



SHM FOUNDATION

Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary
Anglo - Irish Province

1979



SHM FOUNDATION

The Ven. Father Jean Gailhac, Founder
Mother St. John Pelissier Cure, Foundress

BIBLIOTECA DAS "FONTES"
R. S. M.
PROVINCIA BRASILEIRA

And so it happened by divine plan that a wonderful variety of religious communities grew up. This variety contributed mightily towards making the Church experienced in every good deed and ready for a ministry of service in building up Christ's body.

PERFECTAE CARITATIS



The Venerable Father Gallhac

THE VENERABLE FATHER JEAN GAILHAC 1802 - 1890

Founder of The Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary

13th November, 1802

In the deep south of France, close to the Mediterranean coast, lies the ancient Roman city of Béziers, wine capital of the Midi. Here, in the older quarter of the city, a street called Puits de la Courte gives access to the courtyard of the Gailhac home, where their first child, a son, was born to Antoine Joseph Gailhac and his wife, Jeanne Elisabeth Crouzilhac, on 13th November, 1802.

14th November, 1802

Next day, Sunday, 14th November, the infant was baptised in the Baslica of St. Aphrodise, adjoining the Gailhac home, and named Jean Pierre Antoine. During the Revolution (1789-1795), this church had been seized by the state and put to secular use. In accordance with the terms of the 1801 Concordat, it was bought back, and was restored to Catholic worship on 26th April, 1801. Jean Gailhac's was the 164th entry on the baptismal register begun after the restoration

3rd February, 1814

At three o'clock on that Friday afternoon, Pius VI's carriage stopped in Béziers, for a change of horses, on the Pontiff's return journey to Rome, after his release from captivity in Fontainebleau, where he had been held for almost five years by order of Napoleon. Father René, from the nearby Collège de Béziers, presented his class for the Holy Father's blessing. Among them was the boy Gailhac. The traces of suffering on the face of that frail figure were to remain in Gailhac's memory for the rest of his life, and contribute to his sensitive understanding of the burdens of Christ's Vicar on earth.

October, 1818

Sometime in October he entered the ecclesiastical seminary in the university city of Montpellier, in those days some twelve hours by coach from Béziers; today, just one hour by express train. At the seminary he was a diligent student and a deeply pious young man. Recalling him in later years, his classmates accounted him 'affable, intelligent and possessed of good judgement'. At one point he was resolved to become a missionary to distant lands, an ideal he relinquished only on the advice of his spiritual directors, who told him that God was calling him to another apostolate, that of forming others to be missionaries and apostles. Throughout his years in the seminary he used his spare time to help the poor and needy and to visit sick people and prisoners.

23rd September, 1826

He was ordained priest by Bishop Fournier, Bishop of Montpellier. While still a

student, and a subdeacon, he was appointed to the Chair of Philosophy at the seminary. After ordination, he was assigned to teach Dogmatic Theology. During his years of teaching he was also a member of the Diocesan Council, where 'he gave evidence of that wisdom and discernment which were so typical of him later on'.

12th September, 1828

At his own urgent request he was granted the chaplaincy of the City Hospital of Béziers, 'the humblest and least sought after assignment in the diocese'. Here he became deeply involved in the dire miseries of society's poorest and most abandoned. He would continue this work until June, 1849, when the needs of his then newly founded Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary would oblige him to devote much of his time to the formation and direction of the sisters.

Summer, 1832

During the cholera epidemic which raged throughout Béziers all that summer, he devoted himself tirelessly to an exhausting ministry, corporal as well as spiritual, not only to the sick and the dying, but also to the dead, whom others feared to touch, and often abandoned. 'Parents, relatives and friends of the cholera victims remained far away from the hospital', so all duties of tenderness and consolation fell to the chaplain and the sisters in charge. It is not surprising that he became seriously ill with an attack of pleurisy. Doctors despaired of his life. He threw their prescriptions in the fire, 'got out of bed and resumed his usual tasks'. They marvelled at his willpower.

18th August, 1834

In his work in the City Hospital, Fr. Gailhac had come across numbers of young women whose life of prostitution and vice had left them victims of disease and a prey to misery, and who, because they could find no employment when they returned to society, or because they could not resist temptation, went back to a life of sin. Many of these he had already sent, at his own expense, to the Refuge of Montpellier. Realising that his scant resources could help a greater number if he were to find a refuge in Béziers, he purchased, for this end, a house and large garden at 21 Rue Ermengaud, in the older and poorer quarter of the city.

14th November, 1834

Vicar General Grasset wrote to Fr. Gailhac, 'I have been instructed by the Bishop to inform you that you are authorised to found a shelter for repentant women in Béziers'. Meantime, Six good women, truly angels of mercy, offered their services to the priest. They gave up their jobs, left their families, and abandoned their social positions to devote themselves to the task of caring for the poor penitents. The good work began.

30th November, 1834

The ceremony of blessing and formally opening the new Refuge, to be called the Good Shepherd, took place in the courtyard, since there was, as yet no chapel. Fr. Gailhac's esteemed friend and counsellor, Fr. Tailhan, a venerable veteran of revolutionary times, when he had remained in Béziers at the risk of his life to carry on his sacred ministry, presided on this occasion. The women of the Refuge were there in all their finery, with Fr. Gailhac's relatives, friends and benefactors. Among the latter was Mme. Cure, the young wife of M. Eugène Cure, Fr. Gailhac's friend

from boyhood, and for some years now, his most generous benefactor. In the eternal designs of Providence Mme. Cure would be, a little over fourteen years later, the Foundress of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, a congregation whose aim is to perpetuate Fr. Gailhac's apostolic spirit.

November - December, 1834

About the time of the opening of the Refuge, or very shortly after, an incident took place one day in which Fr. Gailhac discerned the finger of God. A young woman, holding by the hand a child of three, came to him and said 'I am an evil miserable woman. I do not want my little one to share my unhappy life, so I have brought her to you. Take her and make her a good woman.' She put the child's hand in the hand of the priest and left quickly. He was perplexed. He had no suitable accommodation for so small a child. There was no security, legal or financial, to cover this new situation. On the other hand, to send the child back to her mother was to send her to a life of sin; to keep her was to save her. He kept her. With that decision the orphanage had opened, and was to continue, in one form or another, to our own day.

20 December, 1834

Bishop Fournier, who had been a good friend to Fr. Gailhac, died.

15th September, 1834

The new Bishop of Montpellier, Charles Thomas Thibault, entered his diocese. In a very friendly letter, written two days later, he expresses trust in Fr. Gailhac: '... what I already know of your zeal, of your love for good and holy works, consoles me and assures me that you will be to me, as you were to Bishop Fournier, an active co-worker. Build up your beautiful undertaking at the Magdalen and count on my willingness to help you, as well as on my deep affection. . .'

1835 - 1840

The actual work at the Refuge was thriving, but criticism had begun to brew in many quarters, most of it directed against Fr. Gailhac's youth in view of the nature of the work. He was called a visionary, said to be imprudent, ambitious. Some of his benefactors, fearful of being involved in a scandal, withdrew their support. He encountered opposition from people in all walks of life, 'but in particular from evil men whose playthings these women had been'. He was attacked and beaten in dark alleys where these men would decoy him with a false summons to the dying, or to someone said to be in grave need. The bishop, alarmed at the unfavourable rumours, began to distrust Fr. Gailhac and felt obliged to intervene. He thought that if a congregation of sisters were to take over the administration all would be well and confidence would be restored. On 29th June, 1840, the Vicar General, Mgr. Valadier, proposed these alternatives: either to accept religious from an already existing congregation, or send the Bishop a Rule for a new group of religious to be founded specifically for the Refuge. There is reliable evidence that, already at this date, Fr. Gailhac wished to found a special congregation designed to take over his works, but hesitated to do so just then, because he had not found suitable candidates. 'You are too much of a perfectionist in choosing candidates', Mgr. Valadier had warned him in the letter of the 29th June. It must have been sometime before the end of 1840 that the Dames de Saint Maur took over the administration of the Good Shepherd, both the Refuge and the fastgrowing Orphanage, and kept very good order until matters concerning their own

congregation obliged them to leave.

