



# Oral History

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*RECOLLECTIONS OF DOMINICAN SISTERS OF THE CONGREGATION OF OUR  
LADY OF THE ROSARY AND ST CATHERINE OF SIENA, CABRA, IN THE  
CONVENTO DE NOSSA SENHORA DO BOM SUCESSO IN LISBON*

*1944 - 2016*

Interviews conducted by Dr Bronagh McShane (National University of Ireland, Galway)  
Supported by the Emigrant Support Programme, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade  
July 2018

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**Sister Aileen Coates, Sister Alicia Mooney, Sister Teresa Wade and Sister Agnes Talty in the Bom Sucesso Cloister, Summer 2016**

## FOREWORD

It is a privilege for me to have been invited to write a foreword to the interviews conducted by Dr Bronagh McShane. This oral history comprises the reminiscences of some of the Dominican Sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Rosary and St Catherine of Siena, the headquarters of which are located in Cabra, Dublin, Ireland. It was due to this connection that the Sisters of *Bom Sucesso* convent in Belém, Lisbon were known as the *Dominicanas Irlandesas*.

I would like to pay tribute to the many sisters, who, since 1639, formed community in *Bom Sucesso*, educated children and endeared themselves to parents, colleagues and friends over the years. In the memories captured through this oral history you will find the minutiae of religious life, the daily rhythm of prayer, study, community and mission – the four pillars of Dominican life. These are not illustrated by grand deeds so much as by fidelity to the daily routine. These were strong women who withstood revolution, earthquakes and changing political fortunes. The extraordinary beauty of the chapel, choir, courtyard etc. formed part of the environment for sisters and students and down to the time of their final departure from *Bom Sucesso* in August 2016, the relationships between the sisters and the local community were warm and mutually supportive.

Many of the sisters who shared their memories travelled from Ireland to *Bom Sucesso* as young women and suffered from loneliness in a strange country. Some had to learn Portuguese immediately, in order to teach in the *Colégio*. All had to adapt to a different culture both within and without the convent. It is, as Padraig Kavanagh said ‘in the bits and pieces of everyday’ that we grow and mature. You will be able to pick up in the reminiscences, the light and shade of life in *Bom Sucesso*, which produced strong, vibrant women, followers of St Dominic with a great devotion to Our Lady to whom the convent is dedicated. For a fuller historical account of life in *Bom Sucesso* please see Sister Honor McCabe’s book, *A Light Undimmed: the Story of the Convent of Our Lady of Bom Sucesso Lisbon 1639-2006*.<sup>1</sup>

Our thanks to Dr Bronagh McShane and to Sister Mary O’Byrne O.P., the Congregation Archivist, who has given archival advice to the project. Thanks are extended to Mr William Cunningham who oversaw the project and to Sister Elizabeth Smyth O.P. who represents the Congregation on the Board of the FOSDRI. The work of the FOSDRI is to oversee the continuation of ministries initiated by *Bom Sucesso*. Gratitude is due to the Emigrant Support Programme, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and to the Irish Ambassador, Orla Tunney, for their support.

Elisabeth Healy O.P.

Prioress General of the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Catherine of Siena, Cabra, Dublin,

July 2018

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<sup>1</sup> Honor McCabe, *A Light Undimmed: The Story of the Convent of Our Lady of Bom Sucesso Lisbon 1639-2006* (Dublin, 2007); [www.dominicanpublications.com](http://www.dominicanpublications.com). This book provides a comprehensive history of the *Bom Sucesso* convent from its foundation in 1639 to 2006. In 2017, a Portuguese language edition was published.

## INTRODUCTION

Established in 1639 by the Irish Dominican and diplomat, Fr Dominic O'Daly (1595-1662), the Irish Dominican convent of *Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso* located in the parish of Belém on the outskirts of Lisbon city, holds an important place in the history of Irish emigration to Europe. It was the first continental convent founded explicitly for Irish women religious at a time when Catholic practice was proscribed in Ireland. Since its foundation in the seventeenth century, a steady flow of new postulants joined the convent so that by 1900 almost 200 women had been professed there, the vast majority of them Irish (although there were a small number of Portuguese, Brazilian and Italian members). The *Bom Sucesso* community has played a pivotal and long-standing role in sustaining an Irish presence in Lisbon and today their legacy continues through educational and outreach initiatives established by the sisters, including the *Colégio do Bom Sucesso*, the *Casinha de Nossa Senhora* and the *Centro Sagrada Família* in Algés. The church adjoining the *Bom Sucesso* convent, construction of which commenced in the mid-seventeenth century, continues to serve the pastoral and spiritual needs of both the local and the Irish diaspora communities living in Lisbon.

The closure of the *Bom Sucesso* convent in August 2016 and the return to Ireland of its last remaining members, heralded the end of a significant phase in the history of Irish women religious and Irish emigration to Europe and thus prompted the oral history project of which the below recollections are the result. The aim of the project was to record and document the experiences of those sisters who had spent either part or all of their professed lives at *Bom Sucesso*. Unfortunately, due to time and funding constraints, it was not possible to carry out interviews with every sister who had spent time at *Bom Sucesso*, while others elected not to participate. The interviews were conducted between December 2016 and October 2017 and subsequently transcribed. The below recollections are derived from these transcripts which were edited and amended by the interviewees. The original transcripts and recordings are held by the Congregation of Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Catherine of Siena, Cabra, who also hold the copyright.

The interviews with Sister Teresa Wade and Sister Alicia Mooney were conducted by the author and Dr Caroline Bowden (Queen Mary, University of London) in September 2015, prior to the closure of *Bom Sucesso*. I wish to acknowledge my thanks to Dr Bowden for kindly granting permission to include these interviews here and for her encouragement and mentorship. Thanks are also due to Dr Carmen Mangion (Birkbeck, University of London) for support and advice. I am grateful to William Cunningham (*Fundação de Obra Social das Religiosas Dominicanas Irlandesas* [FOSDRI]), Sister Elizabeth Smyth and Sister Mary O'Byrne for their help, encouragement and input. Sincere thanks are also due to the Irish Ambassador, Orla Tunney and the Emigrant Support Programme, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for financial support. Finally, my thanks to the participants, without whom there would be no interviews and no story to tell.

Bronagh McShane

National University of Ireland, Galway

May 2018

## THE SISTERS' RECOLLECTIONS

Mary Philomena Talty (Sister Agnes)

In Lisbon, 1944 – 2016



I was educated with the Irish Dominicans in Eccles Street College and Muckross Park College in Dublin. When I left Muckross Park having completed my school education, I wished to become a Dominican sister. A sister in Muckross Park, Sister Anna [Walsh], was friendly with some of the Dominican nuns in the Monastery of Our Lady of *Bom Sucesso* in Lisbon, Portugal. It was some years since young women had entered that Monastery and Sister Anna persuaded me to enter there. There was another lady, Margaret Faherty, from the Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland, who wished to be a Dominican and Sister Anna also persuaded her to enter the Monastery in Lisbon.

In 1944, when the war was still raging in Europe, Margaret Faherty and I set out on the 11<sup>th</sup> March from Dublin to Foynes, County Limerick to board a plane for Lisbon. When we arrived we were told that there was no plane but to wait there. We stayed in lodgings, not knowing exactly when we were destined to leave for Portugal. Days passed with always the same answer, 'You will be told later'. By this time, we had no more money left to pay for our lodging and I had to write to my mother to send me more which she did. We then decided that by Monday 18<sup>th</sup> March, if there was no plane leaving Foynes for Portugal we would return to Dublin. On the eve of the 17<sup>th</sup> March, a man appeared at our lodgings telling us not to go out any more and not to give information to anyone, and that sometime, some day soon, a car would come to take us to the plane. Then, late in the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> March, the car arrived and we boarded the plane in Foynes. The plane was a far cry from the jets of today. It was a small sea plane with no lights and black curtains on the windows. There were wooden seats for four passengers, placed around a wooden table. There was a lady with a small child with us on the plane. It was my maiden flight and only after twenty or more years did I have another but this time not in a sea plane during a war. We were both so dazed by this experience, and I suppose, young and foolhardy, that we forgot to feel the danger of our position, and didn't even feel anxious. Eventually at two o'clock in the morning we landed by the beautiful Tagus river.

As one sails up the broad and lovely Tagus River to Lisbon, two landmarks stand out conspicuously: the Tower of Belém and the Church and Monastery of *Jerónimos*. For hundreds of years these two masterpieces of Portuguese architecture have commanded the attention and admiration of all. Between them and now partially hidden by buildings is the *Convento do Bom Sucesso* and it was to this convent that we made our way on the Feast of St Joseph [19<sup>th</sup> March] in 1944. The lady who travelled with us asked us where we were going and we told her, so she called a taxi and told the driver, in Portuguese, the address. He took us there, at great speed, and we stopped at a very big closed door. We were not expected. There was a bell rope at the side of the door which we pulled several times. I said to Margaret, 'It looks as if we have been kidnapped'! After much ringing of the bell, two quaint, kind old ladies appeared. They spoke Portuguese to us and then brought us into a room with us. Then two sisters in the Dominican habit appeared at the other side of the grille and we knew we had arrived. The following day we visited Lisbon with a past pupil as our guide. That afternoon we entered the enclosure and were welcomed by all the nuns.

The atmosphere in the monastery was one of peace, joy and great simplicity. The Divine Office was the important prayer of our day, which I had to learn to recite and sing as it was all in Latin. We both received religious names when we became novices. Margaret Faherty became Sister Teresa and I became Sister Agnes.

As with many monasteries at that time, there was a school in the enclosure but the pupils (all girls) had their own classrooms and dormitories separated from the nuns' cloister. The nuns were the teachers but there were some lay teachers too, especially to teach Portuguese, History and Geography. I had to learn Portuguese and to do this I sat at the back of the classroom and listened to the Portuguese teachers. I also had "duties" with the pupils: supervising their study times, their recreation, meals and dormitories.

Later I was able to teach and I taught the *Quarta classe*, a very intense and full programme with a public exam, written and oral which took place in the public *Lyceum*.<sup>2</sup> I taught English, Portuguese, History and Geography and later when the *Ciclo Preparatório* (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> classes) were introduced, I taught these classes also.

In 1955, as no women had come to join our community for some years, we were advised to join another group, so we amalgamated with the Congregation of Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Catherine of Siena in Cabra, in Dublin, as many of the nuns in *Bom Sucesso* knew these sisters. As the Cabra sisters were not monastic this meant that the enclosure or cloister ended

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<sup>2</sup> A *Lyceum* is a Portuguese state-run secondary school.

in *Bom Sucesso*. There were many changes. All the grilles were removed from the church, especially the big grille dividing the lower choir where we prayed so now we could see the main altar in the church where Mass was celebrated. Sisters from the Cabra Congregation began to come in twos and threes to join us and they too learnt Portuguese and began to teach in the school. Ten years later, in 1965, after Vatican II, we were allowed to go outside the convent.<sup>3</sup> We visited Fátima and some of the sisters and I took courses in Scripture, Theology, Church History, Canon Law etc. under the direction of the Portuguese Dominican Fathers who had done their studies in Canada. In 1968 I went to Ireland to Sion Hill convent in Dublin to attend a Froebel teacher training course.

On 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1974 there was a revolution in Portugal. It was a military coup and they called it 'The Carnation Revolution' because the soldiers wore red carnations and had red carnations on their tanks. There was very little military activity, although there were some incidents but on the whole it was not violent. The school was closed that day but then opened the following day. The parents asked for a meeting in the school gymnasium to know why the school had been closed. We told them that the school bus had gone to collect the pupils but had been told to stop and not to collect any pupils. Then every night there were demonstrations in the streets with protestors shouting "*Liberdade*" ("Freedom"). Our senior pupils (17 and 18 year olds) were all out protesting and were hoarse when they came to class. The week after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April the Communist groups flew in from France and the Marxist Communists from Russia. The Portuguese Religious Congregations were fearful that they would be expelled as happened in 1910 when Portugal became a Republic. Later that year, the Communist-Marxist took over much of their property, schools and hospitals. They never did that as far as we were concerned but the pupils in our school were very influenced with what was happening and they began to set up communist courts in the classrooms and to '*sanear*' (purge) the sisters and teachers that they did not like. The [lay] teachers called a meeting to decide that they would take over the school. Some of the teachers who were loyal to us told us about this. I was now the Sister Principal of the senior school and I had to deal with this situation. At our International school (in Carcavelos) there were many students whose parents were from foreign embassies and I told the teachers that they would have to deal with them if the activist teachers attempted to take over our school. Our cleaning staff and other personnel left us and joined newly formed trade union groups. We sisters had to clean the classrooms and corridors each evening. We could not recruit new staff as we feared that they would be part of the 'communist infiltration'. Many of our students left, either because their fathers were put in prison or because their families had to leave the country. A military Junta then took power for some years until later a socialist government took over. We asked our Portuguese friends how long all this would last and

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<sup>3</sup> The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (*Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum Secundum*), announced by Pope John XXIII on 25 January 1959, formally opened by him on 11 October 1962 and closed by his successor, Pope Paul VI on 8 December 1965.

they said about ten years, and they were right because it was only in 1986 when Portugal joined the European Union that life became more coherent and settled.

In early 1991, we had to legalise our schools further and we asked the *Patriarcado* of Lisbon what we should do.<sup>4</sup> They advised us to make a Church Foundation for Social Solidarity which could include fee-paying schools. This Foundation was then recognised by the Government in 1993.<sup>5</sup> The Social Security Office in Lisbon offered us a Social Centre in Algés which was available. One or two of the Sisters would have to be in charge of it. It was decided by our community in *Bom Sucesso* that I would be the best person and so I left my classes in *Colégio do Bom Sucesso* and started in a completely new situation.

The Centre was a prefabricated building in the middle of a ‘shanty’ area surrounded by huts and metal containers which served as houses. There were many of these areas around Lisbon and other cities since after the 25<sup>th</sup> of April Revolution over a million people came from overseas to Portugal, that is, Angola, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, and there was no accommodation for them, so they just set up places for themselves wherever they found a vacant spot. Our Centre was dark, smelled badly and was infested with rats. The first week, I went around to investigate everywhere and found a huge refuse heap at the side of the building, alive with rodents. I phoned the *Câmara* to remove it, which they did.<sup>6</sup> This was the first of many calls to the *Câmara* of Oeiras who were a great help to us. Over the years, the President of the *Câmara* became a great friend of mine, and by his generosity the Centre expanded and became one of the best around Lisbon. We had many Portuguese friends from having worked in the *Colégio do Bom Sucesso* and foreign people from our work in St Dominic’s International School in Cascais and they all helped us to build up the Centre. They helped the teachers and auxiliary staff to feed the children, supervise their play, teach them, provide furniture for the different rooms, clear the muddy and gravel area surrounding the building and set up a playground for the children. We began courses of professional training for women and men who had no opportunity to finish their education, and we got recognition as an *Entidade Formadora*.<sup>7</sup> We had ongoing professional training for the administrative staff and all the staff and personnel working in the Centre. Some could not read or write or even sign their name. We

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<sup>4</sup> The increasingly secular trend in Portugal after the 1974 Revolution led to a restructuring of the educational sector, bringing private and religious-run schools more clearly under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.

