

“Where would the church be without you?”
Where would Ireland be without them?

Ossory gives thanks for the Sisters of St John of God

Martin Delaney

Sadly many Irish Religious Congregations are “saying a lot of goodbyes” as they close houses in communities where they have played a key role for generations. Some congregations have made the difficult decision not to seek or accept new members and others find it difficult to keep new vocations because of the absence of a “critical mass” of young recruits. This could, I suppose, be more than a little depressing, particularly for those who have dedicated their lives to a charism and a way of life which they may have thought would go on forever. I recall a talk given by a Cistercian monk in Mount Mellary more than forty years ago. He spoke about how each Order was founded at a particular time in the Church’s history to fulfil a particular need. I often think about that when I hear of another religious house closing or another ministry handed over.

I know that there are religious communities that are bucking the trend, but I can’t get away from the feeling that we are witnessing the passing of something very precious which has been part of our lives at a national, local, and personal level. Will we have to wait until they are all gone before society properly acknowledges what a contribution they have made? A few years ago, Charlie Bird, a journalist not from the Catholic tradition, was quoted as saying:

“In the 30 years since, as a reporter in RTÉ, in many places where I went I met

remarkable missionary priests and nuns doing remarkable things, and they did it away from the glare of publicity, away from their families and their homes.”

Thirty years ago, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen, while campaigning for Ireland to have seat on the United Nations Security Council, acknowledged that so many countries in Africa and South America pledged their support because of the positive role Irish Religious Congregations had played in the development and education of their countries.

At home we have been much more reticent to properly appreciate the incredible part played by religious women and men in the development of our republic. The dark clouds of abuse in its different forms hang over the legacy of many of our religious congregations. For many years now we have been on a journey towards healing, and I can only hope that somewhere in all that there will be the maturity to acknowledge and indeed celebrate the enormously positive contribution of religious men and women. To paraphrase Pope Francis “Where would the church be without you?” Where would Ireland be without them?!!

On The Feast of The Presentation of Our Lord in 2021 our former bishop Dermot Farrell, celebrated his first Mass as Archbishop of Dublin in the Pro

Cathedral. The Feast of The Presentation is also the World Day for Consecrated Life. In a tribute to all Religious he made the following comment:

"The women and men who dedicate their lives to the call of the Gospel are at the heart of life of our Church. Without their service, without the presence of their communities, our Church would be a very different Church. They have been at the forefront of renewal in the Church, taking bold initiatives, and making significant sacrifices, putting flesh on the hope that was within them (see 1 Peter 3:15). This is not a mission that belongs to the past. In another age, they were at the forefront of addressing the educational, social, and health of those who risked being left behind. Today they continue their prophetic ministry in the service of those whom our society might prefer not to see"

In October 2021 the Sisters of St John of God celebrated the 150th anniversary of their foundation. The Sisters of St John of God have a unique bond with the Diocese of Ossory and with the priests of the Diocese in particular. The congregation was founded by Sr Visitation Clancy, a native of Ballyouskill in the parish of Ballyragget. The sisters went on to work in various parishes throughout the Diocese but also they have, for many years provided the Eucharistic Bread for the celebration of Mass in every parish. The sisters also worked in colleges and seminaries throughout Ireland including St Kieran's College and in the Irish College in Rome where many priests of the Diocese came to know them during their years of formation. The Ossory Council of Priests,

at a meeting last October, decided that we as a Diocese should honour the contribution of the Sisters of St John of God in Ossory over many years and the ministry which continues in a number areas today. Originally the celebration was planned for the 8th December 2021 but because of Covid restrictions it had to be postponed until Thursday March 10th. The new date was quite appropriate as it was close to both St Kieran's Day on March 5th and the Feast of St John of God on March 8th. It was decided that the celebration would also include the contribution of the Sisters of St John of God in Bishop Denis' Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin.

Bishop Denis was the main celebrant at the Mass of Thanksgiving in St Fiacre's Church, Loughboy, Kilkenny. St Fiacre's is part of St Patrick's parish where the Sisters have had a presence since their official foundation in Ossory in 1877. Many of the priests from the Diocese concelebrated, and upwards of four hundred people attended. Throughout the Mass, many co-workers of the Sisters from various parishes, schools and hospitals participated. The music was led by a group of musicians and singers from various parishes, under the direction of Noreen Cooney. Following the Mass there was a reception for everyone in the Parish Centre attached to the church.

The Mass began with a ritual of pouring and blessing water from each of the areas where the Sisters have ministered in the Diocese. The ritual incorporated something of the story of that ministry. What follows is the text of the commentary used during the opening ritual.



Sisters of St John of God: Rite of Sprinkling and Blessing Water

We are connected in creation by water which gives us life. For all of us whose roots are deeply embedded in the island of Ireland, water shapes who we are and how we see the world. This evening we gather to give thanks to God for the ministry of the Sisters of St John of God over more than 150 years and particularly how their ministry was and is lived out here in the Dioceses of Ossory and Kildare & Leighlin. Long before any of the Sisters answered the call to Consecrated Life theirs and all our first steps in Faith were taken when we shared the life of Jesus Christ in the waters of Baptism.

