Christina eulogy for 2 September 2025

Mary Cecilia Kenworthy-Browne was born in 1928 and spent her early years in the boys' prep school run by her parents in Wellbury near Hitchin in Hertfordshire. She was the eldest of five children, the remaining four of whom were boys. She herself said that being the eldest was "the best place to be in a family where the boys are so strongly in the majority" – not to mention the boys in the school, in which the whole family was completely immersed. In many ways this rather unusual start in life shaped Mary. She benefited from the very good education she received in the prep school up to the age of 13, but it was a bewildering transition from a rural boys' prep school, in which she was the only girl, to St Mary's Ascot, where she encountered only girls – and teenage ones at that - who were something of a mystery to her, as she had known almost no girls up to that point in her life. However, once over the first difficult year, she grew to love the school, and also the nuns and said that "St Mary's was unique in the love and care we were given and the fun we had". Having gone to the school in 1941 when the Second World War was already well under way, her early years there included quite often spending nights in the sandbagged gym together with other limitations imposed by wartime conditions, but these did not diminish her increasing enjoyment of all aspects of school life, notably the academic, but also needlework and dressmaking, which were her chief hobbies, and at which she was very adept.

It was during the Sixth Form, when she was still only 16, that she felt the first stirrings of her vocation to religious life and this developed during the following two years, one spent at Errollston, and the second teaching the younger boys at Wellbury. Thus, she was 19 when she entered the then IBVM and was given her religious name of Christina in honour of the Feast of Christ the King. Her formation was followed by a Classics degree at Reading University – and, as she was always at pains to point out, studied real Classics – Latin and Greek - and <u>not</u> Classics in translation! Then began a teaching career that lasted 35 years at Ascot and then Shaftesbury, and finally, in 1977, for 12 years as Headmistress of St Mary's Cambridge, the largest IBVM school in the English Province, a role in which she succeeded Patricia Harriss RIP, whom she described as her earliest friend in the congregation. She was a hugely well-respected teacher, as many testimonies from a large number of Ascot Old Girls attest:
Just to give a flavour of these:
She was a tremendous character! I was rather terrified of her to start with, but she was a brilliant teacher, and I came to greatly respect her intellect.
Thank you, strong memories of Latin classes and an imposing presence in class, she seemed to sweep along the corridors!
Sr Christina had a very 'stock saying' when obviously annoyed by over-excited young voices "GO RIGHT AWAY", she would say very loudly!
And lastly, at slightly more length, but I think worth hearing because it paints a lovely word portrait of a sometimes complex person, but one who always entered wholeheartedly into whatever was asked of her:
Thank you so much for letting me know of the death of Sister Christina. She influenced my whole life. I arrived in Ascot in September 1954 from Belfast N. Ireland four days before my eleventh birthday. My father had asked Mother Mercedes the headmistress that I should be taught Greek, she consented even though it was not available at that time. Sister Christina taught me alone for the next seven years. To me she seemed very old but in fact she was twenty-five, only fourteen years older than me. Many years later she told me that she was only a year ahead of me and had taken O Level Greek the year before me so she could teach me! I loathed all games, to me hockey and netball were a nightmare, so very soon she and I agreed that my classes could take place during games time. I still have my 'Greek through Reading' textbook where we started with Aesop and his fables and by O Level were reading Homer. I was bewitched.

After a day of studying for my A Levels I would go for a hot bath and return to find she had left me a hot mug of cocoa and biscuits. One night she left a book of W.B. Yeats poetry with a note" You are Irish and must read Ireland's greatest poet"; it soothed my home sickness… I went on to do a PhD in Homer, an enthusiasm I owe to her and those early afternoons in the Middle School Common Room. Now, at 82, I belong to a group who every second Saturday morning meet and read our way through the Iliad in Greek; she is behind me every step of the way…"

Sister Christina was also a very well-respected, if again sometimes daunting to both staff and students, Headmistress in Cambridge, albeit perhaps that was not the métier in which she was most comfortable. However, she was utterly committed to the school and to ensuring that both school numbers and academic standards were maintained, in the very competitive educational environment of Cambridge independent schools, as well as to preparing the school for the transition being undertaken at that time in all the English Province IBVM schools, to lay Headship and senior management.

