

SISTERS of MERCY  
of St ALBANS





Mother Mary Catherine McAuley (1778-1841)  
Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy

SISTERS of  
MERCY

ST ALBANS 1899 – 1999

JAMES CORBETT

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In gratitude for the service  
of the Sisters of Mercy  
and of Rev Stephen Pickard, Deacon

*You have said it well, John:  
"I know that the doctors of this world  
heal what is of the world,  
but the doctors of souls  
heal the heart."*

The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles 11



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Some Memories of the Sisters of Mercy & Maryland  
by a young man!

MY earliest memories would be in my early teens delivering groceries, by wicker basket on a tradesman's bike (small wheel on the front) from Brinsden's Stores every Saturday morning, at least four separate trips. I had no idea what a nun was, let alone a Roman Catholic; but I was always welcomed by smiles, a cool drink, and sometimes cake or biscuits from the wonderful Sr Johanna. She was my earliest introduction to Catholicism! We have remained friends ever since (some 60 years or so ago!).

My engagement and then marriage to a committed roman catholic brought me into the church, or, should I say, the Holy Spirit did with her usual broad smile; but that is another, and long story.

I remember being asked, as a handsome (in those days) blond, new husband to accompany two of the young novices on some local cycling routes by the then Superior Sr Mary Carmel. These two young ladies had to travel in twos for decorum's sake! We did raise some eyebrows whizzing around Batchwood with two young novices in tow, in full 'gear' flowing behind. What a sight we must have made; our very own St Albans 'Sound of Music'. I'm not sure of their names or even if they made their final vows, but we did cause some 'heads to turn'! My dear wife, Terry, was very accommodating riding everywhere we went.

Of the many Irish families in our parish, one in particular caused a very eventful humorous evening one spring day! Mick Brophy, of particular fame, decided to serenade Sr Mary with

guitar and familiar Irish song, after a few bebies – just for a little light entertainment you might say! The window opened and Mick was politely sent on his way with, “Michael, go home to your wife”. Such fun!

There was always something going on at Maryland. It was more like a ‘second home’ to so many people with a very strong social events schedule: dances, bingo, garden shows, gambling nights (yes, but with Monopoly money), playlets and other shows.

A former Parish priest, Fr Jerry Daly, was about to leave the parish after his first term of office. He has always had a very good sense of humour, so a plot was hatched to spring upon him at his leaving party.

Ted Gordan and I hatched this plan to present his leaving present during the parish party farewell, but in a rather unusual way, which could very easily fail dismally! Would it be possible to ‘dress up’ (we all did in those days) as two nuns? But where would we get any ‘gear’? I posed the question, very casually, to Sr Mary Carmel thinking that she couldn’t possibly approve of such outrageous behaviour. However, little did we know when a smile lit up her face, as it often did. “Come with me, my dears”, grabbing Ted and I by the forearms and propelling us into the very large lounge next to the sister’s refectory where at least fifteen or so of the community were assembled in circular fashion. She wanted to present a proposition to the community and, to do this, two chairs were placed in the middle of the lounge into which Ted, and I were propelled and told to sit tight!

The plot was hatched, and Sr Carmel proceeded to see what the response would be to us two, gentlemen, being introduced

to “habits” and all that entailed. It got even better – “What do you think of this idea, dear sisters?”, to which they all cheered and clapped. Two of the community were dispatched, in haste, to the Convent loft and Ted and I were told not to move – an inch!

Not long afterwards, the two sisters, whose names I forget, returned with a ‘full set’ of two complete sets of ‘gear’ (habits, coifs, headgear and all! Ted and I were ordered to stand, in full view of the community, and we were formally clothed (yes, the full monty) as the first male members of The Sisters of Mercy, amidst much laughter and clapping. The Royal Variety Performance would never be the same and we were both launched into full operation! We, all, have never laughed so much and the lath and plaster ceiling in the sitting room nearly came down!

Ted and I secreted our newly acquired ‘gear’ into the parish hall for Fr Jerry’s leaving party, to appear, at the appropriate time, having changed into fully fledged novices, complete with stubble! But we added some additional dress items which included wellington boots, driver’s ‘L’ plates and rouge plastered onto our cheeks! The parish hall nearly fell off its posts; and the rest was history, shall we say.

Bearing in mind that this was some forty years or so ago some of ‘the ladies of the parish’ were ‘not at all amused’ – ‘bringing the church into disrepute’! But most of all our dear Sisters of Mercy could not stop laughing and looked like they might need medical attention!

