

**The Contribution of Fr. Victor Braun (1825-1882) to the 19th
Century Catholic Church in England and Wales (1870-1882)**



Article by:
Sister Austin Gallagher
Vice Postulator to the Beatification Cause of Fr. Victor Braun in England
Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary
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Nineteenth century London, like many towns and cities in Britain, experienced phenomenal population growth. At the centre of the British Empire, and driven by free trade and industry, it achieved extraordinary wealth, but this wealth was confined to the City and to the West End. East London, however, consisted of "an expanse of poverty and wretchedness as appalling as, and in many ways worse than the horrors of the industrial North.¹ There was clear evidence of the lack of urban planning, as factories were established close to the immense dock buildings constructed near Stratford. Toxic materials such as paint and varnish were produced in large chemical works owned by the German chemist, Rudolf Hersel, as were matches by the firm Bryant and May, and rubber, tar and iron for the building trade by various industrialists.²

Social historians have viewed the dreadful poverty of 19th Century London's East End as a symbol of urban disintegration, in which skilled artisans were reduced to "sweated", lowly-paid labourers. Their homes, built close to the industrial sectors, were erected hastily and cheaply, and lacked proper hygienic and sanitary facilities, so that slum conditions prevailed. Moreover, this housing had to be demolished frequently to make way for new roads and railways, thus creating great hardship for an already destitute people.³

Despite its social disadvantages, the East End continued to attract the homeless and poor from all over Britain, Ireland and other parts of the world. The possibility of obtaining even low-paid work was preferable to living in a workhouse, a last resort for those in dire need. Attempts by the wealthy to alleviate the sufferings of the poor came mostly from charitable organisations which were often denominational in origin.⁴ It was not until the end of the 1880s that the London City Council was formed, and this body took some responsibility for the City's most disadvantaged inhabitants. The immensity of the problem of social deprivation in Stratford alone may be judged from the number of Workhouses and Industrial Schools situated within a two-mile radius of the town: The West Ham Union Workhouse, the Whitechapel Industrial School, St. George's in the East Workhouse, the Plashet School for Pauper Children,⁵ to name but a few.

Ministering to the spiritual needs of the Catholic population of Stratford were the priests of the Stratford Mission which officially commenced in 1823, under the direction of Fr. L. J. Whitfield. Prior to the establishment of this mission, the 'faithful', mostly Irish immigrants, were served by an extraordinary French Abbé, François Joseph Chévrollais, a Vincentian, renowned for his "love of Christ's extreme poor".⁶ He had refused to take the Oath for the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in France and had therefore found himself among the 8000 bishops, priests and nobility who had sought refuge in England during the 19th century. The British people recognised in them the victims of oppression and tyranny.⁷ Later in the century, history was to repeat itself when, on 20th Sept. 1870, another French Abbé, Victor Braun, arrived on the shores of England at Dover.

Fr. Victor Braun was born in St. Avold, Lorraine on 5th June 1825. One of his biographers described him as "an alert and playful child, imbued with a great spirit of faith".⁸ Born into a family strong in the Catholic faith and its practices, Victor would have been familiar with stories about his grandmother Braun, 'Bonne Maman', who had risked her life during the Revolution to shelter priests for the clandestine celebration of the Eucharist. Her heroic rescue of the statue of Our Lady of Perpetual Help vandalised by the revolutionary forces, was already a legendary tale in St. Avold. If comparisons can be drawn, it was in her extraordinary love for the poor that Victor resembled her. She made bread daily and distributed it among them.

From an early age, Victor longed to serve God as a missionary or religious, and he therefore sought a wider field of action than that afforded to him in the diocese of Metz. His fragile disposition, however, prevented him from following what he believed to be his true vocation. During his adolescent years, his intensive application to study often left him weak, and during his period at the Seminary he was frequently forced by nervous exhaustion to interrupt his studies and take time off to rest at his family home. His eldest brother, Antoine, a Jesuit priest serving on the missions in Canada, encouraged Victor not to lose heart in the pursuit of his goal. He wrote to him:

"I believe you will be weak in philosophy, your classes have been so interrupted, but with courage and patience you will reach the goal."⁹

Bishop Dupont of the diocese of Metz hesitated to ordain him because of his frail health, and after delaying the ordination for a year, he required of the Braun family a

guarantee that they would support Victor financially in the years ahead. In addition, the family had to give an assurance that he would inherit a sufficient share of the family fortunes on his father's death.¹⁰

Victor Braun was ordained on 14th June, 1851, at the age of 26, and for some years appeared to enjoy good health. Having engaged in various priestly ministries, he entered the Brothers of Mercy in Orleans after a bout of illness in 1859. He was unable to sustain the necessary effort required by religious life and nervous exhaustion forced him to leave the Institute. In 1872, when he was 37 years old, he joined the Brothers of Charity in Paris, and this was to prove a turning point in his life. The Congregation had been founded by Fr. Le Prévost with the aim of helping those in need, materially and spiritually, and this had a special appeal for Fr. Braun, who later expressed his desire "to serve the poor day and night".¹¹

Although a French citizen, Fr. Braun was a fluent German speaker, so he was given the task of setting up the German mission at the Church of Our Lady of Grace at Grenelle. Here, the plight of homeless young German girls, who arrived from their native land looking for work and unable to speak French, presented him with a challenge. In order to answer to this challenge, he sought help from various religious orders of women but was unsuccessful and then decided to form his own group of helpers, women who would devote themselves to this work of charity. The seeds of a new religious congregation were sown.

Fr. Victor Braun founded the Congregation of the Servants of the Sacred Heart on

the Feast of St. Margaret Mary, 17th October, 1866. Their first convent in Paris was a small apartment at 25, Rue d'Humbolt.¹² In a letter to Mère de Chantal, one of the first Superiors, the Founder delineated the official ministry to which the Sisters were to devote themselves:

Mr. Braun, Director of the work of St. Mary and St. Joseph for the Germans, founded the Congregation whose Motherhouse and Novitiate are at Sèvres, and which the Bishop of Versailles kindly accepted into his diocese.¹³

The apostolate "for the Germans" clearly referred to the 'raison d'être' of the new Community, which was to provide shelter and care for the many young women arriving in Paris from Germany and from the German-speaking provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. This apostolate, however, was soon to be uprooted and changed.

Within three months of the official date of the foundation of the new Congregation, 17th October 1866, he was already addressing the question of the spiritual formation of the new Sisters, or "the little group", as he called them. In his first letter to Mère Gertrude (Marie Schock), January, 1867, he describes how he was preparing a sister for a leadership role:

Mère de Chantal will go on retreat to another monastery, 40, Vaugirard Street, until the day before our retreat in Sèvres. In that way, she will be sufficiently well-prepared to lead her daughters to holiness.¹⁴

From the beginning, Fr. Braun assumed the role of Novice Master himself. He was emphatic that the Sisters religious formation should be inspired by "a close and ongoing relationship with God in the Heart of Jesus, who must be our final end, the goal of our intelligence and our hearts".¹⁵ The early letters contain minute details

regarding how the Sisters would live the religious life. Superiors would be given the title 'Mother', but "they were not to forget that 'noblesse oblige'. This lofty title obliges them to look after their daughters with genuine maternal sentiments".¹⁶ The novice mistress was required to study the Catechism of the Vows by Fr. Cotel S.J., "and then get the novices to read it often so that they have a thorough grasp of the importance of the vows".¹⁷ In guiding "the little group" in the early stages of their spiritual journey, he followed Ignatian spirituality¹⁸ but it was devotion to the Sacred Heart which was to permeate the spirituality and apostolic works of the newly founded Congregation, the Servants of the Sacred Heart.

This devotion was the main driving force behind Fr. Braun's readiness to undertake works which were, humanly speaking, beyond the capability of his frail physical constitution. He was imbued with what the Sacred Heart symbolised - God's love for mankind in a humanly concrete and profoundly attractive way. This devotion was also fostered by the Jesuits, most famously by St. Claude de la Columbière S.J.¹⁹ who was instrumental in making known the promises of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary at Paray-le-Monial from 1673-1675. These promises were to exert a strong spiritual influence not only in France but throughout the Catholic world. Since the new Congregation was primarily founded to be of service to the poor, Fr. Braun insisted that the Sisters were not to have the title 'Dames' but 'Servants of the Sacred Heart'.

The patron saint of the new Congregation was St. Francis de Sales, the saintly Bishop of Geneva (1567-1622). This saint, outstanding for his humility, gentleness and spirit of reconciliation, founded the Visitation Order with St. Jane Frances de Chantal.

