

Memories of a special person Sr Mary Benignus by Maria Farrelly (Lavelle).

Though there were many inspirational people whom I befriended during my time as a member of the order I am going to write a few lines about Sr Mary Benignus, now deceased.



I grew up beside Lough Sillan Lake, near Shercock a small town south of the Border with Northern Ireland. The community comprised of mainly Catholics, Protestants and Presbyterians. Each family recognised and respected each other's faith and differences but a silence always abided about our common political history. A sacred heart picture and lamp was always a feature in a Catholic home while a beautiful picture of the Queen at her coronation ceremony hung in our neighbours houses. Politics or history were never spoken about. Far too sensitive an issue in a border area in those days.

It was only when I got to know Sr Mary Benignus that history and its significance became alive. Although I studied the usual history provided in the curriculum in our schools at primary and secondary level it was not until Mother Mary Benignus who befriended Helen O'Shea and Sr Margaret Mary Davis and myself that I truly came to appreciate history. We were young students attending Coloma College in West Wickham at that time and for some time we were part of the community in West Wickham which comprised of the following extremely academic interesting and very different individuals Mother Mary Lucy, Sr Bernadine, Sr Josephine, St Baptist and Sr Victoire and Sr Mary More. In the diversity there was a great sense of unity and respect. Sr Benignus helped us to integrate into life and to value the joy and the privilege of living in England and to value Christian education as inspired by Constant van Crombrugghe. Sr Mary Benignus was then retired from being Principal of the College of Education.

Sr Benignus who was a fine Kerry lady with a very big heart was confined to a wheelchair when I got to know her. She frequently invited us "young ones" to join her for tea in her room. " It was during these sessions that I grew to realise how deeply politically minded Sr Benignus was. She was passionate about all history but particularly about Ireland's historical past. Sr Benignus frequently chatted about her native Kerry area which she loved with all her heart. She told us many factual stories particularly of how families became divided in Ireland because of their allegiances and so forth. She was extremely descriptive and passionate about the rights and wrongs and in particular about injustices experienced by any group of people suffering from conflict anywhere or in any part of the world.

She never forgot the little things that made life enjoyable. I vividly remember after our Christmas dinner in 1972 (I think) while we sat around the big stone fireplace in Wickham Court which had Anne Boleyn's and Henry VIII names etched in stone, Sr Benignus imparted her in-depth knowledge about the fascinating history of Wickham Court with great gusto and enthusiasm while some of us in the community listened, relaxed and enjoyed "the special afters" to the meal which she provided in the true form of an Irish spirit.

Sr Benignus came constantly to my mind when I attended many of the commemorative ceremonies held in Ireland last year 2016. I realised how her stories were actually so real for many people in the Ireland of that past era... I often could hear her voice echo at these events ... One could visualise her taking a similar journey to Countess Markievicz should she not have joined the order of the Ladies of Mary.

Sr Benignus was truly inspirational to anyone who was lucky enough to get to know her. She was an extremely popular, valued and respected by her community, by college staff and students at all levels. She had a special gift of: Time to talk and time to listen with a welcoming heart. Her inner spirit always shone through. Her greatest passion was always to help everyone value and appreciate the teaching of Canon Constance van Crombrugghe regardless whether one was a member of the order or not. She was extremely committed with deep faith to implement the teachings of the founder which was reflected in her total dedication to Christian education under the patronage of Mary and Joseph. This was evident in the wonderful success which she made of Coloma college while she was a Principal there. She continued to live for a number of years after her retirement in the place she loved ...Wickham Court ..a seat of education.

"You will love God through the hearts of those you have taught to love Him " Constant Van Crombrugghe. .

I have so many joyful memories of those happy years.

May Sr Benignus rest in peace.