

'A CLOUD OF WITNESSES'

(A Glimpse of Redemptorist and Notre Dame History)

1859



FATHER LOUIS DE BUGGENOMS, C.S.S.R.

**In gratitude to Fr Louis de Buggenoms CSsR
whose Missionary Zeal
and Faithfulness to the Charism of St Alphonsus de Liguori
led him to bring the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur
from Belgium to Britain**

Introduction

In the history of the Sisters of Notre Dame, we find a close connection with the Redemptorists who had been founded by St Alphonsus in Naples in 1732 almost a century before Notre Dame's own foundation.

It is the charism of the Redemptorists to preach the Word of God to the poor of the most abandoned places. The connection between the two Congregations is perhaps most evident in Britain and parts of the United States of America but it also exists, in some measure, in Japan and in developing countries such as Zimbabwe.

In one of his early letters to Laura Petrie whom Fr De Buggenoms directed to Notre Dame, he writes that, if she desired to stay in close contact with "the Sons of St Alphonsus" he could think of no better Congregation for her to join than Notre Dame. He also wrote to her of a theme which reoccurs in some of his later writing (eg to Fr Edward Douglas) that "it is the opinion of Church scholars that a Congregation is closest to its charism - and so produces its greatest saints - within the first hundred years of its foundation." Fr De Buggenoms first thought of asking for the Sisters of Notre Dame when Fr Bernard Hafken-schied mentioned them during a stop-over at Falmouth when Fr Bernard and Fr Frederick De Held were returning from a Visitation in America. This was about forty years after Julie and Francoise had founded the Institute. He advised Fr De Buggenoms to approach the Sisters in Belgium with a view to obtaining the sisters he so much wanted for a school to support the work of their mission in Cornwall.

Our sisters in the British Province are very familiar with the story of Fr De Buggenoms and how he was responsible for introducing our sisters to England. Over the past few years I've had the great privilege of doing a little research into the life of Fr Louis De Buggenoms here at Kinnoull, in the Redemptorist Generalate Library in Rome, in the Redemptorist Provincial Library in Toronto and in the Archives of Notre Dame's British Province. Increasingly, I have become aware of the inter-connectedness of key figures in the history of both Congregations. For example, in the Generalate Library in Rome, there is a letter of Fr Prost's, in German, where he

writes of his journey to his mission in St Croix in the Danish West Indies. En route from Austria, he meets up with Fr De Held in Belgium who takes him specifically to meet Mere Constantine, Superior General of the Sisters of Notre Dame at Namur. She received him kindly, we are told, and gave him money for his missionary journey. One wonders if the visit was originally made to appeal for sisters to open a school at St Croix? After Fr De Buggenoms was missioned to the neighbouring Island of St Thomas less than two years after Prost, it seems he, once again, asked for sisters from Namur but none could be spared at that time. Fr Prost is a pivotal figure in many ways - not least in that he was responsible for bringing into the Redemptorist Congregation Saint John Neumann. . . and Prost had lived in community with De Buggenoms and Douglas who were, in their turn, other key figures in the expansion of the Redemptorist Congregation. Just as the estate of Laura Petrie (Sr Mary of St Frances) was so important for expansion in the British Province of Notre Dame, so, too, did Fr Douglas' estate do much to expand the work of the Redemptorists.

The following 'Snapshot' of Fr De Buggenoms and a few of his contemporary Redemptorists is set for 22nd December 1859. The only significance of this date is that it marks the beginning of De Buggenoms' mission to the West Indies of which we, his 'daughters' in the British Province of Notre Dame, have, until now, known very little.

While Notre Dame was beginning to experience what it meant to have "Hearts wide as the world", we catch a glimpse, also, of what this world-wide expansion meant for "the sons of St Alphonsus'. One is reminded, too, of that saying of George MacDonald, the nineteenth century Scottish novelist:

"For those who love God, there is no such thing as coincidence."

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Kinnoull
August 2001

A 'Snapshot' of Fr Louis De Buggenoms and Some Redemptorist Contemporaries

On 22nd December 1859, at the age of forty-three, Louis De Buggenoms stepped ashore on the Island of St Thomas in the Caribbean. A mixed reception awaited him. The Church there was in schism and De Buggenoms had been sent by Rome to rectify matters and to build up a much needed Redemptorist Community on the Island.

That same day, on the neighbouring Island of St Croix, Joseph Prost, a fifty-eight year old Redemptorist, was preparing the children on the island for the great feast of Christmas. Prost, in his own words, had been 'rolled around' as a Missioner. He had lived in community some years before with De Buggenoms in Clapham. Prior to that, he had been five years in America and been responsible for searching out a suitable site for the setting up of a stable community which would form a nucleus for the American missions. His warm, good humoured nature attracted a young immigrant Bohemian priest to seek admission to the Redemptorists. He had seen in Prost a man of deep prayer and great cheerfulness of spirit. This young immigrant, who was received into the Congregation by Prost and became America's first Redemptorist novice, was John Neumann.

