

## CATHERINE O'NEILL

### Part 1

The future Mother Thérèse Emmanuel was born May 3, 1817 in Limerick, the second of three children, Mary Ann, Catherine and Joseph, of Alan Francis O'Neill and his wife, Emily Howly. At that time Limerick was prosperous. One of the leading firms was that of James and Alan Francis O'Neill, importers and exporters. In the late 1810s, the end of the Napoleonic wars brought to a close Ireland's brief period of prosperity. The return to grazing threw thousands of farm workers out of employment. Business was at a standstill. Famine conditions prevailed. Limerick opened porridge kitchens which distributed a pint of porridge a day to the starving. The firm of James and Alan Francis O'Neill must have met serious losses during these trying times. One may deduce that owing to the conditions the business was closed. The O'Neills apparently left Limerick and settled in Liverpool in 1822-3.

Alan Francis left his wife and three children at Rich Hill to await the time when he could provide a home for them in Liverpool or it may be that Emily Howly's health did not permit her to travel. Her death occurred at Rich Hill in 1824. The children remained at Rich Hill until after the death of their grandfather in 1825. In 1826 the two little girls were admitted to The Bar Convent, Yorkshire, where Catherine received her first Holy Communion, Christmas 1827. The two sisters were not happy at the convent and spent only one year there, before being transferred to New Hall, Chelmsford. New Hall was conducted by the Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre. The historic old house, the lovely grounds, the quiet, orderliness of their surroundings over which brooded a spirit of peace and tranquillity, the picturesque habit of the Canonesses who perfectly blended the active and contemplative life, all had a profound effect upon their pupils. With her acute sensitiveness to beauty, Catherine was especially affected by her surroundings.

Mary Ann and Catherine O'Neill left New Hall well prepared for the contemporary society. Dress, dancing, concerts, balls filled their days. There were visits to relatives in London and trips to Ireland. Catherine met talk of marriage with laughter. "I have no wish to put my little store of affection at the service of some one I scarcely know," she wrote in her diary. But she reflected that community life, too, has its defects, its drawbacks: "In any institution where human beings assemble for one purpose or another it is not possible to be free from petty vexations." More serious, to her, seemed the "continual subjection of the will." After the "first fine fervour" would not the vows become unbreakable bonds to imprison the reluctant spirit?

She asks herself, "Is it not better to give one's affections entirely to God rather than to any creature?" Yet her idea of the conventual life seems coloured by her novel reading, "Is not the cloister a very prison for thought as well as action?" she queries and then consoles herself with the reflection that, "After all it is but the sacrifice of a few years... filled with anticipations of the promised reward for the mortifications and privations."

In 1836 Catherine and Mary Ann intended to go to Paris for a while, then on to Rome. At a friend's suggestion their father contacted the Canonesses of St. Augustine who conducted a school for young ladies at Abbaye-aux-Bois in rue Sévres. The Canonesses agreed to receive the two Irish young ladies in the school. Here they would be able to perfect their French. The Canonesses also provided apartments for ladies of the world. The celebrated Madame Récamier, who occupied one of these apartments, had made the name of Abbaye-aux-Bois famous. Her salon was a magnet for the literati.

Mary Ann and Catherine arrived in Paris in January 1838. Catherine soon wrote to her father for permission to remove from the school to the extern apartments. He seems to have made no objection to the change, but place his daughters under the particular guardianship of the Mother

Abbess. The two girls began to enjoy life in the French capital. Familiar as they were with the strength, simplicity and naturalness of Irish faith, how did religion as lived in this circle appeal to them? Were they shocked to discover that attendance at Mass was more or less of a social function, that there were fashionable churches and fashionable preachers and no woman of fashion would entertain the thought of attending or listening to any other?

Catherine with her tendency towards introspection, must have weighed and pondered the two worlds. Her vague, half-formed ideas of a religious life seemed to have developed in this alien atmosphere far enough for her to have consulted a confessor about entering a convent. She often found the attitude of religious themselves towards the life they had embraced difficult to understand. True, she had glamorized, to some extent, at least, life dedicated to the service of God, but she did have a profound respect for the life of a religious. She confesses to shock when one of the nuns of the Abbaye assured her that life in a convent was “not as monotonous as it seemed” for there were “always little excitements.” The youthful Catherine had so high an idea of the vocation that “I could not understand the pitiful consolation of little excitements.”

Early in 1839 she began to pray for guidance, to seek what God wanted for her. Catherine was determined to consult an English speaking priest of whom she had heard. Three times she tried to see him and failed. Meanwhile their French friends had become enthusiastic about the preacher of the course of Lenten sermons at the Church of St. Sulpice. Mary Ann urged Catherine to attend the sermons and prayed that she would go to confession to him. Probably she reasoned the preacher to a fashionable congregation would be unlikely to advise his penitents to abandon the world and all its vanities. If Catherine entered the convent it would mean that they would be separated and Mary Ann was unable to imagine life without Catherine.

Catherine agreed to go to St. Sulpice with her sister. She heard the Father Combalot about whom everyone was talking, and was not impressed. His emotional style of preaching was distasteful to her. Nevertheless she continued to attend his lectures with Mary Ann.

When Catherine O’Neill first saw Father Combalot in the pulpit of St. Sulpice he was at the zenith of his powers. His greatness as a preacher was acknowledged in every diocese in the country, but no bishop wished to have him permanently attached to his own diocese, his impetuosity and irascibility were too well known. None would deny that he was deeply and sincerely religious with an especially tender devotion to the Mother of God, and literally aflame with love of souls, but he had scant respect for rules, procedures, or precedents. He joined to his impetuosity an almost uncanny foresight. He was probably the first to point out the underlying cause of the spirit of irreligion which was gaining ground in France – failure to integrate Christian principles and Christian teaching in daily living. He especially deplored this failure in the education of women.

## **CATHERINE O’NEILL: Part 2**

Two years after his ordination Father Combalot made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Anne d’Auray. There it seemed to him the mother of the Blessed Virgin called upon him to establish a religious congregation dedicated to the Mother of God in her glorious Assumption whose task would be to provide a truly Christian education for the daughters of the wealthy. Even the dress of this new congregation was clear to him – a purple habit for penance with a white veil to symbolise their consecration to Mary assumed into heaven. For twelve busy, demanding years he waited, praying, seeking. Only when he met Eugènie Milleret de Brou did he confide his plan to any one.

He wanted to make her the foundress of a religious order, creator of an educational system which would rechristianise society. Eugénie did not want that. She had no qualifications, no abilities for such a work. She had not even been confirmed. To Father Combalot these things were matters of indifference. . In the end Eugénie surrendered.

Now that he had discovered her, he wanted to build rapidly. Eugénie refused to be hurried. She knew how much she must learn. The work was delayed two years while Eugénie was learning. Then Father Combalot would brook no further delay. He summoned her from the convent of the Visitation nuns where she was making her novitiate. He had now two other postulants, Josephine de Comarque and Anastasie Bévier. He had found a little house in rue Férou where he could begin the new work with the three, Eugénie acting as superior. Then he met Catherine O'Neill.

Mother Thérèse Emmanuel herself has left an account of this meeting. It is preserved in the *Origines* from which the following is quoted. A sermon on the necessity for re-establishing the religious orders in France determined Catherine to consult the popular preacher about her vocation. She writes that it was on the 23 March, 1839, Passion Sunday: "After Mass I entered the confessional of Father Combalot, and at my first word I noticed that he was disturbed. When I began my confession he stopped me."

"Wait," he said.

Then, as he seemed to be thinking I continued,

"Bless me, Father..."

He stopped me again.

"Are you married?" he asked. "Are you free, independent?"

"I am not dependent upon anyone," I answered and again began my confession, "Bless me, Father..."

