

Stories of a Hong Kong Sister and Her Congregation in China

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I. Preface

At 3:10 am on November 17, 2017, Sr. Marie-Aloys Yuan Yin 袁引 (Yeu Yin) of the Society of Helpers (拯望會) passed away peacefully at the Caritas Hospital in Kowloon, Hong Kong at the age of 94. Relatives and friends, her fellow sisters around the world all offered their prayers and Masses in her memory, among whom were many friends from Xingtai Diocese (Hebei Province), including sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady of All Souls (COLAS, 煉靈中保聖母會). After the memorial Mass on that same day, a group of sisters and priests remained for a gathering to commemorate this beloved sister. They remembered her as the superior emerita of COLAS, a caring mother and a strict father for the sisters, and, above all, a faithful companion of the local Church in her most difficult times. From 1994–2004, Sr. Marie-Aloys traveled every year to serve the COLAS, a diocesan congregation located at Zhaozhuang 趙莊, the site of the diocesan cathedral. Each time she would stay for about six months, taking care of the formation for the aspirants, postulants, novices and sisters in temporary vows and accompanying all in their growth.

On November 25, 2017, her own congregation and the local Church community celebrated her funeral Mass at the Cosmas and Damian Parish Church in Tsuen Wan (荃灣聖葛達二聖堂), Hong Kong. Present at the Eucharist were friends from both the Hong Kong Diocese and the Xingtai Diocese, the Society of Helpers, the Congregation of Our Lady of All Souls, Tsuen Wan Providence Primary School (荃灣天佑小學), St. Teresa Parish Church, representatives of the “Associates and Friends of the Helpers” (希望之友) in Hong Kong and Sr. Marie-Aloys’ relatives from Shanghai.

What is offered here is the story of the long time service Sr. Marie-Aloys and her congregation have generously given to a local Church. Originally my intention was to just write an article in honor of Sr. Marie-Aloys, however, in the process of gathering data I was also deeply touched by the past of her congregation as well as the renaissance process of a local Chinese congregation. Their stories kept pushing me to delve deeper into my research.

The Helpers have served China for more than a century. Their success and contribution in the field of education exceeded my expectations. Telling the story of this outstanding

missionary sister is in fact stepping into the great river of the Church history in China that has flowed through contrasting stages of development in the past hundred years or so, wrapping along with it various facts, both ecclesial and political, national and international, temporal and spatial. As a matter of fact, the focus on one individual sister opens up a much bigger horizon, namely the contributions of Catholic women's communities to the Church and society in China, an area largely ignored and thus in dire need of serious study and research.

II. Life of Sr. Marie-Aloys

Sr. Marie-Aloys was born on May 14, 1924, in Shanghai. She graduated from Xiaoming Secondary School for Girls (曉明女中) and later from Aurora University (震旦大學). She taught at Xuhui Secondary School for Girls (徐匯女中) before joining the Society of Helpers in 1943, where she professed her first vows in 1946. In 1952 she took her perpetual vows at the Mother House in France. She collaborated with Sr. Marie-Agathe Chu (朱兆娟), also a Helper from Shanghai, in establishing the Chinese Nan Yang Secondary School for Girls (南洋女子中學, 1953) in Makassar, Indonesia and later also Tsuen Wan Providence Primary School in Hong Kong, where Sr. Marie-Aloys served as its founding supervisor and principal for 24 years (1960–1984). In 1964, together with Sr. Marie-Eugénie Shih and Sr. Marie-Agathe Chu, she started the “Associates and Friends of Helpers” in Hong Kong (the membership stands at 4,000 today). In 1985 she did a sabbatical in the U.S. and upon her return she began serving at the St. Teresa Parish. In 1994 Sr. Marie-Aloys began her missionary service for COLAS of Xingtai, a commitment that lasted until 2004 when her age no longer allowed her long-distance travels. In 2011 she moved into St. Joseph's retirement home in Shangshui. On November 17, 2017 she was called to her heavenly home and was buried in the Catholic Cemetery of Shanshawan on November 25.¹

