



Sr Mary Hayden – A gift of self

We give thanks for the life of an extraordinary woman, Sr Mary Hayden – missionary, visionary and pioneer – who at a young age ‘fell in love with Jesus’ and chose to follow Him, imitate Him and serve Him through a life dedicated to looking after His sheep.

‘Personal, conscious, contact with Christ’, was the fundamental practice that she cultivated her entire life and rooted by this, strived to live out the essential gospel values wherever God led her.

Steeped in her love for God, there was no austere piety distancing her from the real world, as anyone who knew her could testify. Pope Francis advised religious,

‘to stay close to the marginalized and to be shepherds living with the smell of the sheep’, - this Sr Mary did for 76 years of religious life. Her practicality, her initiative, determination, courage, knowledge of world affairs, deep faith and her instant connection with people, topped by a brilliant Irish wit, kept her grounded and able to respond to any situation with such positive results.

Born on the 19.9.1919 in Ballygub, Inistioge, Ireland, she was christened ‘Anne’ by her parents, Charlie and Elizabeth Hayden and was the younger sister of Nora and Mary. Growing up on a farm, life was simple and the young Sr Mary enjoyed it.

Neighbours would always visit and someone would invariably produce a fiddle- or the rosary beads – and the night would be spent in appreciated companionship – something Sr Mary held dear her whole life.

When Sr Mary was 9 however, life as she had known it came to an abrupt end, when her 11 year old sister Mary, died from Scarlet Fever and her dear mother passed away the following year in the same month. Raised by her hard working father and his sister - her beloved Aunt Bess - she was sent to school to learn home economics but Sr Mary knew from an early age, she was not cut out to be a farmer’s wife!

After living what she described herself as a ‘wild life’ as a youth, she was clearly searching for something more. She attended a retreat at 15 and felt the love of God so strongly that she decided to give her life to Him, for this she knew was where her future lay.

When the Good Shepherd Sisters came to her town, looking for girls to join the missions - at 17, she put her name down. She felt that if she was going to give, then she would give all -give up her country, her loved ones, everything she was familiar with and become a missionary. She entered to go wherever she was needed.

In August 1938 she left Ireland for the Good Shepherd Mother House in Angers, France where she was to enter the novitiate taking the habit on Feb 8th 1939. The same year, war was to engulf Europe, yet being schooled in the rules and regulations of convent life: How to maintain perfect silence; how to lift her skirts on the stairs; how to confess to the slightest misdemeanor, errant thought or whispered comment, she knew nothing about what was happening in the outside world.

Starvation and cold was what Sr Mary knew and the tragic loss, one by one, of her young companions to TB. She really believed she would be next.

It was during such times that she made her first vows on February 8th, 1941 – the Feast of Our Lady.

While the French novices could return to their families, this was not an option for the Irish with the seas mined and bombers in the skies. So she and the remaining foreign novices were sent to Orleans where there was more food available and warmer living conditions due to a furnace used in their laundry service for prisoners of war held in a German camp nearby. During this time, Sr Mary was to witness among the sisters, acts of generosity, of heroism, of kindness and together with them experienced the fear generated by the savagery of war.

When the war finally ended she was able to return to Angers and made her final vows on October 20th 1945 but by this time, the Jesus she had known, loved and followed was moving further and further away from her daily life. Sr Mary explained that she had been brought up in Ireland – a country of simple faith where God was part of the family. The emphasis was more on God’s intense love for us than on our love for him - Salvation, a direct gift from God. He loved us and all he asked from us was love in return, to accept his love and to pass that love on to others. This was different to the religion she experienced in



France, where the emphasis was not so much on being loved by Jesus but on keeping multiple rules and regulations to please him and gain merit.

Sr Mary was experiencing what she said St Therese of Lisieux so aptly described as, 'a long and solitary walk' or 'the dark night of the soul' - a trial that despite outward appearances, was to last 15 years. Sr Mary was granted a month to return to Ireland to see her father and sister, before setting forth on a cargo boat for her first mission in Sri Lanka.

There she discovered she had a distant cousin, Sr Charles, who on meeting a quietly weeping Sr Mary for the first time, took her firmly by the hand, marched her over to a picture of Mother Foundress on the wall, and told her that if she was coming to be a missionary, then she had to start by drying her tears!

Sr Mary had to complete her studies under the British system to receive a certificate qualifying her for a teaching position. She excelled in languages – apart from her native Gaelic – but some misinformed soul suggested she take the fine arts class. While Sr Mary excelled in many things, drawing was not one of them and she was soon reassigned new work.

There in Kohtahena, the sisters ran a social institution for women and children with 600 to 700 people altogether. Sr Mary enjoyed her new work – looking after the orphanage and provided with an old car – a Housten – was sent as driver, on multiple social welfare related missions – mostly women in labour who needed to make a quick dash to the hospital, invariably in the early hours of the morning.

