

# FAITHFUL COMPANIONS OF JESUS IN ENGLAND 1830 – 1858 Sister Mary Clare Holland fcJ

## INTRODUCTION

The Venerable Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy, Vicomtesse de Bonnault d'Houet, was born in Châteauroux, France, on 21 September 1781. She founded her Society in Amiens in 1820. Ten years later, in 1830, the Lord of History who, she maintained, arranged all things himself, working through the events and people of that time, led her to the shores of Britain. There she was to find an outlet for her missionary zeal for she arrived at a propitious moment, just as the vineyard was ready to be worked for the Lord.

## ENGLAND: MISSIONARY TERRITORY

On April 10, 1829, the third Catholic Relief Act became law. Known generally as the Catholic Emancipation Act it was the last of those measures (1778, 1791) which brought to an end the civil, ecclesiastical, social and political disabilities under which Catholics in England had lived throughout penal times. True there were still, until 1926, certain restrictions remaining on the Statute Book but, apart from periods of tension, e.g. Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850 and the Eucharistic Congress in 1908, they were not invoked. Catholics were now able openly to own land without fear of dispossession, to have their own chapels and schools and to share in the government and defence of the realm. In a word, to meet their fellow-countrymen on equal terms.

But the Catholics of England were timid in asserting themselves.

Their ambition seemed to be just to live simply and to practise their religion unmolested. The fear of drawing attention to themselves and thus arousing hostility, as had happened in the Gordon Riots of 1780, prevented them from taking advantage of their newly recognised status until the mid nineteenth century. The greater number of the Catholics were to be found in the country areas. There, the upper classes who had remained faithful had lived on their estates, had their own chaplains and opened their chapels to those of the lower classes who were thus able to attend Mass, receive the sacraments and hear instructions in the Faith.

By 1830 another class of Catholics was growing up of whose existence the former group were unaware but whose presence was to make itself felt and ultimately to form the backbone of the Catholic Church in this country. As a result of increasing urbanisation consequent on the Industrial Revolution, Catholics from the countryside were infiltrating the towns in search of work. The migrant Irish who came over for seasonal employment were also being attracted to stay by the prospect of jobs in the factories and workshops.

England was missionary territory, regarded as such by Rome, since she had no hierarchy of bishops in ordinary. The country was divided into four districts each ruled by a Vicar Apostolic who was responsible to the Congregation of Propaganda Fide. Many of the clergy were in the appointment of the Catholic nobility and landed families, who employed them as their chaplains and often

treated them as their servants. This caused tension when the bishops began to assume control of the clergy and redirect their services to areas of greatest need.

## FRENCH INFLUX OF THE 1790s

The arrival in Britain during the 1790s of great numbers of emigrés fleeing from the terror of Revolutionary France had opened the eyes of the non-Catholic population and broken down many of the barriers of prejudice and hostility. The heart of the Englishman was moved, then as now, for the persecuted of countries other than his own. Not only were the French emigrés and their clergy given freedom to practise their religion without hindrance, but vast sums of money were collected by public subscription for their upkeep, and Oxford University, stronghold of Anglicanism, printed Latin New Testaments and sets of Breviaries for their use. Many of the French clergy returned this hospitality by working for the country that harboured them. They founded Mass centres and chapels and taught in schools to which there came not only the children of the French emigrés but those of the locality as well. This was especially true in London and its environments but also further afield, in the Midlands and the North, even to Glasgow, Edinburgh and Swansea.

## FRENCH COLONY IN SOMERS TOWN

Famous among these priests was the Abbé Carron who was exiled from France in September 1792 for refusing to sign the oath required of the clergy by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He had started a number of good works in Jersey but under the Aliens Act of 1796 he was transferred to London. He attached himself to the group of French clergy and people who had settled in the vicinity of Tottenham Court Road. He began schools for the children of the French emigrés, but the newly developing area of Somers Town on the other side of the New Road (Euston Road) offered him more scope. So he moved his schools, doubling their number, and opened two fee-paying schools for the wealthier classes, and two charity schools for children of the poor. From being a builder's speculation that had remained unfinished, the Square and the Polygon in its centre began to hum with the activity of the Abbé's many charitable and social works. Finally, in 1808, the Abbé Carron crowned his works in Somers Town by building a church, dedicating both church and schools to St Aloysius, the patron saint of youth. The charity schools were special objects of his zeal. He was a genius at raising money so that by the time he left for France at the request of Louis XVIII after the restoration of the monarchy in 1814, the schools were financially secure as well as being well organised and disciplined.

The Abbé Carron had trained to take his place a young tonsured Capuchin, Fr John Nerinckx. He had escaped from French Guinea whither he had been deported after the revolutionaries had over-run his native Belgium. He had arrived in Liverpool on 21 August 1799, and went to London to await a suitable opportunity of returning to Belgium. There he came within the orbit of the Abbé Carron who recognised his possibilities, helped him to ordination on 10 June 1802, and associated him in his charitable works. When the Abbé Carron set off for France he was satisfied that he was leaving the mission of Somers Town in good hands. This trust was more than justified by the work of Fr Nerinckx during the next forty years.

