from the Woodford Friary, was invited to write a short history of the congregation and on October 28th of the same year, with amazing rapidity, the first copy of "Chigwell" was received by Mother Laurence.

The apostolate of teaching in parish schools was one of the first to be adopted by the Servants of the Sacred Heart in England, Scotland and Wales. Father Braun had not intended to include teaching in the works of the congregation. Nevertheless, he had said from the beginning, "Your duty is to do works not done by others" and in those early days, as indeed for a long time afterwards, hundreds of religious gave wholehearted attention and direction to this traditional apostolate in the church. On one occasion, the founder wrote to his sisters, "What then must be the attitude to adopt towards the children entrusted to our care? Are we not the guardians of their tender youth? We share the awful responsibility of each guardian angel. God has committed them to you as to the angels, that you may help them to the feet of Jesus. You must answer for these priceless jewels — a thousand times more precious than all the perishable goods of earth — a treasure which Jesus purchased at the price of his most precious blood."

As the work of expansion continued, a number of sisters were sent each year to train in the various Catholic training colleges now sprouting up in several areas to meet the ever-growing needs of the Catholic school population. In 1929, the parish priest of Southall in Middlesex asked Mother Laurence for some sisters to teach in the school which he had just started in his parish of St. Anselm. Two sisters were allotted to him and they joined the community in nearby North Hyde. Sister Mary Carmel O'Brien (Hambledon 1982) who taught in St. Anselm's from 1941–1964, wrote a brief account of her years there; the following is a short extract:—

"Father Buckle, our parish priest, was a man burning with zeal. He built a new primary school, and people who knew him said that he often wrote a hundred begging letters a day in order to get funds to pay for the building. Southall was said to be, after World War II, the largest food-producer in England. Father Buckle was a great liturgist. Even in those early days, Compline was sung every Sunday. The children were keen to learn in school and there were never any behaviour problems. It was not unusual to have a hundred children to prepare for first Holy Communion."

The Dowager Lady Bute was a constant benefactor of the church, all her life. She was extremely interested in various forms of social service which up to the time of her death in 1932 were still largely

voluntary. Nevertheless, the Marchioness was an exacting lady. To please Her Ladyship onerous tasks were taken on as in the case of Sister Colette Coffey, headmistress in the Rothesay school for many years. Sister Theodora Carroll (Homerton 1982) recalls how, to mark the occasion of the visit of Lady Bute to the school, Sister Colette decided to robe the girls in tartan kilts. So she bought a roll of tartan but failed to check if it was of Bute pattern. When Her Ladyship walked through the guard of honour composed of kilted schoolgirls, she flounced into the school angrily because the tartan was the one worn by the greatest rival clan the Butes ever had to contend with.

Notes

- (1) The home at Lochwinnock closed when Durran Hill opened in 1906.
- (2) The community and school transferred to St. Patrick's School, Hayling Island in 1972. The Sons of Divine Providence bought the property.
- (3) For this information I am indebted to Sister Hildegarde McNulty. Sacred Heart Convent, Cork (1982).
- (4) Cardinal Gasquet O.S.B., born London 1846, died Rome 1929, ordained at Downside 1874. Having resigned as prior in 1885 because of ill-health, he turned to historical research and produced many notable historical volumes. Member of the Congregation of Religious. Buried at Downside.
- (5) Father Dominic Devas died in 1982.

CHAPTER 11

Works of Mercy

The apostolate of nursing, especially nursing the poor in their homes was always close to the heart of the founder. 1869 he wrote to the sisters in the infant congregation:—

“Never forget that you are the servants of the sick. In them you give for Jesus Christ, not only prayer and advice but also your offerings, your nightly vigils, your unceasing and skilful care.” As yet there were few public hospitals in England and Wales where the poor could be nursed. In 1912, Mother Helen Murphy, accompanied by a second year novice, Sister Clare Sadlier, went to Cardiff in search of a property which would serve as a small hospital for the sick miners and their families living in the Welsh capital. To begin their service of nursing, they rented two adjoining houses in Glenrhondda Street. They had scant equipment or assistance but plenty of good will. The community was increased and the hospital became known all around the narrow, dull streets of that area as a haven of care and hope.

One of the early casualties of World War 1 was the second son of the Dowager Lady Bute. Lord Ninian Edward Stuart, whose birth in 1883 had been marked by the establishment of the Lady Bute hospital in Cumnock, was killed in France while on active service. His grieving mother wished to build a hospital to his memory and she confided her hopes to Mother Sylvester. In 1918 the sisters moved from Glenrhondda Street to a large house at 18 Cathedral Road, donated by the Bute family. Such was the beginning of the Lord Ninian Hospital which was to become a byword among the people of Cardiff and beyond.

At Christmas time in 1928 a rag-and-bone man, a Mr. Murray, willed a legacy to Mother Arsene Murphy, matron of the Lord Ninian Hospital. Mother Arsene instantly called in the builders to add a much-needed wing to the existing hospital. (1) The Murray Wing came into existence almost overnight. But the matron failed to inform the Bute trustees of this legacy and, as it would be impossible to demolish the wing, Her Ladyship dismissed the community. She then called on Archbishop Mostyn of Cardiff to inform him of the situation and to ask his permission to invite another congregation to staff the Lord Ninian. The Archbishop refused to do as she wished. “My daughters have done no wrong and no other sisters will come”, he declared. Mother Arsene and her community had already left. They closed the

shutters, took the stretcher poles (relics of Glenrhondda Street) and made their way to their friend, Professor Strachan. The professor, who had just moved to a larger home, also in Cathedral Road, offered the sisters his empty house at 20 Windsor Road. A famous man in the medical world, he appreciated the services of the sisters and realised that Cardiff's loss would be greater than Lady Bute's anger. In the end, the dowager realised that she had acted precipitately. After consultation with Mother Laurence, the sisters returned on condition that the lease was handed over to them — as it happened the lease did not change hands for many years to come.

The Education Act of 1907 empowered local authorities to appoint school medical officers and to provide "open-air schools for children who by reason of impaired health need a change of environment or cannot, without risk to their health or educational development, be educated under the normal regime of ordinary school". The first open-air school opened at Forest Hill in South East London in 1908. This Education Act only became fully operational in 1918 when the provision of similar schools for Catholic children now became a necessity. In 1926, the Bishop of Portsmouth invited Mother Laurence to open a school for delicate children in his diocese. "Chateau Blanc", a fine house on the sea-front in Hayling Island, was bought from Lady Peat and the school opened in January 1927, as St. Patrick's Open-Air School. (2)

The following year, on July 25th, the Chigwell school for boys suffering from ophthalmic diseases was adapted so as to admit boys of delicate health. Most of them came from the London boroughs. The school reopened as St. John's open-air school and some months later several acres of land adjoining the convent were bought so as to provide more outdoor space. The education authorities looked to these new residential schools for delicate children to provide "an ordered life in pleasant surroundings, with rest periods and abundance of fresh air and good food".

A fire broke out in St. Patrick's open-air school very early on the morning of August 9th, 1929. The tragic event received national press coverage and aroused the sympathy of the nation. Next day "The Daily Mirror" reported the tragedy:— One of seven heroic nuns lost her life in a fire which destroyed a wing of St. Patrick's Convent, Hayling Island, near Portsmouth, yesterday. After helping to save fifty-eight convalescent children, inmates from London elementary schools, the acting Reverend Mother, Sister Celestine Harrington, was trapped in an upper room. Her charred body was found by firemen. It is thought she was going to the altar to save the Blessed Sacrament when overcome by fumes.

All the nuns fought desperately against clouds of smoke in their efforts to reach the children on the second floor who, unaware of the tragedy, gleefully watched the flames from the garden.

Another heroine in the rescue work was a sister who first discovered the fire and mobilised the other sisters in saving the children. She declined to give her name. "I did no more than any of the other sisters", she said.

"At 1.30 I heard a sound of crackling in my bedroom on the second floor. I ran to the window and saw the glow of flames underneath. I then called the other sisters. There were seven of us. Sister Celestine was with us. We immediately aroused the children, who were sleeping in a dozen different dormitories. Their ages ranged from six to fourteen. In about ten minutes we had all the children in the garden.

We missed Sister Celestine immediately after we had counted the children. We went back into the building, as far as the flames would let us and called. Her death was a dreadful blow to us after we had saved the children."

The publicity given to the work of the sisters in Hayling, exemplified in the way they risked their lives to protect these poor children, made a lasting and immediate impression on an American-born lady living in Surrey, Mrs. Ada Weguelin. The immediate effect of her concern is best recalled in the following letter addressed to the sisters in the congregation on September 1st, by the superior general:— "It is needless to go into details about the death of dear Sister Celestine. I am sure you have heard all about it. The press gave such wide-spread advertisement to the fact, that now it is known all over the world. The letters of condolence and help were numerous. Sister Celestine must have had hundreds of Masses. It was astonishing the number of priests and communities who wrote and said, they had Mass offered for her soul. Over £1,300 has already been subscribed. It is clear that Almighty God had some wise end in sending us this cross, received on the very eve of my feast day.

Two days after the event a lady called to Hayling to offer her sympathy. She gave £100. On the following day she wired for me to go to see her. Mother Assistant and I called and to our utter astonishment she offered us, as a free gift, her house, with a beautifully furnished little chapel and sixty acres of land. The offer seems to us like a fairy-tale but I think it will be realised. I went to see the Bishop of Southwark and he gave his permission to accept it and use it as an open-air school for boys. I am telling you all this so that you may give it a very special intention in your prayers"

On October 30th 1929, the first Mass was said in Mervel Hill House, Hambledon. Again Mother Laurence sent out a circular letter

in which she described that memorable day of opening:-

On the day of our arrival, we were met and welcomed by Fr. Edmund OFM. (The Friary, Chilworth). The house was then blessed by Father Edmund. The following morning we had Mass and Benediction. During Benediction, Father Edmund read out, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, Mrs. Weguelin's offer of her property to God and our acceptance of the same. The following is a copy:-

"I, Mrs. Ada Weguelin, late Mrs. Watney, out of love for Jesus Christ and in order to protect his interests, do willingly give my house and lands at Mervel Hill to the congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. It is my wish that the property be known in future as Mount Olivet. I most sincerely pray that our Lord may bless and continue to bless the sisters and children who shall dwell in this house. May this home be for all time a source of light and grace, not only for the sisters and children, but also for the people of the surrounding country. And from the very depth of my heart, I pray that this my gift may result in the greater glory of God and the salvation of innumerable souls. Amen."

I, Sister Laurence Daly, superior general of the congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, do in the name of Jesus Christ our saviour and our king, accept with heartfelt gratitude, on my own behalf and on behalf of my congregation, the magnificent gift of the house and lands of Mervel Hill from Mrs. Ada Weguelin, late Mrs. Claude Watney. In deference to her wishes I desire that this property be known in future as Mount Olivet. May Jesus Christ, our saviour and our king bless our benefactress with his choicest blessings. May he strengthen her during her life and when the time comes, may he grant her a holy and happy death. May he receive her into his home in heaven there to reward her for her good works, but especially for this beautiful gift of Mount Olivet, as a home for his spouses and the children so dear to his heart.

And in token of deep gratitude I promise that the sisters and children who dwell here will always remember in their prayers the generous donor of Mount Olivet. May Our Lord Jesus Christ bless us all this morning and may this blessing strengthen us during life and unite us all in the bonds of charity. May this blessing console us all at the hour of death and be our joy and glory for all eternity, Amen.

We were all very touched by the ceremony and felt that God would surely bless such a beginning. I knelt beside Mrs. Weguelin during the High Mass and at the Offertory I quietly presented to her your spiritual bouquet (from all the sisters in the congregation). She was greatly pleased and appreciated the offering very much.

Mrs. Weguelin has spared no expense to make the house conventional. She has had the names of the saints carved on all the doors (of the sisters' rooms) with a little red cross above them and a beautiful large crucifix was given to the sisters' refectory.

It has been suggested that we should have a retreat next year for the superiors and I hope to have it — at St. Dominic's School, Mount Olivet.

I am, dear Mothers and Sisters,

Yours devotedly in the Sacred Hearts,

Sister M. Laurence

The Convent opened to receive pupils on November 4th, 1929, and the first pupils arrived on January 13th, 1930. The first boys came from the London borough of East Ham. The Invalid Children's Association contributed 15/- weekly towards their maintenance, while the local authority fees came to 29/-. The first Christmas Mrs. Weguelin came down to present the boys with gifts; each boy received a Harrod's Christmas stocking and a compendium of toys. Srs. Cornelia Martin and Murita O'Leary (Hambledon 1982) remember how in the first days after the arrival of the sisters in November 1929, many visitors — local authority personnel, sisters, and interested parties — came to see this fairy-tale house with its fairy-tale story, but the sisters often wondered how they would manage to make their small supply of food stretch so as to feed them all. After bequeathing her country home, this generous lady retired to her London home in Cornwallis Terrace. In her last illness she was nursed by Sisters Louise, R.I.P. and Redempta Pilkington (Herne Bay 1982). She is buried in the Dominican convent in Chingford, Essex, alongside her half-sister who was a Dominican nun. Mrs. Weguelin, who was received into the church by Cardinal Vaughan, was herself a Dominican tertiary and had close associations with the Franciscan Friars at the nearby Chilworth friary.

On September 8th, 1932, the new teaching block at St. Dominic's School was opened by Bishop Amigo of Southwark. The same day the hundredth boy was admitted to the school, just three years after its official opening.

Notes

- (1) For this information I am indebted to Sister Patrick Moriarty, Sacred Heart Convent, Cardiff, 1982.
- (2) Convent closed 1980. Premises now occupied by the Choir School of Our Lady and St. John, for St. John's Cathedral, Portsmouth.

CHAPTER 12

Beneath the Southern Cross

The history of the Australian mission founded by the English Province of the Servants of the Sacred Heart in 1909 has not been recorded. Perhaps now is the time to attempt to piece together its various strands. Little mention of the mission is to be found in the annals of the Servants of the Sacred Heart recorded in Homerton and now preserved in the Mother House of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Only a few, terse statements, concerning the closing period of the mission, are to be found in Chigwell annals. The personal experience and long-lasting memories of the few remaining sisters who still recall the hushed tones which were used when speaking of this early mission, deserve a place in this brief account.