2nd June, 1843

The Journal de Béziers of this date announced the departure of the Dames de Saint-Maur and the arrival of the Sisters of Marie-Joseph who came to replace them.

1846

The accusations against Fr. Gailhac still continuing, Bishop Thibault resolved to close the Refuge. He went to Béziers to make arrangements, arriving unannounced at the Good Shepherd. He visited every corner of the house, interviewed the sisters and their charges, and was delighted with the order he found and the spirit of charity and devotion that reigned. Fr. Gailhac, all this time, was at the City Hospital, but returned to the Good Shepherd just as the Bishop was leaving. 'Father, you have many enemies', the Bishop said to him. 'This time they have been caught in their own trap. I have seen everything. I am well satisfied, and I congratulate you on this house. Continue your good work.' A few months later the Bishop returned to celebrate Mass in the Good Shepherd. In the presence of a large gathering of priests and laity he turned to Fr. Gailhac and said, 'I compliment you on your house. Count on your bishop. I am making you a canon of my cathedral, and you will be under my special protection'. The promised support was to be manifested on many an occasion from then until the Bishop's death.

1847

Fr. Gailhac needed a chapel for the Good Shepherd. The room he was using was most inconvenient since it was also used as a reception room and a corridor. Eugène Cure had suggested that he should build a chapel. The priest's silence told him that the means were lacking. Then one day the Cures spread out some plans of churches before Fr. Gailhac and studied his reaction to each one. Unsuspecting, he enthusiastically admired the plan of a round chapel with a dome. A short time later Eugène Cure arrived at the Good Shepherd accompanied by an architect and a builder. 'We have come', he said 'to mark the location of your new chapel. I am paying for it'. The Round Chapel was completed and blessed within the year 1847. It remained quite unaltered from then until it was incorporated, as the sanctuary, in the new, and larger, chapel begun in 1947.

2nd November, 1848

Towards evening on All Souls Day, Fr. Gailhac received an urgent summons to the bedside of Eugène Cure. He went instantly, but his dear friend had died before he reached him. Eugène was forty six and a half years old, his widow almost forty. This death touched Fr. Gailhac very deeply. In one stroke he had lost a friend, a benefactor, and an often much needed supporter. But never could he have imagined that, in taking his friend, God was opening the way to the fulfilment of his long cherished dream of founding the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary.

November - December, 1848

By the time of the February revolution of 1848, Fr. Gailhac had framed a plan for his new foundation. Among the lay staff at the Good Shepherd were three devoted helpers who were eager to dedicate their lives as coadjutor sisters; among those in the city whose spiritual lives he directed were two eminently suitable candidates. Yet another was needed to lead the group. They waited and prayed that God would

send them that woman. Then a month, or maybe two, after her husband's death, Mme. Cure sent for Fr. Gailhac. 'I am ready', she told him, 'to place myself and all I possess in the service of the Sacred Heart of Mary.' Judging the idea premature, Fr. Gailhac pointed out that vocations are not decided in this way, especially in times of great sorrow. He feared that this urge of hers might be merely a natural reaction to her grief and loneliness and, as such, only a passing thing. There was another and very practical point. Should he allow Mme. Cure to put her wealth into supporting and developing his charities, and should she subsequently alter her decision, then a serious blow to his work might result. He had to be very sure. He bade her wait, reflect and pray, and agreed to do the same himself. He promised that if, after some months, she still wanted to carry out her plan, he would consult Bishop Thibault and let him decide. It was resolved that neither should discuss the matter with anyone else in the meantime. Mme. Cure remaining steadfast, Fr. Gailhac put the problem before Bishop Thibault. Having given it time and reflection, the bishop pronounced Mme. Cure's call clearly Godgiven. He advised Fr. Gailhac to accept her and go ahead with his plans for foundation. He decided on 24th February as the foundation day of the new Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary.

24th February, 1849

Towards six o'clock on that Saturday evening, Fr. Gailhac waited in the entrance hall of the Good Shepherd. With him were the two coadjutor sisters, Cécile Cambon and Marie Rose Jeantet. The third who had offered herself with these two, Marie Roque, was obliged to stay a little longer with her family because of illness. As the hour sounded from St. Aphrodise tower, Mme. Cure's carriage stopped outside and three figures, dressed in black, alighted. These were Mme. Cure herself, Mlle. Eulalie Vidal and Mlle. Rosalie Gibbal. They entered. All five knelt before Fr. Gailhac to beg a blessing. No records remain of Fr. Gailhac's feelings on this occasion, but it is certain he knew its significance. It was the realisation of a goal long considered, long hoped for.

3rd June, 1849

On this date Fr. Gailhac's resignation from the chaplaincy at the City Hospital became effective. For some time he had been experiencing difficulty in combining his many duties at the Good Shepherd, and the training and directing of the sisters in their new life, with the demands of the hospital chaplaincy.

15th September, 1849

Two more postulants arrived, Marie Elisabeth Maynard and Jeanne Forment. One month later they were joined by Marie Roque, bringing the number of the little community to eight.

18th March, 1849

A local newspaper, the *Courir de Béziers*, reported that Mme. Cure had taken over the administration of the Good Shepherd. This news occasioned new slanders, added to the old ones which still persisted, despite Bishop Thibault's efforts, concerning Fr. Gailhac's work at the Refuge. Rumours were now spread accusing Fr. Gailhac of embezzling Mme. Cure's inheritance. Slanders did not abate for a long time.

1850

In the early part of this year, two of the penitents ran away from the Refuge; later Fr. Gailhac dismissed seven truly insubordinate members. By the end of the year the Refuge was almost phased out. Fr. Gailhac felt that this work was too difficult, and the responsibility too great, for the sisters who were still in the early stages of formation. In the spring of this same year the building of the boarding school was begun, in order to extend the work of christian education to all classes.

8th April, 1850

Fr. Gailhac wished to place his new community of the Sacred Heart of Mary in the care of a community of priests, yet to be founded, who would direct the sisters in matters temporal as well as spiritual. This was to be the Congregation of the Good Shepherd. To put an end to the envy and jealousy surrounding the priest, the bishop decided to approve the two congregations at the same time. He asked Fr. Gailhac to edit the Rules and Constitutions of the Sacred Heart of Mary and send him a copy to examine and approve, before the ceremony of Reception scheduled for the eve of Good Shepherd Sunday, 1850. This S.H.M. Rule acknowledged the role of the Good Shepherd Fathers in regard to the sisters. Episcopal approval was granted in a decree issued on 8th April, 1850.

13th April, 1850

The ceremony of Clothing and formal Reception took place on this date. To make a further profession of his trust in Fr. Gailhac, the Bishop had announced, through the local press, his intention of presiding at this ceremony, but on the eve he sent word that he was indisposed and unable for the trip to Béziers. He delegated Fr. Gailhac to replace him.

30th November, 1850

Mother St. John, as Mme. Çure was henceforward to be known, purchased the de Nattes country estate at Bayssan-le-Haut, about six kilometers from Béziers, in order to establish there an agricultural colony for orphan or abandoned boys. Fr. Gailhac had in mind that the Good Shepherd Community would, in time, take care of this work.

4th May, 1851

Bishop Thibault decided to make one more effort to stem the tide of slander which threatened to engulf Fr. Gailhac's work. Having several times visited and approved of the young community, he wrote to the Founder bidding him prepare them for their profession of vows. Accordingly, on the 4th May, Mother St. John and her seven companions pronounced their Final Vows in the presence of Bishop Thibault. A large number of invited clergy and a great gathering of Béziers's best known families were present. The Bishop took advantage of the occasion to praise the two founders, Fr. Gailhac and Mother St. John, and to express his strong condemnation of the evil tongues that could ruin God's work. In the presence of that representative assembly he made a noble apology to Fr. Gailhac for the misunderstandings of the past. The ceremonies of that day provided a moment of grace for one young man among those present. He was Jean Gibbal, brother of Rosalie, she who had arrived with Mme. Çure and Eulalie Vidal at the door of the Good Shepherd on Foundation Day, 1849, and with them was now making her profession. Years earlier, as her legal guardian, he had vigorously opposed his sister's wish to enter religious life. He had built up the

most successful legal practice in Béziers, but had long remained away from church and sacraments. Now, at thirty five, he felt called to devote himself to Fr. Gailhac's works.

