



## 150 Years of the Sisters of Mercy in Longford

In 1831 the religious order of The Sisters of Mercy was founded by Catherine McAuley in Dublin.

- 11<sup>th</sup> April 1861 five Sisters of Mercy from the motherhouse in Baggot St Dublin arrive in Longford and live at Keon's Terrace.
- 1861 Sisters taught primary school children at St Joseph's school in their house at Keon's Tce. Sisters set up Our Lady's Senior Academy for girls also at Keon's Tce.
- 1869 Three sisters leave Longford to open a new foundation, St Michaels, at Newtownforbes at the request of Lord Granard.
- 19<sup>th</sup> April 1874 Sisters take up residence in their newly built convent on St Joseph's Rd (Convent Rd) Longford.
- 1874 Our Lady's senior school St Joseph's Road.
- 1878 At the request of the Board of Guardians of the Workhouse three sisters move in to the Workhouse to help care for the poor and suffering living there.
- 1886 St Joseph's National School opened on St Joseph's Road
- 1880 Four sisters found a convent in Mohill at the invitation of Dean Eivers
- 1899 Mercy sisters ministered in The House of Industry set up by Bishop Hoare in the McGoey Hall.
- 1900 four sisters from Longford go to Edgeworthstown to found St Elizabeth's Convent and national school.
- 1911 celebration of the golden jubilee of the foundation of Convent of Mercy in Longford.
- 1927 Mother Magdalen purchased Featherstone House and farm in Ardagh and set up Ardagh College of Home Economics.
- 1944 at request of Bishop McNamee three sisters are appointed to the catering and nursing staff of St Mel's College.
- 1954 Sr Calasanctius the first religious appointed as Matron of St Joseph's Hospital
- 1957 New national school, St Joseph's opened on the Dublin Road. It was extended in 1975.
- 1958 Five sisters from Longford convent at the request of the Pallotine Fathers went to Ely, Nevada, USA and set up the Mission of Our Lady of Lourdes.
- 1961 Scoil Mhuire a new secondary and boarding school opened on the Convent Road, it was extended again in 1977.
- 1962 four Sisters of Mercy went to minister in The Little Flower Parish and Grade School in Reno, Nevada, USA.
- 1970s '80s '90s the Sisters were deeply involved, with many volunteers from the community and the help of the Public Service in setting up: the Social Services, Meals on Wheels, Longford Hospice Homecare, Ladies Club at Teallach Iosa and with our priests as members of the parish pastoral team.
- 2010 the Sisters end their service as teachers in our primary and secondary schools.
- 2011 Celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coming of the sisters to Longford and publication of an illustrated history detailing the many and various heroic, pioneering and inspirational works of the Sisters of Mercy in Longford and far beyond.



Sr. Dorothy brings flowers to the altar at Mass.



Bishop Colm O'Reilly pictured with Sr. Rosario and Niamh Mahon.



Sr. De Chantal showing the archives to Mrs. Bohan, Gretta Donlon, Marion Duffley and Betty Donagher.

# "The quality of mercy ...

... is not strained.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven,  
Upon the place beneath.  
It is twice blessed.  
It blesseth him that gives  
and him that takes"

### ■ PATSY FITZMAURICE

I'm told I was about three years old when I first saw a Sister of Mercy! I don't remember. In my boarding school years a dear old nun loved to remind me of the little drama. Two nuns, eyes downcast, hands swallowed up in wide sleeves, made their way from St. Elizabeth's Convent in Edgeworthstown to the local church. Fascinated perhaps, by their garb, I proceeded to run in front of them, and, looking at them in childish wonder, ran down the street announcing "nuns, nuns"! The drama, I'm told, was repeated, until, to their immense relief I'm sure, they reached the sanctuary of the church!

So it began my long association with the Sisters of Mercy. When I came to first year in September 1958 I had already experienced the care and commitment of the nuns, as we referred to them back then. My sister and I were prepared for county scholarships when our circumstances were difficult, to ensure our secondary education. We were assisted with provision of uniforms and other necessary items to get us launched in secondary school, all so discreetly done.

I clearly recall the big wrought iron arch then hanging invitingly over the gates, on what was then Convent Road, bearing the words Clochar na Trócaire. It was behind those gates I learned....determination and self discipline, developed and matured and blossomed under the watchful, caring eyes of the nuns, though I may not have appreciated it then. Like Caesar when he entered the city of Zela (Turkey) "Veni,Vidi,Vici".

Tomes have already been written about the great works of the nuns in Longford when times were hard and life was tough. What impressed me? The little un-noticed kindnesses remain with me to this day.... the nun, long since dead, who, noticing my gym-slip down to my heels, (some things don't change!), took me aside and in two minutes had moved the shoulder buttons, not a word spoken.

Their vast knowledge of their subjects, their skill in music and art and craft, but above all, their commitment to delivering the best all round education one could wish for and for no personal financial reward. Sufficient to add that they prepared generations of girls to face the world, equipped with faith and morals

and confidence and education, the best of everything they believed in. The nuns who taught us were mines of information. It was the age of pen and paper so all their work, when prepared, was written by hand. I often recall my late Latin/English teacher, her love of God and prayer and learning and teaching and us and languages....."and still they gazed and still the wonder grew, how one small head could carry all she knew". I remember her fondly still.

When the boarders joined the nuns for mass at 7 a.m. the nuns had already spent time in church chanting their 'Office'. Through my child eyes I saw an intriguing sight. At the top of the chapel knelt the postulants in their neat black dresses and pretty bonnets. Behind them were the white-veiled novices, heads reverently bowed, all watched over by the professed nuns and mothers in habits so different from today's sisterly attire. Church was a solemn place where levity was frowned upon and punishable at a later stage. The galleries lent themselves to hide and seek! I think lack of realization, not unbelief, made some of us disrespect the holy place. Now I can say with W.B. Yeats in his "Ballad of Fr. Gilligan", "Oh! God forgive, my body spake, not I "Prayer was at the heart of the nuns' commitment as they embraced Catherine McCauley's words" Prayer is a plant, the seed of which is sown in the heart of every Christian".

The nuns who looked after the boarders had a formidable task in dealing with ninety girls full of the joys of youth and living. Supervision for "us" was provided by a Rota of nuns at meals, recreation study and bedtime. At study the sister on duty sat silently at her desk correcting copies or preparing the next day's lessons but missing none of the side shows enacted throughout the hall. Some struggled with the weekly essay, e.g. "Faces in the Crowd" with "hand cold as a scribe in Winter" (Seamus Heaney) while whispers brought the sister supervisor rustling past unexpectedly "vapouring into her breviary". We did not appreciate it then but her sole business was to ensure each student worked to her full potential. All the day's happenings were up for discussion at night in the dormitories, where the rule of silence was supposed to be obeyed. Like Nicodemus in the bible on his night visit to Jesus, secret appointments were kept after lights out. This caused the sister on duty many a restless night. Perhaps the nuns brought the discipline of the convent to the boarding school but with the purest of motives. As the Dalai Lama said "this world is not perfect, there are problems...there is always a positive side to life"

My favourite part of the day was to escape from

study and stand outside the little chapel to listen to the sweet voices chanting....so aptly described by John O'Brien in "the Parish of St.Mel's".

*"How sweet the maidens voices ring while to and fro  
the censers swing  
And incense fills the air.  
Adown the convent chapel aisle the sisters kneeling  
file and file  
Show all that's noble, pure and good in radiant  
valiant womanhood"*

The nuns made a major contribution to life in Longford, nursing, furthering education, visiting the sick and bereaved, caring for the poor and underprivileged where needed, in the grim harsh realities of the fifties and early sixties. They did not spare themselves. We are eternally indebted to them. Their school was a haven of prayer and learning. That is how I remember them looking back.

The five years passed in a flash and in a little over a decade I returned to teach in their convent primary school, that fine establishment on the Dublin Road. Once again I witnessed the sisters works of mercy in their attention to the children in their care, providing hot lunches in school and clothes and footwear too if needed while delivering a quality education with commitment and enthusiasm.

In celebrating one hundred and fifty years recently with the nuns I accepted the invitation to visit the convent. I can best express my sentiments in quoting from "The Chapel" (William O'Brien, "Irish Fireside Hours")- "To kneel and pray in the same chapel, on the same bench, where one knelt more than half a century before, is an uncommon experience. An unearthly one as well, for the congregation of that day has vanished into the graveyard under the windows".

Later, in the little cemetery nearby, I recalled the May Procession and the Rosary and I had something of the sadness of a veteran wandering over a battlefield ... but not a sensation of gloom ... for the sisters rest awhile but their legacy remains. One can apply the epitaph of Sir Christopher Wren, designer of St.Paul's Cathedral..."Reader, if you seek their (his) monument, look around you".

From "The Book of Uncommon prayer":  
Dear God, if the first woman you ever made was strong enough to turn the whole world upside down, all alone, ought not women together be able to turn it right side up again".



Sr. Beatrice and Mary Rose Donoghue pictured at the 150th Celebrations.



Sr. Elizabeth McNamee, former Principal of Scoil Mhuire.



Sr. Rosario, (aged 103) pictured with Fiona Lawlor at the 150th Celebration.