

THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL

and the Victorian orphanage.

by Bernard Lauwyck



Orphans were of all colours and levels of society (as described by Sr. Berchmans in April 1880)

Once stood in the St. Mary's Academy schoolyard, along Turkey Lane in Roseau, a Victorian orphanage. While Victorian orphanages got a bad reputation in books like Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist", this one was, to all accounts, a well run institution with good food and excellent care. The orphanage was run by the Sisters of the Faithful Virgin, originally from La Déliverance, the Diocese of Bayeux in France. The first 7 sisters of the Congregation of the Faithful Virgin arrived in Dominica on December 8, 1857, in response to a request made by their former chaplain Michel Vesque (2nd Bishop of Roseau 1855-1857). They were also called "the Sisters of Our Lady of Orphans" as they opened in 1848, during the Irish Famine, the first Catholic orphanage for girls in England since the protestant reformation .

In Bishop Moris' "History of the Diocese of Roseau" we read "*Whilst attending to the material side of the Cathedral, Bishop Poirier (3th Bishop of Roseau 1858-1878) did not lose sight of the moral needs of the parish. Various pious societies were established for men and women; schools were opened according to means.*

But there remained the waifs and strays, the poor orphans, who had nobody to care for them. Having at his disposal the Sisters of Our Lady of Orphans, he was determined to build an orphanage in Roseau in order that the poorest children, deprived of their parents and of all support, might find a shelter and material care.”

I need to explain that the Victorian definition of an orphan also included children with one parent, who could not cope, and children abandoned or neglected by their family or forced out because of overcrowding at home. This is also illustrated when Bishop Poirier wrote about Edgard L’Etang. *”His father, one of the first magistrates of the island died last year and left behind, without resources, 3 boys and 3 girls, the oldest 12 years old. All these children are very intelligent, especially Edgard who is the eldest. Their mother could not care for them due to illness.”* Clearly children could be orphaned by sudden misfortune in the family or the loss of the breadwinner.

“ On May 22nd, 1866, the foundation stone was blessed by His Lordship and laid by the Governor, James Robert Logden, in remembrance of Her Majesty’s birthday. Queen Victoria kindly consented that the charitable building should bear the name of “Victoria Orphan Asylum”. His Lordship made a touching address to the several thousands assembled, among them many non-Catholics... His allocution was followed by a stirring address from the governor, praising the Bishop for his charitable initiative and wishing the undertaking a full measure of success.

A few months later the building was an accomplished fact and orphans flocked to the institution”(Bishop Moris). It seems that the religious sisters started caring for orphans long before the official opening in 1866 as we read in **“ASSOCIATION EN FAVEUR DES PAUVRES PETITES ORPHELINS D’ANGLETERRE ”** Imp. de Veuve Pagny, 1860 :

I translate from French: *“But where are the orphans? Their classroom is next to the free day-school of the sisters. There are 26 orphans , all are without shoes as the aristocracy alone in Dominica wears shoe. The small ones fray , the bigger ones embroider, sew, crochet. They are generally of good will. They do voluntary household chores but do not like to use the broom called “balay”.*

Let me introduce Aimée: she is three years of age. She is a small black girl of a very gentle nature. She has abundant black curly hair, her intelligence is precious and her character very charming, so she attracts a lot of attention.

Concerning our poor Marie Fidèle, our first orphan, she gives us worries. If you saw her, you would love her immediately! Her suffering reveals itself in her big dark eyes, full of tenderness.”

The orphans, under the motherly care of the Sisters were not only provided with food and clothes, but also taught to be clean, polite, refined of manners and useful to the community by learning some trade or other.”(Bishop Moris)

In "THE MEDICAL TIMES AND GAZETTE", published in London, we get a glimpse of the health condition of people in poverty stricken Dominica in the late 1800's, when we read that "*the food of numbers of the peasantry of Dominica stands lowest in the scale in point of nutrimental value; it is decidedly below that of the local Orphanage in the town of Roseau*" In "TWO CENTURIES OF HEALTH CARE IN DOMINICA" we read that Dr. Henry Alfred Alford Nicholls (1851-1926) had to defend "the dietary of the yaws hospital" which "*appeared less nutritious than did that of the Catholic Orphanage in Roseau*".

There was a real need for an orphanage in Dominica because in 1880 we find that the attendance increased to 60 girls, as we can read in a letter from Sr. Berchmans (see booklet Fr Mark Owen C.Ss.R.) : "*Our orphanage presently holds 60 young girls, most of them taken from among the Caribs.... also one little white girl of eight* "

The education of the orphans was intended to train young girls to get jobs with the better-to-do families. Bishop Moris wrote "*those poor girls, once out of the institution, had to be placed for a living in private houses as cooks, housemaids, waitresses, dressmakers, and the like.*"

This social ministry of the Diocese of Roseau was indeed an act of faith, a work of love and charity, because neither the Bishop nor the sisters received any assistance from the colonial treasury. Bishop Poirier describes in one of his LETTERS TO THE PROPAGATION OF THE FAITH the financial difficulties of this very ministry: "*Unfortunately, in the West Indies and no doubt to some extent elsewhere also, at the outset everyone is afire and aflame for a good work and contributes lavishly; but gradually the fervour cools down, and pockets remain tightly closed. Such was the case with the orphanage when it was in working order. It is with great difficulty that we can, this year, feed and clothe these poor children. Their handiwork of sewing and broderie, which need some input of materials, does not sell very well. There is no wealth in Dominica. Two of our religious sisters went to Martinique to sell these handiworks. They succeeded, thanks to the charity of a few ladies in Martinique.*"

Sadly, the Victoria orphanage did survive less than 30 years due to the dire economic conditions in Dominica. The diocesan records read "*a hurricane struck, with all its power of devastation, the whole island of Dominica in the night between September 3rd and 4th, 1883. Not only was the town of Roseau badly hit, and did the church properties, such as the Bishop's house, the presbytery, the convent and the schools, suffer immense damage. The whole island lay waste.*"

Bishop Michael Naughten (4th Bishop of Roseau 1879-1900), successor of Bishop Poirier, decided to close the orphanage in 1891.

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