

Eastertide

2026 No. 58

St Cecilia's  
Abbey,  
Ryde

Chronicle



**St Cecilia's Abbey, RYDE,**  
Isle of Wight, PO33 1LH  
Registered Charity 1088086

Abbey website: [www.stceciliasabbey.org.uk](http://www.stceciliasabbey.org.uk)

Calligraphy website: [abbeyscribes.org.uk](http://abbeyscribes.org.uk)



01983 562602

email: [abbey@stceciliasabbey.org.uk](mailto:abbey@stceciliasabbey.org.uk)

Retreats: [guestmistress@stceciliasabbey.org.uk](mailto:guestmistress@stceciliasabbey.org.uk)

Altar Breads : [hosts@stceciliasabbey.org.uk](mailto:hosts@stceciliasabbey.org.uk)

Printery: [printery@stceciliasabbey.org.uk](mailto:printery@stceciliasabbey.org.uk)

Sung Mass & the full Divine Office every day.

Usual times of principal celebrations:

MASS : 10.00 a.m. Sundays & Solemnities

9.30 a.m. Weekdays

VESPERS: 5.00 p.m.

COMPLINE: 8.00 p.m.

Paschal Triduum 2026

Maundy Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper 5 p.m.

Good Friday, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, Actio Liturgica 3 p.m.

Holy Saturday, 4<sup>th</sup> April, Paschal Vigil 10.45 p.m.

Easter Sunday, 5<sup>th</sup> April, Mass 10.00 a.m.

Ascension Day: Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> May, Mass 10.00 a.m.

Corpus Christi: Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> June, Mass 10.00 a.m.

Feast of the Sacred Heart: Friday 12<sup>th</sup> June, Mass 10.00 a.m.

**Front Cover:** *Mère Ambrosia Cousin, first abbess of our monastery (1926-1953)*

**Illustrations:** *p.4, Sr Marie Bernard on her Solemn Profession; p.5: with Notre Mère Bernadette; at a festive recreation in 2014.*

*p.13, Mère Ambrosia Cousin and (p.15) her abbatial blazon*

*p.19: Mère Immaculata Tendeng and Keur Guilaye Monastery.*

## *From Mother Abbess*

This year we are celebrating the centenary of our monastery being erected as an independent abbey, and the Blessing of our first Abbess, Mère Ambrosia Cousin. It has been my privilege this Lent to witness two monastic occasions, one a beginning and one an ending, which chimed beautifully with these anniversaries.

The “beginning” was the Abbatial Blessing of Mère Immaculata Tendeng, third Abbess of the Abbey of St Jean Baptiste, Keur Guilaye, Senegal, on 28<sup>th</sup> February. I was one of four abbesses of the Solesmes Congregation who were able to go to show support for this small but vibrant community. The days together were a wonderful experience of the richness of our Congregation and of the Church.

The Blessing itself took place in a marquee just outside the enclosure: “We have printed 1,500 booklets but we are not sure if it will be enough.” There were scores of priests, and dozens of altar servers (young men and small boys, all in impeccable kit), and great gusts of incense; a guard of honour by the local scouts; at the offertory, ladies carrying the local produce in baskets on their heads while the youth of the local parish in matching tee-shirts sang and danced. Most of the Mass was in French, with some hymns and chants in Wolof, but they also thundered out the Missa de Angelis; and yet there was also serious silence and reverence. The guests included the superiors of Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries all over West Africa (Chad, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast), many facing serious challenges, yet full of faith in Christ and full of love for monastic life. It was an honour to be there.

Back at home we witnessed the same faith and love in another key, in the final days of our dear Sr Marie Bernard Eckhardt. We were blessed in being able to care for her here in the monastery, and her cell was a place of intense prayer as Sisters took turns praying at her side. The day before she died, when she could no longer speak, I told her, “You are going to see Jesus,” and she responded with the most beautiful smile. Before dawn the next day, Mother Ninian, Sr M Thérèse and I said the final prayers and this faithful soul passed into eternity most peacefully.

Whether we are beginning a new work, like Mère Ambrosia did 100 years ago, and as Mère Immaculata did this year, or carrying on in challenging conditions, like those abbesses and prioresses in West Africa, or nearing the end of life, like Sr M Bernard, all the strength we need will come from union with the risen Christ. May he bless you and your dear ones.

*L. Eustochium*

*Sr Marie Bernard Eckhardt*  
*6<sup>th</sup> September 1933 – 9<sup>th</sup> March 2026*



only nominal Protestants, their sensitive and imaginative child seemed to have an instinct for things spiritual and the mysteries of faith. She wrote in her vocation story for our Advent Chronicle in 2012:

When I was about four years old, I asked why I had no grandfather. My father explained that he had died and then went to heaven where he would remain for ever. This was called eternity and I remember lying on my bed, closing my eyes for a minute or two and then saying to myself: “No, eternity is much longer than this.” It gave me a great thrill to “play eternity”.

Both her grandmothers were Catholics, one antagonistic to the Church, the other still practising but having married outside the Church. The latter, for a time, took the five-year-old Hadwig to devotions on Sunday afternoons.