On 22nd December 1859, Prost's 'young novice' was now forty eight years old and the Bishop of Philadelphia. In his eight years as Bishop, he had brought a number of Congregations into his diocese including the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. That afternoon, Neumann was feeling strangely unwell with increasing pain and sickness which he cheerfully tried to dismiss. Two weeks later, walking along Vine St, Philadelphia, he collapsed and died. The people of Philadelphia were not to forget their beloved "Little Bishop". Instinctively, they came to pray at his tomb in the Redemptorist Church at the corner of North 5th Street and Girard. Many graces and favours were recorded and, on June 19th 1977 he was canonised by Pope Paul VI.

Neumann, when he had been a Redemptorist Superior at Pittsburgh, had, in his turn, done much to influence the youngest member of his community, Francis Xavier Seelos. On 22nd December 1859, Seelos was Prefect of Students down in Cumberland in the hills of western Maryland and among his students was Frater John Berger - Neumann's nephew. Like Neumann before him, Seelos was to be criticised for his gentle ways and his style of leadership. He could not speak Latin well, was accused of being a 'pushover' and it was reported to local and Roman superiors that he allowed the students to play music after night prayers, to swim at a beach and to put on plays! He was removed from office.

On April 9th, 2000, Pope John Paul 11 beatified Francis Xavier Seelos - a pioneer in his own Congregation.

On 22nd December 1859, Fr Edward Douglas, a friend and correspondent of De Buggenoms, was in Rome. Douglas was a Scot from a very wealthy family and money from his estate was later to build St Mary's Monastery at Kinnoull in Perth. Other places in Scotland had been looked at: Glasgow, Rothesay, Edinburgh and Stirling but on, May 21st 1866, a visit was made to the Earl of Kinnoull and eventually an area of land was purchased on the slopes of Kinnoull Hill. Through his friendship with Douglas, De Buggenoms would have been aware of developments thousands of miles away in the Caribbean. On 22nd March 1870, the newly-constructed church was solemnly blessed and opened, and on the following day a copy of the miraculous image of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour was placed in its present niche above the High Altar.

De Buggenoms was to spend fourteen years in the Caribbean. By the time of his return to Europe in the 1870s, the Sisters of Notre Dame, whom he had introduced to Britain, were well established in England. Before his departure for the Danish West Indies, De Buggenoms himself had sent between 50-60 postulants to the Sisters of Notre Dame from England and Ireland.

On his return from the Caribbean, he was, for a short time, Secretary to the Redemptorist Archbishop Deschamps (later Cardinal

Archbishop of Malines). Laura Petrie (Sr Mary of St Francis) was delighted at his return to Belgium and wrote to ask if he could be granted permission to become Extraordinary Confessor to the English-speaking novices at Namur. On 10th May 1874, Archbishop Deschamps wrote to Father Mauron, the Redemptorist Superior General in Rome requesting this permission for his Secretary since this required the express permission of their Superior General. To give more weight to his request, he wrote:

"Fr De Buggenoms is the true father and the one who introduced the Institute to England."

Permission was granted in a letter received by Deschamps the following month.

Like Neumann, Seelos and Prost, De Buggenoms had his critics. So assiduous was he in visiting the Redemptoristines at Malines, the Sisters of Notre Dame etc. that one superior wrote an irritated letter about him, claiming that the nuns had been "Buggenomised" . . . so much so that "It made him want to throw up"! De Buggenoms' deep prayer life also disturbed this superior who felt he had an unwise attraction to mystical prayer.

Whatever his faults, De Buggenoms was a heroic missionary and a faithful father to the Sisters of Notre Dame and he retained an interest in the Congregation throughout his life. The rigours of his missionary labours had taken their toll and he died at the age of sixty-eight at St Joseph's, Brussels on 23rd May 1882.

In 1903, a commemorative book was published in Ireland entitled "Fifty Years at Mount Saint Alphonsus, Limerick." It contains a tribute to Fr De Buggenoms whom, it says, "had the most important and difficult part in the foundation". In the course of this little article about his life, we read also of his departure for England after his ordination and we read: ". . . It is not possible to chronicle the hundredth part of all that he did for the glory of God, and the salvation of souls in the difficult circumstances of the nine years which followed." It goes on to state: "He had a prominent part in the foundation of St Mary's, Clapham, and England is indebted to him for the introduction and solid establishment of the Sisters of Notre Dame,

who have done much for Catholic education in that country during the last fifty years."

De Buggenoms, Prost, Douglas and other heroic Redemptorist Missionaries were prophets in their time along with Neumann and Seelos who are, within the Church, more publicly known and loved.

It is with gratitude that we remember these men and apply to them the words of Oscar Romero:

"We are prophets of a future not our own."
