

FROM THE HEART OF GOD

The Infant Jesus Sisters, Yesterday and Today (1909-2009)

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2nd edition published 2009 to commemorate the centenary of the Infant Jesus Sisters' arrival in Ireland:

Drishane (1909),
Ballyferriter (1935),
Malahide (1958),
Upton (1972),
Dublin (1973),
Cork (1984),
Tralee (1988),
Millstreet (1992),
Dromcollogher (1995),
Mallow (1997).

Foreword

A journey begun 340 years ago still continues. As we, Infant Jesus Sisters, recall the story, we recognise the many ways in which God has been guiding us. This story tells of the courage, generosity and spirit of faith of so many women who left the known for the unknown, in response to the call of God as they perceived it.

We believe that this same call of God is active in our world today, while showing itself in rather different ways. The Spirit of God blows where it will and continues to touch the hearts of all. It is clear that the religious life as we have known it is being led to take on a new shape – the form of which is still evolving. We are being invited to give God the space to lead us forward, trusting that whatever happens may be what God desires for all peoples on our planet at this time in history.

We recognise that as women we have a role to play in society and in the Church. We are called to develop a listening heart, to be sensitive to those who are searching for a deeper meaning in life, and to facilitate a way of providing appropriate responses.

We live in a world where people are becoming increasingly interconnected. Any group that is committed to follow through on what they believe in can energise one another and be a real inspiration in society.

Among the many challenges to be faced is the healing of broken relationships in all spheres of life, together with the distress of millions of immigrants and displaced persons seeking a life of greater dignity.

The emerging cosmic story opens up for us the wonder of the universe and leads us to touch something of the mystery of God's revelation. Jesus, who came to show us the way, is the one in whom we find the truth, and the one who gives us life.

Our desire is to move into the unknown future with courage and confidence, and in communion with the people of God.

Carmel McMahon IJS

"Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine..."(Eph. 3:20)

Our IJ Provinces

1. Malaysia 1852
2. Singapore 1854
3. Spain 1860
4. Japan 1872
5. Thailand 1885 - 1907, 1957
6. England 1892
7. Italy 1906
8. Ireland 1909
9. Belgium 1910 - 1983
10. China 1936 - 1946
11. California 1950 - 1989
12. Peru 1967
13. Cameroon 1968
14. Australia 1969 - 1989
15. Nigeria 1983
16. Bolivia 1992
17. Philippines 1984
18. Romania 1993
19. Czech Republic 1998
20. Myanmar (Burma) 2001

Preface

This little book aims to tell the story of the Infant Jesus Sisters during significant moments in their history.

Since it is a story, it does not dwell too much on details that are readily available in the archives of each country and especially in the general archives in Paris.

It sets out to answer questions we are often asked about the 'why' and the 'how' of our origins, our expansion to the five continents and the presence of the Institute in the world today. It would not be complete without the inclusion of short accounts of the life stories of some of those who have given witness to a wonderful life.

The title I have chosen has its origin in our founding text, John 3:16, which speaks of God's great love in sending Jesus so that "all who believe may not perish but may have eternal life". This longing of God's heart does not change and challenges us to continue to discover God's dream for us today as witnessed by so many before us.

Reading this short history may help us to appreciate that we, in our turn, are making history now, and that those who follow us will be grateful for the records we keep today.

I owe a debt of gratitude to those who have kept archives over the years and to the sisters who compiled simple histories of particular times and places in recent years. Thanks to the many sisters who wrote to me in recent months giving much of the information included here. To each one I express my sincere appreciation. I am particularly grateful to those who patiently and painstakingly helped to edit and proofread this text.

My hope is that those who read From the Heart of God will find it interesting and inspiring.

Georgina Clarson IJS

Part 1

Origins and life of the Institute in France: 1662 – 1852

“It all began...”

Our story begins in 17th century France with a young priest, Nicolas Barré, and two young women, Françoise Duval and Marguerite Lestocq. Nicolas was deeply rooted in the Word of God and was well known as a spiritual director. He was a man of deep faith, sensitivity and compassion, for whom the mystery of the Incarnation had deep meaning. Inspired by God’s extraordinary inclusive love for all, and aware of the spiritual and moral degradation of his age, he was moved with compassion for those living in great deprivation and who knew little about God. The text of Jn 3:16 obviously made a deep impression on him:

“God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life”.

His concern was for those who risked being “lost” and he sought ways of guiding them towards meaning and direction in their lives. This changed his way of seeing the world. He felt called to do something to help people come to know and love God, while developing their human potential to the full.

Who was this Nicolas Barré? Who were these young women? How did it all begin?

1.1 Nicolas Barré

“Lord, I desire only what you desire and as you desire it...”

Let us imagine ourselves in Amiens, France, on October 21, 1621. There, a baby boy has just been born to Antoinette and Louis Barré. He will be the eldest of five children and the only boy. His parents, no doubt, already look forward to the day when Nicolas will take over and expand the family business.

The Barré family had been in haberdashery for several generations. They sold all kinds of things: fish, candles, thread, wool, fabric, dyes, seeds and soap.

Amiens itself was, in times of peace, a prosperous town handling the cloth trade from England, crops from the North and wine from Bordeaux and Champagne. Only 110 kilometres from Paris, it was a busy crossroads, a centre of communication.

Nicolas grew up in this Christian family and environment under the shadow of the great Amiens Cathedral, a masterpiece of Gothic art depicting the bible in stone, wood and glass. From the age of about ten, Nicolas was educated by the Jesuits. He showed a great desire to learn and to understand. We are told that he was gifted in the humanities, as well as having a lively interest in science and the technology of his time.

These years with the Jesuits were to prepare Nicolas for his later work training the first ‘charitable teachers’. Here he was formed not only intellectually but also in a solid Christian way of life guided by excellent religious teachers. He saw in practice the ideals of this group of apostolic religious, which had finally managed to break with both the monastic and conventual models of religious life. Here he witnessed a deeply contemplative life integrated with action in the world, a Christian life inextricably linked with the social problems of his day. He experienced the fatherly attitude of the teachers who wanted the all-round education of their pupils, and saw how the college provided free board for pupils who could not afford to pay. He would have absorbed the missionary urgency that sent Jesuits to the ends of the earth to share the Good News of the Gospel with others.

As Nicolas grew up, however, he felt drawn neither to his family business nor to any career in law or science that would have been open to such a brilliant student. Instead he felt called by God to be a priest; he felt drawn to the monastic life.

There were several monasteries to choose from in his native town. Even though educated by the Jesuits, Nicolas chose to join the Minims of St Francis of Paola. He was familiar with their monastery, which was situated in a poorer area of the town. Perhaps this choice already showed his awareness of the plight of those who suffered from extreme poverty and its consequences. Most

Minim houses were built on the outskirts of towns, with a view not only to silence and seclusion, but also to being with people who lived on the edge: the unemployed, the factory workers, and the peasants. In this way, the Minims came to experience at first hand the epidemics, fire and war of mid 17th century France, and came to know personally the victims of poverty.

The friars rallied both bodily and spiritual energies to come to the assistance of these people. They lived a life of extreme austerity, having a fourth vow of perpetual abstinence from meat and animal products. As well as this penitential lifestyle, and struggling against the decadence and permissiveness of their society, the friars rose at midnight to begin their day of work and prayer. The spirit of the Minims, with its emphasis on humility, simplicity, prayer, and especially their motto, “Caritas”, was to influence the spirituality that Nicolas Barré later offered the ‘charitable teachers’, the first Infant Jesus Sisters.

Nicolas joined the Minims in Amiens when he was 19 years old and made his final profession in 1642. He was sent to Paris in 1643. While still a deacon he was asked to teach philosophy, and after his ordination he became a theology teacher while continuing his work as a preacher and confessor. He was also appointed director of a famous library at the Minim house in Place Royale, Paris, where he was to come into contact with many learned and famous people of his time.

After some years living this demanding religious and pastoral life, during which Nicolas witnessed the appalling misery of the people of Paris, he himself fell ill and was sent by the friars first to Amiens, and then to Rouen, where he carried out his apostolate mainly with the Third Order of Minims. It was here that he met with Marguerite Lestocq and the other young women who were to join him later as the first teachers in the ‘little charitable schools’.

What then brought about this new development in Nicolas Barré’s ministry, which was to bear such long-lasting and wonderful fruit on five continents?

1.2 17th century France

“A light shone in the darkness....”

To understand the movement set in motion by Nicolas Barré and the women who collaborated with him, we need to look more closely at the conditions that prevailed in the France of his time (the middle of the 17th century).

The first half of that century had been a tragic period for France. A country that had just come through the Hundred Years’ War saw the outbreak of religious wars between Catholics and Huguenots that were marked by cruel massacres and intense sectarian hatred. On the international front, too, France was involved with ongoing wars that frequently meant the prolonged absence of men from their families, farms and businesses.

The economy was mostly agrarian. The land was concentrated largely in the hands of a few, who extorted tithes and rents from the peasant majority. In the 17th century, a number of bad harvests added to the misery, increasing the number of landless and jobless people. Many migrated to the cities, where their plight was aggravated. Malnutrition, disease and outbreaks of bubonic plague made this a dark age indeed for people who were poor, while massive inequalities existed in society. There was also strong resistance to change. The spiritual misery of the vast majority was just as acute. Priests were badly trained; people’s instruction in their faith was sadly neglected. Many, even the well educated, suffered from the influence of the pessimistic Jansenist heresy, which taught that God’s grace was given only to a few, depriving most people of all hope.

Yet all was not dark. The first half of the 17th century in France also produced an impressive number of scientists and philosophers, as well as religious figures such as Margaret Mary Alacoque, Jane Frances de Chantal, Francis de Sales, Louise de Marillac, Vincent de Paul, Pierre de Bérulle and John Eudes.

The Council of Trent had set in motion a period of intense religious and theological renewal. Religious orders such as the Carmelites were bringing to France the reform begun in other countries. There was a democratisation of spirituality. Lay people were being called to holiness by people such as Francis de Sales, who introduced a new form of ‘everyday mysticism’. A great number of young girls and married ladies became involved in charitable action during this time.

Some education was available for those who could afford it. Religious orders such as the Jesuits were providing good secondary education for boys, while religious women such as Mary Ward, the canonesses of St Augustine, and the Ursuline sisters were contributing to the education of girls.

However, these opportunities were limited. Most primary schools had been destroyed by war. Lack of funds meant that efforts made by the State and the parishes to provide primary education for poorer children were hopelessly inadequate. Even where schools were available, teachers were not well trained and had low social status. Parents were so busy trying to look after their families that they had little energy left to worry about education. As well as this, most children had to work to help supplement the family income, while education for girls was not considered important.

Such was the political and religious climate when Nicolas Barré was sent to Rouen in 1659. Here too the Minim monastery was close to where the poorer families lived. They were mostly men and women involved in seasonal, manual and unskilled work whose day-to-day life was harsh and precarious. Nicolas Barré could see that they were caught in a poverty trap that offered no way out. Many of the younger people were illiterate, and spent much of their time in untrained work or roaming the streets. Sometimes they went out to beg or even to steal in an effort to survive. They were the 'street children', the 'delinquents' of their time, who would have been locked up when they got into trouble. Nicolas was keenly aware of people's ignorance of their faith and sense of distance from God. He spent a number of years pondering and praying about this situation, often doing so with other people who were equally concerned.

1.3 A turning point: Rouen

"Some seeds fell on good soil and produced a rich harvest ..."

While Nicolas pondered and prayed, God was also working in the lives and hearts of other people and was preparing the ground to receive the small seed that was one day to become a mighty tree. It happened like this.

A mission, planned to last for an extended period of time, was held at Sotteville, a town about four kilometres from Rouen. At the time, a 'mission' meant that visiting priests would give a series of sermons, visit the families and hear confessions. It coincided with a time of great social problems. A failed harvest had brought hunger and disease and many children had died. As Nicolas went from house to house to invite the families to the mission he could see how the people were suffering. To enable the parents to attend, he decided to invite two young women from other nearby neighbourhoods to come and help with the children. He had already seen how dedicated and skilled they were at this task. One was Françoise Duval, aged 18, and the other was Marguerite Lestocq, aged 20, who was from Amiens and had family links with Nicolas Barré. The year was 1662.

For most of the year, they held classes for younger girls in a little room lent to them for that purpose. The classes were held morning and afternoon according to the families' circumstances. Several times a week Nicolas Barré would visit them at their work and help them with teaching methods. He taught them how to deal with children and their mothers.

Françoise and Marguerite loved their work and began to feel that they were becoming apostles helping to bring the children to God. The mission was bearing fruit and many adults had conversion experiences. The town was changing. Influential people like Mme de Grainville began to get involved, offering a room in her large house for the classes. Soon even that was insufficient and another venue was opened in rue des Carmélites. Other women soon joined Françoise and Marguerite.

The main purpose of 'the little schools' was to teach the children their prayers, to instruct them in their faith and to make known to them the love of God revealed in Jesus. They were also taught how to read, write and do simple mathematics. Nicolas Barré spoke of the value of "instruction and education", and from the beginning he trained the young teachers to respect each child's uniqueness and to develop each one's potential. The teachers were to speak in a humble, gentle and simple manner so that even the youngest could understand, and they were to teach only what they themselves had adequately grasped.

Gradually, the work of these five young women extended beyond the classrooms to the children's homes where they offered guidance to the parents. They sought out, in their own surroundings, older girls at risk or already in trouble. They taught women and young adults to pray from the heart, to reflect on the mysteries of faith and live in the presence of God. Nicolas Barre was very aware of the large number of people who seemed to have lost direction in life and had no knowledge of God. He became convinced that the root of the problem lay in the lack of human and religious education available to young people, especially girls.

1.4 Community life 1666

“No sooner said than done...”

When the schools had been running for about four years, Nicolas Barré shared with the young women “the strong urge and inspiration” he had been feeling for some time now: that if they were happy to do so, the women could live as a community in a spirit of total trust in God’s providential care.

Marguerite tells us how it happened: “He put the idea before us like this: ‘go and have dinner with your sisters who teach at the Carmelites and then invite them to come and have dinner with you at the Penitents, and see if you can live in union with one another’. We did what he asked, through obedience, but quite blindly, not understanding the mystery”.

No sooner said than done! It was a wonderfully human insight that was typical of Nicolas Barré’s wisdom and spirituality. He later explained the kind of life he was offering them and they accepted “wholeheartedly”. The first sister appointed to take charge of the group was Françoise Duval, to be succeeded in 1670 by Marguerite Lestocq. Madame de Buc, a laywoman, was named as the first administrator and took responsibility for the material administration of the community.

The spirituality that was to sustain the Institute through the centuries and the characteristics of the way the sisters would “instruct and educate” were already visible in this first group. Most striking was their total dependence on Divine Providence. As early as 1669, the first sisters signed an extraordinary document expressing their total trust “in the wise, loving, and all powerful Providence of God”, relying upon it uniquely and always for their maintenance and upkeep.

Nicolas Barré made the virtue of ‘abandonment’ the very foundation of the apostolic spirituality of these first charitable teachers. For them ‘abandonment’ was a strong, positive, active, all-embracing, integrating virtue of total trust in a loving God. It presupposed detachment, disinterestedness, not seeking any rewards for oneself, and a spirit of inner freedom in all areas of their life and work. Though Nicolas Barré was to give this community a simple rule, the women were not bound by any official vows; hence, they were free to move and to live close to the ordinary people, not confined by the cloister as religious women were at that time.

1.5 Paris: a formation house

“Like a pen in the hand of the writer...”

Nicolas Barré had to be ready to leave behind even this newly planted young shoot when he was called back to Place Royale, Paris, by the Minims in 1675. He was often heard to say that, like the Church itself, what threatened to destroy the Institute in fact made it stronger. So it was with the beginning of the Institute. Nicolas returned to Paris only to discover that the reputation of the movement had gone before him.

A powerful and illustrious lady, Marie de Lorraine, invited him to open schools at her expense. Ten schools were opened and later, at her request, a small hospital in Liesse.

As the number of schools grew so did the need for well-trained and well-instructed teachers. Nicolas Barré called Marie Hayer to Paris to be in charge of the community in a rented house in rue St Maur, now known as Maison Nicolas Barré, 12, rue de l’Abbé Grégoire. Marie had joined the Institute in 1676 and had already given proof of her ability and goodness. She is remembered now as the first superior general of the Institute.

Because they lived in this house in rue St Maur, our sisters became known as the ‘Dames de St Maur’. This house became a centre for their religious formation and professional training.

A map of Paris dated 1696 shows this building in rue St Maur, with many little schools dotted around the city. Trade schools had been added, in which the older girls could learn a trade and prepare to earn their own living.

Though teachers were still not appreciated or respected in France at that time, the work of these schools was being noticed and supported by some influential people. Through her connections with Marie de Lorraine, Mme de Maintenon brought ‘the little schools’ to the attention of King Louis XIV. Having experienced poverty in her own childhood, Mme de Maintenon had founded a school for the children of the nobility who had fallen on hard times, and for the many children orphaned by the wars of Louis XIV. She requested eight to 15 teachers from the Institute to help train her own teachers, les Dames de St Louis, in the academy of St Cyr.

This request was granted. The sisters went to St Cyr in August 1686 and stayed there until 1694. Then all of Nicolas Barré’s teachers, except one, returned to their own simple, apostolic lifestyle and the teaching of poorer children. This was a remarkable choice and showed that these women had indeed made the spirit of the young Institute their own.

In the meantime, for historical reasons, some of them were sent to the South of France to teach the Catholic faith to new converts from Protestantism. Certain characteristics of the young teachers were now well known and admired: their excellent educational methods; their love of people living in poverty; their ability to adapt; and, their flexibility in accommodating girls at the times most convenient for them. They were ready to travel long distances and work wherever they were called, often living away from the community for a long time. They were equally willing to leave a particular region or school when called elsewhere or no longer needed. They were not preoccupied about money or property, trusting in Divine Providence for all their needs. The flexibility of the Institute made it a wonder among women's congregations. A letter written at the time by the superior of the seminary in Bourges called the Institute "a final work of grace in our time".

1.6 A new development: Rouen and Paris go their separate ways

Nicolas Barré had always insisted that the Institute should not accept "endowments", a form of monetary patronage that would guarantee its financial security. Some of the Institute's lay administrators thought this unrealistic and unwise. Until his death, Nicolas Barré resisted any compromise that could restrain the group's freedom to be true to the founding spirit. Eventually, in 1691, this led to a division between the communities of Rouen and those of Paris.

These two branches of the Institute were to develop separately: the Infant Jesus Sisters – Providence of Rouen, became a diocesan institute with a missionary outreach in Madagascar and Central Africa, and the Infant Jesus Sisters (Paris-based) became an institute of pontifical right with communities in five continents.

1.7 Death of Nicolas Barré – 1686

Nicolas Barré's health, never too robust, was deteriorating, and in May 1686 he was confined to the infirmary in his Minim community. He continued to see people who came to visit him and even dealt with the concerns of the Institute. He put the future in God's hands and prepared for death. This came at about 10.30am on May 31, 1686. Many people mourned his passing, spreading the news: "The holy Minim is dead, the holy Minim is dead".

This holiness was recognised by the Church 300 years later when, at his beatification in Rome on March 7, 1999, Pope John Paul II said of him:

"Nicolas Barré tirelessly sought to lead both the people he directed and the charitable teachers to the prayer of the heart, inspired by contemplation of the inexpressible mystery of God, who out of love became a human being and even a little child. Nicolas Barré, the spiritual master, was both an apostle and a mystic".

1.8 The Institute during the French Revolution

The Institute continued to grow and was still flourishing in at least 96 villages and small towns in France at the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.

Mother Marie Dorothee Adelbert was leading the Institute when the Revolution began. For a time she was able to protect the sisters and their way of life, insisting that the decrees concerning religious congregations and their property did not apply to us. We were a group of committed women, living according to the spirit of the evangelical counsels but without official vows.

Finally, however, in 1792, all religious associations were suppressed and, in 1793, the commissaries stormed the Mother House in rue St Maur, Paris, confiscating what they wanted. The sisters had to leave, taking only the Blessed Sacrament. From then on the Institute lived through a very difficult period. The sisters were dispersed, some going back to their families, others going to live in other regions of France. Mother Adelbert first took refuge in Paris and later returned to her own village.

Even when the Mother House was officially suppressed, the Institute kept its vitality. Through her correspondence, Mother Adelbert kept an underground link with as many sisters as possible, always encouraging them to continue where they could. The period of 'The Terror' lasted from June 1793 to July 1794. We know that some sisters were imprisoned but we do not know the fate of many as most records were destroyed. Many continued with their apostolate as far as prudence and circumstances would allow. Some were offered asylum by families, where they instructed the children.

Driven from one place they took up their ministry elsewhere, often working secretly and in secular dress, sometimes gathering unofficially here and there in small groups.

The Revolution ended with the coming of Napoleon, who signed an agreement with Pope Pius VII to re-establish the rights of the Church. Mother Adelbert made the most of this good will to have the Institute officially recognised. Soon after the publication of the 'Concordat' she had the idea of gathering all the members of the Institute. On May 9, 1805, she wrote a circular letter to all the sisters she had managed to keep contact with, inviting them back to the Mother House. She was already 78 years old and suffering from a painful illness. It fell to Sr Paul Coulon, her assistant, to do all the necessary travelling and organising. This must have been a difficult task as only three sisters remained in Paris at the time.

In April 1806 the sisters met in Paris and the seven elder sisters renewed their promises:

"Here I am, Lord, I dedicate myself to instruct young girls who are poor and form them in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ ... I dedicate myself with all my heart to serve and help my neighbour aided by the grace and help your divine goodness will give me..."

In March 1807 the sisters returned to the Mother House. Mother Henriette de Fumel was elected as the new superior general and led the Institute for 12 years. The Institute was granted legal recognition by the government in 1806. A statue of Our Lady, given to the Institute by Napoleon's mother, Madame Laetitia Bonaparte, can still be seen in the garden of Maison Nicolas Barré in Paris. It was a sign of her interest and encouragement and is a constant reminder to us of that difficult and heroic period of our history.

The Institute in France emerged from the ordeal of the Revolution diminished yet revitalised by its sufferings and ready to carry on its work of education in the faith. One expression of this was a call that came from Monaco in the south east of the country when Prince Charles III, having been impressed by the mission of our sisters in Liesse, invited them to run a hospice and kindergarten in the principality. In 1862 four sisters were sent on a temporary basis. The mission soon developed, with schools offering education at different levels, and our presence there was to last 145 years. Less than 50 years after the Revolution the Institute was ready to hear a totally new call from God. The invitation was to dare to be messengers of the Good News to another continent. The sisters answered positively with the same freedom, courage, and love that had characterised the Institute from the start. So began the historic development of the Institute in other countries and a new chapter in our story.

