

# Two Hundred Years Anniversary

Les Dames de Marie: Ladies of Mary:

Daughters of Mary and Joseph

Founded by Canon Van Crombrugghe

## My Memories

“There are no ex’s, we are one family” Sister Helen Lane

Open letter to Canon Van Crombrugghe

Dear Canon Van Crombrugghe,

I am writing to congratulate you on the religious order which you founded in 1817 of which I was a member for 14 years. You should be very proud of what has been achieved in that time. You will also no doubt be amazed at the massive changes which have taken place. The above quote refers to one such change in attitude.

The words are taken from a conversation between Helen O’Shea and Helen Lane (Superior General) and me last year round a kitchen table in Cork. We were of course discussing the compiling of a book of memories to celebrate the 200 years anniversary of the DMJ’s. I asked Helen if the ex’s would be invited to contribute. I was impressed and delighted by her quick and clear reply “There are no ex’s only one family.”

I hope you are in agreement with the words which are in sharp contrast to some of the earlier understandings. When I was a novice in Belgium one of the novices left the novitiate. We were not given any information about the ‘disappearance’ nor were we allowed to ask any questions. In those days, as the song goes “When you are ‘in’ you are ‘in’, and, when you are ‘out’ you are ‘out’.

My journey as one of your followers began in 1969. Mother Mary Frances and Sister Mary Kieran came to recruit at my school in Ballinamore. I gave my name and address and that was the beginning of a ten month correspondence. As well as letters which I always answered promptly, I received gifts in the form of embroidered pictures, medals and prayer cards. It was all very exciting and made me feel very special. I became increasingly convinced that I **‘had a vocation’**. This was confirmed during my first visit to Castlecor when my entry date of 22 August 1969 was arranged.

The two others who entered that day were, Etty Kelly and Bridget Mc Kenna. A fourth Eileen Maher joined our group of 'Jumelles' a few months later.

I cried myself to sleep every night from homesickness but otherwise was almost ecstatically happy. I loved the rituals and routine; chanting the office, meditation, spiritual reading, washing up to the count of the choirs of angels, affirmations for dressing and undressing (clothe me O Lord with the robe of salvation) silence during the day and grand silence at night, dancing round the octagon and learning the 'high call cap'. If you needed to break the silence you would say "Ava Maria, my Sister" and wait for the reply "Gratia Plena". I think that is quite sweet and respectful.

Castlecor was situated on a farm with a large orchard where one could get lost for long periods. Even to this day when I want to imagine a safe place I think of this orchard with its trees and pond and singing birds.

Once a week we had what was called 'recreation'. We all sat around a large table in the octagon and got busy mending our communal undergarments and night wear. We were allowed to talk which is probably why it was called recreation. To-day people would frown at the idea of communal underwear but for me it was not an inconvenience. I was always happy to find my un-named pile of clean and mended items on my bed on Sunday morning.



I loved the long flowing black dress and blue scapular; the complicated but comfortable head dress (serre tete and bandeau) and the collar and front piece named the 'gimpe' and finally the veil. I did not like it when we changed some years later to a more modern habit and eventually to ordinary clothes. Each postulant and novice had dedicated responsibilities, the chief of which was Sacristan. Others included laundry, the dairy and not forgetting waiting on the priest. The priest was the curate from Ballymahon who came to say mass every morning and stayed for breakfast.

We slept in dormitories varying in size from 4 to 8 cubicles. The cubicles were just large enough for a bed and a small wardrobe.

At any one time the number of postulants and novices would be around 15 with a similar number of junior aspirants plus five or six professed nuns. As a postulant I was in awe of the novices with their white veils which they pinned back when doing household chores.

Finally the day came when the 4 of us postulants became 'Brides of Christ', donned the habit and took a new name. Mine was Sister Mary Fidelma. In preparation for the head dress we had to shave off all our hair. I did grieve for my lovely long curly hair and made

sure I would never catch a glimpse of my shaved head in a mirror. However I accepted it gladly as part of the package.

Our third and final year before profession was spent in the novitiate in Belgium. There we were joined by our Jumelle's from England. This was a year of intensive study of theology and spirituality some of which took place at Louvain University. The novitiate was located in Louvain but we returned to the mother house in Brussels most week-ends.

I loved the mother house at 139 Rue Edith Cavelle. I vividly remember our first arrival. We were warmly greeted with three kisses from each of what seemed like hundreds of nuns, speaking a different language. I thought I had died and gone to Heaven. The feeling of belonging to a much larger whole was very liberating. This was especially so when we were taken to visit the other sister houses (e.g. Alost ) and received the same warm welcome.



