

CHAPTER II

Mother Saint Theresa and the worldwide expansion of Jesus and Mary

India rapidly swallowed up the first missionaries

The succession to Mother St Andrew did not pose any more problems than that to Mother St. Ignatius. It went quite rightly to the Sister who had already replaced her for three years. Mother St Theresa [Mlle Motte] had belonged to the Congregation since 1826 ; she entered at the age of 27, having enjoyed a happy and carefree childhood. When she was seventeen she had told her confessor that she did not know what it was to bear a cross. The desire to save souls predominated in her vocation; she did not even go into another convent where the religious told her 'we only look after ourselves'. She had been present at the farewell to Father Coindre and had lived for eleven years with Mother Saint Ignatius, who had treated her quite strictly in order to form her for the future which she could foresee, that she would, one day, be called to govern the Congregation. On the death of the Foundress Mother Theresa was appointed Assistant General, she then founded the mission in India where she spent twelve years. We have seen her energy and enthusiasm, which even led her to believe that the work of the Congregation would be entirely missionary. Things had moved on meanwhile, the foundations had multiplied in France and in Europe and, however attached she was to her work in the tropics, she had too much common sense to oppose the universal thrust that was evident in Fourviere.

She herself, embodied this expansion, travelling tirelessly from house to house, taking note personally, of the conditions in which the new establishments were being set up, but never staying anywhere too long, because she had to deal with an immense correspondence. She described her responsibilities in an almost military fashion, using an expression of Madame Louise de France, according to whom 'A carmelite should live in such a way that she would always be ready to go to confession, receive Holy Communion and to die'. She added, 'A Religious of Jesus and Mary, should, moreover, be ready to go wherever obedience calls her to work for the salvation of souls', even when saying the Office 'A religious,' she said 'belongs to the Church Guards, and any distraction will enable our enemy, the devil, to breach our defences'. This vigilance, a vigilance that she recommended also in education – she had learned from her

own childhood experience – how easily a pupil who is left unsupervised, can give a bad example to her companions. Here perhaps we can see a personal quality, both of her spirituality and of her conduct, which was characterised by her missionary zeal.

This was the zeal that she had inspired in France. Now it was a question of finding replacements for the Sisters who had been adversely affected by the Indian climate. Now they knew what had to be done. They could no longer nourish the illusions that, too quickly on arrival, had encouraged them to think that they had overcome the fevers, making them reluctant to wear white clothing in heat which was so great that a bishop commented that they were suffering their purgatory on earth. Electric fans, with which to defend themselves, did not yet exist, but only the pankas, or mobile palanquins, that were moved by a rope from outside and a sort of door, made of metal wires which was sprinkled with water to cool the interior of the rooms. Louis Pasteur had not yet taught them how to protect themselves from micro-biotic infections, the valley of the Ganges and the widespread cholera. Nine religious had already died between 1844 and 1851 – ten years later the list numbered 27, of whom the eldest was only 50 years old.

The illusion of enjoying rapid success had also, no doubt, disappeared. The tenacity of the idolatry, the terrible compartmentalisation of the caste system, made it so difficult for Christians to marry without becoming ‘pariahs’ or untouchables. All this reduced progress to a slow ‘crawl’ which offered no self-satisfaction, not even the joy of a tangible result.

But the missionaries were not looking for satisfaction but rather sacrifice and Mother St Theresa had no difficulty in recruiting a team to replace the first group. She began by writing a letter to the Empress Eugenie, a letter that was unknown until a copy was discovered recently in the National Archive of Paris.

«I have come to France, Madame, in the search for more Sisters who will assist me in the difficult, but glorious, service as a missionary. Many of my Sisters from Fourviere and Le Puy, where we have a house, wish to follow me, but my resources, with which to cover the costs of such a long journey, are limited. The French Consul in Alexandria has given me the hope that, with the authorisation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I could make the journey from Marseilles to Alexandria, without cost other than that of food, because the Director of Imperial Messengers must provide free passage for missionaries on the French Mediterranean steamer. A word on your part, Madame, would obtain that authorisation for me. But I still have many other expenses to cover.

