

TWO HUNDRED YEAR ANNIVERSARY
LES DAMES DE MARIE: LADIES OF MARY: DAUGHTERS OF MARY AND JOSEPH
FOUNDED BY CANON CONSTANT WILLIAM VAN CROMBRUGGHE

Diana Walsh (Crowley: Sister Mary Timothy)

In January 1962 at the age of seventeen I left home and entered the convent at Forest Hill



Novitiate. I was very much influenced by the kindness and dedication of the Ladies of Mary at Merrow Grange Convent School in Guildford which I attended in my secondary years. My father cried when leaving me but I did not feel sad, only excitement at the prospect of giving my life to God. This was therefore a sad but momentous occasion as we were not allowed to see family again for some time. It was an understandable wrench for all of us. However I was very excited at the prospect of the life ahead.

Soon, my time was taken up with the daily routine of looking after a large house and gardens, prayer and religious studies. I spent some of the day gardening, a task I loved as I was out in the open air. One older nun used to say that the house was as tall and clean as heaven.

As postulants our clothes consisted of a simple white blouse and black skirt which did not impede activities. Later, as novices we wore long black dresses, a blue scapular and white veil. In preparation for this stage of the Novitiate we had all our hair cut off and our heads shaved. Again, I just accepted this as part of the life we had chosen. Soon after this we were introduced to the discipline which was a form of self flagellation. I thought this was a step too far and I remember crying and wondering what my father would think of this practise. I never told my family what it entailed. Fortunately, this practice was stopped as one of the changes made by the Vatican council. We were also required to relinquish our names and choose a religious name instead. I took the name Mary Timothy after my father. We used to tuck up the long skirt and pin the hems together in order to make the outfit more manageable. I found this all rather cumbersome but soon got used to it, especially when playing early morning tennis.

On special feast days we were allowed coffee instead of the usual tea. Instead of cups and saucers we drank from jattes which were large bowls. This was the Belgian custom which we came to accept as the norm.

Around this time, a group of us travelled into London to attend special scripture lectures in Harrow –on-the Hill. This was quite an experience for a group who were used to such a sheltered way of life, especially as we were quite struck by the young good looking priest who delivered the lectures!

In the third year we were joined by a group of novices from Ireland as three of the original group had been sent to Belgium. We all got on very well with the Irish group and enjoyed their humour and company.

After lunch each day we spent an hour of recreation together when we were allowed to talk while undertaking something constructive such as sewing or mending garments. Some of my time was spent making and sewing habits, a task I really enjoyed.

Sometimes Mother Mary Gertrude, the novice mistress, read or played classical music. As I was a chatterbox I always enjoyed this time. When we wanted to say something important we had to say 'Ave Maria' and finish with the words 'Gratia plena'.

We often went for walks around the surrounding urban area of South London. We walked in pairs or small groups. I missed the wide open spaces and trees of Surrey as I had been brought up in the countryside most of my life.

For a few years we regularly visited the elderly. Again we went in pairs. I usually visited with Sister Francesca (Margaret King, Frampton). On one occasion we visited an old dear who insisted on giving us a drink of bitter lemon. I cannot drink it today without thinking of these occasions. The conditions under which these people lived was quite an eye opener for us. The houses were often sparse, dirty and untidy. One year we were sent to help at a Sue Ryder residential centre. Margaret and I spent two weeks at a centre in Ampthill for disabled people. Whilst there we were invited to the wedding of two wheelchair bound residents. We thoroughly enjoyed this visit and remember it to this day.

After three years in the Novitiate our group became 'brides of Christ' and took part in the profession ceremony by making our first vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. After this our group was split up and we went our different ways. It was decided that I should go to the Orders teaching college in West Wickham, Kent. I was not particularly enthusiastic about this direction but again accepted it. The breaking up of our large group was difficult as we thought of everyone as real family, knew each other's family members and took a really close interest in goings on.

I enjoyed the freedom of the teaching college as I was able to participate in the wider activities offered by my two chosen subjects, biology and art. One memorable biology field trip was spending a week in Shropshire taking part in messy tasks such as pond dipping, walking through undergrowth and generally getting very wet and muddy...all this wearing the long black habit and veil.

During this period we spent lovely holidays together. My favourite holiday destination was staying in a place called Ravenscar in an isolated old house on the cliff tops near Scarborough in Yorkshire. We did some marvellous walks around the spectacular cliffs and neighbouring countryside.

After completing three years at college I was sent to Shirley near Croydon where I taught biology and religion at St. Thomas More secondary school.

As our final profession advanced a group of us decided to have a year out and ultimately left the order. I was given one small suitcase and a small amount of money. I spent a year working as a volunteer at a rehabilitation centre for drug addicts in Kings Road Chelsea. During this period I lived in a hostel in Gower Street so had to travel across central London. While working at the centre I decided that I wanted to take a course in youth and community work and applied to Westhill College near Birmingham. I then made the decision not to return to the Ladies of Mary.

I would like to thank the Founder for the friends and love I received during my seven years with the Order. Also for the opportunity of living together with a group of like minded people and learning the importance of kindness and consideration for others. A group of us still meet up regularly and have many a laugh together. We are still very much a family and appreciate the time we have spent getting to know each other. Thank you.

Diana Walsh (Crowley)
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