

A celebration of life: The Society of the Sacred Heart arrives in England in 1842:

December 8, 2022

Marking anniversaries remind us of what matters to us and they provide opportunities to look back over the years since the event we are marking, to reflect with gratitude on how it has shaped us as an individual and a group.

This is true of the 180th anniversary of the arrival of the Society of the Sacred Heart in England, an event we mark in a year of celebrations beginning on December 8th, 2022. On that date in 1842, six Religious of the Sacred Heart, including the first superior Mother Merilhou, travelled to England with two students to make a new foundation.

It had long been a dream of Madeleine Sophie Barat, our foundress, to plant the seeds of the Society on English soil. As far back as 1802, Sophie had declared that "this nation (England) is made for great things." In December 1842, after long negotiations, the conditions were deemed right for such a foundation. The newly arrived RSCJ settled in Berrymead Priory in Acton, at that time a small village six miles outside London.

Four days before the six foundresses left France to sail across the English Channel, Sophie made clear their objective in a special farewell conference. She reminded them that "(God's) particular gift to you is to make devotion to His Heart loved in this country (England) where it encounters a thousand obstacles and prejudices; by your awareness of the constant presence of God you will merit to discover the treasures and immense riches enclosed in the Divine Heart and you will share your abundance with others. Everything is there for you....

With this foundation a new chapter opened in the Society's rich story, a story we are still part of 180 years later. Across the years, countless women of faith have committed their whole lives and given their all to the service of the mandate given to our foremothers by Sophie Barat in 1842. Today we might express it differently, but the meaning is the same.

"To discover and make known the love of the Heart of Jesus"

How did they live that mission and shape what has now become the province of England -Wales? By being rooted in that awareness of the constant presence of God and by sharing from the abundance of their gifts and creativity as educators, teachers, poets, mystics, scholars, artists, dancers, writers, prophets, thinkers, scientists, listeners, healers of mind and body, dreamers, nurturers of body and soul, welcoming others with a loving heart and befriending the vulnerable and those on the margins.

On this anniversary we recall with deep gratitude those on whose shoulders we stand, those who are the present stewards of the charism including those who walk with us as partners in mission, creating together the next chapters of the story. We remember too all those whose lives have been touched and shaped by the Society's mission over the nearly two centuries of our presence in these islands.

It seems appropriate to dedicate to them all the words of Dag Hammarskjöld:

"For all that has been, Thanks. To all that shall be, Yes."

Catherine Lloyd RSCJ

December 8th, 2022.