I loved the Church from the very first minute and admired the altar boys in their red cassocks, the candles, the incense, the flowers and pictures. I was rather a tomboy, but as soon as I was in the Church I was very quiet watching over everything. Soon I would join in the Ave Maria although I had no idea what it meant and what it was all about. This was repeated for a few Sundays. Once I said the Ave to myself at home. My parents heard it and my grandmother was probably told not to take me to these devotions anymore. This was the end of my encounter with the Catholic Church for the time being. I had a little Catholic friend and from her I heard a few things later on, e.g. that there was Confession and that Jesus lived in the white host which was kept in the Tabernacle. I stored all this information carefully in my memory.

The memory which stored this information was very good, as the little girl was very bright. Lacking siblings, she was used to playing on her own: later she would recount playing at shops and typing out invoices on her father's typewriter.

The next stage in her spiritual journey came with her Protestant Confirmation, after which she "became very interested in religion, the Bible, the eucharist and above all in prayer". As tertiary education beckoned, her great desire was to study German literature, but her father said, "There's no money in that," and insisted that she do business studies at the commercial college in Zürich. Though she had by now given up going to the Protestant services, she still felt drawn to things spiritual, spending her lunch-breaks in a Catholic Church she discovered not far from the College. "I just sat there quietly and I felt a strange well-being as if Jesus was really there and I tried to pray." It was as if she was being drawn bit by bit, even beginning to think of becoming a nun. First, she must enter the Church, and this she did not long after taking a job in a big bank in Zürich, helped by a good friend who was a Catholic.

Her life at this time, however, was getting complicated. On a trip to England to stay with an uncle and his wife by the sea, she had met the nephew of her aunt-by-marriage. As she put it, "It was the right scenario for a romance." This charming, intelligent and stylish young woman certainly captivated the young man's heart. The desire to become a nun slipped into the background and she consented to marry him on the condition that he would wait until she had finished her studies.

Once the studies were over and she was now a Catholic, the future looked clear to him, but not so to Hadwig for whom the question of becoming a nun came up again very strongly. She confessed her dilemma to her fiancé, who



suggested – generous young man – that she make a retreat. This she did, and had the benefit of long talks with Archbishop Thomas Roberts SJ (the retired Archbishop of Bombay). The result was that she broke off the engagement. (The young man went on to marry someone else, and he and his wife were her life-long friends.) It was the enclosed contemplative life that was drawing Hadwig, and Archbishop Roberts recommended St Cecilia's, as he had visited here while giving a retreat to the monks at Quarr.

The decision to enter a monastery was painful and bewildering for Mr and Mrs Eckhardt, but after months of arguing they decided to give their blessing, on the basis that it was her life, though Sr M Bernard suggested it was also partly because “many people told them that I would return in a few weeks because I was far too independent and would not be able to obey”.

Hadwig entered on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1958. It cannot have been easy for this sophisticated young woman, yet she persevered and received the habit in November of the same year. Her first profession was on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1960, and her solemn profession on the same date in 1963.

Even as a junior Sr Marie Bernard was put to work in the cellary and Notre Mère Bernadette later appointed her cellarer in 1970. Those were the difficult days when the community’s finances had barely recovered from the War, then a serious fire in 1962, and then all the work and expense of the Indian Foundation. The young cellarer watched every penny – a practice she maintained always – and worked all she could to repair the house and put order into the accounts. She was shrewd and businesslike, and won the respect of employees and business contacts, both for her professionalism and for her kindness. Within the community she was respected for her common sense and competence. She served on the Abbess’s Council for over thirty years; she was named Sub Prioress in 1994 and then became the Prioress in 1996 until 2008, faithful, loyal and always an excellent example of the observance (though perhaps not of tidiness).

These virtues could not have flourished without the serious spiritual life which she maintained in spite of the demands of her charge. Hers was not a frothy piety and she was not one to gush about spiritual aspirations or experiences. Rather, it was a matter of faithfully focussing on Christ, and drawing spiritual nourishment from the purest sources – the liturgy especially. Favourite authors were the Fathers such as Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, John of the Cross and of course, St Bernard.

When she was replaced as cellarer on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009 it was a sacrifice for her, but she gave a textbook example of how to come off a charge – with the utmost encouragement for her successor to whom she wrote, “I will always tell you what I think but it is your duty from now on to take the decisions.” She kept this promise and was a huge support.

Bit by bit, however, the problems of failing mobility increased. For one with her active temperament this must have caused great suffering. Throughout her life she had had to live with a tendency to depression which she tackled with great courage and simplicity, and of course also her inimitable humour. In her final years, when



almost everything had to be done for her, it was her faith and courage which shone out most of all. She continued to be most courteous, interested in everything and everybody, sometimes quite blunt in her opinions, always full of kindness. In her final months, her chief preoccupation was her longing for heaven, but she understood that while still on earth she could pray for “Papa Leone” and win merit for the misguided souls who have recourse to euthanasia.

