



*From the Acorn to the Oak*  
*Celebrating the Brigidine Story*

*Rita Minehan csb*



## **Introduction**

I was invited to share the Brigidine Story “From the Acorn to the Oak” with the Brigidine Sisters in the Irish-UK Province in July 2006, in preparation for the Brigidine Bicentenary in 2007. This was the beginning of “a world tour” with the story. I’ve been privileged to share it with the Sisters and Associates in the US Region, and the Sisters and their co-workers in the Victorian and New South Wales Provinces in Australia. A shorter version of the story has been shared in parishes in Tullow, Mountrath, Abbeyleix, Paulstown, Kildare, Ballyboden, Finglas, Denbigh and Slough. The story was slightly adapted to include a little local history in each location. The story has been shared with teachers and students in Denbigh, Wales; in Indooroopilly, Queensland; in St Ives, NSW; in Killester and Mentone, Victoria.

A great number of people around the world have been drawn into the Brigidine Story over the past two hundred years. Sharing the story during the bicentenary year was a very meaningful and enriching experience.

Rita Minehan csb Finglas, Dublin 2009

## **Acknowledgements**

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Cover photo taken by Brendan Kealy.

# *Celebrating the Brigidine Story*

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# *Celebrating the Brigidine Story*

## *Chapter 1. Preparing the Soil*

The story goes that .....

Daniel Delany was the elder of two sons born to Daniel and Elizabeth Delany (nee Fitzpatrick) in the townland of Paddock, in the County of Laois, in the Diocese of Ossory, in the year 1747.



The Delany and Fitzpatrick families were wealthy farmers, unlike the majority of Catholic families of the time. They were tenants on the Castlecoote Estate.



**Remains of Daniel Delany's home in Paddock, County Laois**

The Delany family experienced huge loss and turmoil in its early years. Mr Delany died when the two boys were very young, and tragedy was to strike again when John, the second son, died. That must have had a devastating and traumatic effect on little Daniel and his mother.

Life around them was in turmoil too. The Penal Laws were in full force. Catholics were denied human and religious freedom. Catholic schools were outlawed. Severe penalties were inflicted on Catholic parents who attempted to procure Catholic education for their children at home or abroad. Only Protestant schools were lawful and most of these were proselytising institutions. The Catholic population persistently refused to send their children to these schools.

The Hedge Schools emerged to fill the void. Wandering Catholic school masters, often with a price on their heads, kept the lamp of learning burning in Ireland. They conducted classes in wretched huts built of sods in the ditches; they had neither door,



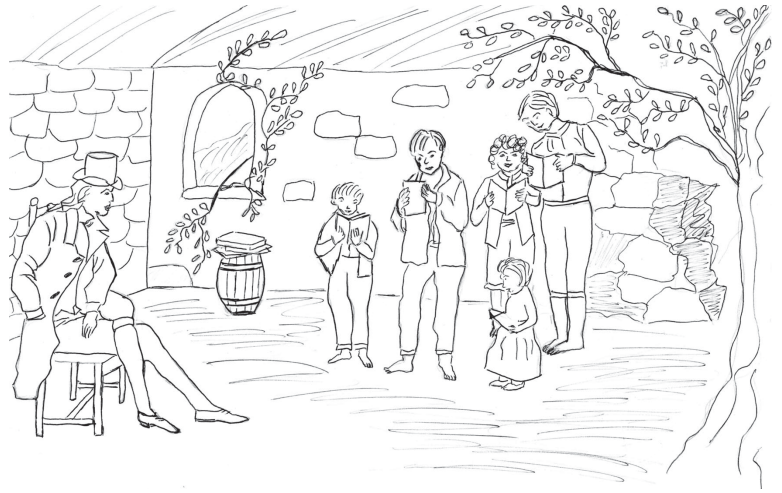


nor window nor chimney. To quote one writer “*They were fully attended in summer, half empty in spring and harvest; they were utterly deserted in winter.*”

## Early Formation

Daniel Delany’s earliest education took place in a hedge school in Briosclagh near his home. When Mrs Delany received the offer of a more secure education for her son, she sent Daniel to live in Mountrath with her two sisters – the Misses Fitzpatrick who had a shop in the town. One of his aunts was a fairly well-educated woman and she took charge of Daniel’s education and taught him everything she knew.

The Delany and Fitzpatrick families were highly respected amongst their Protestant neighbours. It would seem that one branch of the Fitzpatrick family was Protestant. It was a young Protestant boy who gave Daniel his first Latin grammar and secretly gave him some lessons in Latin. It was the beginning of a classical education.



We have the well-known anecdote about Daniel and “the beggar man” he met in the town. The man was hungry and miserable and begged Daniel for food so Daniel took him home to his aunts who weren’t too pleased with his visitor. Daniel pleaded for food. The aunt relented and gave the man a good meal.

The story goes on to say that when he had finished the meal, he gave thanks to God and then crossing the floor placed his hands on Daniel’s head and proclaimed, “*This head will one day wear a mitre.*”

The two aunts lost no time in telling Mrs Delany what the man had said! Even at an early age we can see traits and qualities in Daniel that he was to portray during his later life. Many years lay between the prophecy of that poor man and its fulfilment.



The pastor of Mountrath at that time was Fr Denis Lalor. He lived in disguise, in a mud-hut, in a bog nearby. He instructed Daniel in the faith. The only place of Catholic worship in the town was a small roughly thatched house, built on a sand-bank by the White Horse, a tributary of the river Nore. This is close to the present day parish church in Mountrath.

It was in that little chapel on the sand-bank that Daniel received his First Holy Communion when he was about ten years old. We are told in the annals that he used to open and lock the chapel, help when it got flooded and prepare the table for Sunday Mass. He would also gather other boys of his own age, and teach them hymns. In 1763, at the age of sixteen, Daniel Delany decided he wanted to be a priest. With the help of a good Protestant friend he was smuggled out of the country to a college in Paris to begin his studies for the priesthood. (One could say he was not too unlike many of the asylum seekers who come to our shores today seeking safety and a better life).

### **Education for the Priesthood in Paris**

We know very little about his time in Paris. The records in most of the colleges were destroyed during the French Revolution. He was ordained, probably at the end of 1770.

**Centre Cultural Irlandais, Paris, formerly Collège des Lombards where Daniel Delany studied**



We know he remained attached to the teaching staff of one of the great Colleges in Paris for about seven years and tradition associates him with St Omer.

### **St Omer's College**

James Warren Doyle (J.K.L.), \* who was later to become Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, was personally acquainted with Daniel and tells us that Daniel showed “*evidence of rare endowments and brilliant talents*” while studying and lecturing in Paris.

\* Dr Doyle adopted the initials J.K.L. - James, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin

When Daniel heard that the Penal Laws had relaxed somewhat he decided to return to Ireland, but he came in disguise. One can only imagine the joy in the Delany and Fitzpatrick households. They hadn't seen him for fourteen years. Fear probably tempered their joy as priests were still outlawed.

