

## **F.C.J. CENTENARY**

### **Helen Downe fcJ**

#### POPLAR

This autumn, the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus, in England, are celebrating two events - the bi-centenary of the birth of their foundress the Venerable Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy de Bonnault d'Houet, and the centenary of the coming of their sisters to London's East End.

It was at the time of the commemoration of the first centenary of the Foundress' birth that a small group of F.C.J. Sisters came to take up residence in No. 67 East India Dock Road, actually on 5th September, 1881. The sisters had already two convents in the London area - the original foundation in 1830 at St. Aloysius, Somers Town, by 1881 a secondary school for the middle classes; and the second at Gumley House, Isleworth, opened in 1841 as a boarding school for the upper classes. In both these places the sisters were also actively engaged in teaching in the Parish schools, running night schools and sodalities for the women of the parish and instructing the converts sent to them by the priests.

Their foundress, Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy, had been born in Châteauroux, France, on 21st September, 1781. She grew up during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic era when education of the young had been disrupted by the suppression of all monasteries, convents and colleges. She herself was educated at home by her mother and an aunt who had been an Augustinian nun. In August, 1804, she married Antoine Joseph, Vicomte de Bonnault d'Houet, and it was by the latter part of this title that she preferred to be known - simply as Madame d'Houet. Their married happiness lasted eleven short months for Joseph was suddenly stricken by typhus and died on the 1st July, 1805, before the birth of their son in the following September. After the period of mourning Madame d'Houet re-entered society with thoughts of a possible second marriage, but God made it increasingly clear that He wanted her for Himself. God used her need to find a suitable boarding school for her son to bring her into contact with the Society of Jesus in Amiens. Madame d'Houet was greatly attracted by the spirituality of the Jesuits and by their life-style, and, in seeking to understand God's interior manifestations, she sought their help and advice. When she began her own religious society in Amiens in April, 1820, she adopted a slightly modified form of the Rule of St. Ignatius and took as the name of her nascent society, "Faithful Companions of Jesus." Her name, Marie Madeleine, inspired her with the desire to follow Jesus even to Calvary, as did Mary and the other Holy Women. Her zeal for the salvation of souls was to find its outlet in the field of education, in retreat work and in missionary endeavours.

When the July revolution of 1830 threatened the security of her four houses in France, Madame d'Houet decided to open a house of the Society in another country. Thus it was that in November 1830 she arrived in England, then missionary territory, and, by God's Providence, found herself in the former French colony of Somers Town. She was given charge of St. Aloysius' Charity Schools, then in the care of Father John Nerinckx and his sister.

It was this same Father Nerinckx whom Father James Lawless knew as a little boy and whose last Mass he served in the Convent Chapel at Somers Town. He knew at first hand the work being done by the Sisters and he had met Madame d'Houet during one of her visits to Somers Town. Therefore it was only natural that after his

appointment in 1878 as parish priest of S.S. Mary & Joseph, Canton Street, Father Lawless should seek the help of the F.C.J.s. in this area of Poplar.

The parish had its roots in the Virginia Street Mission. In 1816 it was reckoned there were about 1,000 Catholic children in that area, receiving no education. The migrant Irish were also moving into the area in increasing numbers as the demand for unskilled and heavy labour in the East and West India docks kept pace with developing trade. So a new School-Chapel was opened in Poplar - origin of the Wade Street Schools. A new church was built and opened in 1856. This debt placed a crippling burden on the parish until Father Lawless arrived and determined to do something about it and the schools.

He decided that he needed Sisters to help him and with this end in view he began to petition Rev. Mother Josephine Petit, second Superior General of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, for a community to be established in his parish. Father Lawless had a great personal devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary under her title of Our Lady of Sorrows. Was it a coincidence that his first meeting with Rev. Mother Josephine Petit's representative should take place on the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, 15th September, 1880? But another year of difficulties, negotiations and increased prayer to Our Lady of Sorrows was to pass before the Sisters finally arrived on 5th September, 1881.

The house to which they came at No. 63, East India Dock Road, was very small and in a rather dirty and deplorable condition. To make matters worse, through some mischance, the packing cases had not arrived so that the Sisters were without blankets and other necessities. They set to and spent nights as well as days scrubbing and cleaning to make the house habitable before the "official" opening on the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, 15th September, 1881. A small room was prepared as a chapel. Holy Mass was celebrated and there was exposition of the Blessed Sacrament during the day. So many flowers were received from the people of the Parish that every conceivable receptacle was pressed into service - potatoes and turnips were scooped out to make holders for the candles. The tabernacle on the altar was that which had been in Somers Town and from which Father Nerinckx had given Holy Communion during his last Mass when the altar server had been none other than the boy James Lawless.