Her motto *In lumine tuo* is from a verse in Psalm 35 which the Latin translates in the future tense, “In your light we shall see light”. This question of the tense was important to her. The Lord whom she loved and worshipped she knew by faith, not by sight. This was yet to come. Her oft-repeated phrase, “I want to go to heaven,” was shorthand for the whole unfolding of a reality of which she had only glimpses here, and to which she had oriented her whole life. When the moment came she went forth with faith and confidence to meet Him whom she loved. May the Lord reward her now, and may she intercede for PCJ.

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***Homily of Father Abbot Xavier Perrin  
for the Funeral Mass of Sr Marie-Bernard Eckhardt  
12<sup>th</sup> March 2026***

*Readings: Is 25.6-9; 1 Jn 3.1-2; Jn 6.37-40*

As we entrust our dear Sr Marie Bernard to the Lord, we are greeted by powerful words of hope and consolation. First, we heard the words of Isaiah about the feast on the mountain, the end of death and the wiping away of tears. Then St John spoke of our already being children of God and promised that when Jesus appears we shall be like him. Finally, Jesus Himself, in the Gospel, revealed to us the will of the Father that Jesus should lose nothing of all that the Father has given Him, but raise it up at the last day. How could we not be filled with sure hope and deeply consoled?

But there is more for us today. With the words, we have a witness to the words; with words of hope, hope lived out. Sr Marie Bernard directed her whole life

according to these words. She hoped for God's mercy. *She desired eternal life with all spiritual longing* (*Rule of St Benedict*, chapter 4). The words of hope of the Bible found in her heart and in her life an incarnation. For her life was entirely built on this hope. She declined offers in marriage, she left her dear parents of whom she was the only child, she moved to a foreign country never to return to the beautiful mountains of her dear Switzerland. God's calling proved stronger than anything else. She came here and she stayed.

One could see a paradox in the fact that the main way she was asked to express her longing for heaven was by serving the temporal needs of her monastery. As Cellarer, a task she assumed for nearly forty years, she had to deal with all the material aspects of the life of the community. She had to direct workers and to speak with brokers. She was asked to care for money which she did with the precise and conscientious way we spontaneously associate with Switzerland. She did it very well, serving God and dealing with Mammon in a matter-of-fact way which did not allow for any sentimentality. For her, it was, as it should be, a service to the community, just as she was called to serve first as sub-prioress and then prioress, as well as a member of the Abbess's council for many years.

Dom Delatte has spoken of the ideal of the cellarer who should be a very practical man, well equipped to deal with matters of this world, but at the same time someone with a deep spiritual life and a great desire for God. He was probably thinking of his own cellarer, Dom Noetinger, who played such an important role at Quarr and Solesmes, being one of those rare men equally at ease at managing investments and at translating the English Mystics into French. Sr Marie Bernard belonged to the same category of monastic personalities whose hope for heaven is rooted in a highly competent care for the realities of this world.

The word of God, source of our hope, and the same hope incarnated in a life of monastic service: this is what we give thanks for today. The hidden life of this faithful servant of God speaks more than many books about our Christian hope. Sr Marie Bernard was not spared difficult times. She showed great patience in the infirmities which forced her to become an accomplished driver in the corridors of her monastery. Her smile, her sense of humour, her perfect courtesy made her inner joy palpable.

We pray that she may be given the everlasting joy she longed for so intensely, that *reward that God Himself has promised: Eye has not seen nor ear heard, what God has prepared for those who love Him.*

## *The History of the Abbey of Valsainte, Nîmes: Part 1: Origins*

If an intelligent enquirer asked us what Benedictine traditions had formed our community of PCJ, we would explain about the reform of Madame Florence de Werquignœul and the traditions that came to us from Paix Notre Dame, Liège, and then about the influence of Solesmes, and our privilege of being received into the Congregation. Special mention would no doubt be made of our first prioress, Mère Placide Delhæs, whose kindness to the exiled communities from Solesmes did so much to forge the bonds of friendship with them. Nevertheless, the great figure who took us into the Solesmes Congregation was Notre Mère Ambrosia, who received her initial monastic formation neither from Liège nor from Solesmes. In honour of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her monastic profession in 2025, and the centenary of her abbatial blessing in 2026, we have tried to see if we could find out a little more about the monastery of her profession, the Abbey of Valsainte in Nîmes.

Nîmes is slightly inland from the southern coast of France; its glory days were during the Roman Empire, when it sat on the main road that linked Italy with Spain. Christianity is said to have come to Nîmes in the person of St Saturninus, sent by Pope St Fabian, around the year 245, but the earliest monuments attesting to the presence of Christianity date from only the fourth century. The first bishop is said to have been a St Felix, who was martyred in 407. The city's patron saint, however, is St Baudile. The story goes that he was a layman or possibly a deacon (though married) from elsewhere. When travelling to the city towards the end of the third century he came upon a group of pagans holding a sacrifice in woods near the city gates. He protested and knocked over the statue of the pagan god. The pagan priests in fury whipped him and then cut off his head. His head bounced on the ground three times, each impact bringing forth a spring of water: later an oratory was built on the site in commemoration of the miracle. Meanwhile St Baudile's wife took his body to a village up in the mountains called Valsaintes and buried it: Valsaintes thus became a place of pilgrimage, with a church built in the fourth century and a monastery in 511. Between 718 and 890, however, the whole of this region was devastated by repeated incursions of the Moslem Saracens, and during this time the original monastery at Valsaintes was destroyed. In 1180 the Cistercian monks of the Abbey of Silvacane established a new monastery in this "holy valley". In the seventeenth century the Cistercians moved a couple of kilometres to the west, to the summit of a hill but retaining the name Valsaintes.