III. Brief History of the Society of Helpers

The Society of Helpers, originally called the Society of Helpers of the Holy Souls, was founded in 1856 in France by Mother Mary of Providence (1825–1871). They adopted the Ignatian Spirituality – seeing God's presence in all things – and had Jesuits as their spiritual guides. Their charism was to assist the souls in purgatory as well as all those in need through prayers. On May 26, 1957, Pope Pius XII beatified Mary of Providence, with the feast day set on February 7, the anniversary of her death. The Helpers came to China in 1867, per invitation of the French Jesuit Bishop Adrien Languillat (郎懷仁, 1808–1878), then Vicar Apostolic of Kiangnan (江南, Shanghai). They served as educators, operators

1 See “Sr. Marie-Aloys of the Society of Helpers, a co-founder of the Providence Primary School, Hong Kong, Passed Away” 拯望會袁引修女安息，曾創辦荃灣天佑小學, in: *Kung Kao Bao* 公教報, No. 3849 (November 26, 2017), p. 3.

of orphanages and pastoral workers, in Shanghai as well as in Chili Southeastern Apostolic Vicariate (直隸東南代牧區), both Jesuit missions.²

Statistics show that the Helpers' Convent of the Holy Mother (le Convent de la Sainte Mère, 聖母院) at Xujiahui 徐家匯 (Zikawei) had taken in more than 10,000 abandoned baby girls in their nurseries and orphanages. They also operated a kindergarten and a school for the deaf-mute. The girls did sewing, embroidery and laundry works in the convent or artifact works at Tushanwan (T'ousèwè) Workshop (土山灣工藝品廠).

The Helpers began their work as assistants to the Jesuits at the Jingyan Primary School (經言小學, 1876) and moved on to eventually establish three reputed girls' schools, namely Xiaoming Secondary School for Girls (曉明女子中學, 1871), Chongde School for Girls (崇德女校, 1898) – later Xuhui Secondary School for Girls (徐匯女中, 1934) – and the Qiming School (Aurore College) for Girls (啟明女校, 1904). Xiaoming was the origin of today's Shanghai Gezhi Secondary School (上海格致中學), whereas Chongde/Xuhui and Qiming were the precursors of today's Shanghai No. 4 Secondary School (上海第四中學).³

The Helpers left China between 1950 and 1953. They continued their mission in Indonesia (1951), Hong Kong (1954) and Taiwan (1960). Currently, the Society of Helpers has 104 communities serving in 24 countries worldwide, including India, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan in Asia. 2017 was the 150th anniversary of their arrival in China and with Sr. Marie-Aloys' death, their missionary era in China was formally concluded.

IV. Their Contribution and Influence in China

In 1950, at the time of the Helpers' departure from China, there were more than ten women's religious congregations working in Shanghai and with 176 sisters the Helpers were the largest. Besides Shanghai, they were also active in Hebei and Beijing, in the fields of education, social work, art and culture as well as pastoral works.⁴

The girls taken in by the Helpers, together with the boys educated by the Jesuits in their orphanages and many other young people, made important contributions to modern Chinese painting and sculpture in the areas of the East-West cultural exchanges, especially through their works at the Tushanwan Workshop. Among them many with hearing and speaking disabilities were educated by the Helpers. The Helpers had sent their sisters for special training and opened a school for the deaf-mute in 1893, which “marked the beginning of special education in Shanghai.”⁵ This was some 20 years ahead of the Shanghai

2 Xiaohong 小紅, “The First Bishop after the Revival of the Jesuits – Msgr. Languillat, the First Vicar Apostolic of Xianxian” 耶穌會復興後的第一位主教—獻縣教區首任代牧郎懷仁, <http://www.amdgchinese.org/2016/05/09/耶穌會復興後的第一位主教-獻縣教區首任代牧/>; see also the Chinese Wikipedia entry at <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/郎懷仁>.

3 Bin Fen Shanghai's Blog 繽紛上海的博克, “Urban Memory: The Precursor of Shanghai No. 4 Secondary School, the Beginning of Chinese Women's Education” 城市記憶: (上海市) 第四中學前身, 曾開中國女子教育的先河 (July 13, 1919), http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_af4379240101b19g.html.

4 Tian Nianci 田念慈, “Stories of Xujiahui” 話說徐家匯 (7), http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_51a238b40102wqo0.html.

