

Perspectives on the Pandemic from one Retreat and Conference Centre

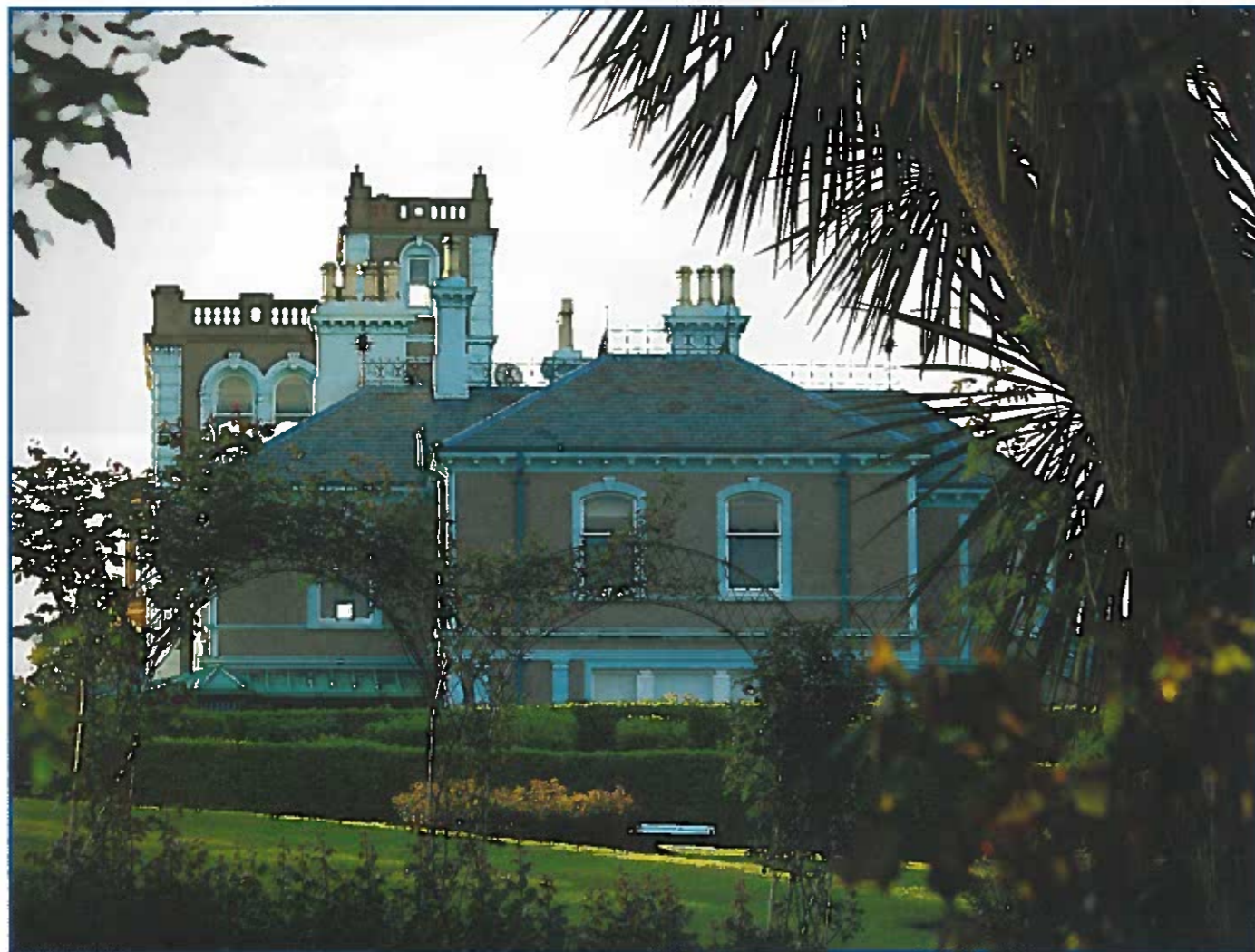


Photo: Drumalis Retreat and Conference Centre

On 19 March 1930, the Sisters of the Cross and Passion moved into Drumalis, the 'big house' in Larne, a staunchly Unionist town on the Antrim Coast. It was almost a military operation because of the apparent need of secrecy! The sisters, who taught in the local primary school, were told to be on the veranda of the house for 6pm and to enter the grounds in pairs and at different entry points. After the children had gone home, they trundled little handcars with their bed and bedding up the hill to the big house at dusk.

