

Mass of Thanksgiving for the Loreto Sisters 1854-2015

**by Most Rev. Philip Boyce, O.C.D.
Bishop of Raphoe
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A letter circulated to the staff of Loreto Convent Secondary School (Letterkenny) on 1st July 2015, and a statement to the press the following day, announced the closing of the Convent and the departure of the Sisters. Although the inevitable was foreseen for some years, it filled many hearts with surprise and sadness. The statement made public the distressing news and gave the reasons: “regretfully, the Sisters of the local Loreto Convent will be vacating it within the next few months. The reasons for this decision are the decrease in numbers and the ageing profile of the Sisters.” It became the talk of the town. The refrain that was so often repeated since then, was: “It’s the end of an era.” Yes, the end of 161 years of the presence of a Community of Loreto Sisters and of the outstanding education they gave to young girls in Letterkenny and elsewhere in the Diocese.

We find ourselves in a period of change and transition in the Church and for Consecrated Sisters in Ireland. For the moment, young girls are not as attracted to that way of life as they used to be. But it is not the end of hope. Indeed, for Sisters and all those in Consecrated Life: “hope is not built on the foundation of our strength or our numbers, but on the gifts of the Spirit: faith, communion, mission” (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Keep Watch*. Year of Consecrated Life. A Letter to consecrated men and women journeying in the footsteps of God. Catholic Truth Society 2014, No. 11, p. 47).

Our history has seen in various centuries the passing of an old way of life, followed by a renewed flourishing. As Moses said to Joshua (1st Reading): “be strong, stand firm... the Lord himself will lead you; he will be with you; he will not fail or desert you. Have no fear, do not be

disheartened by anything” (Deut. 31: 7-8). And so, we look back with gratitude over 161 years of the presence of Loreto Sisters in the Diocese, and we look forward with hope, since they leave a rich legacy behind them. Last November (2014), Pope Francis wrote a Letter to all consecrated men and women, asking them “to look to the past with gratitude” for in telling one’s own story, one holds on to one’s identity. To look to the past is not an escape into what some would imagine to be the good old times, but a means to awaken gratitude in our hearts to God for his many gifts. At the same time, we have to live in the present moment “with passion”, that is with eagerness and joy and zeal for the gift of the Gospel, for the faith, our calling in life or, as with the Sisters, for their charism. The Lord guides us to a future of which we do not know the details but of which he and the Holy Spirit are the guarantee. Therefore, we look forward to the future, “with hope” knowing who holds the future in his providing and caring hands. If we had not a past to build upon and a future to shape we would be poor and adrift on our journey.

But the Loreto Sisters and we ourselves in the Diocese of Raphoe can look back on 161 years of education and learning. Education of the whole person, physically, spiritual, moral and academic is at the core of the calling and charism of the Loreto Sisters. At the whole School evaluation last year, it was noted that “everyone in the School was cared for”. Everyone has a talent, let it shine!

The origins of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known to us as the Loreto Sisters, go back to the 17th century. Venerable Mary Ward, a Yorkshire woman, was inspired to provide education for girls just as the Jesuit Fathers were giving it to boys. For this purpose she founded a Community of religious women, without enclosure, which was a novel idea at the time. She met with misunderstanding and opposition but persevered until the Pope granted her permission to open schools in

Rome. Later, her Sisters had a Convent in York, England, where a Dublin lady, called Teresa Frances Ball entered in 1814. Seven years later, Sr. Teresa Frances Ball, went from York to found the first Irish Branch of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a Convent in Rathfarnham, Dublin. More convents and schools were founded throughout Ireland. Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom and Queen of the Angels, protected and guided the Sisters on their Mission down the years.

Letterkenny and the diocese of Raphoe came into contact with the Loreto Sisters through the good offices of Dr. Patrick Mc Gettigan who became Bishop of Raphoe in 1820 – the year before Rathfarnham Convent was founded. Catholic Emancipation was granted in 1829. Then came the devastating famine years in the 1840's. Bishop Patrick Mc Gettigan was a wise and farseeing man. He knew the value of education for the young. In the early 1850's he wrote to and visited the Loreto Sisters in Rathfarnham asking them to set up a boarding School and a day School (a "free School") in Letterkenny.

On August 28th 1854 seven Loreto Sisters and a Novice left Rathfarnham for Letterkenny. They travelled by train to Strabane and then on to Letterkenny by carriages. Their entry was a triumphal procession led by the Bishop and surrounded by most of the people of the town. They came up the Port Road and through the Main Street to the church which was located near to where the Cathedral now stands. In no other town in Ireland had the Loreto Sisters experienced such a friendly welcome and such generosity. Bishop Mc Gettigan had vacated his own residence and given it to the Sisters for their Convent and first School. It would be the first Convent of Sisters opened in the Diocese of Raphoe since the Reformation. He himself would go to live in Rathmullan. The house he left them still forms part of the Loreto Convent today.

