

Memoirs dmj 2017

Very recently I had the chance to take the road which passes the old mill by the River Inny, from where is probably one of the best views of Castlecor, in full view of the lovely picture window in that room always known as 'the novitiate'.

Continuing from there, via Longford, to my Leitrim home, I recalled the journey with my parents to Ballymahon on the day I joined the Congregation, almost fifty-four years ago. Even if on that September day in 1963 I had little idea of what was ahead of me, I was full of hope, and that hope has not been disappointed. I do not underestimate the gift it is to be able to look back on the past half century and have no doubt but that life has been very good to me. That, of course, is not to deny that there were times which were difficult, tough, painful, frustrating and disappointing, but the overall memory is of a life that has been greatly blessed.



Mere Marie-Eulalie (Judith)

I still remember vividly the excitement of Vatican II. The doors and windows which it opened made it a great moment in which to be setting out in religious life. While being in ways distant and formidable, Mere Marie-Eulalie (Judith) as Superior General was the person who was pushing us to move toward being 'The Nun in the Modern World', inspired as she was by the book's author and her friend, Cardinal Suenens. Bit by bit, our novitiate formation opened up to embrace a new programme which, even if with limited resources, exposed us to serious study of Scripture, Liturgy, Human Development, the Arts...and much more. Here was set an enduring foundation for spirituality, ministry and further studies in the years ahead.

Being lucky enough to have been sent to Kilkenny in the early days of Peace in Christ, I certainly learned a lot about cleaning, cooking and shopping! But that was not all. This was the diocese which, with the insightful leadership of its Bishop, pioneered a broad range of social services for people who were marginalised, many of whom were living in poverty. Here was a Church which was taking seriously the calls of the great social justice encyclicals of the '60s. Relevant education and training were offered to lay people who then took up key roles in providing creative and compassionate responses to social needs in their community and beyond. With its focus on programmes for lay adults and young people, Peace in Christ, as the diocesan retreat centre, was at the heart of this dynamic movement. Out of that came the opportunity for a second small community in Co Kilkenny. For DMJ, as for most Congregations at that time, to have Sisters in a rural area was an innovation, as was a social work ministry focussed on a widespread country parish. Gradually getting to know just about everybody in that parish, and responding to needs whenever and however I could, the depths of resilience, goodness and friendship which I experienced from the people there made a lasting impression.

As with most things in my life before and since, going to Ghana in 1978 had certainly not been in my plan. Nor could anyone have foreseen that the seven eye-opening, wonderful years there would be the beginning of an *Into Africa* journey which would continue, in one way or another, until 1997. Africa, East and West particularly, and in a more limited way North and South, opened up vistas of culture, tradition, values, religion and worldview which make it impossible ever again to look at life within earlier, more restricted, frameworks. But it is the people who embodied and enlivened these other ways of being and doing, other ways of seeing, understanding and relating, who challenged, enabled and inspired broader horizons. I have

never forgotten, nor will I ever forget, that this widening of perspectives has been possible only because of being part of DMJ.



I had the good fortune over the course of twelve years to visit nearly all the places where the Congregation is present. Many conversations with Sisters, seeing the rich variety of their ministries, often meeting the people with and among whom they lived and worked, opened up new worlds. But what I most appreciate and remember was the dedication, enthusiasm and energy which I witnessed, even where considerable obstacles, whether personal or from outside, had to be overcome. What never failed to inspire me in our Sisters was what our Founder called 'zeal', zeal born of compassion.

The opportunity to have a wide-angled view of many parts of the world led to what, in one way or another, has been my ministry for the past twenty or so years. As I see it, the plight of refugees and forced migrants globally, as it continues to worsen, calls unceasingly for what is at the heart of our charism. It becomes more and more clear that to be a compassionate presence is what is most needed. I

have come to realise that very often what one can do is minimal, but that action of itself is not what counts most. Here, I see another facet of religious vocation revealing itself by way of a call to see the world of today with new eyes. Above all it is to realise that in the plan of our Creator God, the goods of the earth are for the people of the earth. I know that for me to come to this realisation is a slow conversion that needs to continue wherever the journey ahead leads...

Celebrating the bi-centenary of the DMJ, and having been a part of more than 50 of those years, brings to mind above all those Sisters, present and former, those still living and those who have gone before us, with whom my life has been and will continue to be intertwined. As the Ghanaians write on their passenger lorries, *No one knows the future*. But reflecting on the past 200 years fills us with hope for the unknown future - and what a marvellous blessing that is.



Joan Roddy

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