Who could have guessed that 90 years later, on 19 March 2020, we would not be celebrating the anniversary as planned but shutting our doors and, along with the rest of the country, entering a period of lockdown and withdrawal? Just as the original sisters had witnessed the

devastating effects of the 1918 flu pandemic, so too the current sisters, the extended community of Drumalis, the staff and retreatants had to come to terms with a global destabilisation of lives, jobs and expectations, the loss of a sense of predictability and the control we in the First World believe we hold.

As the pandemic unfolded and after much prayer, discussion and consultation, the management of the centre made the painful and difficult decision to extend the lockdown until the Spring of 2021.

The implications of this recent announcement were grim: staff cutbacks, an empty building, a lonely garden, loss of personal contact with the wider community of support. Above all, this temporary closure was a complete financial disaster which could have

disastrous consequences in the long term. And yet, from this apparent annihilation so much good has emerged.

Reactions to the situation have been compassionate. There is disappointment, concern, worry and sympathy for the resident community and the support staff, who are still maintaining this beautiful centre. There is sadness, loneliness and a sense of loss. People see it as a wise decision, but one which will cut off access to a beloved place of nourishment for soul and body.

Hot on the heels of all these sympathetic reactions, came one response from a friend who was delighted to read about the re-opening of Drumalis in the springtime. Her reading of the announcement brought a totally different perspective to the situation. She was energised by our optimism, courage

and sense of hope. We now realise that the future is determined by how we read the present reality – a terminal situation of doom and gloom, or an invitation to take stock, to re-visit the ministry of the centre and look for the opportunities it offers. We are being called into the so called 'new normal' which must be different. Life and ministry in the Retreat Centre may never be the same again, this is our chance to accept the challenge and look at the invitations emerging out of the global pandemic.

How we choose to deal with the situation, depends totally on how we see it. Just as the original sisters responded to their situation with imagination and flair, we too anticipate using this fallow time creatively, seeing it as an opportunity to re-equip ourselves to serve a world and a church which will be much changed by the global catastrophe. During these quiet months we have come to realise that the people and Church we belong to and serve have changed, never to return. The ecological crisis has come sharply into focus. When we look at the conditions of countries where the virus has been most virulent, the social inequalities and injustices of our world are clear for all to see. The evidence that climate change, pollution and consumerism have contributed to the spread of the pandemic is an invitation to open to new possibilities within the retreat ministry. We have a choice as to how we respond – bewail our losses or take up the challenge which this new world is calling us into.

From this perspective on the situation, the positive creative approach is already generating new energy and creativity. We, the sisters, have experienced in a tangible way the level of support which surrounds us, the sense of ownership and responsibility many of our supporters feel towards Drumalis, their spiritual home. During this time of isolation, we have come to know that we are not alone.

We are finding new ways of delivering retreats and courses. With the help of



Photo: Drumalis Retreat and Conference Centre



Photo: Lisa Johnson.com

technologically experienced supporters we have moved all the courses online. Directed Retreats, community meetings, prayer and liturgies are being offered by Zoom, some attracting greater numbers and international participation because location is no longer an issue.

Early on in the shut-down Drumalis hosted a three session seminar on 'The Church Unlocked: the Church after Covid' which opened up a new discussion on how we can maintain our membership and sense of belonging to a community which is deprived of the familiar channels of spiritual nourishment, when traditional practice is not possible. While availing of the possibilities of the virtual world, the challenge here is how to combine them with the ethos of welcome, personal encounter and care that is at the heart of retreat centres.

Yes, it all depends how we read the situation; the choice is ours. Do we proceed as usual or adapt to a new world? Let us not despair at the empty spaces in our places of prayer. We can also see them as new spaces opening for

renewal and enrichment of our faith and practice. Or, as a recent writer to *The Tablet* suggested, let us see the whole situation as a challenge 'to turn tragedy to Mission.'

Margaret Rose McSparran is a Sister of the Cross and Passion from the Glens of Antrim. As director of Drumalis Retreat and Conference Centre, she has been involved in the development of the programmes, the facilities and outreach. Her particular interest is in ecological matters which is an integral part of life at Drumalis as well as programmes for faith development, growth in prayer and spiritual nourishment and providing hospitality for groups and communities from all over the world. www.drumalis.co.uk



ONE WORD WRITING PROMPT

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DAWN • SILENCE • FEAR • JOY • WONDER

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