Dean Hennessey, parish priest of the flourishing mission at Young, New South Wales, Australia, was a native of Co. Tipperary, Ireland. In his parish of St. Mary's, he had already built a convent grammar school which was staffed by the Presentation Sisters. This enterprise was followed by a boys' grammar school where the De La Salle Brothers taught. Towards the end of 1908, having failed to obtain a community of sisters willing to staff the new hospital he proposed to establish, the undaunted Dean sailed for England, hoping to find there a religious order willing to found a mission in Australia.

On January 20th, 1909, Dean Hennessey called on the provincial of the Servants of the Sacred Heart at Homerton. He may well have visited beforehand the French Hospital in Shaftesbury Avenue, which had been staffed by the sisters since 1878. The hospital was held in high esteem particularly in Catholic circles throughout London. Mother Imelda, provincial of the English province, agreed to establish a mission in Australia. It was decided that eight sisters would leave for the distant continent as soon as possible. All expenses were to be paid by the Dean. On November 29th, the missionaries sailed from Tilbury. Sister Mechtilde O'Connor (cousin of Sister Irene Shannon, Hambledon 1982) was named superior. In September 1907 she had been elected assistant superior at Homerton where she was also a member of the provincial council. On January 14th, 1910, four of the party disembarked at Melbourne. From there they travelled by rail to the little town of Wombat where they were to open a boarding school for girls. The convent was already built, ready for occupation, and within a few weeks the new school was open to receive the first of the maximum

number of eighty girls.

Meanwhile, the rest of the group sailed on to Sydney. Accompanying Sister Mechtilde were Sisters Victor, Helen and Walburga. Following their arrival in Sydney, the small community remained for a week at Lewisham Hospital, staffed by the sisters of the Little Company of Mary. They finally came to Young, a small but thriving town 250 miles south of Sydney. Sheep farming was the main occupation of the people of the district, though many families cultivated small farms. A picturesque town, surrounded by wooded hills, Young in the beginning of the century, was somewhat of a gem with the prospect of greater achievements, many of them due to the foresight of their remarkable pastor.

The first hospital was set up in a small cottage, No. 4 Campbell Street, Young. Two of the sisters nursed the sick in their own homes, as space for resident patients was limited. Then on November 20th, 1910, the foundation stone of the Sacred Heart Hospital was laid by Dr. Gallagher, Bishop of the diocese of Goulburne.

That the occasion was a happy one may be gleaned from the entry the bishop made in his diary later that day:— “Laid foundation stone of the Sacred Heart Hospital at Young under the happiest auspices. Large congregation, ideal weather, Catholic enthusiasm, spontaneous and generous donations. Contract: £4,000. (20.11.10).” Less than a year later on November 12th, 1911, Dr. Gallagher was once again in Young to bless and open the completed hospital. Sister Marie de Lourdes Carr, (Chigwell 1982) whose hometown is Young, recalls this memorable event:—

“The blessing and official opening were the event of the year. The hospital, claimed to be the finest in the country, boasted a most up-to-date theatre and other specialised facilities. It was an imposing structure of red brick built almost on the pinnacle of one of the many hills which surround the picturesque town and it commanded an almost unlimited view of the undulating countryside.”

In January 1911, with the permission of the Bishop of Goulburne, Dean Hennessey wrote to the provincial of the Servants of the Sacred Heart asking that the Australian province be granted autonomous status. Such a request was in accordance with the wishes of the Australian hierarchy who, because of the remoteness of their country and the difficulty in communicating with mother houses in Europe, advocated the early establishment of an Australian province for all missionaries in the country. However, in accordance with the Constitutions of the Servants of the Sacred Heart, only the Holy See could grant such a permission. Mother Camille, superior general in Versailles,

informed Dean Hennessey of this ruling.

A month later, in February 1911, at a general chapter held in Versailles it was agreed to grant autonomy to the remaining houses of the English province in England, with the exception of the French hospital in London and the convalescent home in Brighton. The convents at Homerton and Chislehurst (1) were now autonomous. Similar status was granted to Young with its daughter-house, Wombat.

Following the decision of the Chapter of 1911, and on the advice of Canon Surmont, vicar for religious in the archdiocese of Westminster, Homerton and Chislehurst agreed to an amalgamation with the sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Chigwell. A decree of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, dated January 22nd, 1913, gave approval to the proposed amalgamation. The happy reunion took place at the convent in Homerton on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, February 11th, 1913. Mother Sylvester, now Superior General, returned to the convent where she had once been known and loved as the provincial of the Servants of the Sacred Heart. There to welcome her was the small community of sisters from Chislehurst, Kent. This foundation, made in January, 1910, was due to the generosity of Mr. Kelly who made a gift of Hornbrook House for use as a convalescent home. Eventually news of the amalgamation reached the sisters in Australia though not through official channels. By now a number of Australian girls had entered the Young convent.

Early in 1912, Mother Mechtilde, accompanied by Sister Antonia, set sail for Ireland to recruit postulants for the Australian mission. This is how Mother Sophia Cumberton (R.I.P.) remembered her meeting with the two sisters from Young:-

"The Irish Sisters of Charity in Harolds Cross, Dublin, used to foster vocations among girls in their Children of Mary sodality. They encouraged these girls to attend evening classes held at the Sacred Heart Convent in Leeson Street. Mother Spinola and Mother O'Brien (Sacred Heart Sisters) both helped many girls to find their vocation. One day two Servants of the Sacred Heart visited Leeson Street and asked if any of the girls present would be willing to volunteer for their mission in Australia. I was eager to become a nun but my father would not allow me to join the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny in Africa. He did, however, give me permission to go to Australia with these Servants of the Sacred Heart. With six others I sailed from Liverpool on March 3rd, 1912. It was three weeks before we sighted land. We docked at Capetown for refuelling and then set sail for another two weeks when we disembarked at Albany, Australia. We sailed for Melbourne and finally to Sydney. Here we boarded a train for the all-night journey to Young. We arrived

at the convent on April 28th, 1912. On May 30th we received the postulant's cap and on November 1st of that year, we received the habit".

Two professed sisters from Homerton joined Mother Mechtilde and her party at Liverpool on the return voyage. They were Sisters Mary Kieran and Mary of Mount Carmel. In 1913 an extension was added to the Sacred Heart Hospital in Young. Already it was being well spoken of for many miles around. Sadly, the community at Wombat greatly lacked harmony. In 1914 the sisters were withdrawn and joined the community at Young. They were replaced by the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Early in July 1914, an outbreak of war in Europe now seemed imminent. With no definite line of conduct coming from either Versailles or Chigwell, Mgr. Keating (2) advised those of the sisters who wished to return to England to leave before war was actually declared. Twelve sisters took his advice — Sisters Angela, Mary Victor, Adrian, Agnes, Bridget, Mary Kieran, Mary of Mt. Carmel. The novices who accompanied them are remembered in Chigwell as Sisters Leontia, Sophia, Eusebia, Maura, Lucilla, Margaret Mary.

The weary travellers, confused and dismayed, arrived on August 20th, 1914, at the Convent in Chigwell, which they had never before visited. The annual Chigwell retreat was in progress and the returned novices were sent to nearby Thurlby House in Woodford Bridge until the retreat ended. The professed sisters, except Sister Angela, who decided to return to Versailles, changed their habits and adopted the rule and constitutions of the Chigwell sisters. The seven novices also decided to enter this new congregation. One, Sister Teresa Martin, was not admitted because of poor health. She died later in Harold's Cross Hospital, Dublin. On February 2nd 1915, having made a second postulancy, these six admirable young women, embarked on a second novitiate, having received the habit from the Dean of Dixonwood, assisted by Canon Surmont, in the convent chapel, Chigwell.

Sister Marie de Lourdes remembers this sudden departure of the sisters from Young "as a most closely guarded secret. It seemed to happen so suddenly. Without any warning, so it appeared to me, late one afternoon the sisters filed out of the hospital, not looking to the left or right, got into the waiting cars and were whisked away into the dusk."

Now there remained in the convent at Young only four of the original group together with the eight professed sisters who had joined the congregation in Australia. In 1915, despite the war that was raging in Europe, Mother Mechtilde embarked on an arduous voyage to

Europe. She was determined to put her case before the Holy Father, in person. Her hope was not in vain because Pope Benedict XV granted her a private audience. Having listened to her earnest appeal for permission to establish a canonical novitiate in Australia, the Holy Father spoke these words:-

"May God Bless the work you are doing in this far-away land. We grant you permission to receive postulants and profess novices." So ended in five minutes what others have waited five years to hear.

Shortly after Mother Mechtilde returned to Young, a second extension was added to the Sacred Heart Hospital. It now became a recognised training hospital for nurses, with accommodation for eighty beds. An out-patients' department was the next addition. A new chapel was built and the existing one was converted into a ward for male patients.

As yet, no provision was made in the area for the care of the aged. In 1918 a large two-storey building came on the property-market. Included in the sale was a well-stocked orchard and five acres of land. The owner had stipulated that the property was not to be sold to a Catholic party. So imagine his dismay when he learned that he had been hoodwinked; the property was bought by a third party, acting on behalf of Dean Hennessey. Moreover, the house was considered to be ideally suitable for use as a novitiate and the necessary renovations were made. Immediately, Sister Augustine was appointed novice mistress. Born in Western Australia, she had been professed only two years before.

At the same time, plans were drawn up to erect a purpose-built home for old people on the land adjoining the novitiate. On December 8th, 1920, Archbishop Cattaneo, Apostolic Nuncio in Australia, paid his first visit to Young. He blessed the novitiate and laid the foundation stone of the new home. Mount St. Joseph's came to be the pride and joy of the citizens of Young and many people even beyond the state of New South Wales, expressed the hope that one day they would end their days in this peaceful haven so admirably run by the Servants of the Sacred Heart.

Between the years 1912 and 1920 eight young Australian women had entered the novitiate in Young, which since 1915 had papal approval. On November 21st 1921, Miss Hilda Hoffman, born in Rochester, South Australia, was received as a postulant. Within a short time, she was distressed to discover that there was a great lack of harmony within the community and a concerted attempt by a small group, including the assistant superior, to displace the superior. On December 6th, Dean Hennessey paid an official visit to the convent and ordered Mother Mechtilde to leave. No further explanation was given

but most of the community understood what was behind this order. Mother Mechtilde took refuge in Mount St. Joseph's where she was joined the following morning by the majority of her community, except for three sisters, the only remaining members of the original community who had founded the Australian mission in 1909. On December 8th, the ousted community attended Mass in the parish church but, to their amazement, the Dean refused to administer Holy Communion to them. The previous day he had removed the Blessed Sacrament from the chapel in Mount St. Joseph's.

A message came from Dean Hennessey on this evening of the feast of Our Lady stating that the nine sisters, together with the postulant, must find alternative accommodation within two days. In desperation, seven of the sisters returned to their families scattered throughout the country, feigning an unexpected holiday. Mother Mechtilde and Miss Hoffman went to stay with friends in Sydney. A few days later this undaunted postulant requested an interview with the Nuncio, Archbishop Cattaneo. Her request was immediately granted and with the forthrightness of those who serve the cause of righteousness, Miss Hoffman related to the Archbishop the startling events she had witnessed in recent weeks. His Grace listened attentively expressing his utter amazement when the complete story was unfolded to him. He promised to do all he could to help. On December 28th Miss Hoffman was summoned to the nuncio's residence. Mother Mechtilde could not be persuaded to present her case in person, even though she was aware that the nuncio believed in her. It was arranged that the community should reunite and go to Cootamundra where Dean O'Shaughnessy was prepared to leave his home for use as a temporary hospital and convent for the displaced sisters. When the sisters arrived, this kindly parish priest of Cootamundra had already vacated his fine residence. He went to stay temporarily with his curate, the future Cardinal Gilroy.

Meanwhile in the Sacred Heart Hospital, Young, only the three sisters who had instigated the dismissal of the superior, now remained. Two years later there was ample evidence to show that they were now openly behaving in a manner totally against the spirit of the religious life. The three sisters were dismissed by the disillusioned Dean, whereupon they decided to return to England and seek admittance to the Chigwell community. They arrived in Chigwell on June 14th 1923 and were neither asked for nor ventured to give the real reason for their sudden return. Indeed, all three were warmly welcomed in a manner quite different from the formal welcome accorded to the sisters who returned in 1914. Shortly afterwards, one of these sisters, who for

some years had acted as deputy matron in the Sacred Heart Hospital, sought a dispensation from her vows. This request was granted. Four years later a second member of the group was expelled from the congregation.

Between 1921 and 1925, Mother Mechttilde and her community carried on their service of nursing in Cootamundra. On June 8th 1923, the feast of the Sacred Heart, Miss Hilda Hoffman received the habit of the Servants of the Sacred Heart from Dean O'Shaughnessy. Later that year a member of the community, Sister Mary Ursula, contracted tuberculosis and died soon afterwards. She is buried in the parish cemetery at Cootamundra.

Following the departure from Young of the remaining Servants of the Sacred Heart, the Sisters of Mercy were invited to take charge of the Sacred Heart Hospital. In 1925, it was evident that the community at Cootamundra could not continue to carry on in isolation. Archbishop Cattaneo, aware that the remaining eight members of the community, excepting Mother Mechttilde, were Australian-born, granted permission for any sister who wished, to join the Sisters of Mercy; one sister accepted this offer.

Finally, on March 25th, 1925, the Archbishop arrived in Cootamundra to make final arrangements for the future of the community, all of whom had made final profession, excepting Sister Mary Patrick Hoffman. Three sisters chose to join the Sisters of St. Joseph (founded by the Australian Sister Mary McKillop). (3) They were Sisters Mary Augustine, M. Joseph, and M. Magdalen; Sister Mary Gerard went to the Dominican sisters; Sister M. Jerome chose the Mercy sisters and Sister Mary Dorothea joined the Little Company of Mary. Mother Mechttilde chose to remain with the Servants of the Sacred Heart. Sister Mary Patrick decided to accompany her to England as, by that time, Mother Mechttilde's health was failing fast.