Life was 'normal' in Sri Lanka and Sr Mary loved every bit of it. However, at the end of the twelfth year, she was summoned to the Superior's Office. Life was about to change and Sr Mary's pioneering life about to begin, though, at 38, she felt she was 'too old'.

In 1957 she again boarded an old cargo boat, this time bound for Singapore to meet Sr Dymphna (Margaret) Brady who was commissioned, with Sr Mary to bring Good Shepherd to Vietnam. Little did she know but another war awaited her.

Their presence had been requested by President Ngo Dinh Diem, who wanted to find a place for the many young women on the streets. He contacted the Good Shepherd Sisters Mother House and as he wanted neither French or American missionaries, the choice fell on Ireland. Two Irish Sisters couldn't do much damage to anybody – or so it was thought! Sr Margaret tightly adhered to every rule, perhaps 'chalk' to Sr Mary's 'cheese' but through many long and difficult years, Sr Mary found her to be the most solid and persevering companion.

After two months of being isolated in a Vietnamese convent belonging to another congregation, it was time to fulfill the mission they had been sent for. 130 kms south of the capital, in the town of Vinhlong where the President's brother served as Bishop, the sisters opened the first house on April 24th 1958. Sr Joan was to join them, along with Sisters Mercy, Anne Furlong, Ursula, Brigitte, Patricia Driscoll, and Sr Fidelma . Sr Mary often spoke of the richness of community life experienced in Vietnam, as selfless devotion to the girls and women in their care and a shared trust in God through adverse situations, brought the sisters close to one another.

They were tireless in their efforts to provide for their 'charges', who were extremely hostile at the outset. They decided to begin by teaching them sewing and just as Sr Mary knew nothing about drawing, she knew even less about sewing! Still, not to be daunted and ever responsive to need, Sr Mary, made it happen.

From the first 20 girls, the numbers rose and by the end of the year, 75 were in their care. A year later, 135 and four years later, 434 girls had passed through the centre. Finding work was important and so skills training was given in sewing, a school opened for the younger children and a mother and baby home in 1967.

The arrival of the American Forces in 1963 and the building of their base and airstrip, on the perimeter of the convent put the sisters and girls in grave danger, with the convent the perfect spring board for attacks on the base. Yet a mutually beneficial relationship was built with the sisters who started a paying service laundering the officer's uniforms and in return, the soldiers who dropped in for home cooking, conversation, a blessing and an Irish coffee, felt some normalcy a long way from home.

Sr Mary remembers her first meeting with Captain Robin Miller who said laughing, "What did you do wrong to get sent to a place like this?" Robin and his crew, went on to save the lives of 8 sisters and 200 girls and women during the Tet offensive of 1968, as he made 16 trips in his helicopter to fly them to



safety. Robin gave Sr Mary another 50 years of life, for which she was and we are, forever grateful.(They were to reconnect in 2008.)

The convent and its outbuildings were badly damaged at the time but no lives had been lost, so the sisters set about repairing the damage, salvaging what they could from the ruins and resumed their lives, though now in the shadow of war and with the fear of further attacks. They frequented their bunkers and took in whole families left homeless when their village homes were destroyed. Yet the mission continued despite all obstacles and people continued to find help.

In 1970 a second house and centre opened in Saigon to provide vocational training for war widows and refugee girls. A clinic was set up to help undernourished mothers and babies and when in 1973 at the peak of the war Sr Mary was chosen as Provincial Superior, responsible for the countries of Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, she relocated to Saigon.

By April 1975, Operation Babylift had had begun, transporting thousands of orphans to the States but on April 4th, tragedy struck with the crash of a Galaxy transport plane and Sr Ursula, who was accompanying the babies was among the 138 children and carers killed. Sr Mary was to say at the time: "Sister's tragic death deepened, in many ways, the sorrow felt by our Sisters, who spent seventeen years in South Vietnam and witnessed over the past years, the agony of the heroic Vietnamese people".

It was obvious that the communist takeover of South Vietnam was imminent and foreigners were advised to leave the country yet Sr Mary dearly wished to remain to help in any way she could. She worked day and night to procure exit papers for the families of the Vietnamese Sisters and other close friends who would be in grave danger under North Vietnamese rule. Within days she had secured papers for 94 Vietnamese. Finally, advised that her presence would endanger rather than assist those dear to her, she reluctantly approached the American Embassy with Sr Mercy – her only Good Shepherd companion still left in the country. Gates closed, they contemplated with dread a 15 foot wall and when spotted by their friend Ilse Ewald, found themselves being hoisted to the top by marines.

From that moment on, Sr Mary was to understand the plight of refugees, as she and Sr Mercy were airlifted to an aircraft carrier and eventually made their way to a merchant ship taking them and over 6,100 other evacuees to the U.S. Naval Base at Subic Bay. They were treated no differently from the other passengers, endured indignities and lost hope. From Subic Bay they were airlifted to Guam, where miraculously, they met up with Sr Fidelma and a young woman, Simone, who had left hurriedly from an airbase before it was bombed. Simone, was Sr Mary's right hand in Vinhlong and loyal friend to this day. Sr Mary, like the congregation's foundress, St Mary Euphrasia, embraced partnership for mission, working closely with the laity and developing deep and loyal friendships her whole life.