5 Zhang Hua 張化, “Resolving the Death Rate Mystery of Orphanage at Xujiahui Shengmuyuan” 徐家匯聖母院育嬰堂嬰兒死亡率揭迷, <https://www.xzbu.com/4/view-4259282.htm>.

School for the Blind (上海市盲童學校), established by the famous Anglican missionary John Fryer (傅蘭雅) and his son George B. Fryer in 1912. The Helpers' three schools for girls contributed enormously to China's modern education. In particular, Qiming was deemed "one of the earliest girls' schools in China, marking the beginning of Chinese women's education."⁶

Not only did the schools educate committed women religious like Sr. Marie-Aloys, even more significantly was the fact that they have educated for modern China generations of outstanding women like Yang Jiang, a renowned author, theorist, interpreter and scholar.⁷ In the education of the students, the Sisters implemented demanding rules akin to those applied in a convent and thus, their schools were known for discipline. On the other hand, their holistic educational approach, which maintained a healthy balance between science and arts, both oriental and occidental, was highly appreciated and well received. Thus recalled Yang Jiang, perhaps the most well-known alumna of Qiming, with fond memories of her alma mater in her old age: "My father always believed that Qiming provided excellent education, strict discipline and thus a solid foundation for both Chinese and foreign languages. Hence, in our family, two aunts, a cousin, two elder sisters were all sent by him to Qiming." Apparently, Qiming was the first choice for girls in Yang's family.⁸

Yang also wrote: "The corridor in front of our classroom was so long, running from east to west, passing a dozen classrooms." Not only was Qiming very big for her, it was also a fascinating new world, so much that even after almost a century this centenarian still vividly recalled those caring "Mumus" 姆姆 (Chinese rendition of the religious title "Mother") as well as a lot of unique expressions only used at Qiming, such as "yue tou libai" 月頭禮拜 (holidays at the beginning of each month), "miao hua" 描花 (drawing), "qia qin" 掐琴 (playing piano), "san xin" 散心 (walk following a meal), etc.⁹

At the turn of the 20th century, the graduation and entertainment activities of Qiming were even covered by *Shun Pao* (申報), a very popular newspaper in town. This gives an idea of which social influences the Helpers enjoyed in the field of education. As a matter of fact, Xiaoming and Xuhui made equally important contributions. It is only unfortunate that, merely due to lack of research work or memoirs like the one written by Mrs. Yang, they remain virtually invisible to the society at large.

V. A New Chapter in China

On November 23, 1992, Father Lucien Schmitt OMI, then head of the Asia Department of Missio Aachen, paid a visit to Xingtai Diocese, accompanied by Theresa Yeung Cho

6 Shanghai Xuhui District Information Office 上海市徐匯區新聞辦公室, "Xuhui's Centenarian Schools – Shanghai No. 4 Secondary School, Yang Jiang also Studied Here" 徐匯百年老校之上海市第四中學, 楊絳也曾在此就讀, <http://dy.163.com/v2/article/detail/CEJ8MJEH05149R72.html>.

7 Yang Jiang (1911–2016) was the wife of Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998), a renowned Chinese scholar and author. Fluent in English and French, she made notable contributions to Chinese literature with her translations. Yang Jiang also translated *Don Quixote* from Spanish to Chinese, and it still remains the most popular Chinese version.

8 Yang Jiang 楊絳, "I Studied at Qiming" 我在啟明上學, <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/RS/565568.htm>, originally published in: *Wen Hui Bao* 文匯報, May 15, 2004.

9 *Ibid.*

Woon (楊祖媛) of the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong. They took a tour to the minor seminary as well as the sisters' community at Zhaozhuang. During their conversation, Bishop Joseph Hou Jinde 侯進德 and Mother Song Xiuzhen, an elderly sister from the neighboring Xianxian Diocese who was helping Xingtai rebuild its sisters' community, shared with the guests the sisters' struggles and challenges in the area of formation. They also inquired about the Helpers who used to work there. Ms. Yeung did not know the Helpers, but as soon as she saw on a poster the charism and mission statement of the Zhaozhuang sisters, she recalled having seen something similar in Hong Kong. Ms. Yeung suggested that Bishop Hou write a letter to the Helpers, so that she could try to connect with them once she was back in Hong Kong. On that same day Bishop Joseph Hou wrote and signed a letter to the Helpers on behalf of the Zhaozhuang sisters, with the assistance of his secretary, Father Joseph Ma Yinglin 馬英林 (now bishop of Kunming, President of the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China).¹⁰

