‘Sisters in the Troubles’: Introduction to women in religious orders during the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.

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Since *The Good Friday Agreement* in 1998, which heralded a commitment to peace, stability and a new beginning for Northern Ireland society, oral history projects have been used to assist post–conflict transition and the healing process. Numerous studies have captured the turmoil and suffering experienced by both sides of the political and social divide as a result of ‘the Troubles’, with oral testimonies allowing narrators to express their ‘need to liberate the present and future from the burden of the past that threatens to overwhelm them’.[1] ‘Sisters in the Troubles: Women in religious orders during the conflict in and about Northern Ireland,’ is a unique, innovative, interdisciplinary and collaborative project that combines academic data and archival research with oral history. The project is committed to furthering study of the

[1] Paul Gready, *Writing as Resistance: Life Stories of* Imprisonment*, Exile, and Homecoming From Apartheid South Africa.* Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003, p. 285.

history of the churches' involvement in the 'Troubles', with its bright moments as well as its ambiguities, but above all to the neglected role of women of faith. The inevitable demise of persons who were key participants in the religious dimension of the Troubles gives urgency to an endeavour that looks eventually to move toward fully open dialogue between persons of different political views and ecclesial traditions within Northern Ireland's churches.

A unique element of the project is a series of recorded 'witness seminars' that brought together over twenty RC sisters from different orders together in conversation in front of an all female film crew. The outcome is a remarkable and largely untold story of courage and compassion relating how RC women in religious orders struggled to maintain some semblance of normality for communities subjected to the brunt of the Troubles. The hitherto marginalisation of their story reflects how women's narratives have generally been neglected in the contested and male dominated histories of the 'Troubles.' The hope now is that through the courage of women of faith choosing to relate their experiences, that more women will come forward to add their voices to the prevailing narratives that tend to focus on the male players, be they politicians or paramilitaries, neglecting that whole other dimension of the Troubles, the struggle to survive, to raise families and retain a value system that transcended violence.

The ‘witness seminar’ format is in essence a conversation evolving naturally to bring out personal and shared recollections, the nuances of different memories and perspectives. It requires openness to and respect for individual experiences and encourages the interaction and engagement of a variety of views concerning peace, justice, the social order, and the role of churches in political and public life in a context of mutual respect for the diversity of ideological views and political judgments. Above all, witness testimony highlights the experiences and contributions of individuals whose voices all too often remain unrecorded and undocumented in terms of archival evidence, which in many instances means subsequent interpretations of the latter can hence be misleading. Without witness testimony, individual actions and initiatives can ‘perish as though they had never been,’ detracting from full knowledge and understanding and the deeper insights they provide into the complex issues that emerge in divided, conflict ridden societies.

The first witness seminar, held at the Irish School of Ecumenics in Belfast in February 2015 opened up with a question inspired by a Mary Fishman documentary, *Band of Sisters,* in which American sisters inspired by Vatican II were described as ‘risk-takers.’[2] The sisters gathered in Belfast to discuss their recollections of the Troubles were

[2] *Band of Sisters,* a film by Mary Fishman, http://www.bandofsistersmovie.com

reluctant to accept such a designation, insisting they were simply doing their jobs. Sr. Geraldine Smyth commented:

> I don't like grandiose statements like, 'We are the risk takers…' – I always want to look at, 'Could there be a hidden arrogance in that?' But there is that call to be the dangerous memory of the Church. I do think that Religious women, maybe more than almost any other group in the Church, did take seriously the call of Vatican II to renewal, reform and adaptation to the world today, and to read the signs of the times, and along lines of certain things that are almost axioms for us now, like Option for the Poor and being alongside the marginalised, the radical gospel, there is no gospel living without justice, for example. That's not to say that we do it all the time, either personally or collectively, but it's there as a vision that we're constantly calling one another to…..,

Sr. Liz Smyth spoke spiritedly in affirming the description for the sisters who had been active when she was growing up in the Falls Road during the Troubles, relating how '… some very, very quiet and unassuming people… managed to call forth that ideal of doing the right thing…. they definitely were risk takers and they did take risks on a lot of us who wouldn't be where we are today without them.' She continued:

> …when I reflect back on what Religious Sisters did and what the Church did, I now realise, maybe from hindsight, that there were the Religious Sisters, and there was the Church. And there was the Church that hadn't a clue what was going on. And, unfortunately, that was my experience. I'm not saying that's true, but that's how I perceived it as a young person…
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> They were the people who told you that, just because you happened to be born into a family of 12 that lived in the Falls Road, that didn't mean that was where your life had to end. They were the people who said there is somewhere outside here, there are different experiences, and they didn't give up when the stones got thrown, they didn't give up when the bomb went off at the local pub, they didn't walk away. …They didn't come in and look

> at us like other people did….. And when bombs did go off and you had to move out of your house…., they were there. They never told us they were doing it. They just did it. So people did take risks. And people of my age know they did.

The theme of sisters 'staying with the people' recurred throughout and, according to the sisters in witness seminar III held in Belfast, March 2016, was a core message they internalised. All the sisters paid tribute to the communities they served, families especially, and claimed it was a privilege to experience their resilience, fortitude, endurance, the way they persevered, hoped, got on with life despite the difficult circumstances. An overriding concern for all the sisters was the children, not simply their welfare and security, but their potential to be 'agents for change'.

The value of the witness seminar resides in seeing the contributors, viewing the authenticity of the shared testimony, marked by laughter and tears, also grief, sometimes anger, confirming the findings of a 1999 report, *The Cost of the Troubles Study,* that highlighted the physical and psychological damage inflicted.[3] One of the Board members of the Study was Sr. Marie McNeice. Speaking in the second witness seminar held in April 2015, Sr. Marie recalled a traumatic incident that triggered an intense personal crisis that unleashed a terrible anger: 'I never before connected with such anger as I did then… If somebody had put a gun in

[3] *The Cost of the Troubles Study* (1999) Available from: http://conflictresearch.org.uk/reports/legacy-of-the-conflict/COST-OF-THE-TROUBLES-STUDY.pdf (1999) [Accessed on 3rd June, 2015].

my hand…I reckon I could have used it.'[4] She subsequently left Northern Ireland, returning a year later to become a founding member of *WAVE* (Widows Against Violence Empowered), a grassroots, cross-community organisation established in 1991, to provide support to those bereaved or traumatised during the Troubles, regardless of religious, cultural or political belief.[5] Sr. Marie understood that it was not always easy to move on and to forgive. She observed: 'There is a tremendous burden that comes with forgiveness… forgiveness is a gift that is bestowed upon us'.[6]

The number of organisations with which the sisters were involved, often as founding members and always as key contributors, is truly remarkable. Their activism confirmed how post-Vatican II Catholic Sisters evolved from servants of a male dominated Church into powerful, professional, educated women, providers of social support mechanisms for society's most needy: 'Commitment within a religious calling was no longer defined in terms of doing a religiously oriented job: any occupation could be religious if the person used her profession to better the condition of people.'[7]

In addition, the project, as mentioned in the beginning, also has traditional scholarly underpinnings, including one to one interviews with

[4] Sr. Marie McNeice, Witness Seminar April 2015
[5] WAVE Available from: http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/uploads/pdf/1401187256--89219-08-Wave-Who-Are-We-Leaflet.pdf [Accessed on 23rd November, 2014].
[6] Sr. Marie McNeice, Witness Seminar April 2015.
[7] Helen Rose Ebaugh, (1993) "Patriarchal Bargains and Latent Avenues of Social Mobility: Nuns in the Roman Catholic Church", *Gender & Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 403.

