

## F.C.J. Secondary School Bunclody - History (1861 – 2009)

Bunclody, a small town in Co. Wexford was called Newtownbarry when the F.C.J.sisters came in 1861. Bunclody was the original name of the town but it was renamed Newtownbarry when the Barry family became the local landlords. Following a local referendum in 1950, the town reverted to its original name.

Following the famine years in Ireland, there was great poverty and basic education was much needed by the youth in the towns and villages. Father Parle, the curate in Bunclody was very aware of this and determined to do what he could to improve the educational facilities in his parish. Strong oral tradition in the Convent and in the area suggests that Fr. Parle first encountered the Sisters when he was a student in the seminary in Paris. At any rate he applied to the Superior General of the Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus to send Sisters to provide much needed education for the children of the area.

The Superior General agreed to send Sisters and so Reverend Mother Josephine Petit, Superior General and Mother Marie de Bussy, Assistant General arrived on the 5 August 1861. They were assisted by the Provincial Superior of the Irish houses at Laurel Hill and Bruff together with two other Sisters. Father Parle's house, adjacent to the parish church was transformed into a convent and an annexe added to house a community. Five Sisters: Lucy Fletcher, Ellen Blacket, Mary Philomena Parsons, Teresa Ann Murray, Elizabeth Graham, Mary Redman and Frances Sheehan formed the first community. They immediately took over the running of the girl's primary school but they did not limit their work to primary education.

The F.C.J. sisters had a tradition of working with boarders, having a number of such schools in their Society, on the Continent, in England and more recently in Limerick. So it seemed the most suitable way of providing post primary education in the South Leinster area. We know little about the early days. However we do know that on August 10, 1861, five days after the arrival of the Faithful Companions of Jesus in Bunclody, a notice appeared in "The People" newspaper announcing the Sisters' intention of opening a Boarding School. "to afford to parents an opportunity of giving to their children a good religious education". We know that the school must have thrived from the beginning as the records show that in 1864, the community consisted of ten sisters but two years later this number rose to sixteen and from 1877 there were twenty five sisters in the Convent. We do not know for sure if day pupils were taken from the beginning but school records of 1865 give 54 as the number of students; 39 boarders and 15 day-students. Oral tradition tells us that the day pupils were the children of Church of Ireland families in the area and that Catholic day students were not taken until much later. What is certainly true is that Church of Ireland students were always part of the day pupil intake and there were always very harmonious relations with the local Church of Ireland community with a significant number of Church of Ireland students attending the school.

One of the sisters who had a deep and lasting influence on the life of the Convent in Bunclody was Mother Victoire Henahan. She had come to the convent as Superior in 1883 at the age of twenty nine and she was also in charge of the secondary school for a number of years. There is little doubt that it is no small coincidence that her arrival coincides with a period of expansion and building both in the primary and secondary schools. In 1894, a refectory (dining room), study hall and dormitory were built. In 1898, the lady Chapel, junior study and linen room were added. In 1906, a science laboratory, art room and domestic science kitchen were built to accommodate new curriculum requirements. Finally in 1909, recreation rooms, music rooms and extra dormitories were built. It was under the guidance of Mother Victoire also that the Golden Jubilee celebrations of 1911 were celebrated with great style and ceremony.

The Halldare family were the local landlord family and following the marriage of the heir to a wealthy young woman it was decided to build a house in keeping with their wealthy status and so began the building of the present demesne house “Ballinapark House”. There were no suitable tradesmen in the area for the building of the proposed house so after a long search, tradesmen of the needed high standard were brought from Wales to do the work. The house took several years to build. The Hughes family did the building and the Roberts family were responsible for the carpentry. As the work neared completion the Halldare family were anxious to reduce the number on the work force but the men were having none of this and declared that they would all return together to Wales. However, Mother Victoire needed carpenters and builders and so the dilemma of the families was solved as the workers transferred across the road to begin the extension. The buildings erected were remarkably similar to the Halldare building though less elaborate. The wood panelling, the tiling and the windows were identical. Both families then settled in the area for good. Today and for many years in the past, the descendents of these families have attended the secondary school.

The school continued to flourish during the years that followed and earned a strong reputation for its high academic standards- a reputation richly deserved. The F.C.J. Sisters who taught in the school were very committed teachers and anxious that the students in their care would do well as they knew that these students would have to earn their own living when they left school. It was also an incentive that many of the brothers of the students in the school were boarders in St. Peter’s school in Wexford and it was important that the students there were not seen to outdo their sisters in St. Mary’s Bunclody in public academic achievement!