In the letter Bishop Hou talked about the situation of the newly founded community, their urgent needs in formation and their shared charism. He wrote: "We hope you could guide and assist us, and through our solidarity we could inspire each other in the mission of saving souls for the greater glory of God. We invite you to visit our community at your convenience. All sisters are looking forward to a meeting." Bishop Hou also told them about the challenges they faced in formation: "In these days of the renaissance of the Church we are facing many difficult challenges, especially the break of tradition caused by the age gap between the two generations. We need good collaboration in the areas of education and formation so that these young women could grow into good sisters who can keep alive the tradition in adapting to the new era and give their contribution to the Church." As soon as Ms. Yeung returned to Hong Kong, she contacted the Helpers and eventually met with Sr. Marie-Agathe and Sr. Marie-Aloys, both born and bred in Shanghai just like herself.

The first thought that came to these sisters after reading Bishop Hou's letter was: "This is an invitation from the Holy Spirit!" They were joyfully surprised that God called them to a new service in such an unexpected manner. They prayed, discerned and, following the Superior General's suggestion, responded generously. After much communication and preparation, on September 3, 1993, Sr. Marie-Agathe and Sr. Teresa Lai from Taiwan arrived at the Zhaozhuang Church and visited the sisters' community. During this visit, they were able to meet and talk with Bishop Hou, Mother Song, as well as all the young sisters.

Following their visit and talks with Bishop Hou and Mother Song regarding the urgent needs of the Zhaozhuang community, the Helpers decided to send Sr. Marie-Aloys to Xingtai to assist Mother Song in her formation work. On January 17, 1994, Sr. Marie-Aloys, already 70 years old, leaving behind her work as well as all the comforts in Hong Kong, embarked on the journey to Zhaozhuang, accompanied by Sr. Clara Wu from Taiwan. What awaited them were the harsh winter in northern China and the frugality a village could offer in the 1990s. Despite all these, Sr. Marie-Aloys began her brand new life with great enthusiasm and devoted herself unreservedly to the formation work. Liv-

10 Letter of Bishop Hou to Mother Superior of the Society of Helpers (Hong Kong) on November 23, 1992.

ing and working among the young sisters, she seemed to have found a second spring in her own life. On May 20, 1994, Bishop Hou passed away due to illness. On his deathbed, he entrusted the Zhaozhuang sisters to the care of Sr. Marie-Aloys. And thus, the bond between this elderly sister from Hong Kong, with her congregation behind her, and the young sisters of Zhaozhuang was sealed for good.

Since 1994, when Sr. Marie-Aloys took over the tasks of formation and administration, she also started to prepare a future leadership for the local community. Yet, during all these years, she never “stole” even one candidate for her own congregation. Her service was an entirely selfless one. This was also a confirmation of the principle endorsed by all Hong Kong bishops, from Cardinal John Baptist Wu Cheng-chung to Bishop Michael Yeung, that the service for the Church in the Mainland must be a disinterested one. Just like many other Hong Kong Catholics, Sr. Marie-Aloys and the Helpers have given exemplary witnesses to this spirit.

From 1994 on, Sr. Marie-Aloys traveled to Xingtai consecutively for ten years and stayed for at least six months each time. Later, when she could no longer make this trip but had to stay in Hong Kong, her heart and her thoughts were constantly with the people in Xingtai Diocese, remembering and accompanying them with prayers, letters and numerous phone calls. Not only did she invite other fellow sisters to continue this service, she even encouraged her former students and friends to visit the people there. It is no exaggeration to say that, ever since she accepted Bishop Hou’s request, Sr. Marie-Aloys had given all to the Church of Xingtai, especially to the sisters.