The English Peninsular and Oriental Company which carries the post from Suez to Bombay, charges an exorbitant price, £55 per person for the journey. If your Majesty would speak in my favour to the English Minister and obtain, if not a complete reduction, at least that of a large part of the cost, I would be able to provide much more assistance in India, where we could do so much good if we had the numbers required to found new schools where the needs are greatest. We have already opened 10 schools, at Agra, Sardhana, Musoorie and Bombay, in favour of Irish orphans who are the responsibility of the army, poor native Hindustanis, children found in Bombay, as well as secondary schools for young English ladies. If I am unable to obtain the favour for which I am asking, it will not be possible for me to take more than 5 or 6 Sisters. The Propagation of the Faith offers us only a very small amount. But I hope that Your Majesty will be kind enough to take an interest in our work and thus to share in its merits.

I fear that it could be indiscrete to ask for passages for more than 15 or 16 Sisters, but I need at least that number to meet the most urgent needs. I have been told that it would be easier to obtain passages on sailing boats, rather than steamers, but I am a mother and I would fear the difficulties and dangers of a long journey of five or six months, having myself endured, on my previous visit all the sufferings to which one can be exposed on this form of transport. {National Archives F19 6321 No date}.

Passed from office to office, the request appears to have been granted, for 17 Sisters travelled, a record number.

It was not, contrary to expectations, Mother St Therese who led them, for she was detained by Mother Andrew's poor health. The responsibility was entrusted to Sister St. Bruno {Catherine Jubeau} one of the older members of the Congregation. The niece of Madame Ferrand, who would become Sister St. Borgia and who had brought her up, she had been present at the beginning in Pierres Plantees and already, in the fervour of her 15 years of age, dreamed of consecrating herself to God. She had made her profession at Monistrol at the same time as Mother Foundress and was, by now, the only survivor of that first ceremony. She enjoyed the strength of her age, 51, and still had 25 years of missionary life before her.

The journey was achieved very quickly for those times. The group left in October and arrived on the 2nd February. There was one celebrated passenger on the vessel, Lycingar, which took them on the first stage from to Alexandria via Malta; this was Ferdinand de Lessops who was going to work on the excavation of the Suez Canal. With him was the Italian doctor of the Pasha of Egypt, as well as Father Laderrean, so the Sisters were in good company.

However a Mediterranean storm forced a change of course and they arrived very late at night at a convent where everyone was by then asleep and it took a long time before their knocking was heard and the door unlocked, during which time a crocodile skin hanging over the door seemed to be mocking them. The biblical site of the Nile, the crossing of the desert in a chara-banc, the initiation into curry, the oriental dish that burns the mouth, the memories of these details would be vividly recounted later by Sister St Lucy, then the youngest of the group, when she reached old age.

She said that it was at Bombay that the real series of missionary adventures began. Eight Sisters having remained behind, the others began a roaming existence for six weeks, during which they journeyed by night, to avoid the deadly heat of the day, sleeping for a few hours by day in a dark bungalow, if they found one or under a tree. The countryside was scorched, the trees had no leaves, the fields no grass or any sort of green vegetation. 'We crossed, so-called villages where the naked children played, and then travelled for miles and miles of uninhabited areas, through dense forests filled in our imaginations by animals more numerous than in reality. We saw snakes and monkeys as well as bands of travelling felons'. Sister St Lucy continued 'the nights were terrifying. The bushes and the trees assumed fantastic shapes in the moonlight. It was easy to see a tiger pouncing out of the underbrush and coming towards us in search of prey. What would our guide do if a cobra ventured into our path ?

In the mornings we laughed heartily at our nocturnal terrors and rejoiced to see the birds of multi-coloured plumage, the gracious swaying of the palms and other trees in the breeze and peaceful water-lilies floating on a pretty pool.

