

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-19

The Gentle Sisters of Assunta

12 Road 5/35  
Petaling Jaya, Selangor  
Malaya  
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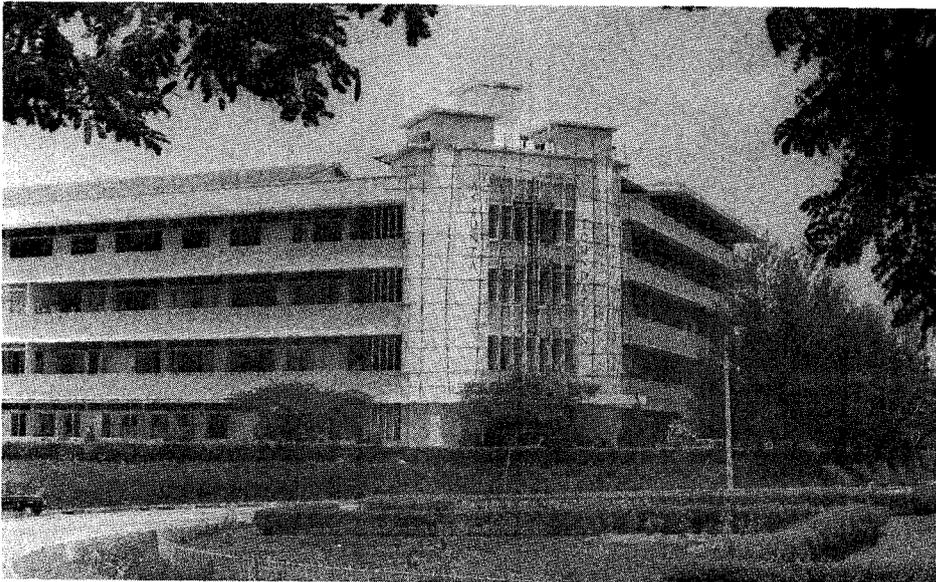
Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Early in 1954 two nuns of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary came to Malaya after being expelled from Communist China. They were joined by four others to make up a team of a doctor, a midwife, a nurse and teachers. They came to serve.

This was at the height of the Emergency, when the Briggs Plan for resettling Chinese squatters was nearly completed. The nuns decided they could be of most service by helping the Chinese in the New Villages. They set up their first clinic at Puchong New Village and one in nearby Petaling Jaya, Malaya's first new town (see GDN-1). They organized a kind of self-help medical service. Private cars were used for ambulances, the local people cooked for the nuns, and the bus-drivers let the sisters travel free when making their medical rounds. Both Puchong and Petaling Jaya were little more than masses of mud, rubber trees being felled, and wooden huts. Neither had a doctor or a school.

The newly created Petaling Jaya Authority gave the sisters land for a convent and asked them to build a primary school as well. The sisters also established a clinic especially for mothers and children. While the clinic was being built, patients were treated at home and



Assunta Foundation Hospital

deliveries were made in the parlour of the convent.

From these modest beginnings arose Assunta Foundation. Today the Foundation runs a M\$ 2 million hospital, a kindergarten, a primary and secondary school for girls, and a new secondary school for boys

This has grown out of the tireless efforts of the sisters, which have also called forth generous assistance here in Malaya and in other countries as well. The Malayan Social Welfare Lotteries gave M\$ 750,000 for the construction of the new hospital. Australia gave X-ray equipment and two operating theaters under the Colombo Plan. German Catholics gave the proceeds of a sacrificial Lenten offering. The National Catholic Welfare in New York has sent tons of milk and other food for distribution through the hospital.

For their part the sisters have organized their own lotteries, fun fairs or bazaars, and house to house fund raising campaigns. As we returned from the Assunta Fun Fair last week, we encountered sister doctor Ravet selling lottery tickets door to door with another sister. For sister Ravet this walking provided a pleasant relaxation, and her eyes betrayed a Gallic delight at what she called an invasion of the Methodist compound, a local appellation our part of town owes to its Methodist church and school.



Sister Cecilia and her mixed brood

At the Fun Fair itself we encountered one of our friends, a charming young Ceylonese-Malayan woman, president of one of the teachers' unions, and a staunch Methodist. She was selling cakes at the fair for the hospital. "I'm one of the awkward Methodists," she explained. "We're not allowed to take part in lotteries, but I still have 100 books of tickets to sell." By explaining that the fair was for the hospital, she also won the support of her school children, who helped bake cakes for sale.

