

CHAPTER VI

MOTHER ST BORGIA AND MOTHER ST THÉRÈSE.**THE TRAGEDIES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY CONTINUE.**

After England it was Spain's turn to give a superior general to the Congregation of Jesus and Mary. Mother St Borgia replaced Mother St Clare.

Born in Olot, in the province of Girona, in 1865, she was called as a young girl, Dolores Mas de Xexas; her parents had sent her to school together with two of her sisters to the convent of San Andrès de Palomar, which had been open for some years. It was there that she heard the call of the Lord, entered the noviciate in Barcelona, and made her vows in Lyon in 1893.

For some years she worked in the boarding school in Fourvière, then in the Pension des Dames. She was sent back to Spain because of the anticlerical laws of Combism. But soon came the turning point in her life. She was chosen for the mission in Yucatan. Thus she began a missionary career in the spirit of those who had gone before her and which would be that of Pope Pius XI, the Missionary Pope. Persecution forced her out of Merida in 1915 where she was superior; she led her daughters to Havana safe and sound; she opened classes there and a boarding school. She attempted foundations in Jaguey and Matanzas; in 1919, she returned to the Mother House in Rome, as a general councillor and mistress of novices; she it was who decorated the pavilion of the Congregation at the missionary exhibition of 1925. At that time there was a momentary respite in the Mexican persecution: she crossed the sea and returned to Yucatan and to Havana until the 1931 general chapter which elected her superior general.

A worthy successor of Mother St Cyrille and Mother St Clare, she then began a life of travelling which lasted up to the war and which took her to three continents. First there was a tour of Europe, then South America; it was almost a family journey, since Argentina had been founded by the Province of Spain and well developed by her sister Mother Maria Esperanza, who had been Provincial there for six years; to the houses of Buenos Aires and to the Institute of Domestic Economy in Cordoba were added a school in the same town and a novitiate in La Calera, not far from there but in the mountains. When she returned three years later, Mother Maria Esperanza was not long for this world; she returned to God on the 7th May 1935; and it was Mother St Borgia, in October who would install her successor, Mother St Julia.

In 1932, she saw her native land once again. The monarchy had been overthrown a year ago and, already anticlericalism was taking a worrying turn. 'We must pray a great deal for Spain', had sighed the Pope, when at the 1931 general chapter the superior of that Province had been presented to him. Since that time, the Church and the State had been separated by the Constitution, the goods of the Church had been confiscated and education laicized.

Worse was to come: on the 19 July 1936, after mounting acts of violence (killings and churches burnt down), the civil war broke out. All the Jesus and Mary houses, except those of Burgos and Saragossa founded in 1930, were in 'red' territory, and most in Catalonia where passions were more unbridled than elsewhere. The nuns had to leave their convent in the utmost haste, dressed in secular clothes, having consumed the Sacred Species; they slipped out by the service entrance, for, in front of the façade, a crowd were wrecking an office of the Catholic press. They went to friends' homes: precarious hospitality and dangerous for those who took them in; after a few days they had once again to seek a new place to stay, going along streets patrolled by the cars of the anarchist militia; the doors they knocked on were afraid to open. Getting on for six o'clock in the evening, Mother St Anne and several novices managed to find a way in to the flat that one of them had left vacant; they spent the night there; but next morning a search was made and people interrogated. Everything came under suspicion: the ruling power of the day scented the Fifth Column everywhere; they suspected soldiers or arms hidden everywhere; Mother St Thomas of Villeneuve, who had taken refuge in another house with the other half of the novices, was also interrogated and, when the militia left, she heard two loud shots; it was the son of the woman who had given them asylum and her brother in law whom they had met in the courtyard outside and whom they had slaughtered.

A group of twenty-three sisters finally succeeded in embarking for Genoa, thanks to a collective passport that a past pupil, a relative of the Austrian consul, obtained from her uncle; an escort of anarchists accompanied them to the police station for the night, then to the quay, without luggage, telling them to hurry in case a group should appear who were 'far more dangerous than themselves'.

Three further groups were to follow in September; some of them piled into the Mother House and Stella Viae, notably the Provincial superior, Mother St Ignace, would die there in her eighties on 19 November; others were taken in in Fourvière, who welcomed them in the same sisterly way as Spain had the French sisters at the time of the anticlerical laws of Combes. These were truly encampments; in Rome in the Nido, the school being transformed into dormitories with the refugees sleeping on straw mattresses, often without a pillow, with a blanket and a basin to share

with several others. ‘The coffee and soup were watered down, they rationed themselves and got by, thanks to the produce of the garden which was abundant that year. Generous hearts gave alms, in spite of all that the fascist government had already collected for its war in Ethiopia. It was a heavy responsibility, however, for Mother St Borgia, made doubly onerous by her patriotic anguish for the lot of Spain. She paid with her own person; she would not hesitate to return at the height of the war (1938 and 1939) to the part of the country where a religious could show herself, in order to visit its houses and prepare new foundations. In November 1939, one would be established in Somorrostro, amongst the miners of Biscay, once indoctrinated by La Passionaria: (Dolores Ibarruri: Spanish politician, leader of the Communist Party of Spain).