15 May, 1851

Among the women who remained in the Refuge were some who had arrived at a radical conversion of life. Many of these begged for some form of religious life. This request led to the foundation of the Oblate Sisters, who were eventually absorbed into the S.H.M. Community. After the Refuge was closed, a second orphanage, called the Preservation, was founded to replace it. This second orphanage was designed, as its name indicates, to preserve young girls who were exposed to grave dangers, whether in the streets, or in broken homes. Ages ranged from twelve to eighteen.

20th July, 1851

By mid 1851 the community numbered twelve, all French. The Founder began to look farther afield. He asked a young Irish woman, a Miss Murphy, living in Béziers, whether she knew of any girls in her own country who might be interested in working with the S.H.M. Community in Béziers. Miss Murphy wrote to her aunt, a Carmelite Prioress in Dublin, telling her about Fr. Gailhac's work. The letter was passed to Canon O'Connell, who happened to have under his spiritual direction two young women who desired to enter religious life. One of these, Rosanna McMullen, a native of Sandymount, Dublin, wanted to enter a convent in Australia. Her parents were deeply upset. Canon O'Connell presented the letter from Béziers, but Rosanna was immovable. A novena of prayer was begun. After prayer and deliberation she finally decided to enter in Béziers. Her parents capitulated. The other girl was Thérèse Hennessy, Kilkenny born, who had recently moved to Dublin with her family. Thérèse's parents were dead and she was of age to make her own decision, which she did, in favour of Béziers. On 20th July, 1851, the community at 21 Rue Ermengaud opened its doors to the first two of its many Irish subjects. Thérèse, as Mother St. Thomas, was destined to contribute much to the development of S.H.M. in the field of foundations and personnel, particularly in the Anglo-Irish and Portuguese Provinces. Rosanna, as Mother St. Charles, served generously in the field of government. She was to be, for many years, the well loved Directress of the boarding school at the Mother House.

3rd June, 1853

After two years of close association with the work of Fr. Gailhac, Jean Gibbal began to experience the desire for total commitment. Leaving family and a brilliant career, he became the first candidate in the Congregation of the Good Shepherd. How and where his ecclesiastical studies were accomplished is not clear, but there is evidence that he was already a priest by 27th September, 1854. Until his death he was to remain the devoted collaborator of Fr. Gailhac in all his works, and to prove especially valuable in legal crises.

1855

An era of untroubled calm in the administration of Fr. Gailhac's works prompted Bishop Thibault to remark, 'See, your troubles are at an end'. 'I don't believe it', said Fr. Gailhac. 'Now why?', queried the bishop. 'Because God has always tried both me and those who follow me', replied the Founder. 'Don't worry', the Bishop reassured

him, remember I am here now.' The bolt soon fell. Two young sisters died, one in August, the other in September. The circumstances surrounding these two deaths were simple, but they were enough to inspire a malicious mind to invent horrible calumnies, and to set afoot a campaign of vile slander. Letters signed 'Paul Louis' (later discovered to be a false name), were addressed to the District Attorney, to the Prefect of Police and to the Bishop of Montpellier, insinuating, in the most insidious manner, that these deaths were the outcome of wicked behaviour on the part of Fr. Gailhac. Accusations were not even confined to the incident of the deaths, but undertook to interpret Fr. Gailhac's services of charity as a cloak for religious fanaticism, cupidity, despotism, self aggrandisement. This 'priest of God', as Bishop Thibault liked to call him, was said to have grown rich through having exploited the weak minded, 'especially a certain widow who had despoiled herself in his favour, to the exclusion of needy relatives'. A formal hearing was opened, witnesses were called; doctors were interrogated. Fr. Gailhac and Fr. Gibbal were summoned to appear before the court for formal questioning. The scandal stirred up the whole surrounding area against Fr. Gailhac. Repercussions were felt by the Good Shepherd Fathers and by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary. When the Founder and his priests walked in the street, insolent taunts were flung at them and their work; the young people in their charge were insulted. Bawdy remarks were shouted in the streets, even about the Foundress herself. Mme. Cure wrote to Bishop Thibault: 'The anguish we are suffering, brought upon us by evil tongues (or rather by the furies of hell), has reached its peak . . . Our dear Father is at the end of his strength.' Fr. Gailhac's health suffered, he lost his appetite and could not sleep. Towards the end of the year the charges were dropped. The Sub Prefect sent his formal statement, dismissing the case, to the Bishop, together with a letter expressing his esteem for Fr. Gailhac. Those months, the most harrowing of his life, had taken their toll of the devoted priest. It is no surprise to find, in the Founder's own hand, beside the entry of the second sister's name in the Death Register, this comment: '. . . her premature death was the innocent cause of the most horrible suffering.' The events of these months have come down in the history of the Congregation as 'the great ordeal'.

19th August, 1856

An imperial Decree of this date granted legal recognition to the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary. It was this document that saved the Congregation from extinction in France in 1905, when the laws governing the separation of Church and State were promulgated. This piece of foresight was, almost certainly, due to the shrewdness and legal skill of Fr. Gibbal.

1862 - 1869

In the early years of her religious life, Mother St. John had suffered a severe attack of pleurisy, a disease which, in the days before antibiotics were discovered, most often proved fatal. She recovered, but remained frail in health. At the beginning of 1862 her doctors diagnosed a liver complaint, and ordered her to take the waters at Vichy. This continued over seven years while her condition grew gradually worse. Each period of treatment required several weeks absence from her community. The Founder's letters, addressed to her at Vichy, reveal his solicitude: 'You understand, you are my main concern . . . Your absence leaves a great void in the community.' Her doctors had confided to him that her suffering might be alleviated, her malady arrested, but not cured. He watched her attacks become more frequent, her suffering

more acute; he noted her selfless devotion to her community and all her charges. No matter what her pain, her loving care never relaxed. An orphan's cough in chapel was of more concern to her than her own grave illness. By the 2nd March, 1869 it was plain to all that she was dying. In her final hours she insisted on seeing each of her daughters. If she was unable to speak when a sister arrived, she pressed her hand in silent farewell. Turning to her spiritual guide whose strong support she had been in the bitterest trials, she said: 'Courage, Father, God will be with you. He will console you in all your sufferings. Yes, our mission will succeed.' Gailhac felt this loss very keenly. Mother St. John died on the 4th March, 1869, at six o'clock in the evening, after twenty years of religious life.

1st May, 1869

Two months later a chapter was held for the purpose of electing a Superior General in succession to Mother St. John. The choice fell on Mother Ste. Croix (Eulalie Vidal), the only survivor of the three who had arrived at the door of the Good Shepherd on the 24th February, 1849. From its opening until that day, she had been the able and saintly directress of the boarding school. There she had left a record of the gentle but effective way in which she could lead the most recalcitrant, not only to obedience, but also to the practices of devout Christian living. Mother Ste. Croix brought to her new role a remarkable combination of qualities: indefatigable energy, a methodical approach to all tasks, firmness that never constrained because of its gentleness and understanding, and in every event a perfect self-control. Both her secular and religious life gave evidence of a rare degree of unselfishness and self-effacement. In her fifty fourth year, when she was elected Superior General, she diligently set about studying the English language, the better to communicate with her English speaking daughters. The first great expansion of the Congregation took place during her generalate: Lisburn, Ireland (1870); Porto, Portugal (1871); Liverpool, England (1872); Braga, Portugal (1877); Sag Harbor, USA (1877). The negotiations for the foundation of Ferrybank, Waterford, Ireland begun in 1877, were completed under her direction. The ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the new convent at Ferrybank had taken place, and the new building was all advanced before she died.

