

**THE SPIRITUALITY OF VENERABLE MOTHER MARY JOSEPH OF JESUS CP,
IN SAECULO ELIZABETH PROUT:
IN HER RELATIONSHIP WITH
VENERABLE FATHER IGNATIUS SPENCER CP**



Blessed Dominic Barberi CP arrived in Aston Hall near Stone on 17 February 1842. From 27 November 1842 he celebrated Sunday Mass in Stone, preached on the Catholic Faith and gave instructions to converts. Elizabeth Prout, living nearby, could have become a Catholic at any time from late 1842. In December 1846 Father George Spencer entered the Passionist novitiate in Aston Hall. He and Elizabeth had certainly met by 2 May 1848 when Father Ignatius, as he then was, mentioned her in the *Aston Baptismal Register* as having been the godmother of a baby he baptised in the Stone workhouse. On 4 August 1848 Blessed Dominic appointed Father Ignatius Superior in Aston Hall, so that it is possible that he then became Elizabeth's Confessor. Before Blessed Dominic died on 27 August 1849, he appointed Ignatius as interim Provincial. By then, however, Elizabeth had experienced life in the Northampton convent, had become ill and, having recovered, was planning to enter a convent in Belgium.

In the meantime, however, on the recommendation of Father Gaudentius Rossi CP, she went to teach in Manchester. There, in partnership with Father Gaudentius and Father Robert Croskell of St Chad's, she founded the Sisters of the Holy Family. It was Father Ignatius who gave Father Gaudentius permission to collaborate with them in that way. From then, as Venerable Ignatius told her Sisters in July 1864, several months after Venerable Mother Mary Joseph's death, he 'worked for her' and was 'mixed up with all her affairs'.

On 24 October 1853 he visited her and her Sisters in Manchester during their fever crisis. In early January 1854, at the request of Father Gaudentius, he gave them a Retreat, the first real one they had had, at Newton Heath, Manchester, where they were still recovering from fever. Writing to his cousin, Mrs Canning on 4 January 1854 he testified that the Sisters were young women who wanted to become Religious but because of their lack of money could not enter the existing Congregations which required a dowry. They were supporting themselves by taking in needlework, dressmaking etc. besides teaching in schools, with the approval of Bishop William Turner of Salford. Venerable Father Ignatius thought that despite the struggles of infancy they would spread widely. He thus testified to Venerable Mary Joseph's option for

the poor and for Religious Life. He also testified to his confidence in her as the Foundress. On her side she wrote to Father Gaudentius to tell him 'of the good Father Ignatius had done amongst the Sisters'. Father Ignatius also entered into his *Mission and Retreat Book* that he 'had good reason to be satisfied and highly interested with the result of the Retreat' and he testified to their contemplative lifestyle, to Elizabeth's spiritual leadership and to their fervour during the Retreat. Venerable Elizabeth's spiritual leadership was obviously good. In June 1855, at the request of Father Gaudentius, Venerable Father Ignatius gave the Sisters another Retreat. His comments again testify to Mother Mary Joseph's own spirituality as he had been 'greatly struck with the progress in spiritual life and virtue which was to be seen in the Community generally since he was with them before'. He was particularly pleased with the individual conferences he had had with the Sisters and especially with the two Superiors, Venerable Mother Mary Joseph and Mother Mary Paul Taylor. Moreover the Congregation was growing numerically under Mother Mary Joseph's spiritual leadership. Venerable Ignatius also testified to her own personal search for holiness.

When Father Gaudentius was leaving for America in 1855, he asked Father Ignatius to take his place with the Sisters, as, he told Mother Mary Joseph, he 'had great confidence in him – and full confidence in his personal virtue or rather extraordinary sanctity.' As soon as Father Gaudentius had departed, Venerable Father Ignatius visited Bishop Turner, Father Croskell and each Sister in all four convents privately to discuss their spiritual welfare and to hear Confessions. Similarly when Father Ignatius returned from a long period on the Continent in 1856 he again visited each Sister and gave a short Retreat in Levenshulme. Then he had to leave for Ireland where he sought postulants for her Congregation. He did not forget Venerable Mother Mary Joseph's own spirituality. Writing to her on 11 January 1857 he encouraged her to seek sanctity. 'Do not disappoint the expectation of Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, St Joseph, of the Church, of the Institute, of Father Gaudentius and, let me add, of poor myself' and she replied that it was her 'sincere will and desire to become perfect' and she 'loved her dear Lord'. Both her spiritual and physical sufferings were acute. They became even more severe as a Sister involved the Congregation in deep debt; previous benefactors withdrew their support; even Father Croskell abandoned them; and Bishop Turner had to hold an investigation into their affairs. But Venerable Father Ignatius, returning from Rome with instructions to rewrite Father Gaudentius Rossi's Rule, told Mother Mary Joseph, 'Take courage, do you not see that this is the time of trial? The children of Blessed Paul did the same ... but God gave others more faithful and worthy, and so He will give you.' He had great confidence in Venerable Mother Mary Joseph. He did all he could to solve her practical difficulties and he held spiritual conferences with all her Sisters. He arranged for her to go to Ireland to beg and possibly to find postulants, as he was doing for her. In 1862 he rewrote the Rule with her co-operation, making it a distinctly Passionist Rule and he assisted her in opening a new foundation in Ashton-under-Lyne. In 1863 he took the revised Rule to Rome and obtained the approbation of the Holy See. Venerable Mother Mary Joseph was 'completely beside herself with joy', when she received his letter with that news and 'having read it for her dear children, who were also greatly rejoiced, they went to the chapel to make a thanksgiving to Our Dear Lord.'

By August 1863, however, Mother Mary Joseph had developed consumption. Venerable Father Ignatius returned to Sutton. By October there was no hope of her recovery but as Ignatius told Bishop Turner, she was in 'happy dispositions'. The Bishop arranged for the General Chapter to be held as he and everyone wanted her to be elected as the first

Superioress General, as, of course, she was and in 'full vigour for her office'. She continued to conduct the business of the Congregation but by the end of November 'she was sinking'. On 3 January 1864, the birthday of St Paul of the Cross, as Venerable Father Ignatius celebrated Mass in the Sutton convent, he recalled all that God had done for the Congregation and his own great zeal and affection for it. Thus he paid a great tribute to Venerable Mother Mary Joseph. He heard what was possibly her last Confession on 9 January. Then he had to go away but he returned to Sutton in the afternoon of 11 January. When about 5 p.m. the Sisters realised she was dying, they sent for him. As he entered the room to give her a last Absolution and Blessing, she turned and recognised him with a grateful glance. Then, as Venerable Father Ignatius gave her a final Blessing, Venerable Mother Mary Joseph peacefully and calmly breathed her last.

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