

# BELO HORIZONTE

**I**N THE province of Minas Geras, in the great city of Belo Horizonte in Brazil, there is a monastery of benedictine nuns, founded in 1949 from the Abbey of Santa Maria in São Paulo. Santa Maria itself was founded in 1910, by a brazilian woman who had gone with several companions to Stanbrook Abbey in England to be trained as Benedictines. Stanbrook sent Dame Domitilla Tolhurst to be Prioress of the little foundation, and a couple of other Stanbrook nuns to support the young community. But the Prioress died on the voyage out; so that, after all, it was one of the Brazilians themselves who became the first superior. The foundation flourished from the start. As was the custom of the times, only well-educated women of portuguese descent were accepted as choir nuns; and by 1949, they were in a position to make a foundation at Belo Horizonte.

A property had been given outside the city on an arid windswept hill, just opposite a poverty-stricken shanty town, or 'Tavella', as it is called. At first, the community had quite grandiose plans, and began to build a beautiful modern monastery. However, poor soil and a total lack of water became a grave problem. The nuns hired professional diggers and probed to see if they could find water on the property. None was found, so the diggers left. Then a water-diviner was invited to see if he could find water. He walked up and down, up and down and found nothing. Then suddenly he stopped and said: 'Dig here. There is much water here'. So the diggers were summoned again and the ground prepared for the digging. Down and down they went, and still no water was found. They had almost given up when the water diviner began to jump up and down: 'Go on, go on, you are nearly there'. It was then that they struck an artesian well and the water gushed up, millions of gallons of it. There was more than enough for the needs of the monastery, so the nuns piped it to the shanty town for the poor people there.

Thus they came into contact with the poor. They shelved their plans for a grand monastery, and made the decision to live with their neighbours. They earned their living chiefly by translating books into Portuguese. Now their monastery is very much at the service of the poor. They have built a clinic on the bounds of their property, close to the shanty town, where they provide for many of the needs of the people. They teach the women house-craft, to read and write, and to care for their children. The nuns also teach the children, and provide medical and dental aid. For these purposes — since the people cannot afford the medicines prescribed — the community has set up a pharmacy in the monastery.

With the passage of time, the community decided to abandon the distinction between lay-sisters and well-born choir nuns, and to accept candidates from among the poor and unlettered. This has meant educating many of

the girls who enter the monastery; though, of course, they still have vocations from among the educated. These help their less well-endowed sisters, some of whom have proved to be very intelligent. The whole experiment has been blessed by God, and further foundations have been made, some of them in the very poor North East.

Since the first foundation in 1910, the city of São Paulo has spread itself enormously and has engulfed the Abbey of Santa Maria, which originally had a very large property. The city council considered it wrong for the nuns to own this 'park land' and forced them to sell all of it, except a very small piece of ground round the monastery. Soon high-rise flats were built all around it, cutting off the sky and fresh air, and making it the cynosure of thousands of eyes. This led to a reversal of the new trend. For when they had found a suitable property in the residential part of the city, they built a new monastery in which double grilles were set up as in the first foundation. However, when the abbess resigned a few years later, the new abbess at once had them removed, and new life has begun to flow under her leadership. She is Mother Maria Teresa Amoroso Lime, the daughter of a well-known Catholic, a member on the Vatican's Commission for Justice and Peace, and one of Brazil's few laymen who can really speak his mind on the acute social problems in the country without fear or favour.

This said, it is worth remarking that while these convents in Latin America have turned to the world around them, they have neither abandoned their religious habit, nor the divine office in choir, nor their enclosure, nor the following of the Rule of St Benedict. They are open to the needs of the Church today and of the world around them and have aligned themselves with the poor, living in great simplicity. The monastery at Belo Horizonte blazed the trail; and most of the other monasteries, not only in Brazil, but in other countries in Latin America, have followed closely after them. Thus the seed planted at Stanbrook in 1910 continues to bear fruit at the end of the century.

*The Abbess of Stanbrook*