One of our less financially, successfully events was when we hired the city hall for an extravaganza to raise funds for the convent. We had arranged to bring the Southern Band of the

Royal Airforce and a wonderful Welsh male voice choir from Rosscwmtawe. With very little combined rehearsal we achieved a reasonable booking of seats and, just, only just, managed to break even. But the runup to financing a male voice choir, transport and back from south Wales was something we hadn't fully appreciated. Nicholas Breakspeare School gave us free access to their school hall for the choir to unload, relax and practise before the evening's concert. However, we had completely underestimated their very specific requirement and that was to provide beer – gallons of it – to quench the Welsh throat, which we did by some 20 gallons; but this ran dry before the transport coaches' engine had time to cool! Hey ho! It was a wonderful night, with the mayor and all their regalia in attendance, and the 'boys in blue' providing an incredible combination of talent.

This year will mark the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of Maryland from which the Mercies served hundreds of children in their teaching roles; catechetics in the parish; musicians; poets; painters; the most excellent of listeners and for providing care for those in the later years. Their care, love and talents will never be forgotten and is written in heaven.

Those were the days – God bless them all.

Rev. Stephen Pickard (Deacon), 2022

## FOREWORD

FOR the past hundred years the lives and work of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and the Sisters of Mercy have been inextricably intertwined in the growth of the Catholic Church in St Albans. This is particularly true in the field of primary education. It is very difficult to get adequate words to describe the debt of gratitude the local Catholic Church owes to the Sisters of Mercy for a hundred years in promoting gospel values in the young hearts of thousands of our Catholic children.

In spite of all the odds, lack of finance, space and facilities and, when they first came, an anti-Catholic climate, they never gave up. How can we thank you for the many sacrifices, crowded classrooms and, at first, hardly any remuneration? How can we thank you for your friendship and support over these hundred years?

In making available your hall for Sunday worship you have built a wonderful spirit of community which has been mutually enriching. Many happy memories will remain of the many events organised by the Friends of Maryland.

Lastly, your wonderful, tender, loving care of the elderly and infirm in your Home is yet another proof of your special charism.

On behalf of all MSCs who have worked with you in St Albans we wish you a happy centenary.

Fr. Michael FitzGibbon MSC (Parish Priest), 2009

SISTERS of MERCY  
1899-1999  
By James Corbett

I

FOR a hundred years, 1899-1999, the Sisters of Mercy working in St Albans have responded to a vocation of prayer and care. Their prayers are those proper to every religious congregation; their work, a consistent variety. From the foundation of the congregation of the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland, in 1831, the Sisters have throughout the world looked after the sick, cared for the elderly, helped the afflicted and taught the young.

The Sisters arrived in St. Albans on 11 July 1899 after the purchase (by the Crispin Street Community, London) of 'Claremont', a house in Alma Road. In fact, the Sisters of Mercy should have been working in St Albans since 1848. Alexander Raphael, the town's then MP, and a Catholic, was building a church in Verulam Road, and an adjoining convent for the congregation, when he died suddenly. No provision having been made for the builders to continue, the scheme was abandoned. But, half-a century later, in the fulness of time, the Sisters of Mercy came at last to the city.

'Claremont', which had been a school for boys, became a much-needed rest home for Sisters working in the East End of London and a holiday home for working women. A year later, 1900, a wooden hut in the garden was opened by the Sisters as a day school for Catholic children. Although unsuitable as a school, the Hertfordshire County Council regarded it as 'efficient' but 'temporary'.

Sharing the Sisters' active interest in education were the priests of the Society of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) who had, also in 1899, taken over the pastoral care of Catholics in St Albans. Thereafter, Sisters and Society would continue to work closely together. An early instance of that co-operation was the building, in 1911, of a three-classroom school behind SS Alban and Stephen Church in Beaconsfield Road.

Staffed, as had been the 'temporary' school by Sisters of Mercy, the new school, like the old, was under the direction of a certificated teacher, Sr M Vincent Falvey. She is remembered as being a noble and powerful person, quick in movement and manner. And her new school was at once granted financial aid by the education authorities.