The City of Nîmes had its share of suffering from the Saracen incursions, but by 990 these were in the past. At this date the then bishop, Frottaire, decided to establish

a monastery of Benedictine nuns. Near to the centre of Nîmes the site of a copious spring had been developed by the Romans into a complex of beautiful pools and various buildings. One of these, a hall with vaulted ceilings and grand archways of exceptional Roman craftsmanship, was assumed in later times to have been a temple to Diana, though modern archaeologists think it may have been a library. The new monastery was built beside it, with the nuns' choir looking into the old so-called temple, now a church. The monastery was called Saint-Sauveur de la Fontaine. Its finances were assured by the income coming from generous grants of land in the area; many girls from the nobility entered; and for some centuries it was known for its strictness of discipline. Such discipline began to sag in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; and there were complaints about laxity followed by attempts to tighten up.

In such a situation it is not surprising that heretical ideas could creep in. For some reason Nîmes was one of the centres of Protestantism as it developed in France. On 21<sup>st</sup> December 1561 all the convents of Nîmes were attacked and pillaged by the Huguenot mob. While the faithful nuns fled to one of their other properties, some who had absorbed Protestant ideas remained. Three days later, these nuns asked to take part in the Protestant communion service and were told that they could on condition that they would leave their "silent quarters." The French court soon ordered that the Catholic religion be re-established, and the faithful nuns were able to return, but very shortly afterwards Huguenot soldiers came and destroyed the altars and other signs of the Catholic religion, and the nuns had to flee again. In 1563 an edict of pacification ordered the return of ecclesiastical properties to their Catholic owners but this was ignored at Nîmes. Instead the monastery was demolished.

Meanwhile the nuns of the Abbaye St-Sauveur moved from one unsatisfactory location to another, eventually settling in the town of Beaucaire near the coast. Marguerite III Radulple de Saint-Paulet held the abbatial office from 1622 to 1661; she enlarged and repaired the house occupied by the nuns, but it seems that she took less care to maintain monastic discipline; one day when the Archbishop of Arles arrived unexpectedly to visit the convent, he found it empty, the nuns having gone to the fairground. The Archbishop condemned the abbess to eight days of fasting on bread and water. Madame de Saint-Paulet was succeeded by Armande II Galien de Védène de Gadagne. This new abbess, determined to carry out her task with all the zeal that the Church had the right to expect from her, gave her convent wise constitutions taken from those of the royal monastery of Saint-Pierre de Lyon. According to these constitutions, the nuns rose at 4.30, from Easter to the Feast of the Cross in September, and at 5am the rest of the year; half an hour later, they prayed for another half hour; at 5.30 or 6am, depending on the season, they recited Matins, Lauds and Prime; the conventual Mass was celebrated at 7am in summer

and at 8am in winter. Terce, Sext and None were said at 9.30 in summer and at 10am in winter and were followed by the examination of conscience. Dinner followed. At 2pm, Vespers and Compline; at 5pm, prayer followed by the Office of the Virgin. At 6pm supper followed, then recreation which lasted until 9pm. At this time the examination of conscience took place, then evening prayer. The subject of meditation for the next day was given and all the nuns returned to their cells for the night's rest.<sup>1</sup>

When the French Revolution hit, there were six nuns in the community. When "freedom" was offered to them they all declared that they wanted to remain in their monastery. They did so until 17th September 1792, when they were driven out and dispersed; the convent was pillaged. Up in the mountains at the Abbey of Valsaintes, the Revolutionaries drove out the monks also. The abbey was turned into a farm, before being completely abandoned.

In the eighteenth century, before the French Revolution, an engineer called Jacques Philippe Marechal surveyed the ruins of the Abbaye de Saint-Sauveur and the Roman buildings and pools, and laid them out as a beautiful park, and they remain thus today. The ruins of Valsaintes were left for much longer, but in 1996 people started restoration work, and now there too there is a beautiful garden. It would seem that there was to be no restoration of Benedictine life for women in Nîmes, however, but one should never underestimate what the Holy Spirit might choose to do. After the miseries of the Revolution, the city of Nîmes once again found its equilibrium and even prosperity. Known for its textiles, its entrepreneurs developed a hard-wearing cloth that was dyed blue, known as "serge de Nîmes," hence the name "denim."