In American suburbia denominations exchange baby-sitting services for religious and social functions. Here there is a gentle rivalry between the groups as they

try to raise money through fairs and lotteries; but when the appeal is for Assunta Hospital, it cuts across all divisions.

Most impressive, however, is to observe the sisters in their relations with the contractors. They stand over operations, inspect, cajole and threaten. "You remember that this money comes from the pockets of school children, and don't you try to cheat them!" In the rapid expansion of building in Malaya, standards of construction and honesty are not easy to uphold, but people who know seem convinced that the sisters of Assunta get far more for their money than does government. The comparison may not be fair, however, for government does seem to be about the least efficient purchaser of construction. There are simply too many people who stand between the contractor and the taxpayer as ultimate purchaser.

The trials and tribulations of the sisters include those of the most sophisticated and professional variety. In a recent fund-raising campaign, the appeal committee produced a small pamphlet in which something was said about Assunta offering some of the best doctors and services available. Malayan doctors reacted with proper professional indignation against this blatant violation of that section of the Hippocratic code that prohibits advertising. The committee explained that it was a lay body, and the non-clerical doctors of Assunta professed their ignorance of this phrase in the pamphlet. This satisfied the professional body and staved off the application of its sanctions, but the sisters know they must be careful not to transgress upon the sacred laws of the profession. The sisters have also been accused of stealing patients who come in search of aid. It appears that the gentle sisters are not the first, nor will they be the last, to enter into jurisdictional disputes with this most ancient and venerable profession.

The most lasting impression I have of Assunta lies in the striking contrast with its American counterpart. At the door of an American hospital, the patient is met by a glamorous, mass-produced, smiling receptionist, who takes charge of his wallet and directs him to the formidable array of highly trained, highly skilled, highly sterilized, and highly paid technicians specialized in every aspect of the art from shaking the pill bottle to lopping off part of the brain. The reception at Assunta is scarcely one of glamour, and even the uniforms of the sisters do not give a mass-produced atmosphere. In place of the high organization, there is a mild confusion that seems to emanate for a combination of a humble approach to human life and its afflictions, and a deep and selfless desire to serve. The sterility is there (Assunta doctors seem to wash their hands no less than American doctors; and we have had fewer infections here than in America), as well as the competence if medical diplomas are any criteria. There is, however, less specialization, less itemization of the minutiae of service, and certainly less of the high salaries and status distinctions that mark the American medical profession.

If it is true, as some doctors claim, that doctors still kill more people than they cure, I think I'd rather be done in by the gentle sisters of Assunta than by their more specialized and higher status American counterparts.

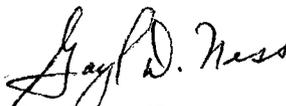
The sisters of Assunta originally came to serve the poor. Although middle and wealthy classes are not discriminated against, the original goal has not been forgotten. Of the 50,000 patients treated, 1,500 babies born, and 600 operations performed in 1961, about a third were free.

This contribution of the gentle sisters is only part of the manifestation of Christian social conscience in Malaya. American Methodists run some of the best schools in the country. The Seventh Day Adventists have excellent hospitals in Penang and Singapore; and Catholics run more schools and clinics all over Malaya. The gentle sisters of Assunta hold a special value for us because our latest son was one of the probably 2,000 babies that will be born in their modern hospital this year. However, all of the missionaries offer all of the Malaysians a lesson in the art of service.

It is primarily the Indians and Chinese who benefit directly from this missionary activity, however. Malays are by no means excluded; they attend schools and are treated in hospitals along with the rest. However, when the British intervened in Malaya in the last century, they guaranteed the Malay sultans exclusive rights to the souls of the Malays. Religious freedom is granted to all under the present constitution, but it is still technically an offense even to give a piece of religious Christian literature to a Malay. The Moslem population here is protected by law against the fervor of Christian evangelists, but they are free to partake of the social services offered.

Whatever one thinks of their theology, one cannot fail to be favorably impressed by these missionaries' interpretation of its social implications. Certainly they are doing a great deal to help Malaya realize the high level of social services toward which it is striving as a nation.

Sincerely,

  
Gayl D. Ness