'Claremont' continued to provide a respite for more and more women until it became necessary to buy an adjoining property, 'Rose Lawn', as a boarding house. A bridge, forming a passageway, was built to connect both houses. The work developed and increased. And Sr Vincent, in the year before her death on 6 February 1927, saw the purchase by the congregation of Townsend House, in Townsend Drive as a new centre for the Sisters' work in St Albans. A large property, set in spacious grounds a mile-and-a-half from the city centre, it was a quiet location and offered plenty of scope for expansion. Maryland Convent, as it was named, opened on 30 November 1926, when the first Mass was offered and the Blessed Sacrament reserved.

## II

Building work started. An extension to the rest-house was completed in 1928, a gardener's cottage built in 1929, followed by a convent wing in 1930, when Mass was offered for the first time in the Convent's Chapel of the Sacred Heart. The chapel had been blessed and dedicated by the Revd John Twomey MSC, the rector of SS Alban and Stephen parish.

By the 1930s it was plain that an increasing attendance at the school run by the Sisters behind the church risked the likelihood of over-crowding. There was no space for expansion on the site: somewhere else had to be found soon. Thanks to Fr Twomey, however, land was obtained in Vanda Crescent, where SS Alban and Stephen Junior School, with accommodation for one-hundred-and-sixty children, opened on 2 September 1934. At the school's opening, the Sisters were complimented on their two decades of patient work in the far from ideal Beaconsfield Road school, which backed onto the railway line.

More and more children attended the new school until, in 1936, an extra classroom was built in what had been part of the playground. The head teacher, Sr M Joseph Carlin, was appointed Superior of Maryland on 7 July 1934, although remaining as head teacher until retiring from the post in 1941. She was succeeded by Sr Edith Hughes.

'When I was appointed,' Sr Edith recalled, 'there were two-hundred-and-twenty-seven pupils, aged from five to fourteen: an average of forty-five per class.' It was the time of the Second World War (1939-45) and as St Albans was a reception area for evacuees, the number of pupils further increased. After

the war, the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen and a steep increase in residents with young children made accommodation matters acute. A hut was erected in the playground for use as a classroom. It hardly made any difference. The solution, for the time being, was to re-open the old classrooms, shaken though they periodically were by passing express trains.

‘The children’, said Sr Edith, ‘had to be brought down to Vanda Crescent for their mid-day meal, which was served in the corridor to the classrooms, there being no hall, and the children sat three in each dual desk. What memories I have of those lunch hours! When there was any piece of mischief to be investigated, the answer I usually got was, “It wasn’t us, Sister, it was them kids from the back of the church.” ’

Sr Edith faced school at the beginning of each new term with trepidation, knowing there would be a queue of mothers asking her for admission for their children. As a result, two supplementary classes were located in the St Albans Adult School building on the corner of Stanhope Road and Granville Road.

### III

There had been changes at Maryland. A noviciate, which had been evacuated to the house until the war ended, returned to St Edward’s Convent, Harewood Avenue, London, in August 1945. Around the same time, Sr M Joseph Carlin, the Superior of Maryland, was succeeded by Sr M Fidelis, who had taught at the ‘temporary’ school before the war.

Among the employed staff at Maryland, working in the garden, was a German former prisoner-of-war. Sr M Fidelis

happened to show him a photograph of the grotto at Lourdes and he, a great friend of Maryland, began to build in the grounds a version of the grotto, finishing it in 1950.

There seemed to be no end to the shortage of accommodation. It not only concerned school-children; parishioners, too, in the newly-built New Greens estate needed somewhere nearer for Mass than the church in Beaconsfield Road. Eventually, a solution to both aspects of the problem was found. At first, the convent's chapel was opened for Sunday mass, but the chapel proved to be too small, despite the saying of second Mass. Clearly, a bolder step was required. The outcome was the building at Maryland of a hall, which could be used for Mass on Sundays and for other activities at other times, and which included rooms for the use of the Sisters. Both Sr Carmel McMahon, the Superior since May 1953, and the rector, the Revd Michael O'Leary MSC, were keen on the project. Their support ensured its completion and, on 8 December 1954, the Marian Hall opened with a stage, chairs, curtains and a movable screen to sub-divide the hall. Its builder, Richard Brindsden, was an old boy of the school behind the church.

What better place than the new hall, from January 1955, as a temporary classroom for local infants for whom the journey to Vanda Crescent was too far? A second classroom opened at the hall in January 1958. At the same time, a specially built playground instead of a make-do area on Maryland's back drive – was constructed on the Townsend Drive side in the interests of greater safety. One Sister taught the five to six-year-olds; another, the seven to eight-year olds. By now, the number of children attending the Marian Hall was about eighty, while the total number 'on the roll' of all schools was four-

hundred-and-fifty-five. The number still was too high for comfort in the space available.

