

Memories from Alison Philbey.

In the beginning ... there was a Daughter of Mary and Joseph! Literally, because I was delivered by midwife Sister Mary-Antonella (Sr Sylvia) in July 1959, before she went to Uganda to run the mother and baby clinic. But, for my mother, this was not the beginning because she had been to school at Coloma – from the Kindergarten through to the last year of secondary education. Later, my sister was to go to Coloma. She was named after Sister Mary-Antonella because a name had already been chosen for me. All through my childhood and teenage years I remember Sister Mary-Antonella coming to see us when she was on leave from the missions. I would sit and listen attentively as she told of the progress of the clinic, her views on the “Nestle Scandal” and, later, also of the terror of the brutal Idi Amin regime. Her accent (she was Swiss), her humour and her almost overwhelming enthusiasm for her vocation, not only as a DMJ, but also as a midwife and an educator in this line, enthralled me and captured my imagination.

Meanwhile, my sister and I had daily contact with the DMJ’s who taught us at Regina Coeli: Sister Marie Paula (Headmistress), Sister Mary Michael and Sister Mary Goretti who was my sister’s first teacher and of whom we are both very fond. I had immense respect for Sister Marie Paula, who was later to be the Provincial Superior I visited to talk about my own vocation; she was there all through my life until she died and I always felt that she was there for me, despite the fact that she was also there for so very many other people, not least of all the whole English Province of DMJ’s! For a period of time Sister Mary Veronica was Headmistress at Regina Coeli, when Sister Marie Paula was unwell. This was my first encounter with the Sister who was to become my Novice Mistress just 13 years later! I kept in touch with her after I left the DMJ’s until she was too ill to correspond and, even to this day, I remember her wisdom and the wisdom of the Founder which she imparted to me. She was hugely influential in my life.

At the age of 11 I went to Thomas More High School in Purley; there, my history teacher was another DMJ: Sister Margaret Monen. She later left the DMJ’s but she had a very positive impact on me and was an excellent teacher who gave me a life-long love of history.

From the age of 4 years old my mother would take me to St. Anne’s Convent in Sanderstead, especially at Easter and Christmas or at other special times. I remember seeing the sisters there in their old habits. The magnificent building with its marble and the sisters’ habits with the blue scapulars were truly memorable (blue was always my favourite colour!).

Years later I was acutely aware of the sadness of the sisters as I helped Sister Mary Goretti clear the sacristy, knowing that it would be sold and, perhaps, guessing that it would be knocked down to make way for some flats.

In September 1983 I moved up to Middlesbrough to live in community and to study social work at Teesside Polytechnic. The most influential DMJ's in my life at that time were Sister Anne (Jordan), Sister Margaret Mary and Sister Anna, as well as Sister Mary (McAvoy). We had a lot of fun and we supported one another well and were a prayerful community. They really looked after me during my student days, with hot chocolate and TLC during my late night essay-writing sessions!

The Summer of 1984 was particularly memorable, since the DMJ's in Temporary Vows were sent off to Belgium to learn about the Founder and the early days of the Institute (Congregation) in situ, as it were. It was a fantastic experience during which sisters from three continents came together; we learned not only about our origins, but also about one another, one another's cultures and backgrounds and, of course, French. Sisters Bernadette (Lecluyse), Margaret Mary (Haller) and Cathleen (McCarthy) led the week long retreat which was included in the 4 week visit to Belgium. The hospitality of the Belgian sisters cannot be overstated or forgotten.

Naturally, my 8 years as a DMJ brought me into contact with more DMJ's than I can remember, given that they were from three of the five continents! In general, it was a very happy time in my life and there is no question that it had a huge impact on my relationship with God, my identity in Christ and on my concept of ministry and mission. The work of Sister Teresa Clements on the charism of Mercy was so helpful to me, personally, as well as to the whole Congregation; she was my spiritual director for a few years and she supported me through a very difficult time for which I shall be eternally grateful.

Particularly special to me are the DMJ's who have kept in touch and remained my friends since I left. In either 1988 or 1989 Sister Deirdre (Slade) invited me to spend two weeks with her in Tabgha on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, towards the end of her Sabbatical there. There are no words to describe what that meant (or means) to me. Sister Deirdre was able to take me to all the Holy Places, since, by this time, she was familiar with them, so it was like having a one-to-one guided tour but without the sense of being a tourist – rather the sense of really being a pilgrim and walking in the steps of Christ with another pilgrim. We had a lot of fun too, of course.

The Herne Bay Community was special to me because it was where I entered as a novice and was made to feel so welcome by all the sisters. I also loved the little seaside town and my walks there. Actually, I only lived there for about 3 months because the Noviciate moved to Guildford, but I often returned to Herne Bay for holidays and had some happy times there. Often, when I visited, there would be sisters there from other provinces – memorably, Belgium, California, Uganda and Ireland. It was so interesting to meet them, whether they were old friends or I was meeting them for the first time. During those holidays I would often spend time with Sister Helen (Conway) who has kept in touch with me and been to stay at my house in Middlesbrough. On one memorable occasion I took her to Middlesbrough Station to get the train home; I got on the train to help her with her case and the train left with me on it! Fortunately it was stopping at Thornaby but I had to explain my situation to the train guard, since I had no money on me to buy a ticket back to Middlesbrough! Sister Helen has been a good friend to me over the years, full of prayerful wisdom, encouragement and fun. Sister June (Bell) has been another loyal friend and correspondent and her cheerfulness and indefatigability are irrepressible.

In the 1990s I went with Sisters Jen (Condrón), Celia (Beale) and Philomena (Lafferty) to spend a few days by the side of the relatively unknown Lake Ennerdale in Cumbria. We took my dog, Tosca, who had a great time with all the walks. This was the last time I was to see Sister Jen who had been an inspiration to me since I had first met her in 1979 whilst she was working with the Irish Travellers. Sister Philomena Lafferty was also particularly influential in my life; she was a challenger but also an encourager – the best kind of friend who gets you to really think about what your values are and how you live them. Well, if it weren't for Sister Celia I wouldn't be an Associate now – and I'm truly glad that I am. Without her I wouldn't have had my first dog, either, since she knew someone with pups and Tosca was one of those pups. Sister Celia was in Middlesbrough at a time when I really needed support and her listening ear, her calmness and her gentle sense of humour helped me through.

It has been my experience that most people who have not met nuns or religious sisters have a very rigid view of what sort of people they are and what sort of lives they lead. The reality is, of course, that people are people, whatever they do and wherever they live – and however they dress! Nevertheless, in my vast experience and knowledge of the Daughters of Mary and Joseph, I can honestly say that, as a Congregation and as individuals, I believe that Constant Van Crombrughe would be very proud of his DMJ Sisters, and would acknowledge that they are “there for the whole church ... as pardoned sinners who have found peace and

rejoice in the merciful love of God". Not only that but fun-loving, grounded, encouraging, challenging, forward thinking, leading. Just as they influenced the young girls they were educating in their first school in Aalst two hundred years ago, so they have influenced generations of pupils, patients, parishioners, colleagues etc. etc., who will go on, in their turn, to share God's love, mercy and compassion with others. What a legacy!

Alison Philbey