



TO JESUS - THROUGH MARY

The Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus

The bell for the Angelus had just finished ringing and the sound was still vibrating in the noonday heat when a sudden thought occurred to Anne Marie. It was one of those seedling thoughts that take root inside a person and grow and grow... *Behold the Handmaid of the Lord...*

"Sister, please," she asked, "Our Lady was the first Handmaid of the Holy Child, wasn't she?"

Sister looked up from her work and her smile held a luminous quality. "Yes, Anne Marie. That is why Our Lady is the inspiration – the model – of our little Society in such a special way, and those words she spoke to the Angel are what we live by: 'Behold the Handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word...'"

Anne Marie was only twelve then, a pupil in a primary school not far from Ikot Ekpene. As she grew older she learned more about this African Sisterhood, as humble and simple in its origin as Nazareth itself – and so remarkably a work of Divine Providence.

The History

Steps Along the Way.

In the town of Calabar, Sister Madgalen Walker, an Irish Sister of Charity, had received permission from Rome to carry on the work in the Convent School there until a particular Congregation of nuns should be found to take it over. This was in the 1920's. As a woman endowed with outstanding ability and strength, she was able to continue this work alone for years aided only by a group of African girls whom she herself had trained. And it was among these co-workers that

the first seeds of a religious vocation in Calabar Province were sown. Four of them were destined to be the first Handmaids of the Holy Child.

Sister Magdalen had been at school at Mayfield, England, with Rev. Mother Mary Amadeus who later became the Superior General of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus founded by Mother Cornelia Connelly. Sister recommended this Society to Bishop Shanahan as a possible one to take over her work. In September 1930, Rev. M. Mary Amadeus came in person to explore the mission field, and a month later the first three pioneer Missionaries arrived – including Mother M. Laurentia who is now the Superior General.

On January 16, 1931, the four aspirants received the hood from Reverend Mother M. Amadeus in the presence of Sister Magdalen and Father Anyogwu (now Bishop Anyogwu) who had offered Mass for them in the Convent Chapel that morning. Three years later, Reverend Mother Mary Fidelis arrived to be the first S.H.C.J. Superior in the Missions. She had much to do with the training of those first four postulants, and she left nothing undone to continue the work begun by Sister Magdalen, who had returned to England. But solid foundations take time to lay and it was not until April 18, 1937 that the four postulants received the religious habit of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. Their names in religion were Sisters St. John, Mary Ignatia, Mary Aloysia and Mary Gertrude – and they were the four strong pillars of the Congregation.

The Rule of the Handmaids of the Holy Child is modelled upon



*Saltpond, Ghana The beautiful
new Convent of the Handmaids faces
the Atlantic Ocean.*

that of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, which in turn is modelled on the one written by St. Ignatius. The new novices studied it, learned to live it, while they toiled with the Holy Child Nuns among pagan brothers, acting as interpreters, teaching catechism, caring for unwanted twins, teaching in schools... The formation of the novices was entrusted to Reverend Mother Teresa Xavier, S.H.C.J. and Mother M. Bernard, her assistant.

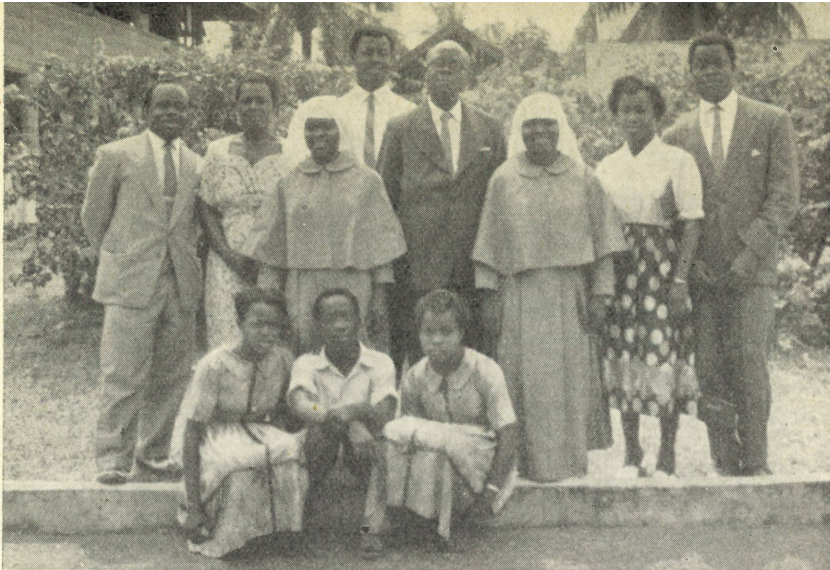
April 21st, 1940 was the never-to-be-forgotten day when these first Handmaids made their temporary religious Vows in the Ifuho Parish Church. Hundreds of people – Catholic and non-Catholic alike – came to witness the ceremony, and afterwards expressed their jubilation with gifts and native dances. In the same year the first Convent of the Handmaids of the Holy Child was opened at Edem Ekpai.

