

Sister Berchmans of Jesus Crucified (Emma Livesey) died in Lytham Cross and Passion Convent on 20 November 1927 and was buried in Saltcotes Cemetery

Born in St Mary's parish, Bolton, Lancashire on 4 May 1860, Sister Berchmans of Jesus Crucified (Emma Livesey) entered the novitiate of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion in Pilkington Street, Bolton on 8 December 1878. She received the religious habit from Father Crook of SS Peter and Paul's, Bolton on 10 June 1879 and made her Vows before Dean Brown on 5 July 1881.

From 1882 to 1889 she was the Headmistress of St William's School, Bolton (St William's Log Book.).

On 17 June 1893 she became Headmistress of the school in Holbeck (Records of Batley Carr).

At the Provincial Chapter held on 3 April 1897 Mother Berchmans was elected Local Superior of St Joseph's Convent, Dewsbury (Dewsbury Records) where she also took Mother Gonzaga McCunnin's place as Headmistress of St Paulinus's Senior School. One of her first tasks was to prepare the children to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee on 22 June 1897. Since the Whit Friday Procession had not been held that year on account of incessant rain, it was decided that it would be held on the morning of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, whilst the town's Jubilee Procession would be in the afternoon. It was all a brilliant success. The Sisters had made a new leading banner, in the national colours, red, white and blue, with St Paulinus and Our Lady on one side and His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII on the other. This proved very effective and set off the procession to great advantage. The weather, too, was delightfully fine as the procession left the school at 11.30 and passed by the convent on its way through the town. After going round the town they returned to the church for Benediction and then they had a substantial tea in school, provided by the town. When that was finished, they got into order and marched to meet the children of the various other schools in and around Dewsbury and all went in procession to the park where they all joined in singing the national anthem. Then they had games until 8 p.m., although no fireworks, to the disappointment of the children. The next day the children again had tea in the afternoon, when each child received a cup, which, as the annalist noted, 'the little ones carried home in great glee', for it was filled with sweets and nuts and bore a picture of Queen Victoria with an inscription marking her Diamond Jubilee.

On 19 August 1897 Father Foley took the Dewsbury Community to Fountains Abbey, making it a red-letter day in their lives. Two days later he inaugurated the preparations for a bazaar to be held in the first week in November in aid of a new

schoolroom, ordered by the Inspectorate. In October he gave the responsibility for the bazaar to Mother Berchmans. Her immediate response was to assemble a sewing group from the parish to work for it each Sunday evening after Benediction. The Sisters, too, were very busy, collecting and working for it, for they made two splendid Altar Cloths. In the midst of all the activity, Mother Berchmans received word that there would be a School Inspection on 27 October, just a few days before the bazaar. Fortunately, as the annalist recorded, the result was highly gratifying: 'The Inspector was highly pleased with everything in the schools without a single exception and as a proof gave his most flattering Report before he left, which was an unprecedented act on the part of Inspectors. He expressed his satisfaction at the efficiency of the schoolwork, the good behaviour and the polite, pleasant and felicitous manners of the children.' On 3 November the Sisters assembled the items for their stall for Father Foley's admiration, as well as to mark their prices. 'We estimate their worth at about £120 of really lovely articles', the annalist wrote, 'two sets of vestments, two splendid Altar Cloths, preaching and other stoles, burses, alb, cottas with lace embroidery etc., etc.' When everything was ready on 4 November there was such a profusion of trees, plants, flowers etc. that the hall looked like Fairyland. There were seven stalls, all artificially and charmingly arranged. Father Foley's sister and niece presided at the Sisters' stall which far exceeded any other. A luncheon preceded the opening, during which the schoolchildren, boys and girls, about sixty in number, did their Drill. Then Father Foley escorted the Mayor, Mayoress, clergy and gentlemen to the platform. The children sang a welcome song and two handsomely dressed little girls came forward. One read and presented a beautifully illuminated address to the Mayoress, whilst the other offered her a splendid bouquet. The Mayor responded 'in felicitous language' complimenting the teachers of the children, the Sisters, on the gracious and graceful manner in which the children acquitted themselves. He presented Father Foley with a cheque for £10. Father Mulcahy opened the bazaar the next day and also gave £10. In total the bazaar realised £300, which was wonderful considering the short preparation and 'the poverty of the people, work being miserably bad'. Thanks to the spirit and good management of Mother Berchmans, the annalist noted, there was a thoroughly good feeling between the stall holders and all parties, a total absence of any friction. All seemed to have worked with one heart and mind. The arrangements in every detail were perfect throughout and though the strain on body and mind was great the success, harmony and charity recompensed for it here below, not to mention the never ending reward awaiting them in heaven.