individual sisters who chose to defy what Susan McKay identified as 'strange silences among those who lived in Northern Ireland during the Troubles', [8] a fact immortalised by Seamus Heaney in his 1975 poem, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*.[9] The success of the interview process is dependent on numerous factors, such as the relationship and trust between interviewer and interviewee, and the setting of the interview itself.[10] Care and sensitivity were key because research has shown that for many participants involved in the truth-telling process, the chance to speak proves therapeutic. Conversely, however, the possibility of reliving the past also has the potential to invoke traumatic memories that have a negative impact on the individuals. Teaching Sister Veronica O'Brien reflected: 'We were just trying to quash things to cope. I have to be honest there are bound to be things I have never really talked about… because you had tomorrow's class to get ready…. There are so many things that happened I haven't even addressed yet'.[11] During one to one interviews several of the Sisters recalled how the pressure outside the convent walls often reflected what was going on within. Sr. Veronica continued:

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[8] Susan McKay, *Bear in Mind These Dead*, London: Faber and Faber, 2008, p. 3.
[9] Seamus Heaney, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*. (online) Available from: http://www.blueridgejournal.com/poems/sh-what.htm (1975) [Accessed on 25th November, 2014].
[10] Angela Thody, *Writing and Presenting Research*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2006.
[11] Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, "'You Understand Again': Testimony and Post-Conflict Resolution in the North of Ireland," *Words and Silences: Journal of the International Oral History Association*, (2004), Vol. 2, no. 2, p. 33.

> Everybody was a victim. There was an anger, one man one vote and the Protestant ascendancy still ruled areas such as the Civil Service in the 1960s and 1970s. The Catholic Church knew what was going on but was between a rock and a hard place. We knew that priests such as Fr. Brady, Fr. Faul and of course Fr. Des Wilson had won the peoples' hearts, people trusted them. Our Reverend Mother, however, didn't need to know details, her role was to keep an even keel.[12]

She further recalled striving to keep a normal routine for her students while dealing with the anguish of her young cousin's murder, which remains unsolved. The trauma endured by the family left a legacy of anger: 'It is a buried trauma not spoken of… forgiveness is a process that we struggle with'.[13] It was a struggle shared by the sisters and the community alike, particularly over the 'Disappeared' and murders such as that of Mrs. Jean McConville.[14] Sr. Mercedes Coen explained: 'That family find it very hard to forgive, and the problem is, it *is* hard to forgive the IRA.'[15] She recalled a bereavement meeting with two grieving mothers 'both wanted answers but found peace at their shared pain… so it is amazing how we find healing in each other.'[16] Reflecting on the comradeship and mutual support and deep expressions of faith, Sr. Mercedes commented:

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[12] Sr. Veronica O'Brien, Interview with Rafferty and Kirby, Europa Hotel Belfast, 14th August, 2015.
[13] Sr. Veronica O'Brien, "Women's Witness to the Troubles", Witness Seminar, ISE, Belfast, February 2015.
[14] "Jean McConville Finally Laid to Rest In Day Full of Symbolism". *The Irish Times*, Monday 3rd November, 2003, p. 2. The IRA said it murdered Jean McConville because she was an informer, an accusation her family vehemently deny, insisting it was because she helped a dying soldier who was shot at her door.
[15] Sr. Mercedes Coen, "Religious Sisters and the Troubles," Interview with Rafferty, The Canal Court Hotel, Monday 10th August 2015.
[16] Ibid.

> Forgiveness is very hard, it is probably the most powerful thing in life, to forgive…Remember too, wives have had to say to husbands, 'I forgive you and we can start over again'. But bitterness can creep up on you, and even when you think you have forgiven it comes up again, you see something that reminds you. Can you imagine if you have lost someone? That's the legacy of the Troubles, never forgetting. You can have scars that if you don't try and heal can trawl back over. But it is amazing how we can heal each other, there's always good in something. It all goes back to the Cross. Can you imagine how Mary felt? It was very difficult for her too.[17]

Sr. Rosaleen Murray remembered ordinary people suffering incursions from various paramilitary factions and the British Army and how it was the women who 'held it all together… even though most of them were on tranquillisers'.[18] Further trauma and division for Sisters and the community came from events such as the hunger strikes. Some Sisters from the Mercy Order, known for its visitations, visited the families of the hunger strikers. However, as Sr. Veronica explained: 'The choice to visit was divisive in the convents, people from different backgrounds living together, some Sisters from English backgrounds living with Irish Nationalists. But we avoided theological debates concerning the hunger strike and suicide, it was the elephant in the room.'[19] Sr. Veronica recalled her visits: 'We were stopped at checkpoints and searched. We dressed in civvies, we never wore our habits or veils, we would have been too easily identified…. We didn't go to all of the families. I think we got

