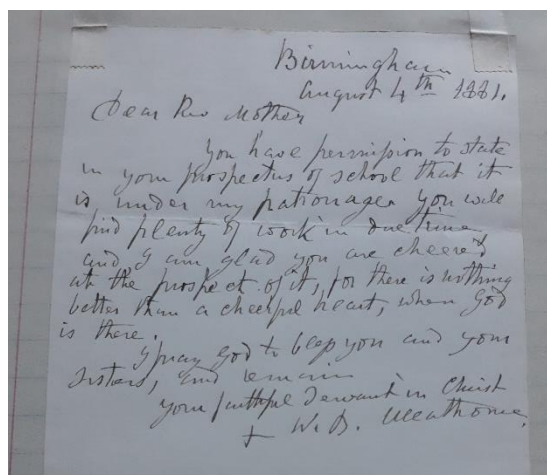


'Actions Not Words' Part II: The SHCJ in 20th and 21st Centuries

Isabel Keating

After the death of their foundress in 1879, the SHCJ did not slow the advancement of their ministry but continued to go wherever they were needed. The early 20th century saw a series of dramatic changes for the Society, including the establishment of the Generalate in Rome in 1924 and the broadening of sisters' ministries after Vatican II.

Birmingham



Letter from Ullathorne to Rev. Mother Mary Clare Hadfield 4th August 1881. He writes: 'I am glad you are cheered with the prospect of [the school] for there is nothing better than a cheerful heart, when God is there.'

One of the first houses to be opened in this new phase of the SHCJ's history was at Hagley Road in Birmingham in 1881. This new SHCJ community took on the local girls' elementary school as well as infant and middle schools. They were welcomed with kindness by Bishop Ullathorne who had met Cornelia in Derby. The Oratorian Fathers organised a picnic at Rednal, so that the nuns would be better acquainted with the congregation and their future pupils.¹

A letter book of correspondence between the SHCJ community and the Oratorian Fathers is witness to the enduring warmth of their relationship. It includes correspondence between Ullathorne, Fr T.A. Pope, Fr William B. Neville and the sisters. It also contains a copy of a letter sent to Cardinal John Henry Newman by the Birmingham Superior, Mother Mary Clare Hadfield on his 81st Birthday. Mother Mary Clare tells Newman that the community 'made a

Novena to Our Blessed Mother for your Eminence's intentions' the 'only way' to thank Newman for 'all your kindness and sympathy towards us from when we came to Edgbaston'.²

Sadly, this first Birmingham Foundation was cut short due to a lack of pupils. Mother Marie Clare recalled Newman's response in a later memoir:

Had he the faintest idea that such a calamity was about to happen he himself would have gone round & begged the people to send their children to the Convent School.³

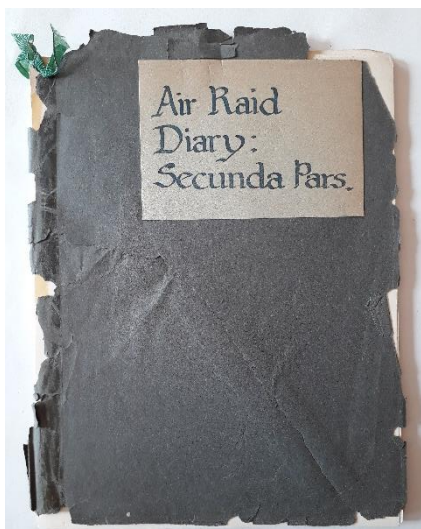
The SHCJ returned to Birmingham in 1933 after the Archbishop of Birmingham asked them to set up a private school for Catholic children in the city since many parents were sending their children to the Edgbaston High School or the Church of England School for Girls. From 1933 to 1936, a new Birmingham SHCJ community continued the Sisters of Mercy school at St Gabriel's in Harborne before establishing a larger school at Hallfield House on 6th October 1936. Mother Maria Mercedes and Sister Mary Cecily also opened a new school at Weoley Castle on 24th July that year.