It had become quite obvious to the Abbé Carron that the mission would become anglicised. He himself had accepted English pupils into his schools. When he

returned to France, most of the masters, mistresses and pupils of French origin went with him. The fee-paying schools, according to the *Laity Directory*, were handed over to be run privately, so Fr Nerinckx was left with the charity schools. These he tried to maintain with the help of his sister, Miss Nerinckx, who had joined him in London.

## CATHOLIC CHARITY SCHOOLS

Charity schools came into existence in the 18th century as a means of helping the destitute poor. They began among Catholics as a form of mutual self-help for those on the borderland of starvation. The funds were often organised and dispensed by the keepers of taverns. In 1764 the Charitable Society for the Relief of Poor Children was founded, and various other charities such as St Patrick's Charity Schools, Soho, 1803 grew up as a result of the activities of priests now founding inner-city parishes. In 1811 there was a fusion into the Associated Catholic Charities - precursor of the Catholic Poor Schools Committee and the Catholic Education Council (1905) of today. The presence of increasing numbers of Catholic poor in London, consequent on the English movement from country to town, was aggravated by the influx of Irish seeking employment during the latter part of the 18th century and again at the end of the French wars. The Irish tended to fasten on to already existing groups of Catholics, especially if they belonged to their own ethnic culture, thus adding to the problems of overcrowding, bad housing and insanitary conditions. The charity schools, by taking the children off the streets and feeding and clothing them, in some cases even sheltering them whilst at the same time attempting to give them some very elementary instruction, were fulfilling a very grave need. By 1830 Catholic leaders had come to realise that without Catholic schools the lower classes would be lost to the Church. The children of the poor were asked, if possible, to contribute a penny or two pence per week, but the majority of those who came were unable to pay even this. As most of the children were hungry and clad only in rags, they were ashamed to come, so to encourage them those running the schools had to be prepared to help with food and clothing. Most of the money was raised by donations from wealthy Catholics, from charity sermons and annual charity dinners. Sometimes, during the dinners, the 'objects' of their charity were brought in to entertain those sitting at table or to touch the hearts of the ladies sipping tea in the galleries or the adjoining rooms, and thus ensure a liberal outpouring of offerings. The various charities put heartrending appeals in the *Laity Directory* (*Catholic Directory* from 1838 onwards) - a more 'chatty' predecessor of its glossy, efficiently produced counterpart of today.

## CATHOLIC FEE-PAYING SCHOOLS

The wealthy had their own selective schools, mostly boarding schools in country areas. These schools had returned from the continent whither they had fled for survival during penal times. Such selective schools were, on the whole, in the hands of the older Orders in the Church. There was still a tradition of sending one's sons and daughters to the continent, as is witnessed by the number of advertisements for schools abroad in the Directories. To meet the needs of the emerging middle class in English society, a number of small private schools, mostly day schools charging a moderate fee, were springing

up. These schools were numerous in and around London but were to be found in other parts of the country as well. The girls seemed to do rather better than the boys, understandably so because there would be more persons of the gentle and genteel sex free to undertake such a good work. The existence of Catholic schools of this type points to the emergence of a Catholic middle class which was sharing in the advancement and growing prosperity of the middle class generally. The distance between the wealth of the gentry and the pennies of the poor was being closed.

It was into this field, whitening for the harvest, that there came the new religious congregations of women, which sprang up in France during and after the Revolutionary period and not bound by solemn vows or the rule of enclosure. Madame d'Houet, Foundress of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, was the first to arrive, November 1830.

### MARIE MADELEINE VICTOIRE DE BENGY

Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy was born in Châteauroux France, on 21 September 1781, and baptised on the same day. After her baptism she was placed on Our Lady's altar and consecrated to her in a special way. The de Bengys came of an old noble line in the province of Berry. They had been distinguished from the time of the Crusades in the military service of king and country. Her father held the Cross of a Knight of the Royal and Military Order of St Louis. Her mother too came of noble stock, was possessed of a strong sense of duty and of piety, tender but in no way sentimental. Both parents were staunch adherents of the faith and brought up their four children in the knowledge and love of God and the practice of solid virtue. No wonder, then, that this child had within her the makings of a warrior for Christ.

She was a lively youngster, headstrong yet gracious. Her childhood was passed in the halcyon days before the storm of the French Revolution broke, unleashing a flood of violence which threatened to engulf the nobility and the Church. The de Bengys moved into the country, to Pouplain in the commune of St Caprais, where they hoped to escape attention. Her father was, however, arrested and imprisoned for a short time. Instead of praying with the rest of the family for his safety and release, Marie Madeleine Victoire prayed that she might suffer a martyr's death along with him. The revolutionaries had released all religious from their vows and dispersed them throughout France. This meant a break in the traditional forms of education in the colleges and convents and in the poor schools started by the teaching brothers of St John Baptist de la Salle. Therefore, Marie Madeleine Victoire's education was undertaken at home by her mother, assisted by her mother's sister, an Augustinian nun from the convent in Châteauroux. Along with her studies she was given a thorough and practical training in the care and management of a house and estates, thus learning the value of property and habits of domestic economy that were to stand her in good stead in later years.