<sup>5</sup> These Private Institutions of Social Solidarity (known in Portugal by the acronym “IPSS”) have become a common form adopted by charities and social service organisations in Portugal. Generally, they are expected not to charge for their services, but an exception was made for fee-paying schools provided the funds are used to further the charitable objects of the institution, and are not distributed to the founders or other stakeholders.

<sup>6</sup> *Câmara Municipal de Oeiras* is the municipal council of a large suburb to the west of Lisbon.

<sup>7</sup> Adult education entity.



contacted a teacher who knew the *Paulo Freire* method for teaching adults which we had experienced when we were in Brazil.<sup>8</sup> Over a year, they had nightly classes and even after some months they proudly presented me with a framed page of all their signatures. The whole story of *Centro Sagrada Família* would fill a book! I worked in the Centre until 2007 when I had a knee replacement. This curtailed my visits to the Centre, but after that I was able to go in the car used by the Centre to visit and see everyone.

In 2010 our community in *Bom Sucesso* had become reduced in numbers: three sisters had died from illness and three were sent to Ireland for further medical treatment. We were told by the Congregation Council that there were no Dominican sisters in Ireland or elsewhere in the Congregation available to be sent to our community in Lisbon and there was the possibility that the convent in Lisbon would have to be closed. This was shattering news for us. We were inclined not to believe it or even think about it. To close a convent with a wonderful history of 377 years and with a mission to over a thousand people, young and old, seemed incredible to us. The community then consisted of five sisters, four of whom had lived in Portugal for 73, 55, 40 and 30 years respectively and we thought we would end our days in Portugal. However, we were gradually convinced that we would have to leave our convent and our very big Portuguese family and go to one or other of the Dominican communities in Ireland.

It all happened very quickly and at the end of August 2016 the four sisters still living in *Bom Sucesso* left the convent and Lisbon on a flight to Dublin. Many members of the Congregation were there to welcome us but we greeted them in tears. The airport attendants said they had seen people leave the airport in tears but never on arrival. Although the move and settling was so upsetting for us, we were chastened by the thought of the thousands of people at this same time who were being forced out of their homes and countries with nothing of their personal possessions and with no welcome to a country or place of safety. Even with our hearts heavy, we thanked God for His goodness to us, and prayed and continue to pray for all the refugees and migrants of our world, and that God will change the hearts and minds of those who continue to wage war and violence.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A teaching method adopted by the Brazilian Ministry of Education in 1963. It is aimed at teaching literacy to those who missed out on early education opportunities.

<sup>9</sup> *Interviewee Note:* Although the Irish Dominican Sisters are no longer living at the *Convento de Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso* their legacy remains strong in the fine *Colégio do Bom Sucesso*, the *Casinha de Nossa Senhora*, the *Fundação Obra Social das Religiosas Dominicanas Irlandesas* and in the *Centro Sagrada Família* in Algés.

## Aileen Coates (Sister Aedris)

In Lisbon 1962 – 2016



When I finished my secondary school education in the Dominican College in County Wicklow, I was eighteen years of age and I wished to give my life to God. I didn't know how I could do that but one of the Dominican sisters said I could do it by becoming a Dominican sister. In October 1947 I entered Kerdiffstown, the Dominican novitiate in County Kildare.<sup>10</sup> After three years I made simple profession and I was sent to the community in Wicklow. I was very pleased as I knew the sisters and they knew me. After some time I was sent to University College Dublin to study for a degree with a view to teach in our schools as education was part of our Dominican charism. Later I studied for a Higher Diploma and for a Teachers Diploma in Science. Then I returned to teach in the Dominican College in Wicklow.

In 1962 I was asked to go to Lisbon to a Dominican convent which had joined our Congregation some eight years before, in 1955. This was the *Convento de Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso* in Lisbon. Sister Michelle Forde and Sister Úna Dempsey were also asked to go to Lisbon so we all travelled from Dublin by plane in late August 1962. It was my first flight and I was very interested and excited. We came to Lisbon and it looked very beautiful with so many lights since when we arrived it was ten o'clock at night. We were met by the driver of the school bus who took us to the convent. We were accompanied by Fr Leo [Lennon] O.P., then prior of *Corpo Santo*, the Irish Dominican Priory in Lisbon.

My first impression was that this convent was very different from any that we knew in Ireland. It was over 300 years in existence and was the oldest Irish Dominican convent in the world. It had long corridors, wooden floors and the ground floor had stone flagstones. There was a beautiful cloister garden in the centre of the convent with a lovely fountain with goldfish, water lilies and pampas grass.

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<sup>10</sup> Used as the novitiate for the Irish Dominican congregation between 1939 and 1967.

Because of the great heat we were told to rest in the afternoon. One afternoon there was a knock at my door and a little sister said to me, 'Do you read *Paris Match*?' I had heard of this glossy magazine but never saw it. 'Do you read French?' she said, and when I said yes she gave me a copy and showed me a photo of Sophia Loren on the cover. 'My name used to be Sofia', she said. She was Mother Dominica, a Portuguese-Italian lady, very cultured and learned. She seemed to know everything that was going on outside the Monastery in spite of being enclosed all her religious life! The older sisters had all taught in the school in the enclosure: Languages, History, Philosophy, Art, Music and Embroidery.

When we first came to *Bom Sucesso*, Sister Bríd Trant who was Irish, had just become the prioress.<sup>11</sup> One day she said we would all go for a drive so we all set off in the school bus with the driver, far out of Lisbon to a beach. The water looked so beautiful and we took off our shoes and stockings and paddled in the water! I thought to myself, 'if I came to Portugal just for this, it was worth it!' We were all enclosed at that time. Only after Vatican II were we allowed to go out of our convents.

It took me some time to settle in and to learn Portuguese. I did have French, a smattering of Malay and Afrikaans and I found Portuguese difficult. One of the sisters of the former community was not happy that the monastic life had ended so she left and joined a monastery in Fátima. As she had been in charge of the day pupils I was thrown in to replace her just a few months after I had arrived. I had to hold an assembly every morning for the pupils. I would write in English what I had to say and Sister Agnes would put it into Portuguese and I would write out phonetically how to say it and read it to the group. Sister Michelle, Úna and I had a Portuguese teacher who came to the convent and taught us. Later when Sister Aimée (Honor McCabe) came to *Bom Sucesso* we went to Lisbon University for classes in Portuguese for foreigners.

At first I taught English to senior pupils and Catechism to younger pupils with the help of a little book with songs and rhymes. Sister Úna and I had to get our university qualification recognised by the Ministry of Education and for this we had to study the history and geography of Portugal in order to do an exam. We travelled across the city to a teacher in her house. She had been a teacher in *Bom Sucesso* College and was now retired. She was excellent and we both became very interested in the history and geography of Portugal and Portugal's overseas colonies. The latter at that time consisted of the archipelago of Madeira, the archipelago of the Azores, Angola, Mozambique, the archipelago of Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Goa, and East Timor. We both taught History and Geography in Portuguese so we had to know more than our pupils! We also taught Religion and Morals and Catholic Doctrine.

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<sup>11</sup> Sister Bríd Trant was professed in 1941.

In the late 1960s English-speaking families came to Lisbon to help to build the Salazar suspension bridge. Many of them were Catholics and they looked for a Catholic School. We were asked to open a school for them in the same building as the Portuguese School in Belém in which we sisters taught. The numbers increased in both schools so we had to find a place for the new addition. The Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritans) loaned us classrooms in their Seminary in Cascais and finally we bought land and began to build a new school called St Dominic's College.<sup>12</sup> We moved to this new building on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1974. We had many problems to overcome because of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April Revolution the same year. And this begins the story of what is now known as St Dominic's International School (SDIS).

In 1985 I became the Principal of St Dominic's International School, a position I retained until 1991. There were students of thirty to forty different nationalities and about eight different religions. All the classes were taught in English except the language classes which would be in that tongue. We had to recruit teachers who were trained for international teaching as the programs are very different from "national" schools in any country. We followed the PYP (Primary Year Programme), MYP (Middle Year Programme) and International Baccalaureate Programme. We sisters attended conferences for international schools held each year in different countries throughout Europe so we had a wide experience of other international schools. I ended my time in SDIS in 1991 and a very competent lay principal took over. At this time we had to get further recognition for our two schools and then began a two year negotiation to set up a Foundation or Trust for our schools and social solidarity centres. This was completed in 1993 and is known as *Fundação Obra Social das Religiosas Dominicanas Irlandesas* (FOSRDI).

I began to work with Sister Agnes Talty who was the Director of our *Centro Sagrada Família* in Algés for children of economically underprivileged families. Later when we were recognised as an entity for Adult Professional Formation I taught these adults with a team of *Formadoras* [tutors], as we were called. This was most rewarding work because when the adults had finished the course and passed their exams they were able to get paid jobs.

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<sup>12</sup> The Spiritans, formerly known in Ireland as the Holy Ghost Fathers, are the largest male religious congregation in Ireland, and run the well-known schools, Blackrock College, St Michael's, St Mary's and Templeogue College in Dublin and Rockwell College in County Tipperary.

## Sister Teresa Wade<sup>13</sup>

In Lisbon 1974 – 2016



This is what we call the lower parlour because there was a room which is now a classroom upstairs and it was the upper parlour. This is where we would have any president or if somebody came we would meet them here. They would come through the stone hall in here. It is also where we sometimes have little fiestas with people who come for celebrations and it's where we have a lot of meetings with sisters and staff or when we have visitors. This would be the parlour where we have them: I can't go back to when it was any different from now, because I wasn't here, but it would have been different before, in the time of the enclosure. There would be others who have been here longer who would [know about] that. But it was still the parlour: the interface between the community and the outside world. We have other parlours; two small parlours [the upper and the lower].

There would be meetings where the sisters and some laity were involved sometimes at the moment it may be just a group of the Principal and Vice principals, the Executive Council and the Board of the School. It can also sometimes be where parents are interviewed for the school or for the crèche. Or it would be where discussions went on about the future of the schools. Where it's a discussion between the sisters, it would be in our community room.

When I came [to Lisbon in 1974] I was sent principally for the international school, which is out in Carcavelos which was about half an hour's drive from here. And I travelled with two other sisters out there every day. We would have spent a lot of time out of the convent during the week. We left here at eight o'clock in the morning and we got back about five or six o'clock in the evening. I was there from 1974 until 1983. Well we moved out [from the international school] in 1983 and moved down to another house to be closer to the English-speaking community in Zambujal parish. Because

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<sup>13</sup> This interview with Sister Teresa was conducted by Dr Caroline Bowden and Dr Bronagh McShane at the *Bom Sucesso* convent in September 2015.

the *horário* [timetable] for this at the convent school was different to the *horário* for the work we were involved in so therefore those early days I wasn't much here.

When I came there was only one sister who was not Irish. She was Sister Gabriel, she was Brazilian and there were no Portuguese as such.<sup>14</sup> There had been, but when I arrived there was just one Brazilian sister apart from the Irish sisters. The convent was founded for the Irish when they could not become religious in Ireland.

When I entered in 1967 it was just the time of the Vatican Council and at that stage, we still did not go home. We lived in the convent and we never went out. Families came to see us; we didn't go to see them. It was a stricter life. We weren't cloistered, but we were more inside than going out. At that stage when you entered if you wanted to go on the missions, you said you were interested in going on the missions, and if you didn't normally you were in Ireland. I entered for Ireland; I didn't enter for the missions. Portugal had joined the Congregation in 1955 and so therefore was reasonably new and a few people were coming out. At that stage we were asked to go and if there was a reason that we shouldn't go: that was how it was put. With the changes that have occurred in those forty years there is much more flexibility and dialogue involved and I think it's common to other congregations. It was the church of the day.

It was a shock to be coming and a shock to be here initially. It was beautiful, but I have to say it was very different. You know there were dressed statues, and statues with natural hair and a lot of this. That's not the biggest thing, but it took time to get used to it and then of course there was the language. But I couldn't say how long because I was also going out to the international school, and so I wasn't as conscious of it as I would have been if I had been in the house all day, and working here, but with time what was strange didn't seem strange any longer and I grew to love it. And with years it has taken on more and more meaning.

There are a good lot of Irish flavours [in the convent]. I mean practical things come to mind. Our food would be more Irish than Portuguese. This convent is continental with a cloister: there are some cloisters in Ireland but you wouldn't have convents in Ireland like this; they're houses, big houses rather than convents. I don't think [there are cloisters] in our houses [in Ireland]. I am not sure about Galway. Cabra didn't have cloisters and that was our motherhouse. I suppose from the practical point of view in Ireland you know with the rain and the cold, you really couldn't have the rain coming up the stairs.

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<sup>14</sup> Sister Gabriel da Costa Cunha, born 1886, professed 1908, died 18 November 1982.

There can be tremendous simplicity I mean there is simplicity in our rules and there is nothing particularly special about our rules, the church and the cloister are [special], and some of our beautiful rooms are, but rules are very simple. There's simplicity in the house and in the community while we are living in a very beautiful and very special place. Not that you can't appreciate beauty: it's terribly important in our prayer and in our life, but it's important to have simplicity. But beauty helps and I am not saying that it doesn't all help, but then I lived for four years in another community, the second community that was founded and it was a very simple square house, but we had very nice simple oratory and it was beautiful. That doesn't take away from the beauty of this, but it was beautiful and we were there for a purpose and our apostolate and our religious life. That became very special but in a different way. And then we went to an apartment and spent ten years in an apartment with needy people and that was very, very plain and open to the whole world. But it was special all in a different way, because it was all open and people came in and you shared what you had and your computer and things; so it was very special but it didn't have the beauty and it didn't have the history of this place and it didn't have the history of the prayer of this place. But it's linked in with your life, both prayer and interaction with people, that's why you are there.

From the road we would appear to be cut off [in the convent], whereas we have the school and the children all round us, as you will hear tomorrow morning at eight o'clock in the morning. We are interacting and sharing the church and so therefore we are not just in here; and we also have a crèche across the way. We are not in that sense cut off and a lot of people come and that to me is important too. Because there's prayer life and community life, but there's also the world to others. We need to have the others and receiving from them as well as giving to them. We give in a way but we also receive. You see the goodness of people. You see the challenges that people meet and that keeps you from getting too heavenly. It keeps you with your feet on the ground. Connection; it's really sharing because we're not meant to be in an island, we're meant to be interacting and meeting people and their reality and that changes your life. I remember sharing the bible in Ireland in a group and some people couldn't read, but my goodness my spiritual honesty was enriched because [they had] new and open and fresh [insights]. They said, 'thank you very much sisters for coming' and we said, 'listen, we're receiving far more than we are giving'.