### **Daniel returns to an Ireland of poverty and illiteracy**

Early Brigidine writings tell us that Daniel was shocked at the conditions that still prevailed in Ireland. Destitution, violence, lawlessness and crime were rampant throughout the country. There was widespread agrarian unrest as millions of landless poor struggled for the rights and privileges of practical ownership.

The little sand-bank chapel in Mountrath stood in stark contrast to the splendour of Parisian church buildings and the solemnity of church devotions. Daniel had left Ireland at an early age and had developed into "a dignified and cultured ecclesiastic." He returned to Ireland as a man of charm and good company. He was a brilliant conversationalist with a baroque-style of letter-writing. The culture shock, on his return to Ireland, was almost too much for Daniel. He would have returned to France almost immediately had it not been for his mother's pleading with him to stay in Ireland, at least while she was still alive. His mother lived for four years after her son's return.

Daniel remained in Mountrath for a few months after his homecoming. He was then appointed as curate to Tullow at the end of 1777. The Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, Bishop Keefe, resided in Tullow at that time.

The social and political conditions that prevailed in Tullow were harsh and intimidating.

Crime, violence and vice flourished in Tullow and surrounding areas. Excessive drinking and faction-fighting were commonplace occurrences. The Whiteboys\* were active in Tullow. Tullow was also a focal point for the Bible Societies. It was a deeply sectarian town. The spirits of the people were broken and they were reduced to hopelessness and helplessness. Few had even a vestige of education.



\* Whiteboys were members of small illegal, largely Catholic, peasant bands in 18th century Ireland. First organized in 1759 in protest against the large-scale enclosure of common lands and other causes of agrarian distress, they were so called because on their nocturnal raids they often wore white disguises.



## The young priest confronts the social ills of the day

Daniel Delany, at the age of 30, rose to the challenge that confronted him. He tried sermons and house-to-house visitation. He enlisted the help of the wives and mothers in trying to remedy some of the deplorable behaviour in the parish. He didn't meet with much success, so turned his attention to the youth. He gathered some children and started a choir, teaching them to sing at Mass and at Vespers. From hymn singing he progressed to prayer and religious instruction. He taught the more gifted to play the whistle and flute and started an amateur band. He initiated catechetical classes for first communicants and those preparing for confirmation. Music and singing attracted both children and adults to the chapel. The numbers for instruction grew and the beginnings of a Sunday School system took shape in the ramshackle parish church behind Mill Street. As the youth learned to sing and read, they acquired a new sense of dignity and classes were formed. The numbers increased so much that Daniel Delany had to enlist the help of young women and men whom he trained with great care. Before long, students of all ages, both single and married, were attending Sunday school. The parish of Tullow was slowly being transformed.



It's interesting to read an account of what happened in the Sunday Schools: *"At an early hour every Sunday crowds would make their way to the parish chapel. At a given signal they knelt and sang 'O Salutaris Hostia', and then 'Veni Creator' for light and grace. Standing, they sang the hymn of the season (in English) and this was followed by morning prayer which all recited together. A reflection from Challoner's Meditation followed for an hour. Instruction in classes followed until noon when Mass was offered. At 2.00 p.m. classes were resumed and at 4.00 p.m. all sang Vespers together before returning home."*

## Journey from Priest to Bishop

Daniel Delany was curate for only six years when he was appointed coadjutor to Bishop Keefe in 1783. The ageing bishop was trying to secure a lease to build a diocesan College in Carlow and he was successful in 1786. Bishop Keefe urged Rome to give him Daniel Delany as his assistant. In his letter to Rome he mentions Daniel's *"blameless life and pastoral vigilance"* and states that *"he preached to great effect and with such distinction that even Protestants have flocked to hear him...he is humbly pious and adorned with all the virtues which the Apostle requires in a bishop."*

One of Daniel Delany's first acts as coadjutor bishop was to establish the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament in Tullow in 1783. Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, which he



had imbibed in France, was the ruling passion of Daniel's life. He saw the Confraternity as a means of spiritual formation. In 1784 he surprised everyone, and shocked many, when



he announced a public procession through the town of Tullow on the feast of Corpus Christi. No such display of "Popery" had been seen in Tullow for at least a century. Hundreds flocked from all over the country to the procession. Other processions gradually became widespread throughout the diocese.

He also took a decision to ring the Angelus Bell which had been silent for over a century. This caused consternation. The aged Bishop Keefe was to exclaim on many occasions *"What! This young hothead will get us all into trouble."*

### **Pastoral Plan for his Diocese**

Daniel Delany established the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in 1785. These acts all depict Daniel Delany's courage and zeal. Bishop Keefe died in 1787 just as the building of Carlow College began. Bishop Delany had the responsibility of administering a diocese of 43 parishes and attending to Carlow College. He is credited as co-founder with Bishop Keefe of the first third-level Catholic College in Ireland. Carlow College was originally intended for the education of Catholic lay men, but with the advent of the French Revolution it was used as a seminary.

#### **Right: Carlow College**



Meanwhile Daniel Delany introduced systematic Sunday School catechesis to the diocese of Kildare and Leighlin. He needed to organise and train helpers and volunteers to assist him. He began to train catechists from both Confraternities. He had First Communion schools, Confirmation schools, Reading schools and also started a circulating library. As time went on, the Sunday instruction was extended to weekdays, to evening schools, and even

home instruction. He had an academy of learning in operation in Tullow. The dilemma for him and the crux of the system was to provide the number and the quality of teachers he needed, especially if he were to extend Sunday School to different areas of the diocese. The system was voluntary, the work unpaid and the duties far from light.

Daniel Delany was to lament in later years that though he had personally trained “an almost infinite number,” some married, others died or left the parish, and many fell away.

Daniel Delany also saw the urgent need for secular as well as religious education. We know that in 1788, the year he was appointed bishop, he visited the South Presentation Convent in Cork with the purpose of inviting Nano Nagle’s Presentation Sisters to Tullow. There were two difficulties. Nano Nagle didn’t have sisters to spare and secondly, Daniel Delany wanted education for the rich and poor in his parish. He also envisaged both day and boarding schools. The Presentation apostolate was exclusively for the children of the poor.

### **Repeal of the Penal Laws**

That visit may have sown new seeds in Daniel Delany’s mind. Many of the Penal Laws were repealed in the last decade of the 18th Century. Catholics were permitted to bequeath and inherit lands and to open schools. Daniel’s vision of providing secular as well as religious education for his people, “rich and poor alike,” impelled him to explore other possibilities.

As always, he found the answer to his difficulties in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

**Photo of Daniel Delany’s monstrance, now on display in the Delany museum, Tullow.**



The only way forward was to establish Religious Congregations that would meet the spiritual and educational needs of his people. It took almost nineteen years (1788-1807) of struggle and patience before he could realise this dream.

