



Sister Bridget Tighe

On 25th June 1965, the feast of the Sacred Heart, I entered the postulancy in Ladywell. Six weeks earlier I had left Whipps Cross Hospital, London, where I was a student nurse in order to spend time with my family and friends in Ireland before entering the convent.

My boy-friend (we had been dating for about a year) understood and respected my decision but on the evening of the 24th we cried together and talked about what might have been. He took me to the train the following morning.

Today, as I look out over the Judean hills marred by the separation wall that surrounds Bethlehem like an open prison, I look back on forty-three years of religious life and

marvel at the grace of God that has sustained me through times of joy and sorrow, of faith and doubt, of temptation and perseverance, of the death of my parents tempered the by the joy of new nieces and nephews, and I ask myself: how did I make such a momentous decision at the age of nineteen, and more amazingly, how did I persevere?

I loved nursing and I was very happy in Whipps Cross which, to this day, has a special place in my heart. I joined the Franciscan Third Order and read the lives of Saint Francis and other saints. From about the age of fifteen I occasionally thought of becoming a nun and the thought persisted while I led the life of a normal teenager of the 60s: dancing, boyfriends, and rebelling against my parents who did not want me to go to England. In Whipps Cross, by chance or Divine Providence, I was introduced to the FMDM congregation.

I visited Ladywell a few times and met Mother Francis Spring who was then Superior General. I knew and admired sisters of other congregations but meeting FMDMs different. It was something like falling in love. I wanted to share their life even though I saw things I did not like and things with which I disagreed. It was a case of "warts and all". I asked to join and was accepted. Leaving my home, family, and boyfriend with all the unrealised potential that involved, was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Being young helped. Young people have the capacity to pursue an ideal even at great cost to themselves. Leaving Whipps Cross and the professional advancement it offered was a close second.

Like getting married, profession of religious vows is a life-long commitment, for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, and joining the convent is only the beginning of the long apprenticeship in community living, discernment and formation that culminates in commitment to live the rest of one's life in the congregation one has joined. I entered wholeheartedly into the life of prayer, silence, study and work, and I availed of what was offered by way of instruction and spiritual

direction, but throughout my life the most important decisions, like whether to remain in the congregation or take a different path, were made in the depth of my own heart in prayer.

I was assigned to our community in Jordan and had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land while still in temporary vows. Visiting the sacred sites associated with Christ's life, death and resurrection brought the scriptures alive, and the Word of God has remained a source of strength for me through the ups and downs that constitute adult life whatever vocation one is called to follow. The language of religious vocation often mentions the hundredfold promised by Jesus in the Gospel to those who leave all to follow him as priests or professed religious.

Looking back on my life and reflecting on my present ministry, I'm beginning to acknowledge the fulfillment of that promise in my own life. I gave up nursing education that I loved but later qualified as a nurse and midwife and worked for many years with Palestinian refugees. I've always loved study and after years of living in Jordan where study opportunities were limited, I read theology in the University of Cambridge and Health Economics at the London School of Economics. I later established and led a college for Catholic women, the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology that is associated with the Divinity Faculty of the University of Cambridge.

In May 2006 I was appointed Vice-Rector of Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem where the diverse experiences I gained in Jordan and Cambridge come together in a new and challenging ministry. But religious life is not primarily about the work we do, rather work, referred to as apostolate or ministry, is a practical expression of the charism (meaning gift) specific to each congregation. A sister lives the charism of her congregation and shares it with others by her whole life – community living, prayer, study, work, relaxation, illness or old age, according to her ability and in cooperation with, and in obedience to, her religious superiors. Hence sisters will be found in all kinds of places doing all kinds of work according to the charism of the congregation to which they belong. It is often the work of a community that initially attracts.

It has been said that charisms specific to religious congregations exist in individuals as well as in communities which is why an individual is attracted to, and feels affinity with, one particular group rather than to any other. This was my experience when I first met FMDMs, what I referred to as something akin to falling in love. This feeling of attraction and later of belonging, while recognising the human weakness of individual members, is an important indicator that this is where one is called by God to be. There is a deep down peace often accompanied by a feeling of joy that can co-exist with desire for other ways of life, even with doubt and inner darkness.

The period of formation, established by the Church, provides the person in formation with time and spiritual guidance to discern if this is indeed her vocation. One who decides to leave during this period will have benefited from the experience, particularly formation in prayer that will be a good foundation for her future life, and those who remain and make perpetual vows will receive the hundredfold promised in the Gospel to those who leave all to follow Christ through the profession of the evangelical counsels.