The tribulations consisted in having to cross over rivers on the backs of our porters, the collapse of a wagon during the night, whose driver then ran away for fear of reprisals. The consolations were the assistance of two English soldiers and the discovery that not all the cross-channel heretics are necessarily bad. Sister Lucy's simple account tells us all this, but finishes with a reference to the, otherwise grave dangers that would follow.

For we are on the eve of the Cipayas rebellion {Indian Mutiny}, which broke out in 1857 ; the atrocities that marked it are well known. The Sisters of Agra and their pupils took refuge in the Fort, where they occupied the elephants' stables, one of the more comfortable places, they said. It was under seige from the 22nd June to the 2nd of September, when it was relieved by a column of help which arrived from Delhi, just in time to avoid the fate of the Europeans who were massacred at Cawnpore. They would hear of the martyrdom of several priests, killed out of

hatred for the name of Christian, for it was rather an explosion of fanaticism than of nationalistic rebellion.

The orphanage for native children and the noviciate were burned down, but nothing altered their commitment and as Mother Theresa, who feared the worst for them, thought that it was her duty to recall them, they protested that they would not abandon the field of battle where they had struggled so hard. ‘We do not see your kind hearted invitation to go to a port and return to France as an order’, wrote Sister St Bruno, ‘that beautiful country, however dear it may be to us, is, to be truthful, no longer our homeland. God has placed us here to save some souls. He has preserved us from all misfortune, we have lacked nothing, either for body or soul, we ask you therefore to allow us, Reverend Mother, to be faithful to our mission.

Far from fearing such a departure, the Bishop of Agra would go to France as well as to England, where he hoped to recruit some novices. In fact the generalate of Mother Theresa would make possible the foundation of three new houses in India, two in 1860, one in Pune the city of the plateau overlooking Bombay, and one in Simla, in 1863, the hill station which, later on would serve as the summer capital of the Viceroy.

Jesus and Mary answers the call to far-off Canada

The apostolate of Jesus and Mary would also develop in a completely different direction, but there was a link between these diverse foundations. In 1842, at the time of her departure for India, Mother St Theresa arrived in Civita Vecchia on the same boat as Mgr Forbur Jansen, who had helped Pauline Jaricot with the foundation of the Propagation of the Faith and who, after a lengthy visit to the United States, was going to Rome to set up the Holy Childhood. He knew well the Bishop of Marseilles and Founder of the Oblates, Mgr de Mazenod, who had just sent some priests to Montreal, and who frequently received bishops from the ‘New World’, en route for Rome or the Holy Land. He himself had been the guest of Mgr Baillargeon and, at Montreal, of Mgr Bourget.

The efforts of the latter to attract French Congregations are well known, the Oblates, the Fathers of the Holy Cross, the Clercs de St Viator, the Brothers of the Christian Schools and those of Christian Instruction, as well as a variety of women’s congregations; there was a real renaissance of religious life, an implanting when compared with the previous century.

Mgr Bourget went to France in 1855. He had been asked by Father Routhier, the parish priest of Levis, to find some sisters dedicated to Christian education. Naturally Mgr de Mazenod gave him

the name of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, as he had seen them on three occasions when they embarked from his city, a smile on their lips, for the distant Orient. Mgr Bourget would knock at their door and his request accepted.

Four Sisters, Mother St Cyprian, Sisters St. Clement, Joachim, and Remi, together with four novices, left Fourviere on the 21st of November. They embarked at Le Havre with the blessing of Mgr Bourget.

During the crossing – one of sixteen days – they were threatened by a storm that endangered their boat and when they landed at New York, they learned that another boat, the one that was carrying their baggage, had sunk, swallowing up books, work-books, souvenirs and clothing, but at least they had arrived safely. On arrival in Canada they went to rest for two days at Longueuil with the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary – a fraternal bond. They set out for Levis across the December snow, a country so different from that of their older Sisters in Asia.

The school opened in January 1856 ; some time later, Father Routhier, whose poor health had prevented him from travelling, went to the Mother House in Fourviere to bring news, both to them and to the families of his collaborators.

England – a providential foundation that would respond to the needs in India.

