

Mother Mary Joseph: Update Ten

IN A GREAT TRADITION: Mother Mary Joseph & our first clothing ceremony, 21 Nov 1852

The Order of Service of the Vestition of the Sisters, which was to take place on 21 November 1852, was written by Father Gaudentius Rossi CP, who based it on the Book of Vestitions and Professions which he had borrowed from the Benedictine Abbess of Caverswall. There had, of course, already been a 'clothing ceremony' on 2 February 1852, presided over by Father Robert Croskell in the Lady Chapel in St Chad's church, Manchester, when the first three Sisters had adopted a black dress as a sign of their religious commitment but Fr Gaudentius Rossi's Clothing ceremony bore all the liturgical marks of a serious commitment to the Profession of Vows two years later, as, indeed, occurred on 21 November 1854.

The Clothing ceremony took place in the convent at 69 Stocks Street. A room had already been fitted out as a chapel but for this event the workroom, where the Sisters did their sewing, was arranged as a temporary chapel. At 3.30 pm Fr Gaudentius waited in this temporary chapel. The Sisters all assembled in the old chapel. Then Sr Clare, carrying a Cross, followed by Srs Agnes and Mary carrying lighted candles, led those to be Clothed in procession, two by two, into the temporary chapel. As they arrived, they bowed to the altar, then retired to their places while the rest of the community came in. All bowed together to the altar; Sr Clare put the Crucifix in the centre; and Srs Agnes and Mary put their candles on the altar steps. Then everyone knelt down.

The ceremony itself began with a hymn and prayer to St Joseph. Then Fr Gaudentius questioned the Sisters on their desire to be Clothed in the religious habit. After a short prayer he began the Litany of the Saints, during which (provided there was sufficient space) the Sisters to be Clothed prostrated. Then everyone sat down while Fr Gaudentius gave his sermon. As he finished the Sisters knelt down, while he blessed and incensed the religious habits. Next he sat down, as each Sister knelt before him. He removed a shawl from her shoulder, saying a prayer as he did so. She then rose, bowed to the altar and returned to her place. He recited two more prayers and sat down again. Then, coming forward in twos, each Sister received the habit from him and left the chapel to go to the dormitory to put on the habit and guimpe. While they were absent he blessed the other articles of religious dress. When they had returned together, he sat down as Sister Mary Joseph (Elizabeth Prout) approached him to receive the girdle [leather belt]. Two other Sisters helped her to fasten it and then she remained to help each of the other six Sisters. Then each received a white veil, rosary beads, crucifix, and holy rule. Next he placed a cross on the shoulder of each Sister, while reciting a prayer. Then he gave each one a lighted candle. The ceremony closed with a hymn to the Holy Spirit, the final prayer and the Te Deum. Then the community processed out of the chapel.

Fr Gaudentius had obviously given much thought to this Clothing Ceremony. The Sisters cherished its memory and carefully preserved the script of his sermon. In fact, it was a landmark event in the history of English Catholicism. Conventual religious life in England can be traced back to the very early middle ages. In its contemplative form it was the prerogative of ladies of nobility, affluence and education. Other women who sought religious life could follow an active form, working in the same convent as the others prayed the Divine Office. That form of religious life continued in England for about a thousand years until, with the Reformation of the 16th century, it was outlawed with the rest of Catholic belief and practice.

The anti-Catholic laws, however, did not destroy Catholicism: they simply sent it underground. The Autobiography of Father John Gerard SJ, perhaps the most important document in post-sixteenth-century English religious history, describes how the Catholic Faith was kept alive by the gentry and

clergy in most parts of England and how English conventual religious life survived, particularly in Belgium, thanks to the heroism of young ladies who risked imprisonment and death to escape to the Continent. There they devoted themselves to lives of prayer and penance, aware that their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters in England might at any moment face imprisonment, torture, starvation and terrible deaths for their Catholic Faith. It is in this context that our first Clothing ceremony has a special historical significance. Fr Gaudentius was obviously ensuring it was accurately carried out.