The Church too, began to recover, and during the nineteenth century had a series of energetic and holy bishops. The one of most interest to us is Claude-Henri Plantier, who was born in 1813 and ordained in 1837. Though of humble origins (his father was a gardener), a year after ordination he was named professor of Hebrew and Sacred Scripture in the faculty of theology at Lyon. In addition, from 1852 he was ecclesiastical superior of the Sisters of St-Elisabeth, and from 1853 of the Benedictine nuns of the Abbey of Pradines, then in 1855 he was named Bishop of Nîmes. As bishop he was a zealous, campaigning against the heretical book *The Life of Jesus* by Renan. At the First Vatican Council he was an ardent supporter of Papal Infallibility. (The archivist of S-Pierre reports that there does not seem to be any correspondence between Mgr Plantier and his contemporary Dom Guéranger, but no doubt they are friends now.) Once bishop of Nîmes, Mgr Plantier had to cease being superior of the Abbey

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<sup>1</sup> M l'Abbé Goiffon, *La Paroisse Saint-Charles* (1872), pp 165-187.

of Pradines, but he maintained close relations with the Sisters and visited them frequently. In the words of the biographer of the Abbess at the time:

Accordingly, his visit to Pradines in August 1871 was not a surprise. But the purpose of his visit was a surprise indeed, and a great one. The bishop was accompanied by Abbé Prouvèze,<sup>2</sup> director of the school of the Cathedral of Nîmes. He had just gathered together sixteen girl orphans, who were of an age to earn their own living, and at their head two spinsters of advanced age, and a widow who was young and rich. These three women, having passed a few months in a monastery [one would love to know where] felt themselves ready to constitute a Benedictine community with the orphans. With the support of the bishop, Abbé Prouvèze asked [the Abbess] Mère Saint Stanislaus nothing less than the affiliation of the future disciples of St Benedict to the community of Pradines, and permission to adopt the Constitutions of Madame de Bavoze [founder of Pradines] for the young foundation.<sup>3</sup>

There was a bit more to it than that. Earlier Abbé Prouvèze had written a report to his bishop:

The thought of establishing a house which was a place of prayer, of devotion and of merits offered secretly to God, for our separated brethren, was born in the soul of several of my friends, and in mine, at the very beginning of your episcopate, when we were still in the seminary.<sup>4</sup>

Such an idea was bound to win Mgr Plantier's heart. According to his biographer, the bishop "never prostrated himself at the feet of Pius IX without begging of him with tears for a blessing for the dissidents of the diocese of Nîmes; in all the religious communities of which he had pastoral charge, he prescribed prayers and asked for Communion and penance for their conversion".<sup>5</sup> To this aim, Abbé Prouvèze added another hope: "to render entry into religious life easy for vocations lacking a dowry, by fruitful work."<sup>6</sup>

*To be continued...*

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2 Louis Prouvèze (1814-1884) entered the Assumptionists in 1852. He was known for his extraordinary zeal for prayer and his devotion to the liturgy. Unfortunately, the archives of the Assumptionist Order make no mention of his connection with the monastery of Valsainte. The founder of the Assumptionists, Emmanuel d'Alzon, was Mgr Plantier's vicar general.

3 Archives de Pradines, *Vie de Mère Ste Stanislaus*.

4 M l'Abbé Goiffon, *Notice historique sur les Carmes et la paroisse St Baudile de Nîmes* (1873), p 49.

5 M l'Abbé J Claston, *Vie de sa grandeur Mgr Plantier, Evêque de Nîmes* (1882), p 479.

6 Goiffon, *ibid*.

## *Chronicle of the Election and Blessing of Mere Ambrosia: April 1926*

**April 20.** Following the telegram of February 24<sup>th</sup> assuring us that the canonical erection had been granted by Rome, a second telegram arrived on the 17<sup>th</sup> of this month informing us that the Apostolic Brief was en route. Although the election had been appointed for the 22<sup>nd</sup>—the anniversary of the Right Reverend Dom Germain Cozien, Abbot of Solesmes—Bishop Cotter indicated that it could not proceed until the official documents were received. Fortunately, the holy Angels, whom our petitions had kept well employed these past days, hastened to deliver the precious document on this 20<sup>th</sup> of April: the very date on which our dear Notre Mère first entered the monastery of Valsainte, in Nîmes.



**April 22.** This morning, at approximately eleven o'clock, the bell summoned the [solemnly professed] nuns to the Great Parlour for the Scrutiny. Bishop Cotter, Bishop of Portsmouth, vested in rochet and mozzetta and attended by his two assessors—the Reverend Fathers Dom de la Messelière and Dom Calmel, monks of Quarr—intoned the hymn *Veni Creator*, which we took up with all our hearts. After the reading of the Pontifical Brief, His Lordship spoke of the gravity of the act we were about to perform, exhorting us to follow our consciences with the utmost scrupulosity.