Dominic said we were to be preachers by our lives and by our actions; and he was out on the roads, he walked the roads and he met the people and he discussed with them. I would say that perhaps with history things have changed also. Our lives have changed [we have] more interaction with people because it is an evolution of the church as well as an evolution in religious life. It was thought at one stage we would be very much in our convents and meeting people there. Then came a [different] time and I think perhaps it's verbalised now, but perhaps people were always enriched by meeting with others. Going home and meeting with your family, it opens you up and enriches you.

## Sister Alicia Mooney<sup>15</sup>

In Lisbon 1975 – 2016



The Lord calls us and it's this call that won't go away and so I had to 'enter' to get peace. I ran away from it for years. I qualified as a Primary school teacher and I taught for a few years. Then I knew I had to answer this call to get peace. Prayer is our life with the Lord all during the day, every day. It is a relationship. At the liturgy and especially at Mass we are with Him in a special way.

We have our private prayers during the day as well. We have our time of contemplation and our time of spiritual reading. And during the day we are walking with the Lord.

We have 730 children in this school and most of them have their lunch in the refectories which are all around the cloister. Bit by bit we have given part of the convent over to the school. So it's a lovely space for the children. When our past pupils come back they recall how lovely it was to be in such a beautiful place. Not many schools have a cloister and a fountain.

The fountain is right in the centre of the quadrangle surrounded by the classrooms on the veranda and the refectories on the ground floor. So the children and the teachers and the other staff members are all working in this lovely environment too. And we're very happy to share our house. We love visitors coming. We have groups of Irish that come every year and of course people from other countries too. Yes, we love to share this beautiful place.

[Before coming to Lisbon] I was in a convent in Belfast. Our Mother General asked me to come here. So we are sent and we get up and go. I was sent to the Portuguese school here, *Colégio de Bom Sucesso*. I am a Primary school teacher and at home Primary school teachers have their own class. In Belfast I was teaching in Aquinas Hall and in my first couple of years here I had a class of my

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<sup>15</sup> This interview with Sister Alicia was conducted by Dr Caroline Bowden and Dr Bronagh McShane at the *Bom Sucesso* convent in September 2015.



own in the Kindergarten section, which was lovely. Then after that I taught English and Religion in the Primary school.

At the beginning of my time in Lisbon Sister Antoninus helped me with the Portuguese and each evening when I came over to the convent I would ask her how I would say some Portuguese phrases which would help me in a school situation. For example, 'pick that up off the floor please' or 'tidy up' etc. And so I would get the phrases that I needed from her.<sup>16</sup>

When we join [religious life] we know being sent to another mission is part of our life. I thought I would always be sent to one of our convents in Ireland. So it was a big shock to be sent to Lisbon and that was back in 1975 when my family didn't often travel. I thought I was going to another planet being sent to Lisbon. I didn't know what to expect but once I settled down it was lovely, it was home.

The prayer routine was similar because we had the same routine of Morning Prayer and Mass, Morning meditation, Rosary and Evening Prayer and Night Prayer. In that way our sisters could come from one convent to another and feel at home. Nowadays of course some of our convents and especially our small houses wouldn't have the same amount of prayer together because the sisters are out during the day as parish sisters or teaching. They might only be together for Morning and Evening Prayer.

When I 'entered' in Ireland we were very enclosed and couldn't go outside the door without special permission. Of course that's all changed now. It's very much absorbed as part of the life in Lisbon as we are dealing with Portuguese people all of the time.

I love the chapel. That would be number one. It's lovely being in our church. It is such a special place, just to be there with the Lord in a special way. With our busy life during the day it is so good to come away from all the noise and the fuss and sit in the church with the Lord, to be in the silence and the peace. It's a very special place and the cloister also. I love the cloister. At the break time and at dinnertime hundreds [of students] pass along here. We try to keep this one side of the cloister a little quieter, it's more cloistered. The other three sides are, as you see, well used and the Portuguese are very lively, as you can hear. Sometimes when visitors come into the cloister for the first time on a Saturday or a Sunday they remark, 'Oh the peace and quietness of the convent, wouldn't I like to be here all the time'. And we say to them, 'wait until Monday morning!' On

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<sup>16</sup> Sister Antoninus O'Rourke, born 1910, professed 1930, died 6 March 1982.

weekdays the children begin to arrive into the playground from 7.30 a.m. and then file noisily to their classrooms around the veranda at 8.45am. Thank God they are full of life. We love to hear them. It helps to keep us young.

## Honor McCabe (In religion, Sister Aimée)

In Lisbon 1963-76, 1984-85



I've been a Dominican since my early twenties. I lived in the North of Ireland for a number of years when I was a young sister and then I was assigned to Lisbon and I spent from 1963 to 1976 assigned there. And later again I was assigned there, but for family reasons had to return to Ireland

As a child, I lived outside Cork, in Crosshaven, and I was at school in the convent there. Then we came back to Cork city and I was in a private school in the South Mall. It was a time when a great number of people were going on Missions so I was fired with that same idea of going to Africa and I searched around and I found that the Dominican congregation had a deeper prayer life, I thought, than all the other congregations. They were big into liturgy and so on. So I decided I would go to the Dominicans. I was drawn to the missionary activity and the fact that they had the liturgy of the Church when other Orders had just the little office of Our Lady. I hadn't gone to Dominican convent schools because there aren't any in Cork.

I entered their novitiate in Kerdiffstown, County Kildare in 1951. That lasted about three years, roughly. We studied different themes and subjects such as the history of the church and so on and the purpose of the Dominican Order, to praise, to bless and to preach. We were initiated to sing the liturgy of the Church which was unusual in those days because not many congregations said the Divine Office at that time. This was in the 1950s. We had the mistress of novices, Mother Rita [Kealy], and then there was a council over the whole congregation. There was a prioress of the community, but they were separate from us. We were in the novitiate part.

After three years in the novitiate you were assigned to some house so I was assigned to the North [of Ireland] because I had my qualifications already and I was able to teach immediately after the novitiate. I had a degree from UCC [University College Cork] before I entered. I started teaching in

Belfast [in the North of Ireland], but I had been in the North before that because I had been teaching as a lay teacher in Lurgan, County Armagh, and I suppose because I knew the North, that's where I was sent after profession. It was a very happy experience. The community was a young community and it was full of joy and fun. It was a very good experience. There were up to twenty or twenty five people in that community. We were all teaching, different grades. I taught English, French and Irish, and of course Religion as well.

Before Vatican II we had very little contact with family. That changed then in the 1960s. We didn't have grilles but we were enclosed, so we didn't go outside the convent then. The school was within the convent. A lot of that changed with the renewal of religious life [that came with Vatican II]. So then we could visit our families. Prior to that, your family could come and visit you in the North, but they didn't. Instead, when I would come to Dublin, because we would have summer holidays and you went to another convent and for those of us in the North who didn't have family there we came to the South. We came to Dublin and we met our families that way.

I was in Belfast until 1963 and then I was assigned to Lisbon. There was no trouble in the North in those days. But then when I came back to Ireland after in 1976, I was assigned again to the North and "the Troubles" were on at that time. There was a very great difference. It didn't impact on daily religious life at all. There might be some disturbance, but normally even the school life went on from day to day. Within the convent there was nothing to be afraid of, but if you had to go out you had to be careful. And travelling up and down to Dublin could be problematic, you know. Not so much checkpoints and things like that, but the trains might be a bit late, I think. It's not very clear now my memory of that. Well I didn't travel that much, but when I did it was only one occasion, I think, when there was an accident on the train. Somebody, a member of the staff in the kitchenette was injured some way, and we had to delay a long time at Drogheda and we were late coming into Belfast and they just held the station open until we arrived. And that was the only time really, I experienced any disturbance. I was travelling on my own, and I couldn't go out of the station at the time. I had to wait until somebody from the convent came for me or I could get a taxi. Because of the Troubles you couldn't go outside the station. You were safe in the station, little things like that, but they were big enough at the time.

When I moved to Lisbon in 1963, I knew it had been an independent convent until 1954 or 1955, I think 1955, and it had applied to join our congregation because we were all Dominicans and so it was only nine years joined to us when I was sent out there. I knew two sisters who had gone out the year before. I didn't have much of an idea what to expect, but it was a beautiful experience and it was very, very interesting because we had to go to the university every afternoon to study the Portuguese language. I had lots of other languages so it was easy enough for me to learn another language I had been travelling a good deal because I spent two summers in the Gaeltacht and a long summer in France (for teaching the languages in the North, you had to spend time in the place

where the language was spoken). So I had been going around like that a good deal and then Portugal was just an added interest.

I was happy to undertake the assignment to Lisbon. I enjoyed it, I was young. I went by plane, but I had been travelling on planes before, so that was nothing new. I was struck by the brightness; it was beautifully bright and such a lovely city. So I fell in love with it immediately. It was beautiful, a lovely time. There was a contrast between the darkness of Belfast and the brightness of Lisbon. The prioress there, Brid Trant, was Irish, too. We had only one Portuguese, and one Brazilian. There were around about twenty-five in the community then, I think. There was great renewal in Lisbon at the time so that was very interesting. We used to go out to the big church assemblies and all that that they had. I don't remember a whole lot about the format now, but it was joyful experience.

Learning Portuguese was very interesting because we had to cross the city every evening, backwards and forwards over to the university which was a very modern place and we studied the language, the culture, the history and so on. Those of us who were starting Portuguese went. The maximum was four but very often we were three, two, three for the most part, but four in all. We were all at the same level in terms of the language. We did this every day, every weekday for most of the first year I was in Lisbon, a good part into the second semester, as far as I remember. I loved the language and had no problem. It's close enough to French, you know. It's another Latin language. We had Portuguese teachers. We were part of a bigger university class. It was a course for foreign students in the language and culture of the country. We didn't have a whole lot of integration with the other students because they were from different native language groups. I remember there were Japanese [students] there. They hadn't enough Portuguese to talk to us and we hadn't enough Japanese to talk to them. So there was very little that way. And, you know, university life is different. You don't have so much of the camaraderie. Especially with these because they were all of different language groups so there couldn't have been the same kind of integration.

Once you start you're always learning a language, really. But I had a lovely experience teaching in Lisbon. I was teaching English at the senior level. They were pre-university students and when I would do, say, the Romantic Movement in English with them the students would tell me about the Romantic Movement in Portuguese. It was a lovely exchange between us and they would tell me what to read in Portuguese, good examples. And these girls were seventeen to eighteen years old, and I would go off and read what they told me to read, and I would tell them what to read in English. This was in the secondary school in *Bom Sucesso*.

The convent was lovely. It was a very happy community. And the older sisters were very good to the younger ones, very good. So we had a very happy time there. The Irish sisters were from various parts of Ireland. Most of them, the bulk of the community had entered there. They didn't know any

convent in Ireland. They had gone out there. I think when they consulted a particular priest who used to advocate vocations and he recommended Lisbon to them. And they went out then. They wouldn't have the language, but, you see, English was spoken in the convent. So it was only when they had to learn it for educational purposes that they used it. It wasn't that difficult for them going into an English-speaking community. English was the primary language of the *Bom Sucesso* convent.

There were some small differences from our Irish convents, but life was in many ways similar because we'd have the same Divine Office and the same feasts. The daily routine of the *Bom Sucesso* was pretty much the same as we had in Belfast. The day would be around the Divine Office, the Morning Prayer and then evening prayer and then in between the other hours of the day. We started at five to six in the morning and we had meditation in the Choir and we had then the Morning Prayer and after that there would be Mass and then we went to the school. The school began around nine o'clock, and we worked in the school until after three o'clock in the afternoon. And then we came together to chat, we called it recreation, and then we had evening prayer, and the space then, and after that we had night prayer. And that was it. It was quite similar to what I had experienced in Belfast. There wasn't any great difference.

Our interaction with the outside community around the convent was mainly with the children and their parents, and the teachers because there were a lot of lay teachers there as well. That interaction would be primarily with Portuguese. Mostly, the parents would speak English to us but they would also speak Portuguese.

We felt very welcome. We were a community on our own really and the only contact we had with communities other than our own was with the Portuguese Dominicans who were very friendly with us and very good to us.<sup>17</sup> Then there were Spanish Dominicans who were exceptionally friendly and we had a lot of sharing with them.<sup>18</sup> We'd go on holidays to their convent and they'd come on holidays to us. And the Portuguese Dominicans - there was a convent of Dominicans very near us. We were living in Belém and they were up in Restelo, which is close by. We would keep communication with them, and we had communication with one congregation of Spanish Dominicans in particular because they originally had a house in Lisbon and when they no longer had a house in Lisbon they would send the missionary sisters to us before they set off for the Orient. Some of them were going to East Timor, which was then a Portuguese colony. And so we would prepare them for their departure.

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<sup>17</sup> The Portuguese Dominican sisters, founded in 1866 by Sister Teresa de Saldanha, had their earliest members trained in the Dominican convent in Drogheda, Ireland.

<sup>18</sup> The Spanish Dominican sisters were founded by Ramón Zubieta y Les and Ascensión Nicol Goñi in Peru in 1918.

Our closest links were with Ireland, though. There was a lot of coming and going as well with the convents in Ireland. The connection was very close. Its only three hours in a plane, you know. At the beginning, I kept in touch with Belfast friends by letter but then as the years go on you become more immersed in the local community. I mean, I became involved in what I faced every day once I went into the school. We were dealing with Portuguese children and Brazilians and other nationalities. And the children at break time would be all around the cloister on the top. In my time, they were not allowed go through the cloister underneath (as they do now). And they were very near us.

The convent building was very different from what I had come from in Belfast. I came from a modern building in Belfast with glass and all. It was fascinating.

The first week I was there, the archivist gave me a copy of the annals that she had re-written so I was introduced immediately into the background and history of *Bom Sucesso*. The archivist was Mother Cecilia Murray.<sup>19</sup> She did a huge amount of work to reconstruct and gather information for my book on the history of the [Dominican] Order and *Bom Sucesso*. She had to research the whole history because in 1910 a sister who was sent into the archives to destroy documents that might be incriminating destroyed the annals, which she shouldn't have done. So then Mother Cecilia spent a lifetime researching and recovering documents. This happened during the 1910 republican revolution in Portugal. The sisters at the time were afraid that they'd have to leave. There was a British ship in the harbour waiting to transport all of British origin because we were under Britain at the time and so they prematurely destroyed a lot of the documents in the archives in case the republicans would have had some political reason for involving the sisters in something or other, so it was just panic at the time

We have an archivist in all the main houses, you know, in the convents. And she would normally also be the annalist who keeps the annals from year to year.

The changes introduced during Vatican II didn't have such a big impact on us in *Bom Sucesso*. You see we were already going out a lot in Lisbon on account of going to the university for the language classes and for various reasons we were out more than sisters might have been in the convents in Ireland, so that didn't impact very much on us. But it was in general the biggest change that we experienced but we had already begun that the process of change. The habit we wore changed, too.

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<sup>19</sup> Sister Cecilia Murray, born 1887, professed 1905 and died 10 August 1972.

It shortened, you know. It was a bit awkward when you were travelling with it right down to your ankles so then it was much easier when you had a shorter habit, and a neater one, you know, not so cumbersome. There was no difference between the habit I wore in Belfast and in Lisbon. It would be the same all around because we're all the same congregation. We were obviously in a much hotter climate so we used lighter material.