After the signing of the Treaty of Amiens, 1802, peace and order were established in France by the Codes introduced by Napoleon.

Religious peace was uneasily restored by the signing of the Concordat with the Pope. Marie Madeleine Victoire was now of age and ready to enjoy the re-bourgeoning of the fashionable social life that one associates with French society. She entered upon a round of balls and parties with unashamed delight, asking her younger sister to pray that she might not miss a single dance.

## MARRIAGE & WIDOWHOOD

On 18 May, 1804, the Empire was proclaimed and on 2 December following, Napoleon, making a farce of Pope Paul VII's presence, crowned himself Emperor of the French. Between these two events, on 20 August 1804, Marie Madeleine Victoire married Antoine Joseph, Vicomte de Bonnault d'Houet in the beautiful cathedral of Bourges. They made their home in Bourges and their cup of happiness seemed filled to overflowing especially when they knew that they were to have a child. Suddenly the cup was dashed to the ground. The young husband was struck down with illness and died on 1 July 1805. In that same year the world, too, was shocked from the false peace into which it had been lulled. The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October, though it destroyed Napoleon's plans for the invasion of Britain, did not prevent him from inflicting a stinging defeat on the Allies at the Battle of Austerlitz, December 2, 1805. Europe was at war again and there was no peace for another ten years.

Meantime the young widow concentrated all her affection and energies on her son, Eugene, born on 23 September 1805. When her period of mourning was over she did, however, resume her place in the world. She enjoyed again a happy social life with the possibility of making a second marriage, but increasingly she gave herself up to works of charity and to the duties and spiritual needs of her household.

## THE INTERIOR CALL

God began to manifest his designs on her and it was through her meeting with the Fathers of the Society of Jesus that his will became more clear. This came about through her need to find help in the education of her son. The Society of Jesus had been restored in August 1814. Madame d'Houet, as she preferred to be called, took Eugene to enrol him as a boarder in the College of St Acheul in Amiens which the Jesuits had newly reorganised.

Being a fond mother and hating to be separated from her only son, she spent long periods of each year in Amiens so as to be near him. She was impressed by the deep spirituality of the Jesuit Fathers, by their spirit of dedication and self-renunciation. She sought their spiritual direction, in particular that of Père Varin, SJ, who had already helped St Madeleine Sophie Barat to found the Society of the Sacred Heart in 1800, and St Julie Billiart, the Sisters of Notre Dame (de Namur) in 1804, as well as some smaller congregations centred in Amiens. On several occasions he tried to induce Madame d'Houet to enter the Society of the Sacred Heart but finally had to admit that God was asking something different of her.

## RESPONSE TO THE CALL

In June 1817, she had several interior illuminations culminating in the voice from the crucifix on Corpus Christi which answered her unspoken questioning as to how she should 'join' the Jesuits: "Behold the first Jesuit and the Master of them all" - stressing that it was Jesus whose companion she was to be and in whose steps she should follow. On the feast of the Sacred Heart, 13 June 1817, the voice spoke again from the crucifix: "I thirst". Madame d'Houet understood this to mean "for the salvation of souls". There followed further interior manifestations which showed how she was to assuage this thirst of Christ:

- 'Etre Jesuite', i.e. to be a companion of Jesus after the manner of the Jesuits;
- to found an institute for the education of children;
- for the giving of retreats for the benefit of persons living in the world;
- for missionary endeavours.

Again she was given the Blessed Virgin as the Mother and Superior General of this Society; four companions - humility, poverty, obedience and gentleness; four gifts - his name, his Spirit, his heart and his Mother. One day she exclaimed: "My name is Madeleine. I will imitate my patron saint. She loved Jesus her master so truly that she ministered to his wants and followed him everywhere in his journeys, his labours and even to the foot of the Cross with the other holy women. They did not flee as the apostles did but in that terrible moment proved themselves to be his faithful companions. That is the name we, shall bear, I and the persons who will join me: FAITHFUL COMPANIONS OF JESUS.

## BIRTH OF THE SOCIETY

That she should take this name and adopt the rule of St Ignatius aroused great opposition from the Jesuits. Yet, despite many trials and tribulations, the Society came to birth in Amiens in 1820. On 20 April she opened a small house and with two companions undertook to look after seven poor girls who were sent to her by the Sisters of Charity.

It was during the forty years of apparent peace which followed the Treaty of Vienna, 1815, that Madame d'Houet's zeal for souls led her to found houses of her Society in the Catholic countries of France, Italy and Ireland and the Protestant countries of Switzerland and England. She declared many times and lastly on her deathbed that she was of no importance in the foundation of the Society of the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus; that the work was not hers but God's and that it was only by supernatural means that it would survive. The first two companions left her but their places were taken by two more and gradually the Society increased in numbers. The foundress opened three more houses in France, namely Châteauroux, Nantes and Ste Anne d'Auray. All this time her ideals were forming. She had adopted the rule of St Ignatius except in those parts that were applicable to priests only. The name and rule continued to arouse great opposition so that she was advised by the Monseigneur de Chabons, Bishop of Amiens, to go to Rome and put the matter before the Holy Father, Leo XII. This she did in the summer of 1826 and the Pope accorded her a Brief of Praise in which the apostolic end of the Society and the name were clearly stated. After this formal recognition of the Society, Madame d'Houet was elected its first Superior General in November 1826. Because of her profound humility, this unanimous election came as a great surprise to the foundress.

