

Biography of Mother Mary Bernadette Kispotta, DSA, Founder, Servant of God

Mary Bernadette Kispotta was born on June 2, 1878 to Mr. Puran Prasad and Mrs. Paulina Kispotta in a devout Lutheran family at village Sargaon of Mandar Block in the present Ranchi District of Jharkhand State in India and was baptised as Christ Anandit Ruth Kispotta on June 9, 1878. At the age of 12 she was christened in the Catholic faith and took the name Mary Bernadette. She had two step brothers and three step sisters. Her father was a small official called *Mokhtar* having a power of attorney at the District Court. He had also built a house at Siromtoli in Ranchi, from where his children used to go to the local schools.

Being disillusioned by the leadership of the Lutheran pastors and attracted by the liberation movement of Fr. Constant Lievens, SJ against the oppression of the landlords and the spiritual crisis of the tribal people, Mr. Puran Prasad and his family converted to the Catholic faith at the hands of Fr. Lievens himself like many other Lutherans. Mary Bernadette also accepted the Catholic faith later but only after ascertaining its originality and truthfulness.

Mary Bernadette, her two sisters Veronica and Cecilia and another girl Mary had the privilege of studying under the Loreto Sisters who came to Ranchi from Kolkata on 19th March 1890 and settled at the Red Lodge on the Purulia Road. These rural girls were highly impressed by the sanctity, simplicity, love and apostolic commitment of the Loreto Sisters and greatly desired to become Religious Sisters like them. But initially nobody understood them, not even the Bishops, Sisters and priests, that the girls had genuine vocation to live the religious life. On the contrary it was a church policy that all grown up and educated girls should get married, for vocation to the religious life was unthinkable from the nascent Catholic community. The parents of Mary Bernadette, Veronica and Cecilia and the people in their village also wanted to marry them off to live a happy family life. But these girls had no interest in marriage as they felt deeply attracted to live the religious life like the Loreto Sisters. No amount of instruction by the teachers, advice by the friends and counselling by the elders as well as scolding by the parents, beatings by the relatives and allurements of golden ornaments including the marriage proposals of handsome young men could deter the girls from their resolve to remain unmarried for the sake of Jesus. These girls had to suffer many ordeals to prove their vocation to the religious life. Mary Bernadette even had a narrow escape from her father's murderous attempt in a fit of anger and frustration. When this happened at home, Mary the fourth girl had stayed in the convent.

All this time the three girls prayed for divine intervention and sure enough God protected them through the Loreto Sisters who clearly understood what He wanted of them. So together with some Jesuit Fathers they spoke to the Archbishop of these girls' genuine religious vocation, which he readily understood and permitted them to become sodalists. Now, all the four girls became excellent sodalists of the Immaculate Virgin Mary. Soon His Grace Most Reverend Paul Goethals, SJ agreed to lay the foundations of the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Anne, Ranchi and wrote its constitutions. Finally on July 26, 1897 the four girls were admitted in this new and indigenous Congregation as postulants and on February 6, 1899 were adorned in the Congregation's indigenous dress at the investiture ceremony conducted by His Grace. Mary Bernadette writes that on that auspicious day of rejoicing their dear dad Puran Prasad also reconciled with them. She then along with her three friends did the novitiate of two years and two months under Rev. Mother Mary Imelda Mc Loughlin, IBVM, the Novice Mistress. Due to the illness of His Grace, Paul Goethals, Fr. Brice Meuleman, SJ, Superior of the Jesuit mission received the first vows of Sr. Mary Bernadette, Sr. Cecilia, Sr. Veronica and Sr. Mary on April 8, 1901. On this very day four Bengali girls from Kolkata came to Ranchi as candidates and became postulants.

Sr. Mary Bernadette and her three Sisters renewed their vows on July 26, 1901 and again next year on July 26, 1902. The same year the four Bengali girls were given the Congregation's clothing on December 8, 1902.

As providence had ordained the Loreto Sisters returned to Kolkata by January 1903 along with the four Bengali Novices who completed their novitiate at Entally, Kolkata under the Lroetos. The Ursuline Sisters of Tildonk from Belgium came to Ranchi on January 13, 1903 in the place of the Loreto Sisters and took care of the Daughters of St. Anne. Sr. Mary Bernadette and her three Sisters took their final vows on July 26, 1906 under His Grace D. Brice Meuleman.

Sr. Mary Bernadette recounts in her memoir that the Daughters of St. Anne worked with the Ursuline Sisters in many places in Chotanagpur like Ranchi, Khunti, Tongo and Rengharih to mention a few. The Archbishop sent them in groups of four or five to various places for religious instruction and general education of people.

Sr. Mary Bernadette also mentions very fondly about the spiritual pillars of her Congregation. One of them was Fr. Alphonse Scharlaeken, SJ, who was the instructor, godfather, and provider of the Daughters of St. Anne from November 1902 – April 1926. He also developed further the rules of the Congregation according to the norms of the Church. Second was Fr. Fredrick Peal, SJ, who was a teacher and like a foster father to the Daughters of St. Anne from 1926 – December 1933. By now Sr. Veronica and Sr. Mary had died of phthisis on 21st September 1921 and on 30th December of the same year respectively; so only Mary Bernadette and Sr. Cecilia celebrated the silver jubilee of the Congregation on 25th November 1922 at the Holy Mass in the Cathedral at Ranchi. Similarly, they celebrated the Silver Jubilee of their first profession on May 27, 1927 when Fr. J. Van Lemberghe, SJ, Rector of Manresa House, Ranchi was the main celebrant at the solemn High Mass in the small chapel of the convent assisted by Fr. Peal. The two Sisters also renewed their vows at mass.

Sr. Mary Bernadette with her Sisters moved to their new house five minutes walking distance down the Purulia Road now called the Mother House on October 18, 1939, while the Ursuline Sisters retained the Red Lodge bequeathed to them by the Loreto Sisters. Sr. Mary Bernadette and Sr. Cecilia also witnessed the jubilant celebration of India's Independence on 15 August 1947. By this time there were 155 Professed Sisters, 188 novices and 13 candidates of the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Anne, Ranchi.

Sr. Mary Bernadette had indefatigable zeal in administering her Congregation. But she had grown old and weak due to the tiresome work. So she handed over the reins of Congregation's governance to Sr. Dolorosa. Sr. Mary Bernadette was hard-working and prayed incessantly for the Congregation. She died of tuberculosis after a prolonged suffering on April 16, 1961. She left for the heavenly Father's abode in a peaceful and holy atmosphere with her Religious Sisters praying for her and recommending her soul to God. She had lovingly nurtured the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Anne, Ranchi like a mustard seed which grew into a huge Religious Institute through her prayers, penance, service and sacrifice for the love of Jesus.