Because times were bad, the people poor and the wintery weather cold, Mother Berchmans realised she needed to do something to help the children to be faithful to their religious duties. Accordingly at the end of term in December 1897 she

provided a tea-party for those children who had attended Mass regularly and she gave prizes to those who had not missed Mass or school attendance. On Shrove Tuesday, 22 February 1898, when the parish held a Tea-Party in the Industrial Hall, a hundred of the children gave a concert after the tea. The newspapers were eloquent in their praise not only of the children, who had delighted the people, but also of the Sisters who had brought them to such proficiency. 'The best children's entertainment there was ever before in Dewsbury, reflecting great credit on the Sisters of the Cross and Passion.'

All these achievements were attained in the most adverse circumstances, for on 5 March 1898, when the Inspectors awarded both the Infant and Senior Schools with the highest grant that could possibly be attained, they also expressed their great satisfaction, especially as the Sisters had such great drawbacks in room and working facilities; and they ordered new classrooms to be provided. Within the month several infants had died of measles.

On 23 December 1899 Mother Berchmans and Sister Anselm, who had charge of the Infants' School, put up a crib in the church; and on 8 January 1900 the new Senior School opened, splendidly equipped. At the same time, however, a Provincial Chapter was held and Mother Berchmans was elected to be Local Superior, and presumably to teach, elsewhere, probably in Yorkshire.

On 1 February 1904 she became Headmistress of SS Peter and Paul's Girls' School, Bolton. With such a record as she had had in Dewsbury, it was not surprising that both Government and Diocesan Inspectors were soon singing her praises and those of her school. 'The energetic, zealous and pious Head Mistress', the Diocesan Inspector wrote in 1909, 'and her able and earnest Staff deserve great credit for their regular and conscientious teaching in this school. I have nothing but praise for the quality of the work throughout this Department. ... The children are all exceedingly well grounded in religious knowledge and by good example shown how to bring it into the practice of their daily lives.' 'A splendid report', added Bishop Louis Casartelli of Salford, no mean scholar himself. Mother Berchmans' own philosophy of education was outlined in the Government Inspector's Report in 1913, 'The Head Mistress has justly conceived that the aim of the school should be to train the girls in habits of intelligence and self reliance, so that when they leave school they will on the one hand be able to face with success the practical problems of everyday life and on the other will carry an appreciation of literature and a power to use books into maturer years.' Thus it continued throughout her teaching apostolate, for in 1923, only two years before Mother Berchmans retired on 1 May 1925, another Inspector wrote of her school, 'The tone of the school is excellent. The girls are clean, well mannered, on

happy terms with their teachers and strive to do credit to their school. The teachers are industrious.' On 5 June 1925, John Dillon, writing in the *Harvest*, a magazine in the Diocese of Salford, described Mother Berchmans as 'a great nun'.

'A noble woman, an exemplary religious, a gifted teacher, a brilliant organiser, are but a few of the outstanding characteristics of the possessor of that name. Mother Berchmans, Headmistress of the Girls' Department at SS Peter and Paul's School, Bolton, Lancashire for the past thirty-three years, has retired from that honoured position, in accordance with the regulations of the Board of Education. Born and brought up on the outskirts of Bolton, the town in which she has laboured and served so well, Mother Berchmans came of an esteemed and respected Catholic Lancashire family, who resided within close proximity to that historic spot Smithills, where the seed of Faith was first planted in the district. It was in the year 1878 that Miss Livesey, as she was then known, entered the novitiate of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion and from the time of her reception her life has been a shining example of devotion to duty. Consequently, during the forty-seven years she has been in the Order, Mother Berchmans has held and still holds important positions. Resolute, yet sympathetic to the last degree, Mother Berchmans possessed the indomitable spirit of determination, which made the seemingly impossible possible. Persons of the average, when embarking upon a project of some magnitude, are not at ease with themselves. They conjure up in their minds the haunting spectre of failure. They either doubt their own capabilities, or those of others with whom they are co-operating. The ultimate result is that what they fear invariably comes to pass. Mother Berchmans was too competent a master to succumb to such frailty. She was at ease always, no matter what her aim and object. The greater the achievement desired, the greater was the ease by which it was assailed and all obstacles surmounted. And the secret of her great achievements is to be found in the fact that she was a genius of organisation and a gifted manipulator of people. It is no wonder, then, that through her ardent enthusiasm combined with her capabilities for doing greater things, she won the confidence and esteem of those with whom she laboured and came to be looked upon as a "Gilt Edged Security". As an educationist, the results of her labours in that sphere stand out as a lasting tribute to the talents with which she had been endowed. She managed and controlled what we might rightly term an elementary seat of learning second to none in the country. The seed of the Faith, which had been planted in the fertile mind of the child, was nourished and cultivated under her direction; with the result that the greatest monument that can ever be erected to her is that which she herself built up during her long career; the great Catholic Womanhood, in which she has produced the true spirit of real Catholic enthusiasm and a warm-hearted generosity. And now, whether it be mere coincidence or the work of some Power over which man hath no control, the year of Mother