"Wait," he said. "I have something important to discuss with you. Come to see me, 47 rue de Vaugirard, at ten o'clock."

"But, Father, can you not tell me now?"

"No. Come to my house."

"And my confession?"

"You can go to confession after."

Dismissed, I left the confessional. But to my great surprise I saw others going to confession. I went back to the house and told Mary Ann that I had to go out again at ten o'clock.

"I shall go with you," she said. At ten o'clock we arrived at rue Vaugirard. I went into Father Combalot's office. At once he said to me,

"My child, have you ever thought of becoming a nun?"

"Yes, Father," I replied. "I would like to talk to you about that after I have made my confession."

"No, daughter. You need not go to confession. God wants you. You should become a nun."

I protested, "But, Father, you do not know me. How can you pass judgement at one glance?"

"When you came into my confessional this morning, I knew as certainly as if an angel had told me. You should be a nun and God wants you for a work that I am establishing."

"Surely you would think me mad to accept literally what you say. You do not know my mind, nor its needs, nor its abilities. You look at me and in ten minutes decide my vocation."

"My daughter, I do not need to know you. God wishes it. He wishes you for the work I am about to found."

"What is the work?"

"It is for education."

"I do not want that kind of work."

"Because you do not understand the greatness of the work of Christian education. You do not understand that it is through women that society will be regenerated. Young girls are taught pious practices, but they are not taught to know Christ. They do not know Him."

He then explained to me the purpose, the spirit, the work of our Institute in burning words and with so deep a conviction that I was overwhelmed. However, I did not surrender.

"Kneel down now," he said, "so that I may bless you for this work." I refused, and he said in an authoritative tone,

"I am speaking to you in the name of God. God wishes it. God wishes you for this work. Kneel down." And such was the power of his words that I found myself on my knees, not daring to resist the will of God stated with so much conviction."

Recovering a little from her astonishment, Catherine put forward her objections to this arbitrary manner. "To judge a person's vocation it is necessary to know that person. You do not know me. You do not even want to know me before you determine my vocation. Surely, you do not imagine that I could have any confidence in your judgement."

"I do not need to know you," the priest repeated. "It is the will of God that I am speaking."

"That is to say that you need subjects to carry on your work. That, I think, is the real reason for your decision."

"My child it is in vain you try to turn away. Stop making objections. It is the will of God and it must be done."

Still Catherine protested, "There are those I must consult," she said, "my family, my father, my sister."

"Is your sister here?" "Yes, Father." "I'll speak to her."

"Oh, please, do not. That will only create more difficulties."

"Don't worry. Make her come in."

I called Mary Ann and went out leaving her with Father Combalot. A moment later he called me back. And what was my astonishment when he said with an air of triumph,

"What did I tell you? Your sister is quite willing that you should undertake this work."

At the same time Mary Ann was saying to me in English, "How much should we give him? A hundred francs?"

"You see, Father, my sister did not understand. She thought it was a charity."

Then Father Combalot explained, "No, no. It is your sister herself who is going to devote herself to a work I wish to establish." At these words Mary Ann gave me a look of deepest sorrow and began to cry and to heap a thousand reproaches on me. The era of tribulation began. From the minute my poor sister was inconsolable. She did not understand and could not restrain her tears.

### **CATHERINE O'NEILL: Part 3**

Catherine was perturbed. Although she had been thinking more and more seriously of her vocation and praying that God would guide her to the community for which she was fitted, she was not prepared to answer immediately to Father Combalot's offensive, though she was stirred by his eloquence and sincerity. During her short sojourn in Paris she had not been blind to the shallowness of the lives of the many so-called Catholics, their indifference to the teachings of their religion, their callousness to the needs of the poor, the injustices of society. To change all this, "to build up all things in Christ" was a challenge to her. However, her common sense warned her that she had neither the training nor the necessary qualifications to undertake a work of education. Against this, Father Combalot's insistent "God wants it" beat continuously. If this was, indeed, God's will for her then he would supply all that was lacking. She had only to depend upon Him.

Catherine and Mary Ann had been seeing much of Father Combalot, but Mary Ann was determined to bring this friendship to an end and announced to Father Combalot that they were going away for Good Friday. Mary Ann thought that they had got rid of him, but on Easter Sunday, as they were

preparing to go to Mass, the maid announced that he was there. He began to speak of his plans for the Assumption as if Catherine were a part of it. He told her that Mademoiselle Milleret was in Paris and a meeting was arranged. Catherine seems to have gone without Mary Ann, but the meeting was far from successful and Marie Eugénie was to record: "When she came to rue Férou she was so beautiful and haughty that I was frightened. She had the face of an angel who might easily become a rebel angel". Anastasie Bévier wrote: "The first time I saw her was in the church of St. Sulpice. She seemed to be looking upon me from a great height. I was overcome and felt that I wanted to be near her always".

After her visit Catherine felt that she had committed herself. The inevitable separation from Mary Ann weighed heavily upon her and her own misery was doubled by her acute realisation of the cost to her sister. Added to this was the consciousness of her own inadequacy. She prayed fervently that God would make her "a good religious". She realised that her independent spirit, the habit of making her own decisions, the insistence upon knowing the reason, her refusal to accept anything that to her failed to "make sense", would be disruptive in any community. She was determined to learn how to ease that, seeking no help except from God. This gave her a coldness and aloofness that caused her to be misunderstood by both Father Combalot and Eugénie.

Twice daily she went to rue Férou for Latin lessons, given by Eugénie and religious instructions by Father Combalot, always accompanied by Mary Ann. It was back to school again and one day when Eugénie reprimanded her for talking during the lesson Catherine nearly gave up, but she swallowed her pride and returned as usual to the next class. She had won her first victory.

Eugénie contracted some infection of the eyes and was unable to give the lessons as usual. Thus she was forced to spend the time in talk. These informal sessions did much to break down the barrier between the two young women. Shortly after, Catherine received an invitation from Eugénie to have dinner at rue Férou. Mary Ann instantly perceived that this was but the preliminary to obtaining her sister's formal request to be admitted to the Assumption. Catherine wondered whether she had the right to purchase her own happiness at so great a cost to the sister she loved. Mary Ann found her writing a letter to Eugénie to decline the invitation for dinner and to tell her that she had decided not to join the Assumption. She tore the letter and exclaimed: "You're doing no such thing. You're not going to sacrifice your happiness for me. You're going to join the Assumption and so am I".

The two girls continued to live at their place, going each day to rue Férou for lessons, until the beginning of August when the little community removed to the country, to a little cottage Monsignor Affre, a friend of Father Combalot, had obtained for them. Mary Ann found life there lonely and oppressive and frequently sought relief by taking a trip to Paris. This proved a boon for Catherine, who could then shed her reserve and come closer to her companions, especially Eugénie, who wrote to Father Combalot: "I like Kate very much. She gives herself so generously to God".

Towards the end of September the little group returned to Paris to a house in rue Vaugirard, found for them by Monsignor Affre. They had been joined by Josephine de Commarque and another postulant, Josephine Neron. Their first care was to arrange the chapel, and on November 9, 1839, the first Mass was celebrated. From this day forward the religious character of the community was clear. The "first Mothers" adopted the names in religion which they would take at their final profession: Eugénie, Sister Marie Eugénie of Jesus; Catherine, Sister Thérèse Emmanuel of God; Anastasie, Sister Marie Augustine of St. Paul; Josephine, Sister Marie Thérèse of the Incarnation.

From the outset Mary Ann was a problem, although she tried valiantly to conform to the life of poverty and self denial upon which Father Combalot insisted. Sister Eugénie recognised her genuine goodness and piety, and her tender devotion to the blessed Mother would have been edifying to her

companions did she not alienate their sympathy by her temperamental outbursts. Mary Ann tried to put up with everything and, as the weeks of her probation drew to a close, Sister Eugénie was inclined to accept her as a novice, but she yielded to the decision of the majority. Early in 1840 Mary Ann left.