VI. A Grain Has Born Much Fruit

Encouraged by Sr. Marie-Aloys, some of her students from Hong Kong have visited the COLAS sisters multiple times and, to carry on the service of the Helpers both in Hong Kong and in the Mainland, they took the initiative to found Ji Wang (= Hope) Association (冀望團體) at the time when Sr. Marie-Aloys was already bedridden in a nursing home. Louis Zhou, one of the co-founders of this charitable organization, gave the following explanation: “Ji (冀) stands for Hebei and Wang (望) stands for the Society of Helpers. Though Sr. Marie-Aloys and Sr. Marie-Agathe are gone and the Helpers have also left, we as their students hope to continue this bond of love between Hong Kong and the Mainland via this new bridge – the Ji Wang Association, so as to keep alive the great love of the Helpers and carry on Sr. Marie-Aloys’ undying service of love.” This lay voluntary association is the newest fruit born from the work of the Helpers.

VII Coincidence or Providence?

Chili Southeastern Apostolic Vicariate, Kiangnan Apostolic Vicariate (江南代牧區), Zhaozhuang 趙莊, Weixian 威縣, Zhangzhuang 張莊 in Xianxian 獻縣: Who would have believed that one day these random geographical terms could all be connected through one name – the Society of Helpers?

On May 30, 1856, the Vatican divided Beijing Diocese into three Vicariates, namely Chili North, Chili Southwest and Chili Southeast. The first two Vicariates set up their episcopal sees in Beijing and Zhengding Fu respectively. As for the Southeast Vicariate, Bishop Languillat, its founding Vicar Apostolic, first chose Zhaozhuang in Weixian County as it had a relatively large Catholic population. However, due to security concerns caused by bandits, he eventually moved it to Zhangzhuang in Xianxian County. In 1864, Languillat was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Kiangnan Vicariate (Shanghai). It was he who, during his sojourn in Paris, invited the Helper Sisters to China in August 1867. That marked the beginning of the Helpers' missionary service in Shanghai, Hebei and Beijing.

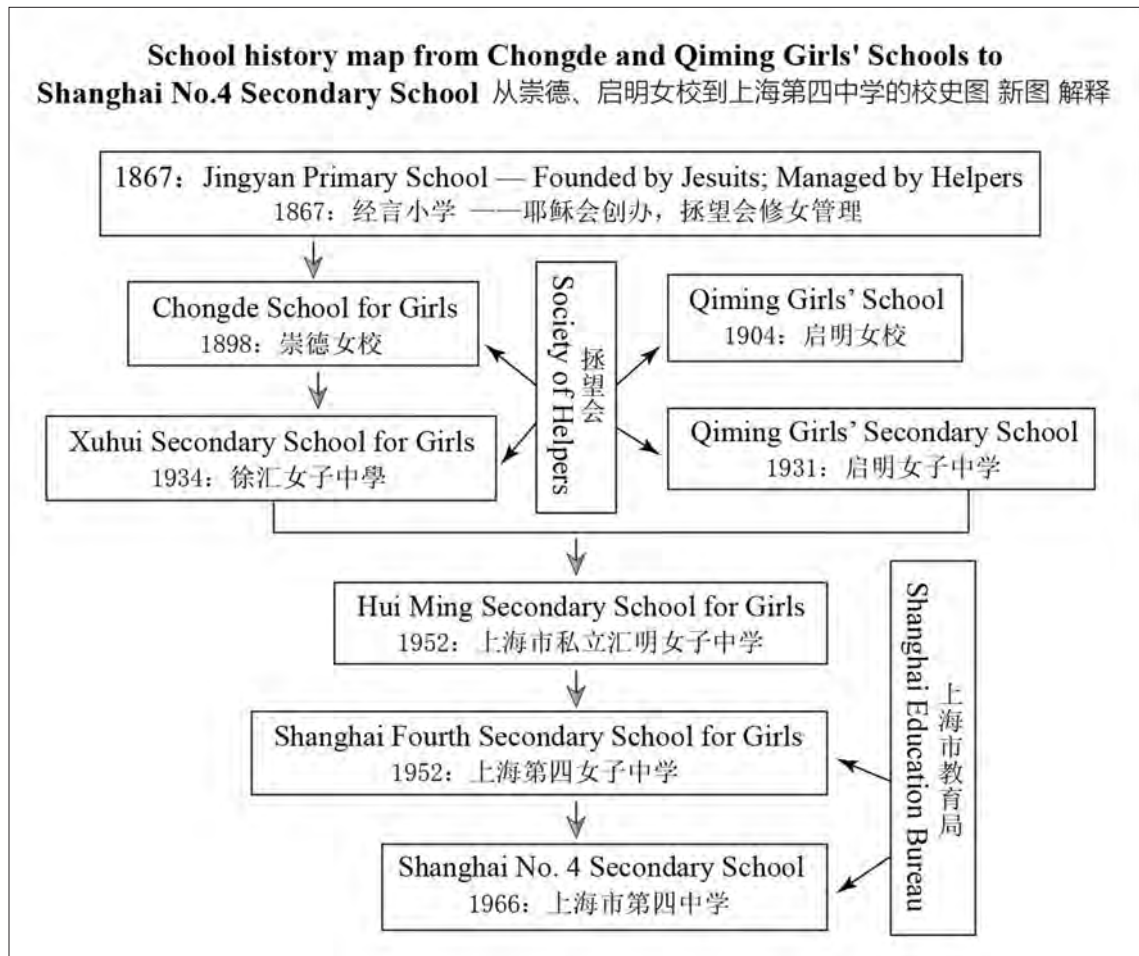
Hence, the historical coincidence is this: Whereas Bishop Languillat began his episcopal tenure at Zhaozhuang, the sisters whom he had invited to China ended their missionary service exactly at the same place 150 years later. To a person of reason, it probably is just a pure coincidence. Nevertheless, in the eyes of a person of faith, nothing is coincident in history, as God is the real author of history. True, it is difficult to explain; but so was Jesus' death on the cross, which was a defeat in the eyes of all; yet, his "failure" offers the salvation to humankind. The same should be said of the services given by thousands of China missionaries like the Helper Sisters. They had to flee the Mainland and abandon their missionary works. Yet what they had sown was not wasted; it had born and continues to bear abundant fruit among the Chinese faithful.