There were other considerations. Vanda Crescent could extend its educational programme only if it had an assembly hall. Sanction was given for one to be built in the playground and, in time for its completion, Hertfordshire County Council gave a gramophone, a piano and physical exercise equipment. The hall was blessed and opened by Fr O'Leary on 28 April 1958.

Next to be tackled was the question of providing a midday meal for the children at school in the Marian Hall. After discussions between the city's school meals organiser, the headmistress and the managers, it was agreed that from September 1958 a midday meal could be supplied – much to the relief of parents. About fifty-five children tucked in daily.

Improvements, too, were on the way for the children and Sisters enduring the inadequacies of the school behind the church. A school was being built in Cecil Road for the juniors; meanwhile, all the children were transferred in May 1959 to a vacated school a short walk away in Alma Road. Their teachers were Sr Lelia, Sr M Edward Cleary and John Farrelly. Sr M Edward had celebrated her Silver Jubilee as a religious in January 1955. John Farrelly, a St Albans city councillor, became mayor in 1969; subsequently, he gave up teaching and council work, and was ordained a priest.

The opening in October 1960 of St Adrian's Junior Mixed Infant School, in Watling View, relieved the pressure on the Vanda Crescent school. Parents were given the choice of leaving their children in the old school or sending them to the new. Most parents living in the New Greens district opted for St Adrian's because it could be reached in a single bus journey whereas two buses were needed for children to get to Vanda

Crescent. Sr Mary Edith, previously head of Vanda Crescent, took charge at St Adrian's. Three other Sisters, Sr Carmel McMahon, Sr M Cyprian O'Brien and Sr M Loyola O'Carroll from Maryland, in keeping with the congregation's educational tradition, moved to a newly opened Convent in Hatfield so as to work as teachers at the nearby Blessed Philip Howard School.

At the Vanda Crescent School three classrooms built adjoining the assembly hall opened in July 1962; a school canteen also was built, serving midday meals for the first time on 2 July 1962. Until then, the children had been going to a canteen in Shirley Road. All the same, despite the opening of St Adrian's, and the extensions at Vanda Crescent, accommodation for Catholic primary school pupils remained inadequate until the opening, in September 1965, of the St John Fisher school in the Marshalswick area of St Albans. It is significant, bearing in mind the city's overall increase in population, that by 1965 a post-war total of 3,196 council houses alone had been built around St Albans in estates such as Cottonmill, St Julian's, New Greens and London Road.

#### IV

Maryland itself next became the focus of attention. The old, cramped kitchen, which was too small to meet the demands upon it, was converted during 1966-7 into a store room, and two adjoining rooms turned into an up-to-date, spacious kitchen. Improvements also were underway in the laundry block and a start made, in 1969, on the building of a sick bay to give better care to the elderly sick. The need had arisen as Maryland had changed from being a guest house to a home for elderly women: statutory nursing conditions were essential.

Consequently, as well as the sick bay, a medical room, bedrooms for invalids and accommodation for a nurse were built. A lift made access easier for the occupants of six bedrooms on the first floor.

For Sr M Joseph Carlin, who had come to St Albans in 1911 as headmistress of the Claremont House school, the sick bay and extensions of 1968 were a long-held dream come true. A year later, Sr M Joseph, a woman of great integrity and deep faith, died aged eighty-nine. Among those who attended her requiem was a former pupil, the Revd James Gunton, the parish priest of Our Lady of Walsingham, London Colney. But the connection between London Colney and Maryland was stronger. Sisters had given children in the area weekly religious instruction and prepared them for their First Communion until the church opened there in 1965.

Comings and goings made 1960 a year of further changes. Among those on the move was Sr M Paul O'Shea. She had taught briefly at the Marian Hall before leaving for teacher training, and returned to teach at St Adrian's School, but in September 1969 was transferred to teach in London. Sr Theresa Joseph, after teaching at St Adrian's since 1958, left to take charge of a new student's hostel at Dundee University and St Adrian's gained Sr Margaret Mary McHugh. On 12 September 1971, she became the first sister in St Albans to be professed at SS Alban and Stephen Church, which was where she had been baptised and confirmed.

Improvements continued at Maryland. A fire escape ladder system was installed for the Marian Hall in 1972; a brick building outside the convent kitchen was constructed to house a new deep freeze. Piped water was supplied to the rooms in the convent and wash basins fitted in the residents' rooms. In 1974

work went ahead to extend and make more comfortable the residents' dining room.