As the Bishop called the roll, each nun in turn passed her ballot through the grille into the urn placed before His Lordship. Once all votes were cast, the Bishop silently unfolded and counted them, passing them to the two assessors who recorded the results. The scrutiny complete, the Bishop declared, to the general joy, that Mère Ambrosia Cousin, Prioress, had been elected Abbess, all votes having been cast in her favour, save her own. The community then proceeded to the Chapter House, where Bishop Cotter performed the Enthronement: having read the prescribed formula in French, he presented to *Madame l'Abbesse* the pectoral cross, the keys, and the seal (*sigillum*) of the Monastery. This modest cross possessed a history of its own: it had been worn, prior to the dissolution of her community, by Madame de Sainte Marie des Anges, Abbess of Valsainte—the monastery our Mother had entered in 1899—and had been providentially entrusted to our

dear Mother following that Abbess's death. As His Lordship intoned the *Te Deum*, the Chapter doors were opened to the junior professed and our Lay Sisters, who joined us for the touching Rite of Obedience, concluding with the Episcopal Blessing. Pleased with the morning's proceedings, Bishop Cotter personally dispatched a telegram to Liège: "*Joyously I announce to Mother Abbess of Liège the election of Mère Ambrosia as Abbess today in virtue of the decree of His Holiness Pius XI. – Cotter, Bishop of Portsmouth.*"

**April 24.** As one might imagine, the Bishop's telegram was received with profound emotion by our sisters in Liège, who had long hoped for Mother's return to *Paix Notre-Dame*. Nevertheless, to share in our joy, they sent the Reverend Mother Charlotte Ransonnet, Prioress of Louvain, and Dame Mechtilde de Rochefée, a nun of Liège and former pupil of Ventnor.

**April 26. Haec est dies quam fecit Dominus...** The great day has finally dawned. The entire house has an air of extraordinary festivity; the Choir is adorned with a magnificence never before seen in this young Abbey. The altar is surmounted by a canopy of state, and the walls are draped in old-gold silk bordered with velvet. To the right, the throne and canopy of white silk bear the arms of the Bishop of Portsmouth. Along the hangings, a series of escutcheons [heraldic shields bearing a coat of arms] decorate the consecration crosses.

To the right of the altar, the eagle of His Holiness Pius XI faces the shamrocks of Bishop Cotter; the mystical rose of Dom Guéranger looked toward the chequered eagle of Dom Cozien; the sword of Dom Delatte answered the "Pax on a field azure" of Dom Alardo; and finally, the shells of St. Michael for Dom Cabrol. On the rear wall, the shield of Madame Cécile Bruyère, whose holy remains rest in our crypt, provided a precious token of blessing; beside it, that of our dear Reverend Mother Placide Delhaes, whom we so longed to have among us to witness the fruits of her arduous labours at Ventnor; the arms of Madame Claire de Livron, Abbess of Sainte-Cécile de Solesmes; and finally, presiding over all, the shields of *Madame l'Abbesse* and of the Monastery, designed by Dom de Saint-Michel, a monk of Solesmes highly skilled in the heraldic arts.

The shield of *Madame l'Abbesse* is blazoned: *Vair, a chief gules*, charged with an ancient spearhead argent. Her motto: "*In Manus Tuas.*" The *vair*, in the colours of Our Lady, is arranged in three tiers symbolising Our Lady of Good Counsel, Paix Notre-Dame de Liège, and Our Lady of Quarr. The chief recalls the arms of our Abbey, the spearhead representing the Sacred Heart. The arms of the Monastery are: *Or, a cross moline sable, between four roses gules*; on a chief of the last, a spearhead between two *fleurs-de-lis argent*.<sup>1</sup> The silver recalls the blazon of Mother Placide



Delhaes; the gold and gules those of Dom Cozien. The roses symbolise our various foundations and patrons: Our Lady of Good Counsel, the "cradle" of Liège, the "light" of Quarr, and Our Lady of La Garde, who gave us our first Abbess. [Notre Dame de la Garde is the statue of Our Lady that overlooks Mère Ambrosia's home city of Marseille]

The *Gaudeamus* of the Introit was taken up with a joyful fervour that betrayed the vibrant gratitude of our hearts. Nothing, moreover, could be more eloquent for an abbatial blessing than this Mass of Our Lady of Good Counsel: "*Ego Mater pulchrae dilectionis... In me gratia omnis viae et veritatis...*

*Qui audit me non confundetur.*" [Sir 24:24-26: "I am the mother of fair love... In me is all grace of the way and of the truth... He that hearkeneth to me shall not be confounded."] And by what more delicate words could the Lord have ratified the choice of our Elect than by those which the liturgy placed upon our lips on the very eve of the election: *Quandoque divina gratia eligit aliquem ad aliquam gratiam singularem... omnia charismata donat.* ["Whenever divine grace chooses someone for a singular grace... it bestows all the gifts needed" from the Office of the Patronage of St Joseph.]

Between the two Alleluias the principal ceremony took place, unfolding with the moving solemnity proper to the Roman Pontifical. *Madame l'Abbesse* read her chart in a firm voice, though one could sense a slight emotion, promising obedience to the Church and to the Bishop; then she prostrated herself upon the ground while the Litany of the Saints was chanted over her. This act of total self-effacement before God, at the moment of elevation to such dignity, remains one of the most striking lessons of the entire rite.