Overall, I think it was a very happy and interesting experience because when you're in contact with another culture it broadens your mind and though it's difficult making sure you know the language and the idiom and so on, but above everything else, it's an enrichment.

Because the convent was founded was for Irish sisters in the penal days, it did not seek to recruit Portuguese sisters. That continued for a very long time, so that normally the Portuguese had their own Dominican [communities] so they didn't need to come to us. That initial founding principle of it being for Irish sisters continued down through the ages. Even though when they restored the Portuguese Dominicans, two of the founding sisters came to Drogheda to be trained. So there was always that Irish connection. They were starting a Portuguese congregation of Dominicans and they needed to train somewhere so they trained in Drogheda.

We also had the support of the Irish Dominican priests of *Corpo Santo*. You see there was *Corpo Santo* and there was *Bom Sucesso*. They acted as chaplains to us. They came to say Mass for us every morning and they heard confessions. We entered the confessional by the choir, where the organ is there's a door there at the side and that goes into a little thing with a grille. We used to go there and the priest would be in the church. It was very narrow [and] claustrophobic.

At the time of enclosure we did have a small altar at the grille and we stayed in the Choir but then that all changed when we put in the altar, the altar is modern, the one where the Mass is said now. That's quite modern and so we went out into the church. After Vatican II we were able to go out.

I was in Lisbon during the 1974 revolution. Well, you know we were kind of lucky in being foreigners, the revolution was among themselves. But you didn't know when they would turn, so you went to bed at night hoping that all would be well that you wouldn't have to be called up in the middle of the night and then you woke up in the morning and said 'thanks be to God it's been a quiet night'. But other than that, that's about all I remember about the revolution.

The convent's relationship with Britain kind of faded gradually. We had some very good ambassadors from Ireland at the time. There was a very good ambassador, Mr Rush, at the time of



the revolution. He would have had contact with the community. He was very obliging, very good. Very much part of the Irish scene.

I think the community sees itself very much as an Irish community, especially the older sisters. I think we went to greater effort in acquiring the language whereas the older sisters didn't seem to need it. You see, when they founded the school, they founded it for developing English and Portuguese people went there in order to have a good knowledge of the English language originally. Possibly, there was greater integration into Portuguese culture and the community by the newer sisters of my generation. We were more inclined to learn it. The times were changing, too, and people wanted the language but they also wanted their own Portuguese culture.

## Sister Michelle Forde

In Lisbon 1962 – 2014



I didn't enter directly in *Bom Sucesso*. I entered in Ireland in 1953. In 1955 *Bom Sucesso* convent, which was an independent monastery joined our congregation. In 1962, I was assigned there, the same year as Sister Aedris and Sister Úna Dempsey. The three of us went together that time. We had been in the novitiate together in Kerdiffstown.

We flew by Viscount.<sup>20</sup> It took six hours, including a stopover at Lourdes. We didn't get to go to the pilgrimage site there. Lisbon was extraordinarily hot for me. We arrived around ten o'clock at night and it was beautiful coming into Lisbon, all the lights. Fr Leo, a priest from the Irish Dominican priests of *Corpo Santo* in Lisbon met us with a bus. On arrival, we got a run around the convent that night with the prioress, Sister Bríd Trant. I thought it was very dark.

We studied the language a bit. We got lessons in it. Then we had to try and use it in our schoolwork. It took time, at least it took me time. I was teaching in the infant school. In the beginning, in the first few years it was meant to be in English. After a few years, they decided that they should prepare the children, as they were Portuguese children, just to have English as a second language. We got a Portuguese teacher. I never taught them Portuguese, because I wouldn't have thought myself capable.

Altogether I was in Lisbon for fifty-two years. I spent nine years out of the convent in another project we had. We had two other outreach centres and I was in one. Two other sisters were in an area that was less privileged than *Bom Sucesso*. We worked there for nine years and then we were

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<sup>20</sup> The Vickers Viscount became the first gas turbine-powered aircraft to carry fare paying passengers on a scheduled service anywhere in the world. Aer Lingus was an early adopter, and one of its Viscounts (Flight EI712 from Dublin to London) crashed near Tuskar Rock in 1968, losing all passengers and crew.

asked to come back again to *Bom Sucesso*. I was there until I had a fall, and I was five months in a nursing home in Lisbon. Then, I was back in *Bom Sucesso* for a good number of years, actually until 2014.

My last active years were in an underprivileged place in the suburbs of Lisbon, about ten minutes by car from the convent. I wasn't living in *Bom Sucesso* at the time. We lived in a house. Our work there was more pastoral than social work. We just had to build up from nothing. We contacted the people by just walking around and meeting them and talking to them. We got a premises which in the beginning was a bit run down. But then we got this flat to live in, the parish priest found the flat, actually. We were working very near it. It was only a few minutes to walk to the place. The premises that we used belonged to another congregation of priests [the Spiritans], but they had stopped working there, and it was not being used. We had a few rooms there and we began with children. We used to let them in and give them things to play with and try to help them with their schoolwork. But we had a motley crowd. We had gypsies and Africans and Portuguese. And the children were mixed. We tried to get them all to live with each other and we had lots of occasions when they didn't agree with each other.

During that time, I continued to teach in *Bom Sucesso*. I used to go back on weekdays to take my classes because I had a timetable there to fill. I went by bus. I used to take a day off each week. Sister Teresa Wade was working with me. We took different days off. She took one day off and I took another day off. And when we were off school, each on her day off continued to go around the *bairro* [district] and continued to do our work there. Since then, they have renovated, expanded and built such a wonderful centre there. There was no pastoral help for the people, no catechists and no Mass or anything like that. They built it up and eventually they had a little chapel and a wonderful apostolate of people.

We were never really enclosed as such; we weren't a monastery ourselves. But before Vatican II you couldn't go out much, [we] couldn't visit our family or anything, you see. This activity outside the convent was after Vatican II. The reforms brought in by Vatican II lessened the restrictions and allowed us to go out and participate in these initiatives in communities, especially the underprivileged ones. There was this thing called the 'option for the poor'. They were a bit neglected. So sisters would go to places where they were needed.

When we were in the novitiate and for a good number of years after that, we went out very little. We went in cars, but we didn't sort of go around travelling on buses and things like that. Well, we did more teaching before we got more freedom to work in the community. Our activity was education, you see, so it was connected all the time with education.

There were Portuguese sisters from the beginning [in *Bom Sucesso*] and when we arrived there was one Brazilian sister and another Portuguese in our community. But there were Portuguese communities of nuns outside *Bom Sucesso*, including Dominicans. We did not have much day-to-day contact with them in the very beginning but by degrees we began. We would celebrate Dominican feasts and things like that together. The Dominican nuns of St Catherine near us were quite popular.<sup>21</sup> There were also Spanish Dominicans in Lisbon, Missionary Sisters of the Rosary and then the Portuguese Dominicans themselves.

I was there [in 1974] for the April 25<sup>th</sup> revolution. There was something on the radio, telling people to stay in and not go out, so the school was closed for that day. Religious orders were not expelled after that revolution, as they were in the earlier revolution in 1910. The Portuguese Dominicans were expelled in 1910. They came back in the 1920's and continued their lives and built up their communities again. In 1910, we were protected under British rule because Ireland wasn't free. So the Irish convent was able to continue to operate when the Portuguese convents weren't allowed.

Aedris and I were together there for fifty-two years and then I left Aedris to finish it off. She was there for fifty-four years. She and I had been prioress, twice I think. We used to go to meetings of Portuguese associations of religious. And they would have meetings in Fatima maybe or in Lisbon sometimes. Usually the prioress went maybe with another sister. It was a busy life being a prioress in *Bom Sucesso*.

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<sup>21</sup> The Congregation of Dominican Sisters of St Catherine of Siena were a religious apostolic congregation founded in Portugal in 1868 by Teresa Rosa Fernanda de Saldanha Oliveira e Sousa, and recognised by the Holy See on 9 January 1900. Its headquarters are located in São Domingos de Benfica, a suburb of Lisbon.

## Sister Elizabeth Delaney

In Lisbon 1994 - 2012



I arrived in *Bom Sucesso* on a very important day in our calendar, the 28<sup>th</sup> January. That is the feast of St Thomas Aquinas and the year was 1994. I was in time for a lovely celebration of a Mass and the afters, the festivities. Now the Mass was celebrated by the Irish Dominicans [of *Corpo Santo*]. In 1994 there were three of them, Fr. Stephen Hutchinson, Fr. Vincent Kennedy, and Fr. Martin Crowe. Of course, we had all the sisters, and the religious from around about, including the sisters from another Dominican convent of St Catherine's which is very near. I still remember a young girl dancing around the floor. We danced a bit and sang songs. We had all [the festivities] in the refectory, or dining room, pushing back the tables as best we could, you know. At that time, they were not using the long tables at the back but were using tables that had come from the Irish college [in *Corpo Santo*]. But they were fine big tables and they were across the refectory. They could push them back with some difficulty to make space for the dancing. They all came to celebrate and thank God for the day that was in it and thank God for St Thomas Aquinas! That was the very day I arrived so it was a memorable day. They were saying to me that I got up and was helping to serve, now I doubt it, but anyway I accept the compliment, I don't remember that bit.

I stayed in Lisbon until the autumn of 2012. And that year, they were about to have another celebration later on, but my ticket for going home had been arranged before so I came home. They were celebrating a school event, to celebrate the beginning of education [in the convent], 190 years before. I contacted them and said I'd a Mass said for them here [in Ireland] but I didn't go back. I was told they could not all fit in our church in *Bom Sucesso*; they were upstairs in the upper choir and they were all over the place, all the neighbours coming in to celebrate and the parents, and they were in the cloister. That was how it was described to me afterwards that they were everywhere and then they had the festivities outside again in the atrium. I don't really know why, it was too late probably, not enough lighting. I don't know why they weren't able to have it as they have the celebration now every year, a couple of times a year, especially for the Feast of the Holy Rosary they have the Masses outside in the school yard where the children play. And they set everything up outside and it was beautiful and you'd see all the children in rows from each class from the infants up to the 9<sup>th</sup> years.

I taught mainly the young children. I didn't do very much with the older children except I was supervising them in the library sometimes when they were studying. I learned my first Portuguese words in there. This girl was talking about her '*cesta*'. And I didn't know what it was at all I couldn't think of anything at all like it except a '*ciseán*' in Irish. And right enough it was her basket she was looking for. She was probably one of the girls who brought what we'd call the basket lunches. They used to bring in a good lunch in the middle of the day in a basket. And there was a place for each child who brought in these lunches along a corridor with their names and all that and they had a very nice tiny room as well as, of course, supervision. So these, I suppose it was easier and handy for mothers to make them a lunch than to pay for the school meals. As you know, it was a fee-paying school all the time. There were no grants but the other people, the other sisters would know that better. Everything had to be paid for, and their parents would pay for the children who got their meals cooked, hot meals, as well as extra tuition, and all the extra things, ballet or music lessons or any of these things. Parents were glad to pay for them, I think, and be sure of their standards. The school was examined by inspectors from what we'd call the Department, in line with the other schools. And they always, the few times I looked at the paper, they were high scores always but maybe I looked only when I heard they had high scores!

Portuguese was a difficult language for me at my age but it wouldn't have been that bad if you'd learned some Latin. We learned Latin in my school in Mountmellick, County Laois, when I was a youngster. Parnell called them the honest people of the Queen's County.<sup>22</sup> There were eight in the family. We all had to do our bit out in the fields, oh yes, when I was growing up. It was a great experience.

When I was working in Ballsbridge [in Dublin] as a Civil Servant, I used to visit the Poor Clare convent there and I got interested in the [Divine] Office and that. Now you wouldn't hear them but there was a lovely room where you could go in to pray. And my aunt, one aunt by marriage, she would tell me to pray for a vocation. And she was saying that for years, and I said, "sure why would I do that, I don't want to be a nun at all". And then I got some idea about orders and then I went to a local priest and told him I'd like to say the Divine Office the same as the Pope. He sent me out to Cabra, the head house then. But I didn't know they were different, a different section of the Church. I didn't know that until Kerdiffstown where I did my novitiate, but it was a bit late because I decided come heaven or high water I was going to stay and I wasn't going to tell anyone I was miserable. So I stayed with the Dominicans. I always loved the Divine Office. I knew their life was prayer. I was going to try the Carmelites and then I heard they needed a dowry so I said I'm not

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–91), Irish parliamentarian at Westminster and popular nationalist leader.

going in for that kind of thing because my father and mother worked hard enough for me and they'd have to borrow the money. And the Poor Clares, I wouldn't have wanted that life. We were told how poor they were and all that.

The Dominicans then were the second choice and I never knew for a long time that I wasn't singing the prayers of the Pope until we got some prayers to sing, a different breviary. That's how I knew, when I got the breviary. You don't get the breviary immediately, you know. It wasn't the fault of wanting to be different, but in St Dominic's time the church wasn't very unified and he had the Office of the canons regular in the Church. Well, most educated people at that time were priests and he had this Office and he kept to it, which is fair enough, it was approved in the Church at that time. It wasn't very much different, we had the psalms and those things but they'd different saints and different feast days. I didn't know what life was about then at all, it was what I wanted myself. In the past few years, Pope Benedict XVI said that the goal of life is a search for God, and we all are searching. So as I say we had the Office and that and I was quite happy when Vatican II came we had the same breviary as the Pope. All over the church it's the same. And on my I-Pad now I have it and they keep in touch with the new translation. Why I have the I-Pad is I cannot see the breviary now, the writing is too small.<sup>23</sup>

A few aunts and cousins were in religion, but none of my immediate family. And I've only one cousin alive that I know of that's why I'm going home to meet her. She's celebrating a feast; she's a Sister of Charity of St Paul, Sister Angela. She's a niece of my mother. I have a good many cousins, still a few cousins here and there.

At the final ceremony in the novitiate, you put on a wedding dress; it was dresses I suppose they were passing down. I didn't bring anything in especially to wear. The wedding dress could have been with a veil and you could have had a train if you had one of the long ones. They'd pass it on.

While in Cabra I was teaching in the primary school for 6 years. When the Department of Education raised the school leaving age to 15, the numbers increased for the Leaving Certificate and the secondary school programme. So we were sent to do our arts degree by night in University College Dublin. We went in by car. At that time we were travelling by taxi, we didn't use other public transport. You'd be very late if you were going by public transport, and we hadn't permission to use it. Then some Chapter came along and said, "oh yes, use the buses". So we did that, three years for

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<sup>23</sup> Before Vatican II older orders had their own special rite with special breviaries and missals. After the Council, there was one standard breviary following the Roman rite for all priests and religious. Older orders were given the option of celebrating their own particular feasts whatever way they wished.

the pass degree and then the other one was the Higher Diploma in Education and I was delighted to see that I was up in the first twenty-five out of 500. I was delighted about that, it was all in the paper.