Long before the Church's recognition of devotion to the Sacred Heart, St. Francis de Sales was attracted to this human expression of God's love.²⁰ Preparing the first Sisters for the role of leadership within the small community, Fr. Braun urged them to study carefully the words of St. Francis de Sales: "What! Should our honour consist in trifles, in possessing high offices and monasteries, in being superior...?"²¹

And again:

Following the example of our holy patron, we will apply ourselves above all to becoming people of prayer. Let us be fully convinced that by obtaining the precious gift of prayer, we will have brought a remedy for all the laxity, for all the failings which we want to remove from our little Community.²²

The Sisters were to read and re-read in public the conversations of St. Francis de Sales.²³

St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641) was held up as a model of service and humility for the Sisters. Of noble birth, she renounced her family life and the title of Baroness to become "the very humble servant of domestics, of the poor".²⁴ The Servants of the Sacred Heart were urged to enter into the spirit of their patroness's humility and "to serve the poor day and night".²⁵ The beginnings of the Visitation Order in 1610 had much in common with those of the Servants of the Sacred Heart in the Paris of 1866. Both Congregations began with small numbers in absolute poverty. The members were to be "contemplatives in action"²⁶ with an external activity of ministering to the sick and poor in their homes.²⁷

The apostolate of the new Congregation expanded rapidly. A year after its

foundation, the Founder wrote that the Sisters were taking care of orphans and the sick. Sick people in their own homes, who sought help from the Sisters, were never refused. A house in Sévres was rented from the Dominican Sisters, and it was in their Convent Chapel on 28th Feb. 1868 that the first clothing of fifteen Servants of the Sacred Heart took place. Their habit resembled that of the Dominicans, except that it was black.²⁸

At this early stage in the the history of the Congregation, the Founder's greatest trial was brought about by the breakdown in the relationship between him and Mother Odile (Catherine Berger) who he appointed Directress of the girls' hostel in Rue d'Humbolt in 1866. Fr. Braun's letters are short on details describing this unhappy affair. There is sufficient information, however, to indicate that the matter became so public and acrimonious as to involve the police and the courts,²⁹ and to threaten the existence of the new Congregation. We read proof of his fortitude and steadfastness during this time of trial in a letter to Mother de Chantal, 3rd Jan. 1869:

In Sévres, things are not going badly; we have fifty-four Sisters in all. The Mayor of Sévres gave great praise to the Sisters and promised to help them.³⁰

Fundraising to support the many young girls accommodated at Rue d'Humbolt would seem to have been a contributory factor to the disagreement between Fr. Braun and Mother Odile. The Founder referred frequently to the need to write to Bishops for permission to collect funds in their dioceses. In 1869, he instructed Mother de Chantal:

Carry on boldly with your collection. Mother Louise is going to write to the

Bishop of Mayence for permission to collect and will send out an article in a newspaper.³¹

For her part, Mother Odile, a native of Bavaria, was intensely active in her own country collecting sums of money to support the Asyle du Sacré Coeur at Rue d'Humbolt. This collection was authorised in 1868 by the Bavarian Legation in Paris and endorsed by the King of Bavaria himself.³² The differences between Fr. Braun and Mother Odile, both of them compassionate people of strong faith, brought about unexpected changes for the new Congregation. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in July 1870 would determine the future of these two charismatic founding figures, and it was an important event in the development of the new Congregation.³³

When Napoleon III declared war on Prussia on 19th July, 1870, Fr. Braun, then aged 45, was serving as a military chaplain at the French army camp at Metz in his native Lorraine. Growing up close to the Franco-Prussian frontier, he would have been no stranger to the divisions created by historical events between Prussia and France. By going to war, Napoleon III believed he would pacify and unite the French republicans, the absolutists and the moderates. Angry crowds had demanded a 'Red Republic' in order to create a just society for the many factory workers "who worked twelve-hour days in wretched conditions" in the new urbanised centres of Paris, Lille and St. Etienne.³⁴ The Prussians, for their part, strove towards the unification of the German States, and believed that the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were theirs by right. Under the leadership of Count Bismarck, Chancellor to Kaiser Wilhelm I, war was seen as "a battering ram that would put all obstacles aside".³⁵

Fr. Braun's sudden flight from the battlefield of St. Avold. Lorraine, to Stratford, East London was preceded by the intensification of the war and its horrors. After the pre-emptive strike by the French -the Battle of Saarbrucken, 31st July to 10th Aug. 1870 - the events of war advanced with alarming rapidity.³⁶ Fr. Braun witnessed what he called "the awful butchery" of war.³⁷ We can only imagine the anxious moments experienced by Fr. Braun at this point, since no letters exist from 6th Aug. until he arrived in London on Sept. 20th.³⁸ Before this date, he was able to continue correspondence with Mother Gertrude at St. Cloud as a military chaplain through the kindness of a Prussian field officer "who promised to post it [a letter] for me in Cologne".³⁹ Writing to Mother de Chantal from London, 19/20th Sept., Fr. Braun confirmed Pope Pius IX's prophecy to the Bishop of Auger, three months previously: "July will be a sad month, August will be terrible, September will be awful. Peace in November and the continuation of the Council" [Vatican I].⁴⁰

The new International Red Cross Society, founded for the aid of the sick and wounded in war, was active in Metz between 19th and 21st Aug. 1870. A representative reported on the ravaged countryside after the assault by the Prussians.⁴¹ Entering this theatre of war was an Irish woman, Josephine Gibson. As a Red Cross volunteer, she held the rank of a nurse and judging from the Society's records, she was very much involved in the care of the wounded on both sides of the conflict at the ambulance at the Chateau of Versailles.⁴² Here she came into contact with Sisters from Fr. Braun's newly founded Congregation, who were also performing services for the wounded. Realising the vulnerability of the German Sisters during the siege of Paris, she availed of the neutrality offered by her Red Cross membership

and on 26th Aug. escorted three Sisters through hazardous enemy lines to a place of refuge in London. Miss Gibson had obvious contacts in London and soon arranged an audience with Archbishop Manning (later Cardinal). His Grace welcomed the Sisters warmly and granted them permission to remain in his diocese of Westminster as refugees. As if to emphasise his welcome, he gave a small cross to the Sisters for their Father Founder with the promise that he too would be welcomed with open arms. Before returning to Paris, Josephine Gibson left the three Servants of the Sacred Heart with the Sisters of Nazareth and the Sisters of Mercy.⁴³ Both of these Congregations were active in good works for the poor and orphans similar to what the Sisters were accustomed to in Paris.

A representative of the Red Cross described Josephine Gibson's amazing courage and resourcefulness during her period of service to the wounded in Paris in 1870:

She did not hesitate to accompany me sometimes on expeditions of a more adventurous character, and I must frankly own that she was more than once my best passport.⁴⁴

Such was the calibre of the woman who rescued members of Fr. Braun's young Congregation, saving it from dispersal and fragmentation. In the mists of wartime confusion, events can take extraordinary twists and turns, and the Founder's movements were no exception to this.

Having placed nine Servants of the Sacred Heart safely in London, Miss Gibson made a third visit to France, accompanied by one of the Sisters. On this occasion, her mission was to seek out the Founder and bring him also to London, so that the young

Congregation could re-group. With her characteristic indefatigable courage, she passed through the wartorn battlegrounds near Metz, and with the aid of two soldiers, she and her companion arrived at the family home of Fr. Braun at St. Avoild. It was 9th Sept. at nine o'clock in the evening.⁴⁵ The good news that some of the Sisters had been rescued from the war zone in Paris and taken to a place of safety under the protection of Archbishop Manning, was communicated to the Founder, whose amazement can only be imagined. Struck by Josephine Gibson's role as "saviour" of the Congregation, Fr. Braun, waiving canonical rules, gave her the habit of the Servants of the Sacred Heart and the new name of Sr. Marie de Jesus.⁴⁶

Fr. Braun described his departure from France as being dictated by common sense, "it was the only option open".⁴⁷ The transfer of the Sisters to London was providential and a means of extending the Congregation's work for the poor already commenced in Paris. On 17th Sept. 1870, Sr. Marie de Jesus, Sr. Marie des Sept Douleurs and the Founder, all wearing Red Cross armbands, left St. Avoild for England. They had to avoid Paris, now under siege and their journey to Dover had to take a route via Trèves, Belgium and Holland. En route, they surveyed the ambulance provision for the wounded at Saarbrucken, where a bitter battle had taken place. They visited similar ambulances in Belgium and Holland, arriving in London at 7 o'clock in the evening of 20th Sept. Fr. Braun regarded their survival as "miraculous" and attributed it to the intercession of "Our Lady of La Salette, who we venerated yesterday in Ostend (19th Sept. 1870). His first impressions of London were of "thick fog, wide streets full of monuments ⁴⁸... everything was grey and black".⁴⁹

The Founder remained undaunted and hopeful, despite the strangeness and uncertainty of living in a foreign country. A week after his arrival in London, he wrote to Mother de Chantal in Paris:

It is impossible for me to write a few lines about how Our Lord has protected your father, bringing him from St. Avold to London where the Archbishop has acknowledged my ecclesiastical ministry while waiting for happier days in our unhappy homeland.⁵⁰

In addition, the Archbishop had authorised him to open a house in London: "This week we will rent a flat so as to start modestly".⁵¹ This flat, owned by the Westminster Diocese, was at 2, Eden Villas, The Grove, Stratford. The Director of the German Mission at Adler Street, Whitechapel, had also accepted Fr. Braun "to help hear confessions and preach on Sundays with pay".⁵² His name can be seen in the baptismal register at Adler St. a month after his coming to Stratford, the first of several baptisms performed by the Founder.⁵³

Distance from Paris did not deter Fr. Braun from carrying out what he believed to be the Congregation's mission of caring for the sick and wounded. Not long after his arrival in London, with his characteristic zeal and quick thinking, he urged Mother de Chantal in Paris to proceed with haste to set up an ambulance depot "for the sick and wounded of both nations, French and German".⁵⁴ He allayed her fears regarding the source of funding: "The British Society (Red Cross) in London will pay you everything you spend for your own needs and those of the sick and wounded."⁵⁵

From that time onwards, the Congregation in France would be dependent on the

English foundation. This fact was evident from clear directives given by the Founder to ensure the safety of the Sisters in Paris:

From now on, you will be considered as Religious, dependent only on the present house in London [Stratford], and you will be under the protection of the English government. Consequently, our German and French Sisters will be protected by both France and Prussia because of this English protection, and because this International Society [the Red Cross] is neutral".⁵⁶

The Founder was sometimes blamed for abandoning the Sisters, but there is no doubt that even from afar he always had their safety and well-being at heart.

The fact that Fr. Braun seized the opportunity to nominate Sisters to care for the wounded soldiers in Paris under the auspices of the International Red Cross must be seen as a means of holding together the four-year-old Congregation, already beginning to fragment through circumstances beyond their control. Shortly after his arrival in London, September 1870, he wrote to Mother de Chantal in Paris:

The Sisters from Grenelle and Argenteuil must put on their habits again, even the postulants, and ask for a pass from the Government in Paris in order to meet up with you and work together for this ambulance".⁵⁷

Fr. Braun's use of imperatives in his letters at this stage might suggest to his critics that his directives to his first Sisters were strongly militarist in tone. But time was of the essence and the Sisters were "commanded", "ordered" to "empty" or

get the Sisters without exception to leave their house in Grenelle. Offer the military government all your beds ... You are no longer French Sisters in Paris but foreign Sisters, English, under the protection of this nation for the

duration of the conflict.⁵⁸

From London, he reminded them that the siege of Paris would intensify:

Tomorrow, the Prussians will be in Paris, which is already devastated. We will wait for you here [in London] under the protection of the Virgin Mary.⁵⁹

Within a week of bringing the Founder to London, Sr. Marie de Jesus (Josephine Gibson) returned to France "with a thousand francs and six huge bundles of things".⁶⁰ She travelled with Sr. Augusta under the name of "the Society for the Wounded in London, with their English passports".⁶⁰ It was arranged with Fr. Braun that they would meet at the Chateau of Versailles with the remaining Sisters from St. Cloud and Grenelle, and "form their own ambulance, sending those unable to care for the wounded to London".⁶¹ The Founder's anxiety for the safety of the Sisters during the siege of Paris is clearly conveyed in a letter to Mother de Chantal: "I have no way of knowing what can be done to get the Sisters out of Paris".⁶² He urges them to have faith "in the dual protection of the Sacred Heart and Our Lady of La Salette".⁶³

Not only did Josephine Gibson (Sr. Marie de Jesus) play a key role in accompanying the Founder and some of the Sisters to London, she also helped maintain the link between England and France during the period of conflict. From her letters written in Jan. 1871 at the Versailles ambulance, there is proof that she had several contacts among influential people in England and in Germany⁶⁴ who helped the new Congregation to continue its works of charity. Little wonder then that the Founder wrote of her: "Mother Josephine and Sr. Augusta have been instruments of the Heart of Jesus in bringing me here".⁶⁵ With less than one ~~month's~~ acquaintance with

Josephine Gibson, Fr. Braun appointed her Superior with the title of 'Mother'. As Superior, she would be legally entitled to represent him, whilst at the same time act as a member of the British Red Cross. Her appointment as Superior would seem to contradict the Founder's strict insistence that the Sisters adhere to religious rules and regulations in the minutest details. Mother Josephine had no prior formation in the religious life, but war can affect even the most sacredly held practices. The Founder saw in her someone who would enable the Community in their duty of charity "to the sick, the poor and children", and who would continue what he described as "just what we have been doing since the beginning".⁶⁶

Fr. Braun remained in London from 20th Sept. 1870 until 13th Dec. He was actively involved in his own priestly ministry and in the setting up of the charitable works to which the Sisters devoted themselves. We do not have a clear picture of the work the Sisters did or what their source of income was during those early days at Stratford. Writing to Mother de Chantal, 28th Sept. 1870, the Founder confirms that

the community has also been admitted [to the Diocese of Westminster], including all its works, with permission to found as many houses as we want and also to collect in the diocese.⁶⁷

Fr. Braun referred to support from "two high-ranking ladies through their donation" which enabled them to start their work among the poor of East London - "they have given us permission to use their names as patronage".⁶⁸ The two ladies, already well-known for their involvement in works of charity, were Lady Lothian and Lady Londonderry.⁶⁹

The support of patronage was to remain a significant factor in the ongoing development of the works of the new Congregation in England and Wales. From the beginning, a member of the aristocracy sent "the young girls who were expelled from Paris" and this "at her own expense" to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Convent, 2, Eden Villas, Stratford.⁷⁰ It is reasonable to suppose that with the authority of Archbishop Manning the Sisters also succeeded in collecting funds to support themselves and their apostolate. In Oct. 1870, the official ministries of the Convent in Stratford were caring for the sick in their own homes and providing accommodation for young girls in need.⁷¹ These works of charity, especially for the extreme poor of London's East End, would justify their quest for donations from those who could afford them. The Superior in charge of the new Convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart was Mother Françoise de Sales (Rosa Grunthwoht), aged 40, born in Stuttgart, Germany. She was to play a pivotal role in establishing the Congregation in England and Wales. She had been arrested and interrogated on her escape route from Paris to England, but was released on the testimony of two Prussian officers.⁷² Within six months of the Sisters' arrival in London, it was recorded in the national census for Stratford 1871 that there were sixteen Sisters at 2, Eden Villas and that their occupation was "Sisters for the Sick". Their ages ranged from 19 to 47 years, and there were eight Germans, five French, two Londoners and one from Limerick, Ireland.⁷³

On his return to France three months after his arrival in London, Fr. Braun went to the Chateau at Versailles, where Sr. Josephine and the Sisters were caring for wounded soldiers. Writing to Mother Françoise de Sales in London, he reminded

her that he had "delegated all" his authority to her before he left and instructed her to "consolidate" the works of caring for the sick in their own homes and providing a home for young girls. Sr. Marie de Nazareth was urged "to continue to be generous and collect" not only for what she needed herself but also for "what may be needed if we are forced to come to London".⁷⁴ While still at Versailles, the Founder wrote to the King of Prussia, Wilhelm I, for permission to collect in Germany "for the house in London". Through contact with Sr. Josephine, the King's son, later Kaiser Wilhelm II, King of Germany, handed over 300 francs to the Sisters in Paris.⁷⁵

One of Fr. Braun's extraordinary strengths was his ability to keep in close touch with more than one crisis at the same time. While the Sisters at Stratford were struggling to survive in a Protestant environment, sometimes hostile, he wrote to them from the ambulance depot at Versailles about the importance of harmony and loyalty in the community. Those who "sow discord" were threatened with dismissal "without pity".⁷⁶

At the end of the Franco-Prussian War, 1st Feb. 1871, the Convents of the Servants of the Sacred Heart in Paris lay in ruins. From this devastation, Fr. Braun wrote from England to the Sisters in Paris: "The Heart of Jesus has visibly protected us everywhere", and he could scarcely contain his joy at the thought of seeing them again:

Come, we are waiting for you with open arms ... bring the children with you.