A few days later both sisters travelled to Sydney where they were warmly welcomed by Mr. Bernard Hoffman, brother of Sister Mary Patrick. Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman made all necessary arrangements for the long voyage to England. They even provided Mother Mechttilde with a cane chaise-longue which they knew would prove very useful as the ship passed through the tropics. On the morning of May 23, 1925, Archbishop Cattaneo invited both sisters to attend Mass in the private oratory of his Sydney residence. Afterwards they had breakfast with this fatherly Italian prelate who had always shown genuine concern for their well-being.

After breakfast Archbishop Cattaneo took both sisters into his garden and bidding them kneel at the foot of the statue of St. Thérèse

of Lisieux, which formed the centrepiece of the well-laid garden, he spoke these words as he blessed them:—

“She will take care of you.” It was the day of the canonization of St. Thérèse in Rome.

The voyage home was long and hazardous. The ship ran into a monsoon while crossing the Indian Ocean and the ship’s doctor feared that Mother Mechtilde would not survive the tropics. There was no priest on board ship. On July 25th, 1925, the vessel docked at Southampton. Somehow Sister Mechtilde managed to complete the journey by boat train to Waterloo. Sister Francis Borgia met them there and brought Mother Mechtilde to Etloe House in Leyton. Both these sisters had known each other well in the early days at Homerton. The superior in Leyton, Mother Malachy, gave the worn-out missionary every attention and loving care. Mother Mechtilde had hoped to travel on to the French Hospital in Shaftesbury Avenue but her request was refused. This was the only remaining convent of the Servants of the Sacred Heart in London. Shortly afterwards, Mother Mechtilde, who was eager to see her family again, made the journey to Ireland, probably accompanied by Mother Malachy. She stayed with her two brothers at the family home in Strokestown, Co. Roscommon. A few weeks later, this dying sister was removed to a nursing home in Dublin where she died soon afterwards. She is buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin.

Sister Mary Patrick did not accompany Mother Mechtilde to Leyton as she would have wished. Instead she travelled on to Chigwell where, in the absence of Mother Sylvester, superior general, she received a warm welcome from Mother Cecilia, assistant general, and Sister Celestine, who was to die so tragically in the fire in Hayling three years later. On the return of Mother Sylvester, Sister Mary Patrick was interviewed by Bishop Doubleday of Brentwood. After careful questioning, the bishop acceded to her request to be admitted to the novitiate in Chigwell. She exchanged the habit of the Servants of the Sacred Heart for the postulant’s cap and began a second novitiate, being professed on March 24, 1928. (4) We know and love her as Sister Mary Patricia (Chigwell 1982).

Mother Mechtilde was born Annie O’Connor in February 1868 at Coonakilla Strokestown, Co. Roscommon. On January 29th, 1896, she received the habit of the Servants of the Sacred Heart in the convent chapel at Homerton, along with Sister Lucy Larkin. She was professed on March 15th, 1898. A faithful servant of the Sacred Heart, she deserves to be included among the legions of unsung holy women whose lives may long be forgotten in this world but whose names are “written in heaven”.

So ended the outwardly flourishing Australian mission. Failure to communicate, insufficient knowledge of what was happening in either London or Paris, lack of awareness of the feelings of others, hastened its demise. During a period of transition, each individual needs to be thoroughly acquainted with the facts of the situation and the proposed changes otherwise confusion reigns.

Sisters Patricia Hoffman and Marie de Lourdes Carr, both Australian born, are a reminder to us today that the congregation founded by Father Braun "solely to give glory to the Sacred Heart". was planted in their far-away country in the first decade of this century.

Notes

- (1) The Convent, Chislehurst, Kent. Used as a temporary hospital for wounded soldiers in 1914.
- (2) Mgr. Keating, vicar general of the diocese of Goulbourne.
- (3) Sister Mary McKillop also made the pilgrimage to Paray le Monial from London, in September 1873.
- (4) For much of this information I am indebted to Sister Patricia Hoffman (Chigwell 1982)

CHAPTER 13

Like to a Grain of Mustard Seed

Perhaps this is the place to pause and reflect briefly on the growth of Catholicism during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Catholics by now were better educated, more integrated with society. No longer did they come either from the very rich or the very poor levels of society. Many were now involved in civic affairs, serving on parish committees and taking an active part in Church and school building. The two main threats to Catholicism, and indeed to society in general at this time, came from communism and a growing materialism.

Throughout the first two decades of this century new housing estates were sprouting up, some of them on the outskirts of the larger towns and cities. In turn, smaller towns attracted large numbers of families as industrialism spread further into the rural areas. In 1911, Liverpool and Birmingham became metropolitan sees in addition to Westminster; in 1917 the new diocese of Brentwood was created. The tremendous increase in the Catholic population made corresponding demands on those religious orders engaged in the Church's traditional apostolates of nursing, teaching and the rising number of corporal works of mercy.

Mother Laurence did her utmost to respond to the many requests which poured in from the hierarchy not only in England but in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Records show that in 1921 there were 254 professed sisters in the congregation spread throughout 28 convents. Since 1903, several foundations had closed. These included:-

Hospital:	Aberdare, Wales (1916)
Orphanages:	Ayr (1905) — Tottenham (1905)
Convalescent Home:	Chislehurst (1920)
Rescue Homes:	Lochwinnoch, Limehouse (1905)
Schools:	Chideock (1908) — Aberdare, Lyme Regis (1) (1905) Oban (1910)

By the end of 1930, further closures took place:-

Orphanage:	Rothesay (1930 — at the wish of Lady Bute)
Rescue Home:	Liberton, Edinburgh (1930 — unhealthy conditions of this diocesan property)
Industrial School:	North Hyde (1930 — closed by archdiocese of Westminster)

On July 25th 1928, Mother General, accompanied by Bishop Doubleday of Brentwood, drove "around the new district of Dagenham with a view to the congregation building a school there" (2) In January 1931, a small group of sisters went to live in a rented house in Gale Street. Very soon they were involved in parish visiting, giving religious instruction on Sunday afternoons and visiting the sick. This preparatory mission work proved a solid base on which to found a Catholic school. In February 1932, St. Peter's School, Dagenham opened. The Sacred Heart Convent, Goresbrook Road, Dagenham, the first purpose-built convent in the congregation, was opened on October 29th, 1934.

At a Council meeting on May 10th 1929, the decision was taken to build a new Catholic primary school in the Walthamstow area of East London. This followed a request from the parish priest, Mgr. O'Grady. St. Patrick's School, Walthamstow (3) opened on January 7th 1930, and was blessed by the Bishop of Brentwood on January 14th.

At the request of the Bishop of Southwark, in 1928, a community of sisters went to take charge of the domestic arrangements at St. Joseph's Diocesan Seminary in Mark Cross, Sussex. This noble contribution towards the education of clerical students was augmented when in March 1930, the Archbishop of Liverpool requested the Chigwell sisters to organize the domestic arrangements in the magnificent, newly-opened seminary at Upholland, Lancashire (4). The sisters took up their duties on Holy Saturday that same year.

In 1929, the Department of Health invited Mother Laurence to open a second mother and baby home in Ireland. Mother Antonia Philippis, assistant general, visited Ireland to inspect properties in Limerick and Wexford but neither proved satisfactory. Father Alberic, OCR of Mount St. Joseph's Abbey, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary heard of the proposed new foundation and of the search for a suitable property. Just at that time, Count John O'Byrne whose estate lay close to the abbey, confided to Father James that he might be forced to sell his family home because of high running costs. Mother Antonia was invited to Corvalla House and she decided at once that it was ideal for a mother and baby home. Whereupon the estate which consisted of a large Georgian house, four cottages and 600 acres of pasture and woodland were acquired by the congregation. Within the grounds of Corvalla House (renamed Sean Ross Abbey) lie the ruins of the medieval monastery of St. Cronan. The first Mass was said in Sean Ross (5) on the feast of the Sacred Heart, June 1931. The first admissions came from the county home in Ennis, Co. Clare.

A third home in Ireland was opened two years later, at the request of the Local Government Board. Kinturk Manor, the former home of the Pollard family, was bought by the congregation and the first sisters arrived on August 19th 1934. The community received a warm welcome from the local people while the parish priest sent his own garden produce daily. In 1941, the Irish Hospitals' Sweepstake (founded by a Mr. Duggan of Dublin) gave a magnificent grant of £15,000 for the building of a new nursery unit at Castle Pollard.

A stained glass window, inserted in the new chapel, built in 1936, bears the inscription, "If God is for us, who can be against us". The contemplation of this window must have helped to replace the stark feeling of abandonment which filled the hearts of many young mothers when they had to step aside temporarily from the world and face their new situation in Sean Ross Abbey.

By 1935 there was need for a second hospital in Cardiff. Mother Dympna came to the city in July 1935, to search for a suitable property which would serve as a temporary hospital. "The Lindens" was bought along with the plot of land adjoining the house. At the request of Archbishop Mostyn of Cardiff, the congregation decided to erect a purpose-built hospital on this vacant site. On September 15th 1938, St. Winifred's Hospital was opened in the presence of three bishops, the superior general, her assistant and Mother Arsene, who, as a young sister, had known the founder. The building was three-storeyed, with wards designed on each floor, which included a sun balcony. A spacious administration block, an operating unit and top-floor accommodation for nursing staff, were the main innovations in the new hospital.

There was great rejoicing throughout the congregation when, on March 3rd 1936, news came from Rome that the constitutions had received papal approval. On April 20th a Solemn Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated by Bishop Doubleday in Chigwell convent chapel. Sister Brenda Kent (Chigwell 1982) vividly remembers that festive day of celebration. On March 25 1935, Archbishop Hinsley was translated to the See of Westminster. A Yorkshireman, he had spent some years in Africa and, though a man of seventy when he came to Westminster, he proceeded to visit every parish in his diocese. He was greatly loved throughout the land, especially by the youth. He took a keen interest in every area of Catholic life — moral welfare, music, art, Catholic Action.

A third foundation was made in the Liverpool archdiocese in 1937. A heart hospital school, with accommodation for about thirty children, was opened at Briars Hey, Rainhill, Lancashire (7). Very soon

the community and children were “adopted” by the people of Liverpool and beyond. An air of joy and happiness pervaded the whole house despite the fact that most of the pupils were bed-ridden for years.

The bishop of Edinburgh and St. Andrew's received the gift of a large house and 150 acres at Aberdour, Fifeshire. In February 1936 he offered it to Mother Laurence to be used as a holiday home for tired mothers and their children, from Glasgow and Edinburgh. St. Teresa's was opened on the feast of the Sacred Heart that year in the presence of its patron, Lady Margaret Kerr. Two years later part of the house was occupied, at the bishop's request, by a community of Poor Clare nuns from Liberton, Edinburgh, awaiting allocation to other convents as their own community was being disbanded. A year later, the military authorities requisitioned the building following the outbreak of war.

Mid-way through the autumn of 1937, Mother Laurence, accompanied by her assistant, Mother Antonia Philipps and Mother Rosalie Dunn, general secretary, set out on a pilgrimage which was to take them to Rome, Genezzano, Florence and Paris. They left Chigwell on October 18th. On their arrival in Rome, they were met by Father Philip Langdon OSB (secretary to Cardinal Gasquet) and two sisters of the Little Company of Mary. Bishop Doubleday visited them the following day at the convent outside Rome where they were staying. On November 13th, the privileged group were received in private audience by the Holy Father Pius XI who greeted them in Italian saying:— “From my heart I bless you all, and I bless all those beloved children of the church whom you bear in mind and for whom you pray during your pilgrimage to Rome”.

A short, but detailed journal of this pilgrimage was kept by Mother Rosalie Dunn. The last page, though, was written by Mother Laurence herself and here it is:—

“When making my arrangements for Rome, it occurred to me that on my way back, while in Paris, I would like to visit the Mother House in Versailles. I accordingly wrote to the Mother General, expressing a wish to visit the tomb of our founder, the Reverend Victor Braun. She replied at once that she would be very pleased to receive us and invited us to luncheon.

We went by car to Versailles, a drive of about half-an-hour from Paris. We were most affectionately received by the Reverend Mother General, Mère Blandine, and her assistant. After a little time, she took us to their beautiful chapel and I knelt down before the tomb of the Founder. I prayed very much for you all, and asked him to obtain for us an increasing love for our holy vocation and the grace to practise the virtues he so earnestly desired to see in his children — the spirit of true

humility, simplicity and zeal for souls, to strive ever more fervently to spread devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in a generous spirit of reparation and love.

For nearly an hour, we remained, finding it hard to leave our beloved father, whom I myself knew so well. His remains lie outside the altar-rails in front of the tabernacle. A simple white marble cross marks his grave.

The Reverend Mother General came for us and took us to every part of the convent. We visited the sick sisters in the infirmary, saw the community, refectory and various apartments.

Then we had a very nice lunch with Mother General, her assistant and councillors. Conversation naturally centred round the memories and virtues of our holy founder. As to his possible beatification, we heard that the Austrian branch of his foundation had the matter well in hand with the co-operation of Versailles.

I assured the Mother General of our enthusiasm in the cause, and of our desire to share the expenses attached to it.

It was a very memorable visit. After it we felt we had nothing further to detain us abroad and the next day we were delighted to be back in our own dear mother house in Chigwell".

The superior general of the Servants of the Sacred Heart returned Mother Laurence's visit the following year. On October 6th, Mother Blandine and her assistant arrived in Chigwell where they were warmly welcomed. On October 8th the entire congregation of the Chigwell sisters was enrolled in the Guard of Honour of the Sacred Heart.

