

On the 28th of April of this year 2020, I celebrated 61 years of being a Daughter of Charity, almost a lifetime in itself, and what a wonderful lifetime! Not all of it has been easy in fact some of it has been difficult and required a lot of giving and a good dollop of self-sacrifice striving to put Jesus and the service of others at the centre of life. But so blessed in a multitude of ways.

I was born in Sunderland, into a loving catholic family and, being the youngest of a family of ten I had many good influences at work in my life. My Mother was vibrant catholic and due to her example and God's grace my father became a Catholic after 11 years of marriage. He treasured his gift of faith and was able to inspire us all with a sense of the importance of our faith and of growing in knowledge and understanding of it. As a family we had many a sharing, discussion even arguments at the dinner table about doctrine, the Mass and catholic practices, using the Catholic Encyclopaedia to keep us right nowadays it would be the Catechism of the Catholic Church!

For me, my Mother was a person who knew how to listen, to evaluate and advise. In a way she was really my first Spiritual Director encouraging me to pray and reflect on my behaviour and intentions and to offer to God the joys and pains of everyday life. As a family we had lots of fun and laughter occasionally celebrating 21st birthdays and weddings with all night parties which ended in going to the 7am Mass on the Sunday morning with the gang of friends and family who had partied and danced the night through.

My brothers and sisters seemed to have a natural balance in their lives. They all lived a full Catholic life, attending morning Mass as often as possible, being variously active in the Parish and wider Church through membership of YCW, SVP and Legion of Mary and other devotional associations. From their example I received encouragement to be active in my Faith; responding to a challenge by one of my brothers to resist selfishness and to look to the need of others, by joining the Junior Legion of Mary and becoming a third Order Servite.

School wise I was educated by the Sisters of Mercy providing me with many happy memories as well as a few scary ones. One day Sister Monica at her wits end with an outburst of my high spirits said "Brenda Matterson you're acting as if you have a boyfriend" rather cheekily I answered "Not one Sister, but many, but don't worry I'm going to be a nun." I actually meant it. Somehow that was always in my mind from being very young. At Sunday Mass Sister Mary Peter would lead us all in Communion thanksgiving prayers one of them was the following

'Jesus you have given yourself to me, now let me give myself you. I give you my heart that I may always love you; I give you my mouth that I may always praise you; I give you my eyes that I may always see you in your creation and in those around me. I give you my mind that you may fill my thoughts, but above all I give you myself in life and in death that I may be with you for ever.'

This prayer became part of me and influenced me in my decision to follow the invitation I felt from the Lord to follow him in the religious life. I continue to say this prayer every day after Holy Communion and strive to live it.

So why did I join the Daughters of Charity and not the Sisters of Mercy who were the Sisters I personally knew, loved and respected? I suppose it's because God in his providence led me to the Daughters through a few clear signposts.

The Junior Legion of Mary held its meetings in the Parish Library where there was a large statue of St Vincent de Paul since the SVP also used the room. One evening a friend offered me a book from the shelves about St Vincent. It was volume one of the Life and Labours of St Vincent de Paul – telling the story of the Works of St Vincent and the founding of the Little Company of the Daughters of Charity in the 17th Century. The account of the Daughters bold me over, their service of the poor, the different way of living, having the streets as a cloister, belonging to the Parish, being ready to go anywhere and do anything in the service of poor people.

I was fascinated by the St Vincent and his ability to reach out to people's need both spiritual and practical. The relationship of St Vincent with St Louise and the first sisters intrigued me as it was so different from the formality of Religious life as I had perceived it up to this time. YES, I would like to be one of them, a sister serving the poor, living a Community life rooted in prayer. But mistakenly, I thought they now existed only History!

As a Junior Legionaries we used to take Miraculous medal to the families who had a new baby and one day on my way by bus to visit such a family I happened to read the leaflet that we gave out with the medal. On the last page it said "For more information write to the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, Mill Hill. They were still in existence and I wanted to be one of them! This discovery started the wheels moving. Sr Mary Peter enlighten me that the Sisters were all around the North East and visiting a vocation exhibition in Newcastle meant I could briefly meet them and find out more.

My Mother told me that a good friend of hers had trained as a Nursery nurse with the sisters in Liverpool. It was she who took me to meet the Sisters at their children's home in Tudhoe where their friendly homeliness impressed me especially as they fed me freshly baked bread at the kitchen table while I took in every aspect of their, then, very distinctive dress.

After this it was only a matter of time from applying for entrance, being accepted and arriving in Darlington to postulate and be incorporated into the Company

When I entered my Mother's advice was very simple, she said, "Brenda if you live this life faithfully it could be heaven on earth, if not, it could be hell." Thank God I can truthfully say that it has been more of heaven and only a touch of hell!

These 61 years of being a Daughter of Charity striving to live the Gospel in the Spirit of St Vincent de Paul and St Louise de Marillac have been sustained by so much that is expressed in the communion prayer of my childhood. For me it's been a source of

wonder and thanksgiving how God manifests himself to us if only we listen, reflect and generously respond. Would you like me to tell about those 61 years – that could go on forever! Maybe I should keep that as Chapter Two! May God Bless you in your openness to find his will for you. Whatever path you follow may Our Lord sustain you in your love for him and for others.