However, while the Institute was experiencing new growth in faraway lands, another ordeal awaited it in France, at the beginning of the 20th century. It came in the form of the 1904 Secularisation Laws, which threatened the very existence of Christian education.

While the government did not suppress the Institute, schools had to conform to the law. The sisters responded to the signs of the times and transformed some boarding schools into retirement homes. They were also responsible for a small rural hospital in St Antoin. The superior general at that time, Mother Henri, went to seek the advice of Pope Pius X. The holy pontiff's reply is preserved in the archives and can still speak to us today in similar difficult situations:

"If in the present painful circumstances, the French Government goes so far as to forbid the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus to teach, the Mother General can allow them to leave off their religious dress as long as they continue teaching. Yes, the apostolic works must be safeguarded and God will reward whatever sacrifice is entailed. Leave that which is not absolutely necessary, in order to save what is essential... 'it is not the habit which makes the monk', and if the whole rule cannot be kept... be faithful to its spirit".

As during the Revolution of 1789, the sisters showed great imagination in finding ways to continue their mission: letting go of the habit, wearing secular clothes, dropping religious names, and so on. In spite of their adaptability, 18 houses of the Institute were closed. Even with these difficulties, the Institute had the generosity and courage to open houses in other parts of the world. Little by little the tensions abated until the Institute had to navigate the next storm: the First World War, 1914-1918.

Part 2 Missionary Expansion

“Go out into the whole world ...”

So far, the story of our Institute has been the story of our sisters in France. For almost 200 years the Institute grew and consolidated its work and its spirit on French soil where it had been planted. While the Institute continued to grow and carry on its ministry there, the mid 19th century saw the beginning of its expansion outside France. The seed that would one day reach the five continents of the globe was being scattered.

In a record of our story in France, written about 30 years after the foundation of the Institute, a historian marvels at the number of young women of our Institute who committed themselves totally, with love and simplicity and without vows, to instructing people in their faith: “It is nothing short of miraculous! Who would not be amazed to see the greatness of spirit with which they undertake long, tiring and sometimes even dangerous journeys in order to go and live in remote places, sometimes even as far away as the New World”. We find only one other reference to this journey to “remote places”: in a 1691 document. There it is said that some sisters may have gone on mission “to the New World”, i.e., to Canada, in Nicolas Barré’s lifetime, but unfortunately no further record exists. It is inspiring to know that Nicolas Barré’s vision of making Jesus known and loved was not confined to his own land. We know also that during the reign of Louis XIV of France there was a request for sisters to go to Siam (Thailand), and that some of our sisters were happy to be sent there. However, the King of France did not think it proper for women to make that long and dangerous journey at the time, so our first recorded community outside France was not to be in Siam (Thailand) but in Malaya (Malaysia) two centuries later.

2.1 Malaya – 1852 (name changed to Malaysia in 1957)

In 1851 the following appeal came to our sisters from Mgr Boucho, the Apostolic Vicar to Malaya: “We must have schools if we want to bring Christianity to this country. We need teachers, can you give them to us?”

Having prayed and reflected, full of pioneering spirit and trust in Divine Providence, the superior general at the time, Mother de Faudoas, and her council, considered the totally new possibility of sending sisters on mission outside France, indeed outside Europe. They made the daring decision to respond to the request and to send five sisters to Malaya.

So, on December 6, 1851, five brave women set out on La Julie for the long sea voyage into the unknown, together with two newly ordained priests of the French Foreign Mission and four De La Salle brothers. Our first missionaries to another continent were Mother Pauline Radot, Sr Pulchérie Bath, Sr Eudoxie Claerbout, Sr Euthyme Panot and Sr Rosalie Flammarion.

This difficult sea journey around the Cape of Good Hope took four long months and we can imagine the conditions and the dangers they endured during those endless days and nights on this perilous voyage. We know that La Julie was nearly shipwrecked in the Channel a few days after its departure and that the sisters were seasick for a whole month afterwards. We know too that, in spite of seasickness and treacherous conditions, they concentrated on learning English and Malay.

Their trials were not limited to rough seas and harsh conditions. One of them, Sr Euthyme, had a serious accident when a pulley fell on her head. Shortly afterwards, Mother Pauline, the leader of the courageous little group of five, fell ill and died on March 13, 1852. She was buried at sea near Christmas Island. The young Sr Pulchérie decided not to continue in the Institute. Later she worked with the sisters as a lay teacher in Malaya.

So it was that only three Infant Jesus Sisters, Eudoxie, Rosalie and Euthyme, who was already ill, finally reached Singapore on March 29, 1852. Their relief must have been enormous, but it was short lived. They were to have no time to rest. This was only a port of call, not their final destination. They set sail again for Penang, Malaya, on April 12, 1852. Conditions on this eight-day journey were even more hazardous and trying. They travelled on a small boat named the Edward Marguard, which was very cramped and uncomfortable. There was neither bed nor blanket, and the women slept on a mattress on the deck.

No sooner had they arrived in Penang than they set about opening a school for Catholic children. They shared their first home with 20 orphans more destitute than themselves.

Thus began, with enormous courage and generosity, the first mission of our Infant Jesus Sisters on foreign soil. Euthyme knew some English and she was put in charge of the mission. However, the long sea voyage, her accident, and especially the last eight days between Singapore and Penang, took their toll. Euthyme was already worn out. She developed brain fever, from which she never fully recovered. She gave of her best for eight years in spite of her suffering and died aged only 33. Eudoxie was just 23 years old and Rosalie some years older.

The sisters were inexperienced and faced enormous difficulties. The leader of their group had died, and there were many challenges in this land that was so strange to them. They had to get used to climate, and local food and customs. In spite of the tropical heat, they wore a heavy black habit. Though they were from France, they taught through the medium of English since Malaya was a British colony at this time. Moreover, Malay was the language spoken by the local people. They cared for the orphans as well as they could, despite the difficulties of their situation. They held out but obviously needed more help.

Once again, the Apostolic Vicar appealed to Mother de Faudoas and a second group of sisters was sent, this time by another route.

Mother Mathilde Raclot was appointed to take charge of this group, which included Sr Damien Dejean, Sr Apollinaire Testodive and Sr Gregory Connolly, who was still a novice. They set sail on the Bentick on September 18 by a shorter route, through the Mediterranean Sea, then crossing the desert from Cairo to Suez to reach the Red Sea. They arrived in Penang on October 28, 1852. To support themselves and their mission they ran fundraising events, and often worked late into the night doing embroidery work, which was sold to rich ladies in the town. It is difficult for us today to recapture the courage and daring of these pioneers who each in her own way faced an immense challenge with faith and perseverance.

On December 2, 1853, three more sisters, Mother Gaétan Gervais, Sr Patrice Devrière and Sr Léonard Gerbal set out to reinforce the group in Malaya.

The life and work of the Institute in Malaya over the next 200 years has been recorded in other places. Here we can simply echo the recognition, often publicly expressed, of the enormous contribution of the sisters and their lay collaborators to education in the country, to the care of the less privileged, and to the spread of the Good News up and down the peninsula. Through the schools, many people came in contact with the Gospel and felt called to the Christian faith. Others learned to respect and love it, and remained attached to their former teachers over the years. From Malaya the Institute spread rapidly to other countries, as we shall see.

We leave the story of the sisters in Malaya for a while as we follow developments in Singapore.

2.2 Singapore – 1854

Shortly after the arrival of the sisters in Malaya, they were also invited to Singapore. Mother Mathilde made a preliminary visit in September 1853 and there she met an American, Mr Cassette, who had befriended the sisters on their voyage to Penang. He it was who helped them to find and purchase Caldwell House, on Victoria Street. The sisters continued to use this building until the school relocated in 1983. It still stands today as part of the complex of buildings under conservation, and is a memorial to our first community in Singapore.

The final decision was made that a community of sisters would come to Singapore and on Sunday morning, February 5, 1854, Mother Mathilde and Sisters Apollinaire, Gregory, and Gaétan Gervais arrived from Malaya to a rapturous welcome. They were swept along in procession to a majestic High Mass followed by speeches of welcome. However, though the welcome was joyful and sincere, no one thought of offering them something to eat or drink! On their first day in Singapore they remained fasting all day until a kind parishioner brought them supper in the evening. Arriving at Caldwell House, they looked at the furniture they possessed and found one bed, two mats, two chairs and two stools to share between the four of them. There was only one saucepan to prepare tea, coffee and curry. There were no doors on the hinges. However, the sisters were not discouraged nor did they begin by looking for more rest, better food or a more comfortable house. They set to work at once. Within 10 days of their arrival they were able to open a home for abandoned children and a school for girls, later to be known locally as the 'town convent'.

They began by taking in 14 fee-paying students, nine boarders and 16 orphans. They experienced great poverty at the start, with no money to buy bread or rice. The language was strange and created many problems. In fact, the difficulties of the first years raised many doubts in Mother

Mathilde's mind about the viability of the mission. There was little support from the small Catholic community and others regarded their arrival as a calamity.

What gave them new heart was that, as time went by, they were given more and more opportunities to do the work they had come to do, educating children, helping poor people, nursing the sick, giving themselves to those in Singapore who needed them.

Slowly the sisters acquired a reputation for charity and graciousness. A contemporary account tells how everyone in need was welcomed at their door irrespective of faith or race, so that the government and the whole city of Singapore began to hold the sisters in high esteem. Their ministry developed and became clearer.

An important part of the sisters' work from the start was providing refuge and freedom for orphans and destitute children. The 'baby gate', later called the 'Gate of hope', marks the place where orphans and disabled or unwanted baby girls were left. The sisters welcomed them and provided food and care, giving them the possibility of a new life. The social conditions of the period were not favourable to people living in poverty. What was special was the important link forged between the school and the home, as the pupils visited the home daily and played with the babies. In that setting, a strong sense of social responsibility and a need to reach out to the less fortunate were cultivated among the students. This bond was to influence many lives in the future.

Looking back at the history of this foundation, we cannot but marvel at the courage of Mother Mathilde and her small band of sisters. They allowed no obstacle to divert them from their mission of providing an education for girls, and that at a period in Singapore's history when many parents were reluctant to give their children, and especially the girls, the chance to be educated. Because of their faith and trust, they forged ahead with generosity and energy, convinced of the intrinsic worth of each child as a unique person loved by God.

2.3 Spain – 1860

Let us return now to Europe where another 'first' is about to develop in the Institute, a first community in another European country.

During the Civil War that ravaged Spain from 1835 to 1841, many families sought asylum in France. Among them were Señora de Argila and her two daughters. They were welcomed in Béziers by the community there and the two girls became pupils in the boarding school. Later one of these girls, Teresa, joined the Institute and was professed as Sr Leocadie in Paris in 1845. She and her family constantly begged Mother de Fautoas to send sisters to Spain.

At first, it did not seem to be what God wanted for them. There were already other congregations in Spain, though these were enclosed religious.

Besides, the political climate was not favourable. Finally, towards the end of 1857, the persevering Señora de Argila went to consult the Curé of Ars. He encouraged her not to give up, saying that the Infant Jesus wanted a house of his Institute in Barcelona. He added: "This foundation will meet with contradictions as do all God's works but the Will of God will be made manifest". Mother de Fautoas could no longer resist and, in September 1860, Mother Aloysia Millet was sent to Barcelona to look into the possibility of opening a school. On her return she gave a positive report and the first group of sisters prepared to go to Spain. Sr Henri d'Andoque took charge of the new mission, together with three others, Sr Leocadie de Argila, Sr Maurice and Sr Luce. Accompanied by Mother de Fautoas and Sr Aloysia they arrived in Barcelona on December 12, 1860, at 8.00am.

Meanwhile Señora de Argila was busy arranging a meeting with the Archbishop, Monsignor Palau.

When the sisters arrived in St Anne's parish they were informed that a letter had been sent to France explaining that there were some difficulties about their coming to Spain. Had they received this news earlier they would not have made the journey. However, seeing the hand of Providence in this, the Bishop invited them to stay and open a school. Such are God's mysterious ways. In 1864 the sisters wanted to open another house in Zaragoza in answer to requests for a boarding school there. However, the Archbishop there requested to see the Constitutions approved by the Holy See. They had none!

We interrupt our story here to see how they dealt with this situation.

Approbation of the Institute by the Holy See – 1866

As Nicolas Barré, in the 17th century, had set up communities without vows and without cloister in order to free the first sisters to go among the people and teach, now, Mother de Fautoas saw the necessity of seeking papal approval for the Institute so that its mission could continue and spread. She set out for Rome, where she stayed from May 31 to December 13, 1866.

She did not achieve her goal without many difficulties. She was granted three audiences with Pius IX. Finally, on hearing that the Institute had remained faithful to its original spirit and inspiration without vows or cloister, the Holy Father granted the approbation saying: “An Institute that has stood on its own feet for 200 years deserves something better than a laudatory approval... and you shall have it”.

On November 21, 1866, Mother de Fautoas received the Apostolic Brief definitively approving the Institute. By this brief, vows were permitted to those already in the Institute and became the norm for those who joined from then on. This involved the revision of the Constitutions based on directives from Rome. The new Constitutions were approved on June 29, 1872, ad experimentum, and finally approved in 1887. Mother de Fautoas presented the new Constitutions to the Institute, saying: “It is the Love of God, which for two centuries took the place of vows for us. Today, may it also be the Love of God that helps us to put into practice what we have solemnly promised”. The superiors who were present at the Chapter in Paris on December 3, 1872, professed the first perpetual vows in the Institute.

The way was clear for the Institute to carry on its mission in Spain. Providing this seemingly simple requirement was to have far-reaching effects on the whole Institute. It gradually led to a more conventual form of life, such as was common to women religious at the time. However, the spirit lived on, as we shall see.

The sisters continued their mission with the same daring and love, answering the call of God and responding to the needs of the times and places in which they lived.

One of these places was Japan.

2.4 Japan – 1872

We wind back the clock to August 1549, when St Francis Xavier, accompanied by an adventurous young Japanese man whom he had known in India, landed in Japan.

Amazingly, in the course of 27 short months he brought the gospel to thousands of Christians whom he called “the joy of his soul”. He left Japan in obedience to St Ignatius, who wanted him to go to India. After his departure, the Church continued to grow until 1597 when mistrust and suspicion led to a terrible persecution of Christians and finally the closure of Japan to all foreigners. In 1858 this ban was partially lifted and permission given to inhabit the waterfront towns. Immediately, the ardent French Foreign Missionary priests availed of this openness and settled in Yokohama and Nagasaki. They were still not allowed into the interior, or to speak to the Japanese people. They waited patiently and prayed. In 1860 Father Girard, who was in charge of the mission, called to visit our sisters in Singapore on his way to and from France. He spoke of his great desire to welcome them to Japan when the night of persecution was over. Finally on March 17, 1865, a few Japanese Christians secretly informed one of the missionaries, Fr Petitjean, of the existence of many descendents of the first Christians who had kept their faith, with no church, priest or sacrament to support them. They numbered more than 25,000! Sadly, another wave of persecution broke out, which lasted several years before some religious freedom was finally granted and Fr Petitjean, now Apostolic Vicar to Japan, set about finding women religious who would come to Japan to undertake the work of education.

In Singapore, on the eve of Pentecost 1872, Mother Mathilde and her community were praying to the Holy Spirit. As they were about to go into church a letter arrived in unfamiliar handwriting. It was from Fr Petitjean. He was appealing for sisters to come and teach in Japan. Not only that, he wanted them to set out immediately! He requested a reply by telegram announcing that they were ready to sail on the next naval package boat!

Fortunately, it was also possible by 1872 to send a telegram to the superior general in Paris, and by eight o'clock the following morning to receive the return telegram from Mother de Fautoas giving her permission and her blessing for the departure to Japan! Ten days later five sisters set out

on the Peiko. They were the four new missionaries to Japan: Sr Gregory Connolly, Sr Gélase Crespín, Sr Ferdinand Constantin and Sr Norbert Levesque, who was in charge of the group. Mother Mathilde Raclot accompanied them on the journey to help them settle in.

The voyage from Singapore to Hong Kong was uneventful, the weather good, and the sea calm, but when they transferred to a smaller boat, Le Volga, and were on the last stage of their journey, the little boat was tossed about in a terrible typhoon. It was advancing slowly towards the coast of China! No doubt the sisters felt that this was to be the end but finally the storm subsided and the boat sailed into Yokohama on June 28, 1872.

As we would expect, the first years in Japan were difficult. The sisters had no idea of the language. To begin with they had neither grammar book nor dictionary, until eventually Mother Mathilde managed to find textbooks in English and Japanese and their initiation into the language began. When the sisters entered Japan in 1872 the country was undergoing profound social changes and turning its eyes to the West. Many influential ladies of high society were happy to avail of the presence of the sisters to learn French or English, or to familiarise themselves with European culture.

So began friendships that, in turn, enabled the sisters to study the language, gradually learn about the wonderful culture and customs of Japan, and to build trust.

However, a heavy cross marked the beginning of their mission. Sr Ferdinand Constantin, the youngest member of the community, became seriously ill and died on October 23, 1872, four months after her arrival in Japan. Mother Mathilde had to go to Singapore with Sr Gregory Connolly, who had also become seriously ill. They both returned to Japan in November 1873 accompanied by three more missionaries from France.

In due course, some Europeans and Americans who had settled in Japan got to know the sisters and confided their daughters to their care. It was a start and an international school was opened in Yokohama, followed by an orphanage for Japanese children.

The sisters' dream was to have a school that would provide Japanese children with a Japanese education on a par with state schools. In March 1873, the decrees relating to religious persecution in Japan were withdrawn. In this new climate young Japanese girls began to come to the sisters for education.

Mother Thérèse Hennecart pioneered this work. She devoted herself tirelessly over the years, setting up well-equipped primary and secondary schools with well-chosen Japanese teachers working side by side with the sisters.

A novitiate opened in Japan in 1921 and the number of Japanese sisters gradually increased.

Many stories of heroism could be told about the lives of our sisters in Japan, including the long night of the Second World War and the tragic disaster of the earthquake in 1923 that claimed the lives of 16 boarders (12 Japanese and four non-Japanese), as well as 10 sisters.

Now, we have to leave the wonderful story of our Institute in Japan for a while and return to Singapore, where another big development was taking place. It led to one of the saddest but most heroic chapters of our history: the story of our beginnings in Thailand.

2.5 Thailand (Siam) – 1885 – 1907, 1957

Three attempts to settle in Thailand are recorded in the Institute's history. The first dates back to the 17th century when, as we said, an expedition from King Louis XIV of France to the King of Siam was to include a group of Infant Jesus Sisters. This expedition was called off. The next account of a mission to Thailand appears in 1884. Monsignor Vey, Apostolic Vicar to Siam, wrote to the Bishop of Singapore requesting that some Infant Jesus Sisters be sent to Siam.

He wanted them to set up schools there. His request was granted and so, on July 22, 1885, a group of sisters left Singapore and arrived in Bangkok at midnight on July 25. When they opened their school in September they had only 16 pupils, since many parents who had never seen religious naturally wanted to see for themselves who these women were before entrusting their children to them. Soon the mission began to make progress but it lasted only until 1907. Outbreaks of cholera brought a period of great suffering. The sisters saw their numbers decreasing until finally it was clear that they could no longer continue. On February 11, 1907, they withdrew from their mission, heartbroken. They left their house in perfect order and even prepared the evening meal for the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres who came to take their place. They left behind them in Thailand the bodies of five Infant Jesus Sisters aged 26 to 38, buried side by side in a single grave. However, that was not the end of the story. God was watching over this mission with a special love and kept love for the

country and its people alive in the Institute. Half a century later, the Institute retraced its steps. The sisters who returned from Siam to Malaya in 1907 had founded a new community in Ipoh and it was from this community, 50 years later, that Mother Charles and five other sisters once again made the journey to Bangkok. On February 16, 1957, at 1.30pm, the Infant Jesus Sisters arrived at the Hualampong Station. They were welcomed by the bishop and priests of the diocese, by some past pupils of our school in Penang and by a large number of friends.

The mission, which had been so tragically interrupted, began to grow, and young Thai women gradually joined the Institute.

In the meantime, in Malaya, the signs of the times were again pointing the Institute towards a new outreach.

2.6 England – 1892

It is 1892 and the Institute in Malaya and Singapore has been growing. Surprisingly, we know that side-by-side with the other European missionaries, 67 English-speaking sisters were already on mission there: 23 from the UK and 44 from Ireland. How did these women get to know of our Institute? Some would have gone to study in France as was common at the time. Others heard the call through family contacts or French missionary priests who came to England seeking help for the mission abroad. Their stories would make fascinating reading. No doubt they influenced another remarkable woman, Mother Gaétan Gervais, who was then in charge in Singapore.

She was convinced that more English-speaking sisters were needed to ensure the continuity of the mission in Malaya, which was then a British colony. She decided that the best thing to do was to set up a community in England in the hope of attracting young women to the Institute. In spite of poor health she set sail for Europe accompanied by Sr Augustine McSweeney, a native of Cork, Ireland. They arrived in London on June 9, 1892. Their faith and absolute dependence on Divine Providence was amazing.

They had no knowledge of London and no resources. There was no one there to welcome them or help them settle in. So, passing through Victoria Station, they first checked into a hotel near Charing Cross. Sr McSweeney contacted a family acquaintance, a Mr Chadney, who sought them out and took them to his own home where his wife and daughter welcomed them.

Mother Gaétan, already very ill, stayed with them until she died there some weeks later.

Their first contacts with the archbishop and parish priests were not very promising. They had come with the hope of opening a boarding school, and of attracting and training English-speaking sisters for their schools in Malaya and Singapore. When they went to speak of their desire to Archbishop Vaughan of Westminster, he informed them that England had plenty of boarding schools, staffed by competent teachers! He did, however, hold out some hope. He invited them to visit a parish in Wood Green. There was no convent in that area so the parish priest reluctantly agreed to have them and directed them to the small town of Southgate. Of its 1,500 inhabitants, just one married couple and 10 other people were practising Catholics. A building was rented for three years and permission given to open a day school. Six sisters were sent from France to complete the community. They arrived during the month of August. The first Mass was celebrated in their house in Southgate on August 21, 1892. The following morning, news came that the intrepid missionary, Mother Gaétan, her mission accomplished, had died at 2.45am on August 22. Her body lies in a lonely plot in Kensal Green cemetery in London. The mission did not develop as hoped, so the sisters thought it better to move to Streatham, a town in another diocese.