We have the wherewithal to house and feed them.⁷⁷

His hope and optimism were expressed in the words: "Divine Providence has been too visible since the beginning of your misfortunes".⁷⁸ The statue of Our Lady of La

Salette had remained intact after the burning of the St. Cloud Convent, and referring to this he wrote: "It was Mary, our kind mother, praying for us".⁷⁹ The Founder's spirit of optimism flowed into his rejoicing over all that had been accomplished by the new foundation in London: "The large house founded in London is thriving ... The German mission for the whole of London is entrusted to me", and he adds a rare comment that he is in good health.⁸⁰

However, in France the peace process was far from being stable although a Peace Treaty signed on 10th May 1871 marked the official end of the war. By the end of the month, 30,000 Communards in Paris were killed by military repression, among them the Archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Darboy, and Fr. Braun's friend and associate Fr. Planchat.⁸¹ Despite these dreadful events in his home country, the Founder wrote from London to Mother Gertrude in Paris giving a glowing account of the first clothing on 4th May of seven novices, at the Church of St. Vincent de Paul in Stratford.⁸² Mother Gertrude herself had only recently narrowly escaped death while rescuing the wounded during the horrors of the Commune. But away from the scene of conflict, Fr. Braun's letters at this time reflect a sense of refounding and hope for the young Congregation. As though emphasising the significance of the London foundation, he wrote:

My presence is really needed, organising the house for the future. We will have a lovely mission here; the Archbishop likes us.⁸³

The Founder closely combined his role of organiser or man of action with that of spiritual director and religious superior. In London, he set up plans for collections

authorised by Archbishop Manning: "Sister Josephine will take the outlying areas and Sister Simplienne those nearby". Mother Gertrude was instructed to send away those who refused to be guided by the principles of religious life. He added: "I will be more forceful than I have been in the past".⁸⁴ This ongoing religious formation of the Sisters was a constant preoccupation of Fr. Braun. He insisted that no one should be allowed to stay who "will in future harm our dear Community which God wants".⁸⁵

The London foundation initiated a change of direction for the Servants of the Sacred Heart and their apostolic work, so it inevitably posed problems. Nursing the sick in their own homes continued to be a need in Stratford and its environs. Within a week of his leaving London, 28th June 1871, Fr. Braun communicated his deep anxiety regarding the future of the house in Stratford. Again, the problem was financial. He wrote to Mother Françoise de Sales: "Our house will never survive with the sick poor alone".⁸⁶ A source of income related to the Sisters' ministry was required. The Founder believed that the care of orphans would be appropriate work since the Sisters were already experienced in the running of orphanages in Paris. His friend and protector, Archbishop Manning, known as 'the father of the poor', would doubtless give his support to this apostolate. The dire need of orphanages to protect London's vulnerable children was reflected in the Archbishop's words:

When we began our work [in 1866] the streets teemed with our children; the gutters were full of them; they were wandering to and fro; they were in Protestant schools; they had been caught up here and there; we did not know where to find them. ⁸⁷

The establishment of an orphanage at the Convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart at Stratford was not to happen. The main stumbling block seems to have been Fr. Mitchell, parish priest of the mission. There was a private school for girls run by the Sisters of Jesus and Mary (Lyons) in the neighbourhood. It is reasonable to suppose that Fr. Mitchell's opposition stemmed from the fact that two schools within close proximity to each other would not be desirable. The Founder's anxiety was evident when, in an effort to resolve the difficulty, he wrote to Mother Françoise:

I am writing to you again to ask you to see Fr. Mitchell to express the pain I experience at being obliged to leave Stratford, because no one will give you anything more if we go out collecting just for the care of the sick, and we will be accused of deceiving our benefactors by asking in our brochures for orphans".⁸⁸

With a view to changing Fr. Mitchell's attitude, he urged Mother Françoise to ask him if orphans from France could be taken, or else girls who could be taught life skills, as the Sisters had already been doing in Grenelle.⁸⁹

If the situation in Stratford was worrying during the Spring of 1871, the plight of the German Sisters caring for the war-wounded in Damstatt was even worse. After the signing of the Peace Treaty in May, when their services would no longer be needed, it was feared that they would be without a home. Fr. Braun wrote anxiously to Mother Françoise:

I can see myself obliged in the next fortnight ... to send (to Stratford) all our German Sisters if I do not succeed in the steps I am now taking to keep them in Germany.⁹⁰

Earlier that year, Sister Josephine Gibson had taken steps to ensure that the Sisters remained in Damstatt to continue their charitable works "which are to nurse the poor gratis irrespective of religion".⁹¹ Writing to Mrs. Lindsay in London, she asked her to use her good offices and acquaintance with Princess Alice of Hess (Queen Victoria's daughter) to help establish a foundation, adding "Our Superior, Fr. Braun, wishes to establish a foundation in Damstatt". Sr. Josephine pointed out: "Our Sisters are in the habit of living poorly and are easily contented".⁹²

The aftermath of the war in France, especially in Paris, presented the Congregation with even greater challenges. Convents were burnt, pillaged and ransacked. The horrific experiences of going through firing lines to collect the wounded,⁹³ or "narrowly missing being crushed by the ruins",⁹⁴ were fresh in the Sisters' minds. But the Founder remained undaunted, trusting in the Sacred Heart and Our Lady. At the end of 1871, Fr. Braun happily reported to the Community at Stratford that a new house in Argenteuil would soon be built, "allowing for more than one hundred Sisters to live there". Returning to London on 5th Dec. 1871, Fr. Braun showed his extraordinary ability to direct several projects simultaneously, and focussed on the foundation at Stratford. He refers to this as

our Community in London which I need to attend to; the creation of a provincial house, of a novitiate; five large parishes are asking for our Sisters to visit all the poor in their homes; I would like one big house in the centre of this huge population.⁹⁵

With thirty-two Sisters and postulants of three nationalities resident in what must have been cramped accommodation at Stratford, the Community was ready to extend its

ministries further afield. The four Superiors in France and England were invited by Fr. Braun to take their first vows in the Church of St. Vincent de Paul, Stratford. The date fixed was the Congregation's patronal feast of St. Francis de Sales, 29th Jan. 1872. Before leaving Paris, the Superiors were issued with meticulous instructions for their journey by fast train via Gard du Nord, Calais and Cannon Street, London.⁹⁶ They were reminded by the Founder that the retreat preceding the event would prepare them for this "great act of profession for which you must have been ready for years".⁹⁷

In the meantime, a meeting between Archbishop Manning and Fr. Braun had a happy outcome. The Archbishop, with his characteristic generosity, promised to build the Community "a big convent in an area where there are no other Sisters".⁹⁸ The Founder added enthusiastically:

There we can get on with all our works, even the school for the poor, the orphanage, youth clubs. We could occupy two hundred Sisters if we had them.⁹⁹

The new Convent was not available for another eighteen months, but the various good works at Stratford continued to expand despite the congested premises. On their daily round of visits to the poor in their own houses, the Sisters were confronted with dire poverty. Fr. Braun showed his concern when he wrote to Mother Françoise, the Superior at Stratford:

The Archbishop and Fr. Mitchell will have to help us form a charitable ladies' committee somewhere in London to raise money for you and clothing for your poor ... This is the Parish Priest's duty, the collection will not be enough

for the Sisters upkeep.¹⁰⁰

Fr. Braun founded the Servants of the Sacred Heart for the poor, and in 19th century England one of the greatest areas of deprivation was education. In fact there was a policy not to make the education of the poor a national priority. Dr. Andrew Bell, a so-called pioneer in the education of the poor, wrote in 1805:

It is not proposed that children of the poor be educated in an expensive manner ... There is a risk of elevation, by an indiscriminate education, of the minds of those doomed to the drudgery of daily labour above their condition.¹⁰¹

Socially and politically, it would have been unsettling to have an educated, articulate population that might challenge the grossly unjust social structures of the day. Subordination had to be maintained at all costs.¹⁰²

The 19th century, however, also saw the rise of great education reformers such as Pestalozzi on the continent, Robert Owen in Scotland and the Quaker, Joseph Lancaster, in England. Archbishop Manning was a national spokesman for the education rights of the poor. Entering into the contemporary debate on the Education Act, 1870, he pointed out:

The knowledge of Christ is a revelation for man, dispelling the blindness of his mind and attracting his will towards God.¹⁰³

Since his Archbishop friend and benefactor was such an ardent champion of the education of the poor, it was inevitable that Fr. Braun and the Servants of the Sacred Heart were drawn into this important ministry. Although he had enthused earlier on

about the provision of "even a school for the poor", ¹⁰⁴ yet he was hesitant about moving the Sisters into teaching. There were reasons for this other than the fact that it was a change from the original apostolate. The Sisters were in a foreign country and unfamiliar with the education system as it was then. Most of them spoke French and German and were linguistically ill-equipped to teach in England. But urged on by their love for the poor, they were quick to respond to the great need of the time. In common with many great religious orders and congregations, uprooted from their countries of origin on the continent, they took up the challenge to initiate schools wherever they were able to do so. It is interesting to note that Fr. Gordon Cong. Orat., writing at this time, stated that it was by no means uncommon in France for small communities of both men and women

to spring into existence with only episcopal sanction ... It stands to reason that such bodies could not have the character of stability and permanence which we attach to the great religious orders ... The new ties that bound them to their own communities were not very strong.¹⁰⁵

Many of these new Congregations faded away, while the Servants of the Sacred Heart continued to grow and expand.