The rebellion of 1798 and its aftermath brought huge turmoil and destruction in its wake. Brigidine tradition holds that Fr John Murphy\* visited Bishop Delany on the eve of his capture.

Bishop Delany had to endure endless difficulties in acquiring sites and leases in perpetuity from Protestant landlords. He took a risk in Tullow and went ahead with plans to build a church and convent on the promise of a lease. Despite all the obstacles and difficulties in his pathway over those nineteen years, Daniel Delany steadfastly kept his dream alive.

The time, however, came to realise his dream. The ground was prepared, the soil was ready. It was time to sow the acorn.



\* Fr John Murphy was one of the leaders of the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and was executed by British soldiers. His statue stands in the Tullow market square.



## Tullow in 1910



Tullow Square

Bridge Street



Brigidine  
Convent



# *Celebrating the Brigidine Story*

## *Chapter 2. Sowing the Acorn*

And the story continues...



The year was 1807. It was La Fheile Bride, St Brigid's Day.



After a long penal winter signs of new life emerged in the Irish church. Six women gathered in Tullow in response to an invitation from Bishop Delany to establish the Sisters of St Brigid. They were Eleanor Tallon, Bridget Brien, Judith Whelan, Margaret Kinsella, Eleanor Dawson and Catherine Doyle.

**Tableau of the first six sisters. Narrator: Rita Minehan**

These six women were well known to each other; all were natives of Tullow and the surrounding parishes of Ardattin and Clonmore. They were members of both confraternities and were trained as catechists by Daniel in his Sunday Schools. These women had taken permanent vows of chastity some years before 1807. They ranged in age from twenty-five to forty-eight. Daniel Delany was waiting to greet them that morning and to welcome them to the simple house he had prepared for them. He blessed the house, celebrated Mass, gave Benediction and then withdrew. They had spent almost the whole of the preceding day and night in prayer.

Bishop Delany chose St Brigid as the patroness of the congregation, thereby linking it to the spiritual heritage of St Brigid, Patroness of Ireland. He insisted that he was not founding a new congregation but rather re-founding the Order of St. Brigid of Kildare which had existed in Ireland from the fifth to the sixteenth century when the monasteries were suppressed.







Take a moment to ponder and imagine what it might have been like for those six women on that first day: feelings of loneliness and sadness at leaving family and friends; feelings of anxiety and fear; a sense of newness and expectancy at what lay ahead; they had no role models; they had never met a nun. They were leaving home and yet not leaving Tullow. There must have been a huge sense of mystery and wonder about it all.

Daniel Delany returned to the Sisters that afternoon and gave them guidelines. He asked them:

**To perform all their actions for the love of God**

**To live together so united as to have one heart and one soul in God.**

**To begin everyday with the same earnestness in God's service as they had on that first day.**

He cautioned against sloth, performing duties through routine and any undercurrent group spirit as a source of discord.

He named Eleanor Tallon as superior and gave them religious names (notice the names of the great women of the Church: Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Clare of Assisi, Brigid of Kildare and the only man, Frances de Sales) There is a story of Judith asking for the name "Rose" but he gave her Brigid instead. Was he testing her resolve and spirit even on that first day?

He gave them a copy of the rule of St Augustine and the Directory of the Visitation Order written by Francis de Sales. He emphasised that love was to be the motivating factor for every action: *"Without love it is all labour in vain. Do everything in a spirit of love and you will not arrive at journey's end with empty hands."* He continually quoted from the letters of St John in his early writings. He also had his own hand-written rule, based on the rule of St. Augustine. The title page reads: *Sisters of St. Brigid, Virgin, Abbess of Kildare, Patroness of Ireland.* The rule was quite austere. The Sisters followed an horarium that was not for the faint-hearted - rising at 5.00 am, and to bed by 10.00 pm.



The early days of this pioneer group of six must have been painful and challenging. Within one month the group was reduced to four. Daniel Delany advised Eleanor Tallon, whom he had appointed as superior, to return to her home. He also asked Margaret Kinsella to return to her family. He believed that they were too attached to their families to be able to live Religious Life. What a shock that must have been for the little group. It was truly a fragile beginning. He then appointed Eleanor Dawson, the youngest, as superior.

Yet amidst this turmoil in their lives, the records tell us that they opened a day school almost immediately. These classes, for want of school rooms, were held in the parish church. The rich and poor children of the parish flocked to the school to gain education.

During those early days Daniel Delany brought an oak-sapling from Kildare and planted it in the convent grounds in Tullow. When he received the lease for the convent ground there was a clause inserted stating that no tree-planting should take place without the landlord's permission. The Brigidine Annals record that on the day Bishop Delany and the Sisters gathered to plant the oak from Kildare, the landlord walked into the convent grounds unannounced. "What! Planting trees, Sir!" he exclaimed. "With your permission" answered the Bishop, and then added smilingly, "We have presumed the permission." The Annals go

on to say that the landlord then exited as unceremoniously as he had entered and nothing more was heard about the matter.



**The little oak-sapling took root in Tullow and out of it grew and flourished the far spreading tree of the Brigidine Congregation.**

July 1807 must have raised the spirits and hearts of the remaining four Sisters. Margaret Kinsella returned to re-join the group within five months of her departure and brought three postulants with her. Two of the postulants did not persevere owing to ill health and the third was a Mary Fitzpatrick from Maryborough/Portlaoise. She was nineteen years old, bright, promising and gifted. She was to become in Margaret Mary Dunne's words "a pillar of the institute."

One very interesting feature about the setting up of the Tullow community was the influence of Judith Wogan-Browne on the life of the Brigidine Congregation. She came from a

privileged family background, living in the mansion of Castlebrowne, standing on the estate of Clongowes Wood. Judith was educated with the Benedictines in Ypres where she had two aunts in the community. When she returned to Ireland in the 1780s she contacted Daniel Delany. She wanted to live “a useful and purposeful life away from the social life in Castlebrowne.” Judith decided to live in Tullow so as to be under the guidance of Bishop Delany, her spiritual director and friend. She was instrumental in getting the lease for the Tullow church and convent through her contact with Mrs Doyne, the wife of the local landlord.

Bishop Delany invited her to train the early Brigidines in religious and secular education. She taught the Sisters not just the basics of literacy; as time passed she also introduced them to European languages. Her tuition extended to music and needlecraft as well as courtesy and etiquette. In the early stages she despaired of teaching them anything in the area of secular subjects.

**Judith Wogan-Browne’s tapestry, now hanging in the Delany Museum Tullow**



On voicing her despair to Bishop Delany she got this very interesting and curt reply. “*You enjoyed the advantages of an education that these women never got. If they had them at your age they might have profited as much or more. Take them quietly, little by little. Rome was not built in a day.*” Miss Browne, we are told, “resumed her task and never complained again.”

Judith was familiar with convent life and discipline from her days in Belgium. So we had a Belgian flair to our Brigidine beginnings. Judith never became a sister, but she played an extraordinary role in Brigidine history: she presided over community meetings and chapter of faults in the absence of the bishop. More about Judith later.