After Ballyfermot, I went to Lisbon and I loved *Bom Sucesso*. I'd go back there again. I had to go to learn Portuguese and they booked me in to a place in Algés which is not too far from the convent, it would be the next little village where there was a school during the day time and after that, I was very exhausted. There was only one poor teacher there and there was some other lady who had opened the little school and she was getting her son taught English by this lady. But after that, we got a teacher on the premises, Fatima was her name. She was very good. I knew of *Bom Sucesso* from '87, I think it was, maybe it was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the school, and I went out to visit it. I was delighted; I fell in love with it. In fact, I was there a few times before I was assigned.

There were sisters there like Sister Philomena said, 'oh, won't you stay with us', and when someone says that you feel wanted, Sister Philomena and Sister Teresa Faherty, and then the other one, Sister Thomas, these two that I mentioned, they were saying couldn't I stay.<sup>24</sup> I would never ask for anything. I was delighted when I was sent, I felt it was a privilege to go.

Convent life in Lisbon was very similar to that in Ireland; Irish food, Irish way of doing things. Except we ate the same meals as the children. They and the staff got hot meals in the day. There was very little difference food wise, except the fruit. We had baskets of fruit every day. We wouldn't have had that now in Ballyfermot, or anywhere in Ireland. I think and it was all local and seasonal.

And then you had the weather, oh I loved the weather; you'd love to bring home the weather. It was lovely, the drying was wonderful. The sunshine and the hot weather, oh I loved it, loved it. You'd just keep out of the main sun. There were lovely places all around, Belém Park, near the *Centro Cultural de Belém*, that's a lovely park there.

We had very few sisters in the last years in Ballyfermot, as we were going to be closed. They were giving our convent to the school so sisters were moving out. But in Ballyfermot we used to have someone playing an accompaniment while we were singing and we did do a bit of that and I loved that. Then when the number of sisters diminished and there was no one to play, we were all crows, and we didn't have great music then. But when I went to *Bom Sucesso*, a few sisters there were very good, they always sang the *Benedictus* and the *Magnificat*, this without any music sheets or

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<sup>24</sup> Mother Thomas Kennedy, professed in 1925, died 27 February 2003.



accompaniment. I love something like that sung, I don't like too much recorded singing especially with tapes. It should be our celebration and that's someone else on the tape. No I'm not mad about the tapes. But you couldn't say that too loud. We still had a lot of tapes, I'd just take out my hearing aid.

We'd have Morning Prayer and we used to have Midday Prayers just before the lunch and then lunch. Midday Prayers, we'd call it at 12.25 or something like that. The singing was in the Lower Choir because some sisters were in the school nearby. Sister Michelle was principal of the junior school, Sister Alicia was principal of the primary and there was also a sharing one year between Michelle and Bernadette Pakenham (the year Sister Alicia went for a sabbatical). I wasn't in that school actually; the school I was in was the real junior school, the pre-school. It had a lay principal called Kikita, a very bright sort of person. She was making sure her school was going to grow. It had only four classrooms when I went there and it went up to eight in the past years. They took the hen house outside that was transformed into a classroom. And they took the office at the front, which had to be transferred across the patio so that room or two went and Kikita used them as classrooms. So she had eight eventually. I was asked to teach English and I was delighted.

My best memories are of my classes. I was as you know, doing English so I got some tapes for them but with the music on them you know like, 'Old MacDonald had a farm', you know that sort of thing. And I thought some of the classes really were good. So I look back also and think I could have done better, you know. Maybe I didn't teach them well enough; maybe I should have got more classes, fit in extra time. That's one thing I have in my mind. But they will make up on that, at least they got some English. And a very good teacher replaced me, she learned her English there [in *Bom Sucesso*], she was very good.

I loved being there for the children's festivities and the birthdays and they'd put a little crown on the child, and we had a little sing-song on the day of the birthdays. These things were very nice for the children. And bringing them to the Church, I loved that. They were trying to ground them in the faith as young children, and reverence in the Church, and genuflecting for the Blessed Sacrament so that's how they became grounded because after all we are running a Catholic school.

## Nuala Dempsey (Sister Úna)

In Lisbon 1962-73



I was born not too far from Croker on St Columba's Road and we lived there until I was about ten and then we moved up the road to Iona Road [Dublin]<sup>25</sup>.

My father was from Wexford and my mother was from Tipperary, so they were blow-ins to Dublin. I think they might have married in 1918 or something like that. I wasn't around anyway. We were five girls and one boy in my family. There was no tradition in my family of relatives entering religious life but we had cousins, you know, who were priests. It would have been what we grew up with. When I said I wanted to enter the Dominicans, the family were delighted, they really were. At that stage, Australian Dominicans and New Zealand Dominicans came [to Dublin] and they were looking for girls who would enter.<sup>26</sup> I wanted to enter straight away. I was probably about fourteen at that stage. And my mother said, 'no way are you going'. They knew that I was interested in the religious life. I went to the local primary school and they were Holy Faith Sisters but then I went to Eccles Street, the Dominican [school], and I suppose I was about eighteen at that stage, and I entered straight away.

My family were delighted. I think that was 1951 and it was generally accepted that some of the family would enter, because in the class that I was in four of us entered in religion that year. And of the particular group that came from New Zealand and Australia, three from my class entered, which was extraordinary because they were only about fourteen. Two of them stayed. One died about three years ago and the third one came back to Ireland through ill health.

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<sup>25</sup> Croke Park, Dublin

<sup>26</sup> Some Dominican congregations in Australia and New Zealand were founded from Ireland in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They sometimes sent sisters to Ireland to look for vocations.

I entered the novitiate in Kerdiffstown down in County Kildare, which I loved. We entered around October and the family were able to come down. I remember one of the sisters and I don't know was it her accent but she was one of Mother Mary Martin's sisters and I remember saying to my sister, 'I don't understand a word she says', and she said 'neither do I'. But my mother was there, with my father and two of my sisters. They saw my profession and the ceremony and everything in the novitiate. During the year, I think they were allowed two or maybe three visits and they'd come and stay for the afternoon and we walked around the grounds and that was lovely. And the group, the postulants were the ones in the black and then there were the whites [novices], and then the others professed. So there would have been about, I'd say there were about sixty of us in the novitiate at that stage. And most stayed, I think one left in the group. She was from Cork or Kerry.

If you wanted to leave, you said it to the Mistress of Novices who was in charge. We were in black and white robes just in the beginning and a little veil on your head and then we got the habit and it was a Dominican habit, white or cream. I found it terrible hard to fix the head dress but you got used to it all. Of course by the time I was entering they had one [veil], you know that kind of a shape, you probably see it in the photographs, but then they were getting more modern [veils]. And then the habits, they were right down to the toes. But they were getting a bit more 'modern', in inverted commas. I was there in the novitiate for three years. And I remember somebody recently saying to me, 'Did you find it difficult?' and I said 'No'. I took it that that was what I had to do, you had to sweep the floor, it wasn't the Magdalene [laundry], but you had to do manual labour and look after the house too.

[While in the novitiate] I loved going out in the garden. Some of them [the novices] would have hated that but my mother was interested in gardening and so was my father so I would have been doing that at home anyway. So I got on ok, I think I did. They never said they'd send me home. I think at one stage I might have said to the Mistress of Novices, 'I don't think I'll be able to stay', and she said, 'Why not?', and I said 'I don't know whether I'm right for this or not', and she said 'of course you are'. End of story. And then when we received the white habit my father and mother and one other [sibling] came; they only had room for three, so that was it. We weren't allowed to take photographs, I always remember, at that stage. Then we studied Latin, and we did Music and English and we read religious books. I don't think we did funny books or anything like that but they were easy to read. And then it came to profession and you had to write your vows and you made them for three years and no bother at all.

So then I was wondering where I would be going because although I'd done my Leaving [Certificate] in school, some of the sisters would have had university degrees. Two of us, Sheila and myself were sent to Muckross Park [in Dublin], one of our convents with a junior and secondary school. But obviously, we didn't have much training so we were in the junior school and we took classes. Somebody supervised us and I got on alright. I enjoyed that too. And then I went to university. I

think they asked me what I'd like to do and sure, I didn't know what I'd like to do, so I went to UCD [University College Dublin] and I was doing an Irish and English degree, an honours degree, and I must have been in the first year of that and at that stage they were thinking of Portugal. I could have volunteered to go to South Africa but Portugal was on the map. I actually went in 1962 and I was there till 1973.

When I was in UCD, because they were thinking of sending me to Portugal and Irish wasn't much use there, so they said I had to change to Geography, and a third one. As long as I had Geography, it was ok. It was a lovely university as well. The only thing I remember having a guilty feeling was because we didn't take a cup of tea at that stage and all the other nun students did. We were Dominicans and the other congregations were there, and we couldn't join them. Well, we could join them, but we couldn't take tea. They were all other Dominicans and non-Dominicans, Loreto, and Sisters of Mercy, but you'd think there was something different about us. There wasn't, but I had a great friend doing English and I'd been with her in Eccles Street and then one day I came in and I said 'I can't talk to you at the break because they said people were doing too much talking' but what else would you do? I remember afterwards, and I kept up with her over the years, saying, you know that I was terribly sore at heart, because I couldn't talk to her, I could say hello, and that was it. Anyway, I finished my degree. At the breaks in university, you had longer breaks and I went back to Muckross [Park] where I had been and then I helped out in Eccles Street and then I went to Portstewart up in the North of Ireland.

I loved that too. It was a boarding school. It was heavy work and you had to mind the boarders. So I must have been there for two years. And then I was assigned, as they said, they were sending me to Portugal, so off I went with two other sisters. I don't think I had a choice, but I was quite happy, I would have gone anywhere at that stage.

My family took it as part of religious life. I don't suppose I really had an option. Ah well, I could have said I don't want to go, but in those days you really didn't say that so I went. I had no Portuguese. I had Irish, that was all, and when I went we had one of those, what do you call them, booklets to study Portuguese with Michelle [Forde] and Aedris [Coates]. Aedris was up in the North, I think at that stage and we were studying during the holiday. I don't know whether I got a holiday before I went. But anyway, then we packed our bags and we went off by plane.

I was sick on the plane all the time and one of the other [sisters] was too. So I said 'oh please God the next time, I'm going back, I'll be on the boat', but that was worse, in the Bay of Biscay. I couldn't believe it. We were all as sick as anything.

They were lovely in Lisbon. They were so delighted to have young nuns that they spoiled us rotten. Ah no, they didn't really, but they were very friendly. Aedris and Michelle Forde came over with me. So the three of us went and it was great because we were great company. And the sisters were very friendly and welcoming. I don't know that we found the food that bad. One of the funny things is, I wouldn't be a wine person or anything and we had little small glasses and we had to drink the wine with our dinner. I don't have a memory of breakfast or anything like that but I'm sure it was porridge. At dinner time you had to take the wine. And I remember sitting beside one of the sisters, and I said, 'I can't stick this', she said, add a bit of sugar to it. So wine with sugar.

Then we were in the primary school, oh they were beautiful, lovely Portuguese children. We were teaching them English, or trying to teach them English and we all had a different class and then we were trying to learn Portuguese because they hoped that we'd get out of the primary school and go to the secondary school so that's what happened. Aedris and Michelle and myself went to university. We had a tutor, a lovely woman, Dona Aurora, she's long dead. She said 'ah, you're grand' and we managed it, it wasn't too bad.

We had a school bus. We had started going out in 1962. I think it was in 1968 we got permission to go home for three days and home was up Iona Road in Dublin so I was very fortunate. Oh, it was lovely and the excitement. I'd never been back home all those years and I remember, that's all we had, the three days. Before that when we came back from Lisbon, four years after going, we couldn't go home to our own home because the permission hadn't come to be able to go. So even though I was staying in Muckcross Park and my father wasn't well at that stage, and I said 'oh God, that's terrible' I couldn't go to him, but he loved coming to see me, you know. We didn't go anywhere even though it was in Muckcross. Then in 1968 we were allowed to visit and we got three days at home at that stage.

Then one of the priests said we were able to go to Fatima and my father and mother and two of my sisters came out but I wasn't allowed to travel on my own with them, so we had to pay for them to go to Fatima as well. I used to think that was terribly hard but anyway my parents were delighted. My parents stayed in the convent; they had visitor rooms but the other two stayed in a hotel down the road. They would all have their dinner in the parlour. And then they were going out in the afternoon but I couldn't go with them because there was no permission. But it was lovely because my father was a bit feeble at that stage so I stayed with him and my mother and the two girls went off.

Then it came to the stage when we did get a holiday and we met Dominicans and they were from Castelo Branco [and were] on their way to Fatima or beyond Fatima and we were perfecting our

Portuguese, you know and they were lovely to us<sup>27</sup>. So we did get out at that stage. So then when it came to 1968 we went on a few tours. We went to St Dominic's birth place in a minibus. There were about eight of us, I think. And Spain was lovely. I'd never been in Spain. Now we didn't go alone; somebody came, but we'd be able to go into town and shop and that was something new for us. We hadn't been able to do that [before Vatican II]. Then we went to visit the castle and places like that and if our family came out we were able to go with them at that stage.

The grille in the convent had been taken down by the time I came. But the convent was still enclosed. When I entered some of them [the sisters] were still in the mind-set of that time, but they came around eventually and we were able to go out to the church and into Mass and all that, no bother. To receive communion, we went up to that grille. But other than that we were able to go around the chapel and the boarders and all the rest, and some of the boarders would have invited us to their families' beautiful *quintas* and all the rest; it was lovely. So it was a new life for us there, really [after Vatican II]<sup>28</sup>.

I was in *Bom Sucesso* for eleven years. I got so used to it. Somebody said to me 'how do you stick it?' but that was life, I suppose. As well as that, we started going to the local parish church for Mass sometimes and then we went to town to see the Vasco de Gama monument and all those sights. We went to the tower of Belém, the *Jerónimos* Monastery and the maritime museum for visits and we could go with our family at that stage.<sup>29</sup> Oh, and we went on picnics, I always remember that, and one of the sisters, much older than I was, dressed up for the bad weather and we just had our togs [swimming costume]. The long habit was right down to the ground but gradually it came up to about our knees.

You'd nearly die with the heat. I remember the heat and the cold were dreadful because in October, November and December the cloister walls were all around and the water was coming down them and we didn't have any heating at all at that stage. I remember one of our sisters, when her parents were visiting, they said 'sure, how do you dry your clothes?' which we didn't, we put them on damp, you know. Then we got little fires and that was a great improvement. I suppose then we got a bit acclimatised. We were younger then.

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<sup>27</sup> A town located 224 kilometres northwest of Lisbon.

<sup>28</sup> A *quintas* is a large country house, usually surrounded by substantial farmlands, vineyards or cork oak plantations.

<sup>29</sup> Vasco da Gama (1460-1524), the first European explorer to sail from Europe to India via Africa. His discovery of this route allowed the Portuguese to create a colonial empire in Asia. It avoided a crossing of the Mediterranean or Arabia, considered to be very dangerous at the time.

