

# STUDIA

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## AUSTRALIA AND OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP \*

### SUMMARY

1. Our Lady of Perpetual Help comes to Australia. 2. Propagation. 3. The Barclaran Novena. 4. Singapore.

Just as the centenary of the enthronement of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in 1966 gave rise to important studies of the picture<sup>1</sup>, the 125th anniversary stimulates further considerations. The picture, brought to Rome in 1499 and restored to public worship in 1866, has in the course of the last century or so been made known far beyond the narrow Roman world. It is the purpose of the present article to examine the impact of the picture on Australian

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\* EDITOR'S NOTE. It is now 125 years since the Picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was exposed to public veneration in the Church of St. Alphonsus, Rome. This event took place on April 26, 1866. A short time afterwards on May 5, 1886, His Holiness, Pope Pius IX came to St. Alphonsus Church to pray before the Picture, and he gave the Redemptorists the command to spread devotion to this Image throughout the world. To-day the Picture is known in almost every corner of the globe.

A high point of the 125th. anniversary was the visit of His Successor, Pope John Paul II, who came to the Church of St. Alphonsus on June 30, 1991. Like his predecessor he prayed before the Picture. He also celebrated Mass at the Shrine (cf. *C.S.S.R. Communications* 85, July 1991).

The Spicilegium Historicum has already prepared for this anniversary with an important contribution of the Picture and its public veneration (cf. F. FERRERO, *Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro: Información bibliográfica y cronológica general*, in "SH" 38, 455-502). Now we have another valuable contribution from our distinguished collaborator, Samuel J. BOLAND, which will be found to be of very special interest.

<sup>1</sup> The principal studies at the time of the centenary were F. FERRERO, *Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro. Proceso histórico de una devoción mariana*, Madrid, 1966; M. CATTAPAN, *Precisazioni riguardanti la storia della Madonna del Perpetuo Soccorso* in *SH* 15 (1967) 353-381. Cf. also *SH* 11 (1963) 257-258; 14 (1966) 28-218; 17 (1969) 383-401. Of earlier writings of particular value are C. HENZE, *Mater de Perpetuo Succursu*, Bonn, 1926 and *Beata Virgo Maria de Perpetuo Succursu, id est de Antiqua Eius et Prodigiosa Imagine in Ecclesia S. Alphonsi de Urbe Cultui Reddita*, Rome 1876.

Catholics. Of particular interest in the history of the devotion is its altogether remarkable growth in places where it has been introduced by Australian Redemptorists. In the Philippines with the huge weekly attendance at Baclaran there is probably the most spectacular veneration of Our Lady of Perpetual Help anywhere in the world. And the wave of conversions to the Christian faith occasioned by the shrine in Singapore must surely be a unique phenomenon.

For the most part information has been drawn, naturally, from the archives of the Canberra province of the Redemptorists<sup>2</sup>. The extraordinary development in Baclaran is thoroughly documented in Australia by reason of the reports, written usually in a distinctly jubilant vein. For Singapore, where the beginnings were much more gradual, there is much less information to hand. The domestic archives of Singapore<sup>3</sup>, however, more than supply the deficiency and have the bonus of their having been compiled by those who were involved in the sudden increase in the pastoral activity in the church of St. Alphonsus and the snowballing movement of conversion.

There are aspects of the progress of devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Australia which are different from the experiences of other parts of the world. They will add a tiny tribute to the honour of the Madonna of S. Alfonso.

### 1. - *Our Lady of Perpetual Help comes to Australia*

An exceptionally diligent Redemptorist missionary in the years when he could no longer take part in the missions he had loved, set about collecting material for a history of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Australia. Unfortunately, his laudable efforts were cut short after he had laboriously gathered a list of authenticated copies of the picture sent by Rome to various parts of the country<sup>4</sup>. It is on his information that we may draw when we trace the beginning of the devotion.

A picture authenticated by Father Nicholas Mauron, Superior General, was sent to the Benedictine nuns of Subiaco, near Paramatta in 1877. With it came an indult of Pius IX granting a

<sup>2</sup> Quoted APC.

