



Sister Colette Flynn CJ 1928-2019

Colette was given her baptismal name because, before she was born, her mother asked the local Poor Clare Colettine community to pray for a safe delivery. The sisters naturally wanted to see the answer to their prayers, but of course they were strictly enclosed back in 1928, so the baby was pushed round to them in the turn to be admired and prayed over – possibly the first unconventional experience in a life which was to be full of them!

She made her acquaintance with the then IBVM as a result of the war; she was sent to Ascot as a boarder, aged 11 or so, as a school in a safer locality than the family home in South London. When she was about 15 and felt that she had a religious vocation she considered the Poor Clares, but decided that, as God had sent her to the IBVMs, perhaps that was where he wanted her to be. Two years later she entered, in September 1946, so was still one of the younger members 'downstairs' in the professed community when I arrived thirteen years later. I remember her as tallish, slim, with a very brown skin (1959 was a good summer, and Colette loved the sun). In the habit as it then was, forehead-band and all, her eyes looked rather slanting, so she had an oriental look. Those were still quite early days for television (two stations – BBC and ITV) and getting a good picture required a certain skill; Colette was in

charge of the set. That was my first acquaintance with her technical skills, which were many – not that we from ‘upstairs’ in the noviceship saw much of the TV!

At that time she was teaching biology, and is remembered as an inspired teacher whose enthusiasm for her subject was infectious. Many former pupils who have made their mark in science-teaching and research speak of her as a key influence in their choice of career. Later, encouraged by accompanying school trips to Italy, she became an even more enthusiastic teacher of History of Art. She is also remembered for her work in the boarding school, where she had good relationships with those in her care.

But her life was changed radically by a sabbatical year in Ireland, 1984-1985. This was her first experience of her family roots; in a sense, that year she learned more of who she really was. When she and her brother Tony were children, family summer holidays were spent in Germany, for which her mother had a passion. (One of Colette’s claims to fame was that once in the late 1930s she shook hands with Hitler!) She and Tony learned German from an early age, and always had a German au pair to look after them, so that they became bilingual. (In later years I remember German guests at the ordination of a young man who had studied in Innsbruck asking Colette what part of Germany she came from). So she was in her 50s before she got to know Ireland, Irish culture and her own family in Dublin and Cork. After the sabbatical she returned often, and it was very important to her.

She returned from sabbatical just before we started the new small community in St. George’s parish, Norwich – which was a wonderful opportunity to make a new start, especially as the job-description from Fr. Tony Rogers, the parish priest, was ‘Find out what needs doing, and do it.’! Soon there were four of us, each working according to her special skills, but united in commitment to St. George’s and its three daughter-churches in a hinterland of the whole northern part of the city and 97 villages between there and the North Norfolk coast. Colette’s speciality was chaplaincy in several hospitals – had she not entered, she would have become a doctor like her father, and an aspect of her natural feeling for people was a particular instinct for the sick and those with disabilities. But she also had a particular geographical commitment to the Thorpe area of the parish and the villages beyond, and the two of us worked together in the parish RCIA programme and in Norwich prison, where St. George’s had the Catholic chaplaincy. Colette’s speciality was the young men in the Remand Centre. She had a weekly cooking-session with them, teaching them simple dishes that they could make for themselves later on. It was hugely popular! But it was in the main prison, where we went several times in the week, that she said something I have never forgotten. Someone from the local radio-station asked us what we did in the prison, and she said simply ‘I do what I do everywhere – I make friends, then it’s for God to do what he likes with it.’ That has always seemed to me not a bad description of CJ ministry, whatever our special activity may be.

And Colette had many special activities. Another of them was work as a prayer-guide in parish weeks of guided prayer. It was in one such, in Cambridge, that she and Margaret Martin formed the friendship which was to be a great joy to both of them ever after. Later in her

Norwich-time she developed new skills in reflexology and Shiatsu, which she used particularly in a home for drug and alcohol abusers, and with cancer-patients in Priscilla Bacon Lodge, though with many other people too. She also gave more time to her artistic interests – to painting, sculpture and pottery – and for many years worked with a U3A architecture-group, with which she studied local buildings, not least Norwich Cathedral, which she loved and knew intimately. And of course she took opportunities to spend time on the Norfolk coast, bird-watching and looking at plants. Walks for Colette were never about covering distance, but about exploring what was to be seen on the way! Serious walking – and climbing – came on holidays with Margaret, especially in the Lake District, and even after knee-replacement surgery, both knees at the same time. Characteristically, she wanted to get all the pain and discomfort over in one go!

But eventually, in 2012, the time came to move up to St. Joseph's – which she did in style, on a steam-train trip, accompanied by Margaret: one of the adventures recorded in two of the pictures in the leaflet!

Once here, she began to explore York, training herself to walk gradually greater distances, using her two long sticks. In the first few years she would spend time by the river, watching the Canada geese and other birds, or visit York's medieval churches, which she came to know well. But then the short episodes of losing consciousness began, followed by the real strokes, and the consequent physical and mental impairment: the zimmer-frame and eventually the chair; the narrowing range of activities until even jigsaws became impossible. What must have been hardest for her was that her mind seemed clear enough for her to have a sense of what she used to be able to do – and there were episodes of anger and frustration. But until very near the end she kept her sense of humour, and could understand and laugh at an account of a funny incident.

The photos show a range of facial expressions, just as there were many aspects of her personality: love of solitude and love of people; impatience with 'churchiness' and deep personal prayerfulness; appreciation of beauty in the natural world and in the arts. Not a systematic reader, she had a feel for quality in books, so it was no surprise to be given a copy of a Shakespeare sonnet a few days ago, and told that it was Colette's favourite. It begins:

'Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken....

She said of herself 'I have been specially blessed in my life with friends I have had and still have. Each one has given me so much love and enabled me to learn to love in return, and I thank God for them.'

Dear Colette, we thank God for you, too.