

Memories of Joan O'Donoghue.



I cannot really talk about my association with The DMJs without talking about a lady who was to become one of my closest friends, the wonderful Sr. Joan O'Donoghue. Through her I was to meet many of the nuns in the DMJs and count some of those as great friends too. Amazing really, as I was an Anglican, father of two young girls, who under normal circumstances would never have had reason to meet this wonderful band of sisters.

There are certain milestone-days in one's life, although you may not see them as such at the time. So it was that I attended a meeting to discuss the setting up of a Cold Weather Shelter in Croydon, to house up to 25 homeless people during the cold winter months of 1990/1991. Little did I know it, but this was going to be my introduction to my great friend and through her the 'DMJs'

The project had been cobbled together through 'Churches Together in Croydon' and Joan was on the steering committee. I had no idea who she was, and she certainly did not know who I was (why should she)? I was leaving the hall, having put my name down to help, when I was accosted with a barrage of questions in a broad West of Ireland brogue. This typified the way Joan approached people, (I was later to learn), whether you be child or adult, saint or sinner, she had a ready arsenal of probing questions! I guess it was part of the teacher in her. This article is not about her though, it is about the Order that Joan had joined as a novice, and had taken her first vows on 29th April 1954.

The Croydon Cold Weather Shelter, despite many challenges, took shape and was repeated the next year. During that ensuing year, I had got to know Joan as a friend and as a result met many of the congregation of The Church of The Good Shepherd in New Addington, and was later to become great friends with Fr Tony Charlton, as well as many of the sisters at West Wickham.

Somewhere along the way, I was invited to the small convent in Montacute Road, New Addington, and there I was to meet Sr. Mary Andrew. I think to start with, I felt quite in awe of her, she always wore a simple working habit and she was always busy in the kitchen. Although she took no active part in the regular soup-run that we were then doing to Waterloo, she was always there as support, baking and clearing up after the hordes of helpers, when they arrived back. I think on her part she found it strange that a non-catholic had become such a great friend to Joan, but in time we became friends too. Of course, we ran the soup-run from there for many years and I remember at Christmas time, it would be organised chaos, in one room there would be a stock of food for the soup run, plus shoe-boxes for Romania, in another there would be hampers for families in New Addington and in another great piles of toys wrapped and donated by Fr Tony's parish. In amongst this would be busy people dashing in and out trying to load the van for the soup-run. In amongst this mayhem, the then local MP, Andrew Pelling, arrived on a canvassing mission one evening. Standing

very bemused on the doorstep, Joan grabbed him not knowing who he was and said 'Don't just stand there man, there's plenty that needs carrying out'!

There were of course many people who crossed the threshold of that amazing place, but the one person, who became as much of a friend to me as Joan was Sr. Cathleen McCarthy. She and I were to enjoy many spirited discussions on all sorts of topics over the years and of course there was the major bond of 'The Boys': Samuel, Semu and Michael, who were to become the closest thing to grandchildren that two nuns ever had! Samuel is my Godson.

In amongst the many talks with Joan, I was to make two vague promises;

1. That I would visit her bit of Ireland and meet her lovely family in Clonkeen;
2. That I would go to Ghana where Srs. Monica and Pat ran a refuge for many of the needy people of the area.

Sadly it was not until Joan's funeral in Ireland that I was to visit that wonderful part of God's world. Joan had told me of the beauty of the place, (she could be prone to exaggeration at times) - in this case she was not.

Ahotokurom was originally set up as special place for leprosy sufferers. Three years ago the opportunity arose for me to go to Ghana and Ahoto, when my young friend, (now Dr) Jonny McGarvey and his wife, who had decided to go out there, asked if I would like to accompany them. What an experience that was! I could write another story just about that, suffice to say it is a place where small miracles happen day after day.

My contact with the DMJs continued through the Thursday soup run and with Sr. Sheila Barrett, though not so much in the last year or so, since my move to Shoreham by Sea, but the wonderful people that I have met through the DMJs will be with me forever in my thoughts and prayers.

Congratulations on this wonderful anniversary.

David Carroll