But it was beautiful then. I remember June and July were very hot. When we went to Fatima, I think we got two days in Fatima but the walking to the Basilica and up to the convent where we were staying, it was lovely and cool in the convent. The food was good. I didn't have any problem with the food, and I was able to take the wine at that stage. I suppose it was cooling me off.

The convent routine was much the same as in Ireland except I can't remember detail, you know the way your memory fades. I don't know how early we were up in the morning but I'm sure we were up around seven o'clock and then we went to pray and we prayed in English. And then, later on, if there was a Mass and it was in Portuguese we'd be able to join in the responses and all that. I think there was a morning prayer and there was *prime*, *terce*, *sext* and *none*, four shorter versions and then we had Mass. I don't remember what time Mass was - probably about eight o'clock [in the morning]. And then we'd go off to school, because at that stage we would have been trying to teach English to the little ones, and then gradually, this is where my geography came in, Geography and English and Religion and I said, 'God I could be teaching heresies' because they'd ask a question and I wouldn't be dead sure what they were asking.

The sisters who had entered there [in *Bom Sucesso*], they weren't allowed to speak Portuguese because they were supposed to be getting people to speak English. But when we arrived, there was no problem. Their staff would all be Portuguese you know. I remember, I have a lovely story of this. Sister Bríd Trant, whom I was very fond of, said, 'there's somebody out there and they want to know something about the bus', I said 'I wouldn't know what she's talking about', and she said 'yes, you will'. So when I went out the lady was talking about, it was "la camioneta" she was saying, which was the bus. And I thought she was talking about *la mieneta* and I came back to Bríd and I said 'I don't know what she's talking about' so Bríd came back and she said she's only asking about the time of the bus. But it was funny because they'd be very particular about the children and who was going, because we had to travel on the bus with the little ones and they had to make sure and then the usual thing, the driver was late coming on the bus. We saw quite a bit of Lisbon because they [the children] were all dropped off at home, well not home, the nearest gate.

I left *Bom Sucesso* in 1973 and returned to Ireland. I returned only on visits, and the extraordinary thing, I remember my friend saying, 'where did you go back to?' [I went back to] Portstewart, the furthest part [of Ireland]. And one of the sisters was saying, (my name was Nuala before I entered), 'oh isn't it great that Nuala is getting home and she's going to help to look after her mother'. And the other sister said, 'look after her? Sure, she's up in the North of Ireland. How could she look after her?'

The *Bom Sucesso* community were wonderful and really they took us, all of us, to their hearts. We felt one of the community and they were so grateful. And we were, I suppose we were young legs

around and we chatted to them. But it was a lovely atmosphere. Oh, and the other thing was oh so funny. What do you do on Patrick's Day normally and you're singing and all the rest. So we had 'A Nation Once Again' and all those songs, and I still remember standing up on a chair and singing the National Anthem and singing in the convent. Our sense of Irish identity was very strong, though we did have one sister who was Portuguese and one from Brazil, but they were really lovely.



## Sister Francis Lally

In Lisbon 1954-56 and 1959-64



I went to school in Taylor's Hill in Galway [city], and I wanted to enter there but they wouldn't take sisters [siblings]. I had a sister, Sister Alberta, in the convent already, and they didn't allow two from the same family in the same convent so I asked them was there any other place that I could enter and I they said 'what about Siena in Drogheda [County Louth]?' So I wrote off there, and they sent me back a little book about their life and it said in it 'and the Sisters shall sleep on the straw'. So I said, 'I thought you'd shake out the straw like for cattle, and I couldn't descend to that'. So I said, 'is there any other place?' and Mother Rose [O'Neill] said 'there's a nun in Lisbon and she's Novice Mistress but she has no novices, what about joining there?' As she spoke I pictured a lovely pink sky and the trees etched against it, and I thought, 'this is the place I'll go to' so I wrote off to the prioress [of *Bom Sucesso*] and I got a lovely letter back from her and she sent me a list of things I'd need to bring. She said 'we'd be glad to have you, and all you have to do is to get the permission of the Father Provincial' because they were enclosed at the time.

The Sisters were under the Father Provincial so I met him in Galway when he was down visiting. After that, I got ready and my parents were pleased about it. So I went off. I went on the boat. There were no planes to Lisbon at that time, in 1954. I arrived in Lisbon five days later. I travelled alone, but I met a nice lady on the boat and she said, 'when we get to Vigo, I'll bring you around, we'll have a few hours and I'll bring you around and show you the markets and things'. So that's what we did.

I entered in *Bom Sucesso*. Before I left, I went up to the Bishop of Galway. My mother said 'you should get his permission to go as well'. So I went up to him and he asked me all about the convent I was going to and everything. When I entered, about a month after that, he came out and visited me. The nuns said that this was an enclosed convent and that he couldn't come inside the enclosure

and he said 'but, oh, I had dinner with the Papal Nuncio and I got permission for you to let me in'. He said 'all I want is a lemonade'. They had no lemonade so they started squeezing oranges and making an orange drink for him, so that was nice. When I was there, there was a big room, a parlour, and it used to have a big grille and that's where people would meet their visitors. He [the Bishop of Galway] was allowed to go beyond that. He was allowed inside and to go around to the church and the chapel and the refectory and see the place downstairs, you know. He was able to see inside the cloister.

About a month after or sometime afterwards, my bell rang and I had a big long bell because I was the junior, I was number twenty-four in the group of sisters, the last one. Mother Gabriel [Cunha] was prioress, a Brazilian nun and she was in the garden and she wanted to talk to me.<sup>39</sup> Before I entered I was given a fortnight to see the sights of Lisbon. The priest brought me around to show me every place and they bought cigarettes for me. I used to smoke that time and they were in a white packet, you know. Mother Gabriel rang my bell and when I went down she had the white packet like the priest gave me, and she said 'now, I want you to have these'. And I thought they didn't know I was smoking, you know, and I said 'but I've given up smoking and I'd never be able to give them up again if I started'. The last thing I did [before entering] was to put out a cigarette. So Mother Gabriel said, 'now obedience is better than sacrifice' she said, 'you're to have these now'. So I took the packet opened it, and there was chocolate inside.

There was a young Irish priest from Galway that I knew in *Corpo Santo* and he was based in Lisbon so it was nice to have a friend there. My family were happy about my entering, you know, but they were sad because of the journey. My aunt actually came out when Saint Martin de Porres was canonised.<sup>31</sup> The Galway priests brought a group on pilgrimage to Rome for the canonisation and my aunt went on that and they stopped off at Lisbon. She brought me a pair of shoes, I remember. And it was great to see her, after being away from home.

In Lisbon, I was a postulant for six months. At that time, I wore a black dress and a cape and a little veil, a light veil and then after that I received the habit and I was in my 'white year', they used to call it, because you wore a white veil then. That was for a year. I was separate from the rest of the community because we were enclosed, you see, and the novices always had to be on their own. The

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<sup>39</sup> Mother Gabriel da Cunha, born 1886, professed 1908, died 1982.

<sup>31</sup> Martin de Porres Velázquez, O.P. (1579-1639), a lay brother of the Dominican Order who was beatified in 1837 by Pope Gregory XVI and canonised in 1962 by Pope John XXIII. He is the patron saint of mixed-race people, barbers, innkeepers, public health workers, and all who seek racial harmony. He was noted for his work with the poor, establishing an orphanage and a children's hospital. He maintained an austere lifestyle, which included fasting and abstaining from meat. Among the many miracles attributed to him were those of levitation, bilocation, miraculous knowledge, instantaneous cures, and an ability to communicate with animals.

Novice Mistress, Mother Thomas Kennedy, was with me. I didn't mind it, she was very nice. I'd been a white for a year, and after that, the nuns came out from Cabra in Dublin and the nuns in Lisbon decided that they'd join up with the Cabra nuns who would send out sisters [to teach in] the school because they weren't getting postulants, you see.

The Mother General [of the congregation] who came out said to me did I want to stay with the nuns [in Lisbon] or did I want to stay in a community with enclosed sisters and Mother Gabriel Cunha, who was the prioress said 'if you want to be an enclosed nun we will arrange for you to go to a nice convent'. So I said 'well, whatever you're doing, I'll do'. The nice convent was probably in Spain. And then the Prioress General said 'well if you're staying you'll have to come home to train for teaching and to make your final profession' so I said, 'all right then' and I was brought back to Ireland.

For [teacher] training I went to Sion Hill in 1956 to do Froebel, and then I went back out to [Lisbon].

It was mostly English they taught anyway so they were able to teach it and they used to teach Irish dancing to children. Mother Cecilia and Sister Emmanuel had their [sibling] sisters in the convent in Lisbon. They allowed sisters to be in the same convent in Lisbon. They were mostly Irish [the sisters in *Bom Sucesso*]. The prioress was Brazilian and there was one Italian nun and all the others were Irish. There used to be nuns and priests over in Ireland who were interested in *Bom Sucesso* and [they] would encourage girls to go out, like Sister Agnes and Sister Teresa. I was teaching in the boarding school. They had a little primary school and the nuns had come out from Cabra to help out in [the] school. Sister Bríd Trant was principal of the senior school and she got a bus and she asked me to go every morning and collect the children for the school all around Lisbon. So I used to do that, but we had a man to drive the bus.

I used to take them in and [one day] didn't I take in a child that didn't belong to us, and nobody realised till later in the day, she said this wasn't her school. She was only a little one, you know. And they couldn't make out, the teachers came out to see would they be able to discern who she was or how to get her home so she said, when they asked her about her father what he did, and she said 'Fluazinha' and that was a character on television so the teachers realised that she was the daughter of that 'Fluazinha'. He was a kind of comedian. They were able to trace her and they got her back home.

All the teaching I did was through English. I had first year [students] for English and I used to write up phrases. I had to learn Portuguese myself and I'd write up phrases and I'd put the English and they had to learn it off by heart.

The community employed a teacher who taught me Portuguese. She used to teach sixth class in the junior school and she was good at languages.. There were a lot of people that weren't educated in Portugal and they were allowed do the third and fourth primary school exams to get into driving buses or different jobs like that, you know. So Mother Gabriel said to me, 'would you ever do the third class exam' and that lady prepared me for it and I got the exam. You had to do an oral exam and a written exam and then I did the fourth class exam again and I got a pass in that as well. So it gave me confidence, you know. If you learned Irish you have the nasal and the guttural sounds of the Irish language, you'd pick it up. I spoke Irish at home. My father was a [irrelevant – the army does not send sergeants to Carraroe] sergeant out in Carraroe [in County Galway], and we used to go out there every summer and stay with him. I used to pick Portuguese up from the children too, I'd be out at recreation with them and teaching them how to skate.

The biggest change down through the years was mostly *egress* you know, going out. We used to have an *egress* book and when you were going out, you put your name into the book. This was to say you were out so that if a phone call came for someone and we went to her room to look for her and she wasn't there and she wasn't in the refectory or the chapel you'd go then and look at the book which is always on the table near the door and you [would] see a name down, 'out at 2.30pm'. And maybe some people would put another time on it, say '2.30 – 5pm', that they would be out for that length of time. And sometimes they'd just put the time they went out. And then they'd know and they'd go back to the person and say, 'sorry we can't get her would you like to ring at tea time, we expect her back for tea', something like that. In the early days we didn't have that flexibility to come in and out like that. We didn't go out. I had trouble with my ear and I was deaf in one ear and Mother Thomas who was the Novice Mistress [at the time] arranged to go to the doctor with me. She had a past pupil to take us in her car. At that time, she had to get special permission from Rome for us to go out. That was fine but when we got out, she said 'there's no point in going to the doctor and coming back'. Once we have the permission to go out we were out. So she said, 'you like art so we'll bring you to all the exhibitions and museums'. So we saw some of the pictures and had tea out.

Another change after Vatican II was having the Divine Office in English. That was the biggest thing for us really. Before that, it was in Latin. They also took down the grille. First, when the old nuns were there they had a grille with and there were spikes coming out from it. So they got a beautiful design done with just bars down, you know, forming a cross. And it was much easier to see in. There was a one nun, from England, and she came down and she said 'oh before this it was keep out, keep out, keep out' she said, 'now it's come in, come in, come in'. We also had shorter habits then after that again we went into lay clothes.

The prioress was elected every six years. It was a secret vote. They'd talk together about who they wanted and it was within the group so there were always a few that were there [and held the position] repeatedly. Mother Thomas and Mother Gabriel were very often prioress and sub-prioress.

I spent five years in *Bom Sucesso* and in 1964 or thereabouts I returned to Ireland. I went to Cabra for two years then I came to Dun Laoghaire, and I'm here ever since. The decision to move to Ireland was not mine. We were assigned. I went back to Lisbon on my holidays afterwards. I have some photographs taken by my sister and myself when we visited *Bom Sucesso*.

## Sister Laura Peelo

In Lisbon 2001-04



I volunteered to go to *Bom Sucesso* in the 1960s. I was already in a convent here [in Ireland]. I was a late vocation. I was twenty-eight when I entered, and there were thirty of us that entered [that year]. The average [age at entry] would have been twenty or twenty-one.

I had been working before that as a secretary in a legal office in Dublin. I'm from Dublin and I always worked with a solicitor. I was in two different offices, Brennan and Brennan. I was there for a long time. Then I worked with Dermot O'Byrne and Neil O'Byrne, two lawyers. And then in, I think it was in 1962, I'm not sure, I entered.

In my spare time, I was a Girl Guide captain. We used to go to what they called guide camp [held at] a big house in County Wicklow. The sisters in Wicklow had become familiar with us. They used to see us going down to the beach or they'd see us in the church and that and one of them sent for the captain in charge. So I had to go down and tell them what we were doing and that. So through that they became interested in me. And I was interested then in them, because the guides had been formed in Wicklow from the [Dominican] school. They were attached to the school. So eventually then I decided, I was about twenty-eight, and I decided that I wanted to become a Dominican because of what I'd seen going on. So I entered in Kerdiffstown.

I think we were one of the biggest intake groups there [that year]. They used to talk about 'our set', and we always talked about 'our set', 'your set', you know. A set of us. And I was second senior. And we had a very nice group. I liked them very much. And I think there are about sixteen of us still around.

I had no knowledge of the Dominican order before that. My interest in it was because I was the guide captain in Wicklow. I was taught by the Presentation Sisters in Terenure [in Dublin] and during the war we had to sell the house and move into Dublin city and my parents transferred us to the Presentation Sisters in George's Hill and that's where I went to school. I had an older brother who was a Franciscan. That was the only religious connection in the family.

It was the Dominicans I was always in touch with because I had connections with the Eccles Street guides and the Wicklow Company. As I say, I started that because it was far away. There wasn't anybody who wanted to travel to Wicklow to start this company and something urged me, something within urged me to say I'd do it. So I told the members of the executive committee that I would undertake that and I did.

We always had our guide meetings on a Saturday afternoon and the Divine Office was one of the things that attracted me. They sang the Divine Office in the choir in Wicklow as they did in all the Dominican [convents] and I used to go into the chapel; the choir was part of the chapel. And I liked all of that. I liked the liturgy. So that was one of the things that attracted me. I became very interested in it. If you had a guide company attached to the convent there was always a sister put in charge of the whole thing. The sister in charge was a Sister Margaret Fitzgerald. I liked her very much and I became interested in their life.