1868 - 1869

In the early 1860's both community and novitiate counted several Irish sisters. After 1863 there was a considerable increase in their number. Various factors in their country's recent history, besides the radical change in climate and culture experienced by them in the far south of France, created health problems for some of these young sisters. Fr. Gailhac discovered that a visit to their own country often helped to restore them to health. Weighing all these factors, together with his desire for the expansion of his works, he decided to seek a foundation in Ireland. One of his earliest attempts, linked with Callan, County Kilkenny, in the Diocese of Ossory, was foiled on account of a conflict between the Parish Priest of Callan and the Bishop of Ossory. When, towards the end of 1869, the Founder got a clear view of that situation, he withdrew and waited.

1870

There was not long to wait; Providence soon opened another door. Mother St. Thomas Hennessy, who was Novice Mistress, was chosen to accompany a novice returning to Ireland because of ill health. She set out with instructions to study the

possibility of a suitable location for a foundation. Providence used a chain of circumstances, striking in their simplicity, to lead her to Lisburn, County Antrim, in the Diocese of Down and Connor. This populous town was the centre of the linen industry in the North of Ireland, a presbyterian stronghold, where few amenities were available to the catholic minority. Wages were often below subsistence level, the work hard, the working hours long. The gravest need, however, was catholic education. Fr. Kelly, Parish Priest of St. Patrick's in Lisburn, welcomed the idea of bringing sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary to establish free schools for his poor children, and pay schools for those who could afford them. In this way a catholic education would be provided for all the children of his parish, and the pay schools would help to support the free schools. Episcopal approbation was sought, and was readily granted by Bishop Dorrian. The political situation in France itself, however, demanded careful planning. Her foreign policy had not endeared France abroad; at home she had been thrown into turmoil by the fall of Metz and the Sedan disaster. Paris was in a state of siege. The travellers' route had to be carefully considered. The Founder cast all his care on that Providence which had directed his community to Lisburn, and then planned prudently. Mother St. Thomas was chosen to lead the small band of the nine sisters to the new foundation. On the eve of their departure a moving farewell ceremony took place. In the presence of the community and novitate assembled in the Small Choir, with Mother St. Thomas and the nine gathered at the foot of the altar, the Founder addressed them, speaking of the virtues which would deepen their spiritual life and render their mission fruitful. He blessed them and, taking the book of Rules and Constitutions from the altar, he placed it in the hands of Mother St. Thomas, exhorting her to guard its spirit in the fidelity of its observance. 'And thus', he finished, 'you will become saints and save souls.' Early next morning, 13th November, feast of Saint Stanislas and the Founder's own birthday, they left Béziers by train for Bordeaux, accompanied by two sisters from the community, who would bring back news of the embarkation of the group. The missionaries sailed on an English vessel bound for Liverpool. 'The journey was good for that season', the records tell us. The captain was exceedingly kind, and when they arrived in Liverpool, provided overnight hospitality for them, in his own home and in the homes of his friends, while they awaited the morning boat to Belfast. They arrived in Lisburn on 22nd November, 1870. This foundation Fr. Gailhac dedicated to Saint Patrick. The house that received the sisters offered very little more than walls and a roof. Furniture was sparse, of household equipment and provisions there were none. The warmth of their welcome, however, was rich compensation. A protestant lady was the first to come to their aid. They were still holding the cups which she had provided for their tea, when the clergy came to greet them. The rigours of that winter left an indelible memory. Both catholics and protestants helped to make the house ready to open schools by February, 1871. In the years ahead they would experience the awful effects of bigotry, but mercifully not yet.

21st February, 1871

Death struck again. This time Fr. Gailhac lost one of his most cherished disciples, Fr. Jean Gibbal, both good friend and valued collaborator. Another death keenly felt.

January - July, 1871

On 23rd January the Founder wrote to his new community in Lisburn, urging them to be worthy of their vocation and dedicated to the work God had confided to them:

Rekindle your faith constantly so that all your works may be works of faith. Do not forget that you must spread about you the sweet odour of Jesus Christ; your gentleness must attract catholics and protestants alike.

Again on 8th March, wishing to impress upon them the nobility of their vocation, he wrote:

So your work has begun How good God is to have called you to cooperate with His divine Son in the work of redemption. What a glorious mission is yours: to make God known to those whom He created in His image and destined to possess Him forever Dear daughters, be worthy of your call.

On 2nd July he arrived in Lisburn. This was his first time out of France, and the first of those many visits to his future branch foundations which, up to his last journey overseas in 1888, would take him to Ireland, England, Portugal, Rome - all in the service of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary. As far as possible he preached the annual retreat to all the sisters in their own locations. For the remainder of his life his chief apostolate was the spiritual formation of his daughters, whether in Béziers or in the branch foundations. Between visits he wrote letters, to individual sisters and to communities, as well as circulars for special occasions and liturgical feasts, all of which now form a rich treasury of his teaching on the spiritual life and on the fundamental principles of mission for Christ.

Writing to Béziers from Lisburn on the first visit he reported:

Only on our return will I be able to tell you in detail about the gracious welcome extended to us everywhere Our little family in Lisburn is very well; the house is excellent, more elegant than Béziers and very well kept. Our daughters are appreciated, honoured and loved; everyone is devoted to them, and every day they have new proofs of that devotion. Their future is promising. I am doing all I can to be faithful to God's plan. The children in the various classes are delightful; they love their teachers, they are sweet, honest, docile, and work hard to learn the practice of all the Christian virtues. The priests are very friendly and go out of their way to say a few words in French to me.

In Gailhac's terms, the 'works' of the Institute are but the means of carrying out 'the work of God'; that is, ministry in every form is the means of carrying out the mission of the Institute. In a letter of 1877 he sums up this principle: 'The works we do . . . are but the continuation of the Work of Redemption.'

September, 1871

The second foundation followed hard upon the first. Providence, this time, had elected to direct the Founder to Portugal, through the agency of Mother St. Thomas's sister, Margaret. Margaret was head mistress of a select boarding school in Porto, called the English College. The owner, an elderly lady, decided to bequath the entire property to 'Miss Margaret'. Years later, she in turn, decided to donate her school to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary. Brigid, the middle one of the three Hennessy sisters, had lived and worked in the English College for some years before she followed her younger sister, Mother St. Thomas, to the novitiate in Béziers, where, as Mme. Ste. Marie, she had made profession in 1856. She seemed an obvious choice as leader of the small community of five who were assigned to the new foundation in the Hennessy school in Porto. From the outset Mother Ste. Marie's health gave cause for concern. Her illness frequently took her away from community and school; all was not well with either. Besides, the area in which the school was located was found to be somewhat unhealthy, so the sisters' health suffered too. The Founder and Mother Ste. Croix weighed the situation and decided:

Mother St. Thomas was replaced as superior in Lisburn and sent to Porto with a mandate to restore all things, which she quickly did. She arrived in Portugal some time after Easter, 1872, and helped to develop there the fruitful S.H.M. apostolate which still flourishes in that country. Meanwhile, Mother St. Thomas found other problems to contend with in addition to those concerned with health. Masonic influence, strong in Portugal, had generated anti-religious feeling. France was politically unpopular in Portugal. Together, these two factors made the sisters from France most unpopular. They dared not appear out of doors wearing any form of religious dress or religious symbol; they dared not call their house a convent; they dared not acknowledge their government of the school. 'Miss Margaret' had to remain the nominal headmistress. The political situation in Portugal was never to be easy, still is not easy, yet the time came when the Founder could say that his Portuguese foundations afforded him 'solid satisfaction'.