A small school was started in the Convent for the children of the middle classes. At the same time the Sisters went out to teach in the Wade Street Infants' and Girls' Schools. Here conditions militated against discipline and ordered learning. The girls were confined in an upstairs room, but Standard One overflowed onto a stone staircase down which books, slates and pencils were passed as required. If anyone wished to go up or down the staircase the whole class had to be disturbed. The desks were just two boards, one to sit on and one to write on, and packed so tightly together that one had to climb over them to get in or out. The children resented correction and were very difficult to manage. To supplement the small grant received by the Voluntary Schools, the pupils were supposed to pay "tuppence" a week but many were unable to pay this so they stayed behind in the evenings to sweep and dust the school, under the supervision of the Sisters. Gradually the influence of the Sisters began to tell and new school buildings made work easier so that in time the Wade Street Schools were recognised by the Board of Education and the London County Council as second to none.

Mother Veronica Connolly, the Superior, led the Community in supporting all the efforts of Father Lawless to build up the Parish. After the Lenten Mission of 1882, the Sisters undertook the night-school work for the factory girls. They discovered that many of these girls had never received any of the Sacraments since Baptism; that they were totally ignorant of the knowledge and practice of "the Faith." They also instructed the converts who came to them. On the feast of Corpus Christi, 1882, the first outdoor procession of the Blessed Sacrament in Poplar was held in the Convent grounds. About 300 people walked and the canopy bearers wore long scarlet cloaks. When Father Lawless opened a Chapel-of-Ease, known as the Holy Name, in Devons Road, Bow Common, the Sisters went every Sunday to prepare the place for Mass and taught Catechism there on Sunday afternoons. They gave, not only "spiritual" aid but also, as far as their slender resources permitted, material help to pay off the debt on the new church. They helped to promote a variety of activities, e.g. entertainments, bazaars, sales of needlework, etc., in order to bring in the money.

The people of the Parish appreciated the work of the Sisters and a bond formed between them. When, later, the first party of "new" missionaries gathered together in Poplar before their departure for Australia, in April 1882, the people were involved. Two of the Sisters from the Wade Street Schools, Mothers Xavier McIlroy and Gertrude Tyrell, were among the group and likewise Mother Mary John Daly, the Provincial, who had supervised the Poplar foundation. The morning after the missionaries sailed all the Children of Mary in the Parish attended the 6.00 a.m. Mass and received Holy Communion. At its conclusion the Litany of Our Lady was said to invoke her protection for the travellers.

Meantime, circumstances had changed at the Convent. No. 67 East India Dock Road was



soon too small to accommodate the pupils who came, so the Society bought the house and grounds of No. 83 East India Dock Road. This property had belonged to a wealthy shipping magnate, Duncan Dunbar, and he had named it "Howrah House" after his dockyard at Mulmein, India, where many of his ships were built.

Father Lawless arranged an inaugural Triduum to mark the event. The Community, however, tried to move all their furniture and belongings by night - "it not being a kind of court publicity," as an old record says. On 21st January 1882, Mass was said for the last time in No. 67. The Blessed Sacrament was then taken outside to a waiting carriage. This belonged to the local doctor, Doctor Power, who had lined it with white for the occasion. He and a Mr. Connolly, a shipping merchant whose children were in the school, walked on either side of the carriage, each carrying a lighted candle. The Community walked behind. Cardinal Manning had promised to come and bless the house and grounds but was prevented by illness, and so Father Lawless assisted by five

priests, carried out the ceremony. The first Mass in Howrah House was offered the next day by Father Lawless in the presence of four priests. On the third day, 23rd January, there was exposition of the Blessed Sacrament all day. The Cardinal paid his promised visit towards the end of March. But, THE official opening took place on 31st March, the Friday in Passion Week, then kept by the Church as the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows. High Mass was celebrated in the Convent chapel in the presence of seven priests. This was followed by Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Quarante Ore had just been held in the Church and £20 worth of flowers were sent on to the Convent - they filled the house as well as the Chapel. Someone speaking recently of her schooldays at Howrah House in the 1930's remembers the annual celebration of this feast of Our Lady of Sorrows which coincided with the opening of Quarante Ore in the convent chapel. She vividly recalls the statues were covered in white lace veiling instead of the seasonal purple and that the altar was adorned with masses of flowers and lights.



The community welcomed Rev. Mother Josephine Petit, the Superior General, to their new home in April, 1882, when she came to wish Godspeed to the Sisters setting off on the Australian Mission.

Once established in Howrah House the Convent school went from strength to strength. In the early days boarders were accepted as well as day-scholars. The school was soon presenting pupils for public examinations and was recognised by the Board of Education in 1905 as a grant earning secondary school. It became aided by L.C.C. in 1919. There was a Pupil Teachers' Centre in the Convent in the days before Teacher Training Colleges became the accepted means of entrance to the profession. The Convent premises were extended to meet the increased needs because Howrah House was the only Catholic girls' Grammar school between the Ursuline convent in Forest Gate, Essex, and St. Aloysius convent F.C.J. in N.W. London.