For Sister Thérèse Emmanuel the separation was equally painful and drew her closer to Eugénie. Whatever barriers had existed between them, they were now gone. For half a century they were to work together, one the complement of the other. Their friendship rested on a triple foundation: the spiritual affection which exists between the Superior and her spiritual daughters; the affection and respects which exists between co-workers in a shared cause; finally was the natural affection that draws hearts together.

Eugénie's first fears that the postulant "with the face of an angel" would become a "rebel angel" proved groundless. While still a postulant Sister Thérèse Emmanuel had set out to be a "good religious" and for that she recognised obedience was necessary. Obedience and humility became the motive powers of her spirituality. When entering upon her religious life she declared "My Lord and my God, I am now entirely yours for all eternity: my will, my personality, my judgement, spiritual exercises, the intellectual pleasures which are so precious to me".

#### **CATHERINE O'NEILL: Part 4**

The poverty of the newly-formed community was so great that these young women who hitherto had known only ease and comfort were now confronted, like the very poorest, with scanty and not always nourishing food. They were obliged to continue to wear the dress that they had worn upon entering for there was no money to purchase habits for the novices. With good humour they tried to get hold of recipes for very cheap dishes and they washed and mended their scanty wardrobes. The only thing that caused them distress was that they did not look like religious. A complete habit was out of the question, but finally they decided that a head-dress could be managed and Sister Marie Eugénie with Sister Thérèse Emmanuel set about designing a novice's cap which could be worn with their ordinary dress. For some time that had to suffice.

When at length it was possible to provide a distinctive dress the two sisters designed a habit from the description given them by Father Combalot. Years before, when the inspiration had come to him at St. Anne d'Auray to found the Assumption, he seemed to see in a vision a nun in a purple habit and white veil. The habit was, therefore, purple, the sign of penitence, with a white veil, symbol of their dedication to the blessed Virgin, a white linen wimple and a large white cross on the breast. The archbishop of Paris gave his approval to it and the new community celebrated a simple ceremony to introduce it.

To mark the special occasion Father Combalot asked each of the sisters to make him a special promise. Sister Thérèse Emmanuel's promise was the expression of all she had been striving for during the twelve months that had passed since she had joined Eugénie and Anastasie in Meudon: interior obedience to God and submission of judgement. "Now, my child," Father Combalot said to her, "you are all mine", but she raised her beautiful eyes and answered: "No, Father. I belong entirely to God."

There was something almost prophetic in this interchange, for though neither was aware of it, the day of separation was not far distant. And it was Sister Thérèse Emmanuel whose words were to sever the ties between Father Combalot and the Assumption. How right was his friend, Father D'Alzon, when he told Father Combalot that there was but one obstacle to the success of the new Congregation—himself.

Although his own disposition was so often in opposition to authority, Father Combalot exacted the most meticulous obedience from the little community, especially from the young superior, perhaps because he feared that the temptations of her position in the community would prove excessive for her age. In any case, Eugénie had no freedom to make any single decision and the necessary stability of the novitiate was disturbed by Father Combalot's swiftly changing enthusiasms and frequent absences. Worried by the situation and not knowing what to do, Eugénie obtained Father Combalot's permission to consult his friend, Father D'Alzon. Under the circumstances there was little that the latter could do. He urged Eugénie to insist that the rule be kept with exactitude in all things. "This," he assured the anxious Superior, "is your right."

Despite these anxieties the life of alternating work, prayer and study continued peacefully. Domestic duties were lightened by the admission of two lay sisters (also known as Coadjutrix Sisters), Sister Marie Catherine and Sister Anne Marie, who took over responsibility for the kitchen and the housekeeping. From the first day they formed an integral part of the community, taking part in all activities except the studies which for the choir sisters were severe. Father Combalot had insisted that a thorough knowledge of Latin was essential. He gave the novices for their Latin texts the Bible, the Roman Breviary, the Missal, the Papal Encyclicals, the Catechism. He demanded also that an hour daily be given to the exposition of certain texts of St Thomas. During the Advent of 1839 he had prescribed the recital of the Divine Office in choir. The sisters had found so great spiritual help in this practice, which united them to all the Church, that they begged to be allowed to continue a practice that eventually was written into their Rule.

Added to all this, Eugénie and Thérèse Emmanuel had the extra task of drawing up the Constitutions, which when completed were given to Father Combalot for editing. As soon as he had finished, with his usual impetuosity he proposed sending them directly to Rome without first having submitted them to the Archbishop of Paris. Eugénie pointed out the effect such a discourtesy undoubtedly would have on the Assumption: it would alienate the Archbishop and would sound as a gesture of defiance to the whole Church. Father Combalot was forced to yield to her reasoning, but reproached her for her excessive prudence.

Eugénie asked then Mgr. Affre, their old friend, now archbishop of Paris, to nominate an ecclesiastical superior for the new congregation. He consented to nominate someone resident in Paris, who would give the continuous and personal guidance to the community that Father Combalot's prolonged absences made impossible. However, the latter, when approached, declared vehemently, "As long as I live, my daughters will have no Superior but me." To insure this he determined to remove the community from the jurisdiction of the Archbishop and informed the sisters they were to relocate to a chateau in Brittany, with no previous consultation whatsoever. Eugénie could only sit in stunned silence, but Thérèse Emmanuel quickly pointed out the implications of such a move: the Assumption had been founded to provide the means for the education of young women, but parents would not send their children so far to a new Congregation and rumours of their flight from Paris would make them unwelcome in another diocese. Father Combalot took no further action for the time, but was not convinced.

In subsequent visits to the convent he spoke to the sisters individually, explaining to them the necessity for removal from Paris and the advantages of Brittany. They all felt a certain loyalty to Father Combalot, because it had been him who had guided them in the discernment of their vocations. Eugénie was not different, but she knew that the change would most certainly put an end to the work of the Assumption.

On May 3, 1841 he called all the sisters except Marie Eugénie to meet him in order to give their

individual and collective consent to the transfer to Brittany. Sister Thérèse Emmanuel opposed the move with respect, but also with firmness and conviction. When the others indicated that she spoke for them all, Father Combalot, gathering up his papers, left, declaring that after such “disloyalty” they would never see him again. Eugénie and Thérèse Emmanuel sought him at his house, but he refused to see them. They never saw him again, but he nobly sent a letter to the Archbishop placing the community under his direct care and acknowledging his lack of skills to complete what he had so enthusiastically founded.

## **CATHERINE O’NEILL: PART 5**

After Eugénie’s return from Nimes in 1842 one of her first acts was to appoint Thérèse Emmanuel mistress of novices, an office she held, with one short interruption, for over forty years, continuing also as assistant to the Mother General and as a member of the Council. In these latter capacities she rendered invaluable service to her congregation. Her keen, logical mind, her ability to take the long view of the various problems which arose, her objectivity gave her opinions weight with the community. But it was through the more hidden work of forming the spiritual life of the young nuns that she made her greatest contribution to the Assumption. Possessing in a rare degree knowledge both of the interior life and of practical matters, she could give forthright instruction on conduct, singing or methods of studying Latin verbs or she could guide the novices’ introduction to adult spirituality.

Her character was charming enough to attract the love of the novices and she had a genuine concern to turn this devotion from herself to the Assumption. She was genuinely grieved when it seemed she had failed. On one occasion she appealed to her Superior to know why in spite of all her instructions some of the novices appeared to attach themselves too much to her personally. Eugénie answered teasingly: “The problem you have posed for me with so much anxiety made me smile. What is it that makes one so easily attach herself to you? Why, because you are naturally so lovable. It’s a long time ago that I discovered that for myself.”