## MISSION TO ENGLAND

Her burning desire was to go on the missions. This was to happen sooner than she expected. Charles X, 1824-1830, was determined to restore as fully as possible the power of the nobility and the Church. This caused a great wave of anti-clericalism to sweep over France. Some religious orders, notably the Jesuits, had already suffered. St Acheul was closed in 1828. The air was alive with the threat of revolution. Finally the

Bourbon monarchy was overthrown and replaced by the House of Orleans in the person of Louis Philippe who promised to govern according to a Charter. Madame d'Houet was naturally concerned about what would happen if the houses were closed. She consulted the bishops who agreed that she should make a foundation in another country. Most of them thought that it should be England. This pleased her because she, too, like the Church, regarded England as mission territory. But the Bishop of Amiens, to whom the final decision was left, said that she should try Belgium and if that failed she should return via England.

Disappointed but faithful to carry out the advice given, Madame d'Houet set off for Belgium on 19 October 1830. The time, however, was not propitious for a foundation there. Revolution had already broken out in the Kingdom of the United Netherlands, so she decided to go to England. In view of this contingency, she had taken as her travelling companion a young sister, Mère Julie Guillemet, whose qualification for the role was that she had been learning English for two months and, though she had no oral practice, she had mastered all the rules of grammar! They visited a certain Belgian priest, Fr Bruson, who warned them against such an undertaking saying that it would cost a small fortune to set up a foundation in England. Under gentle but firm pressure he gave them the name of a Belgian priest who was working in London to whom they could refer. So, rather dampened in spirits, they took ship from Ostend on 9 November, 1830. The Channel worked up one of its worst storms so that the boat took two days to make the crossing, and when they landed in London the city was enveloped in one of its best November fogs. They might have been discouraged but God seemed to be with them. An unknown gentleman had paid for their room in Ostend and for their passage; and again, when they had driven around London for three hours, in a fruitless search, a lady appeared and directed them to their destination. What was their surprise to discover that it was to the French mission of the Abbé Carron in Somers Town that they had come. This made things easier because the language difficulty which they had feared was removed.

#### ARRIVAL IN SOMERS TOWN

On arrival the travellers did not disclose their identity as religious sisters but, after they had been received with such courtesy by Fr Nerinckx and his sister and on the following day been shown over the whole building, they felt that they should do so. Fr Nerinckx told them that neither he nor his sister had ever been for one moment in doubt of that fact, and that they saw in their arrival, the fulfilment of the Abbé Carron's prediction that one day sisters would arrive from France to take charge of the schools. Fr Nerinckx went into great detail about the financing of the establishment and, just at the point at which Madame d'Houet was convinced of her inability ever to undertake such a project in England, he offered her the whole building and concluded by saying that all the teachers, including his sister, wished to join the Society! After a visit to Dr Bramston, the Vicar Apostolic for the London District, the necessary arrangements for the transfer were concluded and, on 16 November 1830, the Faithful Companions of Jesus officially took charge of the schools in Somers Town and thus began their work for the Church in Britain.

The *Laity Directory* for 1831 gives us some idea of what was involved. The advertisement describes the two establishments of St Aloysius' charity schools, viz. a Female Establishment and a Boys' School. "In the principal establishment 160 females are boarded, lodged, clothed and educated. Of these

40 are exempt from all payment; but for the others a pension of from £6 to £12 each per annum is stipulated to be paid. A separate schoolroom has been lately erected for the accommodation of female day scholars in which 100 already receive education; of this number 36 are gratuitously fed and 24 clothed. The third division educates more than 120 boys - 36 are boarded and lodged for £13 per annum. " The boys' school was not the concern of Madame d'Houet. Fr Nerinckx told her that the new extension had cost 80,000 francs (£6,000). Madame d'Houet would seem to have fallen on her feet - to have landed in England on 11 November practically penniless and on the 16 November to be in charge of a large establishment! She herself writes: "God's hand was indeed manifestly visible. What is more astonishing, the spirit of our Society, gentleness, humility and charity, was at once as thoroughly understood and practised as in any of our houses. All this shows that God was the bond which united us. "

But it was not all plain sailing. There were difficulties to be encountered, the main one being that though Fr Nerinckx had handed over the charge of the girls' school to the sisters, he still preserved in his own mind certain proprietary rights and at times tried not only to interfere in the running of the schools but also in the religious life of the sisters. Under no circumstances would Madame d'Houet tolerate this latter interference. In fact she closed some of her French foundations because local bishops tried to change the rules and lifestyles of the sisters. The Society had pontifical status and was therefore non-diocesan. It had one centre of unity, its Superior General, and one rule common to all. Even before her return to France in January 1831, she went to see Fr Nerinckx to say that she had decided against remaining in London, but after mutual expressions of sorrow and reconciliation, she allowed her sisters to remain. Nevertheless, the matter cropped up several times. In 1833 she wrote to Mère Julie: "I do not regret the good we have done at Somers Town, yet it remains difficult for me to go on. "