After retiring as Headmistress, Christina was invited to become Province Bursar, based in Hampstead from 1989 to 2000 and then in York, and she was as dedicated in her 14 years of service in this ministry as she had been during the years of her education ministry. She threw herself into learning all the aspects of the role – finances, property and law. Although dealing with her over financial matters could be a little daunting on occasion, she was an outstanding steward of the Province's financial resources and played an enormous role in ensuring that the Province had planned well for the years when ministry income began to decline and the financial demands of the needs of older members increased. During this period, she also played a major role as a member of the Association of Provincial Bursars and when she finally retired was given the honour of being made an honorary member of the Association – according to their records, the only person to have been accorded this honour - in recognition of her many years' service of the APB.

It is worth noting at this point that over the years Christina also served on several school Governing Bodies, was a longstanding Trustee of the CJ Charitable Trust and the Bar Convent Trust, and in 2002 was a delegate at the historic General Congregation at which Mary Ward's dream of "Taking the same of the Society" was realised, with the decision to adopt the full Jesuit Constitutions and the name Congregation of Jesus.

Following on from her retirement from her role as Provincial Bursar, Christina became Province Archivist in succession to Sister Gregory Kirkus, whilst also being a member of the Provincial Council. It was during her years as archivist that she devoted herself with her usual energy to a more intense study of Mary Ward and in particular to the earliest biography of Mary Ward – what we know as the Briefe Relation -written by Mary Poyntz, one of Mary Ward's first companions – together with other significant writings of Mary Ward. Her love of her subject and her scholarship shine through the 2008 publication that was the fruit of these labours – "Mary Ward 1585-1645", published under the auspices of the Catholic Record Society, of which Christina was a devoted and, again, much valued member.

It was while Christina was at this stage of her life that, in 2011, the CJ held the General Congregation at which I was elected as General Superior. Having arrived in Rome in early 2012, it was not long before I realised that the workings of the Italian financial system were little short of opaque as far as I and my companions on the team were concerned.

One day, when I was even more flummoxed than usual, I rang Christina to seek her advice on something – well, that was what I intended at the outset of the call, but about halfway through, the Holy Spirit turned up and I found myself inviting Christina to take on the office of General Bursar for a transition period, part-time in Rome and part-time in York, and to use her gifts and experience to put the financial affairs of the Generalate on a more sure footing. Christina took to her new role and our Generalate community like a duck to water and took great delight in realising and telling me that she was invited to this ministry at exactly the same age, 84, as Frances Bedingfield, foundress of this house, was summoned to Munich by the then General Superior, Anna Barbara Babthorpe, a symmetry which greatly pleased Christina. An early part of her new ministry was to help with the appointment of the first lay person to work in the Generalate finance office in support of the General Bursar. I know that Christina would want me to say here how much she valued the support and eventually friendship of Giovanna Pisano, who was appointed to the role and with whom Christina worked happily and harmoniously for the three and a half years or so of her time as General Bursar – a friendship that led to Giovanna and her family coming to visit Christina during her time here in St Joseph's, bringing her much joy at a point when she was still able to welcome and enjoy them. By the time Christina's time in office ended, at the end of 2015, she and Giovanna had completely transformed the workings of the Generalate finance office, such that her successor, Sister Lucia Boașa, was able to take on the office of General Bursar with a smooth transition and minimum difficulties. Lucia remembers that Christina was, and I quote, "a blessing in my life, a light that illuminated my path in my new mission" …

On her retirement from being General Bursar, Christina returned to her beloved archives, but as time went on her health began to deteriorate and it was time to move to St Joseph's, where she spent the last years of her life in the wonderful care of Philippa and her team. I think I am not alone in thinking that, despite, or even possibly because of, increasing physical and mental infirmity, this was one of the happiest periods of Christina's life. We saw her discover a gentleness and frequent smile that had sometimes eluded her earlier in her life. And so she slipped quietly back to God in the early evening of 13 August, with one of her longstanding companions in the CJ, Mary Ann, by her side.

I mentioned Frances Bedingfield, one of Christina's heroines earlier, and also Sr Gregory Kirkus, whom she also greatly loved and admired. I would like to end this appreciation of Christina's life and legacy with the words that Sr Gregory wrote in her mini biography of Frances Bedingfield and which, in my view applied equally to Christina, as I wrote in her letter of appointment as General Bursar in July 2012. Sr Gregory wrote that:

"Frances' last gift to the Institute was the exercise of her wisdom, experience and virtue in the service of the Institute."

I am certain that both Mary Ward and Frances Bedingfield, together with Christina's family, greeted her with open arms when she joined them on the 13th of August, united in saying "well done, good and faithful servant". Thank you, Christina, from us all, for the exercise of <u>your</u> wisdom, experience and virtue in the service of the Lord and of the Institute these 67 years…

Jesus say Amen