Throughout all her instruction her aim was to make her novices instruments capable of ‘forging souls in truth’ and capable of submerging their own wills in the Will of God. The latter was probably the result of her being Irish, brought up in saying one recurring phrase for every situation “Praised by the Will of God”. Her consciousness of God’s will as a guiding force in all daily activities may be said to be one of Thérèse Emmanuel’s gifts to the spirituality of the Assumption.

In her teaching Thérèse Emmanuel never lost sight of the special purpose for which the Assumption had been formed: opening children’s souls to the knowledge, love and service of God and thus bringing about a social revolution. To achieve this the future teachers must know and understand the Church’s teaching on all that touches the needs of humanity. They must be saturated with Christ, only thus could they convey to their pupils the all pervading influence that religion should have on their activities if they were to lead truly Christian lives. To bring souls to Christ was the aim of the Assumption.

The work of the Assumption finally began on August 15, 1841, the date chosen for their profession by the three first sisters of the Assumption, Sister Marie Eugénie, Sister Thérèse Emmanuel and Sister Marie Augustine. From the week of retreat preceding profession, Sister Thérèse Emmanuel emerged strengthened and enlightened. Some of her joy can be perceived in the notes she left: “Tomorrow I shall be born into the life of Jesus Christ into the poverty of the poor, into the obedience and servitude of the least of creatures, into purity and sanctity, being lifted out of my human nature by the Word made flesh. I have no dowry to bring to my Spouse save my weakness and poverty, but I am to share His infinite riches.”

On the great feast of the Assumption, the three nuns received from the hands of Monsigneur Gros the white veil of purity and dedication to Christ and His blessed mother. He placed on their finger the golden circlet symbolising their union with Christ and their dedication to the virtue of charity. On each ring was inscribed the motto the nun had chosen for her religious life. Sister Thérèse Emmanuel's motto was the exultant words of the Apocalypse: *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*, fitting choice for one who began her life as a religious with the promise "My life to the glory of God. My work to the glory of God. My thoughts to the glory of God." The ceremony for the profession, simple and solemn, had been adapted by sister Marie Eugénie and Sister Thérèse Emmanuel from the Pontifical for the Consecration of Virgins.

Just two months later they received their first pupil. She was Emma Henriette Ryan and she came from Ireland, being the niece of a friend of Sister Thérèse Emmanuel. In December the second pupil arrived and in January 1842 a third. It was all that the little house in rue Vaugirard could accommodate. If the school, the work for which the Assumption had been founded, was to expand new premises must be found without delay.

Eventually Marie Eugénie discovered a property in the Latin Quarter. It was in a ruinous condition, but she believed that it could be made habitable. Formerly it had belonged to the Augustinian nuns and consisted of two fair sized houses and a garden. In the spring of 1842 the Assumption moved in and of that moving day Sister Thérèse Emmanuel writes: "The weather was very cold, the ground covered with snow. Nothing more dismal could be imagined."

The nuns set to work to transform the ruin. Hitherto they had often been called "Father Combalot's intellectuals" and "wealthy blue stockings", but now they plunged into the rough, manual work required to put the place in order. At length the houses and grounds were reasonably comfortable, at least the quarters for the pupils. And that more room was essential was proven when in October 1842, just one year after the arrival of the first pupil, fourteen were enrolled.

With the additional pupils it was necessary that the school be efficiently organised. Sister Thérèse Emmanuel now officially became assistant Superior, Sister Marie Augustine Mistress of Studies with Sister Marie Gonzague as her Assistant. Sister Marie Thérèse was appointed infirmarian and Sister Marie Joseph, bursar. Besides these particular duties all the sisters, even the Superior, had their classes and the school early won a reputation largely because both English and German figured in the curriculum. Mother Marie Eugénie taught German and Mother Thérèse Emmanuel English and geography. It would be revealing to be able to read the impressions of some of the pupils whom she taught. It is said that to her pupils she seemed "like a celestial apparition", probably the more because she "never scolded".

However, with the school organised and classes running to schedule Mother Thérèse Emmanuel was to have her first experience in administration. It was found advisable that the superior should go to Nimes where she could consult Father d'Alzon on the revision of the Constitutions. Father d'Alzon had had wide experience in matters of this kind and his advice was urgently needed. As Assistant Superior Mother Thérèse Emmanuel must act in the Superior's place during her absence.

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Her character was charming enough to attract the love of the novices and she had a genuine concern to turn this devotion from herself to the Assumption. She was genuinely grieved when it seemed she had failed. On one occasion she appealed to her Superior to know why in spite of all her instructions some of the novices appeared to attach themselves too much to her personally. Eugénie answered teasingly: "The problem you have posed for me with so much anxiety made me smile. What is it that makes one so easily attach herself to you? Why, because you are naturally so lovable. It's a long time ago that I discovered that for myself."

Throughout all her instruction her aim was to make her novices instruments capable of 'forging souls in truth' and capable of submerging their own wills in the Will of God. The latter was probably the result of her being Irish, brought up in saying one recurring phrase for every situation "Praised by the Will of God". Her consciousness of God's will as a guiding force in all daily activities may be said to be one of Thérèse Emmanuel's gifts to the spirituality of the Assumption.

In her teaching Thérèse Emmanuel never lost sight of the special purpose for which the Assumption had been formed: opening children's souls to the knowledge, love and service of God and thus bringing about a social revolution. To achieve this the future teachers must know and understand the Church's teaching on all that touches the needs of humanity. They must be saturated with Christ, only thus could they convey to their pupils the all pervading influence that religion should have on their activities if they were to lead truly Christian lives. To bring souls to Christ was the aim of the Assumption.

#### **CATHERINE O'NEILL: PART 6**

Year by year interest in the work of the Assumption increased and the enrolment grew so rapidly that a third move was necessary. A house, with spacious grounds, in rue de Chaillot near Champs-Élysées was obtained, but before it could be occupied it had to be extensively remodelled and a chapel built. Even with these improvements it was far from ideal. The better part of the house was given over to the school and the dormitories for the pupils. The sisters took the basement, which was lively described by Sister Marie Thérèse: "A great room with a ceiling so low that you could touch it with your hand served as a dormitory and infirmary. It was like Noah's Arc with its mixed population of sisters, all tumbled together. We used to call it the yellow room because by hanging yellow curtains we were able to manage 'cells' with a little privacy. Our refectory was in the cellar and no room could have been darker or uglier. A number of postulants left after one glance at this dismal room. But theirs were not solid vocations. We didn't feel too badly about them."

It was probably in Noah's arc that Thérèse Emmanuel was confined for the better part of the year 1847-8 with scarlet fever complicated with pneumonia. Marie Eugénie's prayers were ceaseless. "If I lose her," she wrote in despair to Father d'Alzon, "if God deprives me of this help, what will become of the work? Is it possible that I can carry the burden alone." But after a lapse of many months she was once more in her place.

Meantime the local state of affairs got more and more dangerous. The long threatened revolution broke out in February 1848. The children had to be sent to their homes when the distance was not too great. Those from afar had to stay. The situation did not become really alarming until June when the streets of Paris were turned into a battle ground. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, word came to Marie Eugénie that

the insurgents planned that night to seize all children in convents and place them on the barricades to prevent the troops from firing. Fortunately the plan was not carried out, but the Superior could take no chances with the lives of those left in her care. Her uncle, Monsieur de Franchessin, placed his apartment at her disposal, and the girls had to be sent there.

