

Malaysia

The Sisters arrived in Malaya as it then was in 1852 - the first mission on foreign soil since the Founding of the Institute in 1666. The first School as well as an Orphanage was in Penang and others soon followed. Today the work of education in both formal and informal settings continues in Kuala Lumpur, Bukit Nanas, Kapar, Rawang, Port Dickson, Seremban, Cameron Highlands, Bagan Serai, Ipoh, Sitiawan, Telok Intan, Johor Bahru, Melaka, Keningau, Penampang as well as in Penang.

(Name changed to Malaysia in 1957 after Independence)

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.

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.