There was also a very strong French influence on our beginnings. Daniel, while in France, imbibed the spirituality of the time which was devotional in nature. He was in France at the time when Jansenism, as a movement, was strong. There is no doubt that its emphasis on the evil of the human body and on self-denial influenced the thinking of Daniel Delany. This was evident in the early Rule and its ascetical approach. Margaret Mary Dunne has a telling sentence in *Gleanings*: “*The Sisters persevered with great edification in this*



*austere and ascetical life which certainly included amongst other penances the use of the hair shirt and discipline.”*

Daniel Delany's ascetical tendencies were tempered by his devotion to St Francis de Sales which emphasised the joy of Christian existence, a gentler approach. Daniel certainly watched caringly over the founding sisters in their early years. His humour and humanity came through in an anecdote which told about a pious lady who approached him about a serious matter. She had been visiting friends whose windows gave a view of the Sisters at recreation. The ladies were shocked by the levity of the novices. Worse still the older Sisters had done nothing to prevent such behaviour. The Bishop asked if they had jumped over the wall. Surprised, she replied that the wall was too high for that to happen. “Well,” said Daniel, *“if at any time you see them jump over the wall please let me know, because that would be against their rule, and I could not allow it but until they jump the wall do not mind them.”* There were no further complaints from the lady.

Bishop Delany realised another dream on the second of February 1808 when he established his second religious congregation, the Brothers of St Patrick, the Patricians, to meet the needs of education for boys.

The Sisters suffered huge loss in their early years. Brigid Brien died in 1808 from a “tedious illness.” That must have caused much suffering to the little group. Brigid begged her mother to allow her sister Mary to join the group. Mary joined later and lived until 1849.



1808 brought three postulants to the group, a Catherine Neill from Tullow and two Delany sisters, Kate and Brigid from Ballyfin, Co Laois.

Seeing the community grow in numbers, Daniel undertook to build an extension forty feet long to the little house. The Patrician Brothers and locals built it and completed it in 1812. The oak-sapling was getting sturdier.

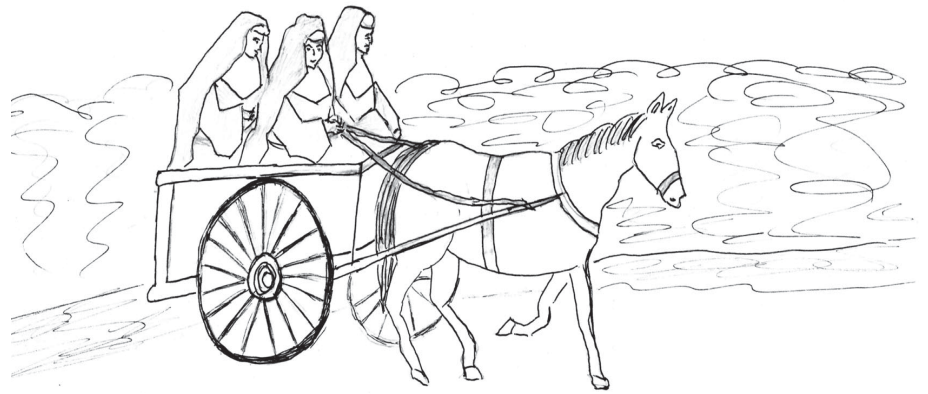
1809 was a great year for postulants - eight new postulants! Daniel Delany established his second Brigidine foundation in Mountrath on the eighteenth of April 1809, the Feast of St Lazerian. Years before, in 1792, as in Tullow, he had established Sunday Schools in Mountrath and had sent catechists from Tullow to conduct the schools. Mary Dawson, sister of Eleanor Dawson, led the group. She was an exceptional woman by all accounts. Mary died within a short time and the catechists had to be withdrawn. Daniel Delany had dreamt of religious foundations in Tullow and in Mountrath, where Orangeism was rampant, at much earlier dates than 1807 and 1809. Some historians contend that he also had a Brigidine revival in mind for Clonegal in the late 1790s.





The foundation in Mountrath had to wait until 1809. That year saw the maiden flight of the Brigidine Sisters. He looked to his pioneers for his new foundation. Eleanor Dawson was superior in Tullow. Brigid Brien died in 1808. Judith was very ill. He sent Margaret and Catherine, the remaining pioneers, and also Mary Fitzpatrick to Mountrath.

One can only imagine the historic take-off from the convent grounds, the tears tempered with excitement and loneliness. It took a horse and dray (cart) a good eight hours to cover the forty odd miles from Tullow to Mountrath. I can vividly remember the religion class



in Mountrath when Mother Oliver McNally told us about that journey. She told us they came on a palliasse (a feathered mattress). A number of us thought it was some kind of friendly ass! The mattress must have softened the bumps along the roads. Tradition records a heavy fall of snow and the sisters shivering with the cold.

However, from the annals we hear that they received a wonderful welcome to a “blazing fire, hot dinner and were received with great kindness by the people.” They were amazed to find Daniel there to greet them; he was on visitation of the diocese. He had warned Fr Duane PP to have their little house “well-aired” and partly fitted for them. He celebrated Mass, gave Benediction and also presented the same guidelines to the Sisters as he had given in Tullow. He appointed Margaret Kinsella as superior and Mary Fitzpatrick as Novice Mistress. He stayed in Mountrath for three weeks and made provision for a school building. Daniel was constantly interchanging Sisters between Tullow and Mountrath as he wished them to have “one heart and soul in God.”

The Synod of Tullow also took place in 1809, attended by Archbishops and twenty Bishops. Judith Whelan died the following year so within three years two of the pioneer Sisters had died, but the remaining Sisters didn’t let this huge loss engulf them. Postulants continued to come. Daniel Delany didn’t make it too easy for new entrants. We are told that the

Misses Lalor from Maryborough asked for admission to Tullow Novitiate. The Bishop instructed Margaret Kinsella, superior in Mountrath, to give them a true picture of the life they would embrace. He wrote to Margaret:

*“How are the Misses Lalor? How do they go on? And what are their present resolutions respecting their coming to Tullow? I request that you will take an opportunity of informing them very fully, between ourselves, of every difficulty they will have to encounter in this project: the hard living, early rising, poor and gross fare, meat - and that often not the best or most delicate - only twice a week; and no tea, save on extraordinary occasions, the fasts and constant application to work and prayer, perfect obedience and renunciation of their own will. Woods (Brother Francis) tells me he is quite persuaded from the plentiful and comfortable manner in which they live at home that they could never put up with the kind of life practiced in our convent here.”*

Brother Francis was mistaken. The two Lalors, Mary Anne and Brigid, grandnieces of Fr Lalor, Mountrath, were to become leading members of the communities in Tullow and Mountrath. Tradition holds that they walked to Tullow from Ballyfin.

