

The Sisters of St. Columban

LEAVES FROM THE ANNALS OF A SEVENTH-CENTURY CONVENT.

(By H. CONCANNON, in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*.)

It was not possible to read, without a great stirring of the heart, that in the autumn of last year—yea, even of that year of agony, 1922—there came to happy birth a new Congregation of Irish nuns, the "Missionary Sisters of St. Columban."

A new Congregation? Or a very old? Were the Sisters of St. Columban born last October in that Clare "Bethlehem," so beautifully described in the *Far East* of February, 1923? Or do their origins reach back over the centuries to the days of Columban himself? I venture to think that whether our Missionary Sisters of St. Columban consider themselves the newest of our Irish Sisterhoods or the oldest (they have their choice), they will not hear unmoved the names, or learn without a kindling of sisterly love the stories, of long dead women who followed the master's Rule, under Abbess Burgundofara, in the celebrated Convent of Faremoutiers, over thirteen centuries ago.

It will be remembered by those familiar with St. Columban's life that on his way to Bregeuz, after his expulsion from Luxeuil by King Theuderic, he was hospitably entertained by the father of Chagnaold, one of his favorite monks, at his villa outside Meaux. Chagneric, as the Saint's kind host was called, was a high official of King Theuderic's court, and a man of much wealth and influence. Both he and his pious wife, Leudegonde, were devoted to Columban, and at their earnest request he spent several days at their home, instructing their household. Before he left, we are told by Jonas his biographer, he blessed the house and all its inmates, but in a very special manner his host's little baby daughter, Burgundofara, whom he dedicated to God.*

The years passed, and Abbot Eusthasius ruled over Luxeuil in Columban's stead. It happened that Eusthasius found himself obliged by some business of the Order to visit the court of King Chlothair. His way took him past Chagneric's villa, and he, in his turn, was received with the same honor as had been shown to the master. The family, however, was in great grief, for the young and beautiful daughter of the house, Burgundofara, lay blind and stricken on a bed of mortal sickness. Eusthasius soon learned the cause. He father had arranged a match for her with one of the young nobles of the king's court, and the girl, who regarded herself, since Columban's visit, as the promised bride of Christ, had offered such vehement resistance to the execution of her father's will that she had fallen desperately ill under the strain, and was like to die. Eusthasius pointed out to the father that he had drawn down this punishment on himself and his family by trying to force his daughter to wed an earthly spouse, while her heart was given, and her troth plighted, to the "Son of the King of High Heaven." The father, pretending to be convinced by the Abbot's words, promised not to oppose his girl's desires any longer, if only her health and sight were restored. Eusthasius promised to do what he could for her, and was led to the dying maiden's bedside. He first asked her if it were with her own consent that she was about to break the promise, made in her name by Columban to the heavenly Bridegroom. She answered that never would she consent to such a breach of her troth. She told, too, how, in her dreams the preceding night she had seen a man like Eusthasius, and heard a voice commanding her to do whatever that man would tell her, and that she would be healed. "Tell me, then," she entreated, "what I am to perform, and conjure away by your prayers this sickness which God has laid upon me." Moved by her words the venerable man prostrated himself, and with prayers and tears besought of God the restoration of the maiden's health. Then rising he pressed his hand over the poor blind eyes, and made the sign of the Cross over them, and lo! without delay, sight was restored to them, and the maiden rose from her bed restored to perfect health. The Abbot then proceeded on his journey to the king's court, having arranged that her formal clothing in the religious habit should take place on his return.

But no sooner was Eusthasius out of the house, and Burgundofara well again, than Chagneric went on with his

preparations for her marriage. There was nothing left for his daughter but to take refuge in flight. With a trusty girl companion she stole away one night from her father's house, and fled to the Basilica of St. Peter in Meaux. Chagneric, having discovered his daughter's whereabouts, sent his armed servants in pursuit of her, telling them to threaten her with death if she would not return home at once. But she, the valiant maiden, proclaimed herself happy to suffer death for Him Who had not disdained to die for her.

At this point Eusthasius returned from his embassy, liberated the maiden, and spoke so sternly to her father that the latter no longer dared to oppose any obstacle to his daughter's vocation. Burgundofara, accordingly, made her vows, and was clothed in the religious habit by Gundold, Bishop of Meaux. Her father gave her a site for her convent on his estate, between the rivers Grand Morin and Aubetin, at a place called then Evoriaacas. Eusthasius sent some of his monks from Luxeuil to help with the building, and when it was finished he deputed Chagnaold, Burgundofara's own brother, to train herself and her two nuns in the monastic Rule of Columban. When Chagnaold was made Bishop of Laon his place was taken by Waldebert.*

How well Burgundofara profited by their training, how faithfully she adhered to the master's Rule, was proven many years after, when the false brother, Agrestius, tried to make mischief in the various houses of the Order by his attacks on the Rule. Some of the brethren fell away, but the Sisters, thanks to Burgundofara's stand, remained unshaken in their fidelity.† A modern writer has spoken somewhere of women as "the more stable sex." Burgundofara is one of those chosen souls—valiant and steadfast and faithful—who have earned for womanhood that great commendation.

The convent founded by Burgundofara, known originally as Evoriaacas, and in later days, from its foundress's name, as Faremoutiers (i.e., the Monastery of Fara), became one of the most famous in all Europe. Not only from all parts of France, but from other countries, noble girls (daughters of English kings, some of them) flocked to it to devote themselves to the religious life. In later centuries it became a celebrated school for girls, and during the seventeenth century many a little princess received her early training there. A delightful picture of that school is conjured up by Bossuet in an *oraison funèbre* on one who had been a pupil there, Anne of Gonzaga. "In the solitudes of Saint Fare, on that holy mountain chosen by God, a thousand years before, the early life of Princess Anne passed happily. The Mysteries of religion were revealed to her, the Scriptures became familiar to her. She was taught the Latin language, because it was the language of the Church, and the Divine Office formed her greatest delight."

Such was Faremoutiers in the "Grand Siècle." But it is our privilege, if we desire to avail ourselves of it, to visit it and its noble-hearted Abbess, and its gentle Sisterhood, a thousand years earlier—and that in the company of no less a guide than Jonas, the biographer of Columban himself. He was a great friend of the Abbess, and often visited her, especially when he was collecting the materials for his *Life of the master*. Very often he would say Mass for the community, and he was present at the death-beds of some of the nuns. Eleven chapters of the Second Part of his *Vita Columbani* are devoted to stories he has thus collected of the holy lives and saintly deaths of the Sisters. His book was probably written before Abbess Burgundofara's own death took place, for he makes no mention of it. But we learn from the researches of Professor Gaston Bonet-Maury that it took place on April 3, 658, and that her remains were interred by the side of those of her brother, Bishop Faron, in the latter's monastery at Meaux. Many an Irish pilgrim must have prayed at that tomb; for Faron's monastery was a favorite "station" of our countrymen on the pilgrim route to Rome; and it was from that centre that St. Killian went forth to evangelise the country around Arras.

Very charming, very appealing in their girlish gentleness and innocence are these seventh-century "Sisters of St. Columban," to whom Jonas introduces us. We do not love them any the less when we find that in spite of Abbess Burgundofara's strenuous training, they have not wholly

* *Vita Columbani*, ii. 7.

† *Ibid.* ii. 10.

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