1872

Back in 1871, while Mother St. Thomas was still superior in Lisburn, Fr. Gailhac wrote to her requesting her to meet, in Liverpool, two sisters destined for the Lisburn community. Now, Providence again manoeuvred the situation. Mother St. Thomas and the two sisters missed the boat for Belfast and were obliged to spend the night in Liverpool. Next morning they assisted at Mass in St. James's, Bootle, which is in the suburbs of the city. After Mass, the celebrant, Fr. Thomas Kelly, the Parish Priest, invited them to his house. As they talked he told them that he was, just then, looking out for a community of sisters to help him to found parish schools. State schools, he explained, enjoyed good government grants, had fine equipment and were very efficient, but instruction in the catholic religion was not permitted in these schools. That left the children of his parish sadly neglected in the teachings of their faith. Mother St. Thomas was keenly interested in the apostolic challenge which this situation presented, and promised to consult her superiors in Béziers about sending a group of sisters to help Fr. Kelly, while he sought the authorisation of the Bishop. When negotiations were successfully concluded, Fr. Kelly, on behalf of the Founder, purchased a house in Seaview Road, Bootle, in St. James's parish. From the records, one gleans that this foundation was of special importance to the superiors in Béziers. Seven sisters were chosen, all young, all promising. Mother St. Eugène, the Founder's niece, was named superior. The Superior General, Mother Ste. Croix, accompanied them, planning to stay a while with them in order to guide them through their first days. The voyage from Bordeaux had been rough. Only one sister was not ill on the journey, and she had devotedly tended all the others, rousing them from the effects of mal de mer with her own infectious gaiety. Hardly had they disembarked at Liverpool, when this sister was stricken with a severe illness, and died a few hours after their arrival in Seaview Road, on 22nd June, 1872. The shock that this death caused in their midst is not difficult to guess at. Barely arrived in a country that was alien to every member of the group, not having had time to provide even the simple things necessary at everyday level, they were faced with all the confusion and embarrassment of a post mortem, funeral arrangements, compliance with civic regulations, and finding a grave. Medical authority declared the cause of death to have been quinsy. The young sister, Mme. Dominic Hoyne, a native of Kilkenny, was in her twenty seventh year. Her grave is in Ford Cemetery, Liverpool. In all these trials Fr. Kelly was the help and stay of the bereaved community. Opposite Mme. Dominic's name in the Death Register at Béziers the Founder appended in his own hand: 'one of the most promising members of this foundation.' To Fr. Kelly he wrote: '... my paternal heart was crushed with sorrow but, adoring

God's plan I submit to his divine will.' Work got under way quickly, and prospered. On a visit to Bootle in July, 1877, the Founder wrote to Béziers:

I am convinced that this house will give great glory to God. It is already doing a great deal of good. At least four hundred persons have received religious instruction and are eternally grateful The harvest is great and, if they are wise, our children will gather it all.

The community began to find the Bootle house too small for the fast expanding boarding and day schools, the night school for adults, catechism classes and sodality work. About 1882 it was decided that the secondary schools had to move out. An extensive property was purchased just a few miles from Seaview Road, in Seaforth on the Mersey shore. The new house, called Seafield, was quite luxurious. It had previously been a health resort, with heated salt water baths, spacious elegant rooms, staircases grandly designed, extensive conservatories and well kept lawns and gardens. Later, the whole campus would move out to the suburban area of Great Crosby and take its name, Seafield, with it. However, this did not happen until many years after the Founder's death. As he began to experience the restraints which advancing age imposes, Fr. Gailhac found himself less able for his customary annual visitation of all the foundations. The large house at Seaforth offered a solution to his problem for the communities of Lisburn, Ferrybank and Seafield. It provided adequate accommodation for all three to make together there the annual retreat, which Fr. Gailhac himself usually preached. His last struggling effort to do this was made in the summer of 1888. It was during these years that Seafield came to be acknowledged as the central house for the English-Irish communities, a role it fulfilled for many decades.

1873

With the growth of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Fr. Gailhac's thoughts turned towards seeking Papal approval, and a special blessing from the Holy See on all its works. Bearing letters of approbation from the bishops of the dioceses where foundations had been established, he left Béziers for Rome, at the end of the summer. He was accompanied by the Superior General, Mother Ste. Croix and her assistant, Mother St. Felix. They were granted a private audience and given a papal blessing for the congregation. Pius IX, Pio Nono of esteemed memory, also granted to the congregation a decretum laudis, literally a decree of praise, dated 16th September, 1873.

1876

On 23rd September, Fr. Gailhac had completed fifty years of priestly life; fifty years of selfless devotion to the poorest and most abandoned; fifty years of service in the spiritual direction of a large number of priests and religious, whether as individuals or communities, and a vast number of the laity; fifty years in the arduous ministry of preaching. Besides all this, there had been his labours for the various foundations designed to continue his work in the Church: the formation of his Good Shepherd priests and brothers, the training and direction of the sisters, the foundations overseas and the correspondence and travel involved in their guidance. His treatises on religious life, written for the sisters, for the most part after 1872, filled two large volumes when they were published posthumously in 1892. He who had added a vow of zeal to the three canonical vows of the sisters, in the early years of their Institute, had himself exercised an unremitting apostolic zeal ever since his seminar days. Yet the Lord seems to have renewed this man's youth like the eagle's, for his

biographer, Fr. Victor Maynard, one of the Good Shepherd priests, describes thus, 'the Fr. Gailhac who celebrated his golden jubilee in 1876';

. . . he never grew old. His face was full and fresh; he always had a healthy colour; his sight was good; his step firm and lively. His intellect was as well preserved as his constitution. His mind was clear and alert, his memory excellent, his will strong and his heart burning with love for God and the salvation of all mankind.

While the sisters busied themselves preparing a worthy celebration, Fr. Gailhac was away in the quiet of the Abbey of Fontfroide making his preparation: an eight-day retreat under the direction of his dear friend and spiritual guide, Abbot Jean. He returned to Béziers in time for the festivities on the 11th October. Fr. Maynard, who was present, recounts his impressions:

It is impossible to describe the respect, the veneration and love with which Fr. Gailhac's daughters, priests, brothers, orphans and other pupils surrounded him on his jubilee day. Joy and happiness shone in every face and Fr. Gailhac himself seemed rejuvenated. It was a joy to watch the sweet expression on his face, which still gave promise of a long and fruitful career. He was host to a brilliant gathering of prelates and priests, all his friends. Bishop de Cabrières of Montpellier and the Bishops of Besançon and Constantine, army colonels, vicars general, archdeacons and archpriests from all over the diocese, swelled the numbers. The leaders of Beziers society, many of whom had been educated at the Sacred Heart of Mary school, or directed by Fr. Gailhac, joyfully took part in the festivities to show their affection for the good priest. Fr. Gailhac celebrated High Mass in the courtyard of the boarding school, which had been gaily decorated The students of the Christian Brothers' school sang the Mass and the military band of the 17th Regiment supplied the music. All were deeply touched as their beloved Father in Christ ascended the altar, intoned the beautiful chant of the angels, affirmed his faith at the Credo, and prayed with tears in his eyes at the Pater Noster. This dignified old man was admired and praised by all, as an honour to the diocese, to the priesthood and the Church.

March, 1877

Certain society ladies in Braga, Portugal, sought to establish in that city a good secondary school for girls. They consulted a former member of their circle who had been educated in the Sacred Heart of Mary school in Porto and had later become a member of that community. She was now named Mme. Marie de Jesus. Diocesan authorisation, and the approval of the Béziers superiors having been secured, Mother St. Thomas was deputed to purchase a suitable house. The foundation was made in March, 1877. An interesting point which emerges from the early history of this foundation at Braga is Father Gailhac's conviction that it was unwise to found a religious community on a rented property. He wrote to Mother St. Thomas on 8th April, 1877:

. . . .a community that does not own a house is a mobile community. I feel it is imprudent to begin a foundation without buying a house. I will never consent to this situation again.

Reading this now, one is conscious of the radical change in approach to be found in religious communities, resulting from the renewal stimulated by the teaching of Vatican 11. The apostle of nineteenth century France, working in a Church still concerned with recovering the stability so badly shaken by the Reformation and the Revolution, sought to give permanence to his mission through security in every form. Today's apostle is likely to find liberation in a pilgrim Church, a Church on the

move, a community free of impedimenta, 'a mobile community'.