The cross that adorns the breast of *Madame Notre Mère* is a pious and cherished gift from Monsieur Canon Mendre. Of solid gold and engraved with small medals of Saint Benedict, it bears three ruby trefoils set like drops of blood at the points of the nails. These rubies were given from an antique jewel belonging to Mrs Horrigan [mother of two members of the community]. Saint-Pierre and Sainte-Cécile of Solesmes, in the persons of the Right Reverend Dom

1 *Vair, a chief gules..*: Vair is a blue-and-white pattern representing heraldic fur; Chief is the top band of the shield; Gules is red; Argent is silver/white. Or is gold; *Cross Moline* is a cross with curved, split ends; Sable is black; "Of the last" refers back to the previously mentioned colour (red).

Cozien and Madame Claire de Livron, united to offer *Madame l'Abbesse* a ring of great beauty; but as it was unable to reach us in time, Madame de Livron lent the very ring she herself wore at her own abbatial blessing, which our beloved Mother will wear until her own arrives. A detail from the conclusion of the ceremony: instead of conducting Madame to her assigned seat, Bishop Cotter seated her upon his own throne beneath the canopy. "The monks told me the ceremonial did not prescribe it," he confided kindly to us that afternoon, "but I replied: I will do it." Profoundly happy and proud of his first blessing of an Abbess, the good Bishop could not resist this departure from the rubrics to follow the impulse of his heart.

Within the monastery there is an atmosphere of inexpressible happiness. The Lord has borne His children up to Mount Tabor. Bishop Cotter entered the enclosure for recreation and sat in our midst like the Good Shepherd among his sheep. "It was a beautiful ceremony," he told us. The Bishop then blessed the two novices whom the Right Reverend Father Abbot Dom Cozien will consecrate tomorrow.

The Prelates and guests took leave of *Madame Notre Mère* before Vespers, which concluded with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. And in the evening of so radiant a day, the words once spoken by the Right Reverend Dom Delatte return to our memory: "There is happiness for you, my children—more than your heart can contain."

### ***Memories of Mère Ambrosia***

*These daughters of hers, how profoundly she loved them! She wanted them to be strong, supernatural, wholly orientated towards God. Hating half-measures as she did, she knew how to stimulate the weaker ones and lead them, with exquisite delicacy, to give their full measure to God. Great sweetness and goodness were allied in her to a firmness and persuasive strength which would not compromise either with pusillanimity or voluntary negligences ... In a word, happiness reigned, and Pax Cordis Jesu was no empty title!*

– Notre Mère Bernadette Smeyers, 2nd Abbess of *Pax Cordis Jesu*

*I see her in stature small and dignified, graceful with a quite unconscious ability to attract... [Her eyes] glowed, they searched yours, they invited your confidence, they were warm, friendly and true. She held together a community of several nationalities in truest Christian charity, warm and genial, self-effacing and entirely lovely, and this through two world wars. Her secret was her living example, a woman who chose exile from home and country infinitely dear to her, that she might follow the highest call of her loving nature, her wise counsel, her deep sympathy, her firm but gentle rule, her extraordinary power to wed all together in Christ.*

– A friend of the community in a letter of condolence

*Extract from the Homily of Fr Abbot Xavier Perrin for the Feast of St Agnes  
and First Profession of Sr Lucy Theisen, 21st January 2026*

Last September Pope Leo declared Pier Giorgio Frassati and Carlo Acutis saints. The enthusiasm and the joy which accompanied the canonization of these two young men can help us to understand the love and fervour with which the very young martyr Agnes was revered at Rome and in the wider Church in Antiquity. Here was a martyr who was neither a pope, nor an old bishop, nor even a highly respected deacon. Agnes was a woman and a child, but God's holiness shone through the generosity of her young heart. She had been given to perceive the everlasting value of the truth and love revealed in Jesus Christ. Agnes is strength in weakness and wisdom in young age. She combines the unsullied and luminous love of a youth with the mature love of a spouse. The fire in her heart is stronger than the flames of the persecutors. She lets herself be totally filled with the powerful life of the Risen Christ.



*Sr Lucy, centre*

Young Saints give us hope. They open doors of courage and free streams of unknown energy in our hearts. They come to us with the fascinating charm of children to whom all seems so simple. They remind us that it is indeed simple, natural and good to love God and to be loved by Him. This is what human vocation is about. We are men and women of desire and God alone can quench our thirst for life.

Dear Sister Lucy, today's ceremony leads us to this moment of encounter between the person of Christ and the longing of your heart. The Lord has called you to follow him. He has led you to this monastery, to this community. Here, he instructs you daily, like a master to his disciple. He shows you the way of the Benedictine Rule. By descending the steps of humility and living the good zeal of love, the sons and daughters of Saint Benedict attain the perfection of life. They achieve this by constantly renewing the youthfulness of their souls.

Only a young and free soul can sell everything to acquire the precious pearl of the Gospel. Only a nun who constantly renews her longing for God at the source of the sacraments and the Word of God can give herself to Christ and promise to serve him in prayer and work, in solitude and community life, in song and silence.

