

LAUREL HILL SECONDARY SCHOOL F.C.J. LIMERICK

Marie Madeleine Victoire de Bengy, foundress of the Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus, was born on 21 September 1781, at Chateauroux in Northern France. She was the eldest of five children of Sylvain de Bengy and his wife, Marie de Congny de la Presle. Victoire's childhood gives us a glimpse of the life of a noble French family in the latter half of the 18th Century. What strikes one is the Christian atmosphere. Church feasts were honoured and its laws observed. The education of the children was the constant concern of Monsieur and Madame de Bengy.

When Victoire was ten years old, the French Revolution caused the family to move hastily to the countryside. This meant a complete change of circumstances for the family as poverty and fear became the order of the day. Her father, Chevalier de Bengy was sent to prison but was eventually released in 1794. Abbe Claveau was given shelter by the family and acted as their chaplain as well as giving religious instruction to the children.

When she was eighteen years old, Victoire became seriously ill but later recovered. At the age of twenty three a marriage was arranged between Marie Madeleine and Joseph de Bonnault d'Houet. On 24 August 1804 they were married in Bourges Cathedral. Theirs was a very happy marriage. They rivalled each other serving the poor and visiting the sick in the local hospitals. Joseph became ill, his illness being contracted during his visits to the sick. He died in July 1805.

A son, Eugene, was born seven weeks after his father's death on 23 September 1805. Her husband's death left Victoire distraught. His love and companionship, his gentleness and Christian fervour had been important influences on her life. In November 1814 Victoire travelled from Bourges to Amiens. The Jesuit College had re-opened there and she decided to enrol her son, Eugene.

As years passed, Victoire found that the pleasures in life were becoming less important to her and prayer more important. She had thought of re-marrying. During the years 1817 to 1820, much prayer, enlightenment from God, and difficulties regarding the future course of her life were Victoire's, showing her the way forward.

On Holy Thursday, 30 March 1820, while she prayed before the Altar of Repose, the Society of the Sisters faithful Companions of Jesus was born. Daughter, sister, wife, mother, Victoire was now the foundress of the F.C.J. Society. Her first house was established in Amiens, in France. With two young girls, who joined her, she began teaching seven poor children to read, write, pray and work. During her lifetime Marie Madeleine founded Convents and schools - both free and fee-paying in France, Switzerland, England and Ireland.

In 1842 the parish priest of Oughterard , Co. Galway, Dr. Kirwan, had come to London on a preaching tour to collect funds for the re-roofing and refurbishment of his parish church in Oughterard. He was invited by Abbé Nerincks to preach at Somers Town, London, where the F.C.J.'s had a foundation. He met the F.C.J.'s there and saw the great work they were doing. He then visited the Convent at Gumley House, outside London, founded on 25 March 1841. He had come to ask the foundress to send some sisters to establish an Irish foundation.

Ireland at that time was suffering the after-effects of the Penal Laws and the need for Catholic education was urgent. Would Madame d'Houet send some of her religious sisters to Oughterard ? Yes, she would. In February 1843 the sisters started the foundation in Oughterard.

The next request came for a foundation in Limerick. Father William Burke, Administrator of St. John's Parish, Limerick invited Madame d'Houet to come to Limerick. Brother James Patrick Walsh, an Irish Christian Brother, worked in London in 1837 and came into contact with the F.C.J sisters working there. He was most supportive of the sisters as they arrived in Limerick on 5 September 1844. Madame d'Houet came to Limerick herself to "see to every detail regarding the foundation". It was decided that a Day and Boarding school should be opened in Limerick, in view of providing for the needs of the children of well- to- do parents, who were sending their children to England to be educated. The poor of the city were already well catered for by the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Sisters.

The Day school was opened at Number 1, the Crescent, on 24th February 1845, with 33 pupils. The property of Laurel Hill was purchased in the summer of 1845 from the Limerick Quaker family, Newsome. On the 26th June 1845 the boarding school began with 11 pupils. One part of the Deed of Assignment reads that the property was "to be used as a place for the instruction of females in general knowledge and in the principles of the Christian religion according to the rites and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, in such a manner and under such rules and regulations as the said Marie Madeleine d'Houet during her life or the trustees for the time being..... shall from time to time order and direct". The property of Laurel was thus acquired and the negotiations sealed.

