

# THE FRANCISCAN MISSIONARY SISTERS OF OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP OF JAMAICA

## The Blue Sisters

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*An abridged story of the life and ministries of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help of Jamaica.*

The story of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help of Jamaica, is one that speaks of a most unlikely "Founding" of a Community of women religious in the eyes of those who lived when this Congregation was first started. It took place at a time in the history of the Country when missionary Priests and Sisters came to the Island to evangelize a Colonized People, bringing them to the Catholic faith. These missionaries came mainly from Ireland and the United States of America. Among them were Franciscans and Jesuits. The latter were mainly from the New England Province of Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

Our Congregation of the "Blue Sisters" was founded on September 8, 1929. It was something quite strange to our city people to see local "nuns" and there was great skepticism that a group of "natives" could survive the rigours of religious life as it was then perceived. At the same time, this was a plus for the Church. In his book, "The History of the Catholic Church in Jamaica," Fr. Francis J. Osborne, S.J. wrote, "The most noteworthy event in connection with local religious was the establishment of a Community of Sisters who were purely Jamaican." This was an accomplishment that earlier bishops had attempted but without success.

## **COMING TO JAMAICA**

It was during the administration of Bishop Joseph Dinand, S.J. and when Mother Mary Alacoque, O.S.F of the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, New York was Superior of the Immaculate Conception Convent in Kingston; that a request was made by him to bring this local Congregation into being. No doubt, by Divine Providence, there was one Jamaican Religious Sister who was a member of that Order at that time. She was to be asked to take up the task of becoming the Mother Superior of the small group of five women of Jamaican heritage who, among many others and over a period of time, had been expressing their desire to enter Religious Life.

Once this request was honoured, Sister Mary Humiliana, OSF, the former Agnes Jesse Surapure of French-Jamaican ancestry was asked to become the Superior and Co-Foundress of the "Blue Sisters." As a matter of interest, this name reflects the colour of our habit or usual dress and speaks to the tropical warmth of the Island and the blue skies reflected in the waters of the Caribbean Sea. Blue, in contemporary times, has also become the international symbol of "peace" which is a Franciscan value. It is also, by tradition, the colour in which Jesus' mother, Mary, is depicted by many artists over the centuries. It is on the Church's celebration of Mary's Birthday that this Congregation was established.

Over the nearly eighty-five (85) years of its existence, the Congregation gradually grew in number but more so in our prayer life and our ministries. We are involved in education, in hospitals as nurses, in social and pastoral work, as well as, in the capacity of cancer hospice care. Our service in education to the country and as an important ministry of the Church began in 1930 with seven children. They were the first pupils of the Holy Childhood Preparatory School now the main feeder school for Holy Childhood High, which today has a population of over one thousand, five hundred female students.

## **MISSIONS**

Our missions and schools were spread throughout the Island in both urban and rural communities. Over this period of our history, we have had Convents and Schools in Above Rocks, Rock Hall, Alva Primary in St. Ann, St. Thomas More Prep in May Pen, St. Gabriel's Academy in Balaclava, Sacred Heart Academy in Christiana, a mission in Black River, and we pioneered such schools as Sts. Peter and Paul Prep and St. Richard's Primary in Kingston. Stella Maris Prep is now our flagship school serving the Stella Maris Parish and its environs.

We also ventured overseas on our first mission to Grand Cayman where we opened the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Preparatory School - now under different administration and called the St. Ignatius Catholic Prep School. In 1995, we pioneered a mission to the Federation of St. Kitts-Nevis in the diocese of St. John's Basseterre where Archbishop Emeritus Donald Reece, was the then Bishop.

I was the Supervising Principal for the two Catholic Schools. Sr. Barbara Marie, herself a Kittitian was employed as a nurse at the Government Hospital. Our Sisters also served in schools and parishes in Atlanta, Georgia and in Phenix City, Alabama, U.S.A. We have been engaged as Coordinators of Catechetics in the Archdiocese of Kingston, as well as, in pastoral work in other areas of the Archdiocese.

Today there is one Sister in social work in one of Kingston's most socially volatile communities. Sr. Beverley Marie does her ministry daily from St. Anne's Church in downtown, Kingston. At Stella Maris, there is the FMS "Table of Love" which serves a meal twice each week for close to one hundred and fifty (150) elderly and Shut-Ins of Grants Pen. This ministry, which integrates prayer and conversation along with a substantial meal operates from the Stella Maris Church Pastoral Centre.

## **OUR DWINDLING NUMBERS**

The sad reality today is that our Community is being depleted in numbers by the death of Sisters who were once very active in all three Dioceses of the Island. Currently, the majority are now of retirement age, or are in our infirmary – the Mother of Perpetual Help Villa located as a wing of the Stella Maris Motherhouse. So, we have had to withdraw from our Overseas, as well as, from all our rural Missions. Health issues now pose major challenges for our finances as a Community. We do, however, have three young sisters in initial formation for which we give God the glory.

As the only local and Diocesan Congregation of Sisters, we are completely self-supporting, with no affiliations with, or financial assistance from, associations with other Orders or Congregations Overseas. We, however, continue to live out our Franciscan charisms – especially those of hospitality, as well as, care for the poor and care of the Earth.

I may add here also, that there is the Stella Maris House of Prayer which serves as a place for Adoration, Retreats and personal quiet time, and is open at any time of day to persons who would wish to visit for prayer or spiritual direction. It also offers short-term accommodation to volunteers – local or from Overseas. Each year groups of students from Canada and the United States reside here as they come to do voluntary work or the JASY camp during their spring break.

Currently, I serve as the Administrator at the Consie Walters Cancer Care Hospice and am the General Minister of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters. We live by the Rule of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis of Assisi - the TOR. We profess Vows of Poverty, Chastity and the Obedience of love and live in Community both of which define the essence of Religious Life.

September 8, 2014 marked the 85th Anniversary of the Founding of this historically still fledgling Congregation.

We have much hope for new growth in the future and are committed to the recruitment of more members through the initiation of plans for "The FMS Vocation Blitz 85."

I already envision a year of spiritual growth as we pursue other activities throughout the Archdiocese. I have already met with, invited, challenged and, hopefully, energized the Young Adults of our Stella Maris Parish, as well as, the Catholic Women's League (CWL) to become more engaged in a partnership with our Community. I anticipate that they will come on board sharing our Franciscan spirituality and our quest in asking Jesus to "send more labourers into His Vineyard." This will, undoubtedly, be His special "gift" to us in return for the years of love, commitment, challenges and zeal, as we continue ministering among the People of God, even in our limited way. Our hope is that one day, we will have enough vocations to go further afield into our rural communities, to our Caribbean neighbours and again to the Metropolis.

May God's Will be done in our lives and yours!

*Contributed by Sr. Mary Andrew Campbell, F.M.S. General Minister of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Jamaica, W.I.*