<sup>3</sup> For the availability of the appropriate material from the Singapore archives Father J. Wallace, the rector, has been most generous. They are quoted SDA.

<sup>4</sup> The uncompleted manuscript of Father William Packer is in APC, historical section.

plenary indulgence to all who should be present at the ceremony of presenting the picture for public veneration, and other spiritual benefits besides. When the nuns moved to their new home in West Pennant Hills, they took the picture with them, together with a translation of the papal indult, signed by Roger Bede Vaughan, Archbishop of Sydney. The picture is now in the public chapel of the Redemptorists in Pennant Hills, the very generous gift of the Benedictine nuns, who had introduced Our Lady of Perpetual Help to Australia. The authentication by Father Mauron, attached to the back of the wooden picture, is still clearly legible.

Two years later, in 1879, a second picture was sent to St. Stephen's cathedral in Brisbane. The cathedral was new, having replaced the elegant but tiny Pugin church which for thirty years had been the pride of the little flock in the northern colony<sup>5</sup>. On his arrival in 1860 the first bishop, James Quinn, found it already inadequate. The larger building he raised was conveniently situated, close to the city centre. From the beginning it has drawn large crowds of the faithful at all hours of the day. The shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help with its large stand for votive candles proved to be popular. A practice grew up which is still fondly remembered, even if a more self-conscious generation had allowed it to lapse. One would often see a person rise from prayer and reach out a hand to touch the sandal shown falling from the Child's foot.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help was to retain her claim on the people of Brisbane. In the 1950's the Perpetual Novena saw a most remarkable manifestation of devotion<sup>6</sup>. It met with an immediate and enthusiastic response in the cathedral. It was necessary to repeat it three times of a Friday to cope with an attendance which thronged the large building. Many still remember the policeman who had to be on duty each Friday to ensure the safety of the crowds crossing the busy city street to attend the Novena.

The Redemptorists came to Australia in 1882<sup>7</sup>. Naturally, they brought with them a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The leader of the band of six pioneers was Father Edmund Vaughan, uncle of the Archbishop of Sydney. The chronicle of the foundation

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<sup>5</sup> Concerning the old St. Stephen's cf. Denis MARTIN, *The Foundation of the Catholic Church in Queensland*, Toowoomba, 1988, 96.

<sup>6</sup> The chronicles of the Redemptorist house of Oxford Park have several enthusiastic references to the Novena in St. Stephen's in the course of 1950.

<sup>7</sup> For the beginnings of the Redemptorists in Australia cf. *SH* 25 (1977) 250-271.

years are in his hand<sup>8</sup>. On their voyage, he writes, they had with them "a beautiful Madonna of Perpetual Succour, painted and framed in Rome, authenticated by Father General and blessed by Leo XIII". This picture was enclosed in a case with folding doors; and it was the centre piece of the cabin which served the community as an oratory during that tedious sea journey from England.

It was Bishop James Murray of Maitland who had brought the Redemptorists to Australia, giving them temporary charge of the parish of Singleton, a farming community in the Hunter valley. There the precious picture was installed in the tiny oratory in the presbytery. There it remained until the foundation was transferred to Mayfield in Newcastle, where it is beautifully enshrined in the domestic oratory.

In August of the year of their arrival the Fathers brought their picture into the parish church during a mission they had promised to the people. After the mission, as Father Vaughan records, at the people's request, "a handsome altar was designed and work begun by Brother Laurence"<sup>9</sup>. Brother Laurence Watters was a competent and extraordinarily versatile craftsman, whose talents were to prove beyond value in the pioneering years. His altar in Singleton, in beautiful red cedar, is a monument to his skill and devotion. When the shrine had been completed in 1884, it received its own copy of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the fourth to come from Rome to Australia.

