

Postulancy and Novitiate time in Mbarara

It was September 1973 when I said good bye to my parents in Rukinga about 30 miles from Mbarara to enter the then Ladies of Mary Convent. The Image is still vivid in my mind. I was carrying my suitcase on my head while holding a bag full of books and teaching apparatus. Approaching Maryhill Liz McCarthy appeared driving to Mbarara town. She must have guessed who I was. She stopped, asked my name put me in the car and drove me to the Convent. She was a God send.

Up to the Convent we went. Sarah Durkan who was to be our Novice Directress, Margaret Mary Ascott, Cathleen McCarthy, Eileen Maher, Mary Moran, Katie (Matthias) and Helen Lane who were teaching and working at Maryhill came for lunch just as Liz and I were arriving. I was ushered into the dining room for lunch.

I felt overwhelmed as it was my first time to be with such a big group of nuns. But what struck me and remained with me was the overwhelming joy which was reflected on their faces and in their conversation, they were a little bit noisy but very Jolly. People had warned me I might be sent back home because I was wearing a mini dress, yet all the dresses I had were mini so I had no choice. I was received as I was and that calmed my fears. The challenge I faced was to try to use a knife and fork for lunch that day. I observed how others were handling those utensils but it was not easy. I was aware some sisters were watching and that made me nervous until boldly Katie came and literally made me hold them properly. It was a bit embarrassing but I was better for supper and I soon became an expert in using a knife and a fork.

Donatilla came in the evening of the same day and that made things easier. We were received on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, 14th September after a week. We then moved from Emmaus to one of Maryhill staff houses. It was Sarah, Mary Moran, Donatilla and myself.

Sarah and Mary had a room each and Dona and I shared a double bedroom. But we did not stay alone all the time. Some of the days we had to mind Karoli, Mary Moran's adopted son whose mother had died at his birth. His father who was a catechist in one of the Parishes brought him to us one morning. He was about 5 months old, healthy and lovely. He was brought to us to mind for weekends and it was a delight. During the week, he was minded by some of the students at Maryhill who were taking Home Economics. We also used to have many visitors because of Karoli! Since this was the first ladies of Mary novitiate in Uganda, all was new both for the sisters and for us postulants.

President Idi Amin had taken over the Government 2 years earlier and things were becoming harder by day. Essential commodities like food, soap, salt, sugar and flour had to be rationed and the only few shops in which they were found were Indian shops in Mbarara town. Petrol too was scarce. We baked our own bread. Because of scarcity and costs we sat as a

community and each of us decided what we should give up. Dona gave up bread for sugar and I gave up sugar for bread. Since then, I do not care for sugar. I do not remember what Sarah and Mary gave up but each gave up something

After a year and a half, we moved into the Annex of Emmaus community which became our novitiate. Mary Kizito joined us then. Mary was a secretary at Maryhill but left after her novitiate. We had meals with the community but had our recreation in the Annex ourselves. Sarah too slept in the Annex. Time for bed was 10.00 pm but sometimes we stayed up late chatting. We knew Sarah was deaf in one ear and we made sure to find out on which side she liked to sleep at night so we could stay up late. Dona and I joined the students at Maryhill for Home Economics and needle work classes. We also joined the choir and the Legion of Mary and we used to go out to villages to visit the sick and help the poor. It was a very enriching time for us. In actual fact we all three had a wonderful time. While in the Novitiate, we were encouraged to communicate with other novices in other countries like Jennie and Sheila Barrett in England and some 3 others in California who have left since.

I look back in awe and gratitude for all my formators those still living and those who have gone to God. I was very happy to visit Sarah in August 2014 and what was still vivid in her mind was novitiate time. When I reminded her of some of the fun we used to have, she



reminded me that one of the novices had left before her first vows and that was Mary Kizito. That she could remember is still a mystery to me!

The learning which I still hold precious when I look back to those years is that what Sarah kept emphasising for us was not the Canon law or any other rule but putting mercy into practice by welcoming an orphan in our formation place and reaching out to the disadvantaged. We had not even started learning about our charism.

Anna Mary