From the mission in India, another thread led to England.

In 1857, Mgr Amherst, who had just been consecrated as Bishop of Northampton, was making his visit Ad Limina and met, at Notre Dame de Fourviere, his colleague from Southwark, Mgr Grant, whose brother was in India as chaplain to the Sisters of Jesus and Mary. They were mentioned in the conversation, the Mother House being only a few steps away and the new prelate began to dream of obtaining their help.

Two years later he made the official request. Mother St Theresa thought it to be a providential idea, as, after the sufferings of the mutiny, the cholera had taken several missionaries away and it had always been difficult to find anyone with a knowledge of English. To make a foundation in England was not to disperse one's resources, but rather to set up a resource from which India would draw replacements and a place where they could learn the language.

Five Sisters, led by Mother St Xavier {Mlle Tengisian} went, in August 1860, to Ipswich, the town assigned to them as their residence. There they found the relics of the former Catholic

England in the pilgrim shrine to Our Lady, the remains of houses of the Augustinians, Dominicans and Carmelites, all having been destroyed during the Reformation.

A French priest, expelled at the time of the Revolution had restored parish life in Ipswich and an old property would become the Convent. An orphanage and then a school would maintain the community on the twin paths of service that Mother St Ignatius had undertaken. Soon, in 1863, a reception of the habit would revive the ceremony forgotten, in England, for 300 years.

All this, however, could not take place without arousing sectarian opposition. The small street-boys taunted the Sister who did the shopping with shouts of 'Roman Diddy', the same name that, much to his surprise, greeted Mgr Amhers. On November 5th a catholic apostate rallied a crowd against the Church, in the cause of liberty for the cloistered victims. The mob filled the road which echoed with their shouts, 'Down with religion and freedom for the children'. They smashed the windows and tried in vain to break down the doors which had been chained by Mother Xavier and to which a Miraculous Medal had been attached.

The local authorities, however, apologised for the attack and paid for the damage. From then onwards the police provided security and the newspapers expressed indignation. Mother Theresa who had arrived to see what needed to be done joked with her daughters about the hostility of the devil who foresaw their success. She said, laughingly, 'If the windows have been broken, do not be worried, you will see that many children will come, not only through the doors but also through the windows'.

When Mother Theresa retired, the Congregation had spread to five countries and three continents. Faithful to the spirit of Mother Foundress she linked christian education with manual work as well as secondary studies. In Lyon itself, where it had not been possible to re-open the Providence, one of the first actions of Mother Theresa on the 10th December 1856, - when she was not yet officially the Superior General - had been to admit young girls to what would be the Pension des Dames, in order to offer them work and further formation.

Thus the building would again find its role in responding to social destitution and fulfilling a prophecy of the Cure d'Ars who had dissuaded her from selling it, persuading her that much good would be done there.

In England, as in India we saw the orphanages develop in parallel with the schools. In 1863, the mission in India was enriched with the introduction of Indian Affiliated Sisters, who had their own Rule and special customs. This was a sign that the Congregation had taken root, and it was

hoped that these Sisters would help to overcome racial barriers and would be invaluable on account of their familiarity with a psychology foreign to Europeans, however well disposed.

Mother St Theresa, who had been getting weaker for some time was afflicted by paralysis in 1867 and asked to be released from her responsibilities ; Mother St. Pothin was chosen to replace her. The former superior indicated from her armchair that she wished to kiss the hand of her successor, as a sign of submission that is part of the ceremony and , when St Pothin went to her Mother Theresa kissed her hand with an emotion that brought tears to the eyes of all who witnessed it. Mother St Pothin generously responded to Mother Theresa's affectionate deference. After her installation, she brought Cardinal de Bonald to M. St Theresa and he continued to address her as Reverend Mother ; when she protested, he placed his cape over her head, as one would with a child in need of comfort and said 'Both of you will be Reverend Mothers'. She lived for a further two years, surrounded with affectionate care as Mother St Andrew had been and she died with the same edifying simplicity.