The earliest reference to the Servants of the Sacred Heart becoming involved in education is 17th Nov. 1872. The Founder wrote to Mother Gertrude in Argenteuil describing the Feast of St. Stanislaus at Stratford:

We had a splendid feast for the solemn inauguration of our evening school and the patronage of forty-three big factory workers.¹⁰⁶

The evening school was clearly set up to meet the needs of those young people,

mostly girls, who worked during the daytime for a meagre wage at some laborious task, in one of the numerous factories around Stratford. They could acquire the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy at the evening classes. The factory workers to whom the Founder refers were Catholic employees, most of them emigrés themselves, who provided some financial guarantee for this educational endeavour. It has to be remembered that under the Board School System (1870) the government of the day denied funding to voluntary schools that did not fit its requirements. Cardinal Manning (nominated Cardinal in 1875) lamented this in his pastoral letter, Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 1875:

The fierce competition of the Board School System, with its enormous superiority of money derived from the education rate, from which we are absolutely excluded, has made it beyond measure difficult for the voluntary schools to compete under such immense disadvantages.¹⁰⁷

In the same pastoral letter, the Cardinal praised the work done in education by religious orders of women: "In this we had at once the inestimable help of our devoted and efficient nuns of many orders".¹⁰⁸

Later on, the small beginnings of the evening school at Stratford was to expand to several educational foundations in England, Wales and Scotland.

During the Franco-Prussian War, some of the Sisters earned outstanding commendations for their nursing skills among the soldiers on all sides of the conflict. By order of the King of Bavaria, Sr. Marie Josephine Gibson (born in Shanagolden, Limerick, Ireland)¹⁰⁹

[The] Superior of the Convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, London,

was recommended for the Cross of Merit on the grounds that she and twenty Sisters of her order tended the Bavarian wounded in the theatre of war with the greatest devotion.¹¹⁰

Sister Josephine signed the order herself at Stratford, 12th July 1872. Having won this public acclaim, it was not surprising that the Founder was invited to staff the "biggest and richest hospital in Vienna",¹¹¹ the Rudolf, with the Servants of the Sacred Heart, "under the protection of the Emperor Wilhelm I and the Cardinal of Vienna".¹¹² This new ministry necessitated German-speaking Sisters, and this placed added stress on the already under-staffed work in France and London.

The year 1873 was one of rapid expansion for the Congregation. The Founder travelled frequently between London, France and Vienna in order to establish and direct new works. In those days, means of travel were far from luxurious and it can only be imagined how he stood up to the hazards of these journeys, given his frail constitution. The extent of his correspondence was quite phenomenal. It ranged from letters to Kings, Emperors, Cardinals and Bishops in his efforts to secure recognition and funding for the new Congregation. He kept in constant touch with the Provincial Superiors - Mother Gertrude in France, Mother Françoise de Sales in London and Mother Mary Joseph in Vienna. The aim of this correspondence was to guide and direct the Sisters in accordance with the principles of the religious life, and especially to ensure that they had a thorough understanding of the vows. Some light is thrown on the general state of his health during this intensely active period of his life in a letter to Mother Gertrude in Argenteuil:

The Curé near Düsseldorf has suddenly cured me of my stomach ailments

[ulcers], informing me that my headaches would not be cured because I am too tense and highly strung.¹¹³

Urged on by the love of the Sacred Heart and the desire to seek the glory of God, he continued with amazing stamina to establish more charitable works.

The Congregation spread rapidly in France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, and when the Founder died in 1882, there was a total of five hundred members. Within three years of their arrival from France in 1870, the Sister in Stratford had become well-known and respected for home-visiting and the care of the sick poor. The evening classes accommodated a much-needed outreach for young girls. These works of themselves helped towards the creation of a community spirit beneficial to the local people of Stratford, many of whom were Irish Catholics. The Church of St. Vincent de Paul in The Grove became a centre of Catholic worship and a place where the Sisters prepared young people and adults for the reception of the Sacraments. It is no wonder that the Founder experienced "pain" at the thought of having to leave Stratford. Early in 1873 he wrote from London to Mother Gertrude in France:

Our English and French Sisters are admirable. They do a great amount of good. Home visits by the Sisters [in Stratford] to the poor are having a great impact. Yesterday, a Protestant Minister came to see me and brought me 200 francs, promising the same each month so that our Sisters can go and visit Catholic families in his parish, as if the Sisters were giving it from their own pockets without naming him.¹¹⁴

The Archbishop's gratitude was also conveyed to Fr. Braun:

The Archbishop [Manning] thanked me with tears in his eyes and wrote this

very morning of going himself to Archbishop's House to collect £200 sterling to help us buy a house.¹¹⁵

The house referred to was Sidney House, Hassett Road, Homerton, a distance of about three miles from Eden Villas and closer to the City of London. It was necessary for the Sisters to vacate their premises at Stratford to make way for the Franciscan priests who had been invited by Archbishop Manning to run the mission. The Church of St. Vincent de Paul, named after its founder, Abbé Chévrollais, 1868, was renamed St. Francis of Assisi. The uprooting of the Sisters, who had just settled into a new life in England, must have entailed considerable suffering. But they were Servants of the Sacred Heart, and as refugees who were accustomed to living with uncertainty in a foreign country, they accepted their lot and moved into Sidney House on 29th Sept. 1873. This new convent, with Mother Françoise de Sales as Superior, was to become the Provincial House, the nucleus from which the Congregation would spread its various apostolic works in England, Wales and Scotland, during the latter part of the 19th century.

Sidney House had been the elegant Regency home of Thomas Ballance, a wealthy silk manufacturer, who had suffered reversal of fortune when the silk trade collapsed in the 1860s.¹¹⁶ The house went up for sale in 1873, without its spacious grounds of nine acres. It seemed like the fulfilment of Archbishop Manning's early promise to Fr. Braun to provide "a large convent" for many of the good works the Sisters could engage in. The neighbourhood was said to be "the poorest in London" and "to include South Hackney, Hackney Wick and Homerton, Spicer Street, Whitechapel, Mile End Road and Victoria Docks."¹¹⁷ The Sisters were already familiar with these

areas from their convent in Stratford, where they had been involved in teaching catechism, home-visiting and visits to Workhouses. They were already teaching in the Day School and Sunday School at Guardian Angels, Mile End Road.¹¹⁸ They continued to run a dispensary at the convent in Hassett Road, named Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, and to nurse the sick "day and night". It was the Founder's dream that this new foundation would accommodate an orphanage where the growing number of London's homeless children could receive shelter and education.

Although Fr. Braun was the driving force behind the purchase of Sidney House, it was Mother Françoise de Sales, the English Provincial, who carried the burden of negotiating the transaction and raising the necessary funds. This German Sister possessed remarkable faith, patience and stamina in the midst of very difficult circumstances. From the Rudolf Hospital in Vienna, the Founder instructed her on how to proceed with the negotiations: "For a while, let as many Sisters as possible go out collecting so we can buy the house".¹¹⁹ He urged her to go and see Lord Beaumont to borrow money, giving the house as a guarantee. If she could not buy it, then she could rent it for twelve or sixteen years, in order to build a wall around the property and a children's dormitory and classroom. With his typical attention to detail, Fr. Braun advised Mother Françoise to send the details of the repairs to the Homerton property to him in Vienna. In taking on repairs costing from fifty to sixty pounds, the owner would be obliged to sell it after six months at the price agreed by Mr. Macnolté (correct name McNulty), advisor to Mother Françoise, and the solicitor, Mr. Sils. Fr. Braun would sign the deed of sale for the house bought in his name. Astutely he added: "I am considered to be living in London where I spend a lot of my

time".¹²⁰

The precarious financial basis of the Homerton property was to lead to many trials and tribulations in the years ahead. In April 1875, Mother Françoise was "commanded" by the Founder to send all money collected to the Solicitor for the payment of the first instalment due on 1st June. She was urged to ask Fr. Akers, the Parish Priest at Homerton, to write to Cardinal Manning for a loan of £800, to bring up the sum owing to £2000. At this point it was feared that the Sisters would have to leave Sidney House. Fr. Braun instructed the Provincial to go out herself with Sr. Marie Josephine "to collect as much as possible".¹²¹ In the meantime, the Sisters whose mission it was to collect money 'cast their net' into more distant places: Sister Simplienne went to Germany, Sisters Julia and Winifride went to Ireland, Sr. Laurence and postulant Regina went to Belgium and Sister Edward to London areas.¹²²

Much of the Founder's correspondence with Mother Françoise in the 1870s contains references to the anxiety generated by the debt on Homerton. She was sometimes berated for her lack of business insight and for not taking a stronger lead. One can only imagine her suffering, since we do not have her side of the correspondence, as she persevered in her spiritual leadership of the Sisters, whilst, at the same time, managing the temporal welfare of all. To add to her trials, Mr. Magnolté (McNulty) was not the person he seemed to be initially, and Mr. Sils, her solicitor (also the Cardinal's) went bankrupt,¹²³ forcing Fr. Braun to make one of his sudden visits to London from Argenteuil.