In common with many archives of Catholic religious institutes, the SHCJ Archives contain fascinating stories of sisters facing the constant threat of bombs and other dangers during the Second World War while continuing their ministries as best they could. One of the most striking sets of documents within the Birmingham papers are the Air Raid Diaries which describe how the Community and a

¹ EP/200/EN7/1: Mother Marie Clare's Reminiscences, f.1

² EP/200/EN7/1: Edgbaston 1881- 1885 Letter book, copy letter, Mother Marie Clare to John Henry Newman, 20 Feb 1882.

³ EP/2/EN7/1: Mother Marie Clare's Reminiscences, f.6.



Birmingham Air Raid Diary 'Secunda Pars' September to December 1940.

group of 12 pupils took shelter in the school cellars. They span from 25th June 1940 until the 4th June 1943 and are testament to the nuns' courage, kindness and humour during a frightening time. The diaries contain everything from notes on how speedily nuns and children reported to the cellar to a poem in honour of the 'jolly little MOOT', the mouse that visited the community during long tense nights spent below ground. The sisters also describe the grim aftermath of bombing raids: 'fires burning after the raiders have gone and the devastation in the city which daylight reveals'.⁴

In later years after Vatican II, the ministries of the Birmingham SHCJ Community expanded into parish work, organizing inter-faith and intercultural meetings and events as well as befriending recovering alcoholics and others needing support. The SHCJ managed the school at Edgbaston until 1993 when a lay headteacher took on the leadership of the school. It continues today as the Priory School and remains an active

member of the SHCJ network of schools.

Harrogate

The first SHCJ Convent in Harrogate, the location where most of the current European Province members are now based, was established in 1896 with a school on Clarence Drive before its expansion led to the acquisition of a site on Hookstone Drive. This move, along with land donated by the father of Mother Mary Aloysius Radcliffe, allowed a large boarding school to be established.



Mother Mary Joseph Lynch outside Harrogate Convent on Hookstone Drive with the school dog, circa 1920.



Sisters of the Apley Grange Community, circa 1980.

In 1948, the school's growth meant that the purchase of Apley Grange and its grounds was necessary for dormitories and classrooms. This building eventually became the SHCJ's infirmary and a convent for elderly sisters. There are sisters at Apley Grange today who remember the building from their time as Harrogate Holy Child pupils (including using the building's elaborate marble bathroom inherited by the SHCJ when they purchased Apley Grange). Within the archives we have a beautifully illuminated roll of the children of Mary which features many names of SHCJ sisters.

⁴ EP/2/EN7/2: Edgbaston Community Air Raid Diary 3

Oxford

From October 1902, the SHCJ spent their first two years in Oxford serving the elementary school and local community of St Ignatius Parish. In 1904, they moved to a property adjacent to University Parks named Cherwell Edge. Swiftly following the Papal Decree of June 1907 allowing Catholic women to attend the universities of England, St Frideswides was established at Cherwell Edge as a hostel for female Catholic students attending the University of Oxford. Their first students arrived on 4th September that same year. Frideswide's became part of the Society for Oxford Home Students, a university institution that later evolved into St Anne's College. The Oxford papers feature letters between the Oxford Community and prominent figures in female education at Oxford such as Annie Rogers, the head of the Society of Oxford Home Students, a gifted classicist and campaigner for the admittance of women to Oxford University.



Photograph postcard of St Frideswide's, circa 1910

As the number of women's colleges increased and attitudes changed, St Frideswide's was no longer required and so closed in 1970. The SHCJ moved to a building in Norham Gardens. The community, led by Sr Mary Lalor, established a conference and retreat centre which hosted meetings between groups of all faiths as well as many secular groups. The centre also hosted an after-school club managed by the sisters. It was home to the SHCJ archives from 2004 to 2023 when the house was closed and the community, along with the archives, moved north to Harrogate.