[17] Sr. Mercedes Coen, Interview with Rafferty, The Canal Court Hotel, Monday 10th August 2015.
[18] Sr. Rosaleen Murray, Interview with Rafferty,
[19] Sr. Veronica O'Brien, Interview with Rafferty and Kirby, Europa Hotel Belfast, 14th August, 2015.

a bit war weary, or burnt out. It was very emotional. I remember a family in Camlough as a very sad visit, but the family was glad to see us.'

The contribution of religious orders and individual sisters to the social peace process cannot be overestimated. Many of the sisters interviewed were proactive in reconciliation projects, involved in cross community initiatives and ecumenical endeavours, reflecting their conviction that communication and cooperation was crucial to help diminish violence and fear. Historian Valerie Morgan cogently remarked: 'The role of female religious as peacemakers has provided some of the vital tools which the whole society needs in order to build peace - it now remains to be seen how good women and men will be at using them".[20]

Dominican Sister, Noreen Christian, returned from South Africa after twenty-five years and founded an ecumenical residential community the *Currach* community, which was situated on the 'Peaceline' in Belfast. Sr. Noreen was aware that women from both communities were under intolerable pressure during these years of the Troubles, whether from living among the violence of the conflict and the worries that brought, or the struggles of maintaining a safe home life for their children under the threat of paramilitary and state violence. Sr. Noreen explained how she

[20] Valerie Morgan, (1996) "Peacemakers? Peacekeepers? Women in Northern Ireland 1969-1995". *INCORE, Londonderry* (online). Available from: http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/women/paper3.htm [Accessed on 23rd September, 2015].

was inspired to act by seeing the effects of the conflict on Sisters in pastoral ministries:

> I saw the faces of those Sisters at meetings and when they would speak… they were exhausted because everybody who was in trouble was coming to them for sympathy, for guidance, or whatever… they were weary. I looked around them and thought oh my God! I was home, fresh, bubbling, dying to get going - they were really exhausted, and I thought nothing is going to happen here if these women don't get rejuvenated. But they did, they gradually picked themselves up.[21]

The name *Currach*[22] symbolised the ecumenical movement, and its inclusivity of both lay and religious members, regardless of gender, race or faith.[23] Sr. Noreen explained that ecumenism 'gave us a chance to get together and gave us a focus… It meant that only people who felt strongly about their faith… became part of it.'[24] From the beginning she never wore a habit: 'there's no point wearing something people take objection to.[25]

Sr. Noreen explained the one thing women who came to *Currach* had in common was 'their experience of living on the edge.'[26] Many women were dependent on antidepressants; 'it was the talk you know, I'm on such and such… Things were happening in front of our eyes in

[21] Sr. Noreen Christian, Interview Rafferty and Kirby, Belfast, 11th November, 2015.
[22] Currach is the Irish word for a small boat.
[23] Sr. Geraldine Smyth, *The Turning Tide: Dominican Women and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, Unpublished work, 2016.
[24] Sr. Noreen Christian, "Ecumenism, the Troubles and Reconciliation", Interview with Rafferty and Kirby, 11th November, 2015.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

Belfast and you felt you had to do something'.[27] Consequently *Currach* strove to create a peaceful oasis for women, Catholic or Protestant: 'We were not discussing religion at all… some of the Protestant women were not church goers… most were not faith focussed, but they came to *Currach* knowing that it was about bringing Catholics and Protestants together… that was the basis for groups".[28] Sr. Noreen has precious memories of those times:

> Classes began in the church hall organised by local women and included beauty, massage classes and movement to music classes… we weren't talking religion in those women's groups – except in so far as we shared our stories. There were people there who were connected to their own side very much, including one woman whose husband was the head of the Orange Order on the Shankill at that particular time. But the groups educated each other about their traditions and beliefs, they even went away for weekends with each other and gained confidence in their friendships... Catholic women going to Stormont and saying it felt so alien, and then hearing Protestant women saying they never felt it was their building either.[29]

Sr. Noreen recalled: 'I look back on my times with the Currach Community and Forthspring Community Centre with real fondness and joy. I met so many good people, lovely people… all struggling for the idea of working together, for inclusion.'[30] Reflecting on Sr. Noreen's achievements Sr. Geraldine Smyth, formerly Prioress of the international Dominican congregation (1998-2004), commented that she stood 'out as a counter-cultural Dominican who has left behind her a legacy of the spiritual and social fruits of reconciliation, when all the historic odds

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

seemed stacked in favour of violent division.'[31] For Sr. Geraldine, working in partnership with others outside the Dominican community provided crucial support for Dominican Sisters, enabling them to take risks and to have the courage to face the challenges working in Northern Ireland inevitably produced. They had a shared determination to reconcile 'truth and memory, faith and politics, justice and peace.'[32] She suggested that small gestures, such as offering their premises for Catholics and Protestants to meet to undertake ecumenical ventures, made all the difference.[33]

Education was viewed by many of the Sisters as an obvious alternative to violence and was promoted in the schools as the only efficient means of altering or escaping the intolerable circumstances in which people had lived.[34] Many of the Sisters who took part in the research have been involved in the educational system and their oral testimonies recall the immense pressure of presenting a sense of normality to their pupils, even when bombings and shootings were going on outside the school walls. Church control was a given, noted by Sr. Noreen who remarked that she, like many Sisters involved in education, 'had to be subject to the Church authority even though Parish priests had little knowledge of educational matters.'[35] For Sr. Kathleen Keane education was an obvious alternative to warfare, and a means of altering or escaping the intolerable circumstances in which people lived.[36] Former

[31] Ibid. Sr. Noreen's leadership was far-sighted reflected in her capacity to bring others together in the hope for a new, shared vision. Her leadership skills received public and royal recognition, when Sr. Noreen received an OBE at Buckingham Palace in 1998 and the President's Prize Award at the White House, USA the following year.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Sr. Kathleen Keane, *Report on Belfast Meeting of Sisters At ISE For Global Sisters Report (NCR),* 2015, http://globalsistersreport.org/column/justice-matters/conversations-between-sisters-belfast-regarding-'-troubles'-25581
[35] Sr. Noreen Christian, Interview with Rafferty and Kirby, November 2015.
[36] Sr. Kathleen Keane, *Report on Belfast Meeting of Sisters At ISE For Global Sisters Report (NCR),* 2015, http://globalsistersreport.org/column/justice-matters/conversations-between-sisters-belfast-regarding-'-troubles'-25581

Head Teacher, Sr. Nuala Kelly agreed, stating education played an important role for her pupils; 'they knew that education was the key to their future, their key to freedom.'[37] Sr. Liz Smyth's vocation was inspired by the commitment of her teachers: 'They did not leave; so now I'm determined not to abandon young people who are disadvantaged'.[38]

Sisters suggested that education was a way out of poverty, a view noted in the work of Sr. Marie Duddy. However, education also brought to the fore the inequality of available opportunities between the two communities.[39] This did not, however, diminish empathy. Sr. Mercedes Coen recalled the sense of unity among many school children who prayed together on hearing that a bomb had gone off even if it wasn't in their area. "You see the Troubles were everybody's business. It was just there. If it was yours today, it would be somebody else's tomorrow. Everything was terrible, really terrible".[40]

Sisters recalled the impact of events on schools. Sr. Nuala Kelly remembered: 'The night hunger striker Bobby Sands died it was like a scene from a movie, with the army and children on the streets, burning cars, but you got on with it.'[41] Sisters were determined that their pupils receive an education and the requisite qualifications: 'At exam times you were down round the streets looking for them. If we knew there was going to be trouble in the area the Principal stood her ground and wouldn't back down to pressure (to close the school).'[42] Sr. Veronica O'Brien recalled how the schools in her area had to 'stagger' home times to avoid conflict, as stones would be thrown at buses, or pupils were