By that time the Redemptorists had begun their Australian missions; and as they preached they did not fail to carry with them knowledge of their cherished Madonna. The first to venture out from Singleton was the eloquent and witty Father Thomas O'Farrell. In October of 1882 he set out<sup>10</sup>. According to an evidently bemused newspaper report, his purpose was "to preach missions before the bishop"<sup>11</sup>. It was, in fact, a gruelling visitation tour made together through the lonely northern and western parts of the vast diocese. The places they evangelised are now shared by the neighbouring dioceses of Armidale and Bathurst. The tour took them from Gunnedah

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<sup>8</sup> The Singleton chronicles up to the transfer of the community to Mayfield are in APC, Historical Section. The passage on the voyage is in vol. I, 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Father O'Farrell set out on 1st October according to Father Vaughan's notebook, which is in APC, Historical Section.

<sup>11</sup> The missionary journey is described by Father O'Farrell in entertaining detail in a letter to his provincial, Father Hugh MacDonald, dated 7th December 1882. The letter is now in the archives of the Dublin province. Cf *SH* 25 (1977) 259.

through Walgett and Coonabaran to Coonamble with frequent stops at homesteads and clusters of huts, tortured all the way by scorching heat by day and sharp frost at night. While the missionary did most of the preaching, the bishop shared the laborious tasks of instructing the children and hearing confessions in all sorts of makeshift confessionals. Not only did the bishop share the missionary's toil, but he usually shared his bedroom as well.

Towards the end of October the two came to Coonamble. Father O'Farrell declared: "No place needed a mission more"<sup>12</sup>. The people were so stirred by his preaching as he rose to the challenge, that he and the bishop were quite unable to cope with the flood of confessions. The busy schedule made it necessary for the campaigners to leave; but they promised to return. They came back a month later to complete what was to prove the transformation of that place that had needed the mission so desperately. Father O'Farrell was able to report gleefully: "I had the happiness of seeing laid the first stone of a new church to be dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour"<sup>13</sup>. In due course Coonamble parish church was completed, and in 1884 it received the fifth authentic copy of the picture to reach the country.

Redemptorist missions and their accompanying message concerning the Mother of Perpetual Help were slow in coming to Victoria. The first mission in the southern State was preached in St. Mary's church, St. Kilda, in 1885 by Fathers Vaughan and O'Farrell with Father John Stokes, newly arrived from Ireland. The report, once again in Father O'Farrell's exuberant style, tells of great enthusiasm, spontaneous applause and unrestrained weeping<sup>14</sup>. Even though the scenes must have startled the staid Melbournians, there can be no doubt of the success of the St. Kilda mission, so that it is fitting that St. Mary's church should have been the first in Victoria to receive an authentic copy of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The parish priest was Father James Corbett, who shortly afterwards became the first Bishop of Sale, where he dedicated his cathedral to the Mother of Perpetual Help.

During the years that followed, the Redemptorists made Our Lady of Perpetual Help known through their missions in all parts of Australia and New Zealand. Their passage can be traced, not

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> O'Farrell to MacDonald, Feast of the Most Holy Redeemer, 1885, in the general archives of the Redemptorists, Rome, Provincia hibernica, Australia, I. Cf. *SF* 25 (1977) 262.

only by the authenticated copies painted on wood, but by the far more numerous prints. The churches where they are still objects of popular veneration, many bush chapels as well as city churches, are simply beyond number. In Catholic homes and cherished books of devotion the pictures are legion.

## 2. - Propagation

Even before the arrival of the Redemptorists in the country, the Irish Christian Brothers had begun to make Our Lady of Perpetual Help known in Australia. Their association with the picture dates from the 1870's<sup>15</sup>. In the Autumn of 1875 the Irish bishops sat in synod in Maynooth and passed decrees, not published until 1877. The Brothers were greatly alarmed by provisions for the supervision of Catholic schools by the bishops and even by parish priests. They saw their jealously guarded autonomy threatened.