Cherwell Edge, the building of the original SHCJ Convent and St Frideswide's, is now the main campus of Linacre College.

Foundations in West Africa

In 1929, Sister Mary Charles Magdalen Walker, an Irish Sister of charity who had attended Mayfield as a young girl, sent a letter to her old friend, Mother Mary Amadeus Atchison, who was now the Superior General of the SHCJ. Sister M.M. Charles had been teaching girls in a school in Calabar for 6 years, but 'longed' to secure the future of this project and requested the presence of SHCJ sisters to expand on all that been achieved by her and the young Nigerian women she had trained as teachers.⁵

M.M. Amadeus and M.M. Genevieve arrived on 20th September 1930 and were soon joined by Mother Mary Laurentia Dalton, Mother Mary Joachim Forster and Mother Mary Edith Rudwick in October 1930. The sisters followed M.M. Amadeus' instruction to learn the local language, Efik. M.M. Joachim took special care with her learning: she requested prayers for the 'gift of tongues' and would pass her own Efik translations of fairy tales, made for the children, to the Nigerian teachers for corrections.⁶



Margaret Walker as a girl playing Hansel alongside Kathleen Atchison as Gretel in 1896. Kathleen was the sister of Mary Amadeus Atchison.

⁵ EP/7/AFP/1/1 Letter from Sister Mary Charles to M.M. Amadeus, Calabar, 12 Oct 1929

⁶ Patricia Mallinson, *SHCJ Stories: Mother Mary Joachim Forster SHCJ*, Rome, 2000, p.38.



Three of the first four the HHCJ sisters preparing to travel out to teach at 'bush schools', 1940.

The beginnings of the SHCJ's presence in Africa is closely bound with that of another order, the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus, who have Sr Mary Charles Magdalen as their foundress. Among the teachers who taught M.M. Joachim, M.M. Laurentia and M.M. Edith Efik, were four young women who became the very first HHCJ sisters: Sr Mary Gertrude, Sister Mary Aloysius, Sr Mary St John and Sr Mary Magdalen. In the words of Mother Teresa Xavier Fletcher, the Handmaids worked 'shoulder to shoulder' with the SHCJ.⁷

After the SHCJ and HHCJ established convents and schools in the South and East of Nigeria in the 1930s and 1940s, the SHCJ was finally in a position to answer Bishop William Porter's request for sisters to staff a school at Cape Coast. Mother Joachim arrived with Mother Mary Cyril Smith and Mother St Edward Charlton on 20th February 1946. As the three sisters found out on the day of their arrival, they were not only to manage a school but would also be taking over a training college. Fortunately, they were joined in their task by Cape Coast teachers Mrs Susanna Cross-Cole, Miss Sophia Daniel and Miss Philomena Frawoo as well as two additional SHCJ sisters who arrived in May 1946, Mother Mary Julia Ryan and Mother Mary Annunciata Darcy. In M.M. Joachim's first letter from Ghana, she requests Mother Mary Romana to ask the SHCJ at Mayfield to 'pray we may justify our welcome' as the people of Cape Coast celebrated the nuns' arrival and brought generous dashes of fruit and vegetables.⁸



Cape Coast Pupil Regina Adams in her biology class, 1950.

Over the rest of the 20th century and in 21st century convents, schools and health centres were established across Nigeria and Ghana as the countries' independence brought political change and hardships were endured during the Biafran War. In the 1990s, the SHCJ set up an interprovincial community in Chad which is now overseen by the African Province as well as a new apostolate in Kenya. There are currently 11 Holy Child schools and four Holy Child clinics in Nigeria as well as seven SHCJ communities and seven Holy Child educational institutions in Ghana.

⁷ EP/7/AFP/1 M. Teresa Xavier Fletcher's Reminiscences of her work in the African Province.

⁸ M.M. Joachim, Cape Coast, Gold Coast (Ghana), 24 Feb 1946, IP/Af.

Ireland



Harcourt Street Residents with members of the SHCJ community there in the garden, circa 1965.

