

My Happiest Memories of Sydenham.

Sr. Mary Agatha Finnerty.

After suffering so much from a terrible war – Sydenham parish was brought back to life – new life, by the wonderful work of Fr. Bovington and his devoted people. Fr. Bovington and his curates were priests of the people – and because of this the people responded 100%. A new Church had to be built and this brought the Parish together from the oldest person to the youngest child. We had a



glorious time collecting rags and paper and selling them down at the end of the street- I had to go because the children said the **old man** gave more when the **nuns** were with them -then Sunday morning after each Mass selling bricks so that they could go into the walls of the Church. The work and fun getting ready for the Summer Bazaar, held in the Convent grounds- stalls of every kind. Then the Christmas sale-of-work in St Philip's School, another day of work, fun and togetherness. How the men worked and planned, and the wonderful mothers served, cooked and begged from shops,

all done with joy and complete unity.

The Church was opened within the year and what a day of joy it was because the debt was cleared. We were proud people and I think that many of those present are still alive today, may God bless them and reward them and grant eternal rest to those who have gone.

What of the religious side? It was not neglected. Our Lady was well established; she was truly 'Queen of Sydenham'. From the presbytery window she looked out on her many children as they passed along Sydenham Road and her halo of light shone out each night for the weary traveller. Her crowning in May – another big event- up Mayo Road to the Convent grounds. Saturday morning Mass was always in her honour, the children came and brought their parents- it was good to be there.

The Marian Year came (1954) and dear Sr. Elizabeth McCarthy (RIP) teaching with me at the time, suggested taking the children to Lourdes. We went to Mr W Noonan (RIP) who looked in surprise and said we would never get permission from County Hall for juniors to travel. Off we went to Fr Bovington who said his (nun) sisters took children and why not phone County Hall. Mr Noonan did and permission was granted – oh what joy! We took thirty children Whit week and they were as good as gold. If we looked after them, they looked after us, wanting to polish our shoes, sharing sweets etc. etc. The parents were wonderful in getting them ready. We encouraged them to help with their fares by running errands, washing cars for friends of ours who were generous in paying them well etc. They brought their wages Monday morning and we banked it for them.

After that we took them to Lourdes each year and were joined by Mr Noonan, Mrs Sullivan, Mr Jones and even by one non-Catholic teacher who wanted to make the visit- I hope by now he is a Catholic. This continued until I retired. Each year on the first Saturday of the Summer Holidays, Fr. Bovington and the staff took a coachload of the upper school to East Grinstead where Father said Mass and we all squeezed into the little chapel where many a priest hid during the reformation and the children were so excited to see how they escaped when in danger. The children were well instructed in their faith and I hope many have held on to it.

The last gift was a trip to Rome for the Holy Week services –again the staff. We went overland, of course, and it was beautiful. The children were very good until they saw the snow as we passed Switzerland, they nearly jumped out the windows. We were very fortunate as we stayed at a new College, used by the American students who had gone up to the mountains for the holidays. It was beautiful and two priests (SJ) stayed in charge and said Mass for us whenever we wished- but, of course, we more often went to St Peter's. I will never forget Holy Saturday Vigil Mass. We got seats just a few yards from where the Holy Father and his twelve priests said Mass. In Rome children get front seats so we were fortunate. Children had an audience with the Holy Father and he called out the names of each school. When St Philip's was called we clapped of course. And a Spanish group who were near us clapped so much they nearly brought the roof down.

Last but not least, our yearly visit to Walsingham: we took all the school except the Infant class – we prayed and walked the Holy Mile- and got many graces. The staff were excellent Catholics. They were devoted to both Church and School and had the interest of each child at heart.

Mr Noonan was a wonderful man. He was a Catholic before everything and wished to see the school in the same way. Each morning as he got off the bus he would go into Church and again at midday he would slip down again, followed by a group of children. The staff responded and we had the happiest school you could find in England. We did well in exams and got many children to Secondary School and got good jobs for slower ones.

We could boast of five priests, three working in the Diocese; one, Fr J Henderson SJ working in Brixton, one on the Missions and one Carmelite sister. I still keep in touch with most of them. Fr Jim Cronin and Fr Henderson called to see me during the past two years. So, my dear, this ends my attempt. Jenny, if you can take any sentence out of this, you are welcome. Hope you can read the writing – as you know I broke a bone in my wrist and it's still not perfect. It was good to see your name. Hope you are well. Love to you and all especially Sr. Eileen – also to any old friends who may remember me. They were happy days.

God bless and keep you.

Love,

Sr. M Agatha. (RIP 2000)

