

EASTERN EUROPE

From Maria Michael's newsletter, I quote:

"In the last IBMV Newsletter I announced the coming visit of our Sisters from Czechoslovakia to attend the canonization of Agnes of Bohemia. . . . The whole of St. Peter's was filled with Czechs, Slovaks and Poles, and the Basilica positively vibrated with the strong faith of these Slav peoples. It was 'God Almighty his time' (Mary Ward), God who has HIS time for everything! . . . Although I have not yet been able to visit our Sisters, we have been and remain in touch with them, assuring them of our nearness in this time of transition."

Maria Michael then identifies specific events. The Slovak Province has obtained a house at Prešov, the former Provincialate, so a small community of four Sisters have moved in . . . two who are now allowed to teach religion in the school. Bratislava has also re-opened its doors to our Sisters to teach religion.

A group of Sisters from the Czech Province returned to our former house at Štěken, to continue their work in the old people's home. With the arrival of two Sisters, the Institute will soon be present again in Prague.

Last December, the Hungarian Province received official recognition as a juridical person. On November 19 Sisters began work in the parish of Pilisszentlászló.

"The revolution in Rumania caused us great anxiety . . . We had to wait days before being able to telephone and hear from Sister Benedicta the reassuring words: 'All are well, no one has come to any harm, but we have had terrible frights and been actually in great danger.'"

In spite of external events, our Sisters kept to January 11, the date that had been planned for the first profession of nine novices and the Golden Jubilee celebrations of four Sisters.

MARY WARD

Sister Immolata writes:

"I have been told that a few words about the CAUSA would be welcome. On February 6, the first 25 chapters, i.e. over 4,000 pages, were handed over to the "Relator" of the Cause, Father Peter Gumpel, S.J. . . . The second part of the Positio deals with the 'Fama Sanctitatis', the reputation for holiness. It is exciting to see how Mary Ward, 'encumbered' as it were by the Bull of Urban VIII and again later by the Constitution of Benedict XIV (in 1749), survived through the centuries, and how only in our own, that is from 1909, her radiating power

shines forth anew. . . . What comes first for us is not that we too should have a beatified Foundress, but that God be glorified in his Servant for the good of the Church. That is the frame of mind in which we should formulate our desires."

Sister Immolata also indicated that part two includes the Maxims, the Painted Life, confirmation of the reverence shown towards Mary Ward in the first century after her death; the vicissitudes of the jurisdiction conflict, when the existence of the Institute and the office of General Superior were at stake and, indeed, Mary Ward herself; the 'silent years', when Mary Ward could not be called Foundress until her re-instatement, as such, in 1909.

CASA LORETO

In May of 1989, Noni Mitchell was elected to the leadership group of the UISG. The most recent newsletter provides an account of her visitation to England as well as the following, slightly abridged account of lunch with the Holy Father, February 6, 1990.

"Much to my dismay, I was "summoned" by the President of the UISG, Sister Helen McLaughlin, RSCJ, to be with the other members of the Executive in a meeting in Rome requested by Pope John Paul II with seven of the executives of men (USG) and seven of the women (UISG) at 12:30 p.m. on 6 February. The topic was to be "Religious Life today", and we were invited to lunch with him afterwards.

Alas, there were only four of the women superiors-general present in Rome at the time, so Helen asked if I could possibly make my way from North Wales, where I was visiting Llandudno. Hearing that Sister Klara Sietmann, MSC, was returning from Korea on the 5th, and one of the men was flying back from Tokyo, I thought I had better put my best foot forward, and increase the women's numbers!

About 11:30 a.m. on 6th I was briefed by Helen and the other four women present. My contribution was to be: "Important Developments in Religious Life for Women in Oceania". The meeting went well. Seven men and six women, together with Cardinal Hamer and Archbishop Fagiolo of CRIS met the Holy Father, and spoke with him from 12:30 p.m. to 1:45 p.m. Then we visited his oratory (mid-day examen?!) and had lunch with him from 2 till 3:10 p.m.

I found Pope John Paul II very alive and human, full of gestures and humour (even in Italian or English), and anxious to hear how things really were. A hopeful interesting encounter!"

THE BAR CONVENT MUSEUM

(Michael Tuft finds the Bar Convent museum packed with relics of religious history - England The Daily Telegraph)

There has been a convent just outside the walls of York since Mother Frances Bedingfeld had one built in 1686. But the history of the place can be traced

back a further 40 years to the life of Mary Ward - a remarkable and strong-willed woman who wanted to dedicate her life to the service of God without entering an enclosed order. At that time there were no religious orders that suited, so she set up her own and attracted a small group of devotees. Frances Bedingfeld, one of her original companions, was at Mary Ward's deathbed in 1645.

From 1699 the sisters ran a day-school for girls in the convent, one of the earliest in the country. Today, it is still home to members of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which has become a worldwide organisation. The convent is open to the public as a museum and day-centre, and although the running of the school has been taken out of the community's hands, the current curator, Peter Walton, is keen to build on the educational foundations of the place.

Students can now study full-time for a Diploma in Art History, validated by Leeds University, or other, shorter courses. There are temporary exhibitions (on Jewish customs, when I visited) and art displays.

None of the original building still stands, and the present one dates from the 18th century. The first room off the street is the Great Parlour where portraits of the founding sisters hang: judging by these, they must have been a pretty tough group of women.

The practice of Catholicism was illegal at the time and although it seems that the authorities turned a blind eye, the sisters could never be sure of their safety. One prominent local Catholic, Margaret Clitheroe, the butcher's wife, was executed by crushing, and her hand is still in the convent, venerated as a relic.

The place has a welcoming, beguiling atmosphere, so that a visitor can spend a couple of agreeable hours wandering quietly around. I followed the trail through a restored room and past billboards telling the story of Christianity in the North, until I came to the library, where I met Sister Gregory, the convent's historian and archivist.

She told me: "These are the books that the nuns collected over 300 years and they were what nourished their spiritual lives. Their chief value is in bringing us close to the nuns who used them. Of course, some are valuable in themselves, like this first edition of the Rheims New Testament, from 1582. It was the first one the Catholics were allowed to use. It's easy to read, isn't it?" she said. I stared at the densely packed script on the yellowing pages and begged to differ.

There are more than 2,000 volumes of hagiography, doctrine and liturgy in the library. I wondered aloud if the sisters had anything lighter to help them while away the long Yorkshire evenings. "Oh, there were no novels or anything like that," said Sister Gregory, "although there is a book of French jokes. I read through it, but not one made me smile," she said, with a laugh.

Past the library is the convent's chapel, built in the 1760s at a time when it was still illegal to celebrate Mass. It is a splendid, airy room with a high, domed ceiling, which is a surprise as there is no sign of the dome from the outside. Precautions had been taken and the dome was concealed under a tiled, townhouse roof. And just to be on the safe side, the chapel was built with 10 exits and a hiding hole, in case the priest had to beat a hasty retreat.

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