The beginning of the SHCJ's presence in Ireland was closely related to its work in Africa since the Society's first convent in Stamullen, County Meath was to be a centre from which sisters would seek young women prepared to join the Society and work in the SHCJ's West African Missions. The SHCJ made their second Irish foundation in Dublin at 70 Harcourt Street in 1944. The SHCJ community there ran the building as a hostel for young women working and studying in the city.

The Archbishop of Dublin, Dr John Charles McQuaid, was keen to support the SHCJ and wished for them to establish a school in his Archdiocese. This hope was realised in 1947 when Killiney Holy Child School was founded in the buildings and grounds of Killacoon House, Killiney. In 1967, Sister Colette Dwyer, herself born in Cork, became local superior of Killiney Convent and headmistress of the school. However, two happy accidents led to widening of both Sr Colette's ministry and the SHCJ's legacy in Ireland.

A chance meeting with a local community of Irish Travellers became the start of a dedicated campaign to improve the educational opportunities of children and adults in the Traveller community. SHCJ sisters would continue to work with Irish Travellers. From 1982 to 1988, sisters Helena Brennan, Mary McManus and Mary Taylor lived alongside the Clondalkin Traveller community to advocate for the people there.



Sr Colette Dwyer working with the children at St Kieran's, 1972.

Sr Colette's curiosity of the placename 'Sallynoggin' led to a realisation of the town's desperate need for Secondary School education and the establishment of one of Ireland's first community schools there. The headmistress of the school was a laywoman, while Sr Colette managed the school and other Holy Child sisters were part of the teaching staff alongside women religious from Sisters of the Sacred Heart, the Daughters of Christian Education and the Sisters of Charity of Notre Dame d'Evron.

Both Holy Child Community School Sallynoggin and Holy Child School Killiney continue to thrive. They remain bonded both with each other and the SHCJ Network of Schools by Cornelia Connelly's educational ethos.

Wales

On 1st September 1958, the SHCJ made a foundation at Newtown in Wales to take over the management of St Mary's Parish School. For the first year they occupied a property by the river, struggling with the loud roar of the weir at night, before the convent moved to a larger property named Dolerw.

By 1972, the ministries of the Newtown SHCJ included a whole range of activities besides teaching and managing St Mary's School. This included catechetical instruction of



View of Dolerw, 1959.



Sr Kathleen King and Sr Mary Mills camping at Newquay with the Birmingham and Sr Mary's Newtown Guides, July 1978.

Sisters Mary Ultan, Maura Healey and Mary Campion helped at the local hospital as members of the British Red Cross. On her first shift at the hospital Sr Mary Ultan 'gave great merriment to two young nurses by saying "Well, I've never shaved anyone before!" when she had to shave three elderly men with an electric razor. The sisters' contribution was noted by the local B.R.C. president who was heard to state 'the nuns have been marvelous in coming to our rescue'. As Christina Grogan comments at the close of her Province newsletter article: 'the Community at Newtown has helped to explode the idea that nuns shut themselves away from the World and its needs!'⁹

children who attended the local non-Catholic secondary school. Sisters Kathleen King, Christine Mary Austin and Christina Grogan managed the Newtown Guides and Brownies. Sr Margaret Farrell served on the committee for Parents and Friends of those with learning difficulties. The sisters also visited hospitals, retirement homes and the elderly.



Sr Mary Campion (Kathleen) King, Sr Mary Ultan McEvoy, Sr Maura Healy, Sr Mary Matthias Yonge, Sr Mary Christina Grogan, Sr Christine Mary Austin, July 1970.

⁹ Christina Grogan, European Province Newsletter, June 1970.

30 years after the SHCJ came to Newtown, the school numbers had risen to 100 pupils and it gained the status of a voluntary aided Church school under the leadership of Sr Stella Dunn. The convent became a centre for day retreats, conferences and other diocesan activities, serving the growing population of Catholics in central Wales. Sr Maureen Grigg was the District nurse for the Montgomery area and supported the bereaved as a member of Cruse.¹⁰ Although Dolerw had to be closed in 2000, Sr Maureen and Sr Helen Bamber continue to live in Newtown today.