The only building that took place in the intervening years was in 1964 when a concert hall, locker rooms and classrooms were built. Secondary education, though State funded was not free, and only a limited section of the population could avail of it so there was no demand for further expansion in the years that followed. During these years, Ireland underwent a long period of economic stagnation, following the emergence of the Free State. The “Economic War” between Ireland and England from 1932 to 1938, though politically popular, led to an agricultural stagnation that seriously affected the country and money was very scarce indeed. There was little growth during the 1950’s; indeed these years are often referred to as the ‘hungry fifties’. It was only in the late 1950’s under the enlightened leadership of Sean Lemass that economic growth took off.

From 1967, the Irish Education scene changed dramatically thanks to the courage and insight of Donnchadha O’Malley, Minister of Education, who introduced ‘Free Secondary Education’ in that year. While the dramatic announcement of ‘Free Education’ took the population at large by total

surprise and was the talk of the summer of 1967, it was both popular and much needed if economic progress was to expand and be sustained. Not only was education to be free in all secondary schools that opted for it (over 95%) but free buses were provided in September for the students who attended these schools. Dramatic expansion of schools followed including St. Mary's in Bunclody.

In 1969, boys were enrolled for the first time. It was the beginning of a new era that was to profoundly affect the development and character of the school. In today's era of consultation with the need for setting up of committees and sub-committees, such a marked initiative would appear to have necessitated wide consultation and planning. But it was not so. Secondary education for boys was not available in the town – the vocational school established in 1950 only offered the Group Cert – an examination taken after two years, which was the normal entry requirement to the trades of carpentry, plumbing etc. So boys who wished to avail of a secondary school education had either the choice of cycling eleven miles to Enniscorthy to the Christian Brothers' school, or attending the boarding school in St. Peter's College in Wexford.

Sr. Barbara Kennedy, who was a teacher in the Secondary school was also sacristan in the Parish Church and among many other duties trained the altar boys. She asked the boys who were 6<sup>th</sup> class students in the local primary school where they were going to school in September and they replied that they were going to St. Peter's but that they would prefer to go to the Convent. She suggested that they would go up to the Convent and ask Reverend Mother to go to school there. Three or four boys presented at the Convent, asked for Reverend Mother and made their request to her. Reverend Mother, Sr. Zoe O'Connell, had taught and worked for most of her life in Canada and the U.S. and was used to co-education. She looked at the boys who were 'dressed up' for the visit to the Convent and pronounced that they looked like nice boys and she was sure they were nice boys and that they would be very welcome in September. They went home to spread the word of their welcome and she went to the Principal, Sr. Margaret (Gonzague) Hayes, and told her that she had said the boys would be welcome. Sr. Margaret, an eminently practical woman, made no comment other than to say that boy's toilets would be needed and she sent for Andy Mahon, a local builder, who was always called on when need arose. Fourteen boys presented in September. Today, in 2009, boys number 390 and form fifth percent of the student body.

Until 1986, apart from the occasional part-time lay teacher, the school was staffed by members of the F.C.J. Society mainly because lay teachers were few in number and unwilling to come to a rural school, which had very poor public transport. In 1968 Laura Lennon who had married locally was appointed as a fulltime lay teacher. Then, to the relief of the Principal, three young local people qualified as teachers and were promptly employed by the school. Kathleen MacMullan (née Murphy), Mary Nagle (née O'Leary) and Tony O'Loughlin. From that time onwards, more and more lay teachers were employed. In 2008, Sr. Madeleine Ryan retired and since there was no F.C.J. to replace her as Principal, the position was advertised nationally and Ms Frances Threadgold, the Deputy Principal was appointed by the Board of Management to replace her. Today in 2009, there are fifty lay-teachers, one full-time FC.J. Sister and one part – time F.C.J. Sister teaching in the school.

A prefabricated building was also erected during 1968 which added classrooms, a cloakroom, science laboratory and art room to the school. At this time of writing, a framed photograph in the reception room in the school shows the official opening of that building which was attended by Dr. Herlihy, Bishop of Ferns. In that photograph is a young teacher, Tony O'Loughlin, who was the first fulltime male teacher. In 1975, he was appointed Vice-Principal; the first such appointment in the school and a role he continued to occupy until his appointment as Principal of the Christian Brother's Secondary School, Carlow, in 1986.