The bishop of Southwark was approached for permission to open a boarding school and the sisters this time had a letter of recommendation from the cardinal in Paris.

Having waited two months for the reply, they were disappointed to learn that they could not be accepted at Streatham. However, true to their missionary spirit, they did not give up. They were encouraged by the vicar general to request permission to open a day school. This they did.

Sadly, a month later they received another negative answer. It was not possible to open a day school because none of the sisters was qualified to teach in England! Another door closed. Then, surprisingly, hope came in December 1893.

Another religious congregation was leaving its mission in Camberwell and the clergy invited the Infant Jesus Sisters to replace them in the school.

Here, it seemed, was a viable mission at last. It did not work out that way; they stayed there for just five years. Then, in answer to another call, the sisters moved again, this time to settle, finally, in Weybridge. This last move came about through their parish priest in Camberwell, Fr McGrath, who

moved to a parish in Weybridge. There was no Catholic school there so, having recognised the sisters' valuable work in education in his previous parish, he invited them to come and open a school. They came in October 1898 and remained for almost 100 years, carrying out a fruitful apostolate in the school and neighbouring districts. There was, however, another difficult chapter in the story of this pioneering community. In 1904, Bishop Edward Ilsley of Birmingham invited the sisters to replace a congregation that was withdrawing from their mission in the town of Wolverhampton. A group of sisters went to live first in Waterloo Road and later in Merridale Road. They took over the school but government regulations made it increasingly difficult. The school needed extensive renovation and competent, qualified teachers, both a heavy drain on the resources of the Weybridge community. The Catholic school was placed on a lower scheme of grants because it did not accept the conditions that would have made it non-denominational. Other problems followed. The Wolverhampton community sustained all kinds of hardships and privation, even lack of nourishment for the sisters. Finally, after six years, it was decided to close the school, and the sisters returned to Weybridge in 1912.

The Institute would come back again one day to Wolverhampton, as well as spreading to many other parts of the country.

The difficult beginnings in England led to the establishment of the school in Weybridge in 1898. However, the school did not provide the number of vocations that Mother Gaétan had dreamed of to help the mission in Malaya. This fact led the Institute to think of Ireland, where English was also spoken and from which some women, as we have seen, had already travelled and joined the Institute in Asia. We will return to that story. Meanwhile, political events in France were once again bringing about changes that led the sisters to open a community in another country.

2.7 Italy – 1906

Our story returns to 1902 and to Monaco, where some Italian girls had been welcomed as postulants to the Institute. Their parish priest in Italy felt that it would be better if a house could be opened in Italy where other young women could begin their formation. Several attempts were made to set up a boarding school in Italy with no success.

Then, in 1905, two priests from Bergamo came to visit the sisters in Monaco. They begged the superior, Sr Martin, to give up the idea of a boarding school and instead to open day schools for the poorer children. Convinced that the priests were right, she made the journey to France to speak to the superior general, Mother Henri Déruelle, and here, too, the response was positive. As always, the beginnings were hard.

The sisters' first visit to Cenate and Bergamo would have dampened the spirits of women less brave. There was no one to welcome them, no place for them to stay, it was raining and they missed the train! They returned to Monaco totally discouraged, thinking that a foundation in Italy was not God's will. In the meantime the priests continued to prepare a house for them. In early March 1906 Sr Martine returned to Cenate.

The house was ready but still the interview with the bishop of Bergamo was cold, the discussion vague and permission to set up a community was granted for only one year. Undaunted, on October 12, 1906, four sisters left Monaco for Italy. Once again, on arrival, they were to be disappointed. No one to welcome them at the station! Once again they set out in the pouring rain for the parish Church where, happily this time, the parish priest was waiting eagerly for them. Their official welcome on the following Sunday surpassed all expectations.

Men, women and children turned out; there was music and flowers and speeches of welcome. There were even fireworks to add the finishing touch. Quickly a kindergarten school was opened, with 60 children on the first day. The sisters gave themselves joyfully and wholeheartedly to their mission, which drew many people back to the Church. When the bishop came to visit the community the following spring, he was taken totally by surprise. He gave them his blessing and approval, and their ministry spread and flourished.

From the beginning, the Italian sisters were apostolic women. They were willing to announce the love of God to everyone in a simple way. Their way of being with the people won everyone's heart. As a result, many parish priests asked for their co-operation in running kindergartens and teaching catechism in their parishes. The people responded to their caring and affectionate presence among them with esteem and confidence, a real gift from God.

Within a few years several communities were opened in the province of Bergamo and others followed throughout the country.

2.8 Ireland – 1909

Our story now brings us to Ireland where, at the turn of the century, a new community was about to open. This foundation was different from many of our beginnings in other places. Its aim, like that of the mission to England, was primarily to foster vocations for the growing mission abroad.

In 1908 a number of exploratory visits were made to different parts of Ireland. A suitable place was finally found at Drishane, Co. Cork, through the family of an Irish sister living in Malaya. However, the local bishop was not very welcoming. He already had several congregations in his diocese, and a local congregation provided education for girls in the nearby town. Finally he agreed, on condition that the sisters would not accept any local pupils

and that they would provide employment for the local people! Our sisters agreed. Srs Anthony Coleman, Geneviève Rogues and Joseph McCarthy from the Weybridge community, accompanied by Mother M Delbecq, Superior General, had been staying in Cork and they moved into Drishane on March 30, 1909.

On May 19, Mother St Claire Bringeon came as the first leader of the community, and Sr Beatrice Foley, who had joined the Institute in Singapore, was appointed novice mistress.

In January 1911 the sisters opened a small boarding school with five pupils. They showed great ingenuity in setting up a sawmill, a brush factory and a knitting factory that gave employment to local men and women.

They had a farm that gave further employment, as well as helping to supply food and support the new school and community. Once again, we see how our Institute was ready and able to adapt and use every means available to carry on its mission. From the beginning there were close links between the sisters and the lay people, who worked side by side with them in many ways. This contact gave the community a welcoming, open attitude and influenced the sisters' relationships with lay people wherever they went.

The vision that a foundation in Ireland would be a source of vocations was amply rewarded. On October 7, 1909, a local sister, Sr Anthony Coleman, who had joined the Institute in France, made her final commitment in Drishane. From 1909 to 1948 as many as 179 sisters went on mission to Asia, 118 to England and a few to France. A large community remained to keep the home fire burning, providing education in a boarding school, a school of housecraft, a novitiate house and a base for the student sisters.

The uniqueness of this community was remarkable. No other house was founded in Ireland for many years; all hearts were set on "going afar" to share the Good News with others. For over half a century the sisters in Ireland concentrated their energy on supplying 'labourers for the harvest' in other countries, especially Malaya, Singapore, Japan, Thailand, California and Australia. Witnessing the entries into the novitiate and the sending out of the missionaries often left a deep impression on the boarders and inspired some to follow in their footsteps.

In 1935 a house was built in Ballyferriter, Co. Kerry. It was used as a holiday house by the sea for the Drishane community. Being an area where the Irish language was spoken, it also provided an opportunity for students to learn the language. In 1936 a small group of sisters went to live there and a knitting factory was opened to provide employment for local girls. Their families were very grateful, as many of these girls would otherwise have had to emigrate. When World War II broke out our sisters were unable to go abroad on mission and many of them went to Ballyferriter to study. They have happy memories of those days. Though the economic conditions were harsh and the majority of the people were poor, the magnificent scenery and the rich cultural heritage of the region more than compensated.

In 1951 a community was formed in Ballyferriter. This community lived close to the people, befriending and discreetly helping those in need, even helping, like all good neighbours, with farm work. A small group of children boarded with the community and went to school in the local village. The permanent community remained there until 1964, when the knitting factory was no longer needed. The house continues to be a much beloved venue for the sisters of the province for holidays, celebrations, retreats and workshops.

In the meantime, another foundation was made in Malahide, Co. Dublin, where both primary and secondary education was provided.

2.9 Belgium – 1910 – 1983

In 1904, the laws in France forbade religious congregations to teach. Several of our own boarding schools had to close. The sisters, seeing the way things were developing, turned their eyes to other countries where they would be free to carry on the mission so dear to them. The leadership at the time went to nearby Belgium, feeling that there they would be offered hospitality. They visited many dioceses and finally decided on the diocese of Tournai, which was close to the border with France. They were welcomed on condition that only French girls would be accepted as pupils. A property with extensive grounds was purchased in Callenelle. On October 12, 1910, the school opened with about 30 French pupils, some coming from their schools in France. After the 1914-1918 war conditions for religious improved in France.

The school in Callenelle then continued as a technical school for a number of years. It closed in 1983 when the community returned to France.

2.10 China (Manchuria) – 1936 – 1946

Another inspiring chapter of our history was meanwhile being written in a vast country at the other side of the world, in China.

Christianity was first recorded in Chinese history when a Nestorian monk arrived in China in AD636. Christianity spread until it was banned in AD845. Then, when Archbishop John Montecorvino was on a diplomatic mission to the first emperor of the Yuan Dynasty (1206 – 1368), Christianity revived. The Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci and other missionaries further developed Christianity in China in the 16th century. At the turn of the 19th century, the Catholic Chinese population was estimated at 1.3 million, with 520 Chinese priests.

In 1936, 10 Infant Jesus Sisters arrived in Mukden (Sheynang today), Manchuria, which was under Japanese occupation at the time. In the group were sisters of six different nationalities – Japanese, Spanish, Italian, French, Polish and Irish – all of whom had been in Japan until that time. Mother Aidan Fitzgerald led the group. Letters attest to the zeal and courage of these missionaries and to the harmony that existed between them. This in itself was an indirect form of evangelisation.

The sisters began with a kindergarten school for 30 children, using a room in their house as a classroom. The school itself was also international with children from Russian, American, Filipino, Korean, Chinese and Japanese families who worked in the nearby consulates and factories. The winters were severe and the sisters recalled seeing the city garbage trucks in the morning taking away the bodies of those who had died during the night.

They tell of people dying of opium poisoning, and of dangers from smugglers, horse thieves and kidnappers. Still they continued and the school grew.

On December 8, 1941, the Second World War broke out. This was to change life radically for everybody. The kindergarten was closed and the children evacuated.

The community continued to live in Mukden through the war. They gathered some children for private lessons and visited the sick and needy. Several people, including German families, were given shelter in the convent.

Extracts from correspondence in our archives tell how they helped Japanese women and children, Nazis and Chinese people alike, in different circumstances. The sisters welcomed them all, though at great risk to their own lives. They extended help to imprisoned priests, many of whom remained forever grateful to them.

Even when the war ended, life in Mukden continued to be difficult and dangerous; in fact it was more so, as one army replaced another, money was scarce and diseases swept through the country. Typhoid suddenly claimed the lives of Mother Aidan Fitzgerald and Sr Emilio Farine. The health of the others was so ravaged by sickness and the hardships of the war that the community had to be closed in 1946. The seven sisters who survived were able to find passage on one of the repatriation boats prepared by the Americans for the Japanese prisoners of war. It was called The Liberty.

The desire to return to China remained alive in the Institute and contact was finally renewed in the early years of the 21st century.

2.11 California, USA – 1950 – 1989

The end of the war also brought changes on another continent that now enters our story. Prompted by the great need for education as US troops returned home after World War II, the Catholic bishops in the United States made a concerted effort to set up parish schools. They issued numerous invitations to the Institute to come to California. Seeking teachers for a new Catholic elementary school in Healdsburg in 1950, Archbishop Mitty of San Francisco finally sent Fr Mark Hurley to Ireland to meet Mother Anthony Coleman, a relative of his, who set the ball rolling.

In July 1950 two young Irish sisters, Sr Ann Crowley and Sr Helen Keane, nearing the end of their second novitiate year in Madrid, received a telegram from Mother Anthony Coleman telling them to be ready to depart for San Francisco in August! The first to arrive on American soil was Sr Marie Noel Scanlon from Japan. She was joined by Sr Thomas Aquinas Forde and Sr Ann Crowley from Ireland. Sr Helen Keane and Sr Regis Fitzgerald arrived shortly afterwards. Finally, Sr Fintan McAuliffe arrived in December, having travelled by boat to New York. She continued her journey to California on a train transporting US soldiers going to fight in the Korean War. She found these men extremely kind though she had been very frightened initially.

The six founding members were guests of the Ursuline sisters until their own house was ready. They quickly organised the opening of their first school at the end of September. It was only when they arrived that they discovered that the schools were to be coeducational. At that time, they only had permission to teach girls, so they telegraphed Mother Jean Desmet in Paris informing her of the dilemma. Her reply, typical of the flexible spirit of the Institute, was: "Follow the customs of the country". In the same spirit, the school also welcomed children who were not Catholic. Later, two other schools were opened in San Francisco, one in Colma and one in St Veronica's.

The sisters worked in partnership with the local people who maintained these Catholic schools with considerable self-sacrifice. They were also able to reach out and visit the housebound and the sick, and to help children with special needs. Many lasting friendships were formed with the people, who deeply appreciated the high standard of the education offered, which they regarded then as superior to the public school system.

By the 1980s, the sisters felt compelled to review their presence in this mission in California. They decided to place the schools in the competent hands of lay management.

Today the three schools continue to flourish, maintaining the original ethos promoted by the Infant Jesus Sisters. The sisters finally left California in 1989.

While some Americans had joined the Institute, most of them left during the challenging period after Vatican II. Sr Pat Armato, who remained, was faced with another challenging decision at this time. Wishing to be faithful to her commitment, she made a decision to join the province of England and Ireland. She now continues her ministry as a teacher in England.

In all, 31 sisters were involved in the mission in California. Sadly, Sr Oliver Moore died at a very young age and is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery in South San Francisco. Another, Sr Patricia Condon, went on mission to Peru and is fondly remembered there for her work with children with disabilities. She was killed in a car accident in 1986 and is buried in Lima, Peru.

2.12 Peru – 1967

Speaking of Lima brings us to the story of our presence in Peru. The early 1960s will be remembered as the years of the Second Vatican Council, with its huge impact on the life of the Church. It was also a period of new missionary outreach. Calls were being heard from the churches in Africa and South America. Spanish-speaking countries felt called to South America, since they already had a common language and felt a responsibility towards those who had entered their history 500 years earlier. In our own Institute, our Spanish sisters felt drawn to start a foundation on the continent and set about researching possibilities. Around this time a request came from a bishop in Panama. A congregation was withdrawing from a mission there and he wanted sisters to replace them. Before a decision was reached, however, another request came, this time from Cusco in Peru.

The archbishop there suggested that our sisters visit him on their way to Panama, though they had little hope of answering two needs at once.

Then, word came that the sisters we were to replace in Panama had decided to stay on. This left them free to think again about Cusco.

Srs Pilar Maynar and Rosario Brandoly flew into Lima on an exploratory visit on February 13, 1967. They broke their journey there and visited Fr Izuzquiza SJ, well known to the sisters in Spain. He took them to visit the shantytowns mushrooming around the city of Lima. One such place was Comas, to which the sisters came on mission three years later. On February 15 they reached Cusco, flying over the Andes on a four-engine plane where they were given oxygen by mouth! Having spent two weeks in Cusco, they were more and more convinced that Divine Providence was calling the Institute to this area of Peru. The 'scouts' returned to Spain with the good news and preparations began for our first foundation in South America. The first step was to choose five sisters who not only had a great desire to go to Peru but whose health would survive the rigours of the high altitude in the Andes.

Having undergone medical tests several sisters, sadly, had to give up their dream. The first group of three sisters – Encarna Perez, Gloria Coll, and Tere Vives – flew out from Madrid on May 27, 1967, and were later joined by two others.

Archbishop Durán's desire was to set up a Catholic university to ensure the Christian formation of youth. His hope was that the sisters would agree to take on this project. The sisters decided to begin by opening a hostel for university students in the city of Cusco. There was a great shortage of priests, and the sisters quickly got involved in pastoral work in Cusco and the surrounding villages. Later they moved out of the city and worked in a project initiated by the Jesuits, i.e., in one of their Fe y Alegría (Faith and Joy) schools in the poorer surrounding area. Then, in January 1970, they responded to a similar need in another Fe y Alegría school in Comas, Lima.

The philosophy of these schools, initiated by the Jesuits, was to involve all the people of poorer areas who wanted schools for their children. These schools always started in a very simple way and little by little were built up, with the aid of the parents. The curriculum focuses on preparing young people for life in a Christian context. In addition to intellectual studies, they also run workshops on carpentry, electricity, tailoring and secretarial skills. It was in such deprived areas that the 'cry of the poor' was taking on its deepest meaning. The Institute took root and soon young Peruvian women were drawn to become part of our growing Infant Jesus family.

Here we leave their story as we turn to follow our first steps on another continent.

2.13 Cameroon – 1968

In the 1960s the Institute was also listening to appeals for help coming from the Church in Africa. It was decided to answer a request from Cameroon. It was for a community of sisters for the vast region of M'Bam, where the diocese of Bafia was about to be set up. Mother Justin Deleuze and Mother Elisabeth Crapez travelled to meet Monsignor Loucheur and again the choice of location was wide open. It was agreed to choose Somo as our first foundation, even though three congregations had already tried and failed in this area owing to difficult conditions, isolation and lack of income.

An international group of five sisters was chosen for this first missionary journey to Africa – Sr Marguerite Marie Chiardia, Sr Paul Lamotte, Sr Claire Lesay, Sr Regina Casado and Sr Alphonse-Marie Loucheur. Sr Alphonse-Marie went ahead of the others to be present at the episcopal ordination of her brother. The others sailed from Marseille on April 20, 1968.

Their journey may not have been as long or as hazardous as that of the first sisters who had set out for Asia a century before, yet these women were facing another unknown continent. On their way they met many missionaries who welcomed them as they called to various ports. In the Congo they were shown the cemetery of the Spiritan Fathers whose young companions had died of yellow fever, malaria and other tropical diseases. A timely warning! On May 10, 1968, they were met at Doula by Father Neff and Father François, parish priest of Somo, and were warmly welcomed to 'La Procure', the house of hospitality for missionaries.

It was only a short break; the journey from Douala to Somo in those days took 16 hours on a dirt road. They set out in a convoy of two cars and a truck. However, the truck carrying many things needed for the house broke down and arrived five weeks later! The first car, driven by Père Neff, dropped one of the sisters off at Somo, where she was left standing alone, in total darkness, surrounded by the noises of the night in the tropical forest until the others arrived. The people had waited patiently and eagerly all day to welcome them but had finally given up and gone home. The sisters' first night in an empty building was a night of fear and uncertainty in a strange place.

However, with the daylight they were to experience the wonderful ecstatic African welcome that would become so familiar: flowers, singing, drums, dancing and gifts. Before long, the sisters were visiting the villages of their parish, which spread out in a radius of 45 kilometres. The new understanding of 'mission' explored in Vatican II was to be their light as they sought to listen deeply to the people, explore with them what their felt needs were and how they could work together. They began by reaching out to the local communities, supervising and animating the scattered mission schools. Visits to remote villages included first aid, visits to people's homes and liturgical gatherings, or Eucharistic celebrations when the priest could come.

Cameroon in 1968, like many other African states in the 1960s, was getting used to its independence.

Having spent some time living closely with the local communities, listening to them and observing how they lived, it became clear to the sisters that, if the country were to find its new identity and grow in all areas of development, this would depend largely on the evolution of the African women.

It is the African women who usually carry responsibility for food production for their families. They are the guardians of the water supply and transmit their values and traditions to their children. It became evident to the sisters that the best way to enable the people to help themselves was to set up a training centre where women could be trained as leaders and agents of change in their own communities. This centre opened in Somo, Diocese of Bafia, in 1972.

There, young women not only learned in theory how to work with their communities, but also had practical experience by going with the sisters to far away villages. They often stayed for a few days, sharing the people's lives, listening to their stories and in turn passing on to others what they were learning in the centre. Before long, it was clear that something needed to be done about healthcare. Some sisters trained as nurses and went to work in diocesan health centres. Soon other communities were opened responding to other needs in the diocese and, in 1974, the sisters were invited to the diocese of Yaoundé by Monsignor Jean Zoa to run a rural development centre there. Here, in the spirit of *Populorum Progressio*, the Gospel became the power enabling people to take responsibility for their own progress: "The work of development is done with the Gospel in hand, not taking the people's place, but believing that whatever is achieved is their own work and that they are capable of it".

The freedom 'to be with' and to adapt, so characteristic of our founding vision, endeared the sisters to the people over the years. Young Cameroonian women felt drawn to the Institute. They were attracted by the simplicity of manner, the freedom and courage, the desire to educate and empower, the love and faith they witnessed.

Some thought to themselves: 'I would like to do things for my own people in this way', and asked to join the Institute. They were our first African sisters. The missionary sisters, knowing that these young sisters would soon take on responsibility for their life and mission, included them from the start in reflection and discernment processes, so that both their formation and ministry were adapted to their culture.

2.14 Australia – 1969 – 1989

There was still one continent on which the Institute had not been planted. Mission to the Island Continent, which dates from 1969, came about in part due to the political situation in Malaysia at this time. The Institute turned its sights towards nearby Australia and a small group of Irish sisters set off on a new venture: two from Malaysia (Sr Vincent McSweeney and Sr Helen Hennessy); one from California (Sr Elizabeth Golden); and, two from Ireland (Sr Agnes O'Connor and Sr Elizabeth McWey). The Archbishop of Melbourne entrusted a little group of sisters with the management of an elementary school in the newly built-up suburb of Vermont. The school grew and the sisters' house became a meeting place for many people facing the usual difficulties of daily life and needing a listening heart. The sisters' attention was drawn to marginalised groups, such as migrants, who continually flowed into Melbourne at that time.

These people suffered the pain of uprooted people all over the world: difficulty with language, exploitation, prejudice, and lack of proper housing. Teaching migrant children in a parish school became a springboard to access to the hostels for displaced families that abounded in Melbourne. Later, Sr Françoise Gotte came from Malaysia to join the group in Melbourne and, though already elderly, dedicated herself to the marginalised and Aboriginal children in the area.

In September 1971, another group of sisters arrived. This was in response to a request from Archbishop Goody to open a hostel in Chadstone for Australian women studying in a nearby training college. Coming from country areas to study in the city was often a bewildering experience for these young women and the hostel became a home from home for them. This new mission also opened up the possibility for some of our Malaysian sisters to come for studies.

In the Kimberly diocese, North Western Australia, there was a reservation for Aborigines. The John of God sisters, who had run a school there, were about to retire.

