

WORDS FOR THE LAUNCH OF THE ORAL HISTORY (1944 - 2016)

18 July 2018

One of our most famous national poets, Patrick Kavanagh, in his poem *The Great Hunger* has the following beautiful lines:

*Men build their heavens as they build their circles
Of friends, God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday-
A kiss here and a laugh again and sometimes tears,
A pearl necklace around the neck of poverty.*

I want to focus on the words: “God is in the bits and pieces of everyday” because the ‘everyday’ is what you will find in the recollections of the 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 Success, Lisbon. Known as the *Dominicanas Irlandesas* the sisters lived their religious life in a changing Lisbon and indeed, religious life itself, changed greatly over the span of years from 1944 to 2016 going from a state of enclosure to the comparative freedom of the present day.

Interviews were conducted by Dr Bronagh McShane of the National University of Ireland, Galway with twelve sisters, among whom were the last 4 sisters to live in Bom Success, Srs Aedris, Agnes, Alicia and Teresa. Their recollections are not grandiose or pretentious but range from a journey in a flying boat during war time to experiencing the Revolution in 1974 and the challenges and frustration of learning Portuguese.

We get a picture of women who were ‘*building their heavens as they built their circles of friends*’ compelled to go to Lisbon from wanting to do whatever God asked of them; through a sense of obedience; to answering needs as expressed through the Congregation leadership of the time; from a sense of adventure. Answering a call has always been a strong force in our religious vocation as is a passion to follow Jesus and Dominic and spread the good news of what Pope Francis calls ‘*the joy of the gospel*’.

Some wonderful ministries were built up over the years:

- the Colegio, so flourishing today;
- the Creche or *Casinha*, a wonderful help to local families;
- the International School serving the International community and now achieving great results under other ownership
- and the *Centro Sagrada Familia* catering for so many children and greatly appreciated by the local council of Oeiras.

You will find many insights into how the sisters combined their ministry with their community and prayer life; how they appreciated, and at the same time, struggled with the cultural differences of the Lisbon around them. This did not always extend to the food as many remarked that the food was ‘Irish’!

You will find moments of humour in the reminiscences: for example one sister decided she wanted to say the Divine Office ‘the same as the Pope.’ It was some time before she realised that the prayers etc. and the feasts celebrated were different in those days, because she was using a Dominican rather than a Roman breviary!

Bom Sucesso, Lisbon, inspired a great love in the sisters who lived there and I am sure that was partly the reason why the leaving in 2016 was so traumatic. The warmth of the sun, the warmth of

the people, the warmth of community life all joined to become an integral part of their vocation and journey and they can never forget their time in Lisbon whether it was long or short.

I think Kavanagh's words describe the simplicity and routine of the sisters' life in Bom Sucesso very aptly - *a kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears, A pearl necklace round the neck of poverty.*

There were many riches within the routine and hard work: the rhythm of liturgy, Mass and Divine Office, the care of the sisters for one another and especially the love and affection of staff, parents, children and neighbours. Many life-long friendships were formed and have lasted, notwithstanding the fact that the community is closed and there are no longer sisters living in Bom Sucesso. In addition to this, is the outstanding loyalty of so many who have had connections with *the sisters* as they are affectionately called. The work of the Fundação which holds the ministries today, is a testament to this loyalty: that busy people are interested enough in Dominican mission to give their time and gifts to further its continuance in Lisbon.

Many references were made in the recollections to the climate, the warmth of the sun and the cold in winter time; above all, what shines through is the emphasis on education whether in school or in underprivileged places in the suburbs of Lisbon. Education was the lifeblood for the sisters and the school or educational facility always at the forefront of their interests and efforts.

The Church, now so beautifully renovated was always at the heart of their lives. It is a sacred place which, thank God, continues to draw in friends and neighbours under the care of the Colegio.

Some striking points alluded to in the Oral History are the spirit of hospitality in Bom Sucesso- an open door for friends and visitors alike. Relationships with the Irish and expatriate community were always cordial. Indeed we owe this oral history to the good offices of the Irish Ambassador, Orla Tunney and the Emigrant Support Programme, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

A tremendous amount of work was put into this project, principally by Dr Bronagh McShane who conducted the interview and collated the material, by Mr Bill Cunningham who co-ordinated and oversaw the project, Sr Elizabeth Smyth, the Congregation's representative on the Board of the Fundação and Sr Mary O'Byrne, Congregation Archivist also gave valuable assistance.

Our thanks are due to them all and especially the twelve sisters for opening their 'memory boxes' to enrich our understanding of life in Bom Sucesso.

To finish I want to look briefly at the value of a small oral history such as this one: to return to my original quotation from Patrick Kavanagh. In its unpretentious state it is indeed in my opinion, *a pearl necklace around the neck of poverty.* It offers the simple recollections of a group of women who came to Portugal, lived, worked, prayed, laughed and cried through the day to day events of their lives. It is a significant contribution to our understanding of religious life in Bom Sucesso, and also gives glimpses of the Lisbon of the time, 1944-2016 which breathes life into social history.

I end with a line from Psalm 102 v 18

Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord.

and invite you all to say with me the prayer to Our Lady of Good Success, so dear to the 12 sisters whose memories we are celebrating.

Our Lady our Queen and our Mother,
In the name of Jesus and for the love of Jesus
We implore you to take our cause in hand
And grant us good success!

Thank you for your attention!

Sr. Elisabeth Healy OP, Congregation Prioress