Straight after her first visit to Spain, during the winter of 1932-1933, the superior general had followed in the footsteps of Mother St Thérèse and had gone to India. She had already moved two Spanish sisters there and she was to continue each year, drawing above all, as was natural, from within her English speaking daughters, but not without a selection of Spanish, Mexican, Franco-American and Canadian nuns; above all else, the mission in pagan territory had to be a meeting place for the whole Congregation. During the eight years which preceded the war, a total of twenty-five sisters would come to join the personnel in India.

During the summer of 1933, Mother St Borgia travelled all over France, Switzerland and Germany (she was to return there in 1935 and in 1937 as well as visiting England). Nazism reserved for her houses in Saxony the next series of tribulations. In 1938 the Josephinenstift School would have to close because of its religion: the following year secondary school students would be forbidden to board with the nuns. Some fifteen poor girls would come to replace the students and receive individual tuition, which gave a meaning for existing to the community; a few nuns, who were legally able to, taught in the secondary school. But already the war had begun, an excuse for military requisitions, which, each month, encroached a little more. Should they disperse and flee to more hospitable regions? A sister house for closed retreats, established in 1929 in Hosterwitz, close to Dresden, moved to Parsit, in Westphalia; in Rossthal, a home for elderly ladies, opened in 1933, would hold firm, and it was there, on the other side of the Elbe river, that the Sisters from the Josephmenstift would take refuge, when the house was razed to the ground, together with almost the whole town, by the bombardments in 1945; for lack of food, the community would then leave for the West, notably heading for Bamberg in Bavaria; they were happy to have been able to thus escape the tragic events of the Russian invasion. But the houses in Germany, victims of Nazi harassment, were to be no less enveloped by the cataclysm that the Führer unleashed on his fellow countrymen.

In 1934, Mother St Borgia had returned to Cuba, once the scene of her activity, and had this time visited North America; the United States and Canada. On the way, she went to El Paso (Texas), accompanied by the ex-superior of Havana, Mother Mary of Loyola, who, driven out of Mexico under General Calles, had transplanted its community to El Paso. What had simply been envisaged as a temporary halt became, with the prolonging of exile, the home of a new apostolate; the sisters of El Paso opened a business course, and the position of its border town gained them Mexican pupils from Juarez, the twin town; moreover, in the whole of the South Western United States, was there not a the Mexican population, all too often despised and neglected, to provide them with a fertile field of work?

The visit of Mother St Borgia - saddened on her return by the death of Mother Mary of Loyola, taken away by pneumonia in New Orleans – was the preface to a new phase of expansion: this would comprise, in 1938, a house in California, in San Diego; another in New Mexico, in Carlsbad; travelling missions led by the sisters in the holidays, going from parish to parish to catechize and to prepare children for first communion and sometimes to prepare adults for baptism or the regularization of their marriage. In this same year, 1938, the Spanish-American Province would be canonically erected.

In between times Mother St Borgia enlarged the Mother House (the arrival of the Spanish refugees was not the only circumstance to indicate its insufficiency); she opened holiday camps for the little girls of the area. On the death of Mother Euphemia (1936) she appointed an new champion of the cause and instituted a chain of prayers to obtain the beatification of Claudine Thévenet whose centenary was being celebrated; the Congregation participated, by its magazine Voice of Jesus and Mary, in the exhibition of the Catholic press organized for the sixty-fifth anniversary of Osservatore Romano, and, in June 1939, in the triumphal Marian Congress in Fourvière.

These were the last rays of the sun before the storm: three months later, the war broke out, ‘the phoney war’ first that might for a moment have been seen from Italy to be local; whatever its scope, it would not stop Mother St Borgia, in so far as material obstacles would not immobilize her. She embarked in November for a third voyage to Argentina. The steam ship dawdled, with unforeseen ports of call; Genoa, Villefranche, Marseille, Barcelona, where the superior general was able to go to the Provincial House and spend some time with her sisters in retreat. Next, it was the crossing of the Atlantic with all its dangers; Italy was still neutral and Mother St Borgia had taken an Italian boat, but what would guarantee it against misdirected torpedoes? Finally she arrived at the right port; she was to return the following April, a short time before the Blitzkrieg and the Italian intervention which would succeed in isolating her.

Nevertheless, in August 1941 once more she obtained a permit of three months with which she would be able to visit Spain, Switzerland and France; the Occupation prevented her from going as far as Remiremont where the sisters received the habit. At least in Lyon on 6 September she was able to be present at the triple centenary of the Pension des Dames, of the call to India and of the title Jesus and Mary, and in person to reopen the novitiate in Fourvière.

There was nothing more to be done than to wait. In spite of her entreaties, the apostolic delegate and the Spanish Consul warned her against any new journeys: the bombing, the scarcity of food and trains would render any travel an imprudence.