Despite the rapid expansion of the congregation in these pre-war years, some requests could not be accepted. Among those were proposed foundations in Carstairs, Scotland, Leeds, Sligo, Wexford, while the provincial of the Irish Franciscans wanted a mission foundation in China (1938). The last pre-war foundation was made in Old Colwyn, N. Wales (1938). Bishop McGrath of Menevia, was eager to have the Chigwell sisters in his diocese. Sr. Alberic O'Connor (Barrhead 1982) one of the original community, well remembers the early days in North Wales. "Mother Adrienne Harkin, Srs. Pauline Butler, Mary Joseph Phelan (R.I.P.), Eugene and I set out from Chigwell for Old Colwyn to start a new foundation. The convent was already occupied by six Augustinian sisters who used the house as a convalescent home. They stayed six weeks with us. On our arrival, Rev. Canon Quinn (R.I.P.) and his sister Daisy, who acted as his housekeeper, were in the front hall to meet us together with some residents and parishioners. Sefton Hotel (now St. Mary's) and Red House (St. Monica's) were bought later. One was used as a guest house for ladies and the other as a holiday house for

sisters in the northern convents. Mother Rosamunde McCarthy (Cork 1982) and Sister Petronilla Keenan (R.I.P.) were the first two sisters to come on holiday.

On Saturdays, chairs had to be placed in the hall to accommodate the growing congregation at Sunday Mass. People seemed to be everywhere as our small chapel was the only place between Llandulas and Colwyn Bay where Sunday Mass was celebrated. Many Catholics had lapsed because of no contact with priest or church. Mother Columba Morris (R.I.P.) joined the community and soon endeared herself to the people of the area. Many came to her for guidance, instruction and comfort".

"Like to a grain of mustard seed" was the title chosen by Sisters Mary Gertrude Stewart and Mary Ursula for their short history of the congregation. The title was an apt one, because only such a seed could have produced a tree with branches spreading so widely in such a short space of time. On a signed personal photograph, dated May 25th 1939, our Cardinal Protector, Cardinal Canali, wrote this short goodwill message:-

"To the dear Institute of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, with all my heart I wish the choicest of God's blessings". The photograph forms the frontispiece of the book. The joint producers referred to their production as being "a labour of love". Having chronicled the growth of the congregation over thirty-six years, they concluded by reminding their readers that "the aim of the congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary should be that of reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Like that of St. Francis de Sales, its spirit is all simplicity, charity and submission to the will of God, with unbounded confidence in his divine providence".

Notes

- (1) St. Joseph's Convent, Silver Street, Lyme Regis, founded 1890. In 1897 the sisters had moved to this large house near the church. They took in Lady boarders to "help pay the rent".
- (2) Annals of The Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Chigwell.
- (3) Sister Mary Gertrude Stewart was the first principal.
- (4) When the major seminary transferred to Ushaw College, Yorkshire, in 1972, the sisters were withdrawn.
- (5) Convent closed 1970. Irish Department of Health bought the property for use as a psychiatric hospital.
- (6) In 1964, The Heart hospital closed. School reopened to provide residential education for 30 maladjusted girls. Closed 1969.

CHAPTER 14

The Long Night of War

The summer days of 1939 were unusually warm and sunny but they did not at all symbolize the state of a nation on the verge of war. Even before the summer term ended, teachers were already embarking on preparations for the evacuation which now seemed inevitable. Sister Isidore Murphy R.I.P., Guardian Angels' School, Mile End, put in an early order with the machinists at St. Teresa's, Lewisham, for a few hundred arm-bands to be worn by her pupils for identification purposes, when the day of departure came.

At last, in the beginning of September the order came for all children in the London, Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Newcastle areas to evacuate with their teachers. Overnight this uprooting took place; the emotional trauma experienced by both mothers and children on that day of separation has never been sufficiently noted by subsequent generations. The evacuation of children was followed by adults in different types of residential institutions. Remote villages in country areas found themselves packed to capacity; manor houses, convents and presbyteries became "seats of learning" at a sudden suggestion. Parish priests, accustomed to a Sunday Mass attendance of a handful of people, now preached to record congregations.

The first six months were chaotic; lots of people hoped that the war would be over quickly. There was a constant migration of peoples resulting often in a premature return. Some city dwellers preferred the noise of raids to the stillness of the countryside. Sister Gonzaga Norton (Allerton Priory 1982) remembers hearing an old lady sitting patiently on a remote country railway station waiting to catch the next train back to London; "She couldn't stand the 'orrible 'ush".

Those years of evacuation deserve to be recorded in greater detail than the present brief history permits. However, personal accounts from a few sisters will, it is hoped, suffice. The following account is by Sister Monica Coates (Lewisham 1982)

"When news of the war was confirmed, September 3rd 1939, the London schools were alerted and preparations were made to evacuate them. The children were sent to remote country areas where they would be safe.

Arrangements were made for Guardian Angels' School, Mile End, to take refuge in a little country village called Wellington, in

Somerset. Accordingly, two sisters, Sister Damian Ronayne and I, with secular staff and over a hundred children were put on a train at Mile End station and waved off amid the tears of children and parents. At this point, no one knew our destination, which was a source of great worry to the parents. In due time, we arrived at Wellington and were immediately taken to the Y.M.C.A. Hall. There we were given some water to drink. We stayed there for some hours, after which the children were collected by various people who offered to take them into their homes for the duration of the war. Where possible, families were kept together. Teachers were then billeted with a family ready to accept one evacuee. Finally, we sisters were housed with a Mr. Toms who lived in the High Street. Next day, the parents in London were informed that their children were all well and safe".

(Sister Leo Power, Dockenfield 1982)

"St. Teresa's Convent, Lewisham, was, of course, a ready target for enemy action because of its proximity to Greenwich. Two days before war was declared, Mother Hilda Phelan, our superior, managed to rent an 18th century farmhouse, with a large farm attached, close to the village of Dockenfield, Farnham, in Surrey. Nestling in a fold of the Surrey hills, Great Holt Farm was an ideal refuge but to most of our girls who were city lovers, it seemed a dead end.

Early on the sunny September morning, September 2nd, two coaches drove down Belmont Hill packed with twelve sisters, one-hundred-and-thirty-two girls, as well as the minimum of bedding and clothing. We arrived safely at Farnham, despite the sound of a siren, but for the next hour the coaches searched in vain for the road to Dockenfield. Eventually we arrived at the farm house which had been owned by a Major Evans but was now unfurnished, just bare floorboards and a great open fire. The girls settled themselves for the night on their mattresses and we were so weary, we slept soundly.

But if the inside of the house was empty, the reverse was true of the outside. The orchards were laden with apples, pears, plums, peaches even. The kitchen gardens were oozing with vegetables. As there were about thirty cows, we had plenty of milk and soon we made our own butter.

After about six months, the bedsteads were sent for. Then came the sewing machines and we resumed making our orders for men's ties (Hope Bros.) and overalls. The girls settled into their usual routine, looking forward to their return to Lewisham (which never took place). As there was not enough accommodation in the house, Mother Hilda rented a cottage in the village, where Sister Mary de Pazzi Curran and I, together with about thirty girls, lived for the next four years."

Following the declaration of war, the general chapter due to assemble later that month, was postponed indefinitely on the advice of the Bishop of Brentwood. Each day brought news of yet more evacuations. Two Dagenham sisters with their pupils were billeted in a Lowestoft School, Suffolk. Having proved unsatisfactory they soon moved to Southam, near Leamington Spa where they were comfortably housed with the sisters of the Poor Child Jesus. For a time, the tutorial system of teaching was used which involved much movement from house to house.

Three sisters from St. Patrick's School, Walthamstow, were billeted with the Vaux family at Horrowden Hall, Northamptonshire. The Homerton Sisters went to Bishop's House, Northampton. The student-teacher-sisters from Southampton went to Cheltenham. Three sisters from St. Agnes' Bow, were warmly received by the Nazareth House sisters in Oxford. One sister went to Hithe, Oxford, where the chaplain, Fr. Webb, S.J. came to be known as the "bishop of the hopfields".

By September 20th, 1939, shelters for use by the novices and pupils of St. John's School, were completed in the grounds of Chigwell convent. Young children from Woodford Bridge were nightly housed in one of the rooms of the convent. By the end of the year, several rooms in St. Peter's Convent Herne Bay, were made available to the Catholic children of the resort.

Sister Damian Ronayne (Old Colwyn 1982) remembers these days of evacuation:-

"OXFORD 1939-1940 Memories of Evacuation"

In the autumn of 1939 when war broke out we were evacuated from St. Agnes' School, Bow. (Father Leonard, P.P., cousin of late Sr. Celestine, assistant general, R.I.P. was on holiday, in France I think, and could not get back). Father Hathaway, curate, took over and led the whole school to Bromley-by-Bow Station. All carried gas masks and arm bands with the number of the school. The children carried their belongings in various bags and even pillow cases. Some of the latter were so poor the items kept falling out on the way. Parents lined the street (Devons Rd., I think) trying to keep back the tears as we walked in silence. We boarded the train which had no corridor — small compartments with door each side. I had about 14 or 15 under-five babies and an older girl to help me (Eileen Darnell), the schoolkeeper's daughter. My main concern — danger of doors being opened. We had no idea where we were going. We passed sheep grazing in the fields. The infants got so excited, never having seen a sheep in their lives. They shouted, "Look Sister, dogs!" Suddenly I saw several spires on the

horizon. I thought this must be Oxford, City of Spires, and sure enough Oxford it was. We were met by a crowd of students who gallantly carried all my darlings and their belongings. It was evening when we ended up in a school to be sorted out. People arrived to take the children. One said, "I'll take a girl," another two boys and so on. It was night time and we were left with some children, not selected. (Staff consisted of Sister Emmeline, Headmistress, Sister Columba O'Brien, Mrs. McLoughlin, Miss Begg, Mrs. Hornfeck, Miss Lennehay, Mrs. McCarthy and another teacher whose name I can't remember and two helpers, Mrs. Smith, who had a son a priest and another lady who lived on Bow Road and me). Finally we were asked would we like to go to Nazareth House or the Holy Child nuns who had a very select girls' school in Cherwell Edge. We opted for Nazareth House and arrived there near midnight. The superior, Mother Angela, got out of bed to welcome us and what a welcome! She put up the three nuns and some of the teachers and children who had not been placed. Sister Jude cooked us delicious omelettes. A young Franciscan priest was staying there giving a Retreat — Rev. Agnelli Andrew! There were also some Basque refugee children with their priest, Fr. Atoucha. The Nazareth nuns had truly opened their doors to all. We stayed in Oxford for nine months. The first few weeks — (providentially fine) I spent with my little flock in Angel Meadow, sitting on the grass counting, and saying nursery rhymes and eating apples given us by the passers by. We spent the early part of the mornings exploring and praying in the Capuchin Church of SS Edmund and Frideswide, Iffley Road, corner of Jackdaw Lane. We went round the beautiful mosaic Stations which the children loved. The friars made us most welcome. Fr. Wulstan, Guardian, was a Londoner and was very partial to his dear East London evacuee children. He put on a special Mass for them every Sunday and he was so proud because they could sing the Misse de Angelis and several Latin motets. (Father Peter Peacock was studying to become a Doctor of Music and was most helpful to us. Also Frs. Hubert, Eric and Martin who heard the children's Confessions on Saturdays and even offered us the use of their hall.)

We got into the primary school in St. Clements, run by Holy Child nuns, Srs. Honora and Teresa. All bells were forbidden during the war and one of my infants blotted his copy book by ringing the big school bell in the playground! When Sr. Emmeline came to reprimand him he took refuge under my black apron! We often walked to 'Mesopotamia', a stretch of land between two rivers. The children loved this spot — moor hens, grebes and dabchicks abounded in the water. Albie (4 years) he who rang the bell, was especially fascinated by water

and had to be kept in tight tow on these excursions. During the dinner-break the children under the helpers' supervision roamed other meadows and one afternoon I met them returning clutching bunches of Hollyhocks and other flowers which they were going to take to their ladies (foster mothers). A very irate man arrived later to say they had ravaged the Students' botanical specimens."

On March 30th, 1940, Mother Sylvester died at Hillingdon. Mary Jane Halfpenny was born on August 23rd, 1853, in Lobinstown, Co. Meath, Ireland. She was received with the Servants of the Sacred Heart on January 8th, 1881, in the provincial chapel, Homerton and professed on February 23rd, 1883, in the presence of Fr. S. Chauvain S.M. and Mother Francis de Sales. At the general chapter held in Versailles in 1893, Mother Sylvester was appointed provincial of the English province. In 1908 at the first general chapter of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, she was appointed superior general. In 1927, Cardinal Gasquet addressed the following letter to the general chapter then assembled in Chigwell, in which he paid tribute to the life and work of Mother Sylvester:—

"Our first duty is the expression of our unbounded gratitude to the venerable Mother General whose devotion and services to the institute are above all praise and possible recognition. Her reign will remain historic in your annals, not only for the daily solicitude she so generously exercised, but also for the fact that through difficult vicissitudes she has led the congregation to a definite permanent and noble status in the church of God as an independent Pontifical Institute with its own approved constitutions with a clear, useful field of work for God and the church before it".

On June 11th, 1940, the sisters, children and staff of St. Patrick's School, Hayling Island made the long trek northwards to an idyllic retreat in Bryn Bras Castle, Caernarvonshire, N. Wales.

On the feast of St. Augustine, August 28th, the usual ceremonies of clothing and profession were held in Chigwell. Seven postulants were received, six novices made profession and twelve sisters pronounced their final vows, despite the uncertainty of war. Ten days later, the congregation was suddenly jolted by the news that the newly built convent at Rotherhithe (1937) was burnt to the ground. Disaster struck on the evening of September 7th, 1940. Mercifully no one was hurt. Mother Adelaide Devine R.I.P., superior at that time, has left a detailed account of those fearful days and nights. Here is an extract:—"We had left the refectory only about fifteen minutes when the sisters heard bombs dropping. The raid lasted about half-an-hour. Tons of incendiary bombs were dropped, but none fell on the convent. So

terrible was the bombing that it shook the building to its foundations. The walls were rocking to and fro and the sisters were forced to lie on the floor to protect themselves from falling masonry. To add to this terror, a cloud of thick smoke came through the convent windows and doors, so that it was almost impossible to breathe or to see. It was said that five hundred planes took part in this raid and that a smoke screen was used. When the raid was over, we emerged from our shelter into the yard. What a sight met our eyes! The whole of the surrounding buildings were on fire. Darkness spread all over the place and the wind blew most fiercely. The day had dawned so beautifully but now all that had changed and could only be compared to hell on earth.