The Loreto Sisters began with a day School. Soon there were boarders as well. They opened on 4th September 1854 with five pupils. 1854 then was a memorable year in the history of our Diocese. Ireland was enjoying its new religious freedom and struggling to rise from the aftermath of the Great Famine. It was the year the Catholic University of Ireland was opened in Dublin, with Dr. (now Blessed) John Henry Newman as its first Rector, while it was also the year the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX.

In the early years of Loreto Boarding School in Letterkenny, pupils came from all over the country, from other Counties and even from abroad. Protestants also attended from the beginning, so that it was always inclusive and welcoming. For 56 years (1920-1976) all subjects were taught in the School through Irish. In 1978, it ceased to take boarders and became a Day School again. As it grew in numbers there were many extensions down the years – the first in 1861 followed by others in 1922, 1938, 1971, 1980, 1986 and 2004. Now almost 1000 pupils attend the School.

The Diocese of Raphoe has been blessed with the presence of the Loreto Sisters in Letterkenny for 161 years. Many generations of young girls have received their secondary education here, often in years when it was not available elsewhere. My own sister was there in the late fifties. A fair number of pupils followed the Lord's call and became Sisters themselves, in Loreto or in other Congregations. Thirty two girls from Raphoe Diocese entered the Convent and became Loreto Sisters. They became competent teachers and principals in the Loreto School itself in Letterkenny and in other Schools throughout the country. Others worked in the Mission fields of India, Kenya, Mauritius and South Africa. In

recent years it was a Loreto sister from Ballyraine (Letterkenny) who led the new Loreto Mission in Sudan, and was then joined by another Sister.

Later the Loreto Sisters would also establish a primary School in Letterkenny, which today is Scoil Mhuire gan Smál with 476 pupils on the rolls. As with all Loreto Schools, it has a Catholic ethos where faith is taught and caught, creating an atmosphere of peace, joyfulness and eagerness to learn.

The Loreto Sisters have been active down the years in other ways as well. They led prayer groups, took part in the Legion of Mary and in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and helped the poor and needy. In the early years they took charge of the choir in the adjacent church (the Pro-Cathedral) and then in the new Cathedral when it was opened in 1901.

However, the Sisters served not only in the Secondary and Primary Schools in Letterkenny, but elsewhere as well. In 1926, they were invited to take charge of the Northern Preparatory Training College for teachers. They taught in various locations until the designated Ballyconnell College (Coláiste Bhríde) in Falcarragh was ready in October 1930, when they began with 25 pupils. They had three wings, a chapel and other offices added, and taught there until 1961.

In the early sixties, Letterkenny Convent School became too small for the increasing numbers of pupils. Bishop William Mc Neely secured a site in Milford for a convent building and School which opened in 1966 and had also boys and day students. It finally became the Loreto Community School in 1996.

In more recent years, Loreto Sisters have experienced a fall in the number of vocations and have moved out of Schools to continue education in other areas such as family centres, prayer groups, prisons, Aids Centres, and basically anywhere they saw a need to help people to

help and value themselves. They have set up the Loreto Trust Board to continue to manage, guide and support Loreto Schools and their staff.

The Sisters acknowledge that they have always had loyal and friendly supporters in Letterkenny, with a very dedicated staff and Boards of Management. The willingness and happiness of teachers creates an atmosphere in their Schools where it is easier to work at all times both in good days and bad, at sad times and on joyful occasions. The Sisters are grateful to all of them, and to parents and the people of the town, who have been friendly and co-operative down the years. As one of the Sisters said recently: “together with our young people, they blessed and spoiled us and have been exceedingly good to us all these 161 years.”

We, for our part, say a word of sincere thanks to the Loreto Sisters. They have been women of courage, of exemplary lives, of great vision and of total dedication. We shall be all the poorer without them,

However, they leave as a precious legacy. They leave others to carry on their good work. The Diocese has benefited enormously from their presence and their work in education for the past 161 years. Perhaps, it can be summed up in a famous saying of Sr. Canice, whom many of you would have known, a saying which epitomizes her and the Loreto Sisters’ philosophy of education:

“If you are thinking a year ahead, sow a seed,

“If you are thinking 10 years ahead, plant a tree,

“If you are thinking 100 years ahead, educate the people,

By sowing seed, you will harvest once,

By planting a tree, you will harvest tenfold,

By educating the people, you will harvest one hundredfold.”

Yes, the presence and work in education of the Loreto Sisters among us in the Diocese has been blessed by God a hundredfold. May God be with them on their journey in the years ahead and may Our Lady, Queen of the Angels, protect them. Amen.