

JOHN LYNCH

Religion, Migration and Church Abuse Scandals in the Media: Testimonies of Two Irish Religious Sisters

Abstract

In this chapter, two sisters are interviewed and recount details of their early lives as women religious and their subsequent experiences of migrating to London in the 1960s. The pseudonymous interviewees provide fascinating details of what it was like to live in that place during that period and to occupy an identity that was often problematic and subject to hostile attitudes as the Irish conflict extended to the British capital. As both sisters now reside once more in Ireland, their journey and return express an important aspect of Irish life as it once was and will perhaps never be again.

This chapter is based on the oral testimony of two sisters from County Roscommon, Ireland, who, when in their teens, independently chose to commit to a religious life.¹ At the time of the interview they were seventy-two and seventy years of age and both now reside, once more, at home in Ireland. The older sister chose, at the point of entry to the novice stage of religious training, to leave the order she was in and eventually married and raised a family. The younger sister has spent the whole of her adult life as an active member of a religious order. Both lived their working lives in England, primarily London, and both trained as nurses working within the NHS.

1 The phrases 'religious life' and 'women religious' are used here to designate the commitment to the life of a nun or sister. Whilst historically there has been a distinction between these terms as designating an enclosed life (nun) or an active life in the community (sister), they are used here as in the vernacular as interchangeable.

The role of the Catholic Church in Ireland and of those who administered the schools, asylums and hospitals has in recent years come under close scrutiny as a series of reports and investigations have castigated the official administration for widespread abuse and cover-ups that have profoundly shaken the authority and influence it once had within the country. Today, the recruitment of new members from Ireland to the religious orders has almost ceased.² In this sense, therefore, the experience that is described here is something that has passed, what was once so central to Irish identity has now gone.

It has been recognized by a number of recent scholars of Irish culture that certain constituencies of Irish experience have rarely made it into the official and celebrated discourse of Irishness familiar to many. Often prefixed with terms such as neglected, unconsidered, forgotten, hidden,³ these efforts have sought to give a visibility, or rather a voice, to these diasporic experiences seemingly silenced and certainly marginalized. This chapter continues with this practice and offers a consideration, through the words of these two women, of what motivations, opportunities, experiences and intersections of gender and identity defined their sense of being Irish in relation to the religious life, migration and living in England.

As an oral history, it follows in the established path of seeking to present through their own spoken words the experience of the subject. Of course, any such performance is defined by its frame and terms of reference. For instance, the interviewees requested that their names not be revealed and that they would not be identified by the author in the published work.

2 In 2008 the Catholic Church admitted that in that year 228 nuns had died and only two took their final vows. See, 'Ireland's sons turn their backs on the priesthood', *The Independent*, 27 August 2010.

3 See, for example: Catherine Dunne, *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2003); Yvonne Mckenna, 'Forgotten Migrants: Irish Women Religious in England, 1930s–1960s', *International Journal of Population Geography*, Vol. 9, 295–308; Breda Gray, 'Breaking the Silence: Emigration, gender and the making of Irish cultural memory'. Working Paper WP2003–02, Gráinne O'Keeffe, 'The Irish in Britain: Injustices of Recognition', *Sources*, Autumn 2003; Micheál Ó hAodha & Máirtín Ó Catháin (eds), *New Perspectives on the Irish Abroad: The Silent People?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

This has been obliged in the spirit of encouraging open and honest discussion from them without fear of any potential personal criticism being directed towards them by others in the community and religious orders they are associated with. Therefore, the names used are not their actual ones. Some questions and themes were provided before the interview so that they could prepare thoughts and specific details of their life histories. In this regard, this would be defined as a semi-structured interview. It would be clear that there was a suggested focus for them to consider and it should not be ignored how my interrogative framing provided a direction for the discussion to take. At the same time, I endeavoured not to lead the discussion or seek to facilitate pre-existing ideas of preferred responses. The interview was recorded in one session and appears unabridged and has been altered in a minimal way for grammar and readability only. The interviewees are known here as Joanne, born in 1942, and Gabrielle, born in 1944.

Religious Life

Perhaps we could begin by each of you describing how you came to think about committing to a religious life.

JOANNE: I was thirteen years of age, so very young, and still at primary school. In those days the priests and nuns came around visiting the schools on a