Shortly after this, our parish priest, Father Cole, arrived at the convent to take the Blessed Sacrament away from the convent chapel. He had just returned when the skylight caught fire. The flames quickly spread to the chapel and afterwards to the whole building. Twenty-eight firemen lost their lives trying to control the fires in Rotherhithe that night."

The homeless group of twelve sisters and forty-four women, many of them old took refuge, then, in a public shelter during a second raid which lasted from 8.45 p.m. to 5 a.m. Early next morning they made their way to St. Ann's Convent in Whitechapel to hear Mass. Father Cole offered a Mass of thanksgiving after having safely evacuated 2,000 of his people during the night. After breakfast with the sisters, the weary party made a roundabout journey to Lewisham where they were warmly received by the few remaining members of the community there. Sister Valeria Morris (Chigwell 1982) and Sister Gonzaga Norton (Allerton Priory 1982) were both members of that stricken community on that fateful night. Sister Gonzaga had made her final profession in Chigwell, just ten days before.

As the bombings continued, several convents were damaged but no one was injured, thanks be to God. Hillingdon, Homerton, Lewisham and Cardiff were most affected. Homerton parish church was destroyed (March 1941) and St. Patrick's School, Walthamstow, was badly damaged, (March 19th 1941).

Nothing preserves the flavour of personal experience more than the letter form. These extracts from letters written to Sister Mary Gertrude Stewart, during the evacuation period, are a valuable source of information and comment:—

(from Sister Francis Borgia Doyle, c/o Mr. Toms, 45 High Street, Wellington, Somerset. 11.10.'40)

..... Here it is very peaceful. The town is packed with soldiers and people, nearly all from Mile End, Bow and Bethnal Green. Last Tuesday

night we heard a German 'plane overhead but some distance off. Then there was a crash and sure enough it was a bomb. Next day we heard that a factory had been hit a little way off. I wonder when life will resume its normal course once more?

P.S. I was so glad of the Sacred Heart badge — not one holy picture in this house but the old gent is very good.

(Mr. Toms was stone deaf, an Anglican and a bachelor; he made violin strings — for Kreissler and Menuhin.)

(from Sister Gertrude Bryant, Hillside, Buntingford, Herts. 21.9.'40) Thank you for your letter. Did Lady Vaux get her crusade leaflets and the two pairs of socks? Now for the tragic news which brought me here. Last Sunday, the raid was terrific and after weeks of sleepless nights, I felt I could not sleep another night in Homerton Mother General and Mother Antonia came along in the car and took Mothers Alban, Edith, Genevieve and Gabriel to Chigwell. Laura and Dymphna went to Hambledon, Francis Borgia and Charles to Hillingdon, Sisters Anna and Mary of the Angels and self here. None are left. Whether they are still there I don't know. Twelve Catholic churches about London (Hackney and Clapham among the number) were damaged. Mother Mary de Pazzi Potter is at Gainsboro' Road registering children for evacuation, and very likely will go herself again. Sister Mary of Dolours is at the People's Palace on twelve hour shifts feeding the homeless, etc. Mile End church and school have been damaged. Sister Emmeline goes to Bow every day. I expect she will go on evacuation soon again. You should have seen the tragic look on the faces of our Polish and Belgian refugees. That is what let me down more than anything else

(from Sister Regina McDermott, 2 Grove Terrace, Llanharan, Glamorgan
29.12.'40)

. . . . I came here on June 18th — it is a beautiful place — a mining village fifteen miles west of Cardiff. I am billeted with an elderly couple and I have a Catholic teacher with me, a Mrs. Clarke from Wapping. We have no church but we have a priest with us — a curate from Homerton. He is billeted with the local doctor who hails from Scotland.

Father says Mass on Sundays in a hall belonging to an Italian and on weekdays in the waiting room of the surgery.

I have the infants in the Methodist vestry hall — all alone. I am very well off in my billet. The man has an allotment with all kinds of vegetables. We have lots of hens. We do not want for anything. Everyone says I am looking well and I feel it. I wonder when it will all end. People seem very optimistic about the spring

(from Sister Irene Shannon, c/o Round House, Hethe, Bicester, Oxon.
9.3.'41)

I missed your kind letter but I know you must be over-powered without a sister to help you. Sister Cyprian and I keep well. It is a great boon to have sister so devoted to the little ones. Their room in the presbytery is very cosy. We have had a terrible lot of sickness among the children for the past six weeks. Measles (with complications), bronchitis, very bad eczema, and influenza.

Lady Bicester gave me some nice pieces of stuff for coats and khaki cuttings for trousers. She is a great friend. Our numbers are going down, only 50 now and 44 from Walthamstow

(from Sister Mary de Pazzi Brassil, Gainsboro' Road L.C.C. School, East London. 20.3.'41)

Just see me — in imagination — occupying the 'staff-room' of the above for a whole afternoon by myself — not because I am headmistress and therefore a lady of leisure — but because the children can only attend "double shifts". It seems that now Mr. Adolf knows where we are, he is going to visit us more often.

I wonder am I supposed to finish my teaching career in this blessed spot? The church! too sad for words — the walls have withstood the explosion very well but no roof left — organ destroyed.

From 1941 to 1943 the bombing of London and other major cities continued with unrelenting regularity. Early in January 1941 St. Winifride's Cardiff, was bombed but the hospital was mercifully spared. By now food and bus queues were familiar sights in towns and cities. Daily conversation included mention of such war-time accessories as gas-masks, clothing coupons, ration books, black-outs — all of which helped to bind the nation together in the face of greater calamities.

At the beginning of January 1941, Mother Laurence succumbed to a severe attack of influenza. On January 18th, a letter arrived from the Sacred Congregation of Religious extending her term of office for another six years. On February 12th a bad fire broke out in Etloe House, Leyton (1) but no one was injured. It was obvious now that the evacuation of St. Teresa's Lewisham would have to be prolonged for an indefinite period. So when the house and farm at Great Holt, Dockenfield came on the property market, the congregation decided to buy them both, together with the three cottages which formed part of the estate.

A particularly heavy bombing raid was carried out near Chigwell on April 7th followed by a similar one on the 20th. Mother Laurence's health from then on deteriorated rapidly. Worn out by anxiety and fatigue over the cares of the congregation, besides concern for the sisters and all those under their care, she accepted calmly that death was not far away. On the evening of April 26th, the feast of Our Lady

of Good Counsel, the dying superior general asked to meet the community in her sick room, for the last time. In a clear and audible voice she spoke this farewell message:—

My Dear Sisters,

I am very pleased to see you here tonight. There is no need, I am sure, for me to recommend myself to your prayers. I look upon this illness not as a cross but as his holy and divine will. May the most just, most high and most amiable will of God be done, praised and eternally exalted in all things . . . Troubles do not matter . . . let them never keep you away from God. When you come to die, you see things in a very different light. I have not many more days or hours to live. God has given me a long life and I shall have a lot to account for, but He is all mercy and love.

It has been said that I have done great work for God, but one's motive may not always have been pure. I have tried to do all for love of God and the good of our congregation — all for God's honour and glory, nothing for self-glorification. DO ALL FOR LOVE . . . My favourite prayer has been: "My God I love you. I love you the best of all my friends. I want to love you the best of all my friends. I am sorry for any offence I have committed against you". I love Him . . .

The "Chigwell Nuns" have always had a wonderful reputation for their good spirit. I have always found great loyalty in the Chigwell community. I know you all and I love you. I humbly beg your pardon for any disedification or dissatisfaction I may have given you.

Accept as your superior whoever God places over you. Help her in every possible way. I have been fortunate in having loyal and devoted friends ever near me; they have made things so easy for me that I have not felt the burden.

Be loyal to your community. Whenever you hear anyone speaking ill of it, have no respect for them or for what they say. If there is any trouble in the community do not discuss it among yourselves, but go straight to your superior; she is the only one that can set matters right. If my prayers have any power in heaven, Chigwell will not be forgotten spiritually or temporally.

I am grateful to God for having been able to speak these few words to you tonight."

Two days later, Mother Laurence Daly died. Her funeral took place on May 1st. Solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated in the convent chapel by Bishop Doubleday of Brentwood. Forty priests, besides a large number of sisters, attended despite the hazardous conditions of war-time travel. Mother Laurence was born Mary Daly in Skeyne, Co. Westmeath on July 31st 1863. She entered the novitiate of the Servants

of the Sacred Heart in France, at the age of fifteen and was professed on August 15th 1884 in the convent chapel, Homerton. Appointed first superior at St. Mary's School, North Hyde, she was greatly loved by her community and by the boys of the school. The stained glass window erected in the convent chapel at North Hyde on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrival of the sisters there, was a personal gift to Mother Laurence from present and past pupils of the school as a token of their lasting appreciation of the years she spent in their midst. A woman of warm personality, an able administrator, possessed of a lively faith, she guided the congregation through a period of wide expansion, and always with that simplicity which Father Braun wished to see in his spiritual daughters. Her loss was keenly felt throughout the congregation and among the many friends who knew and loved this remarkable religious.

On the evening of the funeral of Mother Laurence, Bishop Doubleday addressed the assembled superiors and councillors. According to paragraph 235 of the Constitutions "the first councillor governs the congregation in the capacity of vicar. Her duty is to assemble a general election as soon as possible". Mother Antonia Philipps now assumed this office.

Despite the prevalence of war, a number of Irish girls were asking to be admitted to the novitiate. Mother Vicar and the council decided to open a house in Ireland where such girls could be admitted as aspirants to the religious life, before making the journey to war-torn London. Sister Gerard Majella Dooher (Turlock U.S.A. 1982) was appointed as sister in charge of this new venture, based in the Sacred Heart Convent, Cork, Ireland.

A few years before her death, Mother Laurence had received a letter from the Under Secretary of State asking if the congregation would co-operate in the education and training of girls aged between fifteen and eighteen who had appeared before the juvenile courts. New schools were now being established following the publication of the Children and Young Person's Act of 1933. These schools were intended to replace the reformatory and industrial schools. They were to be strictly denominational and each had to be approved by the Secretary of State. Hence the term approved school. Before coming to a decision on the matter, the late superior general had written to Cardinal Hinsley for his advice and the Cardinal replied urging the congregation to accept this worthwhile apostolate. On March 25th 1942, the first Mass was offered in St. Laurence's School, Frant (2) a charming village on the Kent/Sussex border. At first the local residents resented this intrusion of young delinquents into their peaceful village but the

community and girls soon became accepted because of their helpful contribution to the voluntary services in the village.

For some time the bishops of Lancaster and Hexham and Newcastle had been petitioning the congregation to establish a mother and baby home in the far north of England. In 1942, Bishop McCormack was offered Lemmington Hall as a free gift from its owner. The bishop immediately wrote to Mother Antonia suggesting that the congregation accept the house for use as a mother and baby home. In June of that year, Mother Antonia visited Lemmington Hall but she realised immediately that due to the remoteness of its location, the Hall would be most unsuitable for the proposed work. However, while still in the area, Mother Antonia visited another property which was for sale near Kendal, in the well-known scenic English Lake District. Brettargh Holt (3) had been built as a family residence by the Brettarghs of Little Woolton, Liverpool, members of an old Catholic Lancashire family. Mother Antonia decided that this property, then used as a hotel, would be a suitable site for the proposed mother and baby home. It was a fine stone building, furnished, and with twenty acres of land so an immediate purchase was arranged. On December 8th 1943, the first Mass was offered in this latest foundation, despite the fact that war still raged.

Meanwhile, the bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, anxious to accept the magnificent gift of Sir Stephen Aitchison, expressed a wish that the Hall might serve as a residential home for mentally handicapped women — an apostolate also urgently needed in the northern counties of England. Mother Antonia agreed to accept this proposal, whereupon the Aitchison family offered Lemmington Hall as a free gift to the congregation for use as a home for mentally handicapped women.

Situated overlooking the beautiful Vale of Whittingham, Lemmington Hall contains a medieval Pele tower now exquisitely converted into a chapel. The house, built in the eighteenth century, was bought in 1912 by Sir Stephen Aitchison, who owned the chain of Willson grocery stores in the north of England. Sir Stephen rebuilt the house, which had lain in ruins for some years, and lived there with his family until his death in 1942. His son, who lived at nearby Coupland Castle, wished the Hall to be handed over to a Catholic charity and this wish was achieved when on April 14th, 1945, the Aitchison family transferred the property by deed of gift to the congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The work of converting the Hall was entrusted to Mr. Burke of Newcastle. The results are a remarkable and lasting memorial to the excellency of his workmanship and to those who assisted him. On November 12th, 1947, Bishop McCormack

blessed and re-opened Lemmington Hall. Shortly afterwards the first girls were admitted.

Notes

- (1) Convent closed 1982. Sold to Laing Homes Ltd., 1982.
- (2) Closed 1973. Greenwich Social Services bought the property for use as a Community School for girls.
- (3) Convent closed 1969.

CHAPTER 15

Step out in Faith

The war ended in 1945; May 8th was declared VE day — victory in Europe. Six years of world war, many of them concentrated on Britain, severely affected family, school and parish life. The large scale evacuation of children, followed by the departure of fathers, sons and brothers to the war zones changed overnight the familiar pattern of family life. Those left at home battled courageously with the land and machines to produce the large quantities of food and munitions in constant demand on the home and the battle fronts.

The return to normal life in 1945 was painful and unpredictable. Great numbers of houses, churches and schools had been wiped out by the blitz; hundreds of others were badly damaged. A general cloud of gloom hung over the weary population caught up in the psychological and economic aftermath of war. The surprise severity of the long winter of 1947 made life appear harsher than ever.

On the other hand, the immediate effects of peace brought a tremendous sense of relief to the whole nation. It found an echo in all the houses of the congregation. On May 11th, 1945, the novices returned to Chigwell from Old Colwyn, their evacuation haven since the previous year. A few months before, on February 11th, the ceremonies of clothing and profession had been held in the small convent chapel there. On May 16th, the boys of St. John's School, Chigwell, returned from Herne Bay. One by one the London school children and their teachers made their way back to scenes of devastation which must have appeared in striking contrast to their peaceful country billets.