The Superior General despatched two Brothers to Rome to plead their cause with the Holy See. They sought advice from the Redemptorists, whose work in Ireland was well known and highly esteemed. They were directed to S. Alfonso, where they were fortunate in finding two excellent contacts. Father Edward Douglas, the long-serving Rector, was able to guide them to helpful members of the Curia, who were among the many friends and penitents drawn by his unfailing good humour and reputation for holiness. Perhaps more immediately helpful was Father Henry Morgan, who recommended that the Brothers pray to Our Lady of Perpetual Help and place her picture in each of their schools. His advice was followed promptly, with the result that the Brothers attributed to Our Lady of Perpetual Help the happy outcome of their appeal. The Holy See pronounced in their favour on 3rd December 1878; and in the following March the protest of the bishops was dismissed.

The Christian Brothers had become established in Australia, with their first permanent school in Melbourne in 1868. Seven years later they opened a school in Brisbane in the old St. Stephen's. For them the year 1879 was particularly significant with the successful outcome of their case in Rome and the arrival of the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the new cathedral in Brisbane. At

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<sup>15</sup> The introduction of devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help among the Brothers is the subject of an article signed P.J.H., *A Bit of Forgotten History in The Christian Brothers' Educational Record*, Sydney, 1919, 47-54.

that time they were preparing to settle in their first permanent school, Gergory Terrace. They promptly implemented the advice they had received from Father Morgan. Not only in Queensland, but in their schools throughout Australia, the Brothers made the Mother of Perpetual Help, and devotion to her, a familiar feature of Catholic life for many a generation.

Much credit must be given also to the Sisters of Mercy of Brisbane for making Our Lady of Perpetual Help known through their schools. Through the assistance of a good friend the Sisters acquired an authentic copy of the picture in 1891<sup>16</sup>. The friend who acquired the picture for the Sisters told them that Father Douglas, a cousin of Hon. John Douglas<sup>17</sup>, had told her that, should the picture gain a reputation for miracles, he would gladly provide crowns for the picture. In the years after 1866 it was the practice that a formal approval be given by the Superior General of the Redemptorists for the coronation of suitable copies of the original. The Sisters acquired very fine golden crowns by means other than the help of Father Douglas. Like the Christian Brothers, they have introduced Our Lady of Perpetual Help to the many Australian children who have passed through their schools.

The most important factor in propagating devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help has been the Perpetual Novena<sup>18</sup>. Originating in the Rock Church in St. Louis in 1922, within twenty years it had won enthusiastic devotees throughout the United States. Then came World War II, and Redemptorist chaplains serving with the American forces eagerly carried the Novena to other countries. Two Fathers of the Baltimore province visited the Redemptorists in Belfast in 1943. Their graphic descriptions of the crowds coming each week to the Mission Church in Boston moved their Irish confrères to make the experiment. The Novena began in Belfast on 9th December 1943 and from the first day it was spectacularly successful. From all parts of the city people travelled by bus bearing the simple sign "Novena" converging on the Redemptorist church in Clonard. In 1947 the church was visited by an Australian Redemptorist,

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<sup>16</sup> Ellie Power to Mother Bridget Conlon, 24th June 1891 in archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane. There is a copy of the letter in the archives of All Hallows' Convent, where the picture is preserved.

<sup>17</sup> Hon. John Douglas became Premier, and members of his family have continued to be prominent in public life as well as in Church affairs in Queensland. The practice of crowning copies in imitation of the honour paid to the original by the Canons of St. Peter's in 1867 was to some extent controlled at first by the Superior General.

<sup>18</sup> For the nature and origin of the Novena cf. S.J. BOLAND, *A Dictionary of the Redemptorists*, Rome 1987, 285-286.

Father Patrick Talty, who had attended a general chapter in Rome. By that time it was estimated that in various churches in Belfast some 40,000 attended the Novena each week. It was Clonard that captivated Father Talty, and he was fired with the wish to emulate its success in his own country<sup>19</sup>.