April, 1877

As the Braga community settled in, another group of sisters was on the high seas bound for the United States. A few years earlier, possibly 1873, a certain Mrs. Peter of Cincinnati, widow of an American Consul, had travelled to Rome on the same train as Fr. Gailhac and Mother Ste. Croix. In a conversational exchange she became interested in the work done by the sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary, particularly in the field of education, and insisted that America needed just such help as Fr. Gailhac's religious could give. She had already brought four communities to Ohio and begged the Founder to send a group from Béziers. Many things had to be considered, not least, the problem of financing the venture. The United States was a long and expensive journey away; keeping the link with the Mother House would not be easy. The following year he met Mrs. Peter again. This time she offered to provide a house and pay for the sisters' travel. He still hesitated. Finally, in 1877, he decided the mission could be undertaken. Mother St. Basil Davis set out with a community of five. After a stormy and tedious journey, they docked at the pier in the North River on 15th March, 1877. The little group huddled on the quayside, scanning every face in search of Mrs. Peter, who was to take them to Cincinnati. No one came. They were rather frightened. Finally a woman stepped forward, looked around anxiously and then came up to welcome the forlorn little band. She had news for them. A month earlier, when they were somewhere in mid Atlantic, Mrs. Peter had died suddenly, too late to send word to Béziers to delay the sisters' setting out. Things were not too bad, however; they now had a friend. Together with Mrs. Dallon they entered the nearest church to thank God for a safe journey, and to offer themselves for whatever mission Providence would indicate. Next day they learned that their field of work was not to be Cincinnati, but Sag Harbor, out on Long Island. This foundation at Sag Harbor was the seed of a mission that, in the years ahead, would spread along the Eastern Seaboard; move out to the West, the Midwest, the Central America, as well as Columbia; and, in the nineteenth century would return to Europe to establish several international schools.

4th September, 1878

Two months after the death of the Foundress, Mother Ste. Croix was elected second Superior General. Her election received episcopal approval on 8th May, 1869. She had sponsored five new foundations: Ireland (1870), Portugal (1871 and 1877), England (1872), The United States (1877). She had been Fr. Gailhac's companion on all his journeys abroad. In the summer of 1878, Fr. Gailhac was preparing to visit Ireland and England. Mother Ste. Croix was obliged to confess that she was not well enough to travel. In truth she herself knew that she was fatally ill. In Lisburn Fr. Gailhac received the news of her death on 4th September. She was the last of the very special three who came to him on 24th February, 1849.

29th December, 1878

Mother St. Felix Maynard was elected successor to Mother Ste. Croix, and thus became third Superior General.

16th September, 1879

Throughout the last year of her life, M. Ste. Croix had been occupied with another Irish foundation, this time at Ferrybank, near the city of Waterford. This house is in

one of the southernmost parishes of the Diocese of Ossory. Nine sisters arrived there on 16th September, 1879. A fuller account of this foundation will be found some pages further on.

1880 - 1881

These years brought political and financial threats to the very existence of Fr. Gailhac's work. With a republican government in power, holding strongly anti-clerical views, particularly in the field of education, the Ferry Laws of 1880 brought no surprise in France, only confirmation of fears. A central authority, organising all grades of education, launched what was clearly an offensive against catholic education. The ultimate aim was to abolish catholic education, which was seen as a threat to republicanism. The immediate aim was to destroy religious orders of men. Rumours were spread that this would be extended to the religious congregations of women. Public opinion voiced a firm resistance to such a move, so another tactic was devised. Crippling additional taxes were levied on all religious communities of women. This gravely increased the financial burden of the Mother House in Béziers, and this at a time when assets were low. Most of the Foundress's wealth had been used for the new foundations already recorded; now there were inescapable further demands. Extensive reconstruction had become imperative in the house at Porto; considerable extensions had been added to the house at Bootle; some of the debt incurred in building the new house at Ferrybank was still outstanding. It was in the midst of these overwhelming demands that disaster struck in the vineyards of the Midi. Some of Mme. Cure's money had been invested in vineyards at Bayssan and La Galiberte. The income from these was the main support of the orphanage and the community. Phylloxera, an insect pest which is ruinous to grapevines, appeared in 1880. It totally destroyed the vintage of 1881. The vines had to be eradicated, the ground dug deep, chemically treated, and allowed to lie fallow for two years before replanting. It would be a further eight years before a good vintage could be harvested. In all these waiting years there was continued outlay without return. The effects of the phylloxera epidemic were felt too in the income from the boarding school. Altogether these were hard times on the Founder and on the community at the Mother House. Nothing, however, could shake Fr. Gailhac's trust in Divine Providence. Even at the darkest moments he would rally the sisters: 'Place all your confidence in God; it is his work that you do; He will not abandon you. Rather will He perform miracles to support and assist you'.

12th December, 1882

Early in November, Fr. Gailhac set out once more for Rome, accompanied by M. St. Felix. He wanted to thank Pope Leo XI 11, in person, for a double favour: first, for the decree of approval granted to the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary by this Pontiff on 5th September, 1880; second, for the appointment of a Cardinal Protector to the Congregation. This first Cardinal Protector was Cardinal Hohenlohe. By virtue of this appointment the Holy Father had given the Congregation the status of Papal Institute. During the private audience of 12th December, 1882, the Pope, noting Fr. Gailhac's healthy vigour, remarked: 'You are still young!' 'Your Holiness', he said, I celebrated my eightieth birthday on this journey to Rome.' 'You are very fortunate that God has chosen you to establish a new family in the Church.' Then the Holy Father exhorted the Founder to lead his daughters to imitate the virtues of Christ. 'Holy Father', he assured him, 'it is for this that I have worked all my life'.

'That is good', the Pope replied. This audience remained a consoling memory for Fr. Gailhac for the rest of his life.

1883

Fr. Gailhac's principal aim in founding the Good Shepherd priests was to provide, through them, spiritual and temporal direction for the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary and their works. The Good Shepherd Congregation had never given promise of a robust future and, now that membership was seriously reduced, he accepted the fact that this community was dying out. With grave problems, political and financial, facing the sisters, he became concerned with finding another community of priests to take on the same role. The Holy Ghost Fathers in Portugal had proved valuable friends and guides to the S.H.M. sisters there, so through their intermediary, the Founder petitioned their Superior General, Fr. Emonet to accept this charge. Delays and uncertainties in Fr. Emonet's decision caused Fr. Gailhac to turn instead to the Society of Jesus in France. Just as negotiations with the Jesuits were coming to a favourable conclusion, a brief note of acceptance arrived from Fr. Emonet. Too late. It would seem, however, that something remains to witness to the friendship between the Holy Ghost Fathers and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary in the remarkable likeness between the crests of the two congregations. The resemblance is too striking to be accounted for as a mere coincidence. Only the mottoes are different. The C.S.Sp. motto is: *Cor unum et anima una*. The S.H.M. motto is: *Spes, salus, consolation nostra*.

1888

In this, his eighty sixth year, Fr. Gailhac made his last trip overseas. He came to Seaforth, Liverpool, but was not able for the journey to Lisburn, or to Ferrybank. The communities from these houses came instead to Seaforth, Liverpool, where he directed their long retreat. Travel had become a trial, both for him and for the superiors who travelled with him. Failing memory was a source of continual mishaps. Deafness and near blindness demanded much patience of him and of those who cared for him in the most ordinary circumstances. Even handwriting had become a problem. Since his late seventies, the trembling of his hands had made it impossible for him to control a pen; he was obliged to use a pencil for letters and notes. In his latter years, these were so nearly illegible that they had to be accompanied by a copy in the firm, clear hand of M. St. Felix. He faced all these problems in his own characteristic way, the way of deep faith. Many years earlier, in June, 1877, when a severe winter had so affected his health that he was unable to travel, he had written, in reply to a solicitous enquiry from one of the sisters:

My age is making itself felt. The winter has been difficult. My strength is failing. I work well . . . but I tire easily. But, why dwell so much on the poor body! . . . the spirit never grows old, neither does the heart. When the body can no more, let us use our heart and spirit to draw near to God and offer to Him, in advance, the sacrifice of all that must perish.