Styled Bold: The Women who followed Cornelia

In 1992, SHCJ sister Radegunde Flaxman wrote a biography of Cornelia and chose the title *A Woman Styled Bold*, using a quote from M.M. Francis Bellasis' testimony of Cornelia's virtues:

She was styled a bold woman, but none of these hard sayings however cruel ever seemed to disturb her peace. "Leave them to God" she would say, "we are what we are in God's sight, nothing more or less."¹¹

The sisters of the SHCJ have shared Cornelia's commitment to be the self that 'Our Lord wants [you] to be' and her refusal to be intimidated by the expectations of others.¹² As any archivist working for a community of Religious will know, every member of an institute has a story of ministry that is inspiring in his or her own particular way. This final section will describe the work of just a few sisters to give a sense of the breadth of the SHCJ's work.



Sr Maria Mercedes O'Brien, 1917. Portrait featured in her memorial book.

Sister Maria Mercedes O'Brien

Ursula O'Brien's school prefect described her as 'full of go and spirit and standing no nonsense' as a pupil and recalled Ursula's advice to her team before the St Patrick's day match:

"Now remember we must win! And if you can't win, at least maim them!" When I remonstrated with her, she said 'Well Mother, we must do something'¹³

As a SHCJ sister, a gentler yet no less courageous side became apparent as a handmade memorial book made to honour Sister M. Mercedes reveals. When the influenza pandemic of 1918 to 1920 struck Mayfield in February 1919, Sister M. Mercedes was among the first of the community to volunteer to nurse those of the school and convent struck by this deadly virus. Mother Mary Dominic recalled how Sr M. Mercedes worked 'from morning till night. I had to insist on her going off daily for a rest from 2 to 3'.¹⁴ Eventually, Sister M. Mercedes fell victim to the disease and died on 12th March 1919. She was aged 25.

Mother Marie Osmonde de Maillé

A daughter of the Duc de Maillé, Sister Marie Osmonde de Maillé's childhood was spent in the glorious surroundings of Chateaufort-sur-Cher. However, when she came to West Africa as an SHCJ

¹⁰ Stella Dunn, 'Developments in Wales' European Province News Jan/Feb 1989, p.10-11.

¹¹ Mother Mary Francis Bellasis' Formal Testimony regarding Cornelia Connelly made 27th August 1923, transcribed in *Documentation*, vol.76, p.62.

¹² Cornelia's advice to her sisters was to 'be yourself but make that self just what Our Lord wants it to be' as recorded by Bellasis in *Life of the Mother Foundress SHCJ* (1919), p.174.

¹³ SHCJ EP Provincial Archives, Sister Papers, Memoir of Sister Maria Mercedes Ursula O'Brien, p. 14

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 65

mission sister, she would contend with shortages of money and interact with girls and women who, from a young age, were expected to 'mind the baby, weed the farm and carry loads to the market' rather than continue in school. Perhaps M.M. Osmonde wondered if she could ever gain the trust of these women and their daughters, who had led lives so very different from her own.¹⁵

In 1944, M.M. Osmonde wrote a report illustrating how the people of Nigeria had embraced their local Holy Child Schools and were proactive in campaigning for their daughters' education. She stated how many parents attended the inspection of the Education Officer and implored her to provide 'more educational advantages, more schools, and higher classes in each school'. Furthermore, 'the people have undertaken to put up more permanent buildings, collecting money'.¹⁶ In co-operation with the local positive action around girls' education, M.M. Osmonde worked hard to maintain the school and training centre she had established. Her letters to senior SHCJ and others include both encouraging descriptions of the progress made so far and frank references to sorely needed books and buildings. M.M. Osmonde was awarded both a CBE in 1956 and the Legion d'Honneur in 1960 for her work in education within the African Continent.



