

## Sr Mary Barbara in Croydon

Sister Mary Barbara was born Hazel Thelma Johnson on 10 April 1926 in North London and was christened in the Anglican Church some months later. Her father, born of Italian parents who had emigrated to Britain, was small in stature, a characteristic which Hazel inherited along with the Mediterranean complexion. Her Father worked for the GPO and, in due course, he became a Postmaster in London. The family moved to Sanderstead Hill in Croydon, Surrey for convenient access to his work. Although not Catholics, her parents sent her to St Anne's College, which happily was just down the road from where they lived. Hazel completed her secondary education at St Anne's in 1942 with the equivalent of 8 GCSEs and after a brief spell of office work joined the WRNS for the duration of the war.

It was during her service with the WRNS that Hazel was received into the Church, a decision strongly opposed by her parents. While serving in Scotland, Hazel was trained to service seaplane engines. On one occasion, a grateful pilot offered to give Hazel and her colleague a ride while he did a test run. They both accepted with alacrity. At the end of the war in Europe, following her discharge from the Navy, Hazel attended Stockwell Teacher Training College on the outskirts of Bromley. It says much for her fitness level that she regularly cycled from Sanderstead to the College. Having successfully graduated in 1948, she began a teaching career but soon decided to pursue her religious vocation with the Ladies of Mary (the title by which the DMJs were then known).

Known now as Sr Mary Barbara, she made her first vows in 1952, along with Sr Mary Dorothy. She taught in St Anne's Preparatory School in Sanderstead and in Regina Coeli Primary School in South Croydon from 1952-58. After just one year in Scarborough, she returned South to Coloma Preparatory School in Tavistock Rd, Croydon from 1959 - 1964., with Sr Mary Constance as her headmistress. Her small stature ensured she was assigned to teach the Reception class. Being so artistic, her classroom was a joy to behold and she proved an extremely gifted teacher. . For one year she was Headmistress at St Winefride's Preparatory School in Mayow Rd, Forest Hill.

After that, Sr Mary Barbara moved to Shirley Court. For some years she had suffered from Rheumatoid Arthritis and it became particularly acute at this stage in her life. It was therefore decided that she would teach only part-time, mainly Form 1(year 7) as well as studying for a Diploma in Education at the London School of Education.

In 1969 she commenced a two year M.Ed. programme at the University of Keele. Sr Mary Anselm, also from the Shirley Court Community, was then in her final year at Keele and the two shared a basement flat on the Keele Road, conveniently near the University. For the second year of her course, whilst researching her thesis, Sr Mary Barbara stayed with the Benedictine Community of nuns at Oulton Abbey, near Stone. She thoroughly enjoyed being with them and they in turn made her extremely welcome. In subsequent years, she often returned to make her annual retreat at the Abbey.

Following her graduation in 1972 she returned to Coloma where she taught Sixth Form Religious Studies and Geography to the Lower School. She was also Head of First Year during the latter part of Sr Mary Cuthbert's time as Head of Coloma.

## Sr Barbara in Cornwall

In 1967, at the request of the Parish Priest at Lanherne, the Ladies of Mary Community (now known as the DMJs or Daughters of Mary and Joseph) from Shirley Court, Croydon, began holding a Summer School for Catholic children from RAF families residing at St Eval. The RAF allowed them to use the Families Centre there and also provided transport for Catholic children living on the St Mawgan Airbase.

Sr Barbara was in charge of the Catechetical programme that was provided during those two weeks. For the next 10 years, the 'Summer School' was a regular feature for North Cornwall Catholics, providing instruction for 50-70 children from 5-15 yrs of age.

In the afternoons, the Sisters visited the families of the children attending the classes.

In 1975 the Sisters moved into a house in Trenance, Mawgan Porth, with Sr Barbara, as she was then known, as one of the Community. Her particular responsibility was the organisation of Religious Instruction groups in Padstow, Wadebridge, Lanherne, Newquay, Newlyn, Truro, St Mawes and Carlon Down. In this she was assisted by the other members of the Community. Barbara played the organ for the weekly Mass in Padstow and also attended flute and guitar lessons. These newly acquired skills were particularly useful in liturgies for young people. She was also a talented artist and learnt to write icons as a form of prayer.

Over the years Sr Barbara helped train many lay people as Catechists and assisted individual mothers of families, living in very isolated hamlets or farmsteads, to catechise their own children. She regularly visited a family in *Ruanlanihorne* - a distance of 21 miles from Padstow - to give instruction to the children of a large family there. Sr Barbara provided advice on suitable workbooks and worked closely with the Diocese. She was appointed Religious Education Adviser in the Diocese and also developed close links with the Anglican diocese of Truro. The Cornwall Council of Churches was always pleased to welcome the Sisters to the Church Tent at the Royal Cornwall Show. and in 1984, Sr Barbara was presented to Prince Charles when he visited the Tent.

In addition to her catechetical work, Sister Barbara was a regular visitor at the Mount Edgecumbe Hospice in St Austell.

The CWL came regularly to the Convent for days of recollection given by Sr Barbara in Mawgan Porth and - after 1985 - to the Convent in Padstow. Sister also gave weekend retreats at the Convent to groups of Sixth Form boys from St Boniface's College in Plymouth. In addition, she organised weekends for young people from Truro, Penzance, Bodmin and her own local parish. Sr Barbara also acted as spiritual director to a number of clergy, both Catholic and Anglican. A highlight for Sr Barbara in 1987 was the invitation to the ordination at Buckfast Abbey of a young man who used to come for retreats at the Convent at Trenance.

On the 8th January 2015, after forty years of ministry in the County, Sr Barbara reluctantly left Cornwall. Her increasing ill-health and frailty necessitated her move to the community for elderly Sisters in West Wickham, Kent. Eventually she settled in her new community, although she always yearned to return to Padstow. The view of the green fields and horses from her bedroom window proved no substitute for that of the Padstow Estuary and the Atlantic Ocean and she missed the extensive involvement in Parish life.

Her final illness was very brief, lasting a mere two days. On the Tuesday she was unwell. She appeared to have recovered on Wednesday and, on that day and Thursday, was well enough to go out in her wheel chair and visit the Rose Garden. There, Sister duly inspected the fish pond, which she always liked to visit, and then did two circuits of the Convent garden.

On Friday a.m. when the carers arrived to give Barbara her shower she was too weak to stand and had to sit while they showered her. They put her to bed and it was immediately apparent that she was dying and would not last the day. Her face became suddenly just like a skull. She complained of pain in her legs and so, when the doctor came, he prescribed an injection to calm the legs. After the injection she was much more peaceful. Fr James arrived around 4 p.m. to anoint her. Sister joined in the Our Father and responded to all the prayers. About five p.m. she drifted into semi-consciousness. She did not speak again but just occasionally moved her hand. About 9 p.m. her breathing gradually became more and more shallow. At 10.35 p.m. her breathing ceased. There was no struggle, she just slipped away. It was a most tranquil death.

May she rest in peace.

+++++