

The Faithful Companions of Jesus
A Centenary Look at the Apostolate in Scotland
1889 – 1989
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FAITHFUL COMPANIONS OF JESUS - PAISLEY, SCOTLAND

Disraeli once remarked "Keep your eye on Paisley". This was prophetic, because by 1880's Paisley rivalled in growth some of the older towns of Scotland. Catholicity had kept pace because of the steady flow of Irish immigrants who came to work in the mills. In 1843 Catholics numbered between ten and eleven thousand. After the famine years (1845-47) the numbers increased still further as did the attendant social problems. The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 had triggered off a war of bigotry and prejudice against Catholics in Scotland, especially on the part of local government bodies and proselytising agencies. When schooling became compulsory after the passing in 1872 of the Scottish Education Act, the priests in their difficulties and need sought the co-operation of the religious orders to help in running the schools, in caring for children's and old people's homes, and to assist in the parishes. It was thus that F.C.J.s, who had gained valuable experience in similar situations in the North of England, came to Paisley in 1889.

The Society of the Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus was founded in Amiens, France, in 1820 by the Venerable Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy, Vicomtesse de Bonnault d'Houet (1781-1858), a widow with a much-loved only son.

She had herself experienced, as a result of the French Revolution, the deprivations consequent upon the shortage of priests and of the religious who had been the mainstay of education in pre-Revolutionary France. Her desire to find the best education for her son brought her into contact with the newly-restored Society of Jesus who were re-organising, in Amiens, the College of St. Acheul (1814).

Impressed by the deep spirituality of the Jesuit Fathers and by their spirit of dedication and renunciation, Madame d'Houet (as she preferred to be called) sought their spiritual direction. Guided by Père Varin, who had already helped St. Madeleine Sophie Barat and St Julie Billiard to found their respective congregations, she felt increasingly drawn to be a Companion of Jesus and to satisfy Christ's thirst for souls by the threefold apostolate of education, retreats and missionary endeavours. Thus she adopted the Constitutions of St. Ignatius and took for her Society the name 'Faithful Companions of Jesus' in her desire to follow Christ faithfully, even to the foot of the Cross, as did His Mother and the Holy Women of the Gospel. In 1826 Mme d'Houet went to Rome where, despite mounting opposition, Leo XII accorded her a Brief of Praise, confirmed by Gregory XVI in 1837, which stated clearly the apostolic end and the name of the Society.

Missionary zeal and the need to make a foundation out-side of France or Belgium because of the July Revolutions of 1830 brought Mme d'Houet and her sisters to Britain in November 1830. Of the new religious congregations which had sprung up in early nineteenth century France, the Faithfull Companions of Jesus were the first to contribute to the revival of the faith in these islands after the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. The Sisters responded to the needs of the Church in London and District, in the North West and the North East of England, and in Ireland.

From experience, Mme d'Houet had learned to accept the social structures of the time so, though the request might be for sisters to work in the poor schools, Convent schools for boarding and day pupils were quickly established alongside. These were necessary to furnish her with future sisters and money for the apostolic work. Therefore when, in 1886,

Canon Hugh Chisholm, parish priest of St. Mirin's Paisley, asked Mother Josephine Petit, the second Superior General, for sisters to take charge of St. Catherine's School, St. Margaret's Convent School for boarding and day pupils was quickly established.

The Scottish Catholic Directory of 1890 records their coming under the entry for St. Mirin's Church, p.158, "St. Catherine's Schools (i.e. girls and infants) are under the charge of the Faithful Companions of Jesus who also conduct a Middle Class School in the Convent with much success...."

The Faithful Companions of Jesus entered into possession of the Convent erected in this Mission in 1888, on the Feast of the Purification in 1889, but the formal opening took place on 18th February. His Grace the Archbishop (Eyre), the Provost and the greater part of the Chapter and a large number of priests and laity attended the ceremony. Mass was celebrated ... and a discourse, appropriate to the occasion, was delivered by the Archbishop on the revival of conventual life in Paisley after a break of more than three centuries, (that is, from the time of the destruction of Paisley Abbey)."

"The Convent which is situated in East Buchanan Street opposite the church (the old church was on the opposite side of the street from the present Cathedral House) is a handsome three-storied building amply supplied with all requisites for the nuns and their pupils, and with a garden attached. The plans were furnished by Messrs. Pugin of Westminster. This is the first house which these Religious have occupied in Scotland, but in England they have numerous establishments."

