
“LAST ORDERS”
from the TABLET 9th February 2008

There is now a layman in Sr Julia's office at Notre Dame Convent in Cobham, Surrey, where I went to school. The pink paint on the walls has been replaced with a more masculine green and David Plummer is now running the 330 strong independent junior school.

Sr Anne passes me in the corridor in her blue habit but otherwise there are no nuns to be seen. The fees are higher, the facilities smarter, and the school runs as an efficient business. The story is similar in Catholic schools across the country. Research by Sr Frances Orchard, the last Religious headmistress at St Mary's, Ascot, showed that in England in 1980 there were 1,001 clergy and Religious in Catholic independent schools (22 per cent of staff), but by 2002 there were just 96 (2 per cent). The decline is equally drastic in the state sector.

A fall in vocations has meant that of the nine Jesuit schools in Britain, only one (Wimbledon College in London, a state boys' secondary) has a priest as headmaster, and five of the six Salesian schools have lay head teachers (Savio High School, Bootle, Liverpool, still has a priest).

Since 1960 two-thirds of Catholic independent schools have closed or ceased to be Catholic schools because the religious communities were too small and their members too old to cope. Others have managed to "hand over the baton", the phrase adopted for this unusual process. But as Sr Frances points out in her dissertation, the jolly image of a school relay race is not always the reality and often the baton is dropped, or released reluctantly and clumsily.

I was invited back to Notre Dame for the celebrations to mark the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Company of Mary Our Lady by St Jeanne de Lestonnac. The remaining sisters came over from their house in Cobham for the festivities. Notre Dame is the only one of 300 schools (the rest are abroad) that has appointed a lay head teacher, and it is now advising others.

In 1982 the sisters confronted the reality that they had fewer vocations and were getting older. They wanted to hand over the school while it was doing well and they were young enough to cope with the upheaval.

“Yes, it was a big decision, but I have always been optimistic.” said Sr Anne. “We enthuse the staff with the vision of the company and they are determined to keep the flame of St Jeanne alive in the school.”

The first lay headmistresses appointed by the sisters to senior and junior schools did not last long, as is often the way when schools go through this transition. Mr Plummer, who underwent five interviews with the nuns, said: "I know it can be tortuous for the first lay head as they don't get the autonomy they expect. For the second lay head it is easier." The sisters kept the fees low, offered free places, never took salaries for themselves and so Mr Plummer and his predecessor sorted out the finances and secured the future of the school.

Sr Frances interviewed a number of lay heads who said they felt isolated and hampered by the need to defer to the order. 'I feel I can't say "you get up my nose!" to a nun,' one told her.

A more positive experience was had by John Stoer who took over last year as first lay head of St Aloysius, a co-educational independent Jesuit junior and senior school in Glasgow. He was also the first lay head in 1994 of the Christian Brothers' school, St Joseph's, Stoke-on-Trent.

"Parents and staff are much more accepting of what the head says if he wears a collar," explained Mr Stoer. "Whereas for a lay head the respect has to be earned. I suppose it is both a good and a bad thing."

Mr Stoer has found the Jesuit structures supportive - he is called a director of a Jesuit Work and is answerable to the provincial despite being a layman. There are still three Jesuit chaplains in the school who teach RE and games.

"I am certain the time will come when there will be no Religious in our schools, and their witness cannot be replicated. It is beholden now on the laity to try and keep the flame alive," said Mr Stoer.

Sorting out the finances is another worry. At Notre Dame the sisters own 75 per cent of the school and the rest belongs to the school's independent trust. There is a clause in the trust founding document which states that the sisters must give the school the first offer to buy should they want to sell the property. The school pays a rent to the sisters - their only income. Two of the sisters are governors.

At the girls' independent boarding school, St Teresa's, Effingham, Surrey, a similar arrangement was made in 2002, with the school becoming a lay trust paying rent to the seven resident sisters. Until then there were "tensions" because the purse strings were firmly held by the now late Reverend Mother Teresa - a tiny, formidable woman who founded the school in 1928.