Immediately after the war, Mother Antonia convoked the first general chapter to be assembled since 1933. The delegates met on September 9th, 1945, and not surprisingly Mother Antonia was elected superior general. She had already guided the congregation wisely and bravely since the death of Mother Laurence. Ahead of her lay a daunting challenge of reorganization and rebuilding. New initiatives were necessary to lead the congregation into the changed society of post-war England.

At the request of the new superior general, the Bishop of Lancaster sought and received permission from the Sacred Congregation of Religious in Rome for sisters to train and practise as midwives and the necessary decree was received in Chigwell in June 1947. The orphanage in Homerton had been badly damaged during the blitz and

in 1948 the children moved to St. Teresa's, Lewisham, which had been left vacant following the transfer of the community and girls to Dockenfield. The Assumptionist Fathers asked for and received a sister to take charge of their proposed new primary school in Bethnal Green. In July 1949, Braxted Park, near Cranleigh, in Surrey, was bought to replace Bigod's Hall, Dunmow. St. Joseph's School, Cranleigh, opened there on July 29th, 1950.

During the war years, all civilian building projects were under way in several houses of the congregation. On August 15th 1950, the new chapel in St. Winifrid's, Cardiff, was consecrated. In October a much needed accommodation block was completed in St. Teresa's, Dockenfield. In June of that year the Lady Bute Hospital, Cumnock, was closed. Some of the hospital equipment went to Mount Carmel, Leeds, the private maternity hospital opened in 1953 at the request of Bishop Heenan of Leeds. The Cumnock property was bought by the congregation from the Bute Trustees and some of the wards were used to provide classroom accommodation for St. John's School, Cumnock, run by the sisters.

In 1951, Mother Antonia was elected superior general for a second term of office. In the six years that had elapsed she had been determined to build a chapel in an area where it was much needed. This was to be the congregation's visible thanksgiving to God for his marvellous protection during the years of war. Old Colwyn was chosen as the site for the proposed new church. However, the Main Churches' Committee in the area repeatedly refused planning permission. In 1951, Bishop Petit of Menevia wrote to Mother Antonia suggesting that a primary school in Pembroke Dock, South Wales, was urgently needed and would she now consider erecting a school in thanksgiving as there seemed no prospect of the church being built. The general council agreed to this suggestion and on the same day as the decision was taken to build the school, planning permission was granted for the church.

On February 6th, 1952, King George VI died peacefully in his sleep. The second Elizabethan age opened with the accession of the young queen to the Throne. In September, Our Lady of the Assumption School, Bethnal Green, was opened and that same month a group of sisters began teaching in the annexe of St. Anthony's School, Hainault, Essex. A new foundation was made in the Brentwood diocese in September 1952. St. Andrew's Convent, Loughton, was opened at the request of Bishop Beck who was anxious that the sisters who had been teaching the children of the new Debden estate in St. Anthony's Annexe, Chingford, since 1950, should also reside in the parish.

One of the new towns to spring up in the 1950's, was Harlow

New Town, in Essex. It was planned as a dormitory town for people working in the Industrial Estate, many of whom worked in the Standard Telephone Plant. Most of the new residents came from Leicester and Liverpool.

Although the housing estate was still in the early stages of building in 1953, Bishop Beck of Brentwood was particularly keen to have a community of sisters living among the people. And so, at his request, Mother Antonia sent three sisters to live in one of the newly-built council houses, 112 Churchfields.

By Easter 1956, St. Alban's Catholic Primary School was opened and four sisters joined the community to teach in the school. Sister John Vianney (Harlow 1982) recalls her first days in the New Town. "Most of our time was spent either catechizing in the local authority school or helping to organize various activities in the community centres. At the outset, I was a sort of museum piece in the school but I was warmly welcomed by the staff and given a classroom where I took a series of catechist-classes daily. The first Sunday Mass was celebrated in Tony Dell's Primary School by Father Burgess, C.R.I.C. The congregation numbered twelve people. It was in the Moab House in the Star, then a small shopping centre, that the first group of communicants made their first Holy Communion on December 8th, 1953. Among them was Michael Turner, now Fr. Michael Turner, C.R.I.C. and a parish priest in Milton Keynes. During the Marian Year 1954, we produced "The Three Children of Fatima" at the Harlow Community Centre. We subsequently played to full houses in Epping, Slough, Frinton-on-Sea and in Kilburn, N. London. Right from the beginning, we felt we were close to the people who did all they could to help us in every endeavour we undertook."

As far back as 1949, the Southwark Schools' Commission had asked Mother Antonia for a site on which to build a secondary school. Four temporary classrooms were built in the grounds of the convent on Belmont Hill. On September 25th, 1954, the foundation stone of St. Theresa's Secondary School for girls, was laid by Archbishop Cowderoy of Southwark. On June 23rd, 1955, the school was officially opened.

The second part of the twentieth century ushered in a period of wide expansion in religious life. Alongside this growth in the number of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, came a period of stability. It seemed that, after the disruption of war, there came a great calm. It was an age of deep conviction in religious life. Religious observance was carefully regulated and practised. Secular society enjoyed a growing material prosperity. The number of vocations to the religious life increased. This influx of vocations added to the further

upbuilding of religious houses and institutions. There seemed no shortage of young and eager religious ready to face life's challenges. Led by the wise guidance of the Holy Spirit, many religious congregations now widened their apostolic horizons to distant lands in Africa, America and Asia where, "the fields were already white with the harvest."

The birth and development of our missions in America and Africa are an important landmark in the history of our congregation. As such, they deserve to be given a much fuller treatment than the present brief history permits. However, this is how the Missionary era began:

The Golden Jubilee of the Congregation was celebrated in Chigwell on March 5th, 1953. A special Mass of thanksgiving was offered in the convent chapel by the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Griffin, assisted by Bishop Beck of Brentwood and a large number of clergy. Twelve days later, on St. Patrick's Day, March 17th, Mother Antonia received a letter from Father O'Shea, pastor of St. Anthony's parish, Atwater, California, asking for a small group of sisters to teach in his parish school. Mother Antonia also received a letter from Bishop Willinger of Fresno, giving his warm approval to the proposed new foundation. The council met shortly afterwards to discuss this new venture. Following the receipt of letters of commendation from our cardinal protector, Cardinal Canali, and the apostolic delegate, Archbishop Griffin, Mother Antonia decided that this new missionary request, coming in the centenary year, must be seen as a moment of special grace in the life of the Congregation. She immediately wrote a circular letter asking for volunteers for the new mission in California and by March 25th, thirty-one sisters had volunteered. Mother Antonia then decided to visit California before committing herself any further.

On May 17th 1953, Mother Antonia accompanied by Mother Adrienne, left Heathrow Airport for San Francisco, travelling thence to Atwater. They returned to Chigwell on June 9th and on June 30th the first missionaries were named. Mother Leontia Collins, superior of the Chigwell community, offered to lead the first missionary community in the New World. Even before the first sisters had left England, the Archbishop of San Francisco wrote on July 29th appealing for a community of sisters to teach in the parish school in Turlock, California. This foundation was accepted for the following year, 1954. On September 5th, 1953, the five pioneer sisters sailed from Liverpool. They were:— Mother Leontia Collins, Sisters Gerard Majella Dooher, Oliver Kinane, Mary Dominic Stordy and Anne Savage. Shortly afterwards Mother Antonia wrote a circular letter giving details of the departure of the pioneer community. She began thus:—

"I do not think I told you about the departure of the Pioneer Sisters for California. The last preparations were completed on the 3rd September and the sisters waited anxiously in Chigwell for their departure. His Lordship Bishop Beck very kindly came on the evening of the 3rd to spend the night and to impart to them his blessing. He spoke very encouragingly to the Sisters and said that although they might feel some excitement or perhaps a little anxiety they had no need to fear. They were carrying out Our Lord's instructions to teach all nations and they had been chosen to carry the Chigwell spirit and tradition abroad. The sisters then approached the altar rails and received individually His Lordship's blessing. He also gave them the Pope's blessing. The following morning the Bishop said Holy Mass for the sisters' intentions.

On the morning of the 5th, after an early Mass, the professed Sisters, Novices and Postulants assembled at the front door to wave a last goodbye (farewells having been said the previous evening in the Community). The sisters very bravely got into the two cars accompanied by Rev. Mother General and Mother Bernadette, and started off immediately for Euston where the special boat train left for Liverpool. After a tedious six hours' journey the sisters arrived at the dock at 2 p.m. where Mother Hilda and Mother Edith, Rev. Father Declan, C.P. and Rev. Father Francis, O.F.M. Conv. waited with Sister M. Dominic's relatives. Customs were quickly got through. Special permits had been secured for Rev. Mother General and the remainder of the party to be allowed on the boat between 2 and 2.30, but it was 2.40 before they got there. However, after a little persuading of the officials, Mother General and the others were allowed on. They had only time for a flying visit to the sisters' quarters which appeared to be very comfortable, and had some photographs taken, then had to hurry off. The gangway was quickly pulled back and as the clock chimed three, the "Media" quickly turned round and sailed down the Mersey. The sisters remained on deck waving until we could no longer see them and the two priests continued blessing them until we left the Dockside."

During the voyage out, Sister Anne Savage kept a daily journal which was despatched at intervals to Chigwell and subsequently circulated to the waiting communities. The following extract describes the tremendous excitement as the sisters finally came to California, more than three weeks after their departure from Chigwell:

"We went through tunnels cut through the sheer face of the mountain. One time we went through the mountain, 4,000 feet below the mountain and lasting for ten minutes. Do you know I have no fear of going in the air now after the heights and depths! If you could have seen the colours of the rocks, the fantastic shapes, spires, towers, pillars cut out by the

weather and the wonderful rock plants and flowers. It was very late before we could tear ourselves away to go for dinner and then the whole time we were looking out at new thrills and beauties. The lovely canyons we passed through, the beautiful rivers, men fishing: beautiful shacks, tiny villages high up in the mountains miles from anywhere. For anyone coming out, although the journey is somewhat of a nightmare, it would be a pity to miss the train journey from Chicago to Stockton.

That evening we went through Utah, strange, mysterious country. I sat up in the Observation car while the others were down in the roomettes. It was weird travelling through hundreds of miles of desert, not seeing any sign of human life, no bird, no tree, only huge rocks, sand, and here and there a dry grey scrub. There seemed to be a deathly silence about everything. Many a time I thought we were coming to some distant city with castles and turrets like a picture in Arabian Nights. When we drew near it was only to discover the 'city' was rock cut out in castle shapes by the elements.

That night I was determined to get up for a glimpse of Salt Lake City but alas! I slept through it. Mother and the remainder of the community saw it. The following morning we were in Nevada — still rather desert-like but more dry grass. Then at least we began to come to fields and vegetation, cattle, towns, villages, farms.

October 7th, 1953, we came to California! We had been right through the States, we had seen sights more lovely than any picture but the most breath-taking of all was the Feather River Canyon, California. The sheer beauty of the mountains, river, spruce and fir, the glorious colours of sky and river and trees and the clear, beautiful air and the sunshine! Oh, those who are coming next year, D.V. must see it. It would be missed by plane.

The excitement that day was intense as we were drawing near our destination. If you had seen us practising our arrival, etc. On one thing we were all agreed — if Father O'Shea were not on the platform to meet us it would be a very bad sign, the convent would not be ready, he had changed his mind about wanting us and so on. We then decided what part of the Feather River Canyon we should return to and two of us were — well we had all plans set. We were then travelling through miles of vineyards, peach orchards and tomato farms. The announcer called for attention — All passengers alighting at Stockton to be ready to alight in five minutes. Out into the corridor we went and it was a study to look at the expressions during the last few minutes. The train drew up, our porter got down and put out a stool for us to step on (it's a great drop from the train to the ground — no platform) and we

had arrived. A long way up the station a group began to race towards us, Sr. Gerard Majella's brother, her two sisters and their husbands and — Father Scanlan. What a welcome we had! But — no Father O'Shea! Of all things, he was in retreat and although he implored permission to come and meet us the Bishop was adamant. Perhaps he knew Father O'Shea would not return! Then another crowd came slowly along — a deputation of parishioners to welcome us. They all wanted to take a sister in their car. Eventually Mother went with Father Scanlan, Sister Gerard's sister Nancy and husband and her brother; Sr. M. Dominic with one group of parishioners, Sr. Oliver with more parishioners and Sister Gerard Majella and I with Alice and her husband. We were a little behind the others but slipped out of Stockton by a short cut and got ahead of all — to our delight. It was fascinating to see the Spanish-Mexican looking towns, the palm trees, almond and peach orchards, cactus and semi-tropical plants and flowers as we sped along.

Guess our feelings as we passed through Turlock (lovely place) and then through Merced (about which we had heard so much) and then Atwater! It is lovely — white houses, palm trees, beautiful avenues, stores, oh, so many new and strange things. We passed St. Anthony's and then the Convent! It is a Spanish style completely surrounded at present by sand, sand, sand! The door was opened and we were welcomed by another group of parishioners. Then we went through our new home. A big dinner was prepared with all sorts of Californian dishes and ending with the cutting of the cake — "Welcome".

Other foundations followed in quick succession: El Cerrito (1955), Watsonville (1959), Livingston (1962), Sacramento (1963), Oakland (1970). On September 23rd, 1955, Cardinal Canali requested and received permission from the Sacred Congregation of Religious in Rome for the establishment of a novitiate in California. After much searching, a suitable property was acquired near Watsonville and shortly afterwards in 1960 the first four postulants were admitted. In 1969 the California Region was established. Sister Gerard Majella Dooher was named regional superior.