It was at the point of time when the convent school could no longer accept all the pupils who qualified for secondary education in those days that St. Bernard's Central school came into being. Canon Ring went to see the Superior General, Rev. Mother Philomena Higgins, to ask for F.C.J. Sisters for this school. He made so bold as to ask for the headmistress of the convent school to be freed to take the headship of this new type of secondary school and his request was granted. The school opened in January 1923.



Both the Convent School and St. Bernard's flourished until the outbreak of war in 1939. Howrah House was evacuated first to Bath and, after being bombed out there, to Kettering, where it joined the girls of St. Aloysius' School. Saint Bernard's pupils were evacuated first to Egham in Surrey, and later to Devon. As a

result of enemy activity both buildings were severely damaged by bombing though there was an interlude in St. Bernard's when the F.C.J. Headmistress was, without any official consultation, made MATRON of an Emergency Rest Centre for the "bombed-out" and saw what was left of her school building filled with beds and hospital equipment.

The Sisters from the Howrah House Community who were not evacuated went to live with the St. Aloysius community in N.W. London.

The aftermath of the war and the changes introduced by the 1944 Education Act, which raised the school leaving age to fifteen and decreed secondary education for all, meant that there could be no return to pre-war days. Through the intervention of the L.C.C. the remnants of Howrah House found themselves, in 1948, no longer in Poplar but in the French Hospital, Victoria Park Road, Hackney. The name of the school was then changed to St. Victoire's Convent Grammar School. A brand new secondary modern school grew up in Poplar on the site of the blitzed church - the Cardinal Griffin School, and in 1969 one of the F.C.J. Sisters came to teach in this school and to link up with the Youth Club.

Just before the outbreak of war in 1939, the Wade Street Schools were evacuated to Botley outside Oxford, where staff and children remained until 1945. Several parents also went with their children and in fact some of the families remained in Oxfordshire after the war. Five new Mass centres were started to serve the influx of Catholic children who had descended upon the area, and these have developed into flourishing parishes, the Botley church celebrating its Silver Jubilee this year. The schools returned in 1945 and continued in the old school buildings until a new Infant school was later built. When Mother Gertrude and Mother Xavier retired in 1956, the F.C.J. Sisters withdrew from the school and the Sisters of Mercy came to replace them.

The F.C.J. Sisters continued to live in St. Aloysius' convent and to travel daily to and from the East End. Then, in 1968, the F.C.J.s. moved back to Poplar, to take up residence in the Lodge, Pope John House, a whole new complex housing a variety of parish activities. There were at first four F.C.J. Sisters living and working here and doing Youth work, and then the following year the community became a "mixed" one, with two Sacred Heart Sisters joining the three F.C.J.s. The larger part of the Lodge was used by students attending the nearby colleges, nursing schools, etc., until, in 1970, Bishop Victor Guazzelli, Bishop of the East London Pastoral area came to live here.

St. Victoire's came back to Poplar, too, in 1973 when it amalgamated with the Cardinal Griffin school to form the St. Philip Howard comprehensive school. A sister continues to teach in this school and is also actively engaged in parish with the young, the old, the handicapped, while another sister works as a secretary to the Bishop. Another sister is working still for I.L.E.A. but under the Youth service in a Youth and Community Project on one of the G.L.C. estates. The project has involved working with young people; arranging classes in the Adult Institute for Mothers and Toddlers groups, and teaching English as a Second Language; family visiting to homes from many different ethnic backgrounds and acting as a liaison between the various statutory bodies involved on the estate.

The needs of this area are many and varied though perhaps differing from those of 1881 and as the Sisters step out into the second centenary of their presence here they look forward with hope and confidence to the continuation of their work for the Lord here in the East End.

- 1781 Birth of Madame d'Houët of the Faithful Companions of Jesus.
- 1881 F.C.J.s. came to Poplar: 63 East India Dock Road.  
Teach in Wade Street Schools.  
Open school in new Convent.
- 1882 Howrah House purchased.
- 1905 Howrah House School recognised by Board of Education.
- 1923 St. Bernard's Central School opened.
- 1939 Outbreak of Second World War.  
Howrah House evacuated to Bath and Kettering.  
St. Bernard's evacuated to Egham & Devon.  
Wade Street schools evacuated to Botley.  
F.C.J.s. no longer live in Poplar.
- 1948 Howrah House School moved to Victoria Park Road, Hackney. Re-named "St. Victoire's."
- 1951 Cardinal Griffin Secondary Modern School opened.
- 1956 F.C.J. Sisters retire from Wade Street Schools.
- 1968 F.C.J. Sisters return to live in Poplar at Pope John House, 154 East India Dock Road.
- 1970 Bishop Guazzelli, responsible for East London Pastoral Area, comes to live in Pope John House.
- 1973 Howrah House and Wade Street Schools re-united in Poplar when St. Victoire's (the old Howrah) and Cardinal Griffin (Seniors from the Wade Street School) amalgamate to form the St. Philip Howard Comprehensive School.
- 1981 Looking to the future with roots in the past.