With student enrolment increasing annually (1961: 135 students; 1971: 262 students; 1981: 540 students, 1991: 578 students, 2001: 701 students and today 2009: 779 students) additional accommodation became a priority from the end of the 1970's. Ten prefabricated classrooms were first provided with the aid of a Department of Education grant and F.C.J. community resources. In 1986 the new red brick building opened (now named St. Patrick's), providing classrooms, cloakrooms, offices & staff room, biology & physics laboratories, sports hall, language laboratory, art room, library, domestic science kitchen and sewing room. Funding was provided by the Department. of Education and fundraising in the school catchment area. Around this time too, the school, though officially known as "St. Mary's" was much more commonly known as 'the Convent'. At a Staff Meeting, the name 'F.C.J. Secondary School' was suggested and adapted and soon it became so widely and popularly accepted that many would not believe it could have ever had another name.



As the number in the school grew, the number of active Sisters in the Community declined in number and a decision was taken at the time of a General Visitation by the Superior General of the F.C.J. Society in 1981 to close the boarding school. This closure took place over five years and each year, vacated dormitories were occupied by the school as general classrooms. In June 1986 the boarding school finally closed after 125 years. That autumn there was a big re-union of past-pupils, mainly boarders, who wished to meet and reminisce about time spent in the school.

Meanwhile the school continued to thrive. Academic achievement continued to be very important in the school but many other activities were initiated. Musicals, drama productions, orchestra and a variety of games including hurling, football, camogie and basketball continued to be important to the life of the school.

By 1990, change was in the air as the Department of Education began a process of modernisation. Schools were encouraged to set up Boards of Management to reflect the various parties with a vested interest in the education of the students in schools. So in 1996 the first Board of Management was established with Mr. Tim Geraghty, Principal of St. Tiernan's Community School in Dundrum, as Chairperson.



As the number of boys increased, it became evident that more practical subjects were needed to accommodate their natural aptitudes and interests. In 1998 new construction studies and engineering rooms [St. Aidan's Building] were erected and funded by the F.C.J. Society. Teachers were also employed to teach these subjects. The old boarding school, which had increasingly accommodated students since 1982 was in a very poor state of repair by 1990 and it was clear that it would have to be extensively renovated or replaced. A Department of Education official visited and declared the building was unsuitable for renovation and said a new building was the only way forward. So began the long and protracted negotiation with the Department of Education to fund a replacement building. This was made all the more urgent as the old boarding school had become increasingly dilapidated and fears for the safety of the students had grown. Finally permission was given and in October 2001, tenders were accepted for a new extension to replace the Boarding School. In early 2003,

the new building, 'St. Victoire's was completed and occupied and the old boarding school was vacated.

Since the original building was planned, the numbers in the school had increased and space was very tight. So when the old Boarding School was demolished, a new extension replaced it, which was funded by the F.C.J. Society. This building is known as 'the d'Houet Building'. The 2003 St. Victoire building was located on the tennis / basket-ball courts but the Department of Education refused to replace them, citing lack of funds. So new basketball / tennis courts, funded by the F.C.J. Society, were provided and the library was converted to music tuition rooms, an office and resource room. The library is now located in room 46 in the d'Houet building. Finally the home economics kitchen & room 68 were refurbished over the summer of 2007. The kitchen (Room 24 - St. Patrick's Building), was in use since 1986 and needed modernising and replacement / renovation of many of the fittings and furniture. Room 68 (St. Victoire's Building) was only built in 2002, but had to be updated to cater for the new Leaving Certificate subject, "Design & Communications Graphics", which has replaced Technical Drawing. Much of the work in this new subject is done on computers so the drawing desks, etc. were replaced by computer work stations. This refurbishment was paid from school savings.

Nationally, the number of religious sisters working in schools throughout the country had seriously declined and it was becoming very evident that the different religious Congregations would not be able to continue the trusteeship of their schools. Facing this reality, twelve religious Congregations, each of whom had only a small number of schools in Ireland, came together to provide a solution to their situation. The F.C.J. Society was one of these Congregations. 'Le Chéile' was established to form a single trusteeship to protect the ethos and interests of their schools and was officially launched in May 2009 in Mullingar and so the school is now at the beginning of a new era in the history of Irish education.

Sr. Madeleine Ryan FCJ

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