Two hundred years and counting for the FCJ Sisters

By Simon Hart

A valuable presence on Liverpool’s Catholic landscape since establishing Bellerive FCJ Catholic College in the 1840s, the FCJ Sisters are marking their bicentenary with a significant pledge.

For Sister MaryAnne Francalanza, the essence of the Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) can be captured in six words.

A teacher of Maths at Bellerive FCJ Catholic College in Liverpool, she explains: ‘We’ve done a lot of work with staff and students and different levels of management to try to find what is the FCJ ethos and we came up with six words: companionship, dignity, excellence, justice, gentleness – which is a very FCJ thing – and hope. Our communities are places where those six values are lived and encouraged.’

This definition is particularly noteworthy now we are in the FCJ’s bicentenary year, which began in September 2019 and continues until the feast of Christ the King in November 2020. A prolonged anniversary year with time for celebration and reflection on times past but also, crucially, an action plan shaped by concerns about tomorrow.

First the celebrations, which began on 21 September, the birthday of the foundress of the congregation, Marie Madeleine d’Houët, who established the first FCJ community in Amiens, France in 1820 and went on to found other schools and missions such as working with the poor not only in France, but also in England, Switzerland, Italy and Ireland. At Bellerive, as at other FCJ schools and communities the world over, pupils participated in an International Day of Kindness, which included serving afternoon tea to local people. For past pupils and friends of the community, a reunion Mass in Merseyside will follow though the date remains unconfirmed.
Bicentenary Commitment in September which includes the pledge for each community to plant 10 trees. Another is to clear all single-use plastics from FCJ communities and homes. According to Sr MaryAnne, these actions will be accompanied by 'advocacy for the poorest' who are the first to be affected by climate change.

The second theme, she continues, is young people’s faith and vocation discernment. 'Like the Jesuits our spirituality is Ignatian from Saint Ignatius Loyola and discernment is one of the main gifts that he gave the Church. It’s what we learn in early years of formation – to help people to discern and make choices. It’s something the Pope’s Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment was talking about so we’re well placed to respond.'

Early days

The FCJ Sisters’ presence in Liverpool dates back to 1844 when a request was issued for Sisters to provide support at St Patrick’s Parish Church, which had been established for the city’s growing Irish community. ‘They came to St Patrick’s from Ireland and opened a school there because our Sisters were known for education,’ says Sr MaryAnne. ‘It had about 1,000 children and in the evenings they had a night school for girls who were already at work.’

An early protagonist, Mother Xavier O’Neill, died of cholera and her name adorns one of Bellerive’s new buildings. Bellerive itself had been established in 1845 in St George’s Square in the city centre, with a self-declared mission to teach ‘Geography, use of globes, Botany, History, Writing, Arithmetic and French and Italian languages.’

In 1896 it moved to its current site beside Princes Park. ‘It’s had various incarnations but it started at a time when girls weren’t necessarily educated,’ adds Sr MaryAnne.

From Liverpool the FCJ influence fanned out, with houses opened in Birkenhead – today’s Upton Hall School – as well as Chester, Manchester and Salford. Eight Sisters even sailed from Liverpool to Canada, as Sr MaryAnne relates: ‘In late 1883 we started foundations in Canada and Australia and they left for Canada from here and went across the prairies in these wagons. It was the most amazing and courageous thing knowing they’d never come back.’

The passing decades have brought changes. Bellerive became part of St Mary’s Roman Catholic High School in the reorganisation of Liverpool's Catholic senior schools in 1983. Its name was restored in 1997. Today it is a six-form-entry college, its days as a boarding school now a faraway memory.

‘In the distant past there were Sisters who’d have done the teaching and the management of the school, the cooking and the cleaning,’ Sr MaryAnne observes. ‘It would’ve been a much bigger community but that work is gone and we’ve fluctuated according to the needs and the availability and the skill of the Sisters.’

If Sr MaryAnne is today the only Sister teaching at the school, a sense of purpose remains intact. So too a strong influence. Sr Brigid Halligan OBE, previously Bellerive head teacher for 24 years, holds a role on the board of the FCJ Educational Trust which oversees all of the order’s schools in the UK and Jersey. Overall six Sisters remain in Liverpool, spread across two houses – one near the old St Hugh’s parish, Wavertree; the other in St Clare’s parish, Sefton Park.

Sr MaryAnne explains: ‘We do quite a lot of young adult spirituality work, retreats and Scripture study. We have sisters who visit the sick and take communion – companionship work. One sister is very involved in the university chaplaincy. Another is a full-time chaplain at our school on the Wirral. We also have a completely new group of people called FCJ Companions in Mission who are lay people but live with the FCJ spirit.’

Positive thinking

This positive tone is echoed by Sister Lynne Baron, whose work in Liverpool centres on vocations. She explains: ‘We’re a very small congregation – we’re only 200 worldwide and there are probably about 85-90 of us in Europe. Around 10 per cent are younger sisters so while our numbers are reduced, we can see there’s a healthy, younger group coming up.

‘We’ve chosen to make changes and come out of some ministries but often with a real sense that “This is where the call is for us now”. In the 1800s we were setting up schools because no one was providing Catholic education for girls. Now we have committed lay people running schools and the sisters are saying, “Where is the call now?” There’s a great sense that this is a good life. It’s really expansive and deepening and God is still calling us.’
With an imprint in 15 countries, the FCJ has a global presence which is felt in the Bellerive pupils’ celebrations of the bicentenary. For instance, before marking the school’s Feast day of the Immaculate Conception with special Masses on Friday 6 December, each year group researched and learned about an aspect of the FCJ’s work around the world.

‘There was a real sense in the school of the children connecting with other schools,’ says Sr MaryAnne, and this brings us back to that FCJ ethos. ‘It’s the Faithful Companions of Jesus so companionship is quite important, so although it’s a school and there are six million boxes to tick, there’s also a sense of being a family and that family reaches to other schools.’ Making the experience of this special year all the richer in the process.

The FCJ’s bicentenary commitment is:

- To celebrate the beauty of creation and make a positive contribution to our local environment. We will plant 10 trees per community and/or group in 2020.
- To endeavour to divest all our FCJ communities and homes of single-use plastics, growing in our awareness and supporting each other in our resolve.
- To publicly acknowledge the impact of climate change on the poorest people in society, raising awareness of issues locally, nationally and internationally, and becoming involved in advocacy where possible.

Follow our celebration on the Bicentenary News page and on social media #FCJ200.

The secret of Christian living is love. Only love fills the empty spaces caused by evil.

Pope Francis

Faithful Companions of Jesus

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