As the accumulating years brought the inevitable restriction of his work in the confessional, in spiritual direction and in preaching, his ability to serve caused him much suffering. In all his trials, however, he was submissive to God's will and was often heard to repeat the words he had learned from his mother: 'God wills it; I will it too. May His holy will be done.'

25th January, 1890

During the last months of Fr. Gailhac's life, when he needed special care, M. St. Felix arranged residence for him at the Sacred Heart of Mary, where the sisters, in particular, M. St. Felix herself, lavished the most delicate attention on the venerable old man. On the 13th November, 1889, his birthday, he celebrated Mass for the last time and heard a few confessions. He then retired to his room, never to leave it again. His strength deteriorated rapidly. By mid January, 1890, it was evident he was dying. Bishop de Cabrières, Bishop of Montpellier, came to give him a blessing; a Papal blessing arrived by telegram from Leo XIII. These testimonies of appreciation brought a glow of gratitude to the face of the dying man. On the evening of Wednesday, the 22nd, M. St. Felix asked him: 'Father, is there any message you would wish me to transmit to the whole Institute on your behalf?' He replied at once and with unexpected vigour: 'Oh! si, l'union, la charité. Toutes, toutes . . . toujours . . .', which may be translated, but not without loss: 'Oh! yes, union . union, charity. Everyone, everyone . . .always . . .' A few minutes after 3.00 hours on Saturday, 25th January, 1890, the Servant of God died in great peace. He rests in an honoured place in the crypt below the Round Chapel which his friend Eugène Cure had built for the Refuge and Orphanage in 1847. in the same crypt rests M. St. John, who brought to his work riches still greater than wealth, in her dedication. There too rests his friend Eugène Cure and Eugène's parents. At the close of the Apostolic Proceedings for the Beatification of Fr. Gailhac in 1969, the Servant of God was declared Venerable.

THE VENERATED FOUNDESS
MOTHER ST. JOHN PELLISSIER CURE
1809 - 1869

About fifteen kilometres north of Béziers, lies the country town of Murviel lès Béziers, set in broad vineyards which provide the livelihood, and determine the way of life, of its two thousand or more inhabitants. A fine old house on the corner of Rue Pierre Rouanet, still standing, was formerly the home of the Pélissier family. There, on a biting cold day, 2nd February, 1809, a daughter was born to Etienne Baptiste Pélissier and his wife, Marie Durand. Their two sons Jean Baptiste Joseph, aged fifteen, and Jean Clément Napoléon, aged eight, completed the household. Some years earlier, another daughter had died at two months. Great, therefore must have been the joy of family and friends when the new baby was declared sound and healthy. On the following Sunday, 5th February, she was baptised at the Parish Church of St. John the Baptist, only a few minutes walk from the Pélissier home, and given the names, Marie Apollonie, afterwards to be known as just Apollonie.

She grew up fast into a lively and at times, mischievous, little girl, with a vivid imagination, somewhat too sensitive perhaps, but warm hearted and generous. Hers was a very open and straightforward nature. She was a petite, dark-eyed brunette, the large deep brown eyes looking out from a small pointed face crowned with a wealth of rich dark hair.

In a family of three, the death of the eldest must make a profound impression on the two who remain. Apollonie was only eight when her eldest brother died at the age of twenty three. The depth of her parents' grief brought home to her the finality of their loss and her own. The trappings of death and funerals in those days, particularly in France, were, to say the least, lugubrious. All this, with the loss of her big brother, must have left its mark on such an impressionable child. Her second brother, Napoléon, engrossed in the pursuits of a sixteen year old on the threshold of manhood, had little time for his young sister. Her father, busy about his extensive property and his duties as Mayor of Murviel, was absent most of the day. Apollonie became her mother's constant companion for the next few years. It must have been during these years that her mother, by precept and example, taught her to love the poor and to serve them tenderly; lessons that were to shape her later life.

Apollonie entered a boarding school in Béziers, very likely the Pensionnat Mathon in the parish of St. Nazaire. What year she went there is not known, probably in her eleventh or twelfth year. Her First Communion in the Cathedral of St. Nazaire on 17th June, 1821, and her Confirmation there by Bishop Fournier on 28th October, 1823, are recorded on certificates which she carefully preserved among her personal papers right up to her death. Her education must have been good, whether in the elementary grades with the Sisters in Murviel or later in the Pensionnat in Béziers. In adult life, her cultural tastes, her letters, her insights concerning educational values, all revealed a standard much above that of young women in her day, even of those in her own social class. A portrait of Apollonie, painted when she was about nineteen, shows, despite its rather stilted treatment, a bright and confident young woman, ready for the challenges of life. Challenges were coming.

Her mother's death on 21st November, 1830, left Apollonie feeling rather alone, but



Mother St. John Pélissier Cure as Postulant

when that was followed by the death of her father on 8th January, 1831, she was alone indeed. Both parents having died intestate, Napoléon and Apollonie were entitled, in accordance with French law, to equal shares of all the Pélissier inheritance, but this simple arrangement was about to run into difficulties.

Much of the problem involved a significant development in Apollonie's life at this time. For some years before their death, the Pélissier parents had counted the Cure family of Autignac among their dearest friends. Mme. Cure had died ten months before Mme. Pélissier. M. Cure and his only surviving child, his son, Eugène, now about twenty seven, continued to visit the Pélissiers. So close was the bond between the two families, that the parents had secretly longed to see Eugène and Apollonie united in marriage. The two families were wealthy; the two young people were endowed with good looks and attractive personalities. Both were well educated; Eugène already a fully fledged barrister. When the young couple declared their love, everything seemed set for an ideal marriage. The death of Apollonie's parents altered nothing in their determination to marry, but that determination was to be put to the test.

Although she had attained her majority before her father's death, a Pélissier uncle and his wife assumed the role of guardian over Apollonie and her affairs. Had this assumed authority been exercised with evenhanded justice it might have been a service to so young a woman. However, a strong bias in favour of her brother, Napoléon, was evident in all her guardians' manoeuvring of Apollonie's interests. Whether this bias was due to mere favouritism of the young man, or to a feudal type of desire to keep the property in the Pélissier name is not clear.

Relentless opposition to the Cure Pélissier marriage was set up. It seems possible that the guardians feared the legal knowledge and legal power of M. Cure and Eugène, who were both barristers. Vigorous efforts were made to break off the engagement, even to floating rumours in Murveil that it had ended. Apollonie remained silent, but adamant. She wanted to fulfil her own and her parents' wishes. When it became evident that she was not going to yield, the guardians presented her with their assessment of the value of her parents' property, which she well knew to be an understatement. All these invasions of Apollonie's rights, and the consequent strained atmosphere in the Pélissier household, prompted the young couple to hasten their marriage. Just one week before the wedding, Apollonie was forced to sign her acceptance of less than half of what her guardians had earlier stated to be the sum of the Pélissier inheritance. The signature betrays her trembling hand. Eugène and Apollonie were married on 11th April, 1831; only three months after her father's death. Apollonie was a little over twenty two. She wore her wedding ring to the day of her death.

Sometime during the year 1831, most likely around the time of the wedding, the young couple acquired the property at 43, Les Allees Paul Riquet, in Béziers, where they planned to establish their new household. While this quietly elegant house was being suitably furnished and made ready to receive them, they were gladly welcomed in the home of Eugène's father at Autignac. There, a separate part of the house was set aside for them. That they were still in Autignac on 28th December, 1831, is clear from the wills which they signed on that date, each making the other the beneficiary of all his, or her, property in case of death. In these documents

Autignac is given as their domicile.