His opportunity came in the following year, when he was back with his own community in Mayfield. A well-advertised celebration in honour of Our Lady was poorly attended, and Father Talty persuaded his rector to introduce the Novena in order to infuse some fervour into the people coming to the monastery church. It was duly decided to commence on 6th November, and it was to be prepared for a couple of months by repeated exhortations at the Sunday Masses. When he stepped into the pulpit at 7 p.m. on 6th November, Father Talty saw every seat in the church occupied and people crowding the choir gallery. The chronicler noted: "A second lot of devotion will have to be put on to accommodate them all"<sup>20</sup>.

And that is what happened just two weeks later. A second session was introduced at 2.30 p.m., only to be itself crowded out right from the beginning. Within little more than a year the sessions had been increased to six, all of them filled to capacity.

Within that short time the Novena had spread from Mayfield. Besides its gratifying success in St. Stephen's, Brisbane, it was also flourishing in three parishes in Sydney, in Tamworth, in Charters Towers in the far north, Hampton in Melbourne and even as far afield as Perth and Wellington, New Zealand. An article in *The Catholic Weekly* of Sydney spoke of its extraordinary propagation<sup>21</sup>. By then the Novena was established in St. Mary's cathedral as well as in many parishes throughout New South Wales, including the pro-cathedral of Maitland.

The passage of forty years has had its effect on the Novena in Australia. In Mayfield it has survived, and it seems to have sound prospects of continuing further. Generally speaking, from about the sixties Catholic devotional life has lost much of its warmth. The pictures of Our Lady of Perpetual Help remain in the churches, even though there is less display of fervour among the people. In fact, the Australian Redemptorists have been finding a much more gratifying response to their message concerning Our Lady of Perpetual Help among the people of south-east Asia.

<sup>19</sup> Talty to K. Turner, 2nd July 1953 in APC, F M1 Father Talty was encouraging Father Turner to undertake a similar venture.

<sup>20</sup> Mayfield Domestic Chronicle 6th November 1948.

<sup>21</sup> *The Catholic Weekly*, Sydney, 11th January 1951.



### 3. - *The Baclaran Novena*

The Redemptorists came to the Philippines in 1905, taking care of the parish of Opon on Mactan, which was in the dioceses of Cebu<sup>22</sup>. As was their invariable practice, they installed the picture in the church of Nuestra Señora de la Regla, and they zealously spread the devotion wherever they preached their missions. The foundation in Opon had been made by the Irish province. The Australians in the course of time came to be associated with Manila and the Island of Luzon<sup>23</sup>.

They came to Manila in 1913 under the leadership of the irresistible and irresistible Father P.M. Lynch, who had been a priest in the diocese of Dunedin. He and his companions were given charge of the beautiful church of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, built by Spanish Augustinians beside the water of Manila Bay. Even though the church was already a renowned shrine of Our Lady, Father Lynch lost no time in erecting an altar of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, which remained undisturbed for seventeen years. When they were building their new house in Baclaran before handing over the parish to the Irish Columbans, they wished to take the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help with them. To their amazement they met with a vigorous protest from the people, who simply would not part with their Madonna.

The builder of the house and church in Baclaran was Father Denis Grogan of Devenish, near Benalla in Victoria, who had been one of the hardy pioneers in Opon. He had been superior in Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, where he had made, as he did everywhere, many lasting friends. Among them was the Ynchausti family who offered to erect a shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the new church. That gave rise to an amicable disagreement. Father Grogan, who had a well-deserved reputation for obstinacy, insisted that there be a picture of St. Therese of Lisieux over the High Altar, since the church was to be dedicated to her. He met his match in Mrs Ynchausti, who argued successfully that nothing but the High Altar could be good enough for the Mother of Perpetual Help. Father Grogan had the good grace in after years to admit that she had been right and he wrong. From the beginning in 1932 the

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<sup>22</sup> For the foundation in Opon there is a fine treatment by M. BAILY, *A Small Net in a Big Sea*, Cebu, 1978.

<sup>23</sup> The foundations in Luzon are treated by S.J. BOLAND, *The Redemptorists in Luzon*, Manila, 1982.

Ynchausti shrine proved as popular in Baclaran as had been its two predecessors<sup>24</sup>.

