

ELECTION AND BLESSING

FIRST YEARS AS ABBESS

PART ONE

1926 - 1936

As for happiness, there is some in store for you, my children, and more than your hearts can contain.
(Dom Delatte)

When Bishop Cotter of Portsmouth paid the nuns a surprise visit one afternoon in February 1926, he was pleased to find Mère Ambrosia still at Ryde. 'Ah, you've come back', he said to her joyfully, 'Well, now you must stay!' The Bishop spoke of his recent visit *ad limina*, of his private audience with the Pope, and of his interview with his friend, Cardinal Laurenti, to whom he had spoken in favour of Pax Cordis Jesu. To express her gratitude to the Bishop, Mère Ambrosia gave him the beautiful carved altar

from the chapel at Ventnor. Bishop Cotter, a zealous church-builder, was delighted with the gift and did not hide his joy and gratitude. It was not long before this altar had gone to enrich the new sanctuary of St. Colman's at Cosham.



On 24 February, feast of St. Mathias, the long-awaited telegram arrived from Rome: 'Erection granted. Bastien.' On the very next morning, the Prior of Quarr, Dom Bouvet, celebrated a Mass of thanksgiving at St. Cecilia's Abbey. With the arrival of the official decree on 20 April, the Community proceeded to an abbatial election on 22nd, the date of Dom Cozien's own election. On 21st, Dom Bouvet wrote with the assurance of Quarr's prayers: 'We are going to sing the *Veni Creator* presently, and tomorrow I shall offer Mass that the Lord may accomplish His work among you during the day. All will go well, and I am sure that tomorrow evening all will thank

our Father in heaven, with happy and unanimous hearts, for the blessing granted to this family which He loves. The cross has been blessed and has received its indulgences. She who is to wear it will be helped by the Church's prayer, which is beautiful and encouraging . . . May Our Lady and St Joseph be very close to you all tomorrow, and may the shadow of our Holy Father St. Benedict watch over you all day and inspire you all with the supernatural dispositions required on such a day.'

On the morning of the 22nd, a bell summoned the members of the Chapter to the Big Parlour. Bishop Cotter of Portsmouth with his two scrutineers, Fathers de la Messelière and Calmels of Quarr, intoned the hymn *Veni Creator*. After the counting of the voting papers, the Bishop declared, to the joy of all, that Mère Ambrosia Cousin, Prioress, had been elected Abbess. All the votes had been in her favour, her own excepted. All then went to the Chapter Room where Bishop Cotter confirmed Mère Ambrosia as the new Abbess in the name of the Holy See, bestowing upon her the insignia of her office: the pectoral cross and the monastery's seal. This cross was that worn by Madame St. Marie des Anges, Abbess of the monastery of Valsainte, where Madame Ambrosia entered in 1899; it had been given to the latter after the death of the Abbess. After intoning the *Te Deum*, the Bishop led her to the Abbess'

stall, whereupon each member of the community, placing her hands between those of the new superior, pledged her obedience and received from her the kiss of peace.

Bishop Cotter then addressed a telegram to Liège: 'Joyously I announce to Mother Abbess of Liège the election of Mère Ambrosia as Abbess today in virtue of decree His Holiness Pius XI. Cotter, Bishop of Portsmouth.' Thus, only four days later, on the 26th April, the feast of Our Lady of Good Counsel, second patron of the monastery, Bishop Cotter returned to the Abbey to confer on Mère Ambrosia the Abbatial Blessing. In the sanctuary front of the altar of Our Lady, were the places for the Right Reverend Dom Cozien, Abbot of Solesmes, Dom Cabrol of Farnborough, and Dom Alardo, Abbot of Clervaux. Other places in the sanctuary were prepared for Dom Bouvet, Prior of Quarr, Canon Mongan, Parish Priest of Ryde, and his curate Fr O'Shea, as well as for an Irish Franciscan, a guest at Quarr. Present in the choir were Lady Abbess Philomena Holcroft of East Bergholt, Mère Charlotte Ransonnet, Prioress of Saint Gertrude's, Louvain, and Dame Mechtilde de Rochelet of Liège, an old pupil of the boarding school at Ventnor. Next to the Communion rail knelt the two Godmothers, Madame Mesureur and Mrs Naish, and the two gentlemen in attendance, Baron de Dorlodot and Colonel Limal.

"Receive full and free power," the Bishop said as he solemnly enthroned her and put the crozier in her hand, "to rule this monastery and community and everything that is known to pertain to the government of the same, within and without, in spirituals and in temporals." Instead of conducting the elect to her throne, however, Bishop Cotter seated her on his own, under the baldachino. "The monks said that the ceremonial did not indicate this," he confessed afterwards, "but I answered: 'I will do it.'"

For the blessing, the new Abbess had to borrow a crozier from Lady Abbess of East Bergholt. A year later, however, the pupils, both past and present would present her with a beautiful crozier of carved ivory, with spiked tip and joint-bands in silver, the mystery of the Annunciation forming the motif within the crook. It was the work of the Parisian craftsman, Py, following the design of Dom Paul Le Corre of Solesmes. In the meantime, she used a more modest one fabricated by two members of the Community, covered with pewter repoussé work, and embellished with polished stud-nails. It had an air of antiquity about it, and the Community jokingly referred to it as 'Ambrosian style, 5th century'! This humble improvisation was always to remain, in the eyes of Madame Ambrosia, a testimony to the eager and affectionate zeal of her daughters. It was to be buried with her.