M.M. Osmonde with her CBE Medal, 1956.

Sister Colette Dwyer



Sr Colette Dwyer at the official opening of Sallynoggin Community School, 1973.

In 1967, standing in a field that was home to nine traveller families, a Holy Child sister stopped and asked a simple question: "is there anything I can do for you?". When a woman asked to be taught to read, a skill most take for granted, Sister Colette Dwyer invited the group to the convent at Killiney to see what could be done.¹⁷ Regular classes for adults and teenagers in the Convent led to the establishment of St Kieran's School for children of the Traveller Community in 1969. Sr Colette was also the driving force behind the establishment of Sallynoggin Community School in 1970. She continued her dedication to improving educational access for the Irish Traveller community, conducting a county by county survey in 1973 and, as National Coordinator for the Education of Travelers, writing a 1988 report on the education, employment and training of Travelers.¹⁸ By the 1990s, Sr Colette's target for over 90% of all Traveller children to attend primary school was reached.¹⁹

¹⁵ EP/400/3: Necrology of Mother Marie Osmonde de Maillé.

¹⁶ Mother Mary Osmund, 'On Women's Education in Nigeria: Evidence given by Mother Mary Osmund, March 9th 1944', 1944, IP/Af, pp.3,7

¹⁷ Colette Dwyer, Cyprian Unsworth et al. "Would You Ever Teach us to read, Sister?", 1995, pp.21 – 22.

¹⁸ Colette Dwyer, *The Education, Training and Employment of Travellers – 21 Years on: 1988 Report of the National Coordinator for the Education of Travellers*, 1988, p.2.

¹⁹ Colette Dwyer, Cyprian Unsworth et al. "Would You Ever Teach us to read, Sister?", 1995, p.28.

Sister Teresa Okure

Sister Teresa Okure's faith carried her through the challenges of becoming the SHCJ's first African sister, which included enduring one of Britain's coldest winters at Mayfield. Writing in 1996, Sr Teresa related how she was called to her vocation as an SHCJ and described seeing her hope fulfilled:

I remember very well the Lord assuring me from this moment that, though I was finite, he was infinite. [...] I feel that he has fulfilled the hope he gave me at the beginning. This hope was that I would become a means through which others would come to join the Society and in fact the Society has been greatly enriched, rejuvenated and renewed by its African members'.²⁰

Sr Teresa has worked as a teacher and theologian for most of her life as an SHCJ. She is currently professor of New Testament and gender hermeneutics at the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.²¹



Sr Teresa Okure at her final procession in the Cornelia Connelly College Chapel, 1971.

Sister Carmel McNicholas



Sr Carmel McNicholas with children from St Joseph's Play Group, Spring 1988.

'Fascinated' by the missionary stories of Mother Mary Edith Rudwick, Sister Carmel decided to join the SHCJ, but was 'devastated' when she was prevented from entering as a choir sister and working in West Africa. Nevertheless, she was still drawn to the spirit of the Society and entered as a lay sister in 1945.²²

Sr Carmel hoped 'I would never be sent to Preston as the place looked so dreary and depressing'. Nevertheless, she spent 'very happy' years working in the junior school and was encouraged by Mother Miriam to work more directly with the children. Between 1977 and 1997 she worked in St Joseph's play group

and later assisted the schoolchildren with reading. Many Asian families had moved to Preston during this period and Sr Carmel made sure Asian mothers and children attending the playgroup would 'feel at home'.²³ Although her dream to teach children in West Africa did not come to pass, she still felt she was 'doing the work I entered for'. When Sr Carmel reflected on her time in Preston to a friend, she commented 'isn't God wonderful?' and concluded, whether in Africa or Preston, 'they are all His children!'²⁴

²⁰ Teresa Okure, 'The Beginnings of an SHCJ African Vocation A Personal Story', *SHCJ History* vol. 1, 1996, pp.90-100.