The nuns tell how they arrived late on Friday night, 1st February 1889. They had brought a hamper of food, sufficient for a week. In the refectory there was a large mahogany telescope table from the Great Eastern and a dozen chairs. The dormitory, common room and chapel were furnished - the other rooms were empty. That night they could not sleep; the good Canon, in his anxiety lest they be cold during their first night in Scotland, had turned the heating so high that they were roasted. But, they felt blessed by the people they had come to serve, for an old Irish woman had come into the bench behind them as they prayed in the church, and after counting them in a loud voice (they were eight in number) she exclaimed, "Thank God you have come and may the Almighty God bless you." When they awoke on the morning of 2nd February the ground was covered with snow.

On Monday, 4th February, they were warmly welcomed to St. Catherine's School by the priests, teachers and children. On Monday, 18th February, Archbishop Eyre of Glasgow officiated at the solemn opening and blessing of the Convent and, on Wednesday, 20th February, the day school opened in the Convent with seventeen pupils, three of whom travelled every day from Johnstone and were later to enter the Society, (M.M. Gertrude Daly, M. Julia Daly and M.M. Agne Daly).

About this time the teachers from St. Catherine's were invited to spend an evening at the Convent. As they became more at home they confessed that they had intended emigrating to America rather than have nuns over them, but now they were only too happy to remain as long as the Sisters would keep them.

From these humble beginnings developed the work of F.C.J.s in Paisley. The Sisters were encouraged by their Mother Provincial to be faithful to the Spirit of the Society in the generosity of their service. She used often to say "We must wear out, not rust out; here in Paisley each one is expected to do the work of three." In addition to the work in the schools and in the Sunday schools, the Sisters immediately took charge of the various sodalities - the Children of Mary, the Holy Angels for the girls who had just left school, and they formed a Confraternity of Christian Mothers under the patronage of St. Monica. These Sodalities met in the Convent every week, and held a monthly Communion. In the beginning, because of their already heavy commitments, it was not possible to open night schools, but 'Clubs' were started for recent school leavers and for those part-timers in the mills who wished for further instruction, not only in

religious knowledge but also in 3 R's and other basic subjects, as well as in country dancing. When the clubs were no longer needed for further education, they provided centres for recreational and dramatic activities for girls and young women. St. Mirin's, St. Mary's and St. Charles's clubs flourished right through the blackout days of World War II until they were taken over by paid Youth Leaders.

In a town where materials and cottons were in plentiful supply, the teaching of all forms of needlework played an important part in the schools and clubs. A Sewing Class was also held in the Convent every Monday evening for those who wished to come. As well as plying the needle for their own benefit, each group was taught to serve the needs of the church - repairing and making vestments, altar linen and articles for the many sales of work.

The Sisters supported the work of Leo XIII in encouraging devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to Our Lady, devotions traditional in the Society. The Convent became a Centre in the area for the Apostleship of Prayer, and the Feast of the Sacred Heart was celebrated with great solemnity. St. Catherine's schoolchildren formed the mainstay of the congregation in St. Mirin's parish for May and October devotions, and there were processions in honour of Our Lady at the end of the month. Long before 8th December ever became a holyday in Scotland (1919) the F.C.J. Annals refer to the solemn celebration of the feast of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament became a focal point of Sunday school and sodality meetings. After the introduction of Pius X's decrees on early and frequent Communion (1905, 1910), the numbers (in the hundreds) of those attending Daily Mass and receiving Holy Communion were phenomenal.

As the Sisters increased in number so did their work which, for the most part, was closely linked with the growth of the Church in Paisley. St. Mary's in the West End had been established as a separate parish in 1876; in 1899 F.C.J.s took charge of St. Mary's School along with the Sunday school, the Children of Mary, and later the Girls' Club. When St. Mirin's established two more Chapel-Schools, the Sisters helped in St. Charles's in the South End (1898) and in the North End in St. James's where the Chapel-School was housed in a disused mill by the Cart (1901), the chapel on the ground floor and the school on the other three storeys. Both these schools were formed by the transfer of pupils from St. Catherine's whose numbers still continued to expand.