Bishop John Jobst issued an appeal for help to the religious of Australia. Our sisters in Melbourne became aware of this and one of them went to explore the situation. As a result, in 1976 two sisters went to live among the Aboriginal people in Beagle Bay, in the remote north west of the continent. Their basic approach from the start was to promote the culture and empower the people. Two years later, another Aboriginal community in the region, Lombardina, requested similar help for their own people and two more sisters responded to this request. The Institute made a valuable contribution to these Aboriginal communities for 10 years, and in 1986 they handed the mission over to another congregation. The privilege and enrichment of those years remains precious to the Institute.

Meanwhile, the hostel and schools in Melbourne were well established and handed over to others. Once again, in 1980, it was time to move on. It was decided to cross to Western Australia, to live among the more needy people and to be 'closer' to our sisters in the North West, even though still at a distance of 2,000 miles! Bishop Quinn suggested that they move to Lockridge, Perth, a low-income housing area with many migrants and Aboriginal people. Here they were joined by a few more sisters from Ireland and Malaysia, and devoted themselves to education, parish work, counselling and marriage guidance.

The Australian mission was challenging, giving scope for the many gifts and talents the sisters brought. They were sustained by a strong sense of community and mutual support. In the 1970s and '80s, vocations to the religious life were diminishing in the developed world and Australian women were not coming forward to join us. Faced with this reality, it was regretfully decided to withdraw from our mission in Australia and the sisters returned to the England-Ireland province in February 1989. Shortly before they left, Sr Françoise Gotte died and is buried in Perth, Western Australia.

2.15 Nigeria – 1983

We have seen all through this story that our being in any particular place at any particular time comes about through a combination of circumstances: human friendships, answers to requests from local churches, or recognition of a particular need. We have seen how Divine Providence often arranges things in ways that seem strange and hard to understand at the time. The same is true of our first foundation in Yola, Nigeria, in 1983.

Our sisters in Cameroon had for many years felt a desire to connect with a neighbouring country. Requests were already reaching the Institute from Nigeria. It was decided to respond to a request from the bishop of Enugu, a highly populated area with a large Catholic population in the eastern part of Nigeria. Three sisters from Cameroon were asked to visit Enugu and make the preliminary contacts. On February 18, 1980, Marguerite Marie Chiaradia, Ana de Travy and Georgina Clarson set out for this unknown territory. However, because of difficulty of communication, they arrived in Enugu to discover that the Bishop was away and was not expected back before their visa would expire! Mysterious Providence! On the morning the sisters left Cameroon, just as they were about to leave the house, a letter had arrived asking them to visit the Bishop of Yola.

Yola was a young diocese in a mainly Muslim part of Northern Nigeria. So, now in Enugu, without a map and with just enough time to make the journey there and back, they decided to head for Yola. Bishop Sheehan, though totally surprised to see them, welcomed them enthusiastically. As a result the decision was finally made not to return to Enugu but to set up our first community in Yola Diocese, which at that time was only 40 years old.

It was also decided that the first group of sisters would be international. It included Srs Gloria Garcia from Spain, Jenny Fernandez from Malaysia, Ana de Travy (Spanish) from her mission in Cameroon and Kathleen Day from Ireland. In 1983, the community settled in the town of Jalingo and took its first steps of initiation into Nigerian life, having had an enthusiastic welcome from the local people.

Once again, they listened to the desires of the people, especially of the women and children, and gradually began to find ways of responding.

One of the Bishop's requests was that the sisters would prepare young women from the north for the religious life. People seemed particularly pleased to hear that we would be ready to welcome young women if they wished to join us. In that huge diocese, there were only 12 women religious from two other international congregations who had not been offering formation for new members at that time. From the beginning, welcoming Nigerian vocations was a priority for the Institute. The education and formation of these young women led to a house being opened in Yola where they could attend a diocesan school.

Other communities followed in Ganye and in Jos.

There we leave the story of this young foundation in Africa for now, to return to South America, where a similar expansion is taking place.

2.16 Bolivia – 1992

As our mission in Peru evolved it was the hope of the Institute to respond to needs in another country in South America. Providence finally led us to Bolivia.

Bolivia, in the heart of South America, is enriched by great cultural and ethnic diversity. The majority of the people are of indigenous descent so the Andean culture is more present here than in any other country of the continent.

Owing to its remoteness and high altitude, and despite its natural beauty and vast historical attractions, Bolivia was the least visited and one of the poorest and least developed countries in the region. The economy depended largely on mining exports and the international markets were unpredictable.

Bolivia produced great riches for its colonisers in the past, but the country was left with the crumbs, so that the people became very poor.

In 1992, having looked at various options for a community in Bolivia, it was finally decided to explore the possibility of working in the diocese of Potosi in the rural area of Azángaro, at an altitude of 4,000+ metres. The sisters came from Spain, Malaysia, Singapore and Italy and one sister from Peru, witnessing that the missionary spirit of the Institute had taken root in that young foundation. The first two sisters, Andrea Arnáiz (Spanish) and Elisa Moscoso (Peruvian) arrived on February 28, 1992. Teresia Mowe (Malaysian) and Joan Tay (Singaporean) arrived on April 1, 1992. Having travelled from Asia, their journey through Bolivia had to take place in stages, in order to adjust to the high altitudes. All received a rapturous welcome from the people and experienced the hospitality and culture of the land that was to become their home. The local women had arrived early in the morning to prepare the meal. The musicians and dancers soon followed, and the little church was full to capacity for the Mass being celebrated to welcome them. Afterwards, everyone joined in the feasting and dancing, typical of the life in Bolivia that was to become so familiar to our sisters.

The objective given by the bishop to the sisters was primarily to form basic Christian communities who would have their own local leaders. He encouraged them to create links of friendship and trust with the people, participating in their lives whenever possible. He encouraged them to evolve a way of living that would speak to the people of God whichever form their ministry might take.

Although the majority of the people were Catholic, they had received little instruction, and their faith expressed itself mostly through popular devotions.

The sisters set to work at once, with weekly mobile missions in the mountain villages, supervising little schools, providing pastoral work for youth and formation for the women.

Soon young Bolivian women were asking to join the community and welcoming them became an important part of the community life. Thus the Institute, strengthened in numbers and increasingly integrated into the culture, began to develop.

2.17 Polish sisters in the Institute

Our story would not be complete without at least a brief mention of some women from Poland who joined the Institute in France in the early 20th century and whose dreams of a community in their homeland remained unfulfilled. In 1921 a young Polish woman, who had come to France to study, decided to enter the novitiate in Paris.

She was convinced that the Institute could one day be implanted in her own country and went home to tell others about her dream.

Some 13 girls left Poland, came back with her to France and entered the novitiate. Others followed later with the desire of returning home one day to carry the mission of the Institute to Poland. Alas, it was not possible immediately, and when the Institute later requested permission from the Polish bishops it had to be refused because of the financial hardships being endured by the Polish church at that time under the Communist regime. The majority of these sisters remained in France all their lives, while some went as missionaries to Asia.

Part 3 The Institute today

Overview

So far, this brief history has touched on the origins of the Institute, its initial development – especially in France – and its expansion to other parts of the world. The story dwelt especially on the way the call to mission came to the Institute at each time and place, and on the courage and daring of the pioneers. The ground ploughed by these adventurous spirits became home to many more missionaries who joined them. Over the years, these fields were tilled and planted by equally brave local members of the Institute who bore the fatigue and the heat of the day. Sometimes they carried out their ministry in countries at war or under oppressive regimes, sometimes in danger from earthquakes, sickness or violence. Mostly, the sisters spent lives of devoted work and prayer, in hidden, humble service in the community and various apostolic services. Their names are written in heaven.

Throughout the three-and-a-half centuries of its life, the Institute has tried to remain faithful to the original inspiration of Nicolas Barré and the first sisters. In the process, there has been a constant call to adapt to changing times, new needs and different cultures, to gradual developments or sudden upheavals in society, and to ongoing challenges as they presented themselves.

So, how is the story of the Institute unfolding today as it moves into the 21st century? As it draws nearer to the people, how is it discovering with them new signs of the presence of the living God? How does it continue to adapt, with creativity and daring, to realities where the Mystery of the Incarnation continues to take place today?

We have seen that the second half of the twentieth century witnessed growth and expansion of the Institute to other continents. At the same time, it experienced radical diminishment, accompanied by the feelings of bewilderment and self-doubt that accompany death and loss. The majority of religious institutes and congregations share these experiences. The reasons for this sudden, historic shift are complex and are still not fully understood. At the same time, there is a strong belief that God's Providence is in all of this.

The second half of the 20th century was a time of enormous change, of technological advances and an explosion of knowledge. It will be remembered as the space age, the television age, the age of the computer, of growth in worldwide travel and instant communication.

Advances in science introduced a new understanding of the laws of the universe and a new cosmology. The 20th century brought the growth of globalisation, and mass movements of peoples. Vast advances were made in the medical field, prolonging life for some, while poverty and new diseases threatened millions of others. In the world at large, these were years of huge social change, of liberation and independence for some people and nations, of oppression and domination for others. In this climate, old certainties collapsed. Women were able to avail of education and took on new roles in society. Life commitment became less of an ideal, as personal experience and freedom became important and new opportunities opened up.

Within the church, the renewal brought about by the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965) had a major impact on our lives as Christians and as religious women. The call to renewal had dramatic effects. Suddenly, overnight it seemed, things changed. Unexpectedly, vocations to the

religious life on some continents began to dwindle and then dry up. Members of some religious communities left in large numbers. Constitutions had to be re-written.

Everything seemed to be in the melting pot. The Council reminded us of “the universal call to holiness” and of the nature of the Church as “the people of God”, giving lay people their rightful place and putting religious consecration in another perspective.

Yet, even though all seemed to be dying, there were already signs of new growth in the Institute. The sisters generously responded to new missionary calls from other continents. Members gradually began to imbibe the spirit of Vatican II, which invited us to rediscover our founding vision, become more deeply rooted in scripture, and offer responses appropriate to the signs of the time. The way of life for the Infant Jesus Sisters, based on this renewal, was formulated in a new Book of the Institute, which, after much hard work and many amendments, was finally approved on November 21, 1986. Gradually, the Institute has acquired a more international face and is being enriched by many diverse cultures. Our spirituality, flowing from the contemplation of the Incarnate God, is now greatly enriched by contact with other faiths, developments in communication, and the wisdom of the sciences. The sisters work less in their own projects and collaborate more closely with lay people and other organisations.

Symbolically, these changes in the Institute can be seen in the changes to the 300-year-old Mother House in rue de l'Abbé Gregoire, Paris. One visible change came about when a decision was taken to transfer the General Council offices from Paris to Rome in 1973. Some 26 years later, these offices moved again, this time to the south of England. While the main archives of the Institute remained in Paris, the 'Mother House' gradually took on a new role. It is now used as a conference centre known as Maison Nicolas Barré, and is under lay management.

What is happening in the other parts of the world where the sisters continue their mission today? How has change affected them and their ministry? Everywhere we still find the same spirit, now expressed in different cultures, in different ways, answering different needs. The many aspects of the face of God continue to be revealed, and the signs of the Kingdom continue to be seen in our own day, in our own ongoing story.

3.1 Bolivia

Since the Institute came to Bolivia in 1992 its mission has expanded. It is now present in Azangaro, Potosi and Sucre where, with faith and courage, it carries on its ministry. Wherever possible, it seeks to work in partnership with priests, religious and committed Christian lay people. One of the greatest joys and fruits of the work of the pioneers is that three young Bolivian women have expressed their desire to commit themselves unconditionally to Christ as Infant Jesus Sisters.

All of the sisters are motivated to search for creative responses to the harsh realities of life, based on solidarity and sharing, attitudes that are very much a part of the Bolivian culture.

Since the beginning, going to visit distant villages has been an important part of the sisters' ministry. Some 80% of the men work in the mines, while a high percentage of the women are engaged in small businesses. In these villages, the sisters support the different parish groups and take part in the local religious celebrations and festivities.

In Azangaro, situated along the way from Sucre to Potosi, the sisters' house serves as a place of meeting and prayer for people of the neighbouring villages, mainly farming communities. To date, 40 families have accepted to pray regularly, making their homes a centre of pardon and peace. The sisters visit their homes regularly and share faith and some skills with these marginalised families, who have little financial income or possibility of education, evangelisation or development.

These farmers own very little land and in some areas are greatly exploited. Many indigenous farming communities are now being organised to defend their rights and to look for solutions to the land problems. They are undergoing a process of defining the land limits that correspond to each farming community and putting title deeds in order.

Women in particular are even more marginalised by a lack of education and a male chauvinist culture. The sisters recognise the need to offer education and skills training to these women. In a spirit of solidarity, the sisters share 50% of the expenses involved in the production of clothing and artistic items. These are sold to subsidise family income. They also offer formation in human relationships and Christian values. These women, having received formation themselves, accompany other women, grouped in about 40 rural organisations, each with about 800 members. Some travel over 60km to the live-in workshops.

In Bolivia there are thousands of marginalised young people with no vocational future. About 100 years ago, an Italian Franciscan priest offered a remedy to this situation when he founded The Schools of Christ. Some of our sisters teach in these mountainside schools and some are also involved with the students of the Jesuit Fe y Alegria (Faith and Joy) schools. The young people who live in faraway villages are provided with board and lodging in hostels attached to the schools. This facility is a great encouragement to them to complete their secondary education. In addition to human and spiritual formation, horticulture and various forms of creative skills are encouraged. Scholarships and nutrition are provided for the most needy young people. In return, they help in the parish community and in institutions that offer an alternative education to needy children and adolescents.

The sisters are also involved in other forms of youth ministry, such as the Child and Adolescent Missionaries. This is an international movement in which thousands of children are helped to deepen their faith and relate to other children and to society in general. Since many of them come from disturbed homes, personal development workshops are organised for them. They learn to reflect on their reality in the hope of building up their self-esteem and learning to cope with the problems and challenges of daily living. The community in Cielo Pata, Potosi, welcomes and accompanies young people who want to continue their education in nearby colleges or who wish to live their Christian life for a while in a community setting. Others come to explore the possibility of a vocation to religious life. Meetings with parishioners involved in the pastoral ministry are held in the sisters' house and their small library is open to all who want to read or do research. Whatever the work or service rendered, the vision is always the formation of leaders for society.

With the help of a retired nurse, and through the St John of God school, the sisters minister to children and young people with special needs, encouraging their families, reflecting with them, accompanying them and their mothers when they go for medical attention, and providing them with wheelchairs and other facilities that make life easier for them and their families. These children, loving and lovable, full of joy and fun, teach the importance of a smile and a hug in daily life.

With great hope, the Infant Jesus Sisters now welcome their 'extended family'. It comprises 25 Bolivian lay people who wish to continue living and deepening their spirituality as Friends of the Infant Jesus. They have regular monthly meetings and seek to live out their commitment in their place of work or study. Some are involved directly with the sisters in the pastoral ministry.

Looking to the future, the sisters trust that the Spirit will continue to help them read the signs of the times and be ready to explore new ways of responding in faith in Bolivia.

3.2 Cameroon

Today in Cameroon there is a growing community of African Infant Jesus Sisters, following Christ, desiring to make Him known and loved, and enabling their own people to better their quality of life.

From the beginning of the mission there the sisters have worked both in rural areas and in towns, staying close to the people, participating in their festivities and their struggles, and working together with local chiefs and catechists. All their ministries focus on human and spiritual formation, in line with the founding vision of the Institute. They have always had a variety of ministries including teaching, nursing, the managing of dispensaries, promoting primary healthcare, prison visiting and attention to children with disabilities.

Some forms of ministry have changed over the years and new ones, such as a school for children who are deaf and dumb, have emerged. The training centre for girls in Somo has adapted to the country's needs and become a technical school. Sisters go into both state-run and Catholic schools to teach or catechise, or to help with the training of teachers.

For some years, the sisters had felt called to widen their horizon by moving into the English-speaking region of Cameroon. The opportunity to do so came in 2004 when they answered a request from Archbishop Paul Belzokov of Bamenda to come and work in the parish of Fundong in an isolated mountainous region. The archbishop and the people of Fundong had always dreamed of having sisters in the village so their welcome was ecstatic. Young and old turned out to greet them. They expressed their gratitude to the Lord for the gift of the sisters in their traditional way, coming a long way to meet them and going before them on the road, singing and dancing. The sisters began their mission holding in their hearts the touching experience of that first day. The mission soon experienced a heavy cross, with the unexpected death of one of its founding members, Sr Martine Batoumbi.

Today the sisters continue living in the village, exploring together with the people ways of responding to their needs and desires for the future.

Another development for the vice-province was the building of a healthcare centre in Yaoundé. The Ekounou neighbourhood of the town of Yaoundé is a deprived and densely populated area whose 30,000 or so inhabitants find it extremely difficult to access healthcare.

Many of those who live there are migrants or refugees. The sisters reflected with the people of the area on what the most urgent needs of this neighbourhood were. Healthcare emerged as a priority and it was decided to build a health centre. This health centre, which includes a maternity unit, opened its doors in December 2006 and the first baby was born there in January 2007. In 2008 triplet boys were safely delivered in the unit.

The sisters in the vice-province of Cameroon share in the distress, difficulties and struggles, not only of their country, but also of the African continent at this period of its history. They know that they are fragile earthen vessels but that they have a treasure to share and they desire to do so with the same courage, daring and generosity as the sisters who planted the first seeds of the Institute in Cameroonian soil in 1968.

3.3 England and Ireland

The stories of our Institute in England and in Ireland are closely linked, since within the Institute both countries come under one administration. During the 1960s and '70s a large number of sisters who had worked on mission abroad for many years recognised that the time had come to return home and pass on the baton to our local sisters. Although these were often painful transitions, entered into with great courage, those who returned brought with them new life and enthusiasm, and contributed greatly to the opening up of new forms of ministry in both England and Ireland, at a time when enormous changes were taking place in both church and society.

One of the first visible signs of change in religious life at this time was that the sisters began to diversify their ministry and live in smaller communities, leading to a very different lifestyle. Gradually, the almost monastic form of community life and prayer that was traditional in the larger houses gave way to a lifestyle more suited to 'apostolic institutes'. The emphasis on working more collaboratively with lay people and other religious called for greater flexibility.

Answering the call to ministry in areas of greater need sometimes meant that sisters no longer lived under the same roof. This led to a new understanding and experience of community living.

Apart from the fact that the number of sisters began to diminish, it was also clear that the days of running institutions ourselves were coming to an end. This led to the closing of Drishane convent and school in Cork in 1992, and St Maur's, Weybridge, England, in 1997.

England

While the number of sisters here is quite small, they are involved in diverse forms of ministry. These include: teaching in primary schools in the state sector; catechetical formation of children and adults; various aspects of parish work; collaboration with people of other faiths; school and college chaplaincy; accompanying people through bereavement counselling; visiting the housebound; and, other local ministries. Two centres for family and children focus on empowering local people to use their potential and to help themselves. Since these centres provide for refugees and asylum seekers, there is a strong multi-faith dimension and a focus on those most in need.

The centres liaise with a range of partner organisations and have a team of dedicated volunteers.

A pony centre offers therapy and developmental programmes where children with special needs integrate with able-bodied children and young people. Through the therapeutic value of riding and being with horses, children learn how to work with and relate to each other within a broad, supportive educational experience and in a safe, structured environment. The centre, which continues to expand, provides a valuable resource for people who, through financial, social or ethnic disadvantage, may not otherwise have access to such opportunities.

Ireland

Many of the sisters who served generously in mission over the years, abroad and in the home countries, are now resident in houses in Ireland, where they live their lives with dignity and a

continuing apostolic spirit. Their supportive presence and prayer is a source of strength for the more active members at home and abroad.

While the number involved in traditional education is now limited, some sisters continue to deploy their educational skills in other ministries: in adult literacy; in the formation and training of parish groups; in human development; and, in the teaching of language skills to the new ethnic and cultural groups recently arrived in the country. Pastoral care is provided through school chaplaincy; various forms of prayer groups; counselling and psychotherapy services; neighbourhood support; recreational clubs; and, the service of hospitality.

Aisling, meaning dream or vision, is the name given to a project for children set up in Ballymun, Dublin, which currently operates out of four centres. Such centres provide a safe haven where children can come after school to enjoy purposeful activities, and where their individual needs and abilities are addressed.

An objective evaluation of such a project at the end of 10 years revealed “better school attendance and progress in school, increased self confidence and sense of self worth, and improved social behaviour”.

In both countries, as care for our planet and sustainable living become a necessity, we too try to live and promote these values in our everyday life and work, as an expression of our belief in the sanctity of all creation and a witness to Christian values.

The call to serve on mission abroad is still heard. Despite diminishing personnel, a number of sisters still work full-time in the developing world or go, when requested, to offer their services for shorter periods.

3.4 France

If the sisters in France had hoped that the 20th century would bring peace and tranquillity, it was not to be.

The beginning of the century was marked in France by the separation of Church and State. The laws that followed forbade religious to teach. Some teaching religious congregations left the country. Our Institute tried, once again, to adapt to circumstances, giving up their religious dress and ‘secularising’. They continued to teach, although they often drew ridicule on themselves by their style of dress or, more seriously, risked being arrested. Yet, in spite of all their efforts, 18 schools were closed. Some boarding schools were transformed into homes for the elderly in the hope that some day they could re-open as schools. This never happened. Then came the two World Wars, with more suffering, dispersal and upheaval.

Again, the written records left by the sisters show their persevering zeal and a great dependence on God’s Providence.

In 1956, there were 1,589 sisters in the Institute.

The growing number of sisters and the gradual internationalisation of the Institute led to a decision to decentralise government by the creation of provinces. France itself was divided into five provinces, each with its own provincial leader and team. This was later reduced to two and finally, in 1971, to one. The transfer of the head office of the General Council to Rome in 1974 marked the end of an era for the Institute in France. Many welcomed this decision as a sign of growing internationality, and the French province became the elder sister among an increasing number of sister provinces.

The Institute in France experienced a great surge of renewal after Vatican II. The Vatican Council also invited Institutes with a common origin to unite as one Institute or to seek ways of coming together. This led us to a decision, at the 1969 General Chapter, to form a Federation between our own Institute and the Sisters of Providence of Rouen. These sisters were also founded by Nicolas Barré and had already separated as a diocesan congregation in the 17th century. While this Federation created links between our two Institutes, it is in France that it is lived out concretely, where regular meetings, formations courses and other projects are combined. The archives of the sisters in Rouen contain precious foundational documents that our Institute can draw on.

During the Revolution, most documents in Paris were destroyed or transferred to the National Archives in accordance with the new laws of the Republic. Many texts relating to our origins were translated and circulated in the Institute during the 1970s and ‘80s. This greatly facilitated the ‘return to the sources’ and the deepening of our spirituality.