²¹ Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 'People: Teresa Okure', available at <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/teresa-okure>, last accessed October 2024.

²² Necrology for Sister Carmel McNicholas, SHCJ European Province Archives, EP/400/3/McNicholas, Catherine Carmel.

²³ Sister Carmel (Catherine McNicholas) interviewed by Christine Carter *Journey in Faith: Life Stories of Fifteen Holy Child Sisters in the European Province*, pp. 31 -32.

²⁴ Necrology for Sister Carmel McNicholas, SHCJ European Province Archives, EP/400/3/McNicholas, Catherine Carmel.

Sister Patricia O'Neill

Understanding how to use difficult experiences to allow oneself to grow and help others was a valuable lesson given to a student of Sister Patricia O'Neill who had been watched over by this thoughtful nun throughout her time at Winckley Square Convent School, Preston. When the student received disappointing exam results, Sister Patricia took her out for the day on a picnic. She used this time to encourage the young girl to continue her education and explained how going through this particular trial would give her a deeper empathy with her own future students.



Sr Patricia O'Neill, circa 2000.

Sr Patricia's protégé went on to have a career in education and the two also shared a lifelong friendship. Reflecting on Sister Pat's thoughtful intervention and holistic approach to education her student later wrote that she was 'a wonderful example of actions not words'.²⁵

Sister Pamela Hussey



Sr Pamela Hussey, circa 2015.

In common with Mother Marie Osmonde, Pamela received the Legion d'Honneur as well as an MBE. The former accolade was presented in recognition of her role relaying enemy naval signals from 'Station Y' to 'Station X' (from the Scarborough station to the famous Bletchley) during the Second World War. However, it was Pamela's efforts to protect human rights in Central America and her work with Salvadorean refugees that lead her to receiving her MBE from Queen Elizabeth on the 16th November 2007.

In the late 1970s, Pamela became a member of the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR) and took on an unpaid role which immediately involved her making an ecumenical visit to a refugee camp of Salvadorians living in Honduras. Pamela was in awe of these resilient people who grew flowers and vegetables, set up workshops manufacturing tools and organized meal timetables to ensure all were fed 'in a dried up river bed with plastic sheeting for tents. It was astonishing'.²⁶

Writing to Sisters Geraldine MacCarthy and Mary Lalor, Pamela was thankful for the chance to carry out her work for CIIR and still had in mind others who she felt deserved the accolade:

I am thinking, of course, of all the people who could also have got this honour, and of all the people in Latin America who will be forever unhonoured and unsung.²⁷

²⁵ EP/4/2 Sister Patricia O'Neill's Personal Papers and biographical material, eulogies and memories

²⁶ Adam Bradbury, 'A Woman Making a Difference', CIIR News, Oct 2000.

²⁷ Letter From Pamela Hussey to Geraldine MacCarthy and Mary Lalor, 19 Jun 2000, EP/400/Hussey, Pamela

Sister Mary Dempsey

Sr Mary Dempsey remained close to her family (who knew her as Molly) all her life, but was drawn to mission work and came to Stamullen as a candidate despite her family's distress at her choice, although her mother ultimately lent her support. She suffered a great shock when, without being notified by superiors at any earlier stage, she learned from another sister that lay SHCJ nuns were not permitted to join the missions. Prior to taking her final vows in 1949, Sr Mary brought this to the Provincial Superior's attention.²⁸



Sr Mary Dempsey, circa 2000.