Within a few years disaster struck Baclaran with the outbreak of World War II. When the Japanese invaded the Philippines, the Fathers carefully stored their chalices and other more important church furnishings in order to save them from the inevitable looters. On their return from the prison camp in 1945 they found everything intact, except the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. For greater security it had been left in charge of a devout and trustworthy family. On their release the Fathers learned that the house of their good friends had been destroyed by fire, and they presumed that the picture had been lost with the rest. Neighbours, however, suggested that the Fathers check the looted property recovered by the Americans and stored in the old Bilibid prison. Two confrères hastened to look, and were delighted to recognise the picture, apparently unscathed, quite close to the check point at the entrance. In fact, while one of them was still speaking with the sergeant on duty, the other called out: "Here it is!"<sup>25</sup> The people were delighted to find the shrine as it had always been; and they did not hesitate to declare that the preservation of their picture must surely have been a miracle. Enshrined once more above the Ynchausti altar, it was to prove the focus of the crowds that would soon come to Baclaran and its Novena.

It was an American chaplain of the St. Louis province, Father John Wallace, who spoke with the Fathers in Baclaran about the Novena. He had no difficulty in persuading Father Gerard O'Donnell, who with the ready assistance of Father Leo English began the Baclaran Novena on 23rd June 1948<sup>26</sup>. There were about seventy people present on that first evening, and they were far from filling even Father Grogan's little church. The scene changed dramatically during the following week as word got about that there were attractive devotions in honour of Our Lady at Baclaran. The numbers grew so rapidly that in little more than a year the original seventy had grown to as many thousands; and the Fathers had found it necessary to enlarge the church to more than twice its size and increase the number of sessions to ten.

That first year had been a testing time for Father O'Donnell,

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> The account of the Baclaran Novena in its early days is in C. Taylor to Packer, 21st September 1950 in APC, F M1.

as he struggled to cope with the snowballing Novena. Busses came from the city of a Wednesday bearing the sign "Baclaran Church" or simply "Redemptorists", and the traffic soon became beyond the power of the police to control. A body of devoted helpers was formed, which has continued to keep order in the swelling crowds and traffic. The poor rector discovered how complex his task was when in an attempt to rearrange the timetable to fit in more sessions he decided to change the 6 p.m. session to 6.30. To his acute embarrassment he received letters from a number of business firms of the city protesting on behalf of their employees that 6 p.m. and no other time could possibly suit them.

For all his efforts, and they were truly heroic, something more was needed. Even the extended church with seating and standing room inside and on the spacious verandah for 4,000 was only too evidently inadequate. The suggestion of a larger and more beautiful church met with a most enthusiastic response. The people were asked for no more than a modest ten centavos a week, but their contributions made it possible for the splendid present church to rise. The foundation stone was laid by Cardinal Gilroy of Sydney in 1953, and the building went on around the existing church until it was opened for use in 1958<sup>27</sup>. It accommodates, sitting and standing, about 12,000. With the devotions continuing ten times each Wednesday, numbers have ceased to be significant. It is no longer possible to count them, with possibly as many standing or kneeling outside the church at each session as there are inside.

The Novena had been flourishing on the southern island of Panay before it had been introduced to Baclaran. Father Patrick Nulty, influenced again by American Redemptorists, had begun it in the church of St. Clement Hofbauer in Iloilo. The spectacular success of Baclaran, however, overshadowed the others. Several churches in Manila followed its lead, and within a few years the Novena was known throughout the Philippines. There were many who now spoke of Wednesday as "the day of the Mother of Perpetual Help". Knowledge of the Novena had been spread principally by the radio. A local station spontaneously offered to broadcast the devotions each Wednesday. From the beginning it proved hugely popular. All hospitals, prisons and other public institutions in the city regularly tuned in to the Novena. Within a few years it had captured the hearts of the Filipino people<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> See BOLAND, 76-77.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor to Packer, 21st September 1950.