The Bishop's constant workload was taking its toll on his health. Despite his ill health JKL (Bishop Doyle) could still say of him in 1813, *“I have seldom seen a figure so striking. I listened to him for about an hour, left him with regret, and did not cease to think of him all the way home.”*

Daniel's house was in need of repair and Eleanor invited him to live in the Convent while the work was in progress. The community room was prepared for him and he was provided with his own bed and furniture. He moved into the convent about mid June 1813. He celebrated Mass in his room almost every day, and the priests of the diocese were constantly with him as he enquired about the affairs of the diocese. In December 1813, he ordained Brother Clancy, a Patrician Brother, in the convent community room and he became chaplain to both nuns and brothers.

Daniel Delany feared he would be unable to carry the monstrance in the procession on the feast of Corpus Christi in 1814. He did so, but from then onwards he grew rapidly weaker. He was visited by the Bishops of Cork and Ossory, and the clergy were at his bedside night and day. He sent to Mountrath for Mary Fitzpatrick. On the evening of the eight July he was visited by his friend Dr Troy, Archbishop of Dublin.

Mary Fitzpatrick, seeing a great change in him, asked for his blessing. He blessed her in the most solemn manner; she asked for words of consolation for her community and he said *“Tell them from me to love and serve God and to live together in peace and charity.”*

All the Sisters and Brothers present asked for his blessing. He blessed them and said *“Walk in the path I pointed out to you”* and added, *“I place you all under the protection of Almighty God.”*

The clergy, some of the parishioners and Miss Browne asked for his blessing; his struggle between life and death continued until 2.00am. He died calmly as Mass was being celebrated in his room. It was 9th July 1814, the 67th year of his age and the 31st of his episcopate. Afterwards, all withdrew except the sisters, who were left to share their feelings together. Their grief was great. They had lost their spiritual father at such an early stage of their formation and growth as a religious group.



Many tributes were paid to Bishop Daniel Delany. The following is an extract from Bishop Doyle (JKL):

“He rendered virtue attractive and vice abhorrent. This bishop laboured unceasingly to rebuild chapels, to increase the number of clergy, to promote instruction by means of schools, confraternities and the circulation of useful books. He built and endowed two convents of nuns and laid the foundations of two monasteries of men, which he partially endowed. His labours were unceasing.”

Ten years after Daniel Delany’s death more than eleven hundred people were receiving instruction from one hundred and twenty nine teachers in Tullow parish every Sunday.

(Confirmed by the Commissioners of Education Inquiry in 1824)



## *Celebrating the Brigidine Story*

### *Chapter 3. Nurturing the Roots*

*And the story continues...*



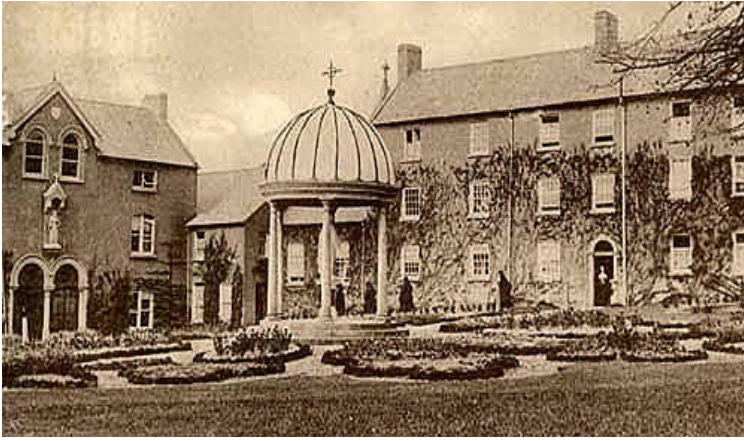
The Sisters were suddenly on their own within eight years of their foundation. In those early years they barely had the necessities of life as they eked out a survival existence, principally by the work of their hands. Life around them in the mud cabins was also very primitive. The Sisters showed a true pioneering spirit in facing the challenges that confronted them.



Within a year of Daniel Delany's death, the Sisters agreed to take charge of orphans from Dublin. The orphans were sent to Tullow where they lived with families on a 'boarded out' system. For a period of 30 years these children were a Brigidine concern. When Margaret Aylward made care of orphans her apostolate, the Brigidines allowed her to use their distinctive design including St. Brigid and children.

Mary Anne Lalor (one of the Misses Lalors) was appointed superior in Tullow in 1818 and, apart from a brief illness, she was superior for twenty-two years. She handed over the Brigidine tradition intact. "Being a living link with the founder for more than three generations, in her was preserved the spirit of the institute." Pupils in Tullow continued to grow in numbers. The early Sisters only had a modicum of education and it took them years to overcome their illiteracy. Under Mary Anne's capable management, the schools flourished and many educational advances were made. She went to the Presentation Convent in Carlow to become acquainted with the Lancastrian system of education and then set it in motion in Tullow.

As the numbers of pupils increased they began a new school building in 1824, a two-storey building at a cost of £600. Mary Anne and the sisters started a button industry with the pupils; the covering of button moulds would help defray the cost of the building. In 1826 alone they raised the princely sum of £61. The Sisters took a decision in the late 1820s to open a boarding school in Tullow when their new school building would be complete. JKL who was then bishop, would only sanction the decision if Judith Wogan Browne was agreeable to it. Judith refused to allow the Sisters to proceed. The Sisters



first of their kind established in Ireland since the Penal Days. Pupils flocked from all parts to these schools, with the result that considerable additions had to be made to both schools. Boarding Schools continued to play a significant role throughout the Brigidine Congregation even when the Congregation spread to new lands.

persisted over many years and one of the last acts of Mary Anne's administration was the establishment of a boarding school in Tullow in 1837. One was also established in Mountrath the same year.

These boarding schools, with the exception of a few in Cork and Galway, had the unique privilege of being the



**Tullow 1910**

The Sisters were faced with a huge dilemma in 1826. JKL was anxious to have the Rule approved in Rome and he considered it would be well to graft it to the Presentation Constitutions. At the same time, he gave the Sisters their first religious habit. Instead of giving the Sisters a distinctive dress, as Brigidines, he gave them the dress of the Presentation Sisters which must have caused great distress. The Sisters accepted the habit, but they respectfully objected to the Bishop's intentions regarding the Presentation Constitutions. It was fortunate that Mary Anne in Tullow and Mary Fitzpatrick in Mountrath, two strong and gifted women, were at the helm. They knew the Founder's wishes with regard to the Rule he gave them. This was a defining time in terms of consolidating Brigidine Identity.

The Brigidines were blessed to receive many gifted educationalists as postulants. Catherine McAuliffe, a Cork woman, entered in 1828 at the age of thirty seven. Her arrival was hailed as "the gift of an educated lady of mature years." Her interest in education and in the schools was unrelenting. She succeeded Mary Anne as superior in Tullow and communicated constantly with Mary Fitzpatrick in Mountrath. Her letters were cheerful and witty and well worth a read. She ensured that the letter of the law didn't quench its spirit and made a major contribution to the Congregation in the work and energy she put into the revision of the Constitutions before they were presented to Rome for approval. It would seem that she was still advocating for the rights and status of an independent and self-governed Brigidine Congregation as late as the 1840s.