In 1968, the State signed an agreement with the private education sector undertaking to pay all teachers provided that they had the same qualifications as those in the state schools.

Some sisters, who were excellent teachers but did not have a state recognised certificate, had to give up teaching. It was a period when hopes of keeping their schools were mingled with the

sufferings of those who had to abandon their ministry. In the 1960s also, France experienced an economic boom. It witnessed the student protests that eventually reached all levels of society. The students questioned authority, claimed better conditions and contested institutions. A wave of new ideas swept the country. The whole of society, family, traditions, education and the Church were deeply marked by it.

These challenges from society, the renewal requested by the Vatican Council, and the call of our chapters to include work for justice in our ministries, all led the sisters to a desire to live outside of the educational institutions so as to live closer to people. By 1969 two sisters were working full-time with a movement focused on the deprived areas on the outskirts of Paris. Others left teaching to become involved professionally with marginalised people in relevant areas, including workers in factories.

Changes of residence and of work brought about a change in lifestyle. Small communities were created. Those were years full of initiatives, debates and questions, but also of a great deal of suffering, tensions and often misunderstandings: Is teaching no longer of any value? Who are 'the poor'? Aren't there poor people everywhere? How can one live out the 'charism' working in a factory?

Commissions were set up to enable sisters working in the same reality or in the same social milieu to reflect together. The small communities, no longer united around a common apostolate, looked for ways to deepen their sense of belonging. New ways of making decisions and of sharing responsibility evolved. Relationships with the people changed as the sisters worked differently with lay people.

As the number of secondary schools, both public and private, increased and spread around the country, the need for boarding schools was no longer felt. As time went on the management of schools was handed over gradually to lay people, with the diocese taking overall responsibility. All this meant that the older sisters, as in the past, could no longer grow old in places where they had continued to render services, big and small, in the school. Many found themselves in retirement homes, which in turn were also handed over to lay management. The sisters who had worked in them, in their turn, became residents, sharing their living space with lay people in similar need. Here, too, as in the educational field, these changes, while demanding and difficult, were accepted with generosity, trust and detachment.

All these changes (brought about also by the fall in numbers joining the Institute), while sometimes sought or accepted due to life itself evolving, gave a new face to the province of France. Within half a century, it was totally transformed. Vocations to the apostolic religious life became rare. The ageing province questioned itself about its future.

Nevertheless seeds of life were germinating.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a new interest in Eastern Europe surfaced. Some sisters went to investigate the needs there. Thus began the French province's outreach to Romania. In France, lay people who wanted to get to know more about the sisters and what motivated them formed a group named the Nicolas Barré Network. Deepening their knowledge of Nicolas Barré's writings helps them in their task as educators or parents. They participate in some province meetings with the sisters. This dynamic network exists also in Romania, where their membership is mostly orthodox Christian. Aware of how lay people appreciate our spirituality, the sisters, in collaboration with the Federation, turned to the media, with some publications and the development of an Internet site. Picking up on the desire of young people today to offer some service in developing countries, programmes have been set up to help them to offer a response.

Following on the 2001 General Chapter, what has now become known as the Nicolas Barré Family was extended in response to the desire of a few women to give their lives to Christ, without at the same time becoming religious like us. The discernment process was entered into creatively in fidelity to the spirit of our origins. Could it be that this is a path being made in the walking? Will this new form of membership evolve in some way?

At the dawn of the 21st century in France, there are nine small communities in local neighbourhoods and five communities living in retirement homes with lay people. Some 11 sisters live alone, linked to a community or to the provincial team. The sisters, whatever their age, have lost none of their passion to work for the growth of each person, or their love for people in need. They express this through many different activities: helping young people with school homework; pastoral care; involvement in associations and movements for immigrants, including assisting people to procure their official documents; supporting women in distress; and, providing aid to developing countries. In the retirement homes, the sisters live more closely with lay people and are open to 'internationality' through their contact with the many immigrants who are employed in these homes.

The sisters in France today feel called, like those who went through turbulent times before them, to deepen the message left to them by Nicolas Barré: "The Institute as it develops will

encounter persecution, trouble and opposition. What appears to destroy it is precisely what will strengthen it. We need to trust the wisdom of God, place all our confidence in God... hoping against hope..." (FM 12, 13)

3.5 Italy

In the 1970s, at the invitation of Vatican Council II, sisters in Italy as elsewhere rediscovered the spirit of their origins with its reminder to focus their ministry on those most in need. In addition, the Italian Church questioned the presence of so many sisters in northern Italy, while southern Italy and the outskirts of many cities were neglected. Urged by these reflections, a new community opened in the south, in Calabria: Paola and later Lamezia Terme. The aim of this mission is pre-evangelisation and human development. It gives priority to youth, and to women whose husbands have emigrated. During the summer, for several years, missionary camps have been organised, focusing especially on the mountain zones such as Lamentino, which are secluded and forgotten. Many young people and students participate in this outreach. Living in their houses, working in the fields, playing and celebrating with them, enhances contact with the local people. In the evening, everybody gathers to share their experiences of the day and reflect on them in the light of the Gospel. These experiences foster in the young people a sense of solidarity and the capacity to give of themselves for others. The sisters witness gestures of real forgiveness, mutual help and care for the weak.

After the General Chapter of 1977, a greater openness to deprived people was again emphasised. Italy was becoming a country where refugees escaping from the war in Ethiopia and Eritrea were being welcomed. The diocese of Rome asked religious to welcome the great number of young people who were awaiting their departure to Canada. The Infant Jesus Sisters in Rome gladly offered hospitality to some of them. It was an enriching experience but one that went against the current of popular feeling. Many people did not understand the sisters' choice and protested against the presence of these refugees. A lot of education is needed before everybody can recognise that we are all sisters and brothers!

Two other communities were opened on the outskirts of Rome. The discreet and caring presence of the sisters among the local people became the nucleus of a new Christian community.

The sisters' own community lifestyle changed over the years as many moved to live in smaller houses. This encouraged greater unity among the sisters and facilitated closeness to the people among whom they lived. In this setting older sisters continue to be quiet witnesses to God and to hope. Today there is a growing desire to share our founding spirit with lay people, especially our collaborators. Younger people are particularly receptive to our spirit. In fact, influenced by the educational style that characterises the Infant Jesus Sisters, many of them reach out to other underprivileged children and young people in their milieu. The young continue to be the privileged focus of the Italian sisters' ministry. From among them new leaders are trained and a deeper spirituality is fostered.

Called by the Church to respond to new forms of poverty found in deprived areas, the sisters opened three new communities in Naples. In a globalised world such as ours the sisters saw the necessity of answering these calls in collaboration with other institutes, groups, movements and people of good will. One sister offered to journey with women 'on the street'.

The diocese of Bergamo opened a centre in response to the huge numbers of people arriving from South America. Two Infant Jesus Sisters participate in this supportive outreach, together with a priest who has returned from Bolivia and many other volunteers.

In 2005 two young women made a commitment as Infant Jesus Sisters. They are encouraged to develop and offer their particular gifts in response to those in greatest need. Each sister in the province seeks to live with the question: 'What does God desire from us in today's world?' One of the strongest lights shining in the heart of each one is the desire to be a woman of communion, tenderness, compassion and hope, and to make our environment a zone of peace.

3.6 Japan

The changes brought about in response to Vatican II directly affected the life and ministry of the sisters in Japan as in other countries. Japanese gradually became the language of the liturgy, of

community life and prayer. As elsewhere in the Institute there was a desire to return to the sources and to adapt to the modern world with its new needs.

Education was being understood in broader terms, and in the 1970s some sisters gradually moved into more deprived areas such as Kawasaki, an industrial area where Koreans, born in Japan, live and work. In downtown Tokyo sisters were involved in parish work in Adachi and Matsue, later moving to Kasai.

Today in Adachi they minister to migrant workers and families from the Philippines, Iran and other places. Increasing numbers of immigrants mean that it is difficult to provide education for all the children. Many do not or cannot go to school, so the sisters visit their homes with a lay teacher to offer them some help.

Some sisters live in ordinary Japanese houses or flats and share their lives and the Word of God with the people around them. Bigger communities of older sisters open their doors to welcome visitors and offer space and time for catechism, sharing the Word of God and life experience, or studying social issues. Some teach the Japanese language to foreign workers. Some retired sisters give instruction in the Catholic faith or bible classes for mothers, past pupils and others who request them. Quite a number of past pupils of our schools share their talents as volunteers.

The IJ Futaba schools continue to play an important role in education in the country. Sisters organise formation programmes for teachers from different faith backgrounds to enable them to continue the values of Christian education in the spirit given to us by Nicolas Barré. These programmes have been running since 1985. Seeing the changing needs of the society, some sisters reach out to people by giving retreats and courses, and offering counselling and personal accompaniment. The sisters are also involved in parish work, literacy programmes and listening to people's needs. Recently, a formation workshop for children with social and emotional difficulties has been set up. In helping them to become aware of their deep feelings the hope is that it may prevent some of the violence common among youth today. The children's mothers also participate in this programme.

In late 1980, two sisters were sent to Okinawa, one of the southern islands of Japan, where 75% of the land is still occupied by big American army bases. The people still carry their experience of the sad and brutal history of World War II, and its consequences for their lives. By their presence and ministry among them, the sisters seek to give support, offering personal development and faith education in various ways.

During the past 20 years, the sisters' interest in the mission in neighbouring countries – The Philippines, Northern Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar, East Timor and Cambodia – has been growing. Some sisters and teachers have had the opportunity to visit these countries to get to know the reality and support some of their projects. They hope that some concrete actions will emerge through these experiences.

3.7 Malaysia

The call to new forms of presence and service came to the sisters in Malaysia, as to the Institute in other parts of the world, in the 1960s and '70s. They answered with courage and generosity, often giving up beloved schools and community homes to respond to changing conditions and new needs.

In response to the call to return to our roots, some of the sisters, who were involved in formal education in their schools, moved on to non-formal education. This marked the beginning of the little 'learning centres' for poorer children. This move began as far back as 1979 when their kindergartens were closed so as to give priority to the materially poor in our society.

Over time, the sisters gradually became involved in various new collaborative ministries such as pastoral work in parishes and with non-governmental organisations. This includes working with people who have been abused, single mothers, and deprived children and young people. Some sisters work among the indigenous people, the 'Orang Aslis', and in community-building projects among economically deprived people in rural areas. This takes the form of non-formal education with children and young people, and human development with the mothers and young women. An important development in their ministry is their presence among the indigenous peoples in the villages in Sabah, East Malaysia.

Here, conditions are still difficult and people lack modern facilities like electricity and piped water. The sisters' efforts are bearing fruit as they work with the local people in community projects.

One such project involves training young women to teach their own children. Meanwhile, ministry continues with the orphaned women who have been with the sisters over the years and for

whom independent living has not been possible. In 1960, the superior general paid a visit to the Malay Governor, at his invitation. He quoted the Koran saying: "The door of heaven is opened for mothers who take care of their children", and added: "It is also opened for sisters who give maternal care to babies, orphans and their pupils". In a multiracial, multi-faith society the sisters are actively involved, where possible, in dialogue with other faiths. Living and mixing with different races and religions, the sisters try to identify the values they have in common, while at the same time recognising that each one has her own special gift to offer. Focusing on these positive values, they endeavour to counteract in some way the forces that seek to bring about division and fear in the lives of so many people today. In situations where this is not yet possible, the sisters continue to be patient, recognising the presence of the living God in the people to whom they are sent and in their common history.

With the growing awareness that new members of the Institute need to be open to new forms and broader areas of ministry, the sisters find themselves moving with the signs of the times, particularly in the structure of their initial formation programme. The younger members are now involved in more challenging services, among people who are deprived or marginalised in some way.

As the journey continues, the sisters take up challenges presented by today's rapidly changing world. There are many concerns calling for a response: caring for the earth as our common homeland so that there may be air, water and soil for future generations; raising awareness of the value and dignity of the human person; and, promoting values that enable people to live together in harmony, understanding, freedom and respect.

The sisters give thanks for all those who have travelled the road before them. Learning from their faith, wisdom and energy, they want to answer the call of God with the same spirit in their own time.

So let us plant seeds wherever we happen to be.
Let us reach out in faith to what is still unknown.
Let us unite to keep the dream alive: A world at peace, human beings and all creation in symphony.

3.8 Nigeria

When missionaries first went to Nigeria, they usually established schools for the purpose of evangelisation.

A few years after independence, the Nigerian government took over all the mission schools. They allowed schools solely for the purposes of training priests and Quaranic schools for Muslim children. For this reason the diocese of Yola was able to have its own 'secondary school' or minor seminary. When girls wished to enter religious life they were allowed to attend this diocesan school to complete their education. Agreement was reached with the bishop that some Infant Jesus Sisters would teach in this school in Yola. In the meantime the sisters in Jalingo and Ganye reached out to the youth in local secondary schools and villages. They provided literacy programmes and skills in small centres for women in those areas. From the beginning, all the sisters have been involved in catechetical and pastoral work.

In the late 1980s, the government re-opened the door to the establishment of Christian schools, recognising the quality of the education given by the missionaries. This allowed our sisters to work with the diocese in setting up small kindergarten schools, both in Ganye and Jalingo. With time these have grown into full primary schools under the sisters' management.

In the early 1990s the people in the Jalingo area suffered greatly from ethnic clashes and land disputes, which led to the destruction of property and facilities, including schools and hospitals. As a result many more girls grew up without education, which led to abuse, forced marriages, early pregnancy and exploitation.

During his pastoral visits, the Bishop of Jalingo became aware of the plight of these girls. He had seen the work already being done by the sisters, and having shared his vision with them, they decided to open a larger centre for young women in Jalingo. This is now flourishing, with a two-year programme for about 50 young women from the villages.

From the start, one of the pastoral concerns of the sisters was the plight of prisoners, many of whom were innocent and left without trial for 10 to 12 years in very harsh conditions. Over the years, some sisters visited the prisoners regularly, helping with medical problems, running prayer groups and even working with the prison authorities to provide basic facilities such as water. In some cases,

they organised legal teams who fought for justice for these prisoners. As the number of young Nigerian women called to join the Institute increased, the need was felt for a formation house in Jos.

Here they can join other young religious for courses while being involved in mission locally. The sisters are currently running a diocesan Catholic primary school in Jos. They instruct children and adults preparing for the sacraments and foster their spiritual life. They have been involved in setting up a number of small basic Christian communities. They also participate in local support groups for people living with HIV/AIDS, sickle cell anaemia and mental health problems.

The sisters today continue to respond to needs to the best of their ability, working in close collaboration with lay people and with other organisations. Their hope is to grow in numbers and in strength, and to continue to be an effective witness to the presence of God among the people.

3.9 Peru

Peru is a country rich in local culture and natural resources, where creativity finds expression in so many diverse ways. It is also a country whose extensive territory presents great difficulties in communication, especially because of the Andes Mountains and the mighty Amazon River. Even today, the people living in these areas are often abandoned and unaware of the reality being lived by other inhabitants of Peru. The education system does not respond to the needs of the people. The percentage of the budget allocated to basic services like health and education is still very low. The teachers are not well trained and good traditional values are being lost. This is worse in isolated areas where nobody supervises teachers' work. Spanish is the medium of instruction, and the peoples' own languages, such as Quechua and Aymara, and other languages native to the Amazon region, are neglected. In the more isolated areas, pupils have less than 500 hours of teaching annually and for this reason their standard of language and mathematics is the lowest in South America.

The same difficulties apply to agriculture in mountain areas, where production is only for family consumption. Farmers are unable to produce for the market because of difficult climate, lack of modern technology and transport, and also because little finance is assigned to them in the national budget. Little by little people are uprooted, as they migrate to the big cities creating great sprawling townships. They gradually lose their cultural values of sharing, group work and solidarity.

The Infant Jesus Sisters try to respond to some of these challenges, both in the Andes and in the barrios around Lima. Some sisters from abroad still work in Peru, while the Peruvian sisters gradually take on ministries and leadership roles. Some young women express the desire to commit themselves as members of the Institute. This is a slow process and the sisters give time to their education, training and accompaniment.

Aware of the importance of education, many of the sisters are teachers, giving their students a solid formation so that they can face the future with responsibility and can serve their country, especially in isolated places. As in other parts of the Institute today, working with others of similar vision is encouraged, such as with the *Fe y Alegría* (Faith and Joy) schools and projects set up by the Jesuits. These schools work closely with parents, who help to build and fund the schools and share responsibility for the children's education. The staff, both lay and religious, work as a team, with a common spirit that reaches beyond the walls of the school into the society.

The sisters' ministry also goes beyond the schools. Some work more directly with the most needy families, offering healthcare and support. Boarding accommodation is offered to young people. This is not just a place to live: it also provides a broad education in elementary skills like hygiene, cooking and housekeeping, while enabling the children to attend the nearby public secondary school managed by the sisters.

One sister, who is trained as a nurse, works full-time in health education in the community. From this base, she is able to support women with unwanted pregnancies and other difficulties.

A sister trained in agriculture has been working for many years with the farming communities. In recent years she has been working as part of a team of priests, religious and lay people to improve nutrition for families living in the mountain area. Because of high altitudes and hard frost it is normally impossible to produce fruit and vegetables in the mountainous regions. This leads to illness and weakening of peoples' immune systems. To counteract this, some greenhouses have been set up in rural schools.

Here the children are instructed in gardening, nutrition and cooking. From the schools the scheme reaches the families who also come on courses and learn to garden in their own family

greenhouses. In fact, the whole neighbourhood benefits, as surplus produce can be sold, given as gifts or exchanged for other things.

In 2006 some of the sisters moved to another area of the Andes to reach out to new culture groups living in isolation. At present they are taking time to get to know where the greater needs are. The Infant Jesus Sisters are a tiny nucleus in a vast country. They trust that God will add to their number and help them to be a light for their people.

3.10 Spain

The turning point in the story of the Spanish province stems from the impact of Vatican II on the Church. The sisters' lives and pastoral ministries took on a different focus from that time. However, initially no one could have imagined the extent of change that would take place.

In 1966, the first group of sisters who wished to follow the original inspiration of the Institute moved to a disadvantaged area in Buen Pastor, Barcelona, where they worked alongside the Marist Brothers. Here they desired to live out the spirit of the Institute in a different way, in what had previously been an unknown area for them. In 1970, another group moved to a similar area in Bellvitge, Barcelona. This area had a high percentage of immigrants, for whom many problems arose owing to difficulties in integration.

In 1974, in Madrid, some sisters left the school of Eduardo Dato and moved out to the margins in Vallecas, which at the time was one of the biggest shantytowns in Madrid. They sought to reach out to these people in whatever way they could. This also became the location for the novitiate, with the newer members beginning their formation in the midst of this reality.

The sisters who moved out of our own schools had to do some further studies to pass the state exams necessary to teach in government schools. They saw this as a means of offering a prophetic presence in the state sector, where they were very much with the local people.

At the same time, the older sisters, who had initially remained in our big schools, were invited to move out to more suitable accommodation. Some houses suitable for retirement were prepared. The more active sisters moved from the school buildings to places where they could be closer to people.

This proved to be a difficult transition for some as they sought to adapt to simpler living conditions in other environments. However, in a spirit of faith they accepted, realising that they were being invited to renew the giving of their lives to God, as they had been taught in their early days. Gradually they adjusted and soon it became quite natural to be among the people in parishes, involved in catechesis and other forms of evangelisation, including much pastoral work with young people. Two sisters worked in a school for gypsies in Barcelona, at a time when it was not possible for them to be in a regular school. Gradually our big communities were replaced by a number of smaller communities, which enabled greater sharing of life, prayer and pastoral activities with lay people. Sisters commuted to the schools and continued teaching there. But as time went on, some moved out of teaching to other areas of pastoral need, such as prisons, soup kitchens, caring for abandoned children and Caritas groups. Living in smaller communities also gave the sisters more freedom to move on to another geographical area if and when it was felt to be appropriate.

In the meantime in our schools, there is a growing awareness that lay people are not there just to be employed by us, but that we are all working in partnership, and hence responsibilities are shared. Given the Church and State relationship in the country, a sister is still head of every school. Reflection continues on other possible ways forward.

All the evolution that has taken place over the years has involved much struggle and misunderstandings. Letting go of much loved establishments has brought sadness and challenge, while seeking to trust in God's providential guidance through all the difficulties.

In 1993, sisters moved to two more remote areas in the country, Almería and Galicia. El Ejido in Almería is an area that has attracted large numbers of immigrants, mainly Moroccans, as well as many local people from the smaller villages around. All of these people came to work in the immense greenhouses set up in the area. Because they never had money and now earn it almost overnight, they face many consequent problems. There is a large number of gypsies in the area also, who live in rather difficult circumstances, which makes integration with the people as a whole very difficult. In Fonsagrada, Galicia, the main problems are associated with extreme isolation in a mountainous area,

where the climate can sometimes be quite severe. The remoteness does not offer a future for the younger generations and hence older people tend to be more isolated. In both places, the sisters teach in state schools and do various forms of pastoral work.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the search continues to find ways of being true to the spirit of creativity and daring that has characterised the history of our Institute. We trust that our way of being present and being involved with others may reflect the Gospel spirit, and the story that began in 1662 with a group of courageous women who said 'yes' to the realities of their time. So the sisters in Spain continue to dedicate themselves with energy and enthusiasm to their mission, always ready to go further.

3.11 Singapore

When we left our story of the Institute in Singapore, the communities there were still part of the Infant Jesus province in Malaya and the country itself was a British colony. Singapore separated politically from Malaysia in 1965 and the sisters became an independent province of the Institute in 1988.

From their first days in Singapore the sisters dedicated themselves to teaching in schools and to the care of abandoned children. The high standard of education and of the extracurricular activities given in these schools was widely recognised. With the separation from Malaysia, there was a new emphasis on industrialisation, and technical education became important in Singapore. Gradually, new syllabuses with common content became obligatory in all schools.

Already in 1957, all non-government schools had to be administered by a board of management. This lessened the freedom and the influence of the sisters in the schools.

Another big change came as this young land-scarce country was struggling to provide housing and other amenities for its people. Singapore's urban planning was radically changing the city centre. Under the bulldozer, the old gave place to the new in the spirit of progress.

The Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (popularly known as CHIJ) complex of buildings stood on prime land. The state offered newly constructed accommodation on another site, in exchange for the sisters' property in the town centre. Reading the signs of the times, the sisters accepted this huge sacrifice of a home full of memories for both staff and pupils and, in December 1983, in one day, furniture, equipment and students moved to the new premises. However, by then many Singaporeans were becoming aware that their cultural heritage was being lost and groups were working hard to conserve some of the historic buildings in the city. The sisters' house and schools were included in this conservation work.