By 1943 two more had been established at Ikot Ene and Anua.

During the years that Reverend Mother M. Osmund was Mother Vicar of the S.H.C.J. on the Missions, she also acted as the Superior General of the Handmaids. Her interest, zeal, love, and deep understanding gave impetus to the growth of the new Congregation. It was she who paved the way for the place it has taken in the Church today. The Rule of the Handmaids which she had helped to draw up with Reverend Mother M. Amadeus, having been submitted to the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide*, was approved by the Most Reverend James Moynagh, Bishop of the Diocese of Calabar on January 13, 1950. And so in the Holy Year the little Society was officially recognized by the Church, and the number of Sisters increased. The training of the Novices was now under Mother M. Vianney, S.H.C.J.

**A newly Professed Sister receives
a big reception upon her return
to Saltpond.**





Mr. and Mrs. Frank Offiong of Essien Town, Calabar, shown here with their family, are justly proud that two of their daughters are Handmaids, Sr. M. Immaculata and Sr. M. Virginia.

Fulfilment.

On December 18th, 1955, the first four Sisters in the Congregation made their Perpetual Vows. The Handmaids numbered nearly fifty by this time, and from 1956 to 1959 they made a trial of self-government. Then, on the eve of 1960, when the Catholic Church in Africa was about to come into her own with the appointment of the first African Cardinal, the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child came into its own, too. The first General Chapter was summoned.

There was a solemn stillness around Ifuho that December 28th, 1959. As Providence arranged it, Reverend Mother M. Laurentia, the Superior General of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus – and the first pioneer Missionary from America – was in Africa on visitation and able to be present for the occasion. At 2 p.m. the silence was broken by the ringing of the large Convent bell heralding the news of the election of the first Mother

General of the Congregation of the H.H.C.J., Rev. M. M. Gertrude, and her Councillors. With this election the Congregation became an independent society in the Church.

Again a bright touch in the plan of Providence – the first Mother General is one of the first four Handmaids who were hooded that long ago day in Calabar.

Today the Handmaids are upwards of 70 in number and work in three dioceses – Calabar and Ogoja in Nigeria, and Cape Coast in Ghana.



Sr. Bernadette Abang of Ogoja, and her sister, Sr. Rita Abang (left). The former has translated the Gospel into Boki, her native language.

The Novitiate

On the Threshold

Anne Marie had met Reverend Mother Mary Gertrude and Mother M. St. John once on the launch going down river from Calabar, and had shyly asked them questions about the Handmaids. What was their life like? What made the Sisters so happy? And finally came the big question that had been looming larger and larger as the years went by: *How did one get to be a Handmaid?*

Their answers settled a number of difficulties for Anne Marie. First, she was told, she should consult the Mission Father who knew her best, her Confessor, and if he thought she had a religious vocation, then she could apply for admittance to the Handmaids. She learned many things that day as the boat made its way past fishing villages built on stilts and then swept into the wider channel. She learned the great aim of the Handmaids – to sanctify themselves by ministering to Christ in the person of their

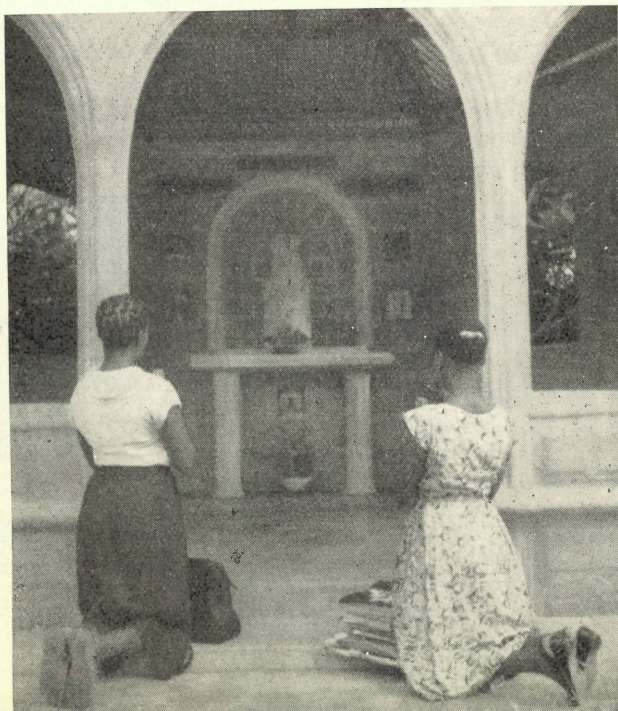
neighbour especially children, the poor, and the sick. And that, thought Anne Marie, is the secret of their joy – the spreading of Christ's Kingdom here in Africa.