Catherine Bunny (nee McEvoy), a widow, joined in 1849. She was a splendid performer, playing the organ, piano and harp. She established and maintained a high standard of education in the music department of Tullow Convent School. Many musical compositions were to her credit. On the literary side she translated into English entire books from French spiritual writers. These treasured manuscripts still exist.

Aloysius Byrne had a special aptitude for languages. She made a study of French, Italian, Latin and Irish, all of which she taught in the boarding school. German was on the curriculum from the 1850s onwards. Here were extremely talented and gifted women who would never have had access to a third level institution.

The Sisters, we are told, earned such a reputation for their system of religious and secular education as attracted a great influx of young ladies from all parts of Ireland. It is interesting to note that the Sisters were referred to as “Miss.”

Meanwhile, the Sisters in Mountrath showed a courageous and risk-taking spirit in those early years following Daniel Delany’s death. Mary Fitzpatrick (Joseph) was the only one of the three pioneers who continued to live her entire religious life in Mountrath, first as Mistress of Novices in 1809 and then as superior. She was relieved from office for a short time by Eleanor Dawson. There was a constant flow of correspondence between Daniel and Mary. Two letters were discovered in the Diocesan archives in the 1990s. These letters show that Daniel was very much at ease in the art of spiritual direction. The Brigidine letter-file between Daniel and Mary was given on loan to Cardinal Moran of Sydney at his request. To date it has not been returned and there is no record of such in the Sydney diocesan archives.

In 1823 the parish priest of Roscrea, Fr James O’Shaughnessy, went to Mountrath and persuaded the sisters to establish a Brigidine community in Roscrea. Two professed nuns and a novice from Mountrath went to Roscrea to found the first convent for women in the Killaloe diocese since the Reformation. They conducted schools in the town. An amazing story followed. They existed as a Brigidine Community for nineteen years and received a number of postulants including Bishop Kennedy’s niece. Their story had both a sad and a happy ending. This little group of sixteen was instrumental in bringing the Society of the Sacred Heart to Ireland, to Roscrea, in 1842. There is no reference to Roscrea in the Mountrath Annals. Written on the margins of the profession book are the words “two Sisters expelled by Bishop (JKL) for insubordination.”

It was only in 1997, in a manuscript found in Saffron Walden Parish among the papers of Fr Dobson, Roscrea, that it was discovered that the two Delany sisters (Kate and Brigid from Ballyfin) went to Roscrea and were dismissed by Dr. Doyle for insubordination in 1823. This cost the community much heartache as evidenced in letters from the Bishop to



Mary Fitzpatrick. It's interesting that JKL disbanded the Clonegal group in 1824. What was going on? Were they just being brought back into line! What might yet be discovered?

A priest from the Cashel diocese, who has edited a history of the parish of Cashel, informs us of another attempted foundation in our Brigidine history:

*In 1825-26, Dean Ryan petitioned Archbishop Laffan for a religious community to educate the poor girls of the town and district of Cashel. In 1826-27 a convent was built for the Brigidine Sisters. He had a fine three storey building erected, the centre section of the present convent in Cashel. He had also secured the services of three ladies to assist, whenever the sisters should come. A community of Brigidine Sisters took up residence in 1827. The sisters were overwhelmed by the poverty of the people and after two years withdrew.*

From which house did they go to Cashel? From Mountrath? There is no mention of this in any of the annals.

The missionary spirit of the Mountrath community was portrayed yet again in a heading in the Mountrath annals in 1851 - "Sisters leave for America." Two Sisters, Angela McKey, choir sister, and Mary Ann Foran, lay Sister, went to America. They must have taken a girl named Mary Delany with them. Bishop Haly strictly forbade the superior in Mountrath to give them the habit or rule book when leaving. Research indicates that the sisters received postulants, taught in a few different states in the U.S. but had to disband eighteen years later when their convent was burned to the ground.\* It is known that two of this Brigidine group made an important educational contribution to the Benedictines in Erie when they joined that Order in the 1860s. Mary Delany returned to Ireland as Sr. Brigid but Bishop Lynch would not allow the Tullow community to give her residence in Tullow. She died as a Brigidine and is buried in a Presentation graveyard in Cork. Mary Fitzpatrick (Joseph) lived through all this and witnessed the departure of the sisters to Kenosha, Wisconsin in 1851. She died in 1853, aged sixty-four years.

Meanwhile, what was happening to Judith Wogan Browne?

Bishop Delany, in his will, entrusted Miss Browne with total financial responsibility for dispensing all of his own estate. Her name preceded the Sisters "probably for reasons of security." Judith certainly held an anomalous position in Brigidine history, attending community meetings and presiding over chapter of faults in the absence of the Bishop.

\* Mary Teresa Cullen csb (US Region) is undertaking research in this area.

Mary O’Riordan contends that her position was anomalous in the history of all female congregations. Despite the influence she had, she was never accorded the title of Foundress; this was due to a canonical connotation of the term. Her authority didn’t lessen with the passage of the years. The power and authority vested in Judith Wogan Browne was upheld by each succeeding Bishop. Judith made an invaluable contribution to our Brigidine beginnings. However, “there is no denying the drawbacks (especially after Daniel Delany’s death) of a non-member of the community making all the vital decisions and having full control of the purse-strings to boot.” Less than seven years after Daniel Delany’s death, Miss Browne’s health deteriorated which necessitated her sleeping in the convent.

The 1820s were turbulent years for her and she made a decision to sell her house in Tullow and live in Ranelagh, Dublin. She lived there for twelve years and despite the distance, she continued her financial administration on behalf of the sisters. She wrote to Bishop Haly in 1840 for permission to return to Tullow with a view to lodging in the convent and the refectory was allocated to her.

She lived for eight years after her return to Tullow. Anne Doyle, “her lady in waiting,” entered in Tullow in 1842. Judith died in 1848 at the age of 93 (some records suggest 98). Brigidine records describe her as “a saintly and devout daughter of the church.” Will there be other Judiths with us in the future?



So to conclude the consolidation phase of our  
congregation we look again briefly at our  
foremothers in Brigidine history:

Eleanor Tallon left the founding sisters within one month  
and did not return.

Brigid Brien died in 1808.

Judith Whelan died in 1810.

Margaret Kinsella went to Mountrath as superior of the pioneer group.

She died in Tullow in 1835 at the age of 86.

Eleanor Dawson was superior in Tullow and later in Mountrath.

She lived there until her death in 1841 at the age of 64.

There is a story of her doing the laundry for the 'gentry' in the area in her later  
years so she could gather money for a silver chalice.

This chalice is on display in the Heritage Centre in Abbeylisk.