#### EXTENSION OF THE MISSION

In 1835 Fr Nerinckx extended his charity schools to Tottenham, a very poor mission three miles to the north of London. This mission had been founded in 1794 by another emigré priest, the Abbé Chéverus. The area, which in those days included Edmonton and other adjacent villages, was very sparsely populated and mainly by the poor Irish who came for the market gardening and the work in the fields. The priest appealed for help in the *Laity Directory* because his people were destitute and often unemployed. In order to attract the wealthier classes to the area he recommended Tottenham as an airy, healthy and pleasant place for their residence. He was worried that unless something was done for the Catholic children they would either be decoyed into the numerous sectarian schools in the area or be exposed to every kind of evil.

William Robinson in *The History and Antiquities of the Parish of Tottenham*, 1840, says: "There are two schools belonging to the congregation (of the chapel): one for boys in Edmonton, and one for girls under the direction of the religious females of St Aloysius establishment, in White Hart Lane. The number of children in both is between 40 and 50. Both schools are supported by voluntary contributions. " He goes on to speak at length about the girls' school: "It is a branch establishment from Somers Town, London. It is conducted by a religious



order of females and supported partly by donations and partly by small weekly payments. Some children are received into the establishment gratis. They are educated, clothed, fed, etc. Needlework is taken in and executed at stated prices, the amount of which goes to the general fund of the establishment."

In 1841 the Faithful Companions of Jesus moved north westwards to Hampstead, again to a mission founded in 1796 by a French emigré priest, the Abbé Jean-Jacques Morel. The sisters had a small house in Church Row in which they continued their work according to the same plan as in Somers Town and Tottenham.

## A CHANGING SITUATION

But their position was a difficult one and problems with Fr Nerinckx were constant. They were inherent in the situation in which Madame d'Houet found herself - running schools which were dependent on the financial support which Fr Nerinckx could bring in in response to his numerous appeals. He who pays the piper calls the tune. The zealous priest would naturally want to exercise more control over what was done with the money, the type of pupil admitted and the type of course provided. Was it that the FCJs were caught in an eternal triangle with Fr Nerinckx at the centre? Was this partly the reason why, when fire destroyed Tottenham in November 1853, Madam d'Houet made no effort to rebuild and shortly afterwards closed the Hampstead foundation? She herself says that the houses were only rented and were not self-supporting. Before he died in 1855, Fr Nerinckx had found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. Many of his most generous benefactors had died and the price of food was escalating.

Was it the arrival in London of other religious sisters dedicated to working among the poor and distressed that gave her the chance to break out and establish a foundation of her own? In 1839 the Sisters of Mercy had arrived in Bermondsey with the express mission of caring for the poor. In 1840 their work was already spreading and the congregation was experiencing a great influx of vocations. Their rule and customs were adapted to living and working in small communities. They dwelt in small houses from which they went out to work among the poor with whom they could more easily communicate because they spoke English. Moreover, in 1841 the Good Shepherd Sisters began their work in London.

Madame d'Houet herself felt that until she could establish a school for the upper classes, these people would think that her sisters had not come to work for them nor would she draw English girls to join the ranks of the Faithful Companions of Jesus and work in the English mission. One of the ends of her Society was "to teach and bring up in Christian morality girls of *all* classes of society, especially those born of poor parents." This was declared in the Brief of Praise given by Pope Leo XII in 1826 and again in the Decree of Approbation granted by Gregory XVI in 1837. This she was doing in France, in Switzerland and in Italy. In England she had by 1840 amply proved her dedication to the children of the poor. Now she must do something for the others.

## GUMLEY HOUSE, ISLEWORTH

On the advice of Bishop Griffiths and aided by Fr Nerinckx who helped her find a suitable property, Madame d'Houet purchased Gumley House, in Isleworth, then a suburb of London. This house, built by John Gumley in the early 18th century had, through his daughter's marriage, passed into the hands of the Marquis of Bath. As he and the other aristocratic families of the neighbourhood moved on towards more courtly precincts, their town cousins with their newly acquired wealth were moving out from London. 1835 had seen the bringing of the railroads into London and the building of Euston station. The area around Somers Town had therefore undergone a change and people were moving out to create new suburbs in the country. The small private schools followed suit. The area of Isleworth commended itself. It had given two of the first English martyrs for the faith, St Richard Reynolds and Blessed John Hale. Mass had been said there without a break because the lands had belonged to the Earls of Shrewsbury who had maintained a Catholic chaplain. Here, then, Madame d'Houet established a first-class boarding school and placed in charge of this venture Mère Julie Guillemet, not experienced in English ways.