They had their eye on me for a while, they said that anyway. So I didn't think, it didn't occur to me that I was the second eldest of the family. There were eight children and my parents, and I didn't stop to think about how difficult that would be for my parents, and they didn't show any objections when I told them. I didn't even think about the fact that I was leaving work. I was a secretary at that stage and I was giving up my salary or my pocket money at home. I didn't think of any of that. Unfortunately, I didn't think of my parents and what they were going to be short of or anything. At that time I think, in the early 1960s, parents would be delighted if someone went to the religious life.

I went only after my brother Seamus, the Franciscan, came back home. He had become a Franciscan over six years earlier and he'd been in Rome for a good while and then he was in Merchant's Quay when he came home.<sup>32</sup> He was the first one I spoke to and I told him one night that I was thinking of going and he said he always knew I would and he was very happy.

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<sup>32</sup> A Franciscan friary in Dublin.

I did have some money and I brought it with me and I did get some. I did have some money going in which was given to me as gifts. There was no requirement for a dowry. I think I was three years in Kerdiffstown and then I went to Cabra [in Dublin]. I was teaching and then, because I had secretarial experience, I went to college to get my qualifications for teaching in Business Studies, which included shorthand and typing. So I went up North for that staying in the convent in Belfast. I went out to classes and then I came back to the South to teach.

I'm not terribly clear on how the move to *Bom Sucesso* came up but I think I volunteered to go out there. They were looking for some people, I think. I can't remember very much, but I knew the sisters and I knew Sister Alicia. I suppose I got the urge to volunteer to go out to Lisbon and I did like it very much. I wasn't apprehensive at the prospect of going to a foreign place and a foreign language. The language didn't faze me but for some reason I didn't ever learn the language. I don't know if I was always with people who spoke English but I never studied the language. I mean I could speak a bit, I could answer people and that or ask questions and that but I didn't have any formal knowledge of the language and it didn't seem to matter. I was teaching more senior girls, so I didn't necessarily need to have a very big level of Portuguese. When I went to *Bom Sucesso*, there weren't the same restrictions as there were in Sister Francis [Lally's] time. You wouldn't go out that much, but there wasn't a restriction. However, you'd always have someone to go with you.

The day would start quite early with Mass and then we'd have breakfast and after that you'd make sure you had all your books and your notes ready for school. Because I was [teaching] more senior students I didn't have to [learn the language]. There were certain things that just were very easy for me. I just used to go into to them and sit with them for a while and then start class. It was always very pleasant. The teaching was good. I got on well with them, and we had a few outings as well and I would go on an outing with them. I'm not too sure if I still wore a habit. The daily life in the convent was very similar to that in Cabra because everyone was Irish.

The prayer routine was the same. We had the Divine Office, it was the same. Even the food. We mostly had a choice of food and we would have Irish food. There wasn't anything very, very different. I do remember that the climate was much nicer and our habits would be lighter. Or we'd wear lighter clothes on the whole and you'd be able to get to the sea even for a walk. That was nice. I just don't remember now the name of the church but we used to go down to this big church. We had our own church of course, but there was a big church in town and we'd go to that on occasions. The daily Mass was held in the convent chapel. We used to have the Divine Office, and it would be recited on a note, and now it's just said, but despite the Vatican II reforms, we've still got the full Divine Office.



Now you would have an opening hymn and a closing hymn but the rest of the Office would be recited in English. The Irish priests used to come up from their own church in *Corpo Santo*. They would come to facilitate us with Mass or confessions so there was a nice friendship there.

I wasn't teaching the Business Studies subjects that I trained for. Instead, I taught English. I can't remember the name but I remember the Irish ambassador to Lisbon and his wife and family. I was friendly with his wife and she used to visit the convent and she used to pray with us. Nothing comes to me that was outstanding about it but there was a nice relationship with the people, and I liked the Portuguese people very much. I thought they were very akin to the Irish people, actually.

It was a nice place for walks. And we weren't very far from the Tagus River so it was lovely to walk by the river. We'd go down to the *Jerónimos* Monastery quite often. We knew some of the people down there. The Portuguese community that lived around the convent were always very friendly with us; at least, I felt they were. A lot of them were English-Portuguese or Irish-Portuguese, whatever you like. They would invite you for a meal or invite you for an afternoon tea. They liked being with the sisters. That's the impression I have anyway. I've no negative feelings about being in *Bom Sucesso*.

The sisters there were such a big part of the local community. Being a Dominican in Lisbon was very similar to being [one] in Ireland because the community was really Irish, so it was very much the same. The people were extremely alike, easy and very like the Irish, I felt. A home from home. It was a nice experience. It was lovely to have been there. I did have my family out to visit and they loved it as well and it was lovely to be able to take them around. We were quite near the coast so we could go to nice places. So there's lots of nice memories in that way. Cascais was a nice haunt to go to by train. It didn't take that long and it was lovely to take people there and to walk along that coast.

## Sister Joan O'Shanahan

In Lisbon 1973-88



I was at Scoil Chaitríona secondary school with the Dominican sisters in Dublin and enjoyed my years there as boarder. The school was situated in Eccles Street near where the Mater Hospital is now. We had a lot of extra activities like sport and music and languages which were very enjoyable,

When I finished my Leaving Cert, I decided to enter as I felt a call from the Lord and went to Kerdiffstown Novitiate, near Naas and was there for three years. Then I came up to Mount Merion Avenue [in Dublin] for a junior year before starting in UCD to do my degree. Afterwards, I studied for my Higher Diploma in Education in [St Patrick's College] Maynooth [in Kildare].

I taught in Scoil Chaitríona (through Irish) for two years [then] in Eccles Street and Mobhi Road and then I was asked by Sister Isidore to go to *Bom Sucesso*.<sup>33</sup> I taught in Lisbon for fifteen years and was principal of the Portuguese secondary school in my later years and a member of the convent house council.

I travelled to Lisbon by boat and train (with Sister Christina Greene) in August 1973 so I was there for the famous revolution of 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974. That was very soon after our arrival.

I did a Portuguese course because I had no Portuguese. My Irish, French and Latin helped a bit but it takes a while to learn a language.

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<sup>33</sup> Sister Isidore Collins, Prioress General of the Congregation between 1968 and 1974.

In Kerdiffstown we had very few family visits. During my first year there, when I was a postulant, my mother died suddenly from a heart attack. I didn't get home to the funeral even though I lived only about an hour away. But those rules changed the following year and that was easier for the families. We could go to funerals and we were allowed home for holidays even before final profession, and those changes happened very quickly. The clothing changes were slower. We would have been in full habit right up to final profession. As postulants we had long black skirts and blouses and a little cape. And then we got the white or cream habit and white veil and after profession we got the black veil.

Apart from the study, I enjoyed my whole experience of being a boarder and then I decided I would try out religious life. I was too young to go to Froebel. I was thinking about Froebel or National Teaching or UCD or whatever.

It may seem tough living a religious life and as well having a full time job in teaching. I suppose our organised life schedule in *Bom Sucesso* helped. We had a daily systematic schedule of early rising and liturgical recital of the Divine Office. We have a tradition of going to the Choir and saying the Divine Office at a brisk pace and then going to school and then coming back from school. Maybe breaking the day with another prayer time and then after school saying the Rosary, celebrating Evening Mass or Mass in the morning with some Portuguese people in our convent chapel.

Our study life was worked into our daily round. We had a full day and then we had regular [lay] teachers and parent-teacher meetings so there wasn't very much time from Monday to Friday for anything else. It was a full schedule and you enjoyed it as such. Teaching was a part of prayer life and prayer life was part of your teaching. Both elements had a deep connection with each other. During the day we met and interacted with different teachers, and educational staff and that school life helped us to become more outgoing and human. It was normal that sisters did some form of teaching or something connected with teaching. Some sisters were administrators or took on leadership roles inside or outside the community. For example, in Lisbon, some of the sisters didn't teach but they worked with the poor in the parish and they worked as catechists and that was their choice, but they always had to consult their local superior or community. We always had a choice but were guided by our Dominican priorities and guidelines. When I was asked to go to Lisbon, I could have said, 'I don't think I could cope with a new language or culture' or so. We learnt from our novitiate days that the Lord expected us most times to be willing to say yes. Dominican spirituality encourages dialogue, personal discernment, conversations and coming to a mutual decision with a superior.

In my case, the congregational prioress, Sister Isidore Collins, asked me if I would go to *Bom Sucesso* and replace another sister who was coming home for a year or two. Sister Isidore was the leader of

the whole congregation located in Ireland, and responsible also for our activities in South Africa, Lisbon, New Orleans, Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil.

I was surprised by her request. I wasn't expecting an assignment and my father hadn't been well and I said 'well I think that'll be ok, but I'd like to talk to my sister about it'. So I talked to my sister who was taking care of my father at the time and she said, 'that's fine' and my extended family were in agreement. I thought it was just for two years, but as time passed I ended up liking it there and continuing for fifteen years.

I knew nothing, absolutely nothing about *Bom Sucesso* [before I went]. I knew that it was a very historic place and that we had a convent in Lisbon and that we had three schools and that it was a very nice community and that the sisters were welcoming. We'd have a Chapter every so often; formal periodic meetings. Dublin leadership would meet the representatives from Lisbon.

Going to Lisbon was my first time to travel outside Ireland. I went with another sister, Sister Christina Greene. We went by boat from Dublin to Holyhead and then from Holyhead we went to Bilbao in the North of Spain and then got a train which linked us with a direct train down to Lisbon. It was a big break, it was very traumatic, leaving your family. It's one thing to leave and enter but another thing to leave your country and that was a big break. It was quite an undertaking for somebody of that age who'd never been outside the country.

We had a very interesting episode on our journey to Lisbon. When we got into the train in the north of Spain heading for Lisbon, part of the train broke away. There were two parts on the train and we had put our luggage in the first class carriage unwittingly and then we sat in another part which was economy class. When we went to check and collect our luggage from first class that part of the train had gone onto Lisbon as an express, so we didn't get our luggage until we arrived in Lisbon. We got it quickly enough in the Station Master's office [in Lisbon]. We had arrived a day early and the sisters weren't expecting us so we made our own way to the convent by taxi. We pulled up at the big gate and were brought in. We were fortunate, because Sister Mary Daly was there and Sister Margaret Purcell and we knew them pretty well. We knew them from Ireland but the other sisters were new to us and we to them. The formal welcome to the convent was given by the sister in charge, the Prioress, Sister Aedris. The other sisters, Agnes, Michelle, Philomena, Thomas, Gabriel, Teresa and Bernadette were also there. They were a very nice community. What impressed me about all of them was that they had left Ireland years previously. Some had entered in Lisbon and some had come from Dublin so they were a real witness to me of missionaries who were willing to go and live in another culture and community for the Lord, as we say.

Sister Agnes was my principal. I was in the Portuguese secondary school in *Bom Sucesso*. We have a primary and a secondary and then we had an international school [St. Dominic's] near Oeiras on the way to Cascais. I had to learn Portuguese. Sister Alicia Mooney was there too in the kindergarten and I was in the secondary school. I gave English and Religion classes.

I did an intensive Portuguese course for one month and later on took some private classes as well. After the one-to-one morning lessons. I had a few hours of just listening to tapes and doing oral exercises. The other sisters in *Bom Sucesso* could speak Portuguese. During class time we spoke Portuguese all the time but then during meal time we spoke in English and among ourselves. Our liturgy was normally in English. On Sundays we had Mass in Portuguese as more people used to come into the church for Mass.

One sister in particular, Antoninus, took care of the gypsies and there were quite a number of gypsies not too far from the convent. Then another sister called Marcoline came later who attended to the refugees from the Portuguese colonies, like Angola and Mozambique.<sup>34</sup> After the 1974 revolution, a lot of Portuguese people who had been living out in the colonies came back to Lisbon so there was a whole influx of people and they were put up by the government in hotels in the beginning and then they gradually got places to live.

The [sisters] were doing these outreach activities before I came. The idea was that the sisters' school salaries subsidised those who wanted to work with the more needy. There had to be a balance. At one stage I remember, I used to help with the accounts. During the course of my time in Lisbon, the congregational bursar, Sister Carmel Thérèse [Heavey], visited us and helped us to separate the school accounts from the convent, because originally *Bom Sucesso* was an enclosed boarding school and the convent and the school were all one. They gradually opened a primary and secondary school and took in Portuguese day pupils.

We went through a very difficult period after the 1974 revolution because the revolution affected people's attitudes. It was a socialist revolution after a dictatorship regime. At the time, we were building St Dominic's school, the international school, and the engineer in charge of the builders had to leave the country so we were left really with a building half-built. Anybody who had a leadership job in the old regime felt they had to flee. Also, we didn't have enough money. We didn't have enough money to pay the teachers their salaries. Some of our teachers were pro-revolution, others weren't, and that caused an amount of internal strife.

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<sup>34</sup> Sister Marcoline Lawler, born 1909, professed 1930, died 11 June 1995.

Sister Aedris went to a meeting in Ireland and asked our own convents in Ireland if they could help and they were very generous. I remember we got great help from Belfast. It was a very traumatic time. Some teachers were leaving the school. That was quite traumatic for everybody, especially for us sisters. In the convent, there wasn't really any fear for our safety.

Fortunately, as time went by things sorted themselves out but that took a while. At that particular time in my personal history, I was very unaware of political affairs. I was just school-minded and busy with education and my classes but I did realise it was a socialist revolution and I think now looking back on it was very good for the country to get away from being a dictatorship to being a more democratic system. Of course, it meant that the right-wing president and the ministers had to flee to Brazil for refuge. Then a more left-wing group in the army took over, led by General Spínola.<sup>35</sup> But afterwards I realised it was good and I realised that Mario Soares of the Socialist Party who eventually became the Prime Minister, was quite moderate.<sup>36</sup> It wasn't anything violent, but it was a huge big change. Salazar was dead by then, but his successor, Marcelo Caetano, fled to Brazil.<sup>37</sup>

*Bom Sucesso* was pretty well established at that time and Agnes and Aedris had a lot of contacts through past pupils in the government and other institutions. Some of the girls later became members of the political parties. But there was some tension. I experienced it with some of the teachers. Some were more pro-revolution and some were not pro-revolution, so it generated a certain tension sometimes in the staff room and that. Gradually it fizzled out.

The school never closed except on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the day of the revolution. Then we went back to work. The students were influenced by the spirit of the revolution, especially the senior pupils. I was teaching third years and fourth years during my first months in *Bom Sucesso*. I didn't have the senior pupils in the secondary school. But certainly they were all imbued. The ones who were in

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<sup>35</sup> António Sebastião Ribeiro de Spínola (11 April 1910 – 13 August 1996), first post-revolution President of Portugal (May to September 1974). Towards the end of a long and distinguished military career, in 1973, he published an influential book, "Portugal and the Future", which expressed reservations about Portugal's rigid colonial policies.