In 1905 the Sisters were asked to take charge of the school in the newly-formed parish of St. Luke's in the Gorbals area of Glasgow. The migratory and deprived nature of this area made the work very difficult. Many children came starving to school especially during the not-infrequent strikes and the money from St. Anthony's Bread had to be used to provide food for them. Two Sisters went to St. Luke's every Tuesday evening to run the Guild of St. Philomena for the girls who had left school. In 1906 F.C.J.s purchased a rest house in Gourrock and were in turn asked to take charge of St. Ninian's School. This they did for one year because, in 1907, their services were requested in St. James's School, Renfrew. In short, in 1909, twenty years after their arrival in Paisley the Sisters were responsible for some 3,628 children in six parish schools, 440 adult sodalists in Paisley alone, and some 300 boarding and day pupils in St. Margaret's Convent.

Also, shortly after their arrival in 1889 they had been asked by a Catholic lady in Bishopton to come, at her expense, to teach catechism to the Catholic children who perforce had to attend the Protestant school. The number of Catholics was too few to justify a parish and Mass was celebrated there only once a month. Two Sisters went every Saturday to Bishopton and they had first to round up the children before they could teach them anything. This Saturday school in Bishopton continued until about 1948, when it became possible for the children to travel to St. James's School, Renfrew.

In addition to this, there was the instruction of converts. In the beginning the classes were large - twenty to thirty in a class. This work continues to the present day though, of course, the converts now come in ones or twos.

Meanwhile the education of Catholic girls at secondary level had gone on apace at St. Margaret's Convent School. In 1896 the top classes were recognised as a secondary department, in 1900 the school qualified as a Science and Arts Centre, in 1904 it became a Higher Grade School, and in 1907 it was officially recognised by the Scottish Education Department. The status and efficiency of the school attracted pupils from all the surrounding districts, and boarders came from as far as the Highlands and Islands. In 1914 when the school celebrated its Silver Jubilee in the presence of the Papal Envoy to Scotland, Archbishop Lépicier, the school was flourishing. A new chapel had been erected in 1902 and two new wings (1905, 1914) had been added to the original school buildings, all fully equipped according to the requirements of the Scottish Education Department. It was for this celebration that Mother Philomena Kelly (Superior and Headmistress 1893-1918) composed the school song based on the words of the newly adopted school motto, 'Loyale je serais durant ma vie'. As her interest in the girls also extended beyond their school years Mother Philomena formed about this time St. Margaret's Former Pupils Association.

Catholic teachers were a prime need of the Church in Scotland, especially after education became compulsory in 1872. Archbishop Eyre, impressed by the work of F.C.J.s in Paisley, and aware that they had already established a Pupil Teachers' Centre in St. Margaret's, asked the Sisters in the early 1890's to found a Training College for women teachers in Glasgow. Because of their already heavy commitments the Sisters did not have the personnel for this work and so the pioneering in this field was, with known success, undertaken by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. But the number of students who could be admitted into Dowanhill College was still unequal to the demand for Catholic teachers so, in 1912, a Junior Students' Centre with its up to date curriculum replaced the older Pupil Teachers' Centre in St. Margaret's. The Government decided that all teachers must be qualified and, as the opportunities of obtaining the necessary qualifications were few, the Convent offered assistance by opening Evening and Saturday classes. Thus by 1918 three hundred teachers had been helped to obtain their final qualifications.

In 1917 Archbishop Maguire of Glasgow, realising that a second Training College would be necessary to meet the increased demand for teachers which would be consequent on the passing of the Scottish Education Act 1918, asked the Faithful Companions of Jesus to undertake this work. In 1919 a property was bought at Netherhill on the Renfrew Road with the intention of opening the college in 1920. In January 1920 notice was received from the Scottish Education Department that the opening of Craiglockhart College in Edinburgh made a third college unnecessary. The Netherhill property was however retained.

The Community moved into Netherhill House and while they continued to teach in the old school they started the building of a new school in the Convent grounds. In 1922 St. Margaret's School moved to its new site on the Renfrew Road. The original house in East Buchanan Street became the Chapel House, and the greatly extended school buildings provided much-needed accommodation for the secondary education of the Catholic boys of Paisley and District. This work had been developing in cramped conditions on the top floor of St. James's School. Now it was given the opportunity to evolve into St. Mirin's Academy for Boys.

The Scottish Education Act 1918 revolutionised Catholic education in Scotland and relieved the Church and the Religious Societies of many educational and financial burdens. But, though F.C.J. Annals record their appreciation on receiving equipment and other benefits previously beyond their means, each successive re-organisation of schools seemed to mark a shrinking of F.C.J. apostolate in Paisley. The Sisters had already withdrawn from St. Charles's in 1915 and from St. James's, Renfrew in 1918. They were to leave St. Luke's, Glasgow, in 1922. St. Margaret's became a Senior Secondary School with a small fee-paying Primary Department. St. Catherine's, St. Mary's and St. James's became large Primary Schools. During the Second World War (1939-1945) the whole of St. Margaret's School building was requisitioned, first for Polish soldiers and later for the Royal Air Force. The house in Gourrock was also requisitioned for the Royal Navy.