The danger to the children passed, but the situation worsened during the next three days. On the 26<sup>th</sup> Archbishop Affre determined on a desperate measure to end the slaughter. He requested General Cavaignac to permit him to go alone to the insurgents to offer peace proposals. The General protested that it would be far too dangerous, but Monsigneur Affre reply was, "The good shepherd gives his life for his sheep." Permission was given and about six o'clock in the evening he set out for the Bastille on foot. Arriving he asked the commander to order a cease fire. The order was given and the Archbishop walked calmly towards the insurgents' lines, preceded by a young man carrying a white flag. In some confusion insurgent fire ceased and Monsigneur Affre gained a barricade. Suddenly a shot rang out. Others followed. The Archbishop fell, mortally wounded, saying "That my blood may be the last to be shed." The civil war was ended, but Paris was plunged in grief and horror. "Paris is calm now," wrote Marie Eugénie to Father d'Alzon, "but the war is not ended. It will begin again some day." They were all profoundly saddened by the death of Monsigneur Affre, who had been a friend, a councillor and a protector for them.

Though affected by the local situation the horizons of the Assumption were broadening at the same time. In a letter written less than a fortnight after the revolution Marie Eugénie seeks the advice of Father d'Alzon on an invitation to open a house in China. He was enthusiastic and urged her to accept. However, the project failed to materialise, but thereafter the foreign missions was a favourite topic of discussion among the religious. They were thus prepared to accept the invitation to the Cape of Good Hope which came in 1849 and two others a little later to England and Bordeaux.

The terrible famine conditions of the years 1845-8 had forced many Irish people to migrate, among other places to England. In two years the Catholic population of the country rose from 100.000 to 1.000.000 and hastened the re-establishment of the hierarchy. Many of the leading English Catholics were concerned about the conditions under which Catholic orphans, who could not be cared for by relatives or friends, were being brought up. The Duchess of Leeds, a Catholic American who had recently returned to the faith after a life of extravagance and luxury, was one of them. She had a property in Yorkshire, in the village of Richmond, which she intended to give as accommodation for a limited number of children, to be tutored by a religious congregation. In the spring of 1849, she met in London Sister Marie Gertrude, who was preparing the foundation at the Cape. All that the Duchess heard from the nun about the Assumption convinced her that the nuns would be ideal for the work, especially for their educational ideals. She asked that Sister Marie Gertrude present her request to the Mother General, and at the same time appealed to Bishop Briggs to make formal application for the foundation. She stipulated that one of the religious must be English speaking and able to meet and win the interest of the Protestants in the neighbourhood. With these stipulations in mind Marie Eugénie agreed to send four sisters to England in May 1850. Difficult as it would be to replace her in the Novitiate, it seemed a foregone conclusion that Thérèse Emmanuel would be sent on this mission.

The months preceding her departure for England were for Thérèse Emmanuel a time of prayer and spiritual preparation for the task ahead. She was under no illusions about the mission, as Orders already established in England had found that the bigotry against Catholicism hindered the mission. To add to this, the reestablishment of the Catholic hierarchy and the arrival of continental orders were not popular with the old Catholics. They were reluctant to disturb the *status quo* that had existed for many years in the country where Catholics were tolerated as long as they kept discreetly silent. Many of the older generation had lived through active persecution and had no wish to see it

revived. At the same time the sudden increase in the Catholic population had completely changed the situation: churches, schools, orphanages and an efficient Church administration were needed.

With the day of departure drawing near the sisters redoubled their prayers for the four missionaries. The separation was difficult, as Sister Marie Thérèse recalls: "The years that we, the first sisters, had spent together had made me believe that we would never be separated. I was content to see the work expand and happy at the thought of all the good Sister Thérèse Emmanuel could do in Richmond, but my poor heart could not endure the idea of being separated from her. When the day of departure arrived I could not hide my emotion. I burst out crying... After her departure I went into the chapel where I stayed a long, long time on my knees praying before the Blessed Sacrament. There I could cry to my heart's content. Suddenly I heard a noise. I turned around and saw Mother Thérèse Emmanuel in her black veil at the back of the chapel. I shall never forget the joy that filled me... But, alas! It was short lived. The travellers had missed the train and had to leave next morning".

### **CATHERINE O'NEILL 7**

The first four sisters of the Assumption to leave France arrived in London in May 1850. Apparently they were met by a step-brother of Mother Thérèse Emmanuel who seems to have been living in London. Monsignor Wiseman insisted in seeing them as soon as possible. He was happy to see them in their habits and said that they could go out in them either on foot or in the trams. Sister Marie Caroline refers to the problems they had with the habits: "Sunday and yesterday we went to a chapel quite near the house for Holy Communion. We were surrounded by a group of children who escorted us all the way. People looked at us in astonishment and one said in passing, 'One of them is going to her grave and the other is following her.' Others said, 'What are they? Are they women? Are they doing penance?' Then we got lost and with everybody stopping to look at us we couldn't find our way again. Mother decided we must ask. We were answered politely and a child came along with us without our knowing. He saw us looking anxiously for the Catholic chapel and said, 'Don't worry. I'll show you.' Our return after Mass was much more exciting. We had a crowd of forty or fifty children shouting around us, but they were not the least insulting. Mrs. O'Neill knew we were coming from the shouts of our escort."

Before leaving London for Richmond Mother Thérèse Emmanuel visited New Hall, where she and Mary Ann had spent happy days at school. One of the nuns of those days had become the head mistress and promised to help them to get pupils and vocations. From there they set out for Richmond. Bishop Briggs had arranged that the travellers should rest a few days at the convent of the Poor Clares at Scorton, not far from Richmond. For a great number of years the Catholics of Richmond and district had been served by a single priest, the Jesuit Father Johnson. Now, old and ill, he was overjoyed at the coming of the religious, making the trip to Scorton to welcome them and accompanied them to Richmond. He had prepared some of the local people for the arrival of the nuns, among them Miss Burchall, who had been taking charge of the school. She was known through the district for her charity and her piety and was seeking guidance in her choice of a vocation. From the moment the sisters arrived she put herself entirely at their disposition.

The little party then went on to the convent, the third to be opened in Yorkshire since the Reformation. It consisted of three rather small cottages which could be remodelled to their new use without great difficulty. At that moment, however, they lacked literally everything necessary. The first service that Mother Thérèse Emmanuel asked of Miss Burchall was to get some straw for their beds. "Straw!", exclaimed the English woman, astonished. "What kind of straw?" "Oh, just ordinary straw and three planks," explained Mother Thérèse Emmanuel. "That is all a nun needs for her bed." Miss Burchall was still incredulous, but managed to provide what was asked.

The first task of the sisters was to prepare the room to be used as a chapel. The altar was the gift of one of the old Catholics of the neighbourhood, a Mr. Maxwell, and had been ingeniously constructed as a buffet. When closed and used for its obvious purpose it presented an entirely innocent appearance. Open, the monogram of Christ appeared and concealed drawers on either side served as hiding places for the sacred vessels and linens. With the chapel furnished and the Blessed Sacrament reserved the community started to work. Almost immediately the first twelve orphans, selected and supported by the Duchess of Leeds, arrived. In addition there were twenty-nine day school children arrangement for whose instruction was one of the first problems with which Mother Thérèse Emmanuel had to deal.

Father Johnson was delighted having them, but was appalled at the poverty of their house and kept worrying about the little food they ate. Their bread he considered scarcely edible. And there were times when it was truly penitential bread. On one occasion Sister Dosithée, who had charge of the kitchen, was ill and her Superior insisted that she remain in bed. The sister protested that the bread she had set would spoil if she did not get up to look after it. "We will take care of the bread," the Superior assured her and did so herself. Later Sister Dosithée heard a great noise coming from the kitchen, hammering or banging. Her curiosity was aroused and she asked the Superior what was happening. "The sisters are trying to cut the bread," replied Thérèse Emmanuel serenely. Her culinary skill apparently had not improved since the days in rue Vaugirard.

