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LITTLE HANDMAIDS OF THE CHURCH

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THE LITTLE HANDMAIDS OF THE CHURCH

The native community of the Little Handmaids of the Church, in Bangladesh, was founded in 1956 by Right Reverend Raymond Larose, C.S.C., to meet a great need in the Chittagong diocese.

From 1928 to 1950, the Holy Cross Sisters, in charge of primary schools, directed the girls having a religious vocation, to Calcutta, to the community of their choice. When the travel formalities became obligatory (passport and visa) between India and Pakistan, there was no possibility of crossing the border; so, the sisters themselves felt they had to provide for those girls called to God's service.

There was also another great need in the diocese: the education of the girls and women. Schools were for boys only, especially in the villages. Only the orphans and boarders in our institutions could receive a proper education. In such a situation native sisters could be a great help and could perform a valuable apostolate in that field.

In Toomiliah, a village in the Dacca diocese, there was a native community (the Associates of Mary Queen of the Apostles) founded some fifteen years before by an American Sister of the Holy Cross, Sister Rose Bernard, and Bishop Timothy Crowley and it was flourishing. Bishop Larose approached the Archbishop of Dacca for an arrangement for the girls from the Chittagong diocese but without success. So the sisters had to solve that double problem themselves.

In order to have girls understand the obligations of religious life, a girls' high school was opened in Padrishibpur in the Chittagong diocese. For six years the Bishop with his diocesan team of priests, brothers and sisters studied a double possibility: to open a Holy Cross novitiate or to start a native community. On both sides, there were advantages and disadvantages.

The Holy Cross Community offered the material security, the richness and solidity of its tradition, the openness to progress, the intellectual, moral, and religious formation, the example and support of the older sisters. But the health of the missionaries could not permit a complete adaptation to Bengali life and customs. The difference in culture and mentalities between the western Holy Cross sisters and the native sisters would cause much suffering on both sides. Consequently, from the very beginning, there would be different ways of living that would force the Bengali sisters to live as foreigners in their own native land. Intuition as well as creativity would give way to imitation and passivity. God does not ask the ones He chooses to leave aside their mother tongue, their culture, their nationality, but rather to consecrate all that heritage and their own persons.

The native community would allow more understanding among its members. For the advancement of the local Church, a native community would be very precious and valuable. After the independence of India in 1947 and the partition between Hindus and Moslems, a great effort was made in the whole diocese to revive Bengali customs and culture. It was a "must" for native sisters to keep and practice their background, culture and customs.

The members of the diocesan team came to the conclusion that a Bengali girl cannot be fully happy nor use her talents fully to the service of Christ and his Church, if not in her own culture and environment. The young Bengali girl joining a western community feels an inferiority complex that paralyzes her ideas of personal perfection, apostolic zeal and ability.

Finally the decision was taken by the Bishop. Bishop Larose, a saintly man, opted for a Bengali community in the Chittagong diocese. For the formation of the candidates he asked for a Holy Cross sister who accepted that mission and saw it as the expression of God's holy will. The Bishop also appointed as a spiritual adviser, Father Martial St-Pierre, C.S.C. who was replaced by Father Philip Payant, C.S.C. a few months later.

In 1955, among the first girls who had passed the matriculation examination, two opted for religious life and they were taken as teachers in the primary school for a while. From April to December 1956, we, Father Payant and I, studied the Constitutions prepared by the Sacred Congregation of the Faith for religious women in mission countries. We adapted chapters to the mentality, customs and culture of the country. The approval from the Sacred Congregation came within a few months.

I visited the candidates quite often and consulted them about the habit, a uniform of the country, signifying their engagement in poverty and virginity, a full white saree with a separate veil of the same material.

The question of a name arose. I proposed to the Bishop that they be called "The Little Handmaids of the Church" for religious are supposed to be at the service of God and his family, the Church. Jesus, in the Bible, is often presented as "the Servant" and did not Mary consider herself as the Handmaid of the Lord? We are very far from being like them; we are so poor, so little! The Little Handmaid would have to cultivate the virtues proper to a servant: availability, active and joyous obedience, interest and zeal for the Kingdom of their Master and Lord.