St Teresa's lost its last headmistress nun in 1977 when Sr Mary Magdalene died quite suddenly of breast cancer. Until then the 26 Sisters of Religious Instruction did everything in the school - cooking, cleaning, gardening, decorating, administration and of course teaching. The other sisters continued to teach in the school and run the boarding house but gradually the laity stepped in. Now three sisters are involved with the girls, one teaching English as a foreign language, one helping in the prep department, and another a boarding mistress. Two are governors.

The boarding is more flexible and informal, and there are fewer Catholic girls in the school (about 30 per cent). Sr John, now in her eighties, has seen the transition. Is she sad about the changes? "No. The pulling away has happened smoothly and gently. Our order was founded to work with young people but we have to adapt to the times and try to fit in."

Some schools do not survive. St Maur's, a girls' independent school in Weybridge, Surrey, closed in 2000 and the sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus went back to Ireland. The crunch came when its neighbouring boys' Catholic school, St George's College, decided in 1998 that it had to become a fully co-educational day school in order to survive. Until then the schools had had a joint sixth form. Founded by the Josephites, St George's appointed its first lay headmaster in 1992 but he lasted only a year. The second was Joseph Peake, who is still in post and, with 1,400 pupils in junior and senior schools, is England's largest provider of independent Catholic education. Three Josephites are governors and the transition appears successful.



Former St Maur's, now St George's College Junior school (cj photo bank)

At St Bernard's Convent - a co-educational voluntary-aided grammar in Slough, Berkshire - the sisters have decided to make a "clean break" and 18 months ago left the convent which had been the community's home for 111 years. To make it harder, the community had to split, with six sisters joining seven other Bernardines at a monastery in Lancashire and four setting up a retreat house in Stroud, Gloucestershire (The Tablet, 16/23 December 2006).

The exodus is not overt. The school sign still says "convent" and the entrance hall bears dozens of pictures of the sisters. The nuns' cemetery is still in the grounds and there is a homely atmosphere to the library and classrooms that were once the nuns' living quarters.

"I do miss the sisters; said Katrina Mackay, 16 and in year 12. Sr Stella ran the folk group, Sr Catherine taught Icr and Sr Michaela took Religious Education. "Sr Stella was fun and mischievous and Sr Michaela was mad about Star Wars and had her own PlayStation!" Lawrence Kitson, 17, showed me the chapel. He thinks the sisters' spiritual life lives on in the school in the community and discipleship programmes.

He himself spends one of his lunchtimes tutoring a younger boy who is falling behind.

The handing over of the baton was awkward and slow for the headmaster, John McAteer, who was appointed in 1998 but had to wait nearly two years before Sr Mary Stephen Bell, the last headmistress from the order, gave up the reins. "It's the way the nuns do things - slowly," he says.

In 2006 the order handed over the school to Northampton Diocese. The independent prep school, St Joseph's, which the order also ran, was passed to an independent trust. The sisters own some land around the school and a house which they will eventually sell to pay for their new retreat house. The diocese gave them a small sum for the residence inside the school building.

"It was a unique experience for the pupils to be educated in someone's home where the playing field was someone's garden and there was a feeling of community and a sense of belonging:" said Mr McAteer, who was at a boarding school in Belfast during the Troubles. "But the spiritual life of the school continues to thrive and we will keep the links with the sisters and make retreats to Stroud."

I spoke to Sr Mary Stephen, now in Stroud, about the move. "It was a time when education was getting more overwhelming and the emphasis on exam results and administration was compromising what we wanted to do pastorally with the students," she said. "We felt education was causing an imbalance in our monastic life. It was a very painful decision for all the sisters to come out of Slough. It is the history of the Bernardine order - do what you can and move on."

Lessons are being learned with each school. Clearly for the clergy and Religious there is a responsibility to move on and out graciously, and for their lay successors there is a responsibility to look after them financially and ensure that the school nurtures the spirit of its founding order. Certainly, it will not be long before virtually no Catholic schoolchildren will have the irreplaceable experience of nuns, monks and priests as their educators.

Victoria Combe is a freelance journalist.



St George's College (cj photo bank)