The other problem was water. As there was no water supply for the cottages Sister Dosithée had to carry all the water from a stream some distance away. Thérèse Emmanuel was determined to have a well sunk near the house as soon as possible. She was told that it would cost a pound a yard for digging and there was no means of knowing to what depth the well would need to be sunk to find water. Nevertheless she decided to start with the works and to stop digging if water had not been reached when the money they had was spent and that is exactly what happened. The workers were paid and dismissed and the sisters began a novena. After Mass on the ninth they went to look at the well and discovered a plentiful supply of water. In the intervening days water from the underground streams had seeped into the well and sister Dosithée's wearying toil was over.

Other problems were more difficult to sort out. Often Father Johnson was ill or absent and there would be no Mass. Other times Father Johnson was unable to come to the convent and they would be obliged to go to the parish church, walking past the crowd of workers hurrying to the mill a little beyond the convent. The majority were Protestants of the rougher type and had no respect for the "foreign women" in their "outlandish garb." Truly, life in England would not be easy, but these painful meetings soon were to bear fruit undreamed of.

### **CATHERINE O'NEILL 8**

The story of the sisters' well soon spread and roused both interest and curiosity, especially among the workers of the neighbouring mill, who frequently met the nuns when they went to the parish church for Mass. Some of them were Irish and Catholic, but the majority were unbelievers and nursed the usual disdain against the Catholic Church. Among them was one Sarah Thompson, who had become notorious for her scandalous life. Meeting the Sisters one morning on her way to the mill she was overcome with revulsion toward her way of life and went to consult Fr. Johnson. The priest sent her to Miss Burchall, the teacher, and finally Mother Thérèse Emmanuel undertook her instruction.

Sarah's reformation was put to the test. Not only was she forced to bear the jeers, ridicule and coarse jests of her fellow workers, but her own brother beat her and threatened her on account of her religion. Sarah told the Irish mill workers about her visits to the convent and Mother Thérèse

Emmanuel's charm. Catholics themselves, they felt 'slighted' that it was a Protestant who had the privilege of knowing this wonderful nun.

Through Sarah it was arranged that the women would come to see Thérèse Emmanuel on a Sunday afternoon. Then they wanted to come again, thus starting with the weekly instructions for women workers, which continued later to be the work of the Richmond community. They became so popular that the men also wanted to hear them, a request Mother Thérèse Emmanuel was obliged to refuse.

Thérèse Emmanuel also tried to contact the Protestants of the district. They frequently came to the convent to "be shown around." Father Johnson was reluctant to have the nuns admit them, but Mother Thérèse Emmanuel felt that if they were freely admitted they would have no further reason for suspicion. She wanted the sisters to see more of the Protestants of Richmond, and through knowing and meeting them, the ideas the Protestants had about nuns and about Catholics in general would change. She writes to Marie Eugénie: "It is by this means that I hope the absurd prohibition of our good friend, Mr. Maxwell, made in his zeal to protect us from insult, will be overlooked. He told Garnett to ask the religion of everyone who came to our door and to admit only Catholics or Protestants coming for instructions. He is always on pins and needles when a Protestant is here."

And in truth, Mr. Maxwell, one of the old Catholics of the neighbourhood, was not without reasons for his actions. It was the year 1850. On September 24<sup>th</sup> Pius IX had published his decree for the reestablishment of the hierarchy in England and on the last day of the month Dr. Wiseman was named first post-Reformation Cardinal.

The anger of the Protestants, including the heads of government, went in crescendo with the news that the Cardinal was returning to England to take up his duties as Archbishop of Westminster, which was interpreted to imply a new and unjustifiable claim to territorial rule. Throughout October public demonstrations all over the country became violent and the Cardinal was advised to go back to Rome.

He did not and calmed the public opinion with a pamphlet entitled *Appeal to the English People*, in which he argued that the admitted principle of toleration included leave to establish a diocesan hierarchy, and effectively contrasted that dominion over Westminster, which he was taunted with claiming, with his duties towards the poor Roman Catholic residents there, with which alone he was really concerned.

Wiseman found himself steadily opposed by a minority among his own clergy, who disliked his ultramontane ideas of "Romanizing and innovating zeal," especially in regard to the introduction of sacred images into the churches and the use of devotions to the Blessed Virgin and the Blessed Sacrament, hitherto unknown among English Roman Catholics.

Many of the old Catholics were unable to forgive what they saw as impetuosity: to them he was solely responsible for the hostility against Catholics which they said had died out almost completely in England. Now Catholics were harassed both officially and unofficially: there were constant complaints about the bells of the Catholic churches, the press attacked Catholics and Catholic institutions, and the government passed a bill for the inspection of convents to ascertain if young women were held against their will by the religious.

Locally, at Richmond, difficulties came especially from one of the local Protestant ministers, who continuously fulminated against the 'papist' infiltration of the community, and warned Protestant parents not to permit their children to attend the school at the convent. Otherwise, things started

to move slowly: Mother Thérèse Emmanuel persuaded Father Johnson to erect an altar to the Blessed Virgil, by assuring him that it was done in London, and the local Catholics finally held the first public procession of the Blessed Sacrament in the convent garden in 1862.

## CATHERINE O'NEILL 9

The unrest following the reestablishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England caused the smallest incident to be transformed into a major scandal. If it became known that a young girl entered a religious order the press protested over her abduction and incarceration. A bill was brought in for the inspection of convents to ascertain how many young women were held against their will by the religious. Thérèse Emmanuel writes in March 1851 to Marie Eugénie: "The English government is giving us plenty of worry with its bills. The Bishop has asked me to send him the names and addresses of all male relatives of the sisters in order that he may be able to ask them to sign a petition against the bill calling for inspection of all convents by Protestant magistrates in order to ascertain that no one is imprisoned in them. The census requires the state in life of every person. Cardinal Wiseman has told the convents to have the sisters put down only their names and surnames in the world. The Bishop has also written that it is not necessary to indicate that we are religious".

The situation of the religious in Richmond was further complicated by the fact that they belonged to a French congregation governed from France but recruited with English subjects. Richmond's complete dependence on the Mother House in Paris implied that postulants would have to spend their novitiate in France and there was no guarantee that their work would be confined to England. Not only the parents of prospective postulants, but priests and even bishops urged that English postulants should make their novitiate in England and be accepted for the English mission exclusively.

The Duchess of Leeds, too, busied herself with efforts to establish the independence of the English house. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel writes: "As for the good Duchess, the idea of an English Novitiate, to which she returns again and again, does not satisfy her. She wants a separate province. She wants the Congregation to surrender the dowries of all English subjects, and the money to be assigned to the English mission. A Jesuit Father to whom she went for advice told her that a Congregation as recently established as ours could not ask to establish a province and that a province could not be established where there is but one house".

The first postulant arrived within two months of the establishment of the convent, another the following month. One of the first postulants was Amy Howly, a cousin of Mother Thérèse Emmanuel. Her parents were reluctant to permit her to join a French order, and were only convinced through the intervention of Henry O'Neill and his wife. They took her to the convent on the first feast day of the Assumption the nuns spent in Richmond and with them went Mary Ann, Mother Thérèse Emmanuel's sister.

The following day the 16<sup>th</sup> August Thérèse wrote to tell the sisters in France of their first feast day in Richmond: "We felt close to you yesterday, dear Mother. It was our first Feast of the Assumption since the dispersion, and we take great pleasure in telling you that, though far away, we were completely united with you in spirit. The first Holy Communion of Sarah and her daughter made the day one of special joy for us, and we celebrated it as piously as possible. On the eve the house had the air of holy activity which seemed to give special significance to the feast. Sarah and her daughter spent the day with us – in retreat. We read to them and talked of God... Mary Ann is here. She looked after the children yesterday evening and all day today while we were together. She enchanted our little girls with her stories and seemed happy to be able to do this for us. Our sisters

are charmed with her amiability which certainly is very great. She is neither temperamental nor demanding as she was before”.