Thankfully, if you go to Singapore today you will find, at the heart of the city, the complex known as 'Chijmes'. As well as the name, which includes Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, it preserves many features of the old convent and stands as a reminder of the contribution of the Infant Jesus Sisters to education, on that site, for 129 years. It attracts over 12,000 visitors a day.

This contribution to education was one of the most effective means of helping the people of the country develop as people, and also spiritually. Improved social conditions and the Singapore government's extensive role in education mean that the sisters' direct teaching role is no longer so critical. This has freed them to respond to other pressing concerns today. The orphanage closed in the 1980s as social conditions improved and fewer babies were abandoned. However, the sisters continue to offer children at risk support, love and care in homes and centres that they continue to sponsor.

Meanwhile the sisters are adapting to other events affecting their religious and apostolic life. The majority are now involved in other ministries that emphasise human and spiritual formation. They give retreats and facilitate faith sharing and prayer groups that help people to deepen their knowledge and love of God. Others are reaching out to people in their surroundings, especially to young women who have lost direction in their lives, and to sick and lonely people in need of pastoral presence and care. In recent years, the sisters are again reading the signs of the times and are spending time in China and Vietnam, where they are involved in formation programmes for priests, religious and lay people. In all these ministries, the sisters work closely with wonderfully committed lay people. At present, 35 sisters belong to the Singapore province, five of whom are on mission abroad. What was it that attracted young women to consecrated life in the Institute in Singapore?

Many sisters in the Institute were past pupils either of the Infant Jesus Sisters' schools here or in other countries. In Singapore, some had been marked by their experience, as pupils, of visiting the

abandoned babies during their break time. This experience of playing with and caring for these abandoned children left a deep impression on them and opened their hearts to the call to give their adult lives to people who are deprived. Others, while still pupils, were moved by witnessing sisters leaving their families and their country to carry the Good News to other parts of the world, and felt inspired to share in this apostolic life. Many drew inspiration from the sisters who taught them or cared for them. Though different in temperament, personality or nationality, they impressed their pupils by the quality of their lives and their relationships as well as their caring human way of reaching out to others.

The call to consecrate oneself to Christ in the Institute is a gift from God, which has, however, often been mediated through direct contact with the sisters or those to whom they ministered. The sisters believe that the witness of their own lives was the primary inspiration to those called to join the Institute. Now, in different circumstances, the sisters in their turn accompany others seeking to discover the call of God and a direction in their lives.

The history of the sisters in Singapore bears testimony to their amazing courage and daring especially when, relying only on Providence, they were faced with what seemed like insurmountable obstacles.

Today, the Institute in Singapore feels invited to remember the past with gratitude, to live in the present with enthusiasm, and to look to the future with confidence and hope, relying on their loving and faithful God.

To be a religious is to be a woman in love with God and with people, giving us the freedom not to do great things, but to do everything with great love.

3.12 Thailand

The sisters had to leave Thailand in 1907, but the dream of returning became a reality for the Institute in 1957 when five sisters from Malaysia responded to a call to take over a school in Bangkok. In the current Thai province there are about 40 Thai sisters who respond to a variety of needs, so that their ministry now extends to five dioceses. Their aim is to equip young people for life, and to foster moral and ethical values, promoting a sense of solidarity in building up a just, peaceful and happy society. In their ministry they work with lay people and organisations that have similar aims. When possible, they promote dialogue and understanding with other faiths.

While they have always had a strong emphasis on education, in recent years they have diversified their ministry to include other forms of education, especially for the less privileged.

In Bangkok, the focus of one of their schools is to enable young women to acquire the skills necessary to earn their living. They are also in contact with a number of children from surrounding deprived areas.

In the north east they continue to teach in schools, with a particular focus on those most in need. They also run a centre that enables young women to learn domestic skills, both for their own use and as a means of earning their living.

In the north, they live in three locations close to the Laos border. Some work with the Thai missionary society, which provides accommodation for Hmong and Main children from the surrounding hill tribe villages. Staying at this centre enables the children to attend the local government school. They are trained to look after each other, the older ones looking after the younger ones. They make crafts, which they sell for pocket money, and are helped to prepare for their future, both human and spiritual. Sometimes groups of students or teachers come from one of our schools in other parts of Asia to share in this mission. Some of them work with the people in the rice and cotton farms, and share in their lives generally.

They learn that, even though these people do not have much materially, they are very happy people.

The sisters continue to move forward in faith and hope, trusting in the Holy Spirit, the source of their life, to lead and inspire them. Being aware of the importance of inculturation and the rapid changes in their society, they search for new ways of responding to needs and new ways of expressing their consecrated life.

Presence of the Institute in other countries

3.13 The Philippines – 1984

In the mid 1980s, a Japanese sister visited Negros, a very deprived area in the Philippines. Later other Japanese sisters, with some lay volunteers, went to see how they could help the people there. For the past 10 years one Japanese sister has remained there, supporting the local people in their desire for development. She works through a wide network of supportive people, both in Japan and in the Philippines.

Now many of the people in the Negros area have become self-supporting, helped by workshops and formation in agricultural skills. Many have been given scholarships to do further studies, which will also help them to offer some service to their own people.

Currently, Neriza Nicolasora, an Infant Jesus Philippina sister who had been in Nigeria for some years, is seeking to evolve a way of responding to needs in her own country.

3.14 Romania – 1993

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the eyes of the world were opened to the situation in Eastern European countries. Many people wondered what they could do to help those countries that were waking up to their newfound freedom. At the end of the dictatorship in Romania, the state of the orphanages and the dreadful plight of the children there received wide international coverage. At a meeting of major superiors in France, awareness was raised about the urgent need to do something. A specific request came to the Institute in France through a university professor and it was decided to send two sisters on an exploratory mission. In July 1993, for a period of three weeks, they travelled the country from Bucarest to Cluj, passing through Iasi, a town in the eastern part of the country.

They met bishops, hospital managers, members of Caritas International, students, teachers, and even the apostolic nuncio. Everywhere they received the same message: "There is a lot to be done but it is better not to open a religious community now". There were already many congregations whose action was curtailed because of the laws still in place in the country. Other visits followed, during which it became evident that there was a possibility of working with students at the university of Iasi, who were aware of the social problems of this region. For the next two years, with the help of young French people, convoys of humanitarian aid were sent to Romania.

Gradually, it became clear that organising 'humanitarian aid' was not our founding vision. In 1997, one sister from the French province who had already taken part in the convoys was asked to go and settle in Iasi. Because of her previous training and experience, she was well suited to set up links with other projects and with the local people.

Since then she has worked to co-ordinate, sustain and evaluate the work of associations present in Romania, especially those projects that give special attention to abandoned orphans, street children and young people in difficulty. She was drawn especially to the children in the hospital who, outside the time needed for treatment, hung around bored all day. She devoted her energy mainly, but not exclusively, to finding benefactors, volunteers and funds for a hospital school.

In 2001, the first hospital school was officially opened, thanks to her actions and those of her Romanian collaborators. In 2001, a Nicolas Barré Network of lay friends was created, which continues to draw nourishment from the spirit of the Institute. Many of these friends are members of the Orthodox Church in Romania.

3.15 The Czech Republic – 1998

God's ways are unfathomable. How true it is that God writes straight with crooked lines!

The story of our Institute in the Czech Republic is linked to that of the Friars Minim, the order to which Nicolas Barré belonged three centuries ago. Minim monks had settled in Vranov in the 17th century as our Institute was coming to birth in France. Their presence was marked by the many vicissitudes of Czech history and they had to leave their monastery several times. After the fall of communism in 1989, a community of Czech monks returned to live in Vranov, near Brno.

In their church was a copy of Nicolas Barré's Prayer of Abandonment. Some young women saw this prayer during the time of preparation for the beatification of Nicolas Barré. Their interest in it led them to ask questions about its author. The outcome was that the monks put these women in contact with the Infant Jesus Sisters in Italy and they were invited to visit the country to see the life and work of our sisters there. They stayed for a period of three years, during which they had the opportunity to learn Italian, studying and working with the sisters, especially in Calabria. These young women felt that our spirit had something to say to their own people. Their dream was to implant an Infant Jesus Sisters community in their own country. Concrete steps were taken in 1998. It was decided to buy a house in Brno and to spend some time discerning where the future lay. A group of young Czech women came to live there, and members of the central team and others came to stay and support them and begin a time of deeper discernment with them. It became evident to two of these Czech women that religious life was not their calling.

One young woman, Veronika Reháková, wanted to continue and went to England, where she experienced various forms of ministry and community life. She made her first commitment in February 2005 as a member of the province of England and Ireland. She then returned to the house in Brno with a sister from Ireland, and carries on her ministry mainly as a teacher.

3.16 Myanmar (Burma) – 2001

In 1994, the military government of Myanmar (Burma) decided to ease its 'isolationist policy' and open its doors to tourists. The apostolic nuncio at that time, Mgr Luigi Bressen, approached the central team asking for a group of Infant Jesus Sisters to come and help the local church. They decided to reflect with two Burmese sisters who were already members of the Institute, Sr Gabriel in Thailand and Sr Fidelis in Malaysia. Sr Fidelis went to stay in Myanmar for three months and was given hospitality by the Xavarian sisters, one of the only two local congregations in the diocese of Pathein. She visited the villages and felt a real call for the Infant Jesus Sisters to come and live among the people. Her letters record the cry for basic education and formation, and describe the plight of the village people. In 1995, the superior general of the Xavarians visited our central team in Rome, offering hospitality to our sisters if they could come to Myanmar. In 1998, Bishop Charles Bo invited us to his diocese of Pathein. The three provincials of Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, accompanied by a member of the central team, visited Pathein and met with Bishop Bo. After their visit, they recommended that a research team spend a considerable length of time to gather data to see what the real needs of the people were.

As a group of non-Burmese, the sisters could not work directly with people in the villages, nor get visas for a long-term stay. It was agreed that they would focus their ministry on offering support and formation to the local sisters, who in turn would see to the needs of their people. Following the research done in 2000 by the fact-finding team, small groups, including Infant Jesus Sisters and lay people from Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, started moving into Myanmar from 2001.

As there was little change in the unstable political situation, a permanent group of sisters and lay people, which calls itself the Myanmar Mission Team, supplemented by other volunteers from time to time, continued to reflect and offer appropriate responses. At the end of 2004 it was possible for the team to rent premises in Yangon, the capital. This ensured a more permanent Infant Jesus Sisters' presence, while all the time they continued going in and out for visa purposes. In recent years, young women from the country have come to the community from time to time, some of them with a view to journeying more closely with us. Living and working like this, with a wide range of ages, experience, languages and cultures, means being flexible, and letting go of an institutional mentality and structured mindset.

The community has four key values: Christ as the centre; living out of the Infant Jesus Sisters' spirituality; sisterly love as the bond that unites; and, the dying to self that is required by life and mission.

From this house, they seek to be open to the people Providence sends their way. They journey with people, trying to focus on their dreams, listening to their needs, discerning with them how best they should act. They accompany as collaborators, not as people having all the answers and know-how. Some of the responses offered are in conjunction with local religious or at the request of the bishop, all seeking to support and empower the local people. They include teaching English and creative thinking skills to young adults. Some of these belong to religious congregations and others are lay students. There are programmes for younger people who have not had the opportunity to go to school to finish their education, or who need extra tuition. There was a real need to train teachers

from pre-schools who have had little formation and have few resources to work with. The team is also involved in spiritual accompaniment, retreat work and personal development courses for local religious and clergy. As time went by the team discovered that the local women badly needed some extra income, so now there are several income-generating projects such as candle making, growing pepper plants, use of organic fertilisers, fish and frog farming, and pig and chicken rearing.

The political situation is highly volatile and the economics of the country unstable. Involvement in this mission calls for remembrance of our founding spirit: courage to take risks, creativity, flexibility, discernment, and above all, trust in God's Providence. The team sums up its experience: "We try to create opportunities for people who have been marginalised to become aware of their potential and to nurture it. As they grow to full stature we, too, are stretched and energised. We grow together".

3.17 Links with China

The memory of the brave women who entered China in 1936 left a deep desire among our sisters to return to China one day. Today, China has 12 million Catholics out of a population of 1.3 billion people. In 2001, one of our Malaysian sisters set out in response to an advertisement in a Catholic newspaper looking for volunteers to help in the New China Link (NCL) in the province of Guizhou, one of China's poorest regions. NCL stresses the value of collaboration and mutual aid among the Asian countries.

In 2003, a sister from Singapore left for China. She started teaching English in Guizhou, where her classes often had as many as 75 pupils. She also worked with NCL on human development projects. These included providing health education, empowering the local village people to obtain a water supply and simple housing, and building a middle school. Also in 2003 another sister from Singapore responded to a request to conduct a formation programme for sisters and laity in the Liaoning diocese in view of their starting a social service centre. In 2004, together with some volunteers, she conducted a course on human and spiritual development in Macau for some priests from China.

Another door opened in May 2005. A sister from another congregation suddenly became ill and was unable to honour a commitment to give a retreat to a local congregation in Fen Yang. An appeal came to the Institute in Singapore and two sisters took up the challenge. In response to further requests, they offered a number of retreats, courses and workshops. This helped a whole congregation to come to a sense of its own identity and spirituality in a time of crisis.

Listening to the needs and recognising the great lack of resources available for formation, they formed a mission team for China to respond to some of the needs of the people in that huge country. It is composed of two Infant Jesus sisters from Singapore, lay collaborators, a local sister (Sr Mathias, who acts as interpreter), and a local priest, Fr Joseph Xia. As a result, for the first time the priests and religious of one diocese had an opportunity to listen to each other and work together on a pastoral strategy for the diocese

Part 4

Biographies from the family album

"Such a great crowd of witnesses..." (Heb. 12: 1)

Introduction

It is said that 'there are no nobodies', yet the life stories of the vast majority of our sisters are known only to God, and often remained hidden even in their own lifetime. We are able to retrieve sketches of a few of our sisters over the centuries because of the work they were called to do or because someone, somewhere, had the foresight to keep a record. Here we tell the story of a small number of these women. They are typical of many; everywhere we find the same spirit of the Institute expressed in a unique way by each one, in her own personality, time and place.

4.1 Françoise Duval and Marguerite Lestocq

We would like to know more about the lives of Marguerite Lestocq and Françoise Duval, the founding members of the group that became the Institute of the Infant Jesus Sisters. They were the first in the long line of valiant women in the Institute who have served God and the people for over 300 years. It is from them that we have inherited the founding spirit of the Institute: courage, self-forgetfulness, trust in God's Providence, inner freedom, a love of simplicity, and a great desire to bring people to know God's love and bring them to their full human potential. When Nicolas Barré first enlisted Marguerite and Françoise to help him during that now memorable mission in Sotteville-Rouen in 1662, it was because they already stood out among the young women who had helped him from time to time in other towns.

Françoise came from Honfleur and was 18 years old at the time. Marguerite, born on May 8, 1642, came from Picardy. She was related to Nicolas Barré and was 20 years old when she began to work with him. For almost a year the women held classes for young girls in a room lent to them for that purpose. We know from the kind of advice and training Nicolas Barré gave them, the attitudes they were to adopt in dealing with the children and their parents. We know from a memoir written by Marguerite herself when she was 39 years old that these young women put into practice all that they were taught with characteristic love and enthusiasm: "Abandon yourself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who gives grace to the humble and puts words on their lips. Avoid all affectation and complicated language. Speak in a humble, gentle and homely way, so that even the youngest and the least educated can understand you".

In their busy apostolic lives, they lived what they taught to others: "Put before your pupils the eight beatitudes. Teach them to live out the Gospel by loving God with all their heart and their neighbours as themselves. Make sure above all that your teaching is loving as well as informative". There was nothing sentimental or unreal about this love.

Marguerite and Françoise were the first sisters to abandon themselves to God's Providence with no guarantee for the future, not worrying about what would become of them one day. They agreed enthusiastically to dedicate themselves to the human and spiritual formation of those in greatest need at that time. This took the form of teaching in 'little schools' and going from house to house to tell the people about God. At a time when teachers were held in low esteem, they offered their services freely and generously, and were grateful for the small stipend offered to them. They persevered, though many thought that teaching girls to read and write was a waste of time and would even endanger the stability of society. Many criticised them, saying that it was more suitable for young women to remain under the protection of their fathers or husbands, or within convent walls. Even the priests and clerics made life difficult for them. We know that they worked hard teaching the children, visiting the families, seeking out young women at risk and, even on Sundays and holy days, instructing the large crowds who gathered for their catechism classes. While motivated by "pure love" for God, these young women were practical, with their feet firmly planted in reality. We know, for example, that they managed to provide beds for destitute families, among whom domestic violence and abuse of women and children were common in the overcrowded conditions of extreme poverty. They arranged to teach at times that suited the families. Their example attracted other young women to join them. Together they responded to Nicolas Barré's suggestion to form a community. They understood that they would have no security for the future, and for each day, just what was necessary to live on: "You will have what is necessary, without any extras".

Françoise Duval became the first co-ordinator of the little group and Marguerite recorded that they "lived in a blessed harmony of gentleness, humility and concern for each other, in an atmosphere of mindfulness and silence".

An influential lady, Madame de Buc, took charge of the material and physical well-being of the little group. This way of collaborating with lay people continued for a while in the young Institute. The sisters shared responsibility for the household chores and gave their time to teaching, prayer and study. Nicolas Barré devoted himself to their formation, insisting that they were to be holy and learned in the faith they taught: "You must not teach what you are not clear about yourselves. Teach people above all the prayer of the heart and to live in the presence of God".

As time went by Nicolas Barré worked closely with a few priests and lay people who shared his concern for education and the care of destitute people. Among them was Nicolas Roland. This priest appealed to Barré to send him a teacher imbued with the founding spirit, from among the pioneers, to help open a 'little school' in Rheims.

At the age of 26, Françoise Duval accepted the challenge to leave Rouen for Rheims on December 22, 1670, along with Anne Le Coeur, who was another member of the first community. It

was the first break-up of the founding group, the first 'sending out' of some of their members to another mission territory. The hearts of their companions were torn. They were losing two of their best-loved colleagues, who were going off into the unknown. Still, they were all filled with the same desire to bring the Good News to other places. Besides, it was Christmas time, the feast that celebrates the manifestation in human form of the immense love with which God loves the world and all creation. These young women wanted only to share in this mission.

Marguerite then became leader of the group in Rouen and the number of little schools grew. There is no record of the year of her death.

Soon other young women joined Françoise and Anne in Rheims, and the community began to put down roots. They remained in contact with their sisters in Rouen and Nicolas Barré would send them messages from time to time. Still, at that distance, Françoise and Anne bore the responsibility of the new foundation and carried on their ministry in collaboration with Nicolas Roland. Nicolas Barré had trained them to reflect on their daily life, the difficulties and problems as well as the joys encountered, believing that this is the best way to learn. He would say: "Difficulties and failures deepen our understanding". Within five years of their arrival in Rheims, Françoise, Anne and their companions were teaching up to 1,000 children in different parts of the town.

Françoise, a woman of great courage who had given so much of herself to establish the 'little schools' in Rheims, was faced with new difficulty in 1679. The schools' administrators no longer agreed with Nicolas Barré's vision of total and absolute dependence on Divine Providence. They planned to obtain legal recognition and to accept financial endowments for the schools. In the end, the Institute in Rheims opted for a religious rule of life that carried certain securities and financial guarantees. In her fidelity to the spirit of the origins, Françoise felt she could not go along with the administrators and made the hard choice to leave this beloved group. With another companion she was then sent to Lisieux, where new work needing her support awaited her. She brought to it her experience of life and of teaching, underpinned by a spirituality tested and strengthened by trials and rooted in unshakeable trust in God.

Françoise returned to Sotteville in 1686, and in September of that year she died there at the age of 42. To these two great-hearted women, Françoise Duval and Marguerite Lestocq, and their three founding companions, Anne Le Coeur, Catherine Lestocq and Anne Marie, the Institute owes the solid foundation on which its spirituality and ministry are built. Their spirit lives on in the women who followed in their footsteps down through the centuries.

4.2 Marie Hayer (? – 1702)

In October 1676, Marie Hayer, a highly gifted young woman, joined the new community in Rouen. There is no record of her date of birth. She was the daughter of a family doctor in Bernay, in the diocese of Lisieux. Some time later, Nicolas Barré did not hesitate to call this young woman from her community in Rouen, together with some others, in response to a request from the princess, Marie de Lorraine, for the work of education in Guise. In a short time, Marie had set up charitable schools not only in Guise, but also in different towns in the region.

When someone was needed to train new members of the Institute, Nicolas Barré called Marie for this important function. The two years spent establishing the schools in Guise, and the way she managed the important house of St Jean en Grève in Paris, confirmed Nicolas Barré's opinion of her outstanding qualities.

Though we were not canonically recognised as religious at the time, we would now think of Marie's role as the first mistress of novices and the first superior general of the Institute. She carried out this double function with all the enthusiasm and energy of youth, with commitment and common sense matured by experience and her great love of solitude. This love of solitude gradually turned into a temptation for her to leave the Institute. On one occasion, during the holidays, she went to spend a few days at home in Bernay. While there, she felt strongly attracted to enter a cloistered convent in that town. She told herself that there she would find a more austere rule than in Paris and a greater separation from the world. Her family, wanting to have her closer to them, encouraged her to follow this inclination. However, she did not want to take this decision without consulting Nicolas Barré.

His advice was that she should wait a while before making such a big decision. In his opinion, this attraction was a temptation and an illusion. We find his views on this subject expressed in his maxims for the sisters:

"When a sister is tempted to leave her work in order to enter a cloistered community, she should give careful thought to what she is about to do. She is giving up a state of life that is more evangelical, more dependent, more difficult, poorer and less esteemed, in favour of another that is easier. She is

like a cowardly soldier who wants to remain always in the garrison, never marching out to battle” (PM 1-3).

In saying this, Nicolas Barré may have been influenced by the corruption that existed in a number of cloisters at that time.

Recognising her giftedness, he saw that the path to holiness for Marie was one of inner transformation through her union with Christ in His mission.

In the end, Marie Hayer remained faithful to her first call and mission in the Institute. She died in 1702.

