

Sister Mary Gabriel O'Driscoll OSU (1926-2016): An Appreciation by Father Stewart Foster

Sister Gabriel ('Gabby' to generations of girls whom she educated), who died on 14 May aged 89, was born in July 1926 in Carrick on Suir, Co. Tipperary, one of four siblings. Her father was a tailor. She was educated locally by the Sisters of Mercy but in her teens made contact with those members of the Ursuline Community at Brentwood who hailed from the same part of Ireland. She entered at Brentwood in 1946 and after her first profession two years later began studies at Royal Holloway College, University of London, where she read German, a language which, together with French, she would go on to teach in the Convent High School. She also taught Religious Education.

Sister Gabriel's love of Germany and all things German remained a life-long characteristic, and as a teacher, Headteacher and Convent Superior she did much to promote contacts with that country, and especially with the Ursulines in Germany. After several years as a class teacher, during which time she gained a reputation as an exceptional communicator and as an educator who was always ready to use varied and different methods to instil knowledge in her pupils – via art, music and especially poetry – in 1969 she was appointed as Headmistress of the Convent High School in succession to Sister Mary Joseph. She was an inspirational Head and is fondly remembered by the thousands of girls who passed through the school during her fourteen years in office. She was considered to be firm but always kind and with a word of advice for her pupils with regard to their future prospects, academic and marital: e.g. she would stand at the hall door after she had presided at morning assembly and remind the girls to walk with straight backs, warning them that if they slouched they would never be successful in finding a husband in future life! Sister Gabriel remained in office until 1983. She also served as Superior of the Ursuline Community and proved remarkably generous in continuing the community's tradition of releasing Sisters for diocesan initiatives, especially in the fields of catechetics and youth work. Gabby, however, was never herself one to retire, and after she completed her time as Head and her term of office as Superior she became a member of the team responsible for the Diocesan Youth Centre at Walsingham

House, Forest View, Chingford. Here, among her many other duties, she is remembered for her enthusiastic leadership of nocturnal forays into nearby Epping Forest in order to show her young charges the wonders of nature by night. When she returned to Brentwood, although by then not as young as once she was, her ever-youthful spirit meant that she engaged in the teaching of English and German to a variety of students, membership of a keep-fit club in the town, and a regular commitment to assisting with work for the homeless at The Passage, adjacent to Westminster Cathedral.

In a tribute made at Sister Gabriel's Requiem Mass celebrated in Brentwood Cathedral on 25 May, her nephew Enda spoke movingly, and with a good deal of humour, about Gabby's closeness to her family and her annual holidays in Ireland. In fact, 'holiday' is hardly the correct word, for the time Gabby spent back home in the summer was more akin to a royal progress. Her arrival was preceded by parcels of various kinds (books, clothes and other necessary items) and much of her time in Ireland, in addition to copiously-planned visits to relatives and places of cultural interest, involved instructing her nephews and nieces even to the point of obliging them to post completed homework to Brentwood, whereupon Gabby would mark and return the books to Co. Tipperary.

Although Sister Gabriel was a daughter of Ireland and steeped in its history and traditions, as well as being a distinguished educator and religious superior, she was also a devoted exponent of all things Ursuline (especially the history of her own Brentwood Congregation with its roots at Forest Gate and before that in the Low Countries) and especially of the post-Reformation history of Catholicism in England. Nationally, she was a member of the Catholic Archives Society and the Catholic Record Society (often attending its Annual Conference in Oxford).

However, her most important role was in the establishment at the Ursuline Convent, Brentwood, in 1958 of the very first local Catholic historical group in England, the Essex Recusant Society (now known as the Brentwood Diocesan Historical Society) of which she was the last of the founding members to die. The chief pioneers of the E.R.S. were Canon Brian Foley of Holy Cross, Harlow (subsequently Bishop of Lancaster), and Sister Gabriel's great friend Monsignor Daniel Shanahan ('Dan

Shan' to her) of St Mary, Hornchurch, and later Our Lady of Lourdes, Leigh-on-Sea. In fact, when I anointed her a week before she died, Gabby was dozing and was not really 'with it.' However, when I said that I was giving her the Sacrament of the Sick on behalf of Monsignor Shanahan (who died in 1995) – whom now she will surely meet 'merrily' in heaven in the words of St Thomas More – she opened her eyes and smiled. Of the twenty or so people who gathered for the first meeting of the Essex Recusant Society in 1958, eight were Ursuline Sisters, two from Forest Gate and six from Brentwood. But it was Sister Gabriel who came to assume the leading role, acting at various times as Secretary, Librarian and Promoter of the Society. In the early days each member was assigned a particular research task, and Gabby's job was to visit the Essex Record Office at Chelmsford on Saturdays and there to transcribe the recusant material from the Elizabethan and Stuart Quarter Sessions Rolls. She also helped to organise a series of 'Walks into Recusant Essex' when members of the Society would visit churches, houses and other places of interest associated with Essex Catholicism and especially its Martyrs. Indeed, when the E.R.S. was re-convened in the year 2000 after ten or so years of not having met, she was in many ways the main protagonist. Personally, through the Society, which I first joined as a sixth-former in 1975, Sister Gabriel was always a source of great encouragement and wise counsel, especially when I became Chairman and thereafter President of the Society. It was a great joy for the whole Society that at its Golden Jubilee Mass at Holy Cross, Warley, in 2008 we were able to present Gabby with a Papal Blessing in recognition of her outstanding contribution to research into the Catholic history of Essex and East London.

May this faithful daughter of St Angela Merici and of Mother Clare Arthur (Foundress in 1900 of the Brentwood Ursulines) now rest in peace.