Later in 1974, on 20 December, the good relations between the Sisters and the MSC priests enabled them to share joyfully in a celebration: a house-warming party at the new presbytery in Beaconsfield Road. The Sisters did the catering. Afterwards, priests attending the event visited Maryland for old times' sake before returning to their respective parishes.

A financial step forward was taken in 1975. Sr Carmel McMahan, the new Superior, began for the first time an annual calling in of auditors to check the accounts of the convent and the elderly women's Home. Until then, the job had been done by the Sisters themselves. It also was in 1975 that the Friends of Maryland (a support group formed by local parents) redoubled their considerable efforts by undertaking to make more improvements to the Convent and the Marian Hall. By a happy coincidence, two founder members of the Friends, Vincent and Helen O'Reilly, celebrated their silver wedding in 1975.

## V

The next year, 1976, the building of the McAuley wing began. Named in honour of Catherine McAuley (1778-1841), the Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, the wing was designed to include apartments for a retreat priest, a parlour for the Sisters, a library, a kitchen to provide refreshments after meetings in the Marian Hall, and a committee room for the Friends of Maryland. The wing opened in 1977. Three years later, 1980, the Friends improved the grotto area. They built a low, retaining wall, made a flower terrace and laid down paving. Flood-lighting completed the refurbishment. In 1981 the

Friends provided new folding tables to replace old, heavy tables in the Marian Hall, and paid for the hall to be re-wired by holding concerts, entertainments, special suppers, whist drives and bazaars.

Installation, decoration, accommodation and renovation held attention during the nineteen-eighties: Maryland was keeping up-to-date. Smoke detectors were fitted in rooms and corridors during 1983. Following the departure of the gardener, the gardener's cottage was decorated and re-furnished for occupation by a nurse, and part of the garden sold. The sale of the land enabled Maryland to increase its nursing care by the addition of a new wing to the sick bay for residents who needed special care. During 1984 the Sisters' Chapel was renovated and an oratory opened in the room which had been used as a library in the McAuley wing. The library was re-located. As the eighties advanced, the refectory was fitted with a new kitchen unit, and the Convent roof was re-slatted in February and March 1986 despite the weather being the coldest for forty years.

From the end of the eighties until 1993 Sr Catherine O'Carroll was an indefatigable co-ordinator of the Maryland community and manager of the home until the management duties were transferred to a lay professional. 'My main contribution the home,' Sr Catherine recalls, 'was to care for and support the staff, and provide and encourage further training for them and, of course, always to be ready to lend a listening ear to our residents.'

Thirty-six years of daily travel by Sisters from Maryland to teach at St Adrian's school ended, happily, in October 1996. A house, 45 Vesta Avenue, next door to St Bartholomew's presbytery, was purchased by the Sisters of Mercy. Its purchase was an expression of the changes in contemporary religious life

where small communities were being established for the better serving of apostolic ministries. Soon the house was occupied by Sr Margaret Jones, the school's head teacher since 1979, and Sr Mary Meaney, who, among other duties, served the sick and elderly in the parish. Of the previous heads of St Adrian's School, Sr Mary Edith had retired in 1972. She was succeeded by Sr Mary Ann Joseph Grogan, who transferred after seven years to St Mary's School in Poole, Dorset, and the headship was then taken by Sr Margaret.

Only their Creator knows the full story of the lives of the individual Sisters who, over the years, have made up the Maryland religious community, but each has played an essential part. Their ministries have taken them to Wheathampstead, London Colney and Abbots Langley. They have supported the frightened child, the stressed parent, the displaced adult, the confused old person and, for many years, fed the hungry knights of the road who found their way to the doors of Maryland. The tradition of hospitality has never wavered.

Almost all the Catholics born in the twentieth-century St Albans have begun their formal education with the Sisters. The Sisters have helped, too, in the building of community and enabled people to adapt in the changing church by becoming involved in adult faith formation. Always, the Sisters' century of work in St Albans has been one of growth, professionalism, evolution and hope. And Maryland according to an official inspection in 1999, was 'the best home I've visited'. Thanks to the hard working managers and staff, and to the friends and supporters, the spirit of Mercy thrives at Maryland. Long may it continue.

