

THE LITTLE HANDMAIDS OF THE CHURCH

The native community of the Little Handmaids of the Church, in Bangladesh was founded in 1951 by Right Reverend Raymond Larose, C.S.C., to meet a great need in Chittagong Diocese.

From 1928 to 1950, the Holy Cross Sisters, in charge of primary schools, directed the girls having a religious vocation, to Calcutta, in the community of their choice. When the formalities were obligatory (passport and visa) between India and Pakistan, there was no possibility to cross the border, so, we 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. Native sisters could be of a great help, and could do a valuable apostolate in that field.

In Toomilia, Dacca diocese, was a native community, the Sisters of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, founded some fifteen years before by a Holy Cross American Sister. It was flourishing. Bishop Larose approached the Archbishop for an arrangement but without success. We had to settle that double problem.

First of all we opened a girls' High School in Padrishibpur, in order to have girls able to understand the obligations of religious life. During six years, the Bishop with his diocesan team of priests, brothers and sisters studied a double possibility scheme: to open a novitiate of Holy Cross Sisters or to start a native community. On both sides, were advantages and disadvantages.

Holy Cross offers the material security, the richness and solidity of her tradition, the openness to progress, the intellectual, moral and religious formation, the example and support of the eldest sisters. But the health of the missionaries could not permit a complete adaptation to Bengali life and customs, consequently, from the very beginning, there would be different way of living, difficulties, mitigation of cultural richness of the country that will bring the Bengali sisters to live as foreigners in their native land. The difference in mentalities would cause much suffering on both sides. The intuition as well as creativeness would have place for the imitation and the passivity — God does not ask to the ones He chooses to leave aside, sacrificing their mother tongue, their culture, their nationality — but to consecrate all that patrimony and their own persons.

The native community would not offer so much guarantee, but would allow more comprehension between the members and a complete blooming. For the advancement of the local Church, a native community would be very precious.

The members of the diocesan team came to the conviction that a Bengali girl cannot be fully happy nor spread out her talents to the service of Christ and his Church if not in her own environment. The young Bengali girl joining an occidental community feels an inferior complex that paralyses her ideal on personal perfection ground as well as on the apostolic one.

Finally, the decision was taken by the diocesan Bishop; he opted for a Bengali community. For their formation, he asked for a Holy Cross sister who accepted that mission as the expression of God's holy will. He also appointed as a spiritual advisor, 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 non-matriculated girls, two opted for religious life and they were taken as teachers in the primary school for a while. From April to December 1956, we, Fr. Payant and I, studied the Constitutions prepared by the Sacred Congregation of Faith, for religious women in mission countries. We adopted the main chapters to the mentality and customs of the country. The approval from that 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 sari with a separate veil of the same material).

Regarding the *name* to give, I proposed it to the Bishop with the explanation: "The Little Handmaids of the Church" The religious are at the service of God and of 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 to be like them, we are so poor, so *little*! The Little Handmaids will have to cultivate the virtues proper to the servants: availability, active and joyous obedience, interest and zeal for the Kingdom of their Master and Lord.

Apostolic project:

The community of The Little Handmaids of the Church was therefore the object of the preoccupations of the diocesan team to meet two great needs in the diocese: a community of Bengali women who according to the call of God, will extend the Kingdom of God through Adult women education.

Realization

The realization of the project took place on the 28th of December 1956, when Sister Alphonse-de-Liguori with Miss Emily Gonzalves, the only one who answered God's call, went to the Baptist Para, in a hired house among Christians of different denominations. Four other girls joined the first one within six months. They were initiated to 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, we had to have our friends of Baptist Para, to enter in a new bamboo house, in the north corner of the mission compound in Barisal, in order to start the novitiate, according to 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 scholasticate, we tried to develop their aptitudes to manual works and intellectual development. They started their apostolate, teaching catechism in primary and

high school and in a poor "para" of Barisal (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 the sisters increased there came a time to open another house in a village. Three sisters went to Padrishipur and the other professed sisters remained at the 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. They had, in 1969 a chapter of election and since that time they have a native superior general. They opened a second house in Narikelbari and in both places they took the primary school direction, the hostel for girls and the dispensaries, to replace the Holy Cross Sisters, but it was 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. The superior general resigned and left. Nine of the professed sisters had to leave also, they 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 bishops of Bangladesh studied the situation and Bishop Joachim Rozario of Chittagong took it in his hands. He closed the two houses, gathered sisters in Gournadi and asked Sr. Eveline-du-Rosaire, c.s.c. (Agathe Drouin), to stay with them for a year and help them in their problems.

Indeed, there were many problems, they had much to forgive between themselves and they had to renew their relations as well as their religious life. Sr. Eveline-du-Rosaire was not superior, but a spiritual advisor and she did it properly.

As the L.H.C. had much correspondence with girls interested in the community, with them Sr. Eveline-du-Rosaire decided to go and visit them. A vocation summer camp gathered them with some 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 in the hands of Sr. Eveline-du-Rosaire. The other Sisters remained in Gournadi, helping the Parish priest in his responsibilities, especially in liturgy.

A year later in a new chapter, Sr. Arati was elected superior general and mistress of novices. Since God's blessing is clearly seen over the community, in 1988, they got four candidates and in 1989, three more.

In January 1989, three of the eldest sisters opened a house in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where Fathers of Holy Cross were as missionaries for about 40 years. One of Tripura girls is presently in Gorarpar (as 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, Servants of the Father, in their simple life of Nazareth. Secondary, to let the Father and his love be known through teaching and service. They live among the poor in the villages and are engaged in pastoral and liturgical work. They have no institutions as such, they visit the people, help the catechists, the teachers, the girls, the young mothers, and their mothers-in-law. They

second the Parish priest and prepare people for reception of sacraments and to the celebration of the main feasts of the Church. Their spirituality is grafted to the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ.

I think that Father Moreau is proud now of his grand daughters; his spirit is still alive in Bangladesh for the Golden Jubilee of the Congregation of the Little Handmaids of the Church — on the 50th anniversary of their foundation, December 28, 2006.

Lucille Latour, C.S.C.