4.3 Lucille de Faudoas (1799 – 1877)

Gabrielle Angélique, called Lucille de Faudoas, was born at Aurignac in France on February 25, 1799. She went to the Infant Jesus Sisters' boarding school in Toulouse, Les Feuillants, in 1812. Two years later her mother took her away from the school because Lucille said she wanted to give herself to the Lord. Later, her mother relented and on October 23, 1819, Lucille entered the novitiate. She received the habit on April 20, 1820, and was given the name François de Sales. She was professed on April 24, 1821. Having been a teacher for some years, she was named superior of the community in Louhans in 1824. She later served for a time as general bursar and as assistant superior general. In 1837 she became the fourteenth superior general of the Institute. She carried this responsibility for 40 years, being re-elected every three years. Under her guidance the Institute continued to expand and develop, both in France and abroad. She is remembered especially because her great courage and vision carried the Institute through the major events that occurred during her time of leadership.

When, in 1851, Fr Beurel, a missionary in Singapore and delegate of Bishop Boucho, came to visit the Institute in Paris, it was to Mother de Faudoas he made his surprising request: would some of the sisters be willing to go as missionaries to another continent, to Malaya?

Mother de Faudoas had great reservations, as we can understand, given the distance and the dangers involved in sea travel at that time. However, she responded with courage and faith and the sisters set sail for Asia. From this daring start the Institute spread to Singapore, Japan, England, Ireland and Thailand.

It was also during Mother de Faudoas' time in office that it became necessary to seek official approbation of the Institute by the Holy See. Mother de Faudoas undertook all the necessary steps. She began by consulting all the superiors of the Institute. They approved of the idea.

Though difficulties came from the papal nuncio and some of the bishops who were not in favour, the bishops of the dioceses where the sisters lived gave their approval and Mother de Faudoas travelled to Rome to further the negotiations. She finally succeeded in getting official approbation in November 1866. In 1876, feeling that she could no longer continue, Mother de Faudoas organised a meeting with all the superiors in France to nominate her successor. She died at the end of a long life of courageous service to the Institute on August 27, 1877.

4.4 Mathilde Raclot (1814 – 1911)

While leaders like Lucille de

Faudoas took brave

initiatives and opened the

doors to growth in the

Institute, the personal call to

go as missionaries to other countries was given to women such as Mother Mathilde Raclot.

Marie Justine Raclot was born at Suriauville, a

village on the borders of Lorraine in France, on February 9, 1814. Her family were farmers and gave her a solid Christian education. After primary school, she went to St Maur's boarding school in Langres. There she felt the call to religious life, and more especially to the apostolate abroad. Later, in her account of her arrival in Japan, she wrote of a childhood dream sparked off by the map of Japan in her geography book long before: "Finally I saw this beloved land, the dream of my childhood".

Her mother, seeing the growth of her deep piety and not wanting to find her called to the religious life, brought her home before the end of the school year. Marie was then 16 years old. Being shy, she did not want to speak to her parents of her persistent desire. Finally it was a friend of the family who approached her parents and persuaded them to let her go. On October 15, 1832, they allowed her to return to the convent in Langres, where she finished her studies and, on September 5, 1833, she entered the novitiate in Paris. She received the habit on February 2, 1834, and was given the name of Sr Mathilde. After her first profession on March 19, 1835, she was sent to teach in various schools. As a teacher she enjoyed working with the lively pupils of the south of France, showing that she could be both firm and kind. In 1850, when conversations began between the priests of the foreign missions and Mother de Fautoas regarding sending sisters to the Orient, Sr Mathilde followed all with a keen interest. She was not, however, among the first five who left for Malaya. Hoping to be

accepted one day for this mission she prepared herself through prayer, accepting without complaint the heat and humidity of the south of France. She even started learning English! On September 15, 1852, Mother de Fautoas sent her this message: "Leave everything and come". That same night she left for Paris. She was named superior of the foundation in Penang and left for Southampton on September 17 to sail to Penang, arriving on October 28, 1852.

Full of energy and well prepared, Mother Mathilde organised the life of the new community with wisdom and common sense. Still, the beginnings were very hard. She encouraged the sisters to learn the languages of the country. Their first mission was to take care of the orphans. In 1853, another expedition of three sisters arrived and that made possible a foundation in Singapore. From then on Mother Mathilde's life was spent in welcoming the new sisters, following up the foundations in different places, overseeing the

building of houses, organising homes for orphaned children, and running the schools. Once, a number of Chinese girls were found to be the victims of sex trafficking, and Mother Mathilde was always prepared to do battle on their behalf. She was so well known that the English judges often invited her to sit in court during sessions to discuss the cases. She made one journey to France in 1867 to give an account of the mission, its difficulties and successes. This personal contact in those days was invaluable for the preparation of future missionaries. The day came when the long-awaited entry to Japan was possible. After an exchange of telegrams between Singapore and Paris, on Pentecost Monday, May 20, 1872, the “yes” everyone was waiting for came. A month later, on June 28, 1872, it was again Mother Mathilde, then aged 58, who led the group of sisters to Yokohama. There followed the study of the Japanese language, the foundations in Yokohama, Tokyo, Shizuoka, and the formation of the first novices. For 60 years this valiant missionary prayed, toiled and gave herself generously to the mission in Asia.

Many wonderful stories have been recorded in Malaysia, Singapore and Japan about this woman of prayer, pioneering spirit and great faith:

“One day in Singapore, when everyone was convinced there was no rice in the house, Mother Mathilde had mysteriously been able to find a store of it in a room which everyone else had been certain was empty. She remembered what had happened in Yokohama itself. During the heat of the summer, there had been no water available for mixing mortar for the building in progress, but Mother Mathilde had calmly set about digging out a well, which had not given water for a long time, telling the sisters to pray, and then, every evening the dried-up well filled with enough water for the next day as long as was necessary”.

Once, when choosing to refuse a request, she gave her reasons: “Father, we would like to work for everyone, poor and rich. After all, rich people have souls too, just like poor people, and goodness knows they are often in greater moral danger than people who are poor. Still, our Institute was founded to give special attention to people in need. They are the ones who most need our help, they cannot buy everything they want, they need us more than anyone else, and as long as there are plenty of poor people for us to look after we’ll not be unhappy. God will provide”.

Mother Mathilde returned to the Lord at the age of 97, on January 20, 1911, at Yokohama in her dear Japan, which she had first dreamed of long before as a schoolgirl.

4.5 Gaetan Gervais (1827 – 1892)

Another woman associated with the expansion of the Institute was Mother Gaétan Gervais. Born in Pontivy in the Morbihan, France, this Breton woman was an ardent missionary. She sailed for Singapore in 1853.

Appointed superior of the community in 1878, her purpose was to develop the mission. The glory of God and her love for people were the motives for all her actions. The needs were many and more help was needed. In spite of the difficulties and dangers of such a long voyage she wanted to return to France to share her experience and ask for more missionaries.

Since Singapore at that time was an English-speaking colony, she understood that missionaries from England were needed. Her experience also showed her that the sisters offering to go to live and work in Asia needed to have good health and experience of religious life before being missionaries in another continent.

So, in January 1892, although seriously ill and worn out by 40 years of missionary work, she started the voyage to Europe. It was to be her last visit. Her project was to found a community in England, a house of formation for young women with a call to missionary life.

After a short stay in Paris, she arrived in London on June 8, 1892. Her health was deteriorating rapidly. None of her contacts could offer hospitality and be there to welcome her and her companion. After a short stay in a guesthouse, it was a Mrs Chadney, a convert to Catholicism, who welcomed them into her home. Helped by the kindness of this family she started work. After a visit to the archbishop, the place for the new foundation was decided. Suddenly her illness became so

severe that she had to receive the last sacraments. Mother Albert, assistant general at that time, came at once from the Mother House to be with her. The Chadney family gave her the best care possible, but the ardent missionary was becoming weaker every day. Realising that she was dying, she offered her life for the Institute, for the success of the mission in London and for the growth of the mission in Singapore.

On Sunday August 21, the eve of her death, she had the joy of knowing that Mass was celebrated for the first time in Southgate, where the small community had arrived four days before. In spite of many setbacks and obstacles, the seed planted at such cost on English soil by this generous woman survived and grew.

4.6 Jane Connolly (1829 – 1885)

Jane Connolly was born in

Strabane in Northern Ireland

on December 9, 1829, the

year that brought Catholic

Emancipation to Ireland. At

the age of 21 she entered our novitiate in Paris. We are not sure how this came about. She may have learned about the Institute from her older brother John, who was a De la Salle brother. He was later to travel to Singapore on the same boat that took the first group of Infant Jesus Sisters to Asia.

Jane was received into the Institute in August 1852 and given the name Gregory. She was immediately chosen to set sail a month later as one of the three sisters in the second group to accompany Mother Mathilde to Malaya. The need for a sister who could speak English was urgent. Perhaps Sr Gregory already showed some of the qualities Mother Mathilde looked for in a future missionary.

Sr Gregory began her work on the long sea voyage. Using a catechism that they had bought in England, she taught her companions English as they sailed. On board one day, a French gentleman was so intrigued that he approached these black-clad women and asked: "Why are your faces so happy and your clothes so sad?" Their reply drew him to the Catholic faith later in Malaya and he became their good friend and benefactor.

Sr Gregory made her first profession in Penang on October 3 the following year. It was planned as a small private celebration in the

community chapel but their first contacts, the De la Salle Brothers and local priests, begged that it take place in the parish church as a form of Christian witness. So it was that the church was packed with people of all faiths witnessing for the first time this moving ceremony. The

date, October 3, was perhaps prophetic; it would later be the feast of Thérèse of Lisieux, patroness of missions, who was born 20 years later in 1873.

Sr Gregory remained in Penang for only four months before Mother Mathilde once again chose her, with two others – Sr Apollinaire and Sr Gaéтан – to found the first community in Singapore. After many fruitful years as a missionary in Asia, Sr Gaéтан went to England to found the Institute there and died shortly after her arrival. Meanwhile, they settled into their missionary life in Singapore. It was a tough beginning and it seemed at first as if they would have to give up. However, they gradually won the hearts of the people, and the Infant Jesus Sisters and their schools soon became part of Singaporean history. One of their biggest difficulties on arrival was language. The sisters spoke French among themselves, while most people spoke English or Chinese. For Sr Gregory, speaking in French was difficult, and in spite of her courage and generosity, hints of loneliness can be glimpsed in her letters home. In her own letters, Mother Mathilde describes Sr Gregory as shy, sincere, enthusiastic, open and generous.

So it was that when Mother Mathilde set off once again in October 1859 to open a house in Malacca, she chose her old team, Srs Apollinaire and Gregory. Having stayed for a while with

them, Mother Mathilde returned, leaving Srs Gregory and Apollinaire behind together to run the small school they had started. In spite of the many difficulties they again faced, their mission was blessed and things went well for a while. Then Sr Apollinaire was recalled to Penang and another sister who was given responsibility for the mission replaced her. This sister became mentally ill and the time that followed must have been one of the most painful in Sr Gregory's life. To add to this she received news that her brother John had contracted cholera and had died aged 43. Though she may not have met him often during their years in Asia, his death severed another link with home. Soon it became clear that the situation in Malacca could not continue and the house was closed. Sr Gregory went back to Singapore, but not for long. When the pioneering Mother Mathilde was answering the call to bring the Institute to Japan at Pentecost 1872 she once again included Sr Gregory in her first team of sisters. They reached Yokohama at 5.00am on June 28. They were the first European religious women to enter Japan. Immediately after breakfast they received their first lesson in Japanese from Fr Petitjean. They had neither textbook nor grammar. Sr Gregory once again found herself

adapting to another climate, another difficult language and another very different culture. Times were extremely hard. They were hard pressed to feed themselves and care for the increasing number of orphans handed into their care. The youngest sister among them became ill and died only four months after their arrival. Sr Gregory herself became ill and had to go for a while to Singapore, returning to Japan as soon

as she was well enough to continue. She became well known for her ability to draw all kinds of people to support the mission. When looking for clothing or food for the children she went directly to people she thought could help and they always did. The mission in Japan continued to grow, but not without cost. Epidemics, fires, typhoons and earthquakes threatened their lives. The intrepid missionaries, aided by their faithful Japanese people, carried on and another house was opened in Tokyo.

The years of hardship were telling on Sr Gregory. She knew she had a fatal illness and that her time to die was drawing near. This happened on September 18, 1885. It was 33 years to the day since she had left Europe on The Bentick, never to return. She was 56 years old. She is buried in the international cemetery in Yokohama.

4.7 Mary de Souza (1840 – 1923)

Sometimes God's Providence works in extraordinary ways to lead people to the Institute. Born in Malacca on May 26, 1840, of Indian parents, Catherine De Souza arrived in Singapore at the age of 14 and there offered her young life to the Lord. She entered the novitiate of the Institute in Malaysia at the age of 18 on August 21, 1859, and was given the name Sr Mary. She made her profession on December 26, 1860. Formed in the religious life by Mothers Mathilde Raclot and Gaétan Gervais, the young professed became a fervent religious.

For 35 years she devoted herself with much love and understanding to the pupils known as the "second boarders". These included many poor and needy children who often sought her advice. To these especially Mary reached out with motherly love, always ready with a listening ear and a loving heart. Later, having been given charge of the maintenance of the house and supervision of the workers, she was exemplary in her level of organisation and order, as well as in her great love of poverty. The spirit with which she went about these tasks led her to develop a deep spiritual life. When the time came for her to let go of these tasks, she remained joyful and serene in doing the little jobs that came her way. She gave much of her time to prayer, and in ordinary everyday life her gentle presence reflected her depth of union with God. Even the way she took her meals spoke of someone who was very close to the Lord. In the evening of life, sickness obliged her to give up her work. Her illness kept her bedridden and it was a real sacrifice for her not to be able to carry on helping others. During these years she suffered patiently the bouts of fever and breathlessness that afflicted her. She was fully conscious at the end when anointed by Fr Ruandel.

The next morning, April 11, 1923, she had the deep joy of receiving Jesus in Holy Communion; then, in a spirit of thanksgiving, she fell asleep peacefully in the Lord. By nature she was a very loving person who had impressed not only her parish community but also many others who came in great numbers to pay their respects at her funeral. Monsignor Barillon led the final prayers, wishing to honour one who had for long years lived the mission so faithfully.

4.8 Adelaide Aïou (1845 – 1911)

It pleases God to plant in the Institute many hidden flowers. These, like the violet, spread all around them a fragrance that reveals their life in God, and that lives on long after them. Such was Sr Adelaide Aïou, whose life was spent in the shade, but whose funeral revealed how much she mattered to people.

Born in Heschaly, China, on August 31, 1845, Marie came to Singapore at the age of 14, where she met the Infant Jesus Sisters. Some years after her arrival her grandmother wanted to take her back home but her refusal was unwavering and absolute. She had heard the call of the Master and despite the sacrifices involved she wanted to make a generous response. She was accepted by the Sisters, received the habit in 1867 and was given the name Sr Adelaide. She was professed on March 4, 1869.

Adelaide was first employed as a helper in the orphanage and in house duties. Later Mother Mathilde placed her in charge of the babies, and she later founded the crèche in Singapore. She filled this challenging post with a devotedness and self-sacrifice that never failed in 40 years. After a hard day's work seeing to the care of the little ones, her nights were often spent consoling them.

Adelaide's frequent and prolonged vigils led to a disease of the eyes, first the right eye and two years later the left. Only then did she agree to reduce her work, but continued to support the young sister assigned to help her. As a result of an earlier accident, she could walk only with the support of a cane. Owing to her blindness, she had to be led to the chapel and elsewhere. Mass, prayer, and acts of resignation and patience then filled her days so that her confessor was to say of her: "Do not be anxious; her lamp is well trimmed, this lamp that does not shine, but gives all the more heat".

Many 'little angels' who had preceded Sr Adelaide into heaven must have been waiting at the gates to escort her when the Master called her home on June 17, 1911, the Vigil of Corpus Christi. At her funeral on June 19, both chapel and church were decorated as for a big feast day. In gardens and streets the lights shone brightly as the remains of the unknown and hidden servant of the Master passed. The Chinese people wished to honour Sr Adelaide with a first-class burial and accompanied her in large numbers to her last dwelling place.

Very many of our sisters, like Sr Adelaide, spent their entire lives in generous hidden service, supporting by their work, self-sacrifice and prayer the more visible activities of the community. Only in heaven will it be revealed how much their lives have contributed to the fruitfulness of the mission of the Institute.

4.9 Marguerita Yamagami Kakusan (1863 – 1939)

It is April 12, 1939. Sr Marguerita or, to call her by her Japanese name, Kaku Yamagami, slowly climbs the 'Bluff' hill in Yokohama. A tiny figure, bent now by age, she is following the path that she has taken every evening for 50 years. For half a century, she set out every morning under the boiling summer heat or braving the harsh winter cold of Japan on her rounds of mercy, her days filled with teaching, consoling and encouraging those she went to visit. She would climb the hill today for the last time. She seemed to know this and went to lie down as if to prepare for her death.

Yamagamisan was born on November 19, 1863, in Hachioji, Tokyo. When she was 15 years old she was baptised with her whole family and she joined the Infant Jesus Sisters in Yokohama at 18. She was professed on March 19, 1891, and faithfully lived her religious life as it was lived in those days, rising early to clean the chapel and attend Mass, praying her rosary and Way of the Cross, carrying out her duties in the community. Then she went outside to see what she could do for those who were sick, suffering or needy in any way. She often spent the whole day with these people, sometimes coming home late at night. She visited the hospital, spent time with married couples who were passing through a difficult phase, catechised and baptised. She also worked in a clinic that distributed Chinese medicine to people who were poor. Here, she had the reputation of being a real doctor! She gave the poor, sick people everything they needed, listening patiently to what they had to say, offering a word of counsel when it helped. So loved and revered was she by all, that Yamagamisan became known as the 'God of the Mountain and Mother of the Poor and the Orphaned'. For years she worked side by side with that other indefatigable woman, Mother Mathilde, who built the orphanage called 'Jinji Dou'. In 1880, Sumire School opened its doors to children from poor families.

Yamagami worked in both the orphanage and the school. She took care of over 3,000 children in all and kept in contact, writing their names in her famous family register.

Whenever she went out, she carried her notebook with the names of all those she had baptised, keeping a careful record of them – 5,678 in total! If ever any of her children were in difficulty they knew they could come 'home' to Yamagami and they would be welcomed.

Always simple and self-effacing, in April 1939 she received with dignity the public recognition of the city of Yokohama for her service to the underprivileged. Unable to attend the ceremony herself, a younger sister represented her and received the award on her behalf, three silver cups. When the award was brought to her lying in bed, her comment was typical: "If I had been able to attend the ceremony myself, I would have told those gentlemen that everything I ever did was done for Jesus Christ".

A few weeks later, she died peacefully on May 31, 1939. She was 76 years old. At her funeral, Bishop Chambon, Archbishop of Yokohama, expressed the wish: "If we could only understand that the source of Sr Marguerite's wonderful love was her deep faith and her desire that all might share in the happiness of finding God!"

4.10 Maria Montserrat España (1878 – 1959)

Carmen España was born in Barcelona on March 5, 1878. While still a young pupil in our school she felt a call to the religious life. However, her father was totally against this as his son and another daughter had already followed a similar call. It was only after a long period of struggle that she eventually was received as a sister on December 26, 1899, in our house in Barcelona, and received the name of María Monserrat. She made her first profession in Paris in 1902. She had always wanted to go to Malaysia as a missionary, but that was not to be.

She lived a very noteworthy life. After two years in Barcelona, she was called to Madrid to help in the foundation of the school there. An energetic worker, intelligent, reflective, kind and understanding, she became director of studies and gave a solid human, intellectual and Christian formation to the students. She also had a good relationship with the young sisters, encouraging them discreetly and kindly.

María Monserrat used to say frequently that "the salvation of souls costs dearly" and for this reason she accepted generously all the changes that came her way. In 1911 she was sent to Burgos to be head of the school. She also took charge of the Sunday school and looked after the postulants. Having then spent some years in Madrid and Barcelona, she was appointed to leadership in Fuenterrabía in 1934, during the period of the civil war. With untiring zeal, she spent much time with the families who were fleeing the war-torn areas, listening to, consoling and helping them in whatever way possible.

In the aftermath of this war, her strong qualities came to the fore in the work needed to restore order. Being a very balanced person, she knew how to take 'both sides of the story' into consideration.

In 1939 she was appointed to leadership in Barcelona, and took on the task of rebuilding the school destroyed in the war. With great trust in God, the sisters, teachers and friends, she devoted her energies to restoring educational facilities for the children. In the following years many vocations came through the school. She was always ready to help and encourage them, as well as their families.

In 1951, María Monserrat founded the house in San Sebastián and was appointed regional leader, with responsibility for overseeing all areas of ministry in Spain. It was with great joy that she set about taking back our house in Burgos, doing so very tactfully and wisely. In 1956 she was appointed the first provincial of Spain. This meant leaving San Sebastián and moving to Madrid. Although advanced in years and in declining health, she lived a very regular life of prayer, work and concern for others. Up to the end of 1957 she was able to visit all the houses in Spain. Finally, she was relieved of all responsibilities and entered into deep prayer for the remainder of her time, offering her suffering for the Church, the Institute and the province of Spain.

María Monserrat became more seriously ill in March 1959 and then followed a long and painful time of suffering. She lived all of this time with great humility, patience and gratitude for all that was being done for her. She expressed very often that her one desire was that her own will would become one with that of the will of God. On November 5, 1959, she was finally called to be with the Lord, whom she had so faithfully served for 56 years of religious life.

4.11 Martha Xavier (1886 – 1934)

Antoniammal Saveriapapillay, better known as Sr Martha Xavier, was born in Madras, India, on November 8, 1886. Later her family moved to Malaya where she came to know the Infant Jesus Sisters and heard the call to religious life. She received the religious habit on September 8, 1911, and made her first profession in Penang on January 4, 1919. As is true of the majority of Infant Jesus Sisters, we know only a few bare facts about her life.

After her first profession, Martha was sent to Kuala Lumpur, where she spent the whole of her religious life. Her humility and devotedness were remarkable. From all points of view, she was an exemplary religious. When our sisters opened a class for Indian children in Central Workshop, Sentul, Kuala Lumpur, Sr Martha was placed in charge and devoted herself to it to her last day, to the satisfaction of the parents, who had absolute confidence in her.

Sr Martha silently endured the illness that would eventually lead to her death for some time; only at the end of the year did she tell the superior how sick she was. The doctor who was consulted called for an emergency operation and, after six months of pain borne with resignation and courage, she passed away gently and simply, as she had lived, on the eve of the feast of the Sacred Heart, 1934. Like many of the sisters of the Institute, the inner story of her love, fidelity, devotedness and courage remains hidden in God.

4.12 Kitty Fitzgerald (1897 – 1945)

The Fitzgeralds of Kilbritten, Bandon, were an ancient Irish family rich in their traditional culture.