From Guam, Sr Mary visited Rome briefly with Sr Mercy and then on to visit the houses in Asia where they had sisters – Singapore, Malaysia, Burma, Thailand and Indonesia. Her visit was to reassure them that she was still alive, though she had been replaced as provincial by that time.

It was important that a place be found for the Vietnamese sisters who were in exile and many possibilities were explored. It was Macau that welcomed them finally and she spent a year surveying the needs and starting a house of Good Shepherd.

She was finally granted permission to take a much needed rest and to spend a year in a Jesuit Retreat Centre in Denver and was happy that Sr Louise Horgan was to join her. Under the supportive direction of Fr Bourke, she had time to reflect and at the end of the course during a 30 day retreat, found the great peace and serenity and former closeness to the Lord and the love she had felt in her youth. A light had come through the darkness. When she left the retreat house, her dream was to join a house of prayer – to be a contemplative – and so she journeyed to the Provinciate in Hong Kong to ask permission. But thankfully for all of us, God again, had other plans!

She was instead, made Superior in Bangkok where the sisters were working with the women coming from the poorest slums. Most of the women living in this squalor came originally from the north or northeast of the country, so in order to prevent migration to the cities of the young people who had no preparation for such a life, the sisters began thinking about ways to reach the women before they left their villages.

With continuous flooding in the Bangkok compound, Sr Mary once again put on her hard hat and started constructing more permanent buildings. She ended her term as Superior after four years.

On Bishop George Phimpisan's invitation, Sr Mary, Sr Margaret and Sr Joan - all Vietnam veterans - and joined by Sr Pranee who was a junior sister at the time, started the community in Nong Khai. Sr Mary was a pioneer once again at 60 years of age.

With 45,000 people in the border camps, the sisters worked with Catholic Relief Services, to respond to the needs. She was secretary at the time, to Khun Suvan Boonthae who took credit for teaching Sr Mary 'how to write a letter' and she reconnected with her good friend Msgr Bob Charlebois who had assisted the sisters when in Vietnam. As the camp finally disbanded, they moved into the local villages and a new mission was begun. Day Care Centres were started, wells dug and women shown how to utilize their weaving skills to help their families. The projects grew and diversified in response to newly identified needs and the numbers assisted increased.



During this time, Sr Mary made three trips back to Vietnam, paving the way for Good Shepherd to return. Today, the mission is flourishing there once again thanks to the seeds she had sown and the 'battles' she had fought.

Sr Mary was to remain in Nong Khai for 37 years writing projects, contacting benefactors, welcoming visitors, planning, constructing and 'dreaming big' in response to the ever changing needs. When illness and age finally restricted her active presence in the field, she continued to support, encourage and accompany the sisters and dedicated mission partners, so that the needs of the poor were met. She was known affectionately as 'Khun Mare' (mother) and provided solace to all in the projects who she continued to visit as long as possible until, over the past year and a half, they in turn would visit her. Her last 'trip' to a project was in June 2016, when she cut the ribbon to open our new Life Centre in the Garden of Friendship, a building whose foundations she had blessed six months earlier.



On the day before Sr Mary died, she told us that she felt - 'someone had opened a door' - a door that was 'no longer locked'. She did not elaborate but we believed God was calling her home. That evening she sang audibly, the Magnificat and then requested time alone with God to 'make her peace'. On a chart on the wall, we had been crossing off the days until Fr Shea - her confessor and friend - was to return from the United States. She was clearly holding on and speaking to Fr Shea on the phone that night, having crossed off the last day, gave her great consolation. The following morning, with Fr Shea due to arrive for 9:30 mass, we sat with her from early morning. As we prayed by her side, the Canticle of Creation - praising God for Sr Mary's beloved beasts 'wild and tame' - at 8:20, she took her last breath.



Almost two hundred tributes have poured in from around the world – from family, friends, sisters and project benefactors. Every one of them speaking of the unique gift Sr Mary gave them – her inspiration and example, her hospitality and unconditional acceptance, her wisdom and faith, her humour, her humanness and above all, her indomitable spirit. All of us were personally loved by Sr Mary and everyone would have a story to share. We hope and pray that those stories will continue to be told and that the mission she loved, will be carried on through every life she touched.

One of her friends, responding to the news of her death, warned that St Peter better ‘watch his back’ with a vision of Sr Mary staging a coup to take over the job of hospitality at the pearly gates. She also suggested that, if successful, Our Lord had better build some extensions, as Sr Mary would not be turning anyone away!

Her dear friend Rosemary Taylor, in a skype call a few weeks ago, told her in no uncertain terms that she could forget about sitting on clouds playing the harp – for Sr Mary’s work is not over – she has all of us to look out for and a world to save! Her new mission is now beginning.