Mary Ann lived in Rome until her death in 1861, and spent short periods with the Assumption from time to time. In one of her visits she brought to Richmond a beautiful statue of Our Lady, known as Our Lady of Newhall. In the house she was always ready to help and would entertain the children so that the nuns could have some time together. She found her vocation in practising charity and, in imitating Our Lady, to whom she had a true devotion, she never permitted herself to speak unkindly of anyone.

Amy Howly was accepted as a postulant, and remained in the convent in spite of her mother's complaints. Thérèse Emmanuel had no doubts of her cousin's vocation, but was less certain about Miss Burchall. From the arrival of the nuns in Richmond, she had worked with them and helped them in every way possible. Now she asked to be accepted as a postulant. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel recognised her sincere piety and devotion, her unselfishness and charity, but for a number of years she had been in a position where it was necessary to exercise authority. Her age, too, was against her. Could she free herself from the habit of command? Could she shed her years of experience and join the novitiate with young, inexperienced girls? She discussed the difficulties frankly with her and found her ready to accept everything and eager to go to Paris and thus break completely with her previous environment. Thérèse Emmanuel and Marie Eugénie corresponded about the progress of Miss Burchall and finally Marie Eugénie sent her a letter inviting her to join the community in Paris as a postulant.

Miss Burchall planned to leave for Chaillot in November 1850. When her purpose became known, her friends begged her not to go. They urged that she was needed far more in Richmond. What would the poor and the sick do without her help? Yet none of these pleadings moved her from her decision. No one then dreamed that within two years she would return to Richmond as Mother Ignatius to succeed Mother Thérèse Emmanuel as Superior of the convent.

### **CATHERINE O'NEILL 10**

The secret for the success of Richmond was the tranquillity and happiness of the sisters in the face of problems and perplexities that are ever the share of a new venture. Among the less serious difficulties, Father Johnson's solicitude was sometimes trying, and the Duchess of Leeds tended to think that her often impractical suggestions should be looked upon as commands. For instance, she insisted that the orphans were taught French. Thérèse Emmanuel could see no advantage to the children in imposing upon them this extra burden which could not possibly be of any use to them. As usual she referred the question to Marie Eugénie who agreed that it would be far better to see that the children "learned manners and the things that would help them to lead a good life when they left the orphanage". It was Thérèse Emmanuel's task to convey this decision to the Duchess as tactful as possible.

There was also the question of the support of the school. The Duchess defrayed the cost of the orphans but not of the day school pupils. Fr. Johnson pointed out that the people would not consider of any value education which was entirely free and would withdraw their children from a 'charity school' to send them elsewhere. On the other hand, the nuns received no payment for their work. Bishop Briggs came to Richmond to discuss details of a plan to be submitted to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel. She sent this account of the visit to Marie Eugénie:

"Yesterday we were surprised to receive a visit from the Bishop who came on foot in the midst of a downpour of rain... He came to see Father Johnson about our school and here is what he proposed to me. He set out the principle that we should not retain any part of the revenue from the school,

but on the other hand it would cost us not a single penny. They wished, as Father Johnson had just explained to him, to send all the little girls to us and confine the existing school to boys. But it must be understood that we are *giving our services free* and that we will have the entire direction of the school. We shall not be asked to spend anything on the support of the school... Our school will be supported by a Board – and it is better for us that the board will not be made up of government officials but of clergy and wealthy Catholics... The funds will come partly from the poor and not be made entirely from the administration. It is certainly unfortunate that in this country they have a passion to pay. It is so that they may feel independent.”

In January 1851 Marie Eugénie came to England to complete the contract of the house with the Duchess and could spend a month in Richmond. One of her tasks was to give the habit to Amy Howly who later went to Paris for her novitiate, when her family finally agreed to it. As Mother Marie Walburge, Amy became the first Superior of the foundation at Nimes, where she won a reputation for sanctity. Through her it became possible later for the Congregation to open a house in Poitiers in the face of official discrimination against religious orders. Bought in her name, it was safe from possible government confiscation as she was not a French citizen.

Another cousin of Thérèse Emmanuel, Josephine MacNamara, one of the early pupils of the Assumption, also joined them in Richmond and travelled to Paris to enter the Novitiate. As Mother Mary Margaret, she became Superior of the house in Kensington, opened at the request of Cardinal Wiseman. Here for the first time since the Reformation, perpetual adoration was established.

Soon after Marie Eugénie left, died Mr. Maxwell, who had been the friend, adviser and support of the sisters since they had arrived in Richmond. The whole Catholic community plunged into mourning and the sisters missed him sorely. Thérèse Emmanuel writes:

“I believe that from time to time God permits me to feel completely isolated in order, perhaps, that I have no other support but Him. In these moments He is my only solace. I abandon myself to Him and trust entirely to His goodness. Since the death of Mr. Maxwell... there are a few words of our Rule which keep ringing in my mind like a bell: ‘that the Sisters remember always that it is not through temporal help that their houses are supported: but by faith, perfection, confidence in God alone and the determination to do or say nothing which has not been done or said by our Lord or His blessed Mother.’ You know, dear Mother, what a generous and devoted friend we had in Mr. Maxwell and how great support we would have found in him in building up our Congregation here. God gave him to us, God has taken him from us: blessed be His holy Name... I have been surprised in talking to our sisters to discover that the same words which struck me have also impressed them.”

It was in this atmosphere that the convent of Our Lady of Peace in Richmond grew. The influence and charm of the superior was far reaching, both among Protestants and Catholics. Protestants came seeking religious instruction. These instructions were one of the most important works carried on by the Assumption in Richmond bringing in many converts as well as recalling negligent or indifferent Catholics to the practice of their religion. Young girls came asking to be admitted to the Congregation and Mother Thérèse Emmanuel was ever seeking postulants.

The first to go to Paris was Miss Burchall who became Sister Marie Ignatius. Writing of her to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, Marie Eugénie said: “You have sent us a wonderful acquisition, and I want to thank Father Johnson most sincerely”. She was professed on March 25, 1852 and sent to Richmond in June to take the place of Thérèse Emmanuel whom the mother house could no longer spare. During her absence Marie Eugénie had taken over the duties of Mistress of Novices, but as the Congregation grew the calls on her were too many for her to continue.

## CATHERINE O'NEILL 11

Back at Chaillot Mother Thérèse Emmanuel resumed her work as Mistress of Novices which she was to carry on for more than three decades. There was little of the spectacular in her active life. She continued to be part of the Council, where her opinion was valued for her objectivity. At that time there were matters of vital importance to the congregation, such as the establishment of the new houses for which now there were numerous requests.

One of these invitations Mother Marie Eugénie was especially eager to accept. It was from Cardinal Gousset, archbishop of Rheims, an old friend of the Assumption. For some time he had wanted to have a house opened in Sedan in his diocese. In Paris in February 1853 he discussed with Mother Marie Eugénie the possibility of a foundation. Again in May he saw the Mother General and reported that the priest in Sedan, Father Nanquette, was most eager to welcome the Assumption to his parish. In July the Cardinal and Father Nanquette were both in Paris and sought a final decision from Mother Marie Eugénie who agreed that as soon as a suitable house could be found the foundation would be made.

At the time she was confined to the infirmary, but she sent in her place Thérèse Emmanuel and Sister Marie Caroline, the companion of her voyage to England. They were warmly received by Father Nanquette who took them to see the house which seemed to him most suitable for a convent and school. The nuns agreed. The speed of the transaction left Mother General with doubts, confirmed on her first visit, but the property could be easily marketable when a more convenient house could be found. In any case the foundation was established.

Another matter of importance demanded their attention at this time. Although in existence since 1839, the Congregation had not been approved officially by the Holy See. In this the Church moves slowly. First the new order must send to the Holy See a statement of the purpose of the foundation, the precise definition of its aims and practices and a résumé of its Constitutions, and testimonials of its work from Bishops into whose dioceses the order has been admitted. When these have been examined and found satisfactory, the order receives the approbation of the Holy See.