Entrance

Two months later she was walking across the Holy Child compound at Ifuho, bag in hand, and knocking at the door of the beautiful Novitiate. Leaving home had not been easy. Anne Marie's parents were not Christians and there had been a storm of objections. Finally, in the face of her quiet determination, it subsided but her father demanded that she pay back every penny he had spent on her education. That posed an enormous problem until her brother, also a Catholic and a teacher in the Mission school, offered to return the money for her. "One day," he said, "our parents will believe as you and I do."

His prophecy was to be fulfilled by the time of her first Profession

AT THE
SHRINE
OF
OUR LADY
OF
IFUHO ...
'O Mary,



help me
to know
God's Will
and
perfectly
to
fulfil it.'



Rev.
Mother
Vicar
and the
Sisters
pray at
the
Calvary,
Ifuhc.

Day, but that was in the distant future as yet.

There were vivid moments in her new life when Anne Marie felt God was so close she could have reached out and touched Him. Going to the Prince of Peace Chapel for meditation early in the morning and kneeling there in the stillness and feeling the surge of prayer all around her – that was one of them, and that new sense of *togetherness* with Our Lord at Mass which lasted all day if she kept Him in mind.

There were other things in this religious life, too, that she had not dreamed of, unexpected little pleasures like the picnics held in the Novitiate garden under shady trees on big feast days... And during the school holidays, when the recreation time was extended, the games of netball or rounders, and the long walks through the woods... On rainy days as they sat indoors, the Sisters would tell stories of their different villages and towns and the Ghana Sisters would compare their customs and ideas with those of the Ibos and Efiks, the Boki and Ibibios from Nigeria. It fascinated Anne Marie to hear them. Day by day as they prayed, worked, and studied together, she felt a deepening tie with this new religious family

that was stronger than any she had ever known.

Putting on Christ

The year of the postulantship came to a close with a little rush, and suddenly it was their Clothing Day, a glorious tropical day that would be etched forever in their memories. They came into the Prince of Peace Chapel first dressed





CLOTHING DAY . . . These brides of Christ are about to take the first great step in Religious Life when they receive the holy habit.

as brides and carrying lighted candles. Slowly Anne Marie walked to the Altar to receive the religious habit, unconscious of the crowd of relatives and friends that had poured into the little building. Afterwards, her mother said it was then that she knew Anne Marie's God must be her God, too.

Just as the Apostles underwent three years of training in the school of our Divine Master before embarking on their great enterprise, so the Handmaids of the Holy Child have three full years of spiritual training in the noviceship. Anne Marie loved the step-by-step process to the active apostolate. First, the fundamental spiritual formation in the "canonical year," then an exploration of the external works of the Congregation in the second year without leaving the Novitiate; and in the third year

the novices were given a trial of these external works in outside fields to test their vocation.

The Handmaids, she discovered, share the same spirit as that which was given to the Society of the Holy Child Jesus by its foundress, Mother Cornelia Connelly: the spirit of the Holy Child Himself, a spirit of simplicity, humility, obedience and charity. The Handmaids follow, too, in the way marked out by their Heavenly Spouse "born in a stable, exposed to suffering and poverty, fleeing into Egypt, hidden and labouring in a humble workshop...". Therein lies the true spirit of the Congregation. And by studying it, making it her own, each Handmaid prepares herself to "become His spouse and to labour and to die with Him in the constant practice of poverty, chastity and obedience."



The novice returns to the Chapel to receive the veil.