Whether Apollonie's first meeting with Fr. Gailhac took place at Autignac or at Béziers is not recorded; it could have been at Autignac. Eugène had kept unbroken contact with his childhood friend, Fr. Gailhac, and, on the priest's return to Béziers in 1829, had taken him as his spiritual director. Apollonie soon chose him as her director too. She came to share her husband's interest in, and generosity towards, his work for the destitute of Béziers.

No children blessed the Cure home, but in everything else these two were supremely happy. They had good friends. Eugène's success as a barrister grew with the years. Apollonie governed a well regulated household where everything was ordered to her husband's happiness and the well being of those who served them. Husband and wife gave liberally to charity, especially to the works of Fr. Gailhac. Cécile, who used to beg for Fr. Gailhac's orphans, could count on filling her donkey's panniers when she called on Mme. Cure. These years of married life went by quietly, happily, filled with good works. Early in 1848, however, disturbing news was arriving from Paris: the February Revolution was moving at a frightening pace and in an alarming direction. The effect on the whole Christian life of France was to be feared. Eugène was deeply distressed. His friends noted that this political upheaval was telling on his health. Later they concluded that it was, to a great extent, responsible for the sudden severe stroke which caused his death.

As he had done on many an evening before, Fr. Gailhac made a brief visit to the Cures, on 2nd November, 1848. Later than night Apollonie sent an urgent message bidding him come quickly as her husband was suddenly taken very ill. The priest snatched the oils for the sick and hurried on the short journey to the Cure home. He was taken at once to the sick room, but there was time only for a final absolution and blessing before Eugène died.

Years before, Fr. Gailhac had promised his good friend and liberal benefactor a final resting place in the crypt of the Round Chapel which had been Eugène's gift to the Orphanage. The municipal authorities now refused permission for this. In January, 1851, with the help of Fr. Gibbal's legal skills, the consent of the authorities would be won, and the remains of Eugène Cure and his parents would be translated to the crypt of the Round Chapel.

In the meantime, when all the legal formalities following her husband's death had been completed, Apollonie found herself a very wealthy woman. She was not quite forty; still petite and pretty; in good health; and now, rich. The world was hers. No doubt many of the town gossips busied themselves planning for her. Most would have reckoned without her love of the poor. She would surprise them all.

The first pangs of grief spent, she began to look to the future. She recalled one quiet evening when she and her husband had sat together for a while in silent intimacy before he asked: 'What would you do if I were to die before you?' Death must have seemed remote then, making it easy to be objective. 'I would become a religious', she replied. After a moment, he said: 'I would enter the community of the Good Shepherd priests, if God were to take you from me'. Recounting this to Fr. Gailhac now, she reminded him: 'In either case our possessions would belong to the poor.'

Then she went on:

Father, fifteen years ago you spoke about your plans of founding a religious community dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Mary. You told my late husband that you needed a third person before you could begin. Here I am. If you think I am worthy, I am ready to take the last place . . . I am ready to place myself and all I possess in the service of the Sacred Heart of Mary.

‘Go sell everything you own and give it to the poor: . . . then come, follow me.’ That was Christ’s plan of life for the rich young man who sought the means of eternal life. But he could not do it; his wealth stood in his way. Mme. Cure saw her wealth as a means of service, of relieving suffering, of building up a better life for Christ’s abandoned little ones. Now, when Christ spoke in her heart and in the events of her life, she was ready with her simple, ‘Here I am’.

She met Fr. Gailhac’s apprehensions concerning her decision with the same quiet steadfastness of will with which she had met opposition to her marriage. He bade her wait and pray. She prayed. She would wait, but nothing would change. When Bishop Thibault finally fixed the Foundation Day for 24th February, 1849, she was ready. It was the first anniversary of that revolution which had so deeply distressed Eugene.

Following the practice of the time in religious institutes, Fr. Gailhac gave each member of his new congregation a saintly patron. To Mme. Cure he gave St. John the Evangelist, his own patron and favourite saint. Henceforth she was to be called, as Foundress and First Superior General, Mother St. John. The twenty years of her religious life were to be marked by simplicity and humility, by a total dedication to others, and by her zeal in giving form to the charism of the Founder in establishing a fervent religious community.

Heaven accorded her a signal consolation on her deathbed. On the 3rd March, 1869, when she was near death and extremely weak, a messenger came to say that her long separated brother, Napoléon, wished to see her. She received him with visible joy, happy in this reconciliation after forty eight years of estrangement. Both were deeply moved. Neither could then have foreseen that Napoléon too would die before the month was out.

At six o’clock on the evening of 4th March, 1869. Mother St. John died in great peace, surrounded by a loving community; concerned only for the glory of God in the welfare of the Institute, in the foundation of which she was God’s chosen instrument. On the day of her profession, Bishop Thibault had turned to her and said: ‘You, Mother, have given a remarkable example of renunciation and devotion in dedicating yourself and your possessions to the service of the poor. God will reward you, I can assure you of that.’

Now, she had Christ’s own assurance:

Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me . . .

As Apollonie Pellissier and as Mme. Cure she had lived the Gospel thus; as Mother St. John she had dedicated all she had and was to this ideal.

Back in her birthplace at Murviel, in March of this year, 1979, the town square between her home and the Church of her baptism has been renamed for her. A plaque bearing the inscription

APOLLONIE PELISSIER SQUARE

has been affixed to the Church tower. The communist dominated Municipality of Murviel decided this on a unanimous vote, '... because she was a good woman who consecrated her fortune, her energies and her life to others'.

The Gospel lived as Mother St. John lived it is a language clear to all.



RESPOND

Message of Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the sixteenth World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

I am speaking in a special way to you, the young people. In fact I would like to talk with you, with each one of you. You are very dear to me and I have great confidence in you. I have called you the hope of the Church and my hope.

Let us remind ourselves of a few things together. In the treasure of the Gospel there are preserved the beautiful responses given to the Lord when he called. The response of Peter and Andrew, his brother: 'Immediately they left their nets and followed him' (Mt. 4:20). The response of Levi the publican: 'And he left everything, and rose and followed him' (Lk. 5:28). The response of the Apostles: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life' (Jn. 6:68). The response of Saul: 'What shall I do, Lord?' (Acts 22:10) From the time when the Gospel was first proclaimed right up to our own time, a very large number of men and women have given their personal response, their free and deliberate response, to the call of Christ. They have chosen the priesthood, the religious life, life in the missions, as the reason for and the ideal of existence. They have served the People of God and humanity, with faith, intelligence, courage and love. Now it is time for you. It is up to you to respond. Are you, perhaps, afraid?

Then let us reflect together, in the light of faith. Our life is a gift from God. We must do something good with it. There are many ways of living life well, using it for serving human and Christian ideals. My reason for speaking to you today about total dedication to God in the priesthood, in religious life, in life as a missionary, is that Christ calls many from among you to this extraordinary adventure. He needs, and he wants to need, your persons, your intelligence, your energy, your faith, your love, your holiness.

You will meet difficulties. Do you think, perhaps, that I do not know about them? I am telling you that love overcomes all difficulties. The true response to every vocation is the work of love. The response to the priestly, religious and missionary vocation can only spring from a deep love of Christ. He himself offers you this power of love, as a gift that is added to the gift of his call and makes your response possible. Trust in 'him who by the power at work within us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine' (Eph. 3.20). And, if you can, give your life, with joy and without fear, to him who first gave his for you.

For this reason I ask you to pray like this:

'Lord Jesus, who called the ones you wanted to call, call many of us to work for you. You, who enlightened with your words those whom you called, enlighten us to work for you.

'You, who supported them in their difficulties, help us to conquer the difficulties we have as young people today.

'And if you call one of us to be consecrated completely to you, may your love give warmth to this vocation from its very beginning and make it grow and persevere to the end. Amen.'

I entrust these wishes and this prayer to the powerful intercession of Mary, Queen of Apostles, in the hope that those who are called will be able to discern and follow generously the voice of the Divine Master.

Solemnity of Our Lord's Epiphany, 6th January, 1979.

Joannes Paulus PP. II.

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