## AFTERWORD

THE sudden closing of Maryland Convent and the Care Home in the early part of 2014 may seem to have heralded the demise of the spirit of Mercy which had thrived in the city of St. Albans and surrounding areas for so long. This spirit lives on, however, through the existence of the Mercy Associates and the continued support given to them by the Sisters of Mercy, notably Sr. Maura Halpin.

The Mercy Associates were formed out of the 'Friends of Maryland' in 2007 and have worked since then to support the work of the Sisters of Mercy through individual ministries and prayer. Since the closure of the Convent and Care Home we have continued to meet regularly and to maintain links with all the Sisters who lived at Maryland, as well as some of the residents and the wider Mercy community. We were delighted to be given permission by Fr. Charles Sweeney MSC to put up a portrait of Venerable Catherine McAuley and have our very own notice board in the new Sacred Heart centre.

Many of us have cherished memories of the Sisters and what they did for us and the Parish. My own include attending Maryland as my first school before we went to St. Adrian's and remembering the warmth and kindness of the nuns especially to my father who was not a Catholic. This booklet serves as a way of recording some of those recollections and as a reminder of just how much we as a parish community owe to the Sisters of Mercy.

Mrs Cath White (Secretary, Mercy Associates of Maryland), 2022

## MARYLAND MERCY ASSOCIATES 2012-2022

ON arrival at Maryland in April 2012 I was fortunate to find a well-established group of Mercy Associates. They met once a month together with some of the Sisters and a resident from the Home. Cath White was the secretary, a ministry which she has continued. She has great admiration and reverence for our Foundress, Venerable Catherine McAuley and a long history with the Sisters at Maryland.

With the closure of Maryland in 2014, making way for a development of homes called Maryland Place, the group were determined to continue their prayer and to meet as often as possible. Venerable Catherine's picture is in the foyer of the Sacred Heart Centre as is a Mercy noticeboard where news items, the monthly prayer leaflet and e-news are posted.

We are fortunate to have a monthly prayer leaflet from Sr Annette McCartan. We use this as a guide and we extend our prayer to the needs of family, parish and the world.

At our first meeting after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted we shared our experience of lockdown. All agreed that although they managed well, they were deeply affected by the isolation and anxiety the pandemic caused.

It is a great privilege for me to meet these Mercy Associates every few months, they surely will keep the Charism of Mercy alive in St Albans.

Sr Maura Halpin RSM, Stechford, Birmingham, 2022

## A GROWING LEGACY

THE enduring legacy of the Sisters of Mercy in St Albans was marked in a very special way. After the re-publication of the preceding history written by James Corbett (1932 – 1999), James's wife, Mary Corbett OBE (1942 – 2023) made a suggestion in the months before she died, that the proceeds of the sale of the booklets could take the shape of a tree planted for the benefit of future generations in St Albans, who were, in many cases, the offspring of those families who had been directly helped by the Sisters of Mercy. Planted at the base of each tree could be a plaque engraved with words to remember with gratitude the work and the help of the Sisters of Mercy, becoming a visible sign linking the past with the future.

In 2020, St Adrian's Catholic Primary School reached its 60<sup>th</sup> year, but the celebration of its Diamond Jubilee was postponed due to the necessary restrictions of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic which began in January 2020. This led to prolonged quarantine and restrictive measures in churches, schools, hospitals, homes and all sectors of society in Britain and around the world. After twenty-four months of such restrictions, by the summer of 2022 it became possible to safely hold indoor assemblies.

On Wednesday, 5 October 2022, Mrs Aideen Porter, Head Teacher of St Adrian's Catholic Primary School and Nursery in Watling View, invited Bishop Paul McAleenan (Auxiliary Bishop in Hertfordshire), Brother Nelson Dionne of the Sacred Heart Brothers, St Columba's College, and Fr Michael O'Boy (Parish Priest at St Alban and St Stephen's Church), to celebrate the belated Diamond Jubilee Mass. Former Head Teachers, Sr Margaret Jones (the last Sister of Mercy Head Teacher), Mrs Yvonne Hawkes and Mr Dominic Bedford

attended. Several of the 'original' Pupils were also welcomed. These included Mr Thomas Short, Mr Bernard Napper, and Mrs Cath White, who began school in 1960. Cath White is now secretary to the Maryland Mercy Associates in St Albans. Other special guests attending were the Head Teachers of two other Catholic primary schools in St Albans, Mrs Clare Moore and Mrs Patricia O'Donnell. Governors, staff, and parents were also welcomed.