Two years before his death, the Founder seemed anxious to ensure that the property at Homerton would be legally secure. Writing to Mother Françoise, 15th March 1880, he stated:

I know I have signed all the mortgage [for Sidney House] by which I have taken on all the debts, which I would have to pay with the fortune from my parents if you couldn't pay it.¹²⁴

He made provision for any uncertainties in the future by adding:

I'll wait until the house is paid for and we have Sisters perpetually professed in whom we can have a greater trust ... My Will will be properly drawn up.

This property will remain for the English convent in London in perpetuity.¹²⁵

The testing times endured by Mother Françoise regarding the Homerton property appeared to come to an end when, in the same letter, he gave her one of his rare reassurances:

You know I have given you my full confidence, even in writing. Deposit this money in your name.¹²⁶

Despite the financial burden placed on the Sisters throughout the 1870s, their good works in the East End of London continued to grow. Their apostolate among the poor followed a fairly regular pattern, consisting of home visiting, clubs for young girls and teaching in day schools at Homerton, Clapton, Poplar, Mile End and Dalston.¹²⁷ With his extraordinary energy and faith, Fr. Braun planned to establish a new foundation at Kirtling in Cambridgeshire. He directed Mother Françoise regarding the Sisters who should be sent to this mission:

I think Sr. Berthe is very well suited to the school as well as Sr. Stanislaus, but the latter must be withdrawn later for the orphanage [Homerton].¹²⁸

Kirtling was in the diocese of Northampton at that time and the Servants of the Sacred Heart were invited to take over a small school and to run an orphanage under the patronage of the Eleventh Baron North and his wife, Lady Frederica.¹²⁹ The Norths were recent converts to the Catholic faith, having been received into the Church at Brompton Oratory in 1868 by Fr. Phillip Gordon, Cong. Orat. The latter was associated with the Kirtling mission from the beginning and celebrated Mass in the temporary church there on 28th July, 1871.¹³⁰

It is not known how the Servants of the Sacred Heart came to be invited to serve the Kirtling mission, but it is reasonable to assume that Fr. Gordon was instrumental in their coming. He belonged to the Association of Compassion which was set up for the maintenance of orphans, and he may have come into contact with the Sisters in the course of their work among poor children in London.

The Almshouses in Kirtling where the Sisters cared for orphans can still be seen today. They were built in 1847 by the Second Marquis of Bute (another patron of the Congregation) at the request of his wife, daughter of George Augustus North.¹³¹ From the Founder's account,¹³² it would appear that Lady Frederica North closely supervised the Sisters' work with the orphans. Any problems, and there were many, had to be addressed to her by Mother Françoise in London. According to Lord North (Eleventh Baron), the orphanage and school closed towards the end of 1876, "when the present system of conducting the school was determined".¹³³ "The present

system" referred to the 1870 Education Act which required inspectors to determine whether or not a school should continue if it had not achieved government standards.

The convent at Kirtling, remote from the Provincial House in London, could not have been an easy mission for Sisters Berthe, Stanislaus and Mary of Nazareth. We only have fleeting glimpses of what life was like for them. Travel by train from London to Newmarket was slow and uncomfortable and the road to Kirtling winding and bleak. The wide stretches of hedge-bound fields must have added to their sense of isolation in the heart of the English countryside. Within three years of their arrival, tragedy struck the small community when Sr. Berthe died on 17th Feb. 1876.¹³⁴ Six months prior to her death, the Founder had advised Mother Françoise de Sales to allow her to go home for a few days.¹³⁵ This is the only inkling there is of her being ill. Her remains were the first to be interred in the new Catholic Cemetery at the Church of Our Lady and St. Phillip,¹³⁶ very close to the scene of her final apostolate. Her name, too, is the first entry in the Register of Deaths for the recently founded mission at Kirtling. Sr. Berthe's grave was marked by a simple cross, which, on the request of the Founder, was removed and taken to the Homerton Chapel¹³⁷ when the Servants of the Sacred Heart withdrew from Kirtling.

Further north in Boston, Lincolnshire (diocese of Nottingham), Fr. Braun attempted to establish another small foundation. Again, its aim was to meet the educational needs of poor children. The school at Boston had been built by Fr. Chêpy, another emigré, between 1854 and 1865.¹³⁸ The question must be asked: Why did the Founder, at that time, seek to spread the Congregation to a location so remote from

the newly established Provincial House in London? A possible explanation may be assumed from his meeting with Fr. Edward Bagshawe, Cong. Orat. on the English National Pilgrimage to Paray-le-Monial, 2nd Sept. 1873.¹³⁹ This pilgrimage was led by Bishop Vaughan (later Cardinal) of Salford, and included members of the aristocracy, for example, Lord Beaumont and the Duke of Norfolk, who were already patrons and benefactors of the Servants of the Sacred Heart. The following year, Fr. Bagshawe was appointed Bishop of Nottingham. He had already been active in London on behalf of the care of poor children and had come to national prominence when he won the right for Catholic priests to visit patients in hospitals and workhouses, in which they were "placed under vexations and restrictions by the authorities."¹⁴⁰

It was at the invitation of Bishop Bagshawe that the Servants of the Sacred Heart came to Boston in 1875. There are references in the Founder's letters to his anxiety about his inability to provide appropriately qualified teaching Sisters. He reiterated to Mother Françoise, the Provincial, that "we are not a teaching Congregation", but added: "This will be an exception".¹⁴¹ He sent three Sisters to Boston - Sr. Jean-Marie, the Superior, with Srs. Camille and Suzanne. Ever mindful of the Congregation's mission to the poor, Fr. Sabela, Parish Priest at Boston, was requested by the Founder to pay one Sister to visit the workhouse and to care for the poor and sick.¹⁴² Despite the Founder's insistence that "the house in Boston must be kept open", it was, like Kirtling, short-lived, and the Sisters were withdrawn at the end of 1877.¹⁴³

At the time when the missions at Kirtling and Boston were struggling to survive, Fr.

Braun directed Mother Françoise to visit prospective foundations in Wales.¹⁴⁴ One of these foundations came under the patronage of the Marquis of Bute, and Mother Françoise was instructed to send him "really good Sisters".¹⁴⁵

The first of the Welsh missions was at Raglan, Monmouthshire. Evidence from the Cardiff Archdiocesan Archives indicates that the Servants of the Sacred Heart came to teach in the Catholic School in the mid 1870s. They were invited by Fr. Delarue, a refugee from France, who was chaplain to the Herbert (formerly Jones) family at Llanarth Court. They were one of the biggest landowners in the area and had maintained a Catholic school on their estate since 1774. They also built the church, still known as Llanarth.¹⁴⁶

Mother Anatolia and two Sisters came to Raglan to live in a small convent attached to the school. Two of them were teachers and one visited the poor. They struggled to survive on an allowance of £6 per annum from the Herbert family. They were expected to live on the money gained as a result of reaching an acceptable standard during regular school inspections. This was often reduced or not forthcoming because a large number of Irish children were admitted after the famine, and these had no previous education. The Sisters resorted to taking in laundry, sewing and embroidery and selling what they could produce. After eight years of toil and effort, it was decided that they should leave.¹⁴⁷

Despite continued setbacks, Mother Françoise, urged on by her love of the Sacred Heart and gifted with unique faith, extended the Congregation further into Wales.

The second foundation was at Aberdare and had outreaches in Hirwaun and Mountain Ash. Like other Bute foundations, it was intended to serve the needs of the families of miners and industrial workers living in harsh conditions in the valleys of 19th century South Wales. The Sisters set up a dispensary at Aberdare but they had to wait until 1880 before a new Bute hospital was complete.

The school at Aberdare was to fare better than the one in Raglan. Like most Catholic schools, it was closely linked to the Parish Church. The Superior of the mission was Fr. Hamelin, another emigré from France, who also served the outlying Mass centres of Hirwaun and Mountain Ash. There was increasing growth in the Catholic population in all these areas as Irish immigrants came to work in the coal mines. Although poor and at a material disadvantage, they had a strong Catholic faith and desired to have their children taught according to their religion.