On October 13th, 1973, celebrations were held in St. Anthony's Convent, Atwater, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the arrival of the first sisters in Atwater. The celebration began on Saturday evening with a "Happy Hour" at 7.00 p.m. Mrs. James Boyce was the receptionist and presented each sister with a corsage and name tag as she entered the hall. This was a time to visit with old friends, meet new ones, and mingle with and greet former students many of whom were present, and a goodly number of these were accompanied by their husbands

and/or wives. Many former graduates, and parents of past pupils who could not attend, either wrote or 'phoned their regrets and good wishes. Among those it gave us great pleasure to hear from were Mr. and Mrs. Chuck Redell of Grand Isle, Louisiana; Brother Teddy Rohrer, S.J. of Los Angeles; and Mrs. Al Battaglia (the former Terry Boland) of Cedar Grove, New Jersey, all members of the first senior class of the school. In the afternoon several parents and friends who were unable to see the sisters previously came to give their good wishes, pictures were taken and goodbyes were said. As Edith McDonald and Adeline Klien said as they said goodbye, it was a great rehearsal for the silver anniversary in five years time!

An interesting circumstance came to light as we talked on the 'phone with Chuck Redell. A new parish priest had just been appointed to his parish, none other than Father Henry Lenz, M.S. who had worked for many years with our sisters in Dagenham! Small world! Of course all the sisters in California were present. About three hundred parishioners attended the dinner.

The delicious dinner of barbecued chicken was prepared by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Trindade, Mrs. Evelyn Rebeiro, Mrs. Joseph McDonald and Mrs. Klein assisted by members of the Catholic Daughters of America organization. On the stage backdrop was a painting of an almost deserted Stockton Station with a solitary train on the tracks from which had apparently just alighted five long-gowned sisters. A large truck stood nearby, piled high with trunks. This painting was the work of Mrs. Nord and her daughter Barbara, a former St. Anthony graduate. Pictures were taken of the scene and I hope they come out. They should bring back some "hot" memories to Sr. Mary Kinane and Sr. Anne. For dessert we had cake and one of the cakes was a large replica of the school, American flag and all!

Mr. Joseph McDonald acted as master of ceremonies and at the end of dinner gave a resume of the events which led to the opening of the school and a brief history of its beginnings. Sr. Gerard spoke for the sisters. Father Peterson, Merced, spoke on the meaning of Catholic Education and noted that none of the speakers had mentioned buildings but people in the development of the school. He stressed that it was the personal links, not great buildings, that formed the binding force of the Church, and pointed out that it was evident from the gathering there that this had certainly been the case where St. Anthony's Church community had been concerned. Monsignor Rechenmacher, Pastor of St. Anthony's thanked all present for coming to honour the sisters for the great work they had done and were doing in the parish, and, referring to the short time he had been in St. Anthony's, emphasised his

gratitude for having inherited such a parish. Father John — with an impossible name — a former assistant at St. Anthony's, gave the blessing. The evening concluded with a half hour of community singing accompanied by Sister Eleanor O'Brien and Sister Bernadette Ward with guitars.

All the sisters stayed overnight in one or other of the Valley convents and at 10 a.m. on Sunday morning a Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated by Monsignor Recherimacher. The church was crowded and almost everyone present received Holy Communion. Those of us who remembered the early days in St. Anthony's when only a handful of the small congregation in the old parish church received Communion, couldn't help thinking that here was the greatest tribute to the work of the sisters in the parish. Sr. Gemma conducted the children's choir, and several of the sisters, including Sr. Winifred Stordy who started the first children's choir in St. Anthony's, helped with the music. The concluding hymn *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord*, seemed a fitting and joyous ending.

In 1952 the Vicar Apostolic of Northern Rhodesia was Bishop van der Biesen W.F., who while on a visit to his friend, Father Murphy, a curate in Homerton parish, spoke of his longing to have a community of missionary sisters who would staff the hospital he proposed to attach to one of the mission stations in his area. "You should go across to the convent", Fr. Murphy advised. He did so and the superior there, Mother Josephine Sculley, advised him in turn to go into Chigwell. "Whatever chance you have about getting nursing sisters," she said, "You have no chance at all about teaching sisters". This was fair comment as, about that time, St. Teresa's Secondary school was being built in Lewisham and a number of sisters would be needed to staff it. Bishop van der Biesen made his way to Chigwell and laid his hopes before Mother Antonia, who listened attentively.

Over a year later on Dec. 1st, 1953, the Bishop made a second visit to Chigwell and again repeated his request. Mother Antonia agreed to send six sisters to Chilonga within the next two years when the hospital and convent would be ready for occupation. She decided to visit Northern Rhodesia, taking as her companion, Mother Adrienne Harkin, assistant general. They arrived in Lusaka on Sept. 8th, 1954, where they were met by a delighted Bishop van der Biesen. He drove them to Chilonga mission where they visited the site of the new hospital.

In the depth of the winter of 1955, the first two missionary sisters in Africa, Srs. Kieran Marie Pilkington and Mary of the Sacred

Heart McManus, left Chigwell on the first stage of the long journey which was to end in the heart of the Rhodesian Bush. Sr. Kieran Marie remembers the day thus: "My most lasting memory of that cold wintry morning Feb. 9th, 1955, is of the long row of white veiled novices standing in the snow-covered avenue, waving and smiling at us as we drove off on the first lap of our journey by car to Waterloo. The ever faithful Henry was at the wheel as we took our last backward look at Chigwell. It was 8.30 in the morning and at 9.30 we boarded the train for Southampton where our ship, the Athlone Castle, had docked and was waiting to receive its first passengers."

Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart kept a daily journal of the voyage out and of the first days spent on African soil. Here is an extract written on February 27th 1956:— "So once more on the train we settled down to await the end of our journey — Lusaka. We passed many more poverty-stricken huts and villages. Some of the huts were made up of about six stout branches of trees standing upright in a circle over which was spread a roof of grass. Better huts were a bit stouter being made of mud walls and grass roofs. Some of the huts had a sort of blanket hanging down the centre from the roof dividing the humble dwelling into two compartments. Sometimes we saw hens and chickens running in and out of the huts. Occasionally we saw some starved-looking cows and sheep. There were a great number of goats, though, and they always seemed fairly well-nourished. The bush is now very thick indeed. God knows what could be lurking there! We passed miles and miles of it but very few streams or pools. About three in the afternoon we arrived at a little station named Menze. Just as the train drew in, the rain started. This was our first tropical rain shower. It was so heavy we thought the train would be flattened to the ground. Needless to say, we thanked God we were inside under shelter. The Africans walked about, unconcerned, in their bare feet, seemingly not noticing anything. One or two had an old coat or hat on but their bare feet squelched water or mud. At 10.40 we could see the bright coloured lights of Lusaka in the distance and it was exactly 10.45 p.m. when we arrived at Lusaka. The bottom step of the train was three feet from the ground — no built up platform here. There were very few people about and Sister Kieran Marie was just on the point of asking a porter if anyone had left a message for us, when the bishop came up to us. He was wearing a light blue jacket so that was why we had not recognized him earlier. He gave us a very hearty welcome to Africa and as we passed our cases, counting them one by one until we came to number six, the bishop said to me, "It looks as if you've come to stay, sister."

Sister Kieran Marie, reminiscing on those pioneer days, twenty-

five years later, remembers "the outstanding kindness, the hallmark of the true missionary spirit, which Fr. Flynn OFM Conv. gave us right from the beginning. The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, whose motherhouse is at Guildford, in Surrey, gave us invaluable advice. Among them especially was Sister Jean Mary, now superior general of her congregation.

When we arrived at Chilonga the convent was still in the building process. The scaffolding was made from tree branches. As we turned into the drive, in the car driven by the bishop, suddenly little tight curly black heads popped over the long grass, smiling shyly at us. The White Fathers of the mission now welcomed us and there was a march-past by the children of the mission school.

Chilonga was the first mission established by the White Fathers in Northern Rhodesia. The missionaries chose a site close to flowing water and here the water flowed down from the mountains which are quite close to the back of the mission, near to the Great North Road which was little more than than a dirt track built by prisoners of war in World War II. All around was red scrubland which seemed to engulf every part of you — hair, habit; it seemed to cling forever. There were few trees about. There was no twilight. Darkness enshrouded us at 6 p.m. The mission comprised the fathers' house, a mission school and a clinic run by one of the White Fathers.

The weather was very hot except in June and July when the nights were particularly cold. From November to December we had the wet season but from May until November we never saw rain. At Christmas time all nature was in full bloom — green leaves abounded. Orange trees were plentiful and other fruits such as lemons, grapefruit, bananas, were commonplace. Bread was homemade, butter was something of the past. Every three months the Fathers went to the Copper Belt to buy stores. A shopping expedition took one week, two days to arrive, two days to return.

On September 26th 1956, we went to live in Chilonga. (Before this, the two sisters lived in a small house belonging to the White Sisters at the Chilabula mission). The Administration block in the hospital was completed so we went to live there. We had no proper kitchen as yet — a wood stove standing at one end of the ward was used for cooking. At the opposite end of the ward we set up a laundry. The first Mass was said in our temporary chapel — a small room — on October 11th 1956, feast of the Motherhood of Our Lady.

The first department in the hospital to open, was the outpatients'. Our first patient was a lorry driver. "How do you feel?" asked the

doctor. "I feel something walking round inside me head", came the reply. "How long has it been there?", the doctor asked. "Seven years", came the reply.

In 1957, we came in contact with our first cases of smallpox. Every child in the village, under two years of age, died. A father came on his bicycle carrying in his arms his sick child but when we examined him, he had already died. If a villager died, next day the house and everything in it, down to the last blanket, was burned.

I shall always remember the extreme courtesy of the Zambian people, their delightful sense of humour and their lightheartedness."

Twenty-five years later, Sister Oliver, Superior General, accompanied by her assistant, Sister Mary Laura Ryan, attended the festivities which marked the silver jubilee of the opening of the mission hospital in Chilonga. The following extract from the article "Zambian Celebration" (Keeping in Touch: Spring 1982) is written by Sister Cyril, regional superior. It is a colourful eye-witness account of that memorable and happy occasion. "OCTOBER 9th, 1981. SILVER JUBILEE DAY was here at last! How often during the past few months we heard the refrain, "Oh keep that, it might come in handy for the jubilee". Now, at last all was ready. With deep gratitude to God and to our congregation, to our pioneer sisters, to those present and to those unable to be present, to all who had given of themselves during the past twenty-five years, we stood before the open-air altar. This Eucharist was being offered to Almighty God with such heart felt gratitude for his goodness and mercy bestowed upon the apostolate at Chilonga.

The scene was truly a brilliant one. The bright sunshine, colourful flowering shrubs and trees, the tastefully decorated altar surrounded by the clergy in their vivid vestments added to the grandeur and solemnity of the occasion. His Grace the Archbishop of Kasama, Dr. E. Mutale, our own bishop, The Right Reverend A. Furstenburg, Bishop of Mbala, and seventeen priests from various parishes concelebrated Mass. The throbbing drums, the enthusiastic singing of the children from the local school, the happy shining faces of the large congregation filled one with unspeakable emotion. And among that crowd we were proud to have our Superior General, Sr. Oliver and her assistant Sr. Laura representing the congregation. No one could tell how many in that gathering had been helped, cured at the hospital, but without doubt there were many, many rejoicing people present with deep gratitude in their hearts for help received over the years. The presence of some of the patients in their hospital attire surely symbolised all who over the years had come through the doors of the hospital with hope in their hearts and need mirrored in their eyes.

Spirited, rythmic dances by the nurses and indeed by the matron, preceded the lunch and entertainment, which was so ably taken care of by the women of the area. Speeches, both in Bemba and English testified to the contribution of our congregation to the work of the hospital. The Bishop and indeed some of the local politicians were most profuse in their thanks. It was heartening to see how much hope and trust they place in the sisters, and how grateful they are for the work being done for the people in the area. During the past twenty-five years the hospital has grown in size and name. It now provides general and midwifery training for young Zambians. Primary health care is undertaken on a large scale. Mother and child care clinics are conducted every month by the hospital team. The growth of the clinics are proof of the dedication of the hospital staff to the improvement of child care for as many children as possible in as wide an area as possible.

As a glorious sun began to set people left for the villages, tired but happy. The twenty-fifth jubilee celebrations will not be easily forgotten. One can imagine conversations many years hence, "Do you remember Praise God for his goodness and mercy".

Other foundations followed in Zambia. In 1961 the residential secondary school for girls opened in Lwitikila. In 1962, the hospital at Mbala was opened. The following year, 1963, the first Homecraft centre was opened at Mbala. Then in 1976 a second centre was opened at Mpika.

CHAPTER 16

The Dawn of a New Day

The long reign of Pope Pius XII came to an end on October 9th, 1958. He had been endowed with remarkable gifts of mind and spirit, which he dedicated to the service of the church, particularly during the twenty years of his strenuous pontificate. Now it seemed a difficult task to elect a successor to follow in his footsteps. On October 28th, Cardinal Roncalli, the little known patriarch of Venice, became the new pope, John XXIII. For the first time, the marvel of television beamed the coronation of a pope to millions of viewers in the Western world.

On the eve of the opening of Vatican II, 1962 six sisters took up residence in the newly-built Sacred Heart Convent, Melville Street. The first sisters lived temporarily in the presbytery, Meyrick Street, which was kindly placed at their disposal on their arrival in May, 1959. The clergy, Father R.J. Newman, R.I.P. and his curate, Fr. Michael Brennan, went to live temporarily in 112 Bush Street. The long awaited chapel, requested by Bishop Petit of Menevia, had been blessed by him on May 1st, 1956. At last Mother Antonia's promise had been well and truly honoured.

Perhaps this is a suitable place to remind ourselves of these words of St. Vincent de Paul quoted in September 1872, in a letter written by our founder: "Let us not anticipate the providence of the Lord. If we know how to wait, we shall perform our works all the better". Father Braun then went on to say: "Works established by religious have always time working for them. They are the outcome of the Lord who knows how to wait because he is eternal. Pater quia aeternus — he is patient because he is eternal".

The 1960's saw a tremendous leap forward in the growth of mechanical power, which abolished much of the drudgery of labour at home and in the world of work. Cheaper food, more leisure time, the impact of television, all helped to encourage an increase in life's expectation by a great majority of people. On the other hand, the bureaucratic age led to a growing anonymity, especially in the larger towns and cities. In addition, new and terrible weapons threatened world peace still further and man seemed set on a course of destruction.