Bulletin boards were covered with photographs from each decade, and every aspect of the school and liturgy reflected the ethos of the Mercy Charism of Truth, Peace and Justice. During Mass, Bishop Paul spoke about ways to live out the mission of the school, "to learn, to love, to live as a community of God, with Christ as our teacher." He emphasised the virtues of kindness, sensitivity to others, and enjoyment of life. The children's singing and accompanied dancing and attentiveness throughout echoed this. Mercy-inspired gifts taken up by Sr Margaret and Cath included the Mercy Cross and an image of Catherine McAuley. A pupil from 1960 carried up the school's very first register of attendance to be placed on the altar.

After the Mass, the guests gathered in front of the school on the cool autumnal morning for the service of planting an ornamental *Malus brevipes* "Wedding Bouquet" tree. Ribbons of red, blue and yellow were tied to the tree to represent Truth, Peace and Justice, the motto on the school badge. Bishop Paul said "We gather here today and as we plant this tree, we think about the life and growth of this great school through the last 60 years. We reflect on the many happy times that have been shared and pray for many more happy memories to be made in the future. We thank the Sisters of Mercy and the Maryland Associates for the part they have played in the history of this

school. We ask Lord, that you bless the school, this tree and this community. We pray that the branches will grow tall and the tree and the school will flourish for many years to come.” On the wooden plaque below were the words, “In grateful memory of the Sisters of Mercy and their work in St Albans (1899 – 2014) and to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St Adrian’s RC Primary School (1960 – 2020). Maryland Mercy Associates, October 2022.”

Nine months later with the St Adrian’s school tree in leaf, commemorations of the founding of St Alban and St Stephen’s Infant School on Vesta Avenue, nearly 90 years before, took place on Wednesday, 21 June 2023, the feast of St Alban. Fittingly, Fr Michael O’Boy, Parish Priest and a school governor, presided at Mass, with Assistant Priest, Fr Andrew Bowden from St Alban and St Stephen’s Church. The Sisters of Mercy were represented by Sr Maura Halpin, the last Co-ordinator of Maryland Convent and Community, Sr Margaret Jones, and Sr Winifred Graham, the last of the Mercy Head Teachers of the infant school appointed in 1973. They joined Ms Tessa Hackett, current Acting Head, and Mrs Charlene Smith, Deputy Head, as well as Mr Peter Keane, Executive Headteacher, and Mr Gerry Dolan, Chair of Govenors.

Fr Michael started with the school prayer, “Dear God, bless all the children and staff in our school. Bless all our loving parents, our school community and parishioners. Let us follow the shining examples of St Alban and St Stephen. Help us to be the best that we can be and guide us as we stay connected to you and Jesus in all that we do. As a school, we are learning and growing with God by our side.” During Mass, children read beautifully the history of the school, founded in 1934 and the story of the Sisters of Mercy. “Today we are celebrating the

founding of St Alban and St Stephen Catholic Primary School by the Sisters of Mercy. It is because of the Sisters of Mercy that we have our wonderful school.” They also thanked the church which had kindly donated two beautiful trees to be planted on the school grounds, and a plaque given by the Mercy Associates, carrying the “Mercy Message”. During his homily on the Gospel message, “your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father,” Fr Michael questioned the children about the trees on the property. Originally an orchard, they were planted for the benefit of others. Likewise, the trees planted today, he assured us all, would provide shade and enjoyment by hundreds and thousands of people that we did not even know, possibly long after we had gone. A growing legacy, surely, if there was one.

On the top of the slope facing the lower school grounds, a Magnolia “Heaven-Scent” was planted, and a Japanese maple Acer tree further down the slope. These would produce green leaves by summer, and scarlet red in the autumn, reflecting the school colours. The plaque was engraved “Remembering with gratitude the Sisters of Mercy for their work in St Albans, 1899 – 2014, and the founding of St Alban and St Stephen School in 1934. Maryland Mercy Associates, June 2023.”

One special past pupil, Mary Blythman Doran, who began school in 1938 was present, along with her husband John Doran. Among the Mercy Associates present were Bob and Cath White, Frank and Bernie Murphy, Marion Burgess, Rosemary McDonagh and Rita Walsh. At the end of ceremony, Sr Maura thanked all for the lovely remembrance of the Sisters’ time in St Albans and concluded by spontaneously reciting the Poem “Trees” by Joyce Kilmer, in which she wrote, “Only God can make a tree.”

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