As part of the sprinkling rite at this evening's celebration we share the John of God story in Ossory and Kildare & Leighlin as we bring water from the various communities where the Sisters have ministered through the years.

The container for the water is fashioned and carved from some bog oak that is more than two thousand years old. While this tree was growing, the seeds of faith were being planted in every townland and parish across our dioceses as our ancestors faithfully responded in different ways to the invitation of Jesus to 'Come Follow Me'. Just as the tree takes on new shape and purpose today, so we too, through the grace of God, continue the life of faith handed on to us and embrace the future with confidence, hope and joy.

Even though the Sisters of St John of God first came into existence in the Diocese of Ferns it was an Ossory woman that Bishop Thomas Furlong approached to found a congregation of Sisters to care for the sick, the poor and the dying in his diocese. Mother Visitation Clancy from Ballyouskill in the parish of Ballyragget was a Bon Secour Sister and together with

a small group they took the courageous step to separate from their congregation and begin the Sisters of St John of God in October 1871. A member of Sr Visitation's family, Niamh Clancy, brings water from Ladywell close to Visitation's home in Ballyouskill

Within a short few years after the foundation in Wexford the Clerk of the Workhouse in Castlecomer, Thomas O'Mahony, asked Mother Visitation to send some Sisters to work in the infirmary of the Workhouse. The Sisters of St John of God remained working in Castlecomer after the Workhouse became the District Hospital. Water from the River Dean which flows through Castlecomer is poured by Kathleen Ryan who worked as a nurse alongside the Sisters in Castlecomer for many years.

In early 1886, three more sisters came from Wexford to work in the Fever Hospital in Kilkenny City. Later that same year, at the invitation of Bishop Abraham Brownrigg, the official foundation of the Sisters of St John of God in the Diocese of Ossory was established. Initially their work was in this City of Kilkenny, founding a Primary School, working with students and priests at St Kieran's College and also providing home nursing. The Sisters went to nurse in the County Infirmary in 1914 and much later in 1933 the St John of God congregation took over the running of Aut Even Hospital. In the early 1980s the Sisters took the brave step to build the magnificent new hospital which we have today. The Sisters of St John of God also established an Altar Bread Department at their convent on the College Road and it was through this ministry that the Sisters have touched the lives of people in every parish of our Diocese. Regina Harding, who for many years worked in the altar Bread Department, brings water from the River Nore on the banks of which this City is built.

The Sisters of St John of God had been founded to care for the poorest and the most vulnerable people in society



and this vision was further lived out in 1888 when three Sisters went to work at the Thomastown Union Workhouse. After 1921 a number of workhouses in County Kilkenny were amalgamated into the Thomastown facility. The Sisters of St John of God who had worked in the Kilkenny City, Castlecomer and Urlingford houses now took on a greater role of management and leadership in Thomastown. In 1957 the Workhouse evolved into St Columba's Hospital where the Sisters of St John of God continue their ministry of pastoral care and healing in the hospital today. Nora Cassin, who worked in St Columba's for many years, brings water from St Colmcille's Well in Thomastown to honour the Sisters' longest continuous ministry within the Diocese of Ossory.

In the early years of the 20th century Canon William Brennan was appointed as parish priest of Rathdowney. Strongly committed to education, he decided to invite the Sisters of St John of God to run the girls' school in the town. Thus began the only presence of the Sisters of St John of God in a County Laois parish and it is a ministry which continues today 118 years after their arrival in 1904. In the intervening years the ministry of the Sisters diversified into the local Secondary School, Social Services and parish pastoral ministry. Martin Bergin, from Rathdowney, brings water from the Erkina river which flows through the town.

Just a few years after the foundation in Rathdowney five Sisters of St John of God established a community in the parish of Templeorum and began teaching in Owing in January 1909. Home Nursing which later evolved in the establishment of Social Services was also part of the ministry in Owing and later still the Sisters supported the Sue Ryder Homes Foundation which opened in 1988. Helen Power, who worked closely with the Sisters in Owing over many years, brings water from the Holy Well at the monastery of Kilkieran

Our celebration this evening also honours the ministry of the Sisters of St John of God in our neighbouring Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin. The Sisters have worked at the hospitals in Kildare and Naas but their most enduring presence has been in the parish of Edenderry in County Offaly where they operated both a Primary and Post Primary school and continue their work today in Parish Pastoral Ministry. Rita Houlihan, a native of Edenderry, a past pupil of both St John of God schools in the town and later Principal of The St John of God Primary School here in Kilkenny, brings water from the Holy Well at Grange in the pParish of Edenderry

Through the water we have poured this evening the people of our communities enjoy the gift of life it symbolises. This evening we praise you Lord and raise our grateful hearts to you – we who live and serve among the waters.