Pope John XXIII's decision to call an ecumenical council which he hoped would bring about 'a new Pentecost', soon came to be viewed as a divine ray of hope in a world that seemed to have lost its direction.

Only the bishops from China, Albania and Vietnam were prevented from attending the Council sessions.

Throughout the Chigwell Congregation, the progress of the Council was followed with increasing interest. In May 1962, the Dagenham Sacred Heart School for girls, built with the help of a sizeable contribution from the Congregation, was blessed and opened by Bishop Beck of Brentwood. Later that year, Bishop Beck returned to Rome to attend the second session of Vatican II, opened by the new pope, Paul VI.

A general chapter was held in Chigwell in 1963, during which Mother Bernadette Flavin, secretary general, was appointed to succeed Mother Antonia Philipps who had been in office since 1941. During those years the congregation had spread to America and Africa while other foundations and initiatives had been taken in home areas. In 1956, Mother Antonia had received the Medal of the Order of the British Empire from Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, "in recognition of the valuable services given by her congregation to the care and education of handicapped children and adults." In 1960, again accompanied by Mother Adrienne Harkin, she had re-visited the Zambian missions and the following year had received a warm welcome from the sisters in California.

Mother Bernadette's term of office was brief but memorable. During her term of office the sisters took charge of two primary schools, St. John the Baptist, Bethnal Green (1964) and Our Lady of Lourdes (1964) which was built in the grounds of the convent in Lewisham. Following a short illness, she died in hospital on October 5th, 1965. Hers was a spirit of total self-sacrifice. By nature retiring and unassuming, she carried out the burden of high office with unstinted devotion. The government of the congregation now rested on the shoulders of the Assistant General, Sister Etheldreda Gleeson. Her first duty was to convene and prepare for the General Chapter as soon as possible.

During Mother Bernadette's term of office, the Irish Provincial of the Friars Minor, Father Boniface O.F.M., invited the Chigwell sisters to send a small community to help staff their school at Assisi Mission, near Enkeldorn, Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Mother Bernadette did not live to see this new missionary endeavour take root. However, Sister Etheldreda continued with the negotiations and in December 1965, Sisters Anne Aherne, R.I.P. and Mary Sarto (Sacred Heart Convent, Cork, 1982) left Heathrow Airport for Salisbury from where they flew to Luanda. They stayed there for a few days with the Little Company of Mary Sisters and then made the journey by road to Assisi Mission, 187 miles away. (1)

The sisters received a warm welcome, and a colourful one from the three hundred boys and girls in the secondary school. The mission was situated in a deep valley, surrounded by groves of trees. It is easy to imagine the crowd of worshippers striding down the hillside on their way to Sunday Mass. The celebration was a heartfelt, joyous experience; at the offertory, the people presented bowls of food, at the same time bravely attempting to ward off the nagging mosquitoes, an ever-present hazard in the huge hut which served as a church. After Mass the congregation liked to sit and talk in the shade provided by the umbrella-shaped branches of the baubau trees.

Racial prejudice was rampant in the area. When the missionaries paid their workers in cash, the white people complained, as they only gave a pail of sazda and the use of a small hut, in return for a week's work. The people were extremely poor. The language spoken was Shona which the sisters attempted to learn in the language laboratory. At weekends, they went into the outlying villages to catechize. There they were treated with that delightful courtesy which they had already received from the young people in the mission school.

The general chapter assembled in June 1966 and Sister Etheldreda was elected superior general. Sister Celestine Leonard was elected as her assistant. The new superior general spent Christmas 1966 with the sisters in California and the following Easter, she spent several weeks visiting the Zambian missions.

The Motu Proprio, Ecclesiae Sanctae, was issued by Pope Paul VI in 1966. The decree called on all religious to renew their original spirit in the light of the gospel, the charism of their founder and the needs of the contemporary world. Each institute was to hold a "chapter of renewal" before 1969, to revise the constitutions of the institute in accordance with council directives.

This daunting task, to set in motion the guidelines which would implement the process of adaptation and renewal called for by the Council, now lay ahead of the new superior general and her council. The instruction, "Renovationis Causam" called for, among other things, immediate innovations in the novitiate. From now on the ceremony of clothing was to be private and simple. A series of adaptations were made to the habit. On July 19th, 1969, the special general chapter of renewal assembled in the Chapter Room, Chigwell. Delegates from the Californian and Zambian houses attended. The work of renewal, which would bring much pain, soul-searching, confusion, but above all hope for the future of the congregation, was now under way.

The new decade heralded in by the year 1970, saw the beginning of two unexpected and unprecedented phenomena in religious life.

These were the sudden departure of a sizeable number of religious from convents and monasteries and a corresponding decline in the number of vocations. For some, renewal came too late; for others it proved too daunting. In our congregation, these happenings were followed by the closure of houses, new developments in traditional apostolates and the introduction of "individual apostolates".

Sister Etheldreda was appointed to a second term of office at the chapter held in 1972. Shortly afterwards, commissions were set up to prepare the first draft of the new constitutions which were to be presented to the chapter due to be held in 1978. During the intervening six years, the congregation lived through somewhat of an upheaval in established rule and custom. No area escaped scrutiny, prayer-life, government, life-style, relationships between ourselves and the outside world.

On January 29th, 1972, the centenary celebration of the first ceremony of profession was held in St. Francis' Church, Stratford. Father Justin O.F.M., The Friary, Stratford, gave the address on that happy occasion. In conclusion, he spoke these words:

"Rightly, today, as you look back, you can be very proud and very grateful. It is almost incredible that it is only a hundred years, when one thinks of the many centres in which you are now working, carrying out your apostolate all over England, in Wales, in Scotland, the Outer Hebrides, in Ireland and in your missions in Zambia and California. So we look back with gratitude on Père Braun, Mother Francis de Sales, Mothers Winefride, Sylvester, Laurence, Antonia, Bernadette and to all those influences which, under God, inspired you these hundred years, seventy of which you have lived in fraternal association with us in Woodford — the happy continuation of the beginnings here in Stratford and at Homerton."

On January 17th, 1974, Mother Antonia Philipps died in Kelton, Liverpool. Mary Philipps was born in Kilmuckeridge, Co. Wexford, on May 28th, 1889. She received the habit on August 28th, 1909, in the little temporary tin chapel then attached to Chigwell Convent. Two years later, she was among the first to be professed in the new convent chapel. After the funeral, Sister Etheldreda wrote a circular letter to the congregation, part of which is here quoted —

"My dear Sisters,

This day week we were all saddened by the news of the death of Reverend Mother Antonia R.I.P. but our sadness was mingled with joy — joy in the knowledge that she had gone to her reward after a

very prayerful and very faithful life. This joy, mingled with a sense of loss, has been in evidence all week, but was especially so yesterday when her body was laid to rest in St. Patrick's Cemetery, Leytonstone.

As a good many of you know, Mother Antonia often expressed the wish that she would be spared a long illness. Almighty God certainly granted her this wish when we least expected it. But Reverend Mother was ready to answer the call whenever it came and while she was waiting to be taken to the hospital for an X-ray examination, she was heard to say that all she wanted was to go home. It was significant that the last community Mass she offered up in the chapel at Kelton, which she loved so much, was on the feast of the Epiphany, January 6th, 1974 — the feast of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentile world. This feast has now become a reality for Mother Antonia".

During the concelebrated Requiem Mass in Kelton chapel, Archbishop Beck of Liverpool spoke movingly of the late Mother Antonia. He said, "The mainspring in her life was her endless trouble to take daring steps to provide homes for little ones, deprived ones, defenceless ones and the handicapped — where each could be given a chance to experience the warmth and kindness of a true Christian home. I knew her when I first went to Brentwood and she was always concerned as to how her communities could help those in need.

Secondly, thinking of her here during these last years — her devotion to the rosary, to the chapel, her daily prayers, her close living with God. Having to live a life of inactivity must have been a great trial to her patience, but surely she could say with St. Paul, "The only thing that matters in the end is to know Christ and him crucified".

In 1971, due to the impossibility of undertaking the immense structural alterations necessary to update the Lord Ninian hospital, Sister Etheldreda had decided to look for an alternative site. The search proved long and fruitless. Sir Julian Hodge, the Cardiff financier, heard of the difficulties. He had decided to build a home for the elderly in memory of his mother, Jane Hodge, who had died in the Lord Ninian On Christmas Day. The time now seemed opportune but there were the inevitable delays.

At the general chapter held in 1978, Sister Oliver Kinane was elected to succeed Sister Etheldreda who had completed two terms of office. Sister Mary Laura Ryan was elected as her assistant. Both had spent many years on the California missions. Sister Oliver's term of office began during what may be looked upon as the "transition period", the challenging years when the congregation moves towards the new image of religious life called for by the Church. One of her first pleasant

duties was to assist at the opening of the Jane Hodge Home, in October 1978. Among those present were Archbishop Murphy of Cardiff and Sir George Thomas, Speaker of the House of Commons. In his speech on that occasion, Sir Julian Hodge spoke with gratitude of his association with the Lord Ninian, saying, "I shall always remember with gratitude the care and affection given to my mother by Mother Agatha and these good sisters. When I heard that the Lord Ninian had to be closed, I knew immediately that I wanted to build another home in my mother's name. Perhaps I should add for the records that Mother Agatha never sent me a bill. She must have regarded me as another charitable case. I cannot think of a more reassuring place to be than under the sheltering wing and the loving care of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. There is a comfort in the strength of love".

In the spring of 1980, Sister Oliver, accompanied by Sister Mary Laura, spent a week in the mother house of the Servants of the Sacred Heart at the invitation of the superior general, Sister Daniele (2). While in France, they visited six houses of the Servants of the Sacred Heart, including the convent at Charolles where Mother Francis de Sales had lived her last years.

The new constitutions were received by the congregation in 1980. Sister Oliver wrote in her letter of introduction:

"These new constitutions and directives are now challenging us to reach out to new horizons in our spiritual life. They are the fruit of much prayer and hard work on your part, and especially on the part of the capitulants at the last and previous chapters.

Let us accept them in a spirit of faith. With the help of Our Blessed Lady may we use them as a means to grow closer to the chaste, poor and obedient Christ".

Revised constitutions of themselves do not bring about renewal. Raymond Hostie's "Life and Death of Religious Orders", states that the average life-time of religious institutes is two to three centuries. One of the signs of decline is given as the disproportion between the number of houses possessed by the institute and the number of religious living in them. All institutes go through phases of decline and development. We ourselves have witnessed a period of decline and now, hopefully, there are signs of a new spring dawning. The two recent foundations in the Brentwood diocese, the parish houses in Witham (1980) and Harlow (1982) are, surely, rays of hope. We cannot, of course, see into God's plan for the future, but the present is ours to live now.

The centenary of the death of our founder, Father Victor Braun, was celebrated in each of the houses of the congregation on May 18th, 1982. It will be recalled that Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of West-

minster, warmly welcomed our founder to London, even before he set foot on English soil. With this in mind, Sister Mary Laura and I visited Cardinal Basil Hume O.S.B. present Archbishop of Westminster. His Eminence spoke especially of his gratitude to the congregation for endowing the Westminster Cathedral Choir School with a number of scholarships, in memory of our founder, Father Victor Braun. Some months later, on the feast of one of our principal patrons, St. Margaret Mary, Cardinal Hume came to celebrate the Mass of the feast and, as he said, "to praise God and to thank him, as you celebrate the centenary of Father Victor Braun." The music for the liturgy was sung by the choristers of Westminster Cathedral Choir School, who delighted the many sisters who formed the congregation on that October day.

During the homily of the Mass, His Eminence quoted for us this passage from the writings of Father Braun, which, said the Cardinal, "give you the secret of your vocation." "You must enter into the interior of the divine Heart, so as to be animated with its sentiments, to think its thoughts. That is the contemplative side of the life. Then when the heart has thus been enkindled by meditation on the life of Our Lord, the apostolic life begins. One can no longer contain the flames drawn from the Heart of Jesus, but feels the need of communicating them".

To communicate to others the good news of Christ's coming is the duty of every Christian; as Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, we have by virtue of our religious profession, dedicated ourselves to communicate the good news with an ever deeper commitment, all our life.

Now as we enter the last decades of the twentieth century, we are called to do so in a world that needs, more than ever, to recognize in our daily living what it means to know Jesus, to love him and to experience what it is to be loved by him.

We aspire to be women of faith — ready to step out, maybe, into as yet unknown paths. We desire to be bearers of hope, the hope that comes to us from our meditation on and adoration of the Heart of Christ, wounded for love of each person.

Our founder would have us be women who are practical, unpretentious, approachable, pleasant. As St. Francis de Sales said, "A sad saint is a sorry saint". Conscious of our human failings, our over-anxieties at times, our covered-up inadequacies, which cause us personal pain, we aspire to be ever more patient with ourselves and each other. Aware of our near-sightedness, our lack of vision at times, we accept that through our weakness, God speaks to others of his love, in ways we may never know. We need a listening heart, a listening ear, too.

We pray always to accept our allotted task, marked out for us by our Saviour.

Our founder bequeathed to each of us but two bequests: Jesus Christ and the poor. We pray that we may resist the efforts of those who might seek to despoil us of either or who would add others, more burdensome but less worthy.

To be a servant of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary is, simply, to desire to be what God wants me to be. As the author of "The Cloud of Unknowing" reminds us in the last page of his precious work:— "For not what we are nor what we have been, does God see with his all-merciful eyes, but what we would be!"

St. Teresa's Convent,
Dockenfield
September 9th 1982.

Notes

- (1) For this information I am indebted to Sister John Vianney Bracken (Harlow, 1982)
- (2) Sister Daniele and three members of her council attended the Father Braun centenary celebrations in Chigwell, June 1982.

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Printed in 10 point medium Press Roman type on Woodfree Paper by
The Poor Clares, Arundel, from IBM typesetting supplied by Southern
Repro Services, Shoreham-by-Sea.

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