Berchman's retiral is to see the result of a life of self-sacrifice and devotion crowned with success. The huge debt, which her people inherited some twenty-five years ago, and which has been a heavy burden borne by priests and people of the parish [of SS Peter and Paul's] during the intervening years has, at long last, been reduced from thousands of pounds and shillings to pence. And, please God, before the Fall of 1925, the remaining pence will have been obliterated. And when this has come to pass, the prayers of the child, the youth, the man and the woman will go out in volumes, in thanksgiving for so great and noble a daughter of God having come amongst them and having been the means whereby their heavy burden has been removed. Mother Berchmans has taken the curtain! She has retired from her life of perpetual motion; and may God grant to her the health and strength to live and enjoy her well-earned retirement, which is her temporal reward for faithful and devoted service to God and man.'

Mother Berchman's final service to the Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion, in 1926, was to write an orderly account of its history from the time of its foundation by Elizabeth Prout. It was then seventy-five years since the Foundress, Elizabeth Prout had bravely led the first group of Sisters to their Clothing in the religious habit on 21 November 1852 and, with the death in 1926 of Sister Mary Helen James, the last Sister to have known the Foundress personally, it was realised how little was known either of her or of the early days of the Congregation. Moreover, by 1926 the Congregation was extending to Chile, Argentina and North America. It seems to have been recognised that the time had come to write a *life* of the Foundress and an orderly account of the history of what was fast becoming an international Congregation. The task was entrusted to Mother Berchmans, who after her retiral from SS Peter and Paul's had gone to live in Lytham. Mother Berchmans placed the story of Elizabeth Prout and the founding of our Congregation in the context of the early apostolate of the Passionists in England, as foreseen by St Paul of the Cross and pioneered by Blessed Dominic Barberi, Father Ignatius Spencer and Father Gaudentius Rossi. Her document presents an important indication of the traditions handed down in the Congregation in those first seventy-five years of its existence. She also gave a pen-portrait of the Foundress as '*a refined, intelligent and gently nurtured lady*', who had had to leave home because of her conversion to Catholicism and who, in spite of being crippled with tuberculosis in her knee taught in Manchester and '*spent all her spare time amongst the poor and neglected Catholics. She was soon joined by other zealous companions who shared her enthusiasm and together they achieved a marvellous amount of good. They taught in schools, visited the sick and negligent Catholics, taught in the night schools and also Sunday schools in Manchester, gave instructions to non-Catholics and worked at ecclesiastical embroidery and other forms*

of needlework, whilst at the same time they daily increased their own sanctification. They gathered together in the evening young girls, who were employed during the day in mills and workshops, for recreation, needlework and other useful and pleasant occupation. Their great object was to keep these young people from the dancing houses, low places of amusements and other dangerous occasions of sin. Mother Mary Joseph (Prout) was eminently suited for the position in which by the Providence of God she was placed. She was active, intelligent and endowed with great business capacity but above all her soul was enriched with the highest virtues. Her bright example cheered her companions and helped them to surmount the greatest obstacles. On her depended the training of the Sisters, as neither Father Gaudentius nor Provost Croskell could be always with them, owing to the missionary labours of one and the parish work of the other.'

Her account ended abruptly, however, at 1856, for Mother Berchmans had fallen seriously ill. From about December 1926 her health was steadily failing. About the end of September 1927 she returned to Bolton, where it was hoped her native air would do her some good. In fact she became worse and so she returned to Lytham to see her doctor. He could do nothing for her, however, and as her health deteriorated further she could take nothing but water. She died, aged sixty-seven, on 20 November and was buried in Lytham on the 22nd. Her death was very much regretted by all the Sisters.

Supplied by Sister Dominic Savio CP, Archivist