Just as the original picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in S. Alfonso had been crowned by the venerable Canons of St. Peter's, on account of its fame for miracles, so the shrine in Baclaran was to be honoured for a similar reason. In 1954, the Marian Year proclaimed by Pius XII, the bishops of the Philippines declared Baclaran the National Shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Their decision eloquently expressed both the extent to which Our Lady under that title had become established in popular devotion, and the wide-ranging influence of her shrine in Baclaran<sup>29</sup>.

#### 4. - *Singapore*

A little later in its development than Baclaran, but in some respects even more striking was the Novena introduced in Singapore by the Australian Redemptorists. Coming to the island in 1935, they had already carried their missions to Sri Lanka and Burma as well as Malaysia when war struck. Before the members of the little community were interned in Changi prison camp they saw their house in Thomson Road a prey to looters. That some precious articles, including the picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help were saved was due to the assistance of good friends, but mostly to the devotion of Brother Denis Cassin, who had claimed the rights of a neutral by reason of his Irish birth. After the war the original house was no longer habitable, but the military authorities offered the use of an old hotel, also in Thomson Road. In 1943 the community moved to its present home at 300 Thomson Road<sup>30</sup>.

In their new home it seemed at last possible to give effect to a wish that had long been cherished. Reports of the wonders achieved in Baclaran and of the Novenas conducted by the Irish Redemptorists in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Bangalore, India, had aroused hopes of emulating them in Singapore. A start was made in January 1959, using a form adapted from the one used in Bangalore. The large room that served as a chapel could conveniently accommodate about one hundred. On that first evening eighty-one participants were counted, a modest enough beginning, which remained so for the first couple of years. Then there was a sudden and marvellous growth, which brought to light an altogether special character of the Singapore Novena.

<sup>29</sup> BOLAND, 80.

<sup>30</sup> See Kevin J. O'BRIEN, *Redemptorists in Singapore and Malaysia*, Singapore, 1985.

A particularly happy feature of the small group that gathered each week at 300 Thomson Road was the bond of friendship among them and with the Redemptorists. Everyone was eager to see more and more join in the prayers and hymns they had learned to love so much. When the church was built in 1950, there was much talk about expansion. In the following year began the phenomenal growth. It was due to the happy inspiration of one of the Fathers and the ready cooperation of the devotees.

A number of car stickers were printed and distributed among the enthusiastic friends of the Novena. They read: "HAVE YOU BEEN TO THE NOVENA?"<sup>31</sup>. They were not many, but they caused a stir in the tight circle of Singapore society. People began to wonder what on earth this Novena could be. Could it perhaps be a new night club to try? The result was that *The Straits Times*, unable to satisfy the many enquiries, sent a reporter to 300 Thomson Road. He faithfully related in considerable detail all he learned. The effects were immediate. Within a couple of months the new church could not contain the numbers. A second session was added, only to be found still insufficient. By 1957 the number of sessions had increased to eight, and by 1963 to ten, which remain to the present and strain to the limit the resources of the Redemptorist community.

The early years of obscurity are long past. People no longer ask "What is the Novena"? As early as the 1950's it was possible to ask a taxi driver to take one to the Novena and without further questioning he would deliver the passenger to 300 Thomson Road. As in Belfast and Manila buses appeared bearing the sign. The name has appeared also in street signs about the church, Novena Terrace as well as Novena Streets North, South, East and West. On the opposite side of Thomson Road a shopping complex has named itself Novenaville, and there is close at hand also Novena Gardens. The most recent recognition has come in the fine station of the Singapore metropolitan railway, identified simply as Novena<sup>32</sup>.

An edifying, if amusing story appeared one Saturday among the thanksgivings put at Our Lady's shrine. The Novena busses used to take up their passengers a little ahead of the normal bus stop. One Saturday a man was reading a paper at the stop, when he was startled to see a bus apparently passing by. As he looked up in

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<sup>31</sup> SDA, G. JOYCE, *The Singapore Novena* (in manuscript).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. O'BRIEN, 142-143.

wonder, the conductor signalled him impatiently to hurry, so he climbed aboard in haste, only to find himself delivered at 300 Thomson Road. Out of curiosity he joined the crowd and after the devotions he even went to confession, after an absence of fifteen years. He became a regular and most contented devotee, as his thanksgiving attested<sup>33</sup>.