The big mother house was filled with intrigue, not least of which was the communal baths situated in the basement. The dining room was massive with seating at table arranged in hierarchy. The superior sat at the top table, followed by the professed nuns, then the lay sisters and lastly the novices and postulants. The division between lay sisters, who did the manual work and the professionally qualified, was soon to be removed.

French was the spoken language and communication was sometimes difficult and gave rise to many giggles. In preparation for our final vows we were required to make a 'last will and testament'. Ma Mere (French speaking novice mistress) gave instructions in English as to how to complete the will. For example, she said, you can leave one part to the order and another part to your legitimate "hair's" meaning "heirs". Giggle! Giggle!

The year in Belgium ended with our first profession. There were about 14 of us, including English, Irish, Belgian and Dutch. This was also the day when we were told where our next move would be. All of the Irish and English, except me, were sent to various convents in England and allocated places at teacher training college. I was told that I would be going back to Castlecor in Ireland. I was devastated to be separated from my friends and felt that God had played a trick on me by waiting until after my vows before the announcement. Eventually my training in obedience kicked in and I gracefully accepted and spent the next 6 years in Castlecor. I was appointed teacher in the Junioriate to students preparing for GCE examinations. I had no qualification or experience but took up the challenge and managed, for the most part, to keep one page ahead of my students.

Living as a professed sister in the novitiate where the ratio of professed sisters to aspirants was 4:30. I had been the “chosen one” for this role and felt I should be grateful but in truth I felt I was always striving to live up to an image and keep in Ma Frances’s good books. If you are listening, Ma Frances I have to say that you had a mighty, kind and wonderful personality with a heart to match your size 12 shoes. The problem for me was that I felt there were unspoken expectations which left me feeling insecure. A nudge or a wink from Ma Frances from the back row of the chapel could mean “open the window” or “ring the bell”. Getting it wrong might mean you were out of favour for an hour. The silent mouthing sign “talk” filled me with terror as I desperately tried to think of something sensible or anything at all to say when 30 of us stood around in a circle the front hall to greet a distinguished priest guest.

I learned to drive the convent car in 2 short lessons from Mother de Fatima. I wonder if she remembers the ‘Zephyr’ car we had at the time. This was before the driving test was introduced in Ireland. I became the convent’s taxi driver and by some miracle drove safely. A priest whom I once picked up from Mullingar station complained to Ma Frances that I drove too fast and was a danger on the roads. No doubt that was true.

So there I was taxi driver and teacher awaiting my next move which was to University in Dublin. With Sister Eunan (Eileen Maher), Sister Constance and sister Ancilla (Agnes O’Shea) I lived in a nun’s hostel in Donnybrook. This was a very big hostel accommodating a hundred nuns from different orders in Ireland.

At the college we had a separate nun’s cloak room and were expected to keep ourselves apart. Needless to say this did not always happen. We were forbidden by the Archbishop of Dublin to attend lectures at the Protestant Trinity College.



*Reverend Mother Eulalie Glouden  
Sister Judith Glouden  
Superior General 1958-1970*

It was interesting getting to know nuns from different orders and comparing notes. I always felt that we ‘Ladies of Mary’ were more forward thinking and free spirits than the others. This was certainly what was fostered by Mother Mary Eulalie who was Superior General for many years and taken up by Ma Frances. I take it that the seeds of this freedom of spirit would have been sown by you when you first started the order.

My next move was to London. Father Colum Mc Donnell SOM persuaded Sister Danielle, who was then in charge of Castlecor, to send 3 of us (Kathleen Clancy, Kathleen Daly and me) as volunteers to set up a project for Irish Youth in

London. The project lasted 3 years and included converting a disused factory into a youth centre.

From there I moved to Ladbrook Grove and completed a one year full time training in Pastoral Counselling at Westminster Pastoral Foundation. I then followed this up with post graduate Diploma in pastoral theology at Heythrop College.

It was then suggested to me, not without reason, which it was about time I started earning some money. I found my first paid employment at The Crusade of Rescue near Ladbrook Grove and followed this up at The Catholic Children's Society in Purley where I then lived.

From Purley I moved back again to Ladbrook Grove. This time I found part time work as a barmaid in a pub in Media Vale and care worker at various nursing homes.

Ladbrook Grove community served as a type of transition for many of us. Number 152 was an ordinary large three storied house, split into dormitories and housing some 12 to 15 of us. We had a chapel and prayed together but for the most part led individual lives. With many of us in outside employment, mainly nursing with irregular hours, it became more and more difficult to maintain the discipline of community religious life. Bridget Johnson who was in charge was an intellectual and visionary but lacked leadership. This applied equally to Mary Ann Curry who succeeded her.

