



Sister Margaret Leedal CJ

1925-2021

by Sister Patricia Harriss CJ

I first met Margaret – then Sr. Alban – in September 1962, when I came up to York for the first time, to teach in the Bar Grammar. She was already in charge of the Prep School, as she was to remain until 1972. Although the community at that time must have numbered about 30, we were only 8 in the school, and it was Margaret who explained to me on Day 1 that we took a place in the refectory at teatime, and kept it through the next day; that we could ‘sit anywhere’, but in practice the senior members stayed put, there would only be two or three spaces on the two long tables at the sides, and we, ‘the school people’, would end up at the small table in the middle.

As we got to know each other, I discovered that we were both from the West Riding – she was from Bradford, deeply rooted there, and knew a great many people. That she had ‘pushed half the clergy in the Leeds Diocese in their prams’ (pram-pushing for neighbours was a little-girl occupation in those days) is most probably a legend – but she certainly knew a great many of them. She had been in Yorkshire – St. Joseph’s College, Bradford, Endsleigh Teacher Training College in Hull, teaching in the Bar Convent, and briefly in St. Cuthbert’s, Bradford - till she entered, which, as she confided to me, she had actually done twice. She returned home after a few weeks as a postulant in Ascot, was met at the door by her redoubtable mother, who said ‘You shouldn’t have come back, should you?’- thought better of it and

returned to Ascot the following September. Looking back, I think that was typical of Margaret: she was strong-willed, made very definite judgements, but had the generosity and humility to admit when she really had made a mistake, and think again.

She returned to York in 1953, after her noviceship, to resume contact with colleagues from earlier years there – friends like Veronica Daniels, and Maureen Marchant, and Norah Cooley and Sheila Murphy, who taught at Our Lady's in Acomb. Some years later they were the two who came with Margaret and me to Lancaster, where her mother had moved by then, for a home-celebration of Margaret's Silver Jubilee with Mass celebrated by Phil, one of her twin brothers, a White Father home on leave from Tanzania. Mass concluded with clapping and singing and an African dance round the garden. She loved Phil and was very proud of him, and was devastated by his early death, not long afterwards, as a result of a motor-bike accident back in Africa.

The two of us had another trip to Lancaster together in the 1980s, dramatic in another way because it was on the evening of Christmas Day. She heard at about tea-time that her mother had been taken seriously ill – so I said I would drive her over. It was a very dark, quiet cross-country drive; most people by then settled in at home, little traffic on the roads. I left her at home – by then it seemed that her mother was over the worst – and set off alone. Margaret had got me through Lancaster to the house – but finding my way out again was another matter. I also realised that I had not filled up with petrol on Christmas Eve; NO petrol stations open anywhere! But God was good, and I made it back to York, though with probably only a few miles to spare!

Phil's twin brother, John, was a teacher like his sister, and eventually also a primary head. He was the only married member of the family, but sadly, for a long time he and his wife Rita had no children. Eventually they adopted first Philip, the eldest son, then Anne – and then Rita gave birth to Matthew, and later to David, to everyone's great joy, and certainly to Margaret's. Much later – in fact, in very recent years – she often travelled to Lancaster to look after Rita, by then a widow and in need of home care, to give some respite to her nephew Matthew, who had taken on the responsibility.

That was also typical of Margaret, a lifelong 100% apostle. This is perhaps a good moment to quote from something that has been passed to me, her letter to Sr. Jane, our general superior, applying to make the Fourth Vow, which about readiness to be sent anywhere, at any time, to answer an urgent need. She wrote: *'I'd like the privilege of taking the 4th Vow – I feel the Lord is saying 'Something special for your old age.... The compelling words for me (are) 'universal mission'.... Practically for me I hope it will amount to at least two things – to be prepared to go wherever health care is offered me and more importantly to spend a set time daily praying for those actively engaged in mission.'* But, to return to her own more active years... She did so many other things, besides teaching in school, mostly in York but also for a year in Shaftesbury (not a success: she loved the country, but was fundamentally a city girl, and apparently used to walk to the end of the mile-long drive almost daily, just to see the traffic pass!) and for four years in Cambridge. While still teaching she also gave a good deal

of time to Faith and Light, working with families who had mentally-handicapped children. After six years away, she returned to York in 1978 and taught till 1982, when she became a parish sister in Kirby Moorside, then in Harrogate, with the aid of a moped. (I have a feeling that she never got as far as a test, but rode with L-plates to the very end.) Finally, from 1988 till 2014 she did hospital chaplaincy, in Harrogate, Leeds and York – eventually only in York. But there was no ‘finally’ with Margaret; once she had formed a relationship with someone in spiritual need, she maintained the contact faithfully, until the person died – which meant that in her latter days she was also a great funeral-goer. Probably no-one ever made better use of a senior bus-pass: she travelled extensively around Yorkshire by bus, until all travel stopped with the onset of Covid. A typical instance was the Italian hairdresser in Otley. She was deeply concerned about his faith, because of course he was a Catholic, but only occasionally practising. So she visited him regularly, though it involved two buses, and he began to cut her hair for free, as a typically Italian insurance-policy with God! But she liked buses, and was sad when the time came that she could no longer go on the Coastliner to Goathland, and spend at least a little time on the Moors.

She was generous in community, too, continuing to take turns in cooking until just before going to St. Joseph’s. I remember with special affection the supper she made the day after the sudden shock of Cecilia’s death – a perfect cheese soufflé, one of her specialities. It was a generous and thoughtful act.

Full retirement in St. Joseph’s must have been the most difficult period of her life, and for the last years of it I was not able to see her, except occasionally in the garden. But her quiet and sudden death seemed so much in keeping with her life. Well done, good and faithful servant – may you rest in peace, or, more likely, find things you want to do!