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My Leaving Certificate 1959

(Article submitted by Áine Hyland to *NAPD Leader*. May 2022).

I sat the Leaving Certificate in 1959 at the end of six years in a convent boarding school run by the Sisters of Mercy in Ballymahon, Co. Longford. It was a small school with 100 students, 90% of whom were boarders. The annual fee for boarders was £50. Because I had won a county council scholarship my secondary education was free – which was just as well as there were thirteen children in family, ten of whom were younger than me.

There were 15 girls in my Leaving Cert class. Subject choice was almost non-existent, we all studied Irish, English, Maths, History, Geography and Latin and we had a choice of Music or Domestic Economy. Science was not on the curriculum. The school was renowned at the time for having a very high standard in Music – every student was in a choir and an orchestra (no mean feat given that the midlands were not noted for musicality!). The school came top in national choir exams as well as in Church music. I sat Music for the Leaving Cert – the performance and aural elements were worth 50% - and my examiner was Anthony Hughes, then newly appointed Professor of Music in UCD. I played a really difficult Rachmaninoff piece which drew tears from my examiner – much to my horror - although I was afterwards to realise that Professor Hughes regularly cried when he was moved by music!

All the teachers were Mercy nuns – the only males I ever saw during those six years were the two local priests and the altar boys in the local parish church where we went to Mass at 7 a.m. every morning. The nuns did everything – they managed and taught in the school; they ran their own farm – and we were well fed and looked after. The nuns did all the maintenance jobs around the school and when in the mid-1950s they purchased a convent car for the first time, they were their own drivers. They were great role models - as young teenagers we saw no obstacles to women taking leadership positions - in spite of the marriage bar. We knew that if and when we got married, our place (as compliant and obedient wives!) would be in the home! Our career ambitions were limited – our choices were entering the religious life or teaching or nursing or failing that, the civil service. University was never mentioned – that was not for girls, especially country girls like us!

I marvel at how aware today's Leaving Cert students are about the details of the curriculum and the examination system. In this world of openness and transparency they have access to sample papers, marking schemes, examiners' reports etc. so that nothing is a secret. The Leaving Cert was a black box to us students in 1959. It was like the third secret of Fatima – if you prayed hard enough you might get a glimpse in advance of how the paper would be set out, but only the “good girls” would get this miraculous insight! We were not even sure whether we were following the correct course – I remember meeting girls from another secondary school some months before I sat the Leaving Cert and they were learning different Irish poems and prose to us. I was concerned but not surprised – our Irish teacher was more concerned with saving our immortal souls than teaching us Irish!

Unusually for a girls' secondary schools in the 1950s, a small number of us were encouraged to take the higher Leaving Cert. Maths paper. This necessitated a lot of extra study, even then. The three of us in my class who attempted the higher paper had to forfeit a long walk on a Sunday as well the only free hour we had on a Saturday, to get extra Maths classes from our enthusiastic Maths teacher. I was one of only sixteen girls in 1959 who got Honours Maths in the Leaving Cert – although in retrospect that was definitely a miracle! I never understood

integration or differentiation – and while I loved geometry and trigonometry, I had no idea that the theorems had a practical application! When I asked my Maths teacher why we learned these abstract concepts, her reply was; “They are good for your mind and your soul. Like mysteries of religion, you must believe them”. And since some years earlier in Catechism class, I had learned that the definition of a mystery of religion was “A profound Truth which I cannot comprehend”, I accepted my teacher’s advice and learned the theorems whether I understood their practical application or not.

Prayer played a huge part in Leaving Cert preparation in my school. We did novenas and triduumms coming up to the exams; we “cut” our text books with holy pictures in the belief that our favourite saint would find the page that which would feature in the exam paper. We wore holy medals and two scapulars (green and brown!) on every exam day. We smuggled statues of our favourite saints into the exam hall. And in the interval between finishing the exam and getting the results in mid-August, we continued to pray – that the examiner would be sympathetic and on our side! I even did the three-day pilgrimage to Lough Derg in the summer of 1959!

And it all worked out! I had always wanted to be a teacher and the call to training was my goal. To me, teaching was (and still is!) the greatest of all professions. I was one of the top ten who got called to training in 1959. But I disliked Carysfort Training College when I got there and left within a few months to accept a post as an Executive Officer in the Department of Education where I met my late husband Bill and married him five years later. Because of the marriage bar, I had to resign my post on marriage but later went on to qualify as a secondary school teacher and ultimately a university teacher. Ironically, I had to re-pay the Department for the cost of the three months I spent in Carysfort – although I subsequently spent almost 35 years teaching student teachers in Carysfort, UCD and UCC.

And the Leaving Cert results continued to matter. When I interviewed (successfully) for the position of Professor of Education in UCC in 1993, the then President was particularly impressed by the entry on my CV that showed I got seven honours including Maths in the Leaving Cert thirty-five years earlier. But in spite of my success, I still have nightmares that I am about to go into the Leaving Cert Exam Hall to sit the Honours Maths paper – and I still do not understand integration and differentiation!