VIII. Conclusion

In Hong Kong, the Helpers arrived in 1954. Six years later, they opened the Providence Primary School, which was handed over to the Diocese in 1980. This also marked the conclusion of their half-century service for the Church and the society in Hong Kong. In China, from their arrival in 1867 to the forced departure of all the non-Chinese and some Chinese sisters in the 1950s, the Helpers served for almost 90 years. This was renewed with their missionary service in Xingtai, beginning in 1994. Then, Sr. Mary-Aloys' departure in 2004 formally concluded the Helpers' mission in China, which lasted a century and a half.

Traversing time and space, the Helper Sisters have left behind a rich legacy for the Chinese, especially in the area of education. This could be well demonstrated by the schools they had created: From Chongde School for Girls at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1898) to today's Shanghai No. 4 Secondary School (1966) (see table below); from Xiaoming Secondary School for Girls (1871) to today's Shanghai Gezhi Secondary School (2003); from Nan Yang Secondary School for Girls in Indonesia (1953) to Providence Primary School in Hong Kong.

2017 commemorated the 150th anniversary of the Helpers' China mission; it coincided with the 150th anniversary of Shanghai No. 4 Secondary School, beginning with the founding of Jingyan Primary School in 1867, which was remembered in a solemn celebration on October 28. Tracing back to its roots, no one could skip Chongde and Qiming, the first girls' schools "marking the beginning of women's education in China." The site of the old Qiming Girls' School was officially declared as Protected Cultural Heritage by Xuhui



District. In fact, in the entrance hall of Shanghai No. 4 Secondary School, the old school motto is still solemnly written on the wall: “Honoring Virtue (崇德), Enkindling Light (启明), Seeking Truth (求真), Building People (树人).” The fact that its old motto is honored today shows that the Helpers’ tradition is still very much alive in many people’s mind and heart. Not only is this a token of remembrance and great tribute to the Helper Sisters, it is also a symbol of continuation of their great altruistic spirit, a sign of respect for history, for the invaluable contributions the countless missionaries of the Catholic Church had made for China.

Though the older generations of Helpers are gone, their memories are treasured forever in the hearts of many. In the schools they were once so proud of, at the Center of Associates and Friends of the Helpers and Ji Wang Association, among the Helpers of Xianxian and the Sisters of Our Lady of All Souls of Xingtai, their charisma and mission continue to live on. The new generation of sisters and the Catholic faithful, the many teachers and students touched by the Helpers are carrying on the legacy of the good Helper Sisters like Sr. Marie-Aloys. R.I.P. Sr. Marie-Aloys! Be our patroness in the presence of God!