William Fitzgerald and his wife Ellen O'Shea gave four children to the Institute. Hannah (Sr Thomas) and Nora (Sr Andrew) both went to Malaya. Lena (Sr Martin) found her apostolate in Drishane and Ballyferriter, and Kitty (Sr Aidan) went to Japan and later to China. Sr Thomas died in 1928, in her sister's arms, on the day Sr Andrew arrived in Penang.

Sr Aidan was born on May 9, 1897, and was educated in Drishane. She followed her three sisters to the novitiate, was received in 1916 and professed in 1918. She spent two years in Weybridge and a few months in Singapore on her way to Japan. In Tokyo, she gave English lessons at the Futaba language school. Nothing seemed too hard for her.

In 1936, Monseigneur Blois asked the Institute for sisters for a very difficult mission in his diocese in Moukden, Manchuria, which was under Japanese occupation at that time. Sr Aidan was appointed leader of a group of sisters of five different nationalities – Japanese, Spanish, Italian, French and Irish – all of whom were in Japan at the time. On arrival in Moukden, they began by opening a nursery and giving private lessons.

It was a time of great unrest in China. The Japanese army had invaded the country and the communists were trying to take over.

The communists entered Manchuria from the south and continued to make trouble between what remained of the Japanese army and the Chinese, who were armed by the Russians.

Sr Aidan visited the camps and consoled the suffering. She also helped the 33 Belgian and Canadian priests and civilians who were interned in the Moukden Club near the convent. She lived in constant danger. The French Council in Moukden told how Sr Aidan placed herself in front of Russian soldiers who wanted to enter the house where some young Japanese girls lived. One soldier pushed her and hit her on the face with the butt of his revolver. She surprised even the soldiers with her bravery. Later an American colonel ordered a guard to protect the sisters.

Heroically she helped refugees of all nationalities, the Japanese fleeing from Chinese and Chinese fleeing from the communists. R Kennedy, SJ, a chaplain to the British army who knew Mother Aidan in Moukden, attested:

"Mother Aidan was a fearless woman, outstandingly brave, who radiated the charity of Christ. I think I have already told you something of the marvellous work she did among all sorts of refugees. She welcomed and helped Nazis thrown out of their homes with no place to go, Japanese women and children in search of asylum from the revenge of the Chinese, and Chinese people fleeing from the Communists. To Mother Aidan they were all one, whether Germans, Chinese, Americans or Japanese. They were unfortunate people, they were Christ's poor, and she did whatever she could for them all".

In 1945 she brought three Japanese orphans who had contracted typhoid to the convent. From them she too contracted the disease and died in December 1945, aged 48. She is buried in Moukden.

4.13 Mary Lunt (1905 – 2001)

When Mary was nearing the end of her long and eventful life, she was prevailed upon to tell some of her story. She was born in England in 1905. She loved to tell people that she was born on April 1, traditionally referred to as April Fools Day, but Mary was no fool.

Contrary to the custom then, she was not baptised, her parents deciding that when she grew up she could choose a faith for herself. Her memories of childhood were happy. She remembers loving books, while being at home with plants and animals and even with 'creepy-crawlies'. One particular experience, which she had when she was about six or seven, remained etched in her memory:

"I had climbed over the garden wall and wandered up a small hill. It was a perfect summer's day and I lay down on the short tuft listening to the bees busy in the clover and trefoil. The air was full of the scent of flowers and overhead a skylark was singing away in the blue sky. Everything was perfect. I was filled with the beauty of it all and yet I realised that I, myself, was different. I lacked something – I wasn't perfect – and I cried".

Though at home God was never mentioned nor prayers ever said, Mary was allowed to attend Sunday school with her school friends and here, at the age of eight, she was given a child's bible with pictures of famous paintings. She was captivated by 'the Man' she noticed in all of these pictures. Her mother dismissed her questions but Mary thought: "Anyway, I wish I were the little lamb He is carrying in His arms".

When Mary was older she was sent to school in Belgium to the Ursulines. She became a fluent French speaker. Here she was expected to do the same as all the other pupils, except receive the sacraments. So she was given a catechism: "I opened it and read with ever growing interest. Here were all the questions you ever asked yourself and all the answers that no one ever had given you". Then one day she was coming down a wide marble staircase in the school. The landing was bathed in the wonderful colours of a beautiful stained glass window above. She sat on the top step and gazed and gazed at these colours, and finally lifted her eyes to see the window itself. It depicted Jesus in Gethsemane. Suddenly she knew that Jesus was a real living person, very much alive and very much Himself. At that moment she fell in love with Him and never fell out again. She decided she wanted to be a Catholic. This caused such uproar at home that Mary postponed her baptism until she was 21. She took up work and the ordinary activities of young people of her age but she didn't forget. Then, when she was 21, she went along secretly to the Catholic Church and asked to be received. Because her parents still refused to hear of it the priest continually delayed her baptism until one day Mary rang the bell and declared: "either you baptise me or I will get transferred to London and become a Catholic there". So it was that, on December 8, before dawn, she crept unseen from her home and went to the church where she was baptised and received her first Holy Communion. She continued her work, played tennis and then met a young man named Tom. The time came when they decided to marry.

Once again the Lord was to have other plans.

One day Mary went to visit the Notre Dame sister who had prepared her for baptism. She describes what happened: "I was walking down the corridor thinking about my future home when I heard clearly and decisively 'This is your home'. My reaction was shock. 'What, me, a sister?'"

She tried to write all this off as the working of an overactive imagination. However, the nagging feeling would not go away and finally she broke the news to Tom and to her parents: she would not marry, she would be a religious. The sacrifices and the difficulties were enormous so she decided to go on a holiday away from England. She went to visit a friend who happened to be a novice with the Infant Jesus Sisters in Paris! While she was there she had a strong conviction that this was where the Lord was finally leading her, so she went home, gave up her work and sold what she had to raise enough money for her fare back to Paris. Her parents would not give their consent and broke off all contact with her.

Mary was professed in Paris in 1932 and spent four years teaching in Monaco. Finally, her request to go to Malaya was granted. She paid a brief visit to England and re-established a less strained relationship with her parents. She arrived in Penang and worked there happily until war broke out. Many courageous things she and the others did during those years are recorded. One episode that happened in Kuala Lumpur shows the same determination and faith. All Europeans were ordered to

evacuate. The sisters refused, not wanting to leave the orphan children behind nor abandon their own sisters to face the dangers alone. Some days later, a Japanese commander came to the convent accompanied by a group of fully armed soldiers. He asked why they had stayed behind and, when the sisters explained, he said, "Since you trusted us we will look after you", and he gave them some money.

When the war was over the sisters continued their apostolate. Then, in 1950, Mary was asked to return to England, to open a house in school in Liverpool for our sisters from Malaya who needed to come to study in England. Having spent two years establishing this new community Mary returned to Malaya for a short period before she set off once again on another missionary journey. This time it was to Thailand. The sacrifice of leaving her beloved Malaysia to move to Thailand was difficult for her: "I protested... I could never learn another language at my age... but I had to go... I had the feeling it was the end of everything". It was not the end of course.

Though there was a strong feeling of isolation and communication was difficult, Mary gradually dedicated herself as before to her apostolate and community.

Then one day she came in contact with people who were to become the great love of her life. She was taken to visit the government leprosarium on the outskirts of Khon Kaen. She discovered many children who never went to school and who were often hungry. She returned to her own school and mobilised a team of her students. Every Saturday they went out to teach the children in the leprosarium, each 'big girl' taking a little group of five children for class while Mary visited the families bringing bags of rice. Finally Mary moved with Sr Jerome (a Thai sister) to live among the people and to open a school for the children within the leprosarium.

The Redemptorist Fathers helped to build the school, dig a well for a clean water supply, and provide a small house for Mary and Jerome.

Every Saturday the sisters would also gather the small children who did not come to school in order to give them a decent meal. She recalled the first meal: "We brought all the ingredients and soon the meal was cooking away for 200 little ones... I went out to discover that at least 500 children had arrived! I told the teachers to give out as much as they had and then turn the cooking pot upside down, which meant that there is no more". At the end Jerome called Mary and said: "You know they all had some, even seconds, and there is still some curry left." They both looked at the children and looked at the pot and said with one voice "That's Jesus, He loves children".

In 1978, Mary decided the time had come to leave Thailand. Our Thai sisters were now more numerous and able to continue their mission and Mary came back to England, to East Acton. Here she took up a completely new apostolate, visiting the inmates of Wormwood Scrubs Prison, teaching English and acting as a catechist attached to the chaplaincy. She worked there for 10 years until increasing deafness forced her to retire.

She went to live for a while in the Weybridge community. One final sacrifice was asked of Mary. When our community in Weybridge closed in 1997, Mary went to Ireland, spending her last years away from her homeland. On March 12, 2001, she felt weak and spent the day in bed. The following day she died peacefully, aged 96, and is buried in Drishane.

Once she was asked by one of the prisoners whom she visited: "Tell us, sister, did you ever regret having chosen to be what you are?" She answered with a hearty laugh: "Not for a split second".

4.14 Pauline Staquet (1915 – 1989)

Pauline Staquet was born in 1915 in the department of Aisne, in the north of France. She was one of a large, happily united family, several of whom became religious in various places. After her first profession in 1938 she was sent to join the community in Liesse. Soon afterwards, World War II broke out. The house was bombed in 1940 and the community had to flee to Fonneuve towards the south.

Sr Paul was full of life. The story goes that, one day, as a postulant, she discovered the community having their traditional walk in the garden and she could not resist showering them with the watering hose lying nearby!

Her jokes and cheerful personality helped to lighten life for her sisters. She was a talented artist, using her painting and embroidery skills in the service of the community.

She had always expressed her desire to be sent on mission to faraway Asia. It was the custom at that time to prepare sisters for life in the tropics by sending them to the south of France where the climate

was hottest. So Sr Paul was sent to Monaco, the community that welcomed future missionaries. Here, while teaching in the primary school, she set about studying the English language with the energy and enthusiasm that characterised her throughout her life.

In 1947 Sr Paul set sail from Marseilles on the long sea voyage to Malaya. She stayed there for 30 years. Always available for any kind of service, she accepted responsibility for the formation of the novices, but her preferred ministry was to those who were poorest and least privileged. From our beginnings in Malaya babies were confided to the sisters' care either because they were abandoned or because their parents could not care for them.

They became a large family. When they grew up, some became religious and many left their convent home to make their way in the world.

However, some remained, the majority of whom had serious disabilities, which may have been the reason why they were abandoned initially. Sr Paul took these women to her heart. Without any professional experience in this field she studied the subject, received the necessary training and involved qualified helpers. She did all she possibly could to give these women as much self-reliance and independence as possible. How many obstacles she had to overcome! How many unrewarded efforts! Sr Paul persevered through thick and thin. She was convinced that a specially equipped house was needed for these disabled women and she managed in the end to open a home to welcome them.

Let us listen to what some of these women had to say about her: *"Sr Paul has opened our sheltered workshop. With other sisters and friends to help, she has taught us to sew, to make beautiful things from almost nothing. Today, though deaf and dumb, I am a good dressmaker."* *"It is thanks to Sr Paul that I can move about more easily. She taught us how to do all kinds of exercises. Today, many of us can walk, sit, stand up, and use a wheelchair. She sent me to school to learn sign language."*

"Sr Paul encouraged me to do exercises for my voice and now I can sing well and enjoy it. For years and years I had nothing I could call my own. Sr Paul bought me a wheelchair. She taught me how to sit up, how to put myself to bed. Thank you, Sr Paul, you taught me how to live, to be attentive to others, to sing and dance."

In 1977, Sr Paul returned to France knowing that other sisters were now able to carry on. At first she was sent to Montpellier to adjust to being home in France. During her 30 years away, life in the communities had greatly changed. Later on she was asked to go to Toulon to take on responsibility for the house for our older sisters. She brought the same creativity and enthusiasm to this work as she had demonstrated in Malaysia.

Her health was deteriorating and she retired to our community in Marseille. But could Sr Paul ever retire? Very discreetly and with great warmth she continued to use her diminishing energy to bring comfort and help to those around her who were suffering.

Finally, knowing that she was worn out, that she had a terminal illness, she requested the Last Sacraments, taking responsibility for her life to the end as she had always done. She died on October 18, 1989.

The sisters in France who had lived closely with her during her final years in Marseilles joined with the disabled women in Malaysia who 'had so loved' her, saying: "Happy are those whose life has been a sign of love for those confided to their care".

4.15 Anna Le Van Duc (1915 – 2002)

The Institute began to make contact with Vietnam in the early 21st century. This was not, however, our first connection with the Vietnamese people. The Institute already had one Vietnamese sister who was professed in Singapore on September 28, 1938. Her name was Anna Le Van Duc. Anna was born on May 11, 1915 in Mytho, Vietnam. She had two sisters and two brothers. Vietnam had been a French colony; French was the official language and, as her father was an ambassador to France, she and her sisters were sent as boarders to our Infant Jesus Sisters in Monaco. That set the direction of Anna's future. She felt called to religious life and entered the novitiate in Paris. She then went as a missionary to Singapore and made first profession there on September 28, 1938.

Her father used to visit Anna quite often during her early days in Singapore. If Anna was feeling low or troubled he would make the Stations of the Cross with her and she would feel encouraged. Her father was a man of deep faith and commitment.

Anna was a gifted musician with a flair for dance and drama, a colourful character who used her gifts with a passion to benefit her pupils and other people. Though qualifications were not required at the time, this never hampered Anna. She was highly gifted, was an excellent teacher and loved teaching. As well as teaching children how to play the piano, she also played and taught violin and guitar.

Anna was gifted with a good sense of humour that was to stand to her in difficult times. During the Japanese occupation of Singapore when the sisters were evacuated to the jungle area of Bahau in south Malaysia, Anna was the life and soul of the community there. In later years she could hold her listeners enthralled as she told sad and funny stories of those days. They help us to imagine how Anna spent this difficult time. Bahau was dense jungle with no amenities. The sisters had to work hard to survive and care for the orphans they had brought with them. They tilled the uncultivated ground and planted their own vegetables. They dug a well and Anna used to tell how one sister's false teeth fell into it one day! They had one precious hen and a cock. The hen laid her first egg on a sister's bed with the cock perched overhead protecting her! One night, Anna placed a drink beside her bed and went off to have her bath. When she came back the light was off and, as Anna took her drink, she almost swallowed a lizard! Next morning she vividly demonstrated with all her acting ability how quickly she spat it out! No doubt little episodes such as this helped to keep up the sisters' spirits until the war was over and they returned to Singapore.

Anna made final profession on September 8, 1944. After some years in Singapore, she went to Malacca and then to Ipoh, Malaysia, where she continued her teaching ministry and shared her many gifts. She returned for a while to Europe in 1956, where her mission was in France and Monaco. In 1968, she went to England and spent some time in Weybridge and in Liverpool where she studied eurhythmics.

When she returned to Singapore, she continued to give piano lessons and to teach singing in our schools. Her pupils often took part in local educational events and festivals such as The Youth Festival or Children's Day.

Anna was ahead of her time in many ways. She was a woman of strong faith, which sustained her in times of sorrow and trouble, and she had no difficulty in letting her opinions be known. She suffered much during the war in Vietnam because of her great love for her family and her country. She suffered still more with the takeover of Vietnam by communism. Her brother René was sent to a concentration camp to be 're-educated' and Anna prayed for him and suffered with him continually during his time in prison. It was at this time also that she choreographed a beautiful Vietnamese prayer dance, which she loved to perform when an occasion arose.

Eventually, her brother was set free and her whole family moved to France. Anna herself finally left Singapore and retired to Jumilhac, Paris, in 1982. Here she continued to use her wonderful gifts of music and dance to express her faith and joy in God. Her final mission was to her own beloved Vietnamese people, many of whom were asylum seekers in Paris at that time. She sought them out and saw to their needs. Anna died in Jumilhac, at the end of a long life of generous service, on October 25, 2002.

4.16 Odilia Giovanzana (1919 – 2005)

Sr Odilia Giovanzana was born in 1919 in San Gottardo, Italy. This is a small town in Lombardia perched between Bergamo and Lake Lecco. Her family was not well off but they were happy and united. They had dignity and deep faith. This background certainly influenced Odilia for the rest of her life. She, too, had strong faith. She was hard on herself but always gentle with others. She was very fond of her family, particularly her two priest brothers with whom she had a deep spiritual bond.

Odilia entered the Institute at Cenate at a very early age and stayed there for several years while she attended the secondary school in Bergamo and did her novitiate. Afterwards, she used to teach the poor families of the town.

There she revealed her passion for teaching, to which she dedicated a major part of her life. After her final profession she was sent to a community in Rome, from which she could go to university and qualify to teach in the new secondary school that was about to open there. She was, in fact, one of the first teachers in the school. She stayed there for 40 years, and was loved by everyone, teaching with great passion.

She had a cordial, affectionate and jovial relationship with all the young people, their parents and her colleagues. Even after many years, she still remembered everyone's situations, problems and difficulties. She was always ready to welcome people and listen to them at any time.

Later on, she was asked to leave the school in Rome, which she had seen develop, and which she loved so much. It was a sacrifice for her but she accepted in total generosity and availability.

She then lived in two neighbourhoods of Rome. The first was Palmarola, where she stayed for two years; the second was Borghesiana, where she lived for eight years. Here she gave the parish and the people her deepest and most precious gifts: her capacity to relate to others, her depth of love, and her passion for music and singing.

Odilia was humble and discreet. She knew how to get to know the neighbourhoods by visiting the elderly and the sick, welcoming youngsters who had problems at school, enriching the liturgical celebrations, and participating in the parish choir, playing the organ whenever it was needed. She was always gentle, never imposing herself. She was available when required, even during her last year when a serious illness left her with little energy.

This is what a woman from the neighbourhood once said to Sr Odilia herself: "You visited the families of the elderly and the sick. Neither the heat nor the cold nor sickness stopped you. Whoever had the privilege of meeting you and knowing you had the joy of receiving comfort, hope and serenity. Even the most serious problems became bearable". When illness forced her to leave Rome definitively, Odilia accepted to live two more years in the community of her hometown, San Gottardo.

Here she was involved once again in parish life, playing the organ and teaching singing. She spent her last year in the retirement home of Cenate, where she died serenely on December 26, 2005.

4.17 Francis Chuchit Phonsuwan (1929 – 2000)

At Sr Francis' funeral mass on September 1, 2000, the church was full of people: priests, religious, teachers, students, professors, parents, ex-pupils and people with disabilities. They came from far and wide, from all walks of life, to pay their respects and to remember how this woman had touched their lives.

Sr Francis was born in Bangkok on March 25, 1929. She was the eldest in a family of 10 children, and had two brothers and seven sisters. She joined the Infant Jesus Sisters on September 1, 1951, in Penang, Malaysia, and made her first profession there on September 6, 1954. She professed her final vows on September 8, 1957, in Paris. She was a member of the first group of four Infant Jesus Sisters who went to Thailand to re-open our mission there, on February 16, 1957, at the invitation of the bishop of Chanthaburi. He wanted the sisters to open a school.

While waiting for the school building to be finished, the Institute received an invitation from the Redemptorist priests for the sisters to open a school at Holy Redeemer Church, Bangkok. This was intended for Thai students and for international pupils whose parents came to work in Thailand. So Francis became the first principal of this Holy Redeemer School.

Francis' whole life was devoted to educating and instructing at all levels. She embodied for many the spirit of the origins of the Institute. She "taught the way of salvation" while ensuring that people received the human formation that is essential for them to live according to their dignity as children of God. Francis was a teacher but her ministry was not confined to the classroom. She was a pioneer in daring to further the all-round growth of the people she met, especially those who were poor or had disabilities. She encouraged and supported them, identifying herself with the "little ones". She mixed happily with them, listening to them, teaching them, and opening the school playground for the local youngsters, even when it meant an occasional broken window. If one of them had difficulty in finding a place in a school or university, she would accompany them on the tuk tuk (local transport) to ensure they were well received. She was warmhearted and generous, approachable and kind, making no distinction between persons, so that many poor people came to see her as the one they could turn to in all kinds of difficulties. People called her Khun Mae, which means Mother. She could be seen visiting families in the slums or spending time with those who were better off. She was well known at the Education Ministry, with every one asking about Sr Francis.

This warmth and desire to educate was not limited to her students; she also encouraged our own sisters to further their studies. She did all she could to ensure that they were well equipped for the ministry of education entrusted to them. Her humanity expressed itself in her simple love for them, often coming home with treats and surprises for them. Her concern reached out to the parents and the teachers, helping them in every way she could when their families had problems.

When Francis' health brought her life as a teacher to an end, she continued to serve others. As she grew older she translated Institute documents and books into Thai for the sisters. In her final weeks her concern was that she would be given the time to finish and return safely a document she was working on. She died on September 1, 2000, aged 72.

The fond memories many people had of Francis are summed up in a special way by the Thai names given to her: 'Good Educator' and 'Mother of the Little Ones'.

Many more stories of our sisters remain to be written. These few examples exemplify for us the spirit of the Institute made flesh in the lives of ordinary women from all over the world down through the centuries. They inspire us through their holy lives and help us through their prayers.

Conclusion

“Wherever the river flows, life will abound... fruit trees of every kind shall grow” (Ezek 47:8)

From its wellspring in Rouen in 17th century France, the Institute has flowed for over three-and-a-half centuries, shaping and being shaped by history. Never a mighty river, it became a living stream spreading out to reach distant lands. Many soils enriched it, contributing to its spirituality and its mission, as it made its way to countries near and far. At times it flowed with great vitality and energy, spreading out and covering new ground. At other times, threatened by drought, it thinned to a trickle. When destructive winds blew it went underground, flowing quietly and courageously out of sight till the danger passed. Sometimes it was forced to flow in narrow channels. Sometimes, when its way was blocked, it changed course and forged out a new bed. Now and then it took a mighty leap into the unknown. Wherever it flowed, in sunshine or in rain, it sought to bring life, comfort, growth and encouragement. It sought out especially those most in need of the water it had to offer. Through its journey of more than 300 years, the Institute tried to remain faithful to its source, following the way chosen for it to live the Gospel. It drew its own life from the Spirit of the Incarnate Word, who came to live among us and teach us the way to God and to human wholeness.

Today, as it enters the 21st century, it still offers to the world the water of its spirit: courage, freedom, detachment, availability, humanity and simplicity. For its own future it continues to rely on God, its only security, from whose heart it still flows. It sings on its way, as Nicolas Barré taught it to from the beginning:

“No feather borne hither and thither on the wind moves with such grace and freedom as do they who allow themselves to be carried by God without resisting”.

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