The community of The Little Handmaids of the Church was henceforth the object and preoccupation of the diocesan team as to how to meet the greatest needs in the diocese: a community of Bengali women who, according to the call of God, would extend the Kingdom of God through the education and training of Bengali women, their sisters in Christ.

The realization of this project took place the 28th of December, 1956, when Sister Alphonse-de-Liguori, with Miss Emili Gonzalves, went to live in the Baptist Para area, in a hired house, among Christians of different denominations. Four other girls joined the first one within six months. They were

initiated to the religious life and their "Mother" as they used to call me, was initiated to all their customs. It was a wonderful experience!

After a year, they had to leave their friends of the Baptist Para to enter a new bamboo house, in the southern corner of the mission compound in Barisal, in order to start the novitiate, according to the Canon Law, before the Second Vatican Council. There was an atmosphere of silence, solitude and reflection necessary for their two years of spiritual formation.

During the two other years of the scholasticate, we tried to develop the sisters' aptitudes for manual work and intellectual development. They started their apostolate, teaching catechism in primary and high schools and in a poor para of Barisal called Bashtola. A cooperative for women grouped more than 300 of them under the care of the sisters with the help of their friends of Baptist Para.

As the number of sisters increased, there came a time to open another house in one of the villages. Three sisters went to Padrishipur and the others remained at the Mother House in Barisal under the authority of native superiors.

In 1968, I came for my holidays in Canada, and the circumstances did not allow me to go back. In 1969 a chapter of election was held and since that time the sisters have had a native superior general. They opened a second house in Narikelbari and in both places they took over the direction of primary schools. The hostel for girls and the dispensaries, to replace the Holy Cross sisters, were not in accord with the aim of the community. One of them became mistress of novices in 1970.

For seventeen years, the community went through many trials and almost died out. The superior general resigned and left. Nine of the professed sisters had to leave also. There remained but only seven. Fathers and

sisters of Holy Cross helped them as far as they could, but the lack of vocations discouraged them.

In 1985, the four bishops of Bangladesh studied the situation; Bishop Joachim Rozario of Chittagong took it in his hands. He closed the two houses, gathered the sisters in Gournadi and asked Sister Eveline, C.S.C. (Agathe Drouin) to stay with the sisters for a year and help them with their problems. Indeed, there were many problems: they had much to forgive among themselves and they had to renew their relations as well as their religious life. Sister Eveline was not their superior, but a spiritual adviser and she did it very effectively.

As the L.H.C. had much correspondence with girls interested in the community, Sister Eveline decided to go and visit them by the end of the year. A vocational summer camp brought them with others. They visited the place chosen for a new novitiate. The 17th of January 1987, six of them entered as aspirants; their parents came to entrust their daughters into the hands of Sister Eveline. The other sisters remained in Gournadi, helping the parish priest in his responsibilities, especially in liturgy.

A year later, in a new chapter, Sister Arati was elected superior general and mistress of novices. Since then, God's blessing has clearly been seen over the community. In 1986, it received four candidates and in 1989, three.

In 1989, three of the older sisters opened a house in Chittagong Hill Tracts, where Holy Cross Fathers have been missionaries for about forty years. One of the Tripura girls is presently in Gorarpar as a candidate. After Easter, five novices will make their first profession.

The aim of The Little Handmaids of the Church is first of all to follow and imitate Jesus and Mary and be servants of the Father, in their simple life

of Nazareth. Secondly it is to let the Father and His love be known through their teaching and service. They live in the villages among the poor and are engaged in pastoral and liturgical work. They have no institutions as such; they visit the people, help the catechists, the teachers, the teen-aged girls, the young mothers and their mothers-in-law. They assist the parish priest and prepare the people for the reception of the sacraments and for the celebration of the main feasts of the Church. Their spirituality is related to the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. I am sure that Father Moreau is proud, now, of his grand-daughters; proud that his spirit is still alive in Bangladesh in her native daughters.

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