## Notebook

On the feast of the Epiphany some members of the community presented a medieval pageant, *The Offering of the Magi*, skilfully adapted and translated from Middle English by Sr Mechilde. Special mention is due to a near-mad king Herod, who, for reason of a “temporary indisposition of his feet”, had to be wheeled in on a lavishly decorated throne which usually serves as a deliveries trolley when not used as a prop. The literal star of the show, however, was certainly the live and very shiny star that, having taking flight from Herod’s presence, graciously re-appeared at the prayer of the three pilgrim kings: “Thou child, whose might no tongue may tell, / as Thou art Lord of heaven and hell, / Thy noble star, Emmanuel, / Thou send us here; / that we may wit by firth and fell / how we shall fare.”

On the feast of St Agnes, we had the great joy of singing the *Suscipe me Domine* together with Sr Lucy Theisen, as she pronounced her first vows. Three of her siblings (and one beloved baby nephew) came from Germany for the occasion; the organ accompaniment at Mass and Vespers that day featured a number of Sr Lucy’s favourite German hymns; and Fr Abbot Xavier preached the homily partly in German, though it has been entirely translated in the extract printed. Her affection for her homeland was unmistakably present on this special day!

Under the guidance of our choir mistress, Sr Bernadette, we have been gradually expanding our regular chant repertoire over the past years. This enrichment makes itself especially felt during the season of Lent: We used to replace a number of the long Sunday Tracts – the Lenten equivalent of the Alleluia chant – with simple responsorial psalms; however, this year we finally managed to sing all the proper Tracts, including the very long *Qui habitat* of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent. We can report that it takes fourteen minutes thanks to one sister with a scientific mind and an accurate watch! These chants are – apart from the last verse, where the whole choir joins in – sung by the schola, alternating between two groups of three chantresses each. As our choir mistress

Tract.  
2.



Q UI há-bi- tat \*

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notation consists of a series of notes and rests, with some notes beamed together. Below the staff, the lyrics 'UI há-bi- tat' are written, with a large 'Q' at the beginning of the first line. An asterisk is placed at the end of the second line of lyrics.

pointed out, however, what makes these pieces real liturgical music is not just the singing as such, but the prayerful attention of everyone in the choir.

We are already looking forward to the Chapter of Abbesses of the Solesmes Congregation which is going to take place at our Abbey this coming October. Preparations are already well under way; among other things, several departments are thoroughly re-

fashioned and newly decorated. After the Juniorate and the Sacristy, it is the turn of the kitchen, which obviously necessitates a considerable number of re-arrangements. The vegetable preparation, for example, had to be moved to our music room, so that we are currently peeling potatoes and chopping up onions right next to the grand piano.



Mother Abbess left us during the first week of Lent to attend the Abbatial Blessing of Mère Immaculata Tendeng at Keur Guilaye, Senegal. The abbey of Keur Guilaye, which currently numbers 17 members, was founded in 1967 by nuns of Ste Cécile and is part of the Solesmes Congregation. Senegal is a dominantly Muslim country, but the Catholic Church

there is nevertheless alive and well as was amply demonstrated by all that Mother Abbess saw and described. We are excited that we will meet Mère Immaculata in October to strengthen our links with Keur Guilaye.



**I**n honour of the centenary of Mère Ambrosia's abbatial blessing, our motto for this year is the one she made her own: *In manus tuas* – into Your hands; shorthand for the verse from Ps 30 that our Lord prayed on the Cross. Our first abbess wanted to write this into the very character of our community and the life of Sr Marie Bernard assures us that Mère Ambrosia's desire was not in vain. Inspired by our monastic forebears, we place ourselves in the hands of the Lord, along with all the intentions confided to our prayers. We wish all our readers the consolation, guidance and blessing of these hands.

## *In Manus Tuas*

Mere Ambrosia's reflections on her motto  
from a small notebook in her own hand:

*Pater, "In manus tuas"*

❖ To be in God's hand – that's the definition of piety; it's being at his disposal, completely committed. The heart is oriented by a very sweet attraction towards this divine pole which is God, who is all Beauty, all Power.

❖ To be in God's hand is to be like a harp which, under the divine touch, gives forth the harmonious melodies of prayer, surrender, thanksgiving, angelic charity.

❖ To be in God's hand is to be sheltered by his powerful protection, in complete safety: "I have engraved your name on my hand" (Hosea).

❖ It's the last word of Our Lord on the cross, when he was abandoned by all, delivered up to dishonour and death; helpless, defenseless, one final refuge remained to him: "Father, into your hands"

❖ The just are in the hands of God, as chosen souls. The hand of God is a hand that blesses, that heals wounds, that removes thorns, that consoles. That's why the just who are in the hands of the Lord are happy souls, even in trial and tribulation. This hand is divinely maternal. It's the place of our rest.

❖ This hand of God is not only the hand which consoles us here below, which guides and blesses; it's also the hand that will crown us in heaven.

*Pater, "In manus tuas"*