Gumley House, situated within 9 miles of Hyde Park and 2 of Richmond, was opened on 25 March 1841. The advertisement in the *Catholic Directory* of 1842 makes quaint reading to our modern minds, accustomed as they are to laying stress on the academic proficiency and technical equipment of our schools. This was "a transferring, as it were, of an entire establishment from abroad and setting it down within this country. It was to carry one of these establishments from the banks of the Loire or the Tiber and place it in the vicinity of the Thames, making all within its walls French or Italian while all without was English. The child is here educated as if she were separated by the sea and hundreds of miles from London, while now that the railways are extended all over England, she is within a few hours journey from her parents." And the subjects: English, French, Italian, Geography, the Use of the Globes, Botany, History, Writing, Arithmetic, Useful and Ornamental Needlework. Music, Dancing and Drawing were extra. The terms: £25 per annum. They worked hard and long in those days. "A Vacation at Midsummer, but no extra charge to Young Ladies who remain at the establishment during that period."

When the boarding school was well established, Madame d'Houet opened a school for the poor children alongside the main building.

## THE BANKS OF THE MERSEY

The *Catholic Directory* of 1845 carries a notice that "the Catholic Public are respectfully informed of the establishment of a Convent of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, No 3 Great George's Square, Liverpool, under the approbation of the Right Reverend Prelates of the Lancashire District." Terms are £28 per annum. Medical attendance is listed among the extras!

This announces the arrival of the FCJs in the North West not directly, as one might expect, along the railroads now extended all over England, but by a circuitous route via Ireland. A certain Dr Kirwan, parish priest of Oughterard on the shores of Lake Corrib in the West of Ireland, came to London in 1842 to make an appeal for the poor of his parish. Through Fr Nerinckx he saw the work of the FCJs in Somers Town and Gumley and decided that the sisters would be welcome co-workers among the poor in his area. He

therefore appealed for sisters. His request was answered and sisters went to Oughterard on 2 February 1843. This foundation was transferred to Limerick in 1844. Dr Kirwan had a friend, Fr Parker, who was in charge of St Patrick's, Liverpool.

Even before the influx of the famine years the Irish people were already entering Liverpool in great numbers. Work had started on the excavation of the docks on both sides of the Mersey. The building of the railroads employed great numbers of Irish navvies, and the market gardening and harvesting of the fertile Lancashire hinterland provided both seasonal and some permanent employment. Many, rather than return to starvation in their own country, stayed in Liverpool and there added to the numbers of poor persons who seem to be the unfortunate concomitant of any fast-developing city. The Irish did not create the problems. Liverpool was already a city of grave social evils resulting from the industrialisation of its port. But they did aggravate them. As in London, the Irish tended to concentrate in groups. St Patrick's, Liverpool had been opened expressly for them in the 1820s by a group of laymen, non-Catholics as well as Catholics, who were concerned for their plight. Fr Parker heard from Dr Kirwan of the work being done by FCJs both in London and in the West of Ireland, so he wrote to Madame d'Houet asking for sisters.

Madame d'Houet, delighted at the prospect of increased work for souls, sent sisters, but she was determined to establish her sisters quite independently of the parish schools. A boarding school was established first in Great George's Square and some of the sisters went out to the parish school during the day. Fr Parker was pressing very hard for a day school for the daughters of the middle classes who must have been well represented in a city that was full of merchants, bankers, industrialists and traders. He also pressed urgently the need to do something for "the poor girls", who were too old for school, some of whom probably would have had small jobs in the rising factories, shops and laundries. They were girls in domestic service of whom there were a great number in the Liverpool of that day; and there were the older women who were clamouring for the instruction they had missed through no fault of their own. All were illiterate to a greater or lesser degree and, though they had 'the faith' they had no grounding in religious faith or practice. This kind of work was dear to the heart of the foundress, for this was how her apostolate had started in Amiens in 1820, with seven little destitute children.

One gets the impression from the foundress's letters to Mère Julie that Fr Parker was in a great hurry and wanted everything - the parish school, the Sunday school, the night school and the day school - started at the same time. She wrote: "Tell Fr Parker that God alone can do everything at once; human beings have to take time." He must also have been making excessive demands on the sisters both about taking the children to Mass on Sundays, the running of the Sunday schools, the number and length of the sessions, what should be taught to adults. She found out what the other sisters in the area were doing and refused to allow her sisters to do more. She was also most insistent that Fr Parker should not go in and out of the schools as he pleased nor interfere. He must abide by the terms of the agreement. She was not having a repeat of what they had experienced with Fr Nerinckx. She was as anxious to help the adults as he was but she decided it was better to undertake things gradually and let them be well done. When she had more sisters she would be ready and willing to undertake the rest. Eventually a night school was opened and the

attendance of 200 girls secured. There were, on an average, 1,000 children attending St Patrick's school.

The work in Liverpool was expanding before the potato famine in Ireland in 1846 and 1847 brought the Irish to Liverpool in their thousands. Park Lane and the district around St Patrick's was an area where they congregated. Liverpool Corporation and the city's businessmen were most anxious to do something for these poor, miserable, starving people but the flood overwhelmed them. The cumulative result of all the ills was that cholera broke out and rampaged through the poorer quarters of the city. The priests of St Patrick's never ceased moving among the sick and dying, and they gathered up the dead to bury them. Three of them, including Fr Parker, died of the plague. Altogether ten priests gave their lives and one FCJ, Mother Xavier O'Neill, the head-mistress of St Patrick's school who died on 30 April, 1849.