In October, 1845, the large central building, sixty feet high and fifty- four feet in length, was begun under the personal supervision of Marie Madeleine d'Houet. The foundation was solemnly blessed by Dr. Ryan, Bishop of Limerick, on 12 November. The building was completed in the autumn of 1846, just a year later. It was opened to the public, who

came from all parts to admire it and to gaze on the beautiful, panoramic view of the river Shannon and the Clare hills, from the fourth storey windows.

During the terrible famine of 1847, the sisters tended to the hunger-stricken people who came to their convent doors. Bishop Butler came to bless the Chapel in 1863.

In 1903, following the early death of her mother, a six year old girl came to the school. This schoolgirl spent 12 years at Laurel Hill and went on to become a fine novelist. Kate O'Brien wrote about her native place, and her novel 'The Land of Spices' vividly portrayed her old school, and perhaps above all, its nuns.

Laurel Hill school was very successful, and numerous building programmes were undertaken to cater for the increase in numbers. In 1908 a new day school was built and housed 80 pupils but by 1912 enrolment had increased to 300. The F.C.J. annals of 1923 tell us that the school was not only renowned for its academic achievements but also for its school choirs, its music, needlework, art and drawing.

In 1935 the sisters undertook another important and significant educational initiative with the founding of an 'A' school at Laurel Hill. In the early 1930's the Irish Government promoted education through the medium of Irish in Primary and Secondary schools in areas outside the Gaeltacht. Tadhg O'Tuama, a Department of Education Inspector urged the setting up of an 'A' School at Laurel Hill. It started with 50 boarding and day school students. In order to distinguish their two schools at Laurel Hill, the sisters decided to give the title 'C' school to the first established secondary school, where subjects were taught through the medium of English. Thus the 'A' and 'C' school titles originated in the Department of Education to distinguish the language medium of the school and did not imply any form of streaming.

In 1950 the new Annus Sanctus building was erected on Laurel Hill Avenue for the Secondary School and continued to accommodate the students for 40 years there. As the years passed by, many pre-fabs were erected as student numbers increased. On 20 November 1954 the extended Chapel was re-dedicated to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

In 1967 Laurel Hill schools entered the free education scheme and in 1969 a new building, grant aided by the Department of Education was opened. This building had class rooms and specialist rooms to cater for increasing numbers and an expanding curriculum.

On the sports front, 1976 saw the provision of the first all-weather pitch and in 1997 a new gymnasium. In 1986 the Boarding school closed with the last 11 pupils. The first

Boarding school opened with 11 pupils also. A Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated and a large gathering of past-pupils of the boarding school attended.

With the closure of the boarding school, the 1845 central building was renovated and converted for school use. In 1990 the two Laurel Hill schools exchanged buildings. Laurel Hill 'A' school relocated to the Annus Sanctus building and the 'C' school to the 'A' school and boarding school area. The sisters vacated all areas they had occupied, except the St. Joseph's block, and these were given for school use.

In 1994 a Mass was concelebrated at St. John's Cathedral, Limerick to thank God for 150 years of FCJ presence in Limerick. The Cathedral was filled to capacity.

In 1997 the sisters gave the St. Joseph's building Secondary School. Renovations were made to include a Religion room, a Music room and sixth class rooms. In 1997 the FCJ sisters vested the Management of each secondary school to a Board Management but continued as Trustees of the schools.



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The two schools now renamed Laurel Hill Secondary School and Laurel Hill Coláiste share the grounds, the chapel, the playing fields, the tennis courts and the Science Labs.

In 1999 Mr. Adrian Cantillon was appointed the first Lay Principal of Laurel Hill Secondary School.



Laurel Hill Secondary School continues to-day as an all girls school of 600 pupils and a teaching staff of 40.

In 2009 Laurel Hill Schools joined the Le Chéile Catholic Schools Trust, with 12 other congregations.

It is now 164 years since the FCJ sisters came to Limerick and during that time Laurel Hill has seen many changes in the social and economic life of Limerick. In the rapidly changing world of education Laurel Hill remains one of the finest of its kind in Ireland. It has expanded and evolved as part of the FCJ international network of educational establishments to become a leading school in Ireland.