Catherine Doyle was the only pioneer to witness the official  
'expansionary phase' of the congregation.

She died in Mountrath at the age of 73.

These are the women we have come from, our foremothers in  
Brigidine history.



## *Celebrating the Brigidine Story*

### *Chapter 4. Branching out / Sprouting new acorns*

*And the story continues...*



The oak-sapling in Tullow continued to push its roots down deeper into the earth and the day came when it was ready to give life to new branches.

It was likewise with the Congregation. Having had space and time to grow deeper into our Brigidine charism and identity, we could then move into a time of new growth and new Brigidine branches.

The Congregation received provisional approval from Rome in 1845. Each community was autonomous until amalgamation in 1889. Formal approval came in 1907. The expansion of our congregation - some of the new shoots from the oak - were to Abbeylaxfield 1842, Goresbridge 1858, Paulstown 1874 and Ballyroan 1877.

It would be impossible to mention all the foundations by name. We reverence all of them and their stories, whether or not they are still in existence. The Brigidine tree kept expanding. The last quarter of the nineteenth century was a momentous time in Brigidine history.

In 1883, Bishop Murray of Maitland, New South Wales, Australia, requested help from the Brigidines to conduct schools in his diocese. The sisters in Mountrath were the first to respond. The parish priest in Mountrath at that time was Fr Phelan who had worked in the Maitland diocese for some years. He spoke to the community and advised them as to what might lie ahead. Sixteen sisters volunteered for the mission to Australia. A brave group of six missionaries left home and country for Coonamble in 1883. They were John Synan, Gertrude Banahan, De Sales Maher, Stanislaus Hayden, Catherine Bergin and Ignatius Fitzpatrick.

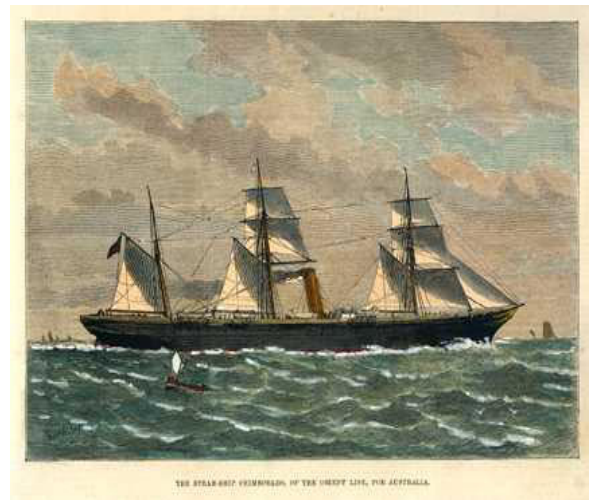
A letter, with a humorous tone, written to the Bishop by the superior in Mountrath has been preserved:

*My Lord, thank God our good old bishop has consented at last to let us go to the "wedding." And if it comes off after the real old Irish style, by the ball being opened in a barn, so much the better. I think one of those likely to go has a brother preparing for your diocese, a member of an old respected family, the Haydens of Bishop Lough, Kilkenny; a second likely to be favoured is a Limerick lady (Miss Synan) and a third a Miss Banahan*

*from Co Roscommon, a real Connaught Ranger ready to set about clearing the bush for you if necessary. I don't know who the fourth will be and can only hope and pray. Those going will be capable of teaching English in its different branches, French, painting and drawing, music and singing, plus plain and ornamental work and so on.*

She left the bishop in no doubt that these missionaries were a talented and practical group of women. The Brigidine archives in NSW hold a treasure - a plain old-fashioned exercise book in which John Synan (one of the pioneers) kept a record of part of the voyage to Australia. It touches into the huge depth of emotional pain and loneliness of missionaries. Her entries portray the six as very human women. These are some snippets from her diary:

*"We came on board the Chimborazo at about 10 o'clock pm- never felt so lonely in all my life... the bell rang at 2.00 am to warn visitors to leave the ship; it was then indeed my heart sank. Fr Phelan wasn't able to speak to us he could not conceal the tears that welled up in his eyes... We went to our cabins and had a nice cry. We dined at six and indeed mingled tears with our dinner."*

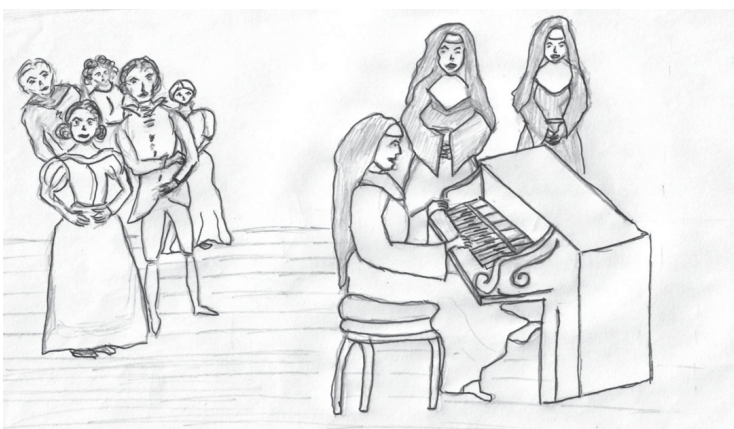


The next day, April 20<sup>th</sup>. *"Up at 5.00 a.m. Notwithstanding that I thought we would never smile again, we felt in much better spirits after breakfast. We went on deck and when we thought the saloon quite empty we went to practise on the piano. In the evening when we got the coast clear we went up to the piano to amuse ourselves and to our*

*great surprise we had quite an audience. When I think of how we were able to sing a note and of the desolation we were in the evening before, it seems to me nothing less than a miracle."*

Further on she writes: *"We have everything very nice except the tea, which we cannot use at all. When we*

*are inclined to misery we remind each other of offering it up for the poor souls but Sr Gertrude is of the opinion that we have offered so much there couldn't be anyone there now! She is a great wag."*





The group left Ireland on 19th April and arrived in Coonamble on 21st June. A number of people had come out miles to meet them. The church bell was ringing amidst the rejoicing. The little cottage was decorated and dinner ready. School opened on 9th July.

**Right: June 2008 re-enactment of the arrival of Brigidine Sisters in Coonamble one hundred and twenty five years on.**

The sisters had very little space and used their own living space as classrooms each day.



The parish of Coonamble, at that time, was greater in area than the whole of Ireland. It's impossible for us to even try to imagine the difficulties and the challenges they faced. They did so with courage and deep faith. The heat alone is beyond our perception. A past student wrote, *"Such hard times ... difficulties of every kind. The death of five nuns all in their 20s, within a few years of the foundation, brought huge sorrow but did not overwhelm them."*



Despite the hardships, the obstacles to be overcome, the Sisters in Coonamble put out a new shoot and sent Sisters to Cooma within four years of the Coonamble foundation. The sapling of the Brigidine oak was secure on Australian soil.