Rather than see the school divided up the Sisters made accommodation available for the day-pupils in the boarding school building. Every available space was used - the dormitories and linen rooms, the study hall and the refectory, the playroom; even the corridors accommodated two classes on each floor. But, in spite of the serious inconveniences to all concerned and to the community, the standard of work was maintained, the public examinations continued as usual, the reputation of the school grew and the number of pupils increased. As St. Mirin's Academy was also requisitioned St. James's, now housed in a fine new building in the Shortroods area, shared their accommodation with St. Mirin's boys. St. Catherine's and St. Mary's became Emergency Rest Centres. It was a great relief when the schools could return to their own school buildings and normal conditions were restored in 1946.

Circumstances brought it about that several of the Sisters, each with thirty to forty years' service, came to retiring age about the same time. Their retirements coincided with the end of World War II and with the introduction of secondary education for all. In the readjustments that followed, the Sisters withdrew from St. Mary's (1945) and strengthened their numbers in St. James's which now developed a girls' Junior Secondary Department numbering for some years over a thousand girls, whilst its Primary roll was five to six hundred pupils. At this time, 1950's to 1960's, St. Margaret's and St. James's were responsible for the education of all the Catholic secondary girls in Paisley, Renfrew and the surrounding areas. In 1964 a new wing and a fully equipped sports hall were added to St. Margaret's to accommodate the growing numbers and the new educational requirements. However, in 1967, consequent upon further reorganisation plans, the Sisters withdrew from St. James's and St. Margaret's became a Senior High School. The same year the boarding school closed and the building. 1975 saw Regionalisation in Scotland and in 1976 Strathclyde Regional Council decided to amalgamate St. Mirin's Academy and St. Margaret's High School. The F.C.J.s relinquished the Headship, though Sisters remained teaching in the school until 1981. The headship of St. Catherine's had been relinquished in 1970 and in 1973 the school moved from the old buildings in Canal Street to new school buildings in Brabloch Crescent, i. e. onto St. Margaret's former hockey field. The last Sister withdrew from St. Catherine's staff in 1979.

Thus, the wheel had now come full circle - the work for which the Sisters came originally was now completed. The schools were in the hands of the Catholic teachers for whose upbuilding and formation the Sisters had worked for 92 years.

One further bond remained to be loosened. In 1978 the F.C.J.s left Netherhill and St. Mirin's Parish and moved into a smaller house in Riccarton Avenue in St. Mary's Parish. Now the Sisters of this small community are fully committed to the life of the local church. Some work as parish Sisters in St. Mary's. They are extraordinary ministers to the sick and the housebound in their own homes and are involved in family visiting. They also visit the Royal Alexandra Hospital and some old people's homes; they are involved in the R.C.I.A. programme in the Deanery. They hold sewing classes on three afternoons and one evening in the week. Thus, the F.C.J.s are continuing to serve the people of Paisley.

Since September 1987 another apostolate, one dear to the heart of the Foundress, has opened up the F.C.J.s in Scotland. They are co-operating with the Jesuits in the Craighead Retreat Centre, Bothwell. There they are fully involved in Retreat work of all kinds and in workshops on Spirituality based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. This work extends beyond the Centre into parishes, schools and youth projects, and into the third tier educational world. It stretches beyond the boundaries of the Glasgow Archdiocese into the Motherwell Diocese, where it is situated, and is open to people of all faiths. An Institute of Life and Faith has also been initiated with a non-residential base in Garnethill Centre, Glasgow. This is undertaking Leadership Training courses especial for small groups in the Christian community and a year's part-time course on the Integration of Life and Faith. All of which work is making a reality of the Foundress's desire that her Society should be involved in the work of Retreats.

On the occasion of the Centenary, the Faithful Companions of Jesus are collaborating with the Paisley Diocese in the launching of a new Young Adult Ministry Programme. With the support of Bishop Mone and the priests who are the

newly appointed Deanery Youth Co-ordinators, the first six week programme will take place at St. Margaret's Convent, Paisley. This will be led by the F.C.J.s on the Craighead team.