<sup>36</sup> Mário Alberto Nobre Lopes Soares, (7 December 1924 – 7 January 2017) was an active critic of the Salazar regime and spent some years in exile in France. In 1974, he returned to Portugal having founded the Socialist Party (currently the ruling party) while abroad. He became Foreign Minister in one of the post-revolutionary governments and eventually Prime Minister of Portugal from 1976 to 1978 and from 1983 to 1985. He was President of Portugal from 1986 to 1996.

<sup>37</sup> António de Oliveira Salazar, Prime Minister of Portugal between 1932 and 1968. He was responsible for the *Estado Novo*, the corporatist authoritarian government that ruled Portugal until 1974.

favour were delighted, and the others, maybe the older ones, wouldn't have been too happy about it.

A few years later, we introduced some democratic procedures at Christmas. We used to have a Christmas party just for the teachers. Gradually we invited the support staff as well. Some of the teachers weren't too happy about that at the beginning. The support staff were the people who operated telephones, the door, the gardener, the carpenter, cooks, cleaners and all, everybody.

We could always go in and out of the convent in Lisbon. In ways we were very lucky because we were away from home so we had much more freedom. We went out to lots of events, talks, all-night vigils, concerts, etc. I remember once going out to hear politicians talking at a rally. I was trying to become a bit more aware of the politics of the country. We'd also go out to Dominican family meetings. We had contact with the Portuguese Dominican Sisters and priests, we had our own group of Dominican family in Lisbon. We visited them in their homes, had prayer meetings. We brought the school children on pilgrimages to Fatima, or on outings or tours. Sisters Aedris Coates, Agnes Talty, Honor McCabe, Mary Daly, Alicia Mooney and myself organised a big tour. We brought students from both schools to Switzerland, Germany, Austria, North of Italy, Liechtenstein. That was a custom in the school and myself and Alicia brought a group of forty to London, and that was hectic, you know, supervising that number in a busy city.

I also went to Rome on the train with five or six others for the end of the Holy Year. On another occasion we went as a community of sisters to Caleruega in Spain to follow St Dominic's footsteps. That was where St Dominic was born, where he set up his communities and all of that, and [we] visited Avila where St Teresa set up her convents.<sup>38</sup> I suppose we had great freedom there as regards going out after school.

I was the only one who could drive the car up and down to Fatima so when visitors came out I might get a free day from school to bring them to Fatima. We had a car for the community and it was used to drive out to work daily in our other English speaking international school in Oeiras, about forty minutes journey [from *Bom Sucesso*], depending on the traffic.

A group of Portuguese Dominican Holy Rosary Sisters, friends of ours, came to live in one part of our school building which they renovated for their use. They were eventually going to find their

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<sup>38</sup> St Teresa of Ávila, (28 March 1515 – 4 October 1582), founder of the Carmelite order.

own house in the poor *bairro* where they were going to work on the outskirts of Lisbon. Two of them got work in our Junior School so that they would be able to support themselves in their new project with the poor.

*Bom Sucesso* was a very welcoming community and had a great missionary spirit. At least twelve Medical Missionaries of Mary from Drogheda would have stayed with us for six months to learn Portuguese, get their visas, etc. before they went to Angola, Africa. There was always one of them with us either going out to Angola or coming back. Over the years they were like members of the *Bom Sucesso* community and their enthusiasm and fervour to go to Angola was good for me and opened my heart to the African mission.

Later on, after I finished fifteen years as a teacher and principal of the Portuguese secondary school, I was offered a sabbatical year. I asked to go with the Medical Missionaries of Mary for a few months in Angola where the sisters worked. Unfortunately, cholera broke out in Angola so the Congregational Prioress asked me to go to Argentina instead. There was a sister recovering from an operation there and they needed somebody to be with her during her recovery. That was the beginning of my twenty-nine years with the poor in Argentina.

Before I left Lisbon, I had had time to notice how the different communities in *Bom Sucesso* had preserved their historical building with limited funding down through time: the countess's belongings, the upper choir, very old cribs and the recently restored tiles and paintings.<sup>39</sup> *Bom Sucesso* was situated in the historical area of Lisbon near *Jerónimos* Monastery, the President's palace, the monument to Henry the Navigator, boat museum, with boats that discovered the sea routes to India and other places.

The community had become very much part of the Portuguese environment. I never felt it like just like an Irish ghetto. I felt that we were very much in contact with the community. Most of the families were Portuguese so we were in contact daily with them. However, having said that, it was different for me when I went to Argentina, living in a small house, working in a full-time parish setting, was a different experience. Perhaps we could have been more in touch, maybe with the political, social, and economic situation [in Portugal].

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<sup>39</sup> Illustrated in *A Light Undimmed*. See Footnote 1 above.



We had a Dominican family who met to reflect on books we had read and I remembered again Sister Jordana's words on of the importance of educating students to do justice in the world<sup>40</sup>. She used to say, 'if our schools are not part of the solution to injustice, then they are part of the problem. We need also to be working with the poor'. When I was principal, I deliberately made sure that a few less well-off families had an opportunity to be educated. They paid lower school fees.

Prayers were at morning, midday, evening prayer and night prayer in the lower choir. The upper choir was really used to pray privately and in a quiet atmosphere. I would go into the chapel or the lower choir. And then, eventually, in my time we turned the second half of the upper choir into a school library, because it was unused. The sisters at the time didn't like the idea of children coming in because it was such a sacred place but we just needed the space. We needed a library so we converted that part into a library. And then we got some of the original paintings hung in the upper choir. While I was in Argentina, the community [in *Bom Sucesso*] contacted some foundation who paid for Portuguese artists to restore the paintings. It was a marvellous job and very well done. I never felt cut off behind the walls of Bom Sucesso even though the building itself would give you the sense you were enclosed, we weren't really that enclosed.

I thank God for my fifteen years in *Bom Sucesso* and the opportunity I had to meet friends inside and outside the community. It was really a significant time in my life. I felt at home with my own sisters in Lisbon, loved teaching and felt it was a good experience for me to move out of Ireland and learn how to become a missionary.

The community were sorry to lose me in 1989 but gradually understood that during my sabbatical in Argentina and Brazil the Lord had convinced me to join our sisters who had opted to work with the poor in the periphery of Buenos Aires Province.

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<sup>40</sup> Anna Roche was born in Dublin 31 October 1915. She entered the Dominican novitiate in Cabra in 1937 and was professed as Sister Jordana. In 1954 she was appointed full-time Secretary to the Council General of the Dominican Congregation by Mother Benignus Meenan, then Prioress General. In 1966 Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, of Dublin, asked her to open and take charge of the Mater Dei Institute. She is perhaps best remembered in the country in her capacity as President of the Conference of Convent Secondary Schools to which job she brought all her talents of organisation. She was also to the forefront in promoting the 'Free Post-Primary Education Scheme' introduced by Minister Donogh O'Malley in 1967. She ended her term of office as Prioress General of the Irish Dominican Congregation in 1986 and died in Cabra on 3 April 2004 after 64 years as a professed member of the Dominican Order.

## Sister Mary Daly

In Lisbon 1972-76



I travelled to Portugal on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1972 with Sister Máire Corbett, who had been there for several years and who was to be my Principal in the International School, St Dominic's College. I remember the heat when we arrived at Lisbon airport. As I stood at the top of the stairway before descending from the plane down to the tarmac it was like standing in front of an open oven door.

As I look back over forty years some first impressions stand out for me. The refectory in *Bom Sucesso* with the tables on a raised area alongside the walls and the lovely Portuguese tiles with which I was to become so familiar. I grew to love the courtyard with the fountain as a centrepiece and the Bougainvillea covering many of the archways around the cloister walk. The one time I did not like this area was when I came down the stairs in the morning, for Morning Prayer and Mass, in a semi-sleepy state. I was often greeted by a blast of very cold air in the open cloister. I was fascinated by the thick walls which helped to cool the building in the summer months but I found it very damp in the winter time and for the first time in my life I had to have a hot water bottle at night. I grew accustomed to the sound of beeping horns and loud conversations from our street. What I initially thought was street fighting was often just two or more people having an excited greeting and exchange of news.

Sister Antoninus helped me, and others, to learn Portuguese so I never had to go to language school. I only ever had a rudimentary knowledge of the language partly because I was teaching in the International School. I found the Portuguese people very gracious no matter what I said in their language. Maria dos Anjos, who worked in the convent for many, many years was usually at the reception area when I returned from St Dominic's each day. When I greeted her she invariably went to great lengths to tell me how my Portuguese was improving. This was a language lesson in itself which I soon understood as it didn't change but helped me feel better about my attempts.

On one occasion I was at the airport waiting for someone to arrive. A small child standing nearby with his mother came over to me and walking around, looking at this creature dressed in a white habit and black veil. I heard him saying to his mother in Portuguese, 'What is that?' My Portuguese was good enough to understand the question!

During the summertime, I often thought it would be lovely if we could wear a simple tunic like the nurses' outfit. I found the habit, even though it had been modernised, very hot during these days. But a shower is a wonderful invention and was a great help.

When I went to Lisbon Sister Baptist was still alive.<sup>41</sup> She had never returned home to Slane, County Meath, where she had grown up. She hadn't lost her accent or her love of a cup of tea. I often saw her standing beside the stove waiting for the kettle to boil. The girls who worked in the convent weren't particular about having 'hot food hot' or making tea with boiled water. Sister Baptist had long before found her own solution.

St Dominic's School, where I taught, was situated about a half an hour's journey away [from *Bom Sucesso*]. Often we left *Bom Sucesso* in darkness and saw the sun rise as we drove along the Marginal. So different to the prolonged sunrise which I knew at home. The first time I went out to the school, it was still holiday time and Sister Máire and I discovered that the floor, everywhere, was covered with ants. I learnt to remember not to leave food on a table top, or any exposed area, overnight!

Many nationalities were represented in the school and as result I became very aware of what was happening internationally because of the impact of world events on some of the pupils and their families. During my time there a lovely Indonesian family had to leave Lisbon and return home because diplomatic relations had been cut off between their country and Portugal. A short time later a Portuguese family came to enrol their daughter in St Dominic's. They had to leave Indonesia and were returning to Lisbon for the same reason. Once when talking about earthquakes and volcanoes with my class, I discovered that many of my pupils had had first-hand experience of both.

The parents of our pupils, usually the father, worked overseas for a company, embassy or NATO and was posted in a country for a few years before they moved on to their next post/country. One American couple I knew told me that because they moved so often the family unit was very, very important to them. They didn't have a specific 'home' place in the USA to which they could return

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<sup>41</sup> Sister Mary Baptist Reilly, born 1883, professed 1905, died 12 January 1976.

and where they would reconnect with people they knew. Another mother told me that her sixteen year-old daughter had only lived a maximum of three and a half years in any one country in her short lifetime.

When I started teaching in the school we were in rented premises belonging to the Spiritan fathers. There were already plans afoot to build a new school because of the increase of numbers in St Dominic's. At a planning meeting I was startled when the engineer talked of the type of structures which would be needed to withstand earth tremors. I was glad I never did have that experience while in Lisbon.

Just about the time we were moving into the new school building the revolution took place, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1974. I always think of that date in Portuguese. Our first knowledge of the revolution was when Senhor Alfeo, bus driver for one of the Portuguese school buses, arrived into *Bom Sucesso* early that morning and told us that there had been a 'military' takeover of important buildings such as the Radio and TV stations. Sister Germanus, who was Principal at that time, cancelled our buses to St Dominic's and then both of us went out to the school just in case parents who drove their children to school had not heard the news.<sup>42</sup> All was quiet on the roads. We didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, I presume because we were some distance from the city. At the school we met two English pupils and their father. Maybe there were others that I cannot remember but we stayed for some time, just in case. On our return journey to the convent later in the morning the one big change we noticed was the number of cars in Pão d'Açúcar (the local supermarket) car park. People were stocking up with food not knowing what was going to happen.

I am sure that many other people, like us, watched the TV for updates on developments both that day and on the following days. I remember being very calm but knowing very little initially about what was happening. I hadn't the language to understand much of what was on the TV. On that first evening Sister Catherine Walsh, a long-time member of the community, had a phone call from some of her family as they had heard that part of Lisbon was in flames.<sup>43</sup> That family lived two doors from my parents in Dublin. I thought I would get a call too from my 'anxious' parents checking that I was safe but I waited in vain. When I asked my parents about it at a later date they told me that they knew that I would be all right!

Prior to that revolution I remember being in some public place with Sister Máire and asking her about the politics in the country. She quickly told me not to bring up that topic in a public place because the secret police/government informers were known to be working in jobs such as porters,

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<sup>42</sup> Sister Germanus Geehan, born 1914, professed 1935 and died 6 June 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Sister Catherine Walsh, born 1902, professed 1925 and died 14 August 1974.

waitresses etc. anywhere they could overhear casual conversations. On 24 April the headquarters of the secret police, (PIDE - if I remember it correctly, was the name of that group) was one place that the revolutionaries went to at the beginning of the takeover.<sup>44</sup>

Gradually I came to some awareness of the great wealth and the terrible poverty in the Lisbon area. I remember well the first time I travelled by rail. As the train moved out from the station I saw people's homes, shacks, built into the banks alongside the railway tracks. Near the entrance to the school (when we were in the Spiritan Fathers' premises) I saw a family building their new wooden home over and around the shack in which they continued to live. At that time we had two cleaning ladies in the school and I remember one of them describing to me how, during a storm, the water flowed in the back door and out the front door of her shack. I knew that people were paid very badly and that is why we 'tipped' in lots of situations where it wasn't done at home. In retrospect, I hope we paid those two ladies a decent wage.

We had a lot of dealings with the brethren [Irish priests] in *Corpo Santo*. During my time Fr Tom Cleary RIP and later Fr Tom Jordan were chaplains to St Dominic's. As well as coming for daily Mass for us in the convent they went to Carcavelos and Cascais for Saturday vigil and Sunday Masses. After Sunday Mass in *Corpo Santo* there was always coffee upstairs as well as regular celebrations on special occasions. One very important date of course was St Patrick's Day. Some of the non-Irish parishioners went to the trouble of writing out the words of their Irish hymns phonetically. The brethren were very hospitable and, as well as looking after spiritual needs, provided a great social centre where there was a wonderful meeting of nationalities.

*Bom Sucesso* was also a centre of great hospitality. As I lived there for just four years, I only saw 'the half of it' as the saying goes. The visitors I remember most were the Medical Missionaries of Mary Sisters who stayed with us often to study Portuguese before going to Angola and elsewhere. Family members and friends and our own Dominican sisters always got a great welcome, often bed and board included. Now I think, 'if only those walls could talk'.

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<sup>44</sup> PIDE (*Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado: International Police and Defence of the State*) was a Portuguese security agency that existed during the *Estado Novo* regime of António de Oliveira Salazar. Formally, the main roles of the PIDE were the border, immigration and emigration control and internal and external State security. However, it became notorious for its political police activities, and developed a Stasi-like reputation for internal espionage and managing a network of informers.