When the constitutions have been completed and forwarded to Rome, a second application for approval is made. If the Church is satisfied, a more definite approbation is given. And finally comes confirmation of the Rules. The order then is definitely established with the full approval of the Holy See. In October 1854 a request signed by Mother Marie Eugénie as Superior General and Sister Thérèse Emmanuel as Assistant General was forwarded to the Holy See through Cardinal Gousset who undertook to present it himself. Testimonials from bishops in France and England, including Cardinal Wiseman, were sent in advance. It was the moment when Pope Pius IX was about to proclaim the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and the Bishops of the entire world were congregated in Rome.

The year 1855 saw the establishment of a house in Nimes, long desired by Father d'Alzon and Marie Eugénie. Lack of funds and of religious to staff it had delayed the project. In November 1854 Marie Eugénie had written to her spiritual director saying that they would send Sister Marie Walburge as superior and two other religious, but Sister Marie Walburge fell seriously ill and soon after, the Bishop of Nimes was fatally stricken. Not until October 1855 was the house finally open.

The year was made memorable, too, by the sale of the house in rue de Chaillot and the purchase of a beautiful property in Auteil. At the time it was well out in the country and surrounded by a beautiful park and grounds which provided the 'monastic seclusion' that Mother Marie Eugénie longed for. Three years later (1858) a first General Chapter was held at which Marie Eugénie was

elected Superior General for life. She held that office until she was too infirm to do so, shortly before dying. However, in 1866, when she had gone to Rome to speed up the second stage of approval of the congregation, Thérèse Emmanuel had to urge her return because some of the sisters sought for a change. Marie Eugénie felt tempted to resign, but Father d'Alzon prevented her from doing so.

This crisis passed, but soon there was another on the way. In July 1870 France went to war with Prussia and on 1 September the Prussian troops defeated the French at Sedan and took the Emperor as hostage. The Prussians were marching on Paris. Auteuil had to be evacuated. Nine nuns were left to cope with whatever situation might arise. The rest were dispersed among the various convents. Some were sent to England, others to Touraine, still others to Arras. The Novitiate was sent to Lyons, but soon the conditions were not secure and they had to move to Saconnex, in the Diocese of Geneva, where the bishop provided a house for them. They called their little refuge Bethlehem. Like the cave of the Nativity it was poor, isolated and desperately cold. As soon as return to France was considered safe the novitiate was transferred to Nice until 1872, when the return to Auteuil was considered safe. Among the new novices was Thérèse Emmanuel's niece Cora O'Neill, later Sister Cécile Emmanuel, who became superior of the Paris house. Two of her sisters also entered the Assumption, Francis, becoming Mother Françoise Emmanuel, and Gertrude, Mother Gertrude of Jesus. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel resumed her work in the Novitiate at Auteuil, so hidden that not even the religious themselves were conscious of its importance.

In 1876 Marie Eugénie had to go to Rome and chose Mother Thérèse Emmanuel to accompany her. She could then complete the Assumption journey begun forty years ago. They visited the shrines venerated by Christians down the ages. They saw the Holy Father in two public audiences and were further privileged to have a private audience with him. When they returned to France, Marie Eugénie insisted in founding a house in Rome. Thérèse Emmanuel agreed, but her greatest wish was to see the Assumption established in the city of Our Lady, Lourdes. Thérèse Emmanuel did not live to see the foundation in Rome, but Lourdes became a reality in 1882.

## **CATHERINE O'NEILL 12**

In 1880 the death of Father D'Alzon not only left Marie Eugénie bereft of her friend and spiritual director, but brought to a head a question which had risen from time to time since Father d'Alzon had founded the Fathers of the Assumption in 1846: should the two Assumptions be amalgamated? They had always cooperated closely and there were strong ties of friendship between the founders. Father d'Alzon had been one of the first friends of the Sisters of the Assumption. During the infancy of the Congregation he had been a constant source of encouragement. When he, in turn, founded the Fathers of the Assumption Marie Eugénie was his staunchest supporter. The sisters were always on the alert to find suitable postulants for him. One sent to him by Marie Eugénie, Father Pernet, became the founder of the Little Sisters of the Assumption. His death severed these informal ties of friendship and mutual assistance. His successor, Father Picard, believed that the relations of the two Assumptions should be clearly and formally defined.

While the question of amalgamation was still unsettled, Mother Thérèse Emmanuel became gravely ill. For days her life was despaired of. Marie Eugénie stormed heaven night and day that 'her right hand' might be spared. Even if she were able to do nothing "I need her to support me," she wrote despairingly to Monsigneur Gay. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel was spared.

She recovered slowly, but with the onset of winter was obliged to go to the milder climate of Cannes. In the early summer she returned to Auteuil and for a short time seemed to regain her strength. It was a critical time and she had need of all her forces. The unity she had never ceased to strive for was in danger. Her last, as her first, act for the Assumption was to save it from a step that

would weaken that unity and destroy the work for which it had been founded by destroying the spirit in which it had been established. During her illness the necessity to reach a decision on the question of amalgamation had become increasingly urgent. Father Picard was in favour of the Superior of the Fathers of the Assumption being also the Superior of the sisters. A decision had to be reached before the Constitutions were submitted for final approval. The keen mind of Mother Thérèse Emmanuel was able to take the long view of the question and to evaluate ultimate results. She saw that in the event of amalgamation the influence of the Mother General would be weakened and unity undermined. From their foundation the Mother General had been the centre, maintaining not merely outward unity but unity of spirit, as well. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel advised her companions: "Don't displace the centre. Return to the original idea of the Congregation".

She realised that so vital a question must be decided not by the council but by a general chapter and only after full and free discussion. She urged that a chapter be called. Her advice prevailed. A General chapter was assembled in August 1886. The discussion soon made it clear that the majority of the Superiors were of the opinion that the aims of the Congregation could be obtained best by continued independence. The Chapter adopted the following resolution which was written into the Constitutions, that the Congregation should be under "The government of the Superior General and of her Council under the jurisdiction of the Ordinaries, except in cases reserved to the Holy See." Only three religious were dissatisfied with the result and joined the Oblates of the Assumption.

Now, indeed, the work of Mother Thérèse Emmanuel on earth was finished. She only had one earthly desire, that she might see the final approval of the Constitutions by Rome where Marie Eugénie had gone to present her request. There were anxious days for her in Rome, for the success of her mission and for Thérèse Emmanuel who had left Auteuil for Cannes.

Cardinal Parocchi, cardinal protector of the Congregation, was in Rome at the time as were a number of other good friends who were most willing to answer questions and explain away objections as they arose. Finally there was but one question to be dealt with, the recitation of the Divine Office in choir. This was the keystone upon which the arch of the Assumption had been built, but there were strong arguments against this being written into the Constitutions of a teaching order whose work, at best, was onerous. In the end this final objection was overcome. The decree approving the Constitutions was signed April 11, 1888. Marie Eugénie sped back to Cannes.

She had the joy of placing the papal document in the hands of Thérèse Emmanuel, who kissed the seal and said with Simeon: "Now Thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord." Her last days were peaceful, as she faced death with the same serenity and joy that she had faced the trials of life. "Sister Marie Michael," she said one day to the infirmarian, "when one offers oneself to God as a victim, He takes you at your word." Just before her death she said to those around her bed as if reviewing her life, "I belong to the Assumption, my life has been consecrated to it entirely. I am not leaving it; I am going to the Assumption of eternity".

On the night of May 2, 1888 Thérèse Emmanuel died in the arms of her Superior. With gentle fingers Marie Eugénie closed her eyes, whispering: "Dear Mother, this is the last service I can do for you, to close the eyes which so often in life lighted my way".