

DMJ Memories

Sr Sheila Barrett.

My novitiate was in Herne Bay, Kent from 1976 to 1979.

There were two communities. One for the older sisters, which faced the sea front, and the novitiate house (no. 56) which was opposite the main house and was separated by two interconnecting gardens.

Srs Mary John, Mary Columba, Mary Bridget, Ambrose, Ogilvy, Monica and Mary Monica, Celine, Bridie and Mary Jude lived in the sea front houses and Mary Veronica, (our novice mistress) Jennie, Pat and myself lived in no. 56. Margaret joined us a year or so later.

Sr. Mary Bridget was a lovely Kerry woman, who was semi invalided. She had an evening ritual of dousing her bed with Lourdes water held in a large plastic container and then taking a swig from it and intoning 'For the Holy Souls' before she settled for the night. She talked with affection about the community in Coalville, which unfortunately had to close.

Sr.Ogilvey had a budgie she named 'Hernie Bay' He was her trusted friend and from time to time she would be seen walking along the sea front, with Hernie in his cage, both delighting in the tangy sea air.

Mary John would regale us with stories from the old Coloma and Scarborough, Labour in Vain and other places in which she had made her mark. She was often the source of giggles, especially during Evening prayer. Eventually Mary John took over the running of the Holiday house, on the sea front.



Sr. Celine

My first impression of Sr. Celine was that of a small teddy bear in a nun's habit, with snow white hair, pink cheeks, wrinkle free skin and twinkling blue eyes that matched the colour of her scapula. Her veil was always a bit askew and she almost always had a mischievous grin. One arm was always crooked with her hand on her hip as if she was thinking, or waiting for something to happen. She told one funny story after another, about Doneraille in Cork, where she was born, and Denny her brother and Mary Ita, her half sister, not to mention her former pupils in Scarborough and the nuns who taught her as a child. Celine was baptised with whisky, as she was premature. She was proud of being a Corkonian and certainly lived up to all that is attributed to those that hail from that part

of the world. She was most loving and had a big heart. She taught me much about religious life and shared unselfconsciously her own spiritual life.

One Holy Thursday, the novitiate decided to enact the Passover, to which all the community were invited. Everyone was asked to dress up. I don't think I saw anything so funny as Columba and Celine arm in arm with their dressing gowns on and tea towels over their veils, both with staff in hand, picking their way across the garden. They were followed by Mary John and Ogilvy likewise attired. That should have been a warning as to what was to happen....As the youngest present I had to recite my designated line, but it was interrupted with a loud snort from deep within when I caught sight of Jennie and Pat. We collapsed into uncontrollable giggles which spread rapidly amongst the sisters but it stopped short of Mary Veronica! I'm afraid the memory of the event stayed with us into the service in church that night as we tried hard to keep our shoulders still... to no avail.

I had entered on March 19th and Jennie around Pentecost. Jennie was inspired by the Charismatic movement, of which I knew nothing. I don't think she would mind me mentioning that once she burst into tears at the thought of Jesus being kept in a tabernacle. I was alarmed at first. I remember Jennie telling us that her mum went to Lourdes specifically to pray for her daughter to leave the Ladies of Mary!

Later that summer, a group of sisters arrived with someone from Middlesbrough who was interested in joining the novitiate. Maria, Jen, Phil and Cathleen had driven down with Pat. She blew in wearing a long hippy style dress and her long hair down her back. She may or may not have had sandals on. She made a dive for the toilet as she had been car sick. She gave the impression of owning the place. I didn't like her one bit and she liked me even less. Despite the culture shock she had received in meeting Jennie and myself, Pat did join us.

I don't think Mary Veronica or the community knew what hit it for a long while. One day when I found Pat crying in her room, I decided I did like her, quite a lot in fact! From then on novitiate life could not be described as dull.

One summer's night we were wakened by unusual sounds of cracking and popping and banging. The air was acrid and hot. We looked out over the garden to see the sky a bright orange, pink and yellow. We tore over to the community only to find firemen all over the place. Then one big beefy man came down the stairs with Sr Ambrose in his arms. She looked so tiny and not quite sure what was happening. Mary Columba was worried about the Blessed Sacrament and was looking for the tabernacle keys. Bridie, we learnt, had put her knickers on, and was desperate to get her money. The amusements arcade, which was only a few yards in front of us down a slope, was in flames and it was feared the wind might blow the fire up to the houses.

Sr Bernadette Lecluyse was a member of the General team, responsible for formation. She introduced us to the riches of Ignatian spirituality. I remember her telling me to 'cut off my head' when I prayed. I'm grateful for her generous and wise guidance.

We attended the Canterbury Franciscan Study Centre for theology and spirituality lectures. It says a lot that one of the few pieces of information I retained was Fr Eric Doyle o.f.m., telling us about his hamster called Norah, spelt 'Gnawer' which he

wrote on the board. I can't remember what the theological link was with Gnawer. Another was about Toad in the Wind in the Willows, when he experienced something strange in the woods, like Awe. Eric also shared that he had malignant melanoma and didn't expect to live too much longer.

I'm grateful to Mary Veronica and all those women who were part my initial formation into the Daughters of Mary and Joseph.



The Herne Bay Novices and their "Jumelles" from other Provinces in 2001.

Anna Mary, Sheila, Margaret, Dona, Jennie
Pat, Agnès Phillips