## POLICY OF PARALLEL EDUCATION

Madame d'Houet, as a result of her experiences, was evolving a policy which set a pattern for her English foundations. She had learnt, as had other religious congregations in France and in England, that the social classes of that era did not mix; that in order to spread the gospel message, one had to be prepared to accept the social structures of the time and of the countries in which one laboured. So, though the request might be for sisters to work in the poor schools, the Convent school was quickly established alongside any work in the parish and night schools. Boarding and day pupils were educated separately though they might share certain facilities and teachers. This running of parallel schools continued even as late as the 1920s when the increased demands for academic standards and the pressure of external examinations forced the combining of the boarding and day pupils for lessons but for no other activity.

On the advice of the bishops of the Lancashire District, a more 'eligible' property was opened in 1849 as a boarding school for the upper classes on the southern banks of the Mersey. Lingdale House was situated within 2 miles of Birkenhead and commanded a beautiful and extensive prospect. This move gave Madame d'Houet the first opportunity to establish in this country retreat work which was one of her great desires and part of the original vision of her apostolate. The first retreat to be held at Lingdale House during the summer vacation was given by the Passionist Father, Ignatius Spencer (1799 -1864), one of the famous converts from the Oxford Movement and great-great-grand uncle of Lady Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales.

A school for the middle classes - later sited on Holt Hill - was opened in Birkenhead itself in 1851. It was from this house that, in response to the Bishop's request, four sisters set off to open, in January 1854, Dee House, Chester. Whilst the apostolic work was spreading on the banks of the Mersey and the Dee, the call came to extend the apostolate to the banks of the Irwell where, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, two large cities were growing up side by side. To meet the demand for labour, the Irish had come in great numbers, the women to work in the cotton mills, the men to do the heavy and unskilled work in the factories. Bishop Turner appealed for sisters. They came

in October 1852 and settled in Adelphi House, Salford. The following year, because there was so much work to be done, a further foundation was made in Manchester itself at 130 Upper Brook Street. From these two houses the sisters spread their apostolate into many of the new parishes and schools of Salford, Manchester and Pendleton.

In all these places the same policy was followed. The Convent with its boarding and day schools was established as the sisters went out to teach in the parish schools. They also took charge of the Sunday schools, the night schools and the various parish sodalities. They instructed the converts, there being sometimes as many as 30 in a class.

#### THE FOUNDRESS' APOSTOLIC ZEAL

Before her death in 1858 the foundress recognised that the work in Liverpool, Salford and Manchester had done much to assuage that thirst of which Christ had spoken to her from the Cross. As far as possible, she herself visited the English houses every year, though in her later years this entailed considerable physical suffering. She had a bronchial-asthmatic condition and suffered frequently from migraine and an ulcerous leg which made it difficult to get in and out of public conveyances. But nothing deterred her from visiting her sisters. It must be remembered that England was not the only scene of her apostolic labours. On the continent, during the same period 1830-58, several houses had been opened in France, Switzerland and Sardinia-Piedmont. Each year she crossed from England to Ireland to visit the sisters in Limerick. It is said that she made more than five hundred journeys by land, over mountain passes, on the sea - by coach, by canal barge, by steamboat and finally along the railroads.

When unable to preside herself at the founding of a house she sent Mère Julie Guillemet, her 'alter ego' whom she had trained with such loving and unremitting care since the time when the young Julie came to her at the age of thirteen. Many, even daily, were the letters that passed between them. Even when local superiors were appointed she kept in touch with all details of the houses, assessing the work of the apostolate, attending to the temporalities and administration, directing improvements and extensions and examining the work done. She did all this because many of the sisters whom she entrusted with responsibilities were very young and inexperienced. Once a sister could accept fully the responsibilities of her office, Madame d'Houet, believing in the principle of delegation, encouraged her to make the decision which best fitted the time and place. She upheld decisions thus made even though she might not wholly agree with them.

#### SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS

The spirit of the foundation was more important than the material conditions. The direction "to place it on a good footing" was often given. This meant that the sisters should be ever seeking to do God's will as it became known to them; that they should make a complete gift of themselves to God through obedience and self-renunciation; that they should love the Cross and humiliations as the ordinary road to humility. "I implore of all our dear sisters to give themselves to God with their whole hearts and to remember that obedience and entire

renouncement of self are the two marked characteristics of the Society". She exhorted them to keep the rule and not to allow any innovations. "If we are faithful to our rules, God will give us abundantly all besides. "

Whenever possible, during her visits, she presided at retreats and endeavoured to steep her religious in the spirit of the Society, to form them into one heart and one soul with all its members and with all its houses, especially to have great love of and great confidence in the Superior General. In a young Society under Papal approbation this was most important, for bishops and priests, more accustomed to congregations that were diocesan, might want to interfere and detach a house from its roots. She used so frequently in letters and in speech the phrase: "Courage and Confidence" that it almost became her motto. She generally attached some phrase or sentence, such as "God and his Mother can do all things", thus revealing the source of these virtues which she manifested so clearly in her own life.

