

## Professions in 1964

I was blessed in the Novitiate in being part of a large, noisy group. After two years in Forest Hill, three of us were sent to Belgium for our third year of the novitiate.... Felicé (Mary Anselm), Deirdre (Mary Damien) and me, (Mary James).

Belgium was wonderful in so many ways. The group there was truly international.... Belgian, Spanish and English. Unfortunately that year, there were no novices from Ireland with us, as they had been sent to join “our” group in Forest Hill.

The usual practice had been for all the novices in Belgium to remain there, and take their First Vows together... then return to their home countries. However, we were different, and sent a secret message back to Sr. Mary Peter, the Provincial in England, asking could we return for our First Profession. She agreed... but it did cause problems for us in many ways – one of which was that we did not have our Canonical Examination with the group in Belgium... and missed it in England initially. We had a 30 day Retreat (in French!) then left for home. We arrived within 2 days of the great day – and very urgent arrangements had to be made for someone to come and Canonically examine the three of us. We were allowed to bring back (wearing it!) only one of our long black habits... and we opted for our “Sunday ones”. However, in my case, I had eaten so many tartines in Belgium that I had put on 3 stone in weight, so my dress only zipped as far as the waist, and then there was a wide gap, shaped like a V, up to the neck! Fortunately it was covered by my half-scapular for the journey home, and caused great merriment on our arrival back in Mayow Road. A new one had to be made for me!

Our group of 5 had expanded in our absence, by the arrival of 9 from Ireland. We 3 did not really know them well – but soon remedied that! So... for our First Profession we were 17!

The year was 1964... and whilst we had been in Belgium there had been the Second Vatican Council. We were the

guinea pigs, setting the trend for a change in our Religious Habit. We made our Vows in St. Philip's in Sydenham, and we processed into the sacristy, wearing our white veils, blue half-scapulars etc.... and came out showing hair, ears and ankles! We were the first to show the "soft veils" and there was huge interest in how we looked, how the veils stayed on and how modern it all was! As we processed down the aisle, singing "My soul give thanks to the Lord", we were holding our heads and necks very stiffly, in case of a disaster and a veil falling off!"

The changes that ensued from the Vatican Council meant that so many of "our" group, both from England and Ireland, subsequently left the Congregation. The three of us who went to Belgium have remained, with the help of God! We went through so many changes in our Religious Life, and indeed in what we wore too, but the essence has remained, and the Joy of being a D.M.J. remains today.

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