Rumblings of complaints about falling standards began to make their way to the provincial superior Elizabeth McCarthy. Among the complaints were of parties serving alcohol and nuns visiting local pubs and dance halls (The Gresham in Holloway Road). In the absence of hard evidence, the only thing the superiors could do was to keep an eye on us by visiting frequently. The atmosphere during these visits was always tense and conversation at meal times was strained. To break the stilly silence on one occasion the visiting superior echoed the never to be forgotten "The cabbage is lovely". With no reply from any of us she tried again with "It'll soon be Christmas". Silence again and outburst of nervous laughter. Not funny!

The inevitable eventually happened and the house was put up for sale. We were told that we would all have to move elsewhere. It was at this point that many of us had a re-think about our vocation. My feeling was that there was not sufficient difference in the lifestyle as a nun to warrant giving up my once held dream of having my own family. I decided to leave. Joining me in that decision were Minnie Day, Helen O'Shea, Marie Farelly, Betty Beecher, Mary Ann Curry, Ann Collins, Bridget Rowe and others over the course of a short space of time.

If you were to ask me what in particular led to my decision, I would have to go back several years to the introduction of the 'personal allowance'. Everyone got the same amount (£2 per week) which was to cover clothing, holidays and all personal items. The amount was adequate for some, less than adequate for others and more than adequate for a certain

percentage depending on the circumstances. Up until then, each individual's needs were met from one communal purse. This I understood to be part of the vow of poverty whereby communal responsibility for each according to their needs freed one to concentrate on more spiritual matters. To me the 'one size fits all' allowance was unfair as people's needs were different. I began to feel that our "One for All and All for One" basic value was being replaced by "Everyone for Himself". I did not realize at the time that a sound spiritual belief system is adaptable to change given time. Many years later I am finding meaning in some of the practices e.g. I use the 'breaking silence' ritual before a difficult encounter or telephone call by mentally saying "Ave Maria" and imagining a "gratia plena" response. It works magic.

Leaving the community was made easy by the fact that everyone in the house was moving. When people ask me why I left, I sometimes say that it felt more like the community left me, rather than the other way around. Minnie Day and I found a furnished flat to rent near Hampstead. We were allowed to keep our last month's earnings to get us started. We had very little belongings. Minnie got a teaching job and I worked as a receptionist and part time councillor. Later I trained as a social worker and I like to think continued my spiritual journey based on the solid foundation gained in the Community.

This brings my journey in the Order to an end. If you ask me if I have any regrets I would most positively say No! Looking back at my 14 years, my memories are for the most part very happy. I appreciate having been encouraged to develop spiritual and emotional maturity in a way that took account of each one's unique journey. It is because of this that I have been able to continue my development by becoming a spiritual healer and counsellor.

I thank you most sincerely for all that I learned and experienced during those 14 years especially for the friends both inside and outside the Order who remain my very precious family. At this point it gives me great pleasure to re-echo Helen Lane's words. "There are no ex's" and to add my own, "Love knows no boundaries."

Thank you Canon Van Crombrughe. You are a true Master and have left a trail of loving footprints. Please help us all to be true to the spirit of what you created and to continue to grow and develop in the true meaning of EDUCATION. When I reach the other side I will find you and give you three kisses in honour of all "Les Dames de Marie".

I remain

Yours in "Les Dames de Marie"

Marie Keegan

PS

Looking back over half a century to when I joined the order I feel like Rip Van Winkle who slept for a hundred years and woke up to a different world. Did I actually accept practices like "the culp" (confessing faults to the superior on bended knees every evening before

receiving her blessing); the discipline (self-flagellation); junior sisters kneeling outside the chapel after evening prayer begging for prayers from professed sisters "My dear Sister please pray for me" The model for perfect obedience was presented to us in the story of a monk who planted a cabbage upside down without question, in obedience to his Abbott. Yes, I was able to integrate these practices and teachings easily into my chosen the way of life. Maybe that is not as strange as it may seem. My identity at the time went beyond brain activity to a spiritual connection with God through Christ which the bible says (surpasses understanding). Maybe also the world today has gone too far in the other direction, needing a scientific explanation for everything. It is all about Mind, Body, and Spirit balance as retreat master Dennis Hickey said many years ago. Therefore in the words of The Desiderata, "Let us be at peace with God and at peace with our soul"

Hopefully one day we will all be able to say with Helen Lane "There are no ex's (outsiders) we are all one in God's beautiful creation.