It is clear from records of the English convents in Belgium that their Clothing ceremonies were spectacular events. In 1633 when Margaret Wake, daughter of a rich Catholic convert, was Clothed in an Antwerp convent, she wore a cloth of silver and a great collar edged with silver lace, a necklace of three rows of pearls and pearl ear rings. Similarly when Gertrude Thimelby of the wealthy Aston family was Clothed in St Monica's, Louvain in 1658 she wore a gown of cloth of silver and a crown, carried by her bridesmaid; and in 1663 Ursula Howard, daughter of Viscount Stafford, wore a gown and petticoat of rich cloth of silver when she was Clothed in St Monica's Augustinian convent in Louvain. Thus these brides of Christ dressed as magnificently as their rank would have dictated on their wedding day. When they cast off this finery, they deliberately made clear their renunciation of the world for a life of prayer and penance. As recorded in a verse of the time:

***Adieu vain world, your follies I forsake
that I with Jesus may a friendship make;
and:
The gate to blisse doth open stand
and all my penance is in view.(1)***

Because this was their wedding day, these wealthy ladies disposed of their dowries, giving their costly dresses to be made into vestments or altar covers or giving them, or money, to their relatives. It was in this tradition that a daughter of the Hon Charles Langdale, a novice in St Benedict's Convent, Colwich, Staffordshire, due to be professed on 20 May 1847, donated £50 of her dowry to Blessed Dominic Barberi towards the cost of building St Michael's church beside Aston Hall. Thus she invoked God's blessing on her life as a religious. In 1852, of course, Sister Mary Joseph and her companions had neither fine dresses nor dowries to give away. All they had to discard was a shawl. But its removal by Fr Gaudentius was just as symbolic as the removal of some item of rich clothing, marking their renunciation of the world for a life of prayer and penance.

It was also symbolic that each Sister individually received the under-habit from him. As in the seventeenth-century ceremony, the smock, or under-habit, given individually, was the first garment to be put on. Each candidate received it individually from the officiating priest and put it on herself. Similarly, Fr Gaudentius gave it to each Sister individually for her to put on herself. The reason why the candidate must put it on herself was given in a recently discovered manuscript of religious meditations: I put it on privately. This garment signifieth prayer, which is the first virtue by which I must seek to invest myself.(2) The under-habit, therefore, was a symbol of the contemplative life of prayer that she was entering. Thus, on 21 November 1852, our Foundress, Sister Mary Joseph led her infant Congregation into a contemplative life of prayer.

Moreover, apart from its being predominantly black rather than white, the habit that Fr Gaudentius gave our Sisters that day, and that Mother Mary Joseph specified clearly in her 1863 Rule, bore striking resemblance to that worn by the English Augustinian Canonesses in Bruges, as shown in a portrait of the Prioress, Mother Mary Augustina More, descendant of St Thomas More and 8th prioress of the Convent of Nazareth, Bruges, from 1766 to 1807.(3) The portrait shows her wearing a white cap fastened under the chin with veil attached; an outer veil (choir veil) of black covering part of

her forehead; a white guimpe with a dog collar; and a long, loose, white habit with very wide, loose sleeves. While the final image is of a predominantly voluminous white habit, this last item may have been a type of smock that was the choir-dress, as the prioress is holding a book, possibly a psalter, and so may correspond to our mantle that would have been used as a choir dress but was, of course, black in memory of the Passion. There was no mistaking our contemplative dimension.

Sr Mary Joseph and Fr Gaudentius, however, were not founding a solely contemplative congregation. It was also to be active. What was of enormous historical significance in our Clothing Ceremony of 21 November 1852 was that the Sisters wore a Manchester working woman's shawl, an indication that, contemplatives as they might be, they belonged to the working classes and must earn their own living. Thus, as the anti-Catholicism of the Reformation raised its ugly head once more following the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850, in that makeshift chapel at 69 Stocks St on 21 November 1852 a beacon was lit that brought that ancient tradition of conventual religious life not just to the wealthy but to the working-class women in Manchester, the very centre of the new age of industrialisation. As Fr Gaudentius said in his sermon that day, no stately convent rose before their eyes to attract their attention and flatter a love of ease and comfort. Theirs was a Congregation of the poor for the poor, offering the poor the contemplative life but demanding that they earn their own living in teaching and sewing. That necessity itself became their apostolate, as they served the poor in bringing them education and made vestments for the increasing number of Catholic churches. In addition they did parish visitation amongst the poor, the sick and the needy, especially the Irish migrants. They visited workhouses. They provided Homes for endangered working girls. Thus, on 21 November 1852, Father Gaudentius Rossi CP and the Servant of God, Mother Mary Joseph of Jesus CP, in saeculo Elizabeth Prout, enkindled a flame that would shine in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales; Bulgaria, Romania and Transylvania; Chile, Argentina and Peru; North America and Jamaica; Botswana, Sweden, and Papua New Guinea; and reach Australia and Vietnam, all in the Memory of the Passion, as taught by St Paul of the Cross.

For this and what follows see J. Stevenson, 'The Tixall circle and the musical life of St Monica's, Louvain', British Catholic History (Catholic Record Society), October 2017, pp.583-602.

Ibid., p. 596.

See C. Bowden (ed.), The Chronicles of Nazareth (The English Convent, Bruges) 1629-1793, Catholic Record Society, 2017, frontispiece.

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