In July 1856, Madame d'Houet made her last visit to England. Her suffering and extreme weakness were visible to all. Her face was more serene and radiant, so that it was obvious to those who met her that they were seeing her for the last time. She did everything to confirm her sisters in the spirit of the Society, reminding them constantly that the Society was God's work, not hers. She died in the Mother House in Paris on 5 April 1858.

Three weeks later, on 30 April 1858, Mère Julie Guillemet whom she had named as her Vicar and who had been her co-foundress in England died suddenly.

#### WELL ESTABLISHED ROOTS

But the roots of the English mission had been truly established. A letter written by Bishop Turner of Salford to the new Superior General, Mother Josephine Petit, expressed the hope that the Society would grow more and more "so that everywhere people may have shoots from a tree which produces such abundant fruit". He it was who testified to the presence of the sisters in his diocese in words that would have rejoiced the heart of the foundress: "The good nuns are distinguished by the two essential virtues of the religious life - charity and obedience. Charity among themselves and charity towards their neighbours. Obedience and fidelity to the rules and orders of their superiors...." He describes the work of a sister and then goes on to invite anyone who wishes to visit the parishes and see for himself: "He will see night schools frequented by hundreds of young persons, day schools with their hundreds of little children, Sunday schools for adults, Sodalities of Our Lady and many other pious works, flourishing among Protestant surroundings where perils for souls abounded. " A pastor of souls he rejoiced in having this holy institute in his diocese.

#### THE F.C.J. SOCIETY TODAY

The main thrust of the Society has been in the field of education of women, understood in its more restricted sense, as this was the area of need in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Now that the principle of secondary education for all has been recognised in the Western world and governments are accepting their responsibilities in this matter, the Society is adapting itself to the new needs in the educational scene. Today in Britain the FCJ sisters are

actively engaged in a number of voluntary aided comprehensive schools. They are still the Trustees of four such schools, all in urban areas. They run two independent schools, one boarding and the other day. Some of their six former Direct Grant schools are now, under agreement, diocesan schools. These include a Sixth Form College which is run in co-operation with two other religious Societies. The sisters still teach in the parish schools. In these various ministries, the sisters hope to continue to serve the Church and the community in new and constantly evolving situations.

The reorganisation of schools and the dwindling number of religious vocations have resulted in withdrawal from some long-established houses. Smaller communities have been established in which it has been found possible for each sister to be missioned to her appropriate apostolate.

Realising more clearly the need for the involvement of religious sisters in the life of the local Church, some are helping the clergy as parish sisters; others are supporting the efforts of the clergy to build up the spiritual life of the parish by attending parish meetings, helping in the running of prayer and liturgy groups, instructing children who attend non-Catholic schools, organising catechetics and adult groups. Visiting the sick, the housebound, the lonely, or simply chatting with the neighbours whom they meet in the streets - these and similar activities all find their place in the role of apostolic community today. Retreat work, so dear to the heart of the foundress, has taken on new significance now that some of the sisters themselves are engaged in, or being trained in, the direction of retreats not only for the young but also for adults. Where possible the Convent is made available for these works.

The FCJ sisters in Britain have tried to respond in a small way to the call of the Third World by sharing in a new Society missionary foundation in the diocese of Kenema in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Here a small group of sisters teach in the secondary school in Kailahun, catechise and "take Church" in the outlying areas of the bush, help the women in their homes and assist in the Pastoral Centre at Kenema.

"To help one person to grow is to help to build the world" (Liverpool Congress)... education covers so much more than schooling. The Faithful Companions of Jesus still endeavour to keep alive in a secular age the missionary zeal of their foundress in response to Christ's plea: "I thirst". Their mission is always to persons, bringing them God's saving love, showing pastoral concern for their human development and, by encouraging them to reflect on their Christian vocation, helping them to grow into full stature in Christ.

Mary Clare Holland, FCJ  
Signum  
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## POSTSCRIPT

### PRESENT POSITION OF HOUSES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

1. Foundation of St Aloysius, Somers Town, developed into two separate establishments – a parish day school and a secondary school. In the re-organisation, St Aloysius' grammar school merged with St Vincent's, Carlisle Place, to form a comprehensive school, Marie Fidelis Convent School, 1974.
2. Gumley House, Isleworth, a grammar school, became a comprehensive school in 1976.
3. No. 3 St George's Square, Liverpool, moved in 1886 to Bellerive, Princes Park, where it is still a grammar school.
4. Lingdale House transferred to Upton Hall, Wirral, in 1863, is an independent day school.
5. Holt Hill, Birkenhead, in the re-organisation, merged with Heathley High School to form the Marian High School in 1976.
6. Dee House, Chester, passed into the hands of the Ursulines in 1925.
7. Adelphi House, Salford, in the re-organisation, merged with the Sacred Heart School to form the Cathedral High School in 1977.
8. No. 130 Upper Brook Street, Manchester, moved first to the Hollies, Fallowfield, in 1900 and to Mersey Bank, West Didsbury in 1961. In the re-organisation it has become a comprehensive school, 1977.