

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SERVICE AND PRAISE: THE SISTERS SERVANTS OF MARY IMMACULATE

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I. The Beginning

Even before the first day of the Community, God knew those whom He had chosen, whom He had determined, and whom He had called for a very specific purpose. As God calls each person into life for the purpose of revealing a certain facet of Himself, so He calls forth a group for a specific purpose: to be another page of "scripture," a further revelation of Himself to His people. God called forth the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate in a certain time and place, from a certain people, to reveal His love for these people incarnationally.

The first revelation He made through, and in, this Community was that it was His love, and His alone, that would call forth the love of each member. A hundred years ago it began:

He plants in the hearts of young girls a spark that is inflamed when Basilian missionaries, going from parish to parish, speak of God's great love. It is so inflamed that a number of these girls want to dedicate their lives totally to this love, and they come to the priests to ask how they may best do this. (At that time in Ukraine, there were only Basilian nuns, monastics, for whom a large dowry and a good education were necessary entrance requirements.) These young ladies ask, "But what if a poor girl wants to serve God, is there no room for her?"¹ "Or is there room only in one of the numerous, flourishing Polish Communities?"² In these young girls' hearts God put the questions. In the missionaries' hearts He would give answers.

Like Jesus, who received His humanity from His Mother, so too, these young girls would come from the very flesh and blood of their people. They too would be given willingly by their parents to help save their people. We need only witness the day the Community began to know it was truly a Community springing out of the people. Its life began with the blessing of the priests and people, the Church. The

¹ *Chronicles of the History of the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate*, Vol. 1 (Archives, Generalate. Rome) chap.1, p.12.

² Ibid. 39.

*Chronicles*³ tell us that a great crowd of people came with the clergy, monastic and regular, to celebrate God's deeds that day. During the service, the missionary revealing God's work said, "The Lord has called a few of your children to His service. Do you regret giving Him these flowers?" The congregation answered, "We do not regret giving them to Him." "Do you truly give them to Him?" Amid tears and great emotion they responded, "We give them to God." This was a people offering its finest fruit to the Lord. However, not only did they offer Him their children, but they gave these children, God's children, as they would come to be called, a house in which to live and the bare necessities of life; their parents brought them food: bread and milk.⁴ The same night that the services initiating the new Community ended, the girls (now postulants) went home to gather their few belongings and bid farewell to their families. There was no physical running away to the desert, nor rejecting the world and its demands. This was a people giving its finest fruit to the Lord for His service in the world.

The foundations of the Community were laid by three persons of vision. The first was Father Cyril Siletsky, parish priest of the village of Zuzel where the first home would be situated, and from which six of the first seven girls came. Because the parish was thriving spiritually under his shepherding, Father Siletsky was called to undertake this project. He was a man with a big heart.⁵ The second founder was Father Jeremiah Lomnitsky, the Basilian missionary who had enkindled the hearts of the first young girls, and whose vision would help shape the young Community. The third great pillar would be Michelina Hordashevskia, chosen to lead the group from its very beginnings. She would come to be known as Sister Josaphata. However, this foundation was not the undertaking of the priests, the Basilian Order, the parish or the first postulants; it was an undertaking led by the "people of God." Newspapers of the day openly advertised the new Community, and solicited support. *Poslanik* said, "This deed has begun, let us now support and help it...this Community is of untold worth, not only in the spiritual, but in the national sphere..."⁶ Immediately after the novitiate opened, it asked its readers to donate however little or much each one could. It called upon its priests first, then Church societies, but also individuals.⁷ *Dushpastor* also announced the progress of the donations. For example, it told of a parish priest who offered to donate two wooden houses and a cow for the sisters and their work.⁸ All types of projects were undertaken by the priests and people to help the sisters; for as the priests said, "From us

³ Ibid. 33.

⁴ Ibid. 35.

⁵ Ibid. 34.

⁶ *Poslanik*, Berezhany (1892-98) 1-13/1/93.

⁷ Ibid. 13-28/8/92.

⁸ *Dushpastor*, Lviv (1892-98) 18-30/6/92.

Ukrainian people with our priests, and from us alone, will come the success of this."⁹ Thereafter, whenever the sisters arrived in a new village to begin their mission, they would be met in procession with the traditional salt and bread, and words of welcome...."¹⁰ "God give us more Sisters Servants...God has listened to your prayers and granted the desires of your heart."¹¹

What were the desires and prayers of these people? The Ukrainian nation in the 1890's was struggling for national identity. Its religious life was one of darkness, superstition, low morality, and general abandonment. Hunger for God was such that people would have to walk many miles to Basilian churches where they could find confessors any time of the day,¹² and good homilies. Here also they found pious devotions which spoke to their simple, but love-starved hearts. For many of these people, the sisters would be able to keep the flame of God's love burning by explaining, encouraging, assisting and leading the devotions. The prayer life of the sisters themselves would always be an example and a source of strength both for themselves and the people.

Along with spiritual needs, there were other needs that the sisters could address. One of the first of these was caring for little children. Of necessity, young mothers worked in the fields and often children were left at home, or placed in the care of the then-numerous Polish sisters. If left at home, the situation might be dangerous. The possibility of fire was very real; and fire in a straw-thatched home would often mean the ruin not only of the house but of the entire village, or a good part of it.¹³ If the children were placed in the care of the Polish sisters, they, along with their parents, were slowly weaned away from their Church. Children from their youngest years needed to be formed in their own Rite, for as children were formed so would the Church be—and so would the nation be. This was a desperate situation among the Ukrainian people, just rising out of serfdom. The Sisters Servants were born not only out of the people, but for the people. To answer their need, day-nurseries were opened.

Since this Community arose out of the needs of the people, one of its characteristics was *presence* with the people; the sisters lived and worked among the people. Their first homes and nurseries were situated in the villages where everyone knew everyone else. Coming and going to work, the sisters, rather than indulge in idle conversation, were to sing¹⁴ religious or folk songs. Deep in their spirit, they could see that everything could be for the praise of God: singing as well as silence,

⁹ *Chronicles* (Rome: Archives) chap.1, p.58.

¹⁰ *Poslanik* 25/5/95.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 16-18/3/94.

¹² *Chronicles* (Rome: Archives) chap.1, p.37.

¹³ *Ibid.* 48.

¹⁴ *Ustavi* (Constitutions) of the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate. Rule 56.