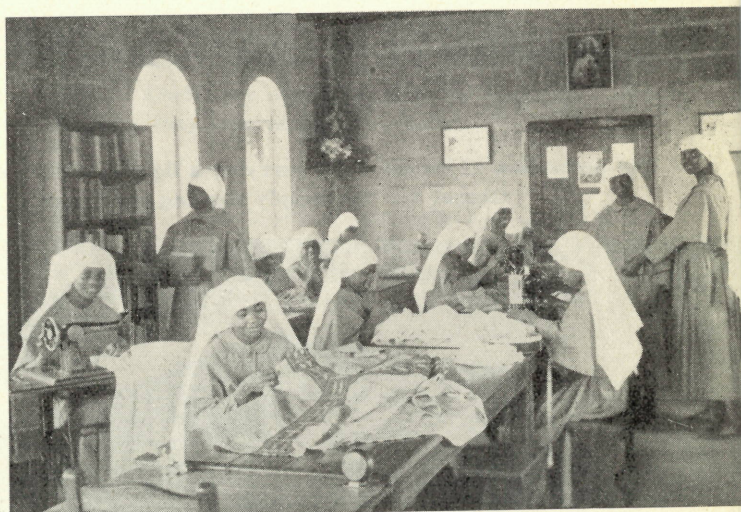
The procession of Sisters, each carrying a lighted candle, enters the Prince of Peace Chapel for the deeply moving ceremony of First Vows.



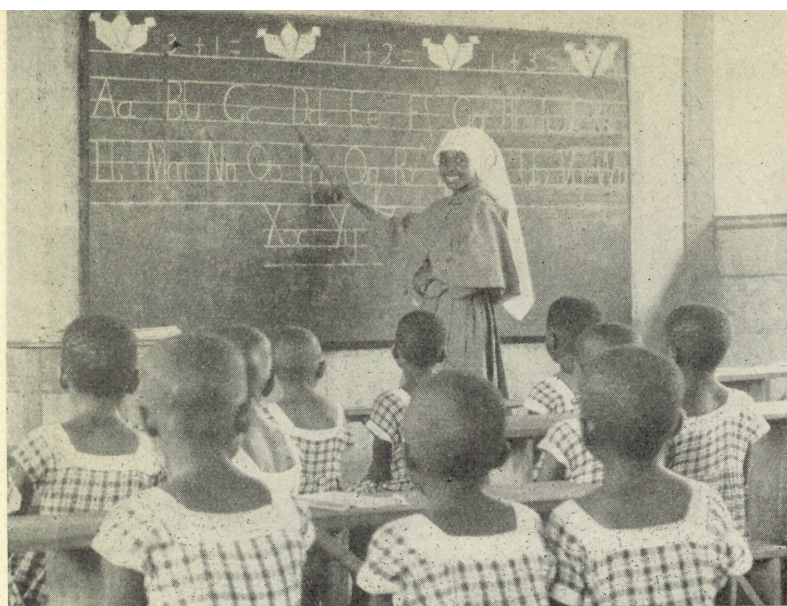


Family and friends gather for the Profession Ceremony

In their community
room, novices
work on vestments
and altar linen.



Sheila, the cat, introduces
her kittens to the novices
at recreation time.



The principal work of the Handmaids is teaching, one of the chief means of establishing God's Kingdom in Africa.

In a letter home during her last year as a novice Anne Marie wrote, "Our principal work, of course, in both Nigeria and Ghana, will be to teach girls in primary and secondary schools, and teacher training colleges. But we shall also take a very active part in apostolic work in the parish. Our Sisters visit the sick, the prisoners, the poor and neglected. In addition to that, we take care of orphans and unwanted twin babies and their mothers who have been cast out of their villages.

Another favorite work of the Handmaids is to establish Rosary centres in different places where the Christians of all ages gather to recite these lovely prayers, and to be instructed further in their Faith."

'Go Forth in His Name'

Shortly before she made her Temporary Vows, Anne Marie's parents and two younger sisters were baptized Catholics. Her father watched her proudly that morning of her

Giving Catechism instruction to adults is also part of their Apostolate.

THE PYLON



**Sisters trained
in Nursing help
mothers and
infants
in maternity
homes**



dedication as she pronounced her Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience before the Sacred Host raised up before her at Holy Communion. Afterwards, he drew her aside for a moment from all the people pressing around to congratulate the newly professed Sisters. "My daughter," he said simply, "my happiness today is complete. May it be the Lord's Will that your two sisters become Handmaids also."

For Anne Marie, the work of the apostolate was just beginning. She was to know all the difficulties of a true missionary in an unploughed field - and all the joys. Six years later she was to return to Ifuho for her Perpetual Vows, and she could say from the fullness of her heart, "Now I know how little I have given Our Lord for all that He has given me. How true He has been to His promise of a hundredfold reward."

Reverend Mother M. Bernard (left) inspects work of Technical School students



**Under the supervision
of the Handmaids,
these girls learn to
support themselves
by sewing and
textile weaving.**