Meanwhile in 1886, the community in Tullow offered Sisters for the second venture in Australia. Four women set out for Echuca, Victoria. A welcome party of 500 people and the Mayor was out to greet them on arrival. The Mayor's daughter Ada Nolan presented them with flowers. Ada later became a Brigidine, and the Sisters also met their first Victorian postulant in Melbourne on their way to Echuca. They lost no time in increasing the Brigidine family!

### **Brigidine Convent Echuca**

Four Brigidine sisters from Abbeylax set out for Beechworth, Victoria, in 1886. One year later in 1887, Sisters from Goresbridge set out for Wangaratta, Victoria. A further year later a combined group from Goresbridge and Abbeylax made a foundation in Ararat, Victoria.





This was an extraordinary time of missionary movement in the Congregation. The sudden expansion to Australia left skeleton teaching staffs on the home front. Mountrath found that it had to close its day school due to lack of personnel. Goresbridge had to decide between closing its boarding school or temporarily recalling its sisters from Paulstown. They decided to recall the Sisters and this left Paulstown without Brigidines for thirty years. Huge sacrifices were made for greater needs elsewhere. Amalgamation of all the Brigidine foundations in 1889 left Mountrath, Abbeyleix and Goresbridge bereft of novice teachers as all went to Tullow for Novitiate.

The Sisters didn't just settle when they reached Australia. In 1898 a group of six Sisters, two from Cooma and four from Coonamble crossed the Tasman Sea to establish the first New Zealand Brigidine Foundation at Masterton. A young Irish priest, Fr McKenna, bound for the diocese of Wellington, New Zealand, had met the Brigidines on the ship that carried the first sisters to Australia in 1883 and he was instrumental in inviting them to New Zealand.

At the dawn of the 20th Century our Sisters had achieved, in a short span of years, a network of day, boarding and parochial schools throughout Victoria, NSW, Queensland, Western Australia, New Zealand and, of course, Ireland.

The Brigidine charism continued to be sown in new lands in the 21st Century as Brigidines went to Denbigh, Wales, in 1939; to Windsor, England, in 1948 and to San Antonio, Texas, in 1953.

**Brigidines went to Hohola,  
Papua New Guinea, in 1966.**



The Brigidine tree kept expanding both within countries and between countries. It would be impossible to mention all our foundations and to share the richness of their stories.

The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s was a watershed in the history of Religious Life. Seismic changes followed in community and ministry. The law of enclosure no longer obtained. The distinction between lay sister and choir sister was removed.

Opportunities for renewal and retraining presented themselves in post Vatican Two years. Brigidines who worked mainly in school-based and home-making ministries responded to new and growing needs and began to diversify their ministries.

The geographic spread of the Congregation continued when Brigidines moved to minister in parishes, schools, hospital, prisons, retreat work and counselling, with indigenous children and children with special needs. Brigidines moved from many of our single-sex convent-run day and boarding schools to community schools and pastures new. Many Brigidines moved from large convent-living situations into smaller houses, living in housing estates alongside the people. The renewal of Religious Life led Brigidines to hear anew the cry of the poor in disadvantaged areas within their countries and in the developing world. Some sisters from across the Congregation moved to minister for specified periods, in new lands, in collaboration with other congregations – in Africa, Iceland, South America, Bangladesh, the Philippines, China. ....

**In 1983 the Congregation began an international Brigidine mission to extremely poor areas of Mexico.**



1983 also saw a new shoot develop in Kenya, Africa.

All this time we were being enriched by the experiences of our Sisters living in new cultures and countries in the developing world.

Some Brigidine foundations regrettably have had to close with the diminishment of membership and discernment regarding priority of needs.

We are conscious that the “trace elements” of our Brigidine charism are left behind in those places where our Sisters have ministered. Who knows what might happen again into the future? “What may not be for us, may be because of us.”

As the old form of Brigidine Religious Life continues to die away we are left with 'the essence' to carry us into the future.

I'd like to name a flavour of the essence as I see it. It encapsulates first and foremost:

- Faith in a provident God - very strong at our beginning and still with us
- A love in our hearts that is inclusive, hospitable, human, which informs our relationships and our actions
- A willingness to die to the old so that the new can be born; we have been asked to do a lot of letting go
- Courage to take risks; our story is full of such risks
- An openness to explore new forms of membership in a fallow time.
- An ecumenical spirit
- A willingness to stay together as Brigidines, to bond together for something bigger and greater than ourselves
- A sense of mission and a spirit of mission.





So here we in the early years of our third century. Our Brigidine Story is set within a historical tradition that links us to the spiritual heritage of Brigid of Kildare.

When we reflect on Daniel Delany's heritage, we have much to proclaim and celebrate.

When I reflect on what has brought us to this moment I'm reminded of that chant we learned some years ago: "Everything before us brought us to this moment, standing on the threshold of a brand new day."

Daniel Delany's zeal and passion, and that of our own founding Sisters, continues to be a strong characteristic of the Congregation. He founded the Brigidine Congregation for the education of children and adults. He liberated an oppressed people and released their hidden potential which slowly brought about new life and new possibilities.

There has been a great commitment to the education of youth at all levels down through the years. Since Vatican Two there has been a noticeable shift towards working with adults in parishes, hospitals and so forth. There has been a growth in Spirituality Centres, which respond to the education of adults, across the Congregation.

Our Congregational chapters over the past twenty years have had a strong thrust for justice, peace and care of the Earth. Living in a more globalising world, there is an evident openness in the Congregation towards working with other Religious Congregations such as our

involvement in UNANIMA at United Nations level. We work in partnership with seventeen other Congregations on the three issues of human trafficking, the plight of the displaced person in our world and the welfare of the planet. In the Irish-UK province we work with lay and religious colleagues at local and national level, with groups such as Associates, Co-workers, Cairde Bhride, Staffs, Ruhama, AFRI, CAFOD, Travellers, Tallaght Intercultural Action, to name but a few. The same is true of other parts of the Congregation.



Brigidines increasingly support, with personnel and finance, projects that are congruent with the vision, mission and ethos of the Congregation. This is just a flavour of the essence we carry with us into the future. So as we look at the horizon, it's from the old to the new; from heritage to horizon, from the acorn to the oak. The acorn was planted on fertile ground.

The oak, like the congregation, is showing signs of aging, needing to be pruned. But there is life in the old oak. It's still full of sap, still green. It's still sprouting acorns and giving new life.

As we look at each other today, and at our Congregation, we can rejoice and celebrate. Like the oak, there is a lot of life in us too. We're still kindling flames of justice and peace. We're still nurturing acorns that hold dreams of possibility. We're still sowing seeds that further the reign of God – a reign of love, compassion and justice for humanity and the Earth.

We acknowledge and celebrate our heritage at this time,  
the horizon keeps beckoning us:

Every ending is a promise of hope...

We continue our journey towards the horizon.

“Something that will not acknowledge conclusion  
insists that we forever begin.”

Brendan Kennelly

**And the story continues...**



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