Around Rome the war was becoming more intense, with its sirens and planes and its growing restrictions. How difficult even was correspondence. How great were the delays, in this country at war, in getting news of far off Provinces such as those of India or simply situated in the other camp? All that remained was to use the various anniversaries so as to recall the special Jesus and Mary vocation, its educational task and its rule. And there was no dearth of anniversaries: after the centenary of the call to India, that of settling in this country (1942), that of Remirement in 1943, the Golden Jubilee of Mother St Borgia herself in the same year,

The isolation over, serious illness would destabilize the health of the superior general; she even received the Last Rites during the winter of 1945. Unable to get about, she resigned from her office at the Chapter of 1946, and she retired to Spain where she died a holy death in Barcelona on the 16 July 1948.

Mother St Thérèse, Canadian and Ninth Superior General

The first General Chapter after the war reflected the newness of the times. The barriers had not yet been lifted; for lack of passports, India could only send one religious, a Spaniard, Mother St Hildegarde. Germany just reached the border, then it had to turn back because the sought-after permit had not arrived. But those who were able to overcome the administrative blockages travelled with a speed hitherto unknown. How far away did those days of 1940 seem in which the writer of the annals noted as a sensational fact the journey of two sisters by plane between Rome and Barcelona. Now it was the normal way of travelling for the electresses from overseas. But the plane also had its victims.

And the successor of Mother St Borgia, Mother St Thérèse, was to be one of these victims. She was Canadian; she had been Assistant General in the times of Mother St Clare and Mother St Borgia and the latter had confirmed her nomination as local superior in the Mother House, with

full administrative powers. These responsibilities she had undertaken for twenty years with tact and devotion equal to any task. The death of the general économe in England made it necessary for her to accumulate a third responsibility.

In 1946 she restored to the current general économe accounts in a perfect state. The economic administration of the years 1936 to 1946 had not been a sinecure. In order to ensure the subsistence of the community, she had mobilised all willing to the intensive cultivation of the land, generous to all who worked on it. In this she was following the advice of the ecclesiastical authorities who recommended using all available strips of land for food production. The community and innumerable families aided blessed Providence of which she was the intermediary. Fruit trees planted, the land improved year on year, water points for all sorts of watering witnessed to her know-how. The Mother House benefitted from her development of the land's production.

She knew how to gain the confidence of her religious daughters who responded to her initiatives with diligence, intelligence and affection. As in the heroic days of the foundations, they laboured hard so as to ensure their daily bread; as in the tragic days of the war, she gave each one her own task in view of a better yield.

Faithful to her mandate as superior general, she undertook the visits of the Provinces. First she went to Montreux, Fourvière, and Remiremont, then to her native land where she was welcomed in Sillery with joy. She did the tour of the Canadian houses and finished at Gravelbourg in Saskatchewan. To shorten the journey to the West, it was usual to go by plane. But flying could be deadly for those with heart trouble. On the outward journey Mother St Thérèse who had caught cold, felt very unwell on the return, when the plane had scarcely taken off; in vain did Mother St Charles, her companion, and the air hostess try to bring her round by making her breathe oxygen, she entered her agony, an agony that most of the passengers did not even notice, and the doctor, on the stop in Winnipeg, was only able to confirm her death. Ten months after her election, the second Mother St Thérèse had perished, a martyr to that missionary vocation that the first of that name had inaugurated.

The Congregation of Jesus and Mary in 1950

At the time when her successor, Mother Luisa-Fernanda, a Spanish woman like Mother St Borgia, celebrated the centenary of the pontifical approbation given to the Congregation (1947), 'the humble seed entrusted to the earth by Claudine Thévenet had become, in the words of Pius XII, 'a great tree which had stretched out its branches to several regions of the world.' More than two

thousand sisters were evangelizing Europe, Asia and the two Americas; their schools contained more than thirty thousand pupils. In spite of the war, all the Provinces had held firm.

The Mother House, dangerously near the airport for which its chapel served as a landmark, did, however escape the bombings and only lost a stained glass window and some panes of glass due to the explosion of a powder keg. Its works for little boys had expanded, sports association, legionaries of Fatima, and the Oratory of St Philip Neri where they went for catechism. School feast days had been organised, a little theatre, the feast of the Child Jesus, a public catechism competition; whilst Stella Viae, also too visible due to its high tower, got away with a cupola penetrated by a bomb, and was beginning once more to receive students after the hostilities ended.

In Germany, those who fled had been received in small groups in the villages of Bavaria and Württemberg, it took some time for them to find out what had become of each other, and one of them had had to travel for twelve days on foot or by lorry before finding her superior again. They were alive but in the most absolute destitution, and thanks only to the aid of Catholic populations. Their bad shoes took in water and couldn't be replaced; from time to time, a distribution of material by the Americans allowed them to make a dress; they would tend the sick, help the dying, look after children and care for refugees, thus fulfilling their double task: the education of the young and care of the aged. In 1950, some German sisters were still behind the Iron Curtain.