[37] Sr. Nuala Kelly, Witness Seminar March, 2016.
[38] Sr. Liz Smyth, Witness Seminar, February, 2015.
[39] Sr. Marie Duddy, *The Call of the North: A History of the Sisters of Mercy, Down and Conor Diocese, Ireland.* Belfast: Ulster Historical Society, p. 223.
[40] Sr. Mercedes Coen, interview with Rafferty, The Canal Court Hotel, Monday 10th August 2015.
[41] Sr. Nuala Kelly Witness Seminar March, 2016
[42] Sr. Veronica O'Brien, interview with Rafferty and Kirby.

attacked. Teaching Sisters were not immune in school to the anger that pervaded the outside community:

> One day a Scottish soldier walked in to the school and I went out into the corridor and asked him what he wanted. After directing him to the main office away from the classrooms, the pupils turned on me calling me a 'soldier lover'. The abuse directed at me really hurt me but I realised these were 15 year olds angry at everything. The pupils were from the New Lodge, Ardoyne, and Ligoniel areas so there was an anger in them anyway. Maybe they had been up all night after their houses had been raided.[43]

Sr. Veronica felt deep compassion for the home circumstances of many of her pupils, aware of the turmoil to which families were subjected and the necessity for Sisters to become semi-social workers: 'Internment was a major event, with no fathers in the homes what was family life like? .... Pupils came into school with the Celtic crosses their brother or Daddy had made in Long Kesh, but families were broken up, and for some, picking up the pieces would take years.'[44] Sisters were concerned about paramilitary recruitment of young people, fearing children could be targeted. Sr. Veronica recalled 'the boyos' infiltrating the youth clubs looking for easy recruits, and 'they would also dominate the decisions that the people in the community had to live with.' [45]

Republican prisoners also received pastoral care from the sisters. Based on the Falls Road and ministering to the parishioners of Anderstown during the Troubles, Sr. Consilia Dennehy undertook pastoral visits to Republican prisoners during the hunger strike. She recalled how she was welcomed into the homes and hearts of many people in West Belfast and conveyed how visiting the prisons had had a lasting effect on her:

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Sr. Veronica O'Brien, interview with Rafferty and Kirby.
[45] Ibid.

> As you know I rarely speak much about those dark days… simply because it was/still may be such a sensitive time and I believe that people's lives are sacred even if I don't share their vision. Personally it was a big learning curve for me as a woman in pastoral ministry, to be invited by the families and prisoners themselves into their lives, visiting the prison and included in parish life. Indeed it was the families in the parish whose members were in prison that initiated these visits, and I travelled in the minibus with the parents and children on an arranged day to the prison. It was a blessed time getting to know and trust each other under difficult circumstances. I felt these pastoral visits were rewarding and spiritual… even if our visions were different, and often a faithful link between church and people… I am grateful for the lasting friendships, which have enriched my life over the years, summed up in a French proverb… 'Gratitude is the memory of the heart'.[46]

Conclusion

This on-going project serves to remind us not simply of the crucial work religious sisters were doing at grass-roots level, but also women in general within the community. It demonstrates how vital a presence the Church can be in conflict situations, and highlights the all too often unacknowledged service of individuals who worked selflessly and quietly behind the scenes, despite being faced with the same fears and anguish as that of the communities in which they lived and worked. It is important to recognise that far from living cloistered existences, Catholic Sisters visited prisoners, taught and nursed in warzones, and fought for reconciliation and peace. They shared the trials and tribulations of their respective communities, and the same pain, trauma and anger. Above all, as Sr. Mary Delargy quietly recalled: 'we stayed with the people'.[47]

[46] Sr. Consilia Dennehy, Email correspondence with Rafferty, 15th January, 2015.
[47] Sr. Mary Delargy Witness Seminar March, 2016.