The success of the Novena in Singapore is rather more surprising than it would be elsewhere, but the numbers speak for themselves. Figures gathered in Thomson Road in 1989 are only part of a large and very impressive figure for the city, where the devotions are held in several other churches. Each week about 15,000 come to the church of St. Alphonsus, and of them no fewer than 20% are non-Christians. A White Father from Africa who visited Singapore was impressed by the fact that the devout clients of Our Lady he saw in the church were, as he put it, "sophisticated city-dwellers, including many professional men"<sup>34</sup>. Other observers have remarked on the evident appeal the Novena has for young adults and for men, both of whom are represented in greater numbers than elsewhere.

The large percentage of non-Christians is something that demands attention. They reveal themselves in the written petitions and thanksgivings and more surprisingly when they join the queue at the confessionals. They are received sympathetically by the Fathers, who listen patiently to their anxieties, offer advice and encouragement and send them away with a blessing.

It was not long after the Novena began to flourish in the 1950's that there was a dramatic increase in the number asking for instruction in the Catholic faith. It was Father Harold Bird, himself a convert from Anglicanism, who organised the enquirers into regular classes, which in time became so large as to require the service of several Fathers<sup>35</sup>. In a study of conversions in Singapore the Novena has been named as one of the principal means of evangelisation in the republic<sup>36</sup>. In his analysis the writer declares that "in 32% of all male converts and 29% of all female the Novena plays the principal role in the process of conversion. In many other cases it plays a significant role ».

<sup>33</sup> SDA, Joyce manuscript.

<sup>34</sup> J. Holmes-Siedle W.F., National Director, Pontifical Works, Kenya, quoted by Mgr. D. Stewart, writing to the superior, Singapore 15th October 1980.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. O'BRIEN, 149-152.

<sup>36</sup> F. GROOT, *Conversion in Singapore in Teaching All Nations*, Rome, 13 (1976) 182-188.

The formal classes organised by Father Bird continued for about twenty years, during which time those received into the Church at Thomson Road numbered about five hundred each year. With the introduction of the RCUA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) programme enquirers have been referred to their respective parishes, with the result that the burden at the Novena church has been lessened<sup>37</sup>. In one parish, where 290 converts were baptised in one year the pastor declared with a twinkle in his eye that 80% had come from "that darn Novena".

In that seemingly insignificant segment of Singapore secularist society the Novena has become a phenomenon that may not be ignored. The White Father from Africa quoted a remark made to him. It came from a business man who, though a visitor, spoke with the genuine accents of a Singaporean. "You know what strikes me most as a man of business? This thing pays dividends". Asked to explain, he said simply: "What I mean is that the prayers people bring here are obviously heard. Otherwise they would not keep coming back"<sup>39</sup>. That judgment, mercenary as it sounds, has the ring of Singapore about it. The people do keep coming back. Their prayers to Our Lady of Perpetual Help pay dividends.

There is possibly something especially significant in that so typically Singaporean comment. Not only at 300 Thomson Road, but also in Baclaran and at many other shrines of the Mother of Perpetual Help in the Far East the clients of Our Lady have in a remarkably short time become legion. Could it be that in the Marian devotions there is something that appeals strongly to the people of Asia? It is striking that while the Perpetual Novena has suffered declining numbers among peoples of European cultures, in the East it is still increasing. For the Australian Redemptorists it is a most gratifying reflection that they should have been the ones to bring knowledge of Our Lady of Perpetual Help to Baclaran and Singapore, where she has captured so many hearts.

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<sup>37</sup> O'BRIEN, 152.

<sup>38</sup> SDA, JOYCE (manuscript).

<sup>39</sup> SDA, Stewart letter.