

ELECTION AND BLESSING

FIRST YEARS AS ABBESS

Part Two

1926 - 1936

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

Saint Pierre and Sainte Cécile of Solesmes joined in giving Madame Cousin a gold ring. Set with a pale amethyst, bordered on either side by two small circular bands of gold, it had been designed by Dom de Laborde. It was impossible for it to arrive in time, so a ring had also to be borrowed, from Madame Claire de Livron, Abbess of Ste Cécile de Solesmes, who lent the one she herself had worn at her own Blessing. The pectoral cross had once belonged to Canon Mendre: in solid gold, engraved with small crosses of St Benedict, it bore three trefoils of rubies originating from a piece of old jewelry donated by Mrs Horrigan, mother of three nuns.

Among the telegrams received, that of Cardinal Gasparri brought Madame Ambrosia Cousin the Blessing of Pius XI: "Occasion your abbatial Blessing, Holy Father sends you, as well as the Community, Apostolic Blessing, pledge divine favours." Abbot Alardo summed-up his impressions of the day: "You are privileged to belong to a fervent monastery. One feels that from the very way the Office is carried out. Your chant breathes prayer."

The following day Fr Abbot Cozien presided over a double *Consecratio Virginum*. Before returning to Solesmes, he said: "Before setting off again on my vagabond travels, I wanted to tell you how much I share your happiness. This Abbatial Blessing is a great joy to me, who have assisted at your development for the past ten years. Enjoy now the happiness God is giving you, and which is, I think, the reward of the fidelity He has found among you and among those who have preceded you. See the admirable things which the Lord has done to make you grow over many long years. It is when the hour of maturity has struck that He grants you stability. It is honouring God, it is giving Him adoration to show Him confidence; but the confidence must be firm not timid, and a confidence that is continual also ..."

Dom Bouvet observed, for his part, that "These events must be looked on as great things. The Lord prepared in the cross, as always, this grace of bounty for the monastery. You must participate now, in some sort, in His own stability. And so the first disposition to put in your hearts is that of gratitude. Those who founded the house and have taken part in all its phases of development, have been able to see that suffering has had a large part in it. Heavenly graces will continue to descend on the monastery in the measure in which souls co-operate in the work of God."

Small and frail in appearance, yet enjoying a strong constitution harnessed to an indomitable fervour, Mère Ambrosia placed at the service of the Community her gifts of intelligence, prudence, and practical good sense. Sparing neither time nor trouble, she worked unceasingly and with maternal solicitude for the good of the souls who had been confided to her. "These daughters of hers, how profoundly she loved them!" wrote her prioress and secretary years later. "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 in the Ambrosian beehive, and Pax Cordis Jesu was no empty title!" Her delicate tact and ability to handle human nature were gifts partly instinctive and partly acquired through years of experience: by

a gesture, a word or a smile, she brought a soul back to the right path, made difficult sacrifices acceptable, comforted a heart prone to discouragement.

Since the transfer to Ryde in 1922, Mère Ambrosia had striven to orient her community more and more towards a purely contemplative ideal of life. In 1930 the boarding school was suppressed, though a small group of alumnates remained. In her zeal to give ever more splendour to the Divine Office, she arranged for Quarr's choirmaster, the renowned Dom Desrocquettes, to come every week for Gregorian Chant lessons to the Community.

In these first years too she was able effect improvements and alterations in the temporal domain: the purchase of new altar-brad baking machines; the enlargement of the dairy for making butter and cheese; the fostering of arts and crafts in the community. In 1932 heating was installed in the main dormitory, Holy Angels; 1936 saw the refurbishing of the refectory; She made many other improvements, particularly to the choir and sanctuary. She whose life had been devoted to the choral praise of God made the beauty of God's house her first care.

Gay, witty and shrewd, Mère Ambrosia threw herself with enthusiasm into every activity likely to increase the happiness of the community. She liked things to go quickly. Her daughters knew well that when some little job was confided to them, it meant that it was to be done instantly, the maternal order being habitually accompanied by a smiling, but clear *illico*!

The years immediately following her abbatial blessing saw her community grow to 48 by 1933. At the same time, several great links with the past were broken. On the feast of St Ambrose, 7 December 1928, Madame Claire de Livron died; three months later, on the 19 March, St Joseph came from Madame Placide Delhaes who in 1882 had founded the priory of Ventnor and governed it for 25 years. Finally, the Community saw the revered remains of Madame Cecile Bruyere return to France. Adorned with flowers the coffin was carried to Choir and laid before the abbatial throne. Mère Ambrosia laid her crozier on it, as if to confide to the foundress of Sainte Cecile, the secret aspirations of her heart which would have to wait another 20 years before their fulfillment. After the Requiem Mass, Dom Bouvet, Prior of Quarr, took charge of the transfer to France. The large marble vault and the **crypt** with its mural paintings, visited whenever the *Suscipe* is sung at each Profession anniversary, would later be the burial place of the first and second Abbesses of Pax Cordis Jesu. If Madame Cecile Bruyere's body had departed, her spirit lived on. Two months later, her great niece, Marie-Agnes Eynaud de Fay entered the community and was given the name Sr Marie-Cecile.

On 12 January 1937 the community lost another great friend in the person of Dom Bouvet of Quarr who for 15 years had given his remarkable energy and gifts to the development of both Quarr and Ryde. He was succeeded on March 10 by Dom Gabriel Tissot, later first abbot of Quarr, who would be a solid support and devoted friend of the Community.