From 1949 to 1966, Sr Mary worked at Layton Hill, Blackpool and the Mayfield Convent as a cook, but chose nursing when offered a chance to undertake professional training. Sr Mary went on not only to care for elderly SHCJ at St Leonards, but to use her skills at St Anne's hostel for homeless men in Birmingham with sisters Laura Charlton and Agnes Hartung. Sr Mary had a lifelong sympathy for the homeless. 'With a twinkle in her eye' she would relate how in earlier religious life, she disregarded an order from the local superior to stop making cooked breakfasts for a gentleman of the road while making one for the local priest, and to give him a sandwich instead. Mary continued to cook the two hot breakfasts but told the gentleman in question to keep out of sight of the superior.²⁹

From September 1983, Sr Mary worked in a shelter for women and children named Brú Chaoimhin with Sr Una McCourtney from the St Joseph of Peace Sisters. Brú Chaoimhin supported women leaving domestic violence, women who had lost their homes in old age, who had recently left psychiatric hospitals or prisons and young girls who had run away from home after physical and sexual abuse. Mary listened to the residents and counselled them, put them in touch with Social Services, dealt with husbands who came to persuade their wives to return, cared for the children and helped with the day to day domestic management of the shelter.³⁰

Years later, Jean O'Brien addressed a Christian Feminist Conference organised for 30 clergy and lay men to tell her story of living with domestic violence - that at one point led to her losing her child - and fleeing with her little son. She found happiness and returned to God during a year sharing the same space with 62 other women due to the support of one religious sister there. The shelter was Brú Chaoimhin and the sister was Mary Dempsey.³¹

²⁸ Sr Mary Dempsey interviewed by Christine Carter *Journey in Faith: Life Stories of Fifteen Holy Child Sisters in the European Province*, pp. 15-17.

²⁹ Tribute to Sr Mary Dempsey read at her funeral by Sr Angela O'Connor SHCJ, 23rd May 2025.

³⁰ Mary Dempsey, 'Brú Chaoimhin' European Province Newsletter, Feb 1984 issue, pp. 10-11.

³¹ Claire Murphy, 'Christian Feminist Conference for Men', European Province Newsletter March/April 1989, pp.12-13.

Sister Eva Heymann

Alongside teaching in the European Province, Sr Eva Heymann helped children coping with the



impact of trauma and later took part in the work of the Terrence Higgins Trust supporting victims of AIDS. Eva used her own experiences of discrimination in Nazi Germany as a young Jewish girl to empathise with the Gay community who she saw as being ostracised in a similar way. She volunteered for the Terrence Higgins Trust at a hospice named Calcutta House. Reflecting on her time there, Eva described how joyful and enriching she found her experiences:

Being here is anything but depressing. I meet God daily in the people here and I have truly witnessed miracles. Calcutta House is a place of hope, of healing, of enabling, of caring. I thank God every day that I am able to be a part of it and make my small contribution to its progress.³²

Sr Eva Heymann, circa 2010.

Archives, Completion, and Legacy

Since the arrival of the archives in Harrogate several members of the Community here have sadly died. They include Sister Julian Breakell, who started religious life as a young nun working at the SHCJ's Fribourg finishing school, went on to teach at a secondary school in Zimbabwe in the 1980s and afterwards became a House Mother for boys at risk in the Westminster Diocese. Remembered as a person of 'great empathy' by Sr Philomena Grimley, Sr Julian defined her work in Lancaster Castle Prison chaplaincy team as persevering and hoping that 'the fact of our friendship and concern pass on, in some way, Christ's own message.'³³

The concept of a Catholic religious institute's 'completion' can only be fully understood by knowing its history, the journey experienced by its members before this destination was reached and how their finished work has influenced the world. The story of the SHCJ, like so many others, includes apostolates long and short lived, members who remained for all their lives and some who departed, involvement and even leading roles in international organisations as well as simple conversations or other kindnesses between sisters and the people they lived alongside. An institute's ministries and particular way of life may be over at this stage, but it will never lose its significance. It is hoped that by preserving the inspiring stories of men and women religious with their vast and varied ministries, the archives have can continue the core endeavour to 'pass on, Christ's own message' to generations to come.

³² Eva Heymann, 'Where was the Church?', 2003.

³³ Philomena Grimley, 'SHCJ memories of Sister Julian Breakell' (read at her funeral) 28th Aug 2024; Julian Breakell, SHCJ Province News, Winter 1998-1999, p.5.