Fr. Hamelin saw the need to establish a Community of Sisters at Aberdare, and in Oct. 1877, he set out terms of an agreement with Mother Françoise at Homerton. He was clearly an outstanding pastor and a gifted organiser. This agreement spelled out in minute detail the Communities duties and responsibilities, as well as the mission's part of the contract. It was approved by Bishop J. S. Brown O.S.B., Bishop of Newport and Menevia. Despite the Founder's reluctance to supply teaching Sisters, the mission school agreement clearly states:

The Community undertakes to teach at the Catholic Elementary Schools at Aberdare, Mountain Ash and Hirwaun, and to provide a sufficient number of certificated and other teachers for the requirement of the Elementary

Education Act (1870), and to provide all requirements necessary to obtain the Annual Government Capitation Grant, which grant as well as school pence [fees collected from the pupils] and all other resources of school account revenue should be the property of the mission.¹⁴⁸

The agreement did not deviate from the Congregation's original apostolate, which opted for the poor. Three Sisters, at least two of them English-speaking, were to start the foundation. Besides teaching in the school, they were to visit the poor and the sick in their homes in the three districts mentioned. They would also undertake religious instruction, and, if required, "would undertake all kinds of instruction, night-school, industrial schools, in connection with the mission". In keeping with the Congregation's newly approved Constitution, they would give their services gratis to "the poor and the sick who they may be called to attend".¹⁴⁹ Fr. Hamelin would pay the Sisters thirty-three pounds a year and "each Sister, certificated or uncertificated", would receive payment quarterly, "with which they could provide for their food and clothing".¹⁵⁰

In common with many Catholic schools in 19th and 20th century Britain, St. Margaret's at Aberdare had to face a huge struggle to survive. But Fr. Hamelin was not one to yield to outside pressures. Having obtained a grant from the Education Committee in 1878 towards the provision of a large room 75 feet by 70 feet, he still had to face the hostility of the Aberdare School Board, who observed that there was ample accommodation for Catholic children in the district. Like so many other pioneers of Catholic education in England and Wales, Fr. Hamelin won his case. The

Servants of the Sacred Heart continued their teaching apostolate at the school, and in 1885, Sr. Gonzaga became its first Sister Headteacher. Her service to the school and to the mission was outstanding, and today a plaque to her memory can be seen in the Parish Church.¹⁵¹ St. Margaret's has continued to flourish up to the present day, despite its humble beginnings and early struggles. In 1997, it moved to new premises at Ty-Fry.

It was a happy event in Aberdare when in 1880 the new Bute Hospital was officially opened and run by the Servants of the Sacred Heart from Homerton. This increased outreach to the coal miners and their families was welcomed in a disadvantaged yet vibrant industrial valley in Wales.

Bishop Charles Graham, in his *History of the Plymouth Diocese*, states: "The Servants of the Sacred Heart from Westminster took on the Poor Schools, 1st May 1876". This quotation reflects the pace and energy with which Fr. Braun continued to extend the apostolate of the ten-year-old Congregation in England and Wales. The Bishop was referring to the small school at Chideock in Dorset, where the Sisters' patrons were members of the well-known Catholic Weld family, who were related to Bishop Vaughan, and with whom Fr. Braun was acquainted. The Founder himself appointed the first Superior of this small mission, Sr. Simplienne, a tireless Sister on the quest. He believed that "her gentleness and piety are likely to lead to the conversion of a large number of Protestants."¹⁵¹

A few miles west of Chideock, also in the Plymouth Diocese, the Sisters took charge

of another small school at Lyme Regis. Here, the Bellingham (later Talbot) family supported them and provided them with a house when their convent at Uplyne had fallen in. To enhance their meagre income from the school, the Sisters took in lady boarders to support themselves.

Records of these teaching missions are sketchy, but Bishop Graham of Plymouth, reporting on his visitation, 13th Oct. 1899, stated that at Lyme Regis Convent things were going well:

The Superior, lately from Chideock, Sr. Edward, with three Sisters from Ireland, of whom two teach in the school. They seem a united and happy Community and all enjoying good health. In the school, there are fifteen Catholics and thirty Protestants on the books.¹⁵²

These small missions at Chideock and Lyme Regis were part of a great endeavour by Religious Congregations exiled from France to establish convents and Catholic schools, while, at the same time, starting off a number of small rural missions.

A similar foundation was made in the Birmingham Archdiocese at Blackmore Forest, near Upton-upon-Severn in Worcestershire. This was also a small village school and the Servants of the Sacred Heart taught there, assisting Fr. Reynolds, from the late 1870s until 1885. A letter dated 17th Nov. 1882 from Archbishop Ullathorne of Birmingham would suggest that the school was in serious financial difficulties.¹⁵³

Despite various setbacks, Fr. Braun continued to go ahead with further foundations in France, Germany, Austria, Belgium and Britain. He even contemplated sending

Sisters to the southern States of America to take care of "a black children's orphanage".¹⁵⁴ This was most likely to have been his enthusiastic response to the Missionary Society of St. Joseph, recently founded at Mill Hill, London, by his great friend and advisor, Bishop Vaughan of Salford. Writing from London to Mother Gertrude in Argenteuil, 2nd Oct. 1878, he described a visit from Fr. Benoit Peter Ludovico, the Bishop of Salford's secretary and later Superior of Mill Hill :

I've promised him a few Sisters. I now have a clear idea of the foundation which I am more inclined than ever to accept. This priest is giving a huge farm with animals and all the equipment for building an orphanage for black girls.¹⁵⁵

Sadly, this foundation never materialised, but his desire to go to a faraway place to help disadvantaged children reflects the breadth of his missionary vision, which was to see the Congregation extend, not just in five countries, but eventually in five continents.

From 1877 until his death in 1882, Fr. Braun's general health, never robust, began to give serious cause for concern. Dr. Genevieve Nave, in her diagnosis of the Founder's symptoms in the late 1870s stated: "Fr. Victor Braun's underlying illness was typical tuberculosis", and she wrote:

From this point until his death he showed extreme courage, forever beating his fatigue levels, praying to be able to fulfil his apostolic charism.¹⁵⁶

His extraordinary fortitude enabled him to make one of his largest foundations in England during this period. In Jan. 1877, he accepted a request from Mr. Rimmel,

Director of the French Hospital in Leicester Square, to send three Sisters from France to take charge, Sr. Francesca (Matron), Sisters Almeda and Celine.¹⁵⁷ This hospital was close to the mission run by the Marist Fathers and had previously been in the charge of the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul. A school for French children was attached to the mission, also two youth clubs, one "for fifteen French children of Mary".¹⁵⁸ The Founder saw this foundation as "a powerful bond with our houses in France".¹⁵⁹ There is evidence from his letters that the Leicester Square apostolate provided a ray of happiness for him during these troubled times: "The Sisters are well paid at the school" and "Sr. Elvire is presiding over a huge hospital ward".¹⁶⁰ From London, he wrote to the Superior General in Argenteuil:

Pray and thank the Sacred Heart for this double foundation of great importance especially the school, because several other good works for the poor will be attached to it.¹⁶¹

True to the Founder's vision, this hospital in the heart of London served not only the French community, but also Londoners within its immediate vicinity, well into the second half of the 20th century.

One of the most worrying uncertainties that constantly tested the Founder's faith was his fear of having to go into exile in England because of frequent political unrest in France. In Dec. 1877, he wrote to Mother Françoise in London "Any moment without warning I may be obliged to escape and come to you dressed as an English gentleman", and he requested that rooms in Homerton should be kept vacant "for our French Sisters".¹⁶² He had the added anxiety that the Congregation had not yet been approved by the French government,¹⁶³ and he instructed Mother Gertrude that in

the event of a quick exodus from Argenteuil, his "cashbox should be put elsewhere than in your room in case of house searches".¹⁶⁴

The deaths of many young Sisters in the early days of the Congregation were a source of much suffering for Fr. Braun. Poor living conditions and enormous stress in their lives were obvious contributory factors. He felt keenly the death of Mother Gertrude at Argenteuil on 17th Jan. 1881, at the age of thirty-five. This "eldest daughter", as he called her, was his first Superior General and closest collaborator during the founding years of the Congregation. As if he had a premonition, he prepared for his own demise the following year. Characteristically, he planned the appointment of the next Superior General, Mother Françoise de Sales, in March 1882. He wrote to her on 2nd Aug. 1881, while she was still in London:

I'm busy seeing to internal matters ... the organisation of the novitiate, in such a way that you will have little to do when you come back here in six or eight months time.¹⁶⁵

His tubercular illness progressed rapidly during 1881, but this did not deter him from making his final visit to the hospital Sisters in Vienna, from where he wrote: "The spirit of our two hundred Sisters is excellent and all I have is consolation"¹⁶⁶ On Ascension Day, 18th May 1882, Fr. Victor Braun's untimely death occurred at the Mother House in Argenteuil. He was fifty-seven years of age.

The motto given by the Founder to the Congregation was: May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere known and loved. This was what gave impetus to all his strivings to create what Pope John Paul II called "a civilisation of love". The Sisters were

urged to be "missionaries of the Sacred Heart". In 1902, the English Province became a separate Congregation with the title 'The Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary'. Today, in three autonomous branches, the Sisters serve the needy in five continents, in France, Germany, Austria, Poland, Czech Republic, England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, U.S.A., South and Central America, the Philippines, Uganda, Zambia and Mali. They remain faithful to the Founder's charism to teach and nurse the sick, to care for young women and prisoners, to serve immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees and Aids victims.

In 1954, Rev. Mother Antonia Phillips, Superior General of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, wrote to Bishop George Beck, Bishop of Brentwood, for a testimonial of the Congregation's spirit and apostolate, to be sent to Rome for the initial stage of Fr. Braun's cause. His Lordship's response reflects quite clearly the Founder's legacy to his Sisters:

... their work is marked by a strong supernatural sense, a happy and friendly charity and a devotion particularly to the spiritual needs of those they serve.¹⁶⁷

Victor Braun's faith was nourished at St. Avold, a small town nestling in the picturesque Moselle Valley in north-east France, and he still speaks to us across the years, reminding us that there is still much to do in the Lord's vineyard. We cannot doubt that his charism, tried and tested, was a fruit of the Holy Spirit. He equated his mission to a single-minded seeking of God's Will in all things. In this we are reminded of the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

That indeed is the real meaning of the saints for us, that they are people who have ventured upon this experiment of the will of God. To a certain extent, they are lights for mankind, signposts to show us what happens, how life can be put right.¹⁶⁸

In 19th century England, Fr. Braun left many "signposts" to show how an indomitable faith can 'move mountains', and his outstanding contribution to the Catholic Church in this period of history lay in the apostolate of the Congregation which he founded, an apostolate directed towards the poor and the marginalised and which encompassed every aspect of works of charity.

Abbreviation

L. Letters of Fr. Victor Braun

Notes

1. Weightman, G. & Humphries, S. *The Making of Modern London, 1815-1914.*
(London, 1983)
2. Ibidem
3. Ibidem
4. *The Catholic Directory, 1872-1873.*
5. Brentwood Diocesan Archives, Stratford File.
6. Ibidem
7. L. No. 23.
8. Dr. Genevieve Nave, *État de Santé du Père Braun* (Versailles, 1997).
9. Canon Émile Thêvenot, *Histoire de la Congregation des Soeurs Servantes du Sacré Coeur de Jesus.* (Versailles, 1917, p. 15).
10. Ibidem p. 5.
11. L. No. 6.
12. Canon Émile Thêvenot, *Histoire de la Congregation des Soeurs Servantes du Sacré Coeur de Jesus.* (Versailles, 1917).
13. L. No. 6.
14. L. No. 1.
15. L. No. 2.
16. L. No. 4.

17. Ibidem.
18. L. No. 400.
19. Encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Haurietis Aquas*, (Catholic Truth Society, 1956)
paragraph 51.
20. L. No. 4.
21. L. No. 29
22. L. No. 5.
23. Ibidem
24. L. No. 3.
25. L. No. 4.
26. L. No. 2.
27. Elizabeth Stopp, *St. Frances de Sales*. (London, 1967).
28. Canon Émile Thêvenot, *Histoire de la Congregation des Soeurs Servantes du
Sacré Coeur de Jesus*. (Versailles, 1917) p. 33.
29. L. No. 4
30. L. No. 10.
31. L. No. 12.
32. Ibidem
33. Having escaped the siege of Paris, Mother Odile emigrated to America and
founded the Sisters of Mary, St. Louis, Missouri, in the early 1870s. There are
two biographies of her life.
34. Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*. (Cambridge, 2003, p. 95).
35. Ibidem
36. Ibidem

37. L. No.22.
38. L. No. 23.
38. L. No. 23.
39. L. No. 18.
40. L. No. 23.
41. Geoffrey Wawro. *The Franco-Prussian War*, (Cambridge, 2003, p. 187)
42. *British National Society for the Sick and Wounded in War*, (London, 1871)
43. Canon Émile Thêvenot, *Histoire de la Congregation des Soeurs Servantes du Sacré Coeur de Jesus*. Versailles, 1917. p. 33.
44. "Woman's Work". from: *In France among the Germans*, p. 70. *A Neutral Volunteer*, Vol I. (London, 1872).
45. Canon Émile Thêvenot, *Histoire de la Congregation des Soeurs Servantes du Sacré Coeur de Jesus*. (Versailles, 1917). p. 79.
46. Ibidem.
47. L. No. 23.
48. L. No. 24.
49. Ibidem.
50. L. No. 23.
51. Ibidem No. 23.
52. *Archive of St. Boniface's Church, Adler Street, London*.
53. L. No. 23.
54. Ibidem.
55. Ibidem.
56. Ibidem

57. L. No. 24.
58. Ibidem.
59. L. No. 25.
60. Ibidem.
61. Ibidem.
62. Ibidem.
63. Ibidem.
64. Josephine Gibson, Letters 1 and 2. Archives, British Red Cross.
65. L. No. 25.
66. Ibidem.
67. Ibidem
68. Ibidem.
69. Canon Émile Thêvenot. Histoire de la Congregation des Soeurs Servantes du
Sacré Coeur de Jesus, Versailles, 1917.
70. Ibidem, p. 85.
71. Ibidem, p. 87.
72. Ibidem
73. National Census for Stratford, April 1871. East London Records Office.
74. L. No. 26
75. L. No. 27.
76. Ibidem
77. L. No. 28.
78. Ibidem
79. Ibidem

80. Ibidem
81. L. No. 34.
82. L. No. 31.
83. Ibidem.
84. L. No. 30.
85. Ibidem
86. L. No. 35.
87. The Tablet (Supplement) London, 31st July, 1882.
88. L. No. 35.
89. Ibidem.
90. Ibidem.
91. Josephine Gibson, Letter 2
92. Ibidem.
93. L. No. 35.
94. Ibidem
95. L. No. 37.
96. L. No. 38.
97. L. No. 56.
98. . L. No. 39.
99. Ibidem.
100. L. No. 61.
101. Andrew Bell, Experiment in Education (London, 1805).
102. Mary Sturt, The Education of People. (London, 1967) p. 28.
103. James Pereiro, Cardinal Manning. (Oxford) p. 47.

104. L. No. 39.
105. Brompton Oratory Archives, Oratory Notes, 1849-1899.
106. L. No. 60.
107. The Tablet, June, 1875.
108. Ibidem
109. Parish Records, Shanagolden, Co. Limerick.
110. Main Bavarian State Archives, (Foreign Ministry Series MA), Document of the
Order of Merit, 1870-1871.
111. L. No. 69.
112. L. No. 89.
113. L. No. 135.
114. L. No. 77.
115. L. Nos. 89, 99.
116. L. No. 77.
116. Isobel Watson, A House in Hackney Wick. Hackney History Vol. I.
117. The Catholic Directory, 1873-74.
118. Ibidem
- 119 Letters V.B. No. 91.
120. Ibidem.
121. L. No. 160.
122. Ibidem
123. L. No. 194.
124. L. No. 359.
125. Ibidem.

126. Ibidem.
127. L. No. 388.
128. L. No. 153.
129. Rev. A.H. Foreman, A Brief History of Our Lady and St. Phillip's Church,
Kirtling.
130. Norwich Catholic Archives. Lord William North's Notes on Kirtling.
131. Kelly's Directory, Cambridgeshire.
132. Norwich Catholic Archives. Kirtling - Lord North.
133. Ibidem
134. L. 146, 176.
135. Norwich Catholic Archives. Kirtling - Lord North.
136. Norwich Diocesan Archives. Diocesan Register.
137. The Tablet, September, 1873.
138. Nottingham Diocesan Archives.
139. Brompton Oratory Archives. Oratory Notes, 1849-1899, p. 61.
140. The Tablet, November, 1873.
141. L. No. 215.
142. Ibidem.
143. L. No. 174.
144. Nottingham Diocesan Archives.
145. L. No. 216.
146. Archives Archdiocese of Cardiff.
147. Ibidem.

148. Denise Jones, *History of St. Margaret's R. C. School, Aberdare*. (Aberdare, 1977) p. 1.
149. Ibidem
150. Ibidem.
151. Ibidem.
152. L. No. 265.
153. *Visitation Reports, Bishop Graham of Plymouth, 1899*.
154. Birmingham Archdiocesan Archives.
155. L. No. 307.
156. L. No. 400.
157. Dr. Geneviève Nave, *État de Santé du Père Braun*. °Versailles, 1997).
158. L. No. 266
159. Ibidem
160. L. No. 287
161. L. No. 269.
162. L. No. 287.
163. L. No. 387.
164. L. No. 265.
165. L. No. 307.
166. Ibidem.
167. L. No. 376.
168. Brentwood Diocesan Archives, Chigwell File.
169. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World*. (San Francisco, 2002)