

## The Calling: memories of a very special time

### Minnie Day (O'Neill)

Two roads diverged in a wood and I,  
I took the one less travelled by  
And that has made all the difference'

This quote from Robert Frost's poem The Road Less Travelled means a great deal to me because I had the privilege of walking a road less travelled for fifteen happy and fulfilled years.

This road was the congregation of the Ladies of Mary, now known as the Daughters of Mary and Joseph, founded by Canon Van Crombrughe in 1817.

When I first visited Castlecor in Longford Ireland, Mother Mary Kevin took me for a walk. It was a perfect May evening in 1956. Ahead of us was a long, country road surrounded by peaceful green trees and the background sound of bird song and farm animals. (A million miles away from my noisy, bustling inner city Dublin!) As we strolled, Mary Kevin began to hum the song 'Keep Right on to the End of the Road' and this led us to discuss the lyrics and share and meditate using the road as a metaphor for our journey through this chosen way of life. Mary Kevin also talked about the founding of the congregation and the spirit of Constant Van Crombrughe which in essence was prayer, love, service, gratitude and joy.

This was a pivotal and precious moment for me. I was only 15 years old but that experience on the Castlecor Road has always stayed with me. Even now in my 70s when feeling a little lost or insecure I revisit that memory, hum the song, refocus and carry on.

This was the beginning of my spiritual journey with the Ladies of Mary. Living and learning with a group of people who had the same ideology was a great privilege and blessing. The support and love through the happy times, sad times and very uncertain times, was and still is a great comfort to me.

My particular journey began in Dublin at the Easter Vigil Mass in Our Lady of Lourdes church in Sean McDermott Street. I felt, with an absolute certainty, that I wanted to dedicate my life to Christ as a nun. This was very strange, as unlike most people who entered convents in that era, I had never been taught by nuns nor had I much personal contact with them. In fact I was the first in our neighbourhood and parish to choose this way of life so in this case God certainly worked in mysterious ways! When I told my family that I wanted to be a bride of Christ one of my sister's quipped 'Great! That will make me His sister-in-law!'

My first encounter with the DMJs was in a hostel in Seville Place. The hostel was run by Mercy Nuns as temporary accommodation for Sisters travelling through Dublin. I was on a mission to find out how to go about becoming a 'nun' so I dragged my pal 'Straw Brains' around the convents of Dublin. We rung the bell and a Mercy nun dressed all in black came to the door. Before we had time to tell her why we were there, lo and behold walking down the stairs were Sisters Peg Rahilly (Mary de Fatima), Agnes O'Shea and Teresa Berry. They seemed really cheerful so I asked to speak to them. Apart from the attractive habit, the Sisters were amazingly friendly and invited us into the parlour for a chat. Immediately, I felt at home with them. They were full of fun, laughter and goodness. Above all they listened and took me seriously. This had not been the case with some of the convents we visited. In fact a Sister of St Vincent de Paul had looked me in the eye and told me that Jesus would never call anybody from my neighbourhood to be His bride. Even for that time this was an unbelievable comment. I reminded her of some of the company Jesus kept!

After this meeting in Dublin Mary Kevin wrote and invited me to visit Castlecor. Never having been outside Dublin this trip was a real adventure. I was met in Mullingar by Sister Bernadette Hanrahan and Mary Rahilly who were very amused when I asked 'Is this the country?' Again, I was welcomed warmly and really felt the spirit of goodness friendliness and normality. I felt totally at peace and knew I wanted to be part of the community. Mother Mary Kevin gave me a very basic book about Canon Van Crombrughe and I found his life and commitment to Christ and people inspirational.

I spent a number of years in the Juniorate which was a preparation for entering the Novitiate. It also gave us the opportunity to observe and be part of the lifestyle before committing to it in a formal way. These were my first formative years in the congregation. I loved this experience and met many great people who are still part of my life. When Eileen Crowley, Collette Keegan, Olive Geraghty and I were finally accepted into the Novitiate we were joined by another group who had been out in the working world before entering the convent. This included Margaret Cussen, Miriam Daley, Jo Collins and Mary Ann Curry.

I introduced Mary Ann to the congregation. She was a civil servant in Dublin and also a member of the Legion of Mary. When I was home on holidays from the Juniorate she and another Legionary called at my granny's house and I, very enthusiastically told them about Rosary Convent. Mary Ann joined us and the rest is history. We all got on brilliantly. Ma Francis, a very unique, complex woman was the Rev Mother. She had a profound affect on all of our lives. Those of us who lived with her recognised that in spite of the difficult times, she was generous and big hearted. To this day when a group of Castlecorites get together, Ma Francis is resurrected in our memories, always with laughter and fondness.

Our days were filled with study, prayer, work and laughter. Of course there were times of doubt, conflict and searching but we always had the support of each other.

The third year of our Novitiate was spent in Forest Hill. We were the first group of novices not to be sent to Belgium. We were fortunate enough to join another group of very special



people many of whom are still my very close and dear friends. A great event was when Sister Josephine Beebwa joined us as a postulant. She was the first Ugandan to join the congregation and we were honoured to have her with us, not least because she was and is a wonderful fun

loving, spiritual and contemplative person.

Sister Mary Gertrude was our formation mistress and as well as study and prayer, she believed that we should do voluntary work in the parish. Once a week we visited lonely and elderly people and we most certainly gained a great deal from these visits.

At the end of that year we made our First vows. The ceremony was extra special because for the first time ever this was held in the parish church where we were joined by family and parishioners. It marked the end of a very special era because our close knit group were split and sent to various places including Ireland and the USA. Four of us were sent to Coloma Teacher Training College where our already great friendships were cemented.

My first job was in Kinyamasaka teacher training college. I just loved Uganda and its people. The experience here was made more special when my very close friend, Sister Francesca (Margaret King, now Frampton) came to join our small community. Teaching the students, (including Sisters Anna Marie and Donatilla who now play such an important role in the congregation) was one of the very great privileges in my life. I especially enjoyed the teaching practices when we went out to supervise the students. The schools were very basic, often without water or electricity. The teaching equipment was minimal and the teachers and students had to improvise. These young students did an amazing job. The children were a pure joy and their enthusiasm and thirst for learning was awe inspiring.

After a few years I went to Maryhill, Mbarara to teach English language and literature. Cathleen McCarthy, Mary Moran, Margaret Mary Ascott and Sarah Durkin were amongst the many people who inspired me at that time. Again the enthusiasm and desire for knowledge displayed by the pupils made teaching a great joy.

It was during this time that Idi Amin's coup took place. It was a time of violence and suffering for the Ugandan people. Soon after the coup Idi Amin came to visit Maryhill and in preparation for the visit the soldiers from the barracks in Mbarara came to show us how to greet this new leader. After the visit they suggested that some of the girls from the school should be allowed down to the barracks to entertain the soldiers. Sister Cathleen McCarthy very bravely told them this would only happen over her dead body and thankfully they didn't pursue it. It was a terrifying time for everybody .

During the school holidays I had some magical experiences in Ibanda hospital where Sisters Brigid Stokes, Francis Burke, Nora McCarthy and all the amazing staff allowed me to help (much of the time to hinder!) in the hospital. They even allowed me, with the permission of the mothers, to be present at the birth of a baby and to experience the wonder of childbirth.



When I returned to England I was based in Ladbrooke Grove and WOW! What a learning curve that was. We were a group of young women looking at social injustice and the devastation drugs were having on young people and families every single day. We wanted and did get involved but there was a dichotomy between the ideology of 'being one with our neighbours' in this very deprived area and the rules of obedience in the congregation at that time. This ultimately led to the sale of the house in Ladbrooke Grove and the decision of many of us to change direction and take time out to consider the paths we were on. I have to mention here the great influence Mona Maher had on a drug addicted parents and their two young children. Mona befriended them and made a huge difference to their lives.

Whilst living in Ladbrooke Grove, Sister Ruth, knowing that I was having doubts about 'walking the path less travelled', suggested that I spend some time in Brazil so I joined Sisters Jo Collins, my jumelle and great friend and Marguerite in Recife. This again was a blessed experience. When I arrived Ruth was visiting and we had some deeply spiritual sharings. This was really the first time I looked at the teachings and implications of our Founder and I was awe inspired.

We were living in a favella amongst the poorest of the poor. The people there were optimistic, full of faith in God and in spite of their inhumane living conditions had a great generosity and joie de vivre.

One of the highlights of my short time in Recife was meeting Dom Helder Camara, the bishop of Recife. He was under house arrest because of his liberation theology ideology. I cannot express how wonderful this man was and the suffering he endured because of the

deaths of his young priests at the hands of the junta. His faith in God and people was overwhelming and I feel so privileged to have met him. I have no doubt that his message of liberation in all aspects of life would have resonated with Canon Van Crombrugghe. That was also the message of our Founder to his followers hence his emphasis on education.

Because of my journey with the DMJs my life has been enriched. I have gone through phases of strong faith, no faith, maybe faith but this project has led me again to reflect on the sacredness of life, that precious gift which should be embraced with LOVE, JOY, HOPE AND FRIENDSHIP.

Whilst ruminating, I realised what a strong, spiritual and committed group of women the DMJs are and were. The building and running of hospitals and schools was a challenge met by Sister Sylvia Probst and many like her. Today this work is still going on with the new Coloma school in Mbarara and the St Francis Family project and university which was started by the inimitable and charismatic Mary Moran.

When Margaret Frampton, her husband Roger and I returned to Uganda seven years ago for the fiftieth anniversary we were reunited with many sisters and friends. One of the special memories was our visit to the Poor Clare Convent where we met up with some of our past students who had entered that Community. This was a great comfort and reminder that prayer is our spiritual nourishment and when we are busy with everyday life and whether we believe or not there is a whole army sustaining us. Of course this includes Sister Bernadette Lecluyse who has dedicated her whole life to embracing us all in her life of prayer.

My gratitude to Canon Van Crombrugghe is enormous. Because of this congregation which he started 200 years ago, my life and the lives of my family have been enriched. When John and I married, I decided to use my Profession ring as my wedding ring because I believe my life hasn't broken off and changed but continues on with the same ideology and the same wish to make a positive contribution to the society and community I live in.

I have been so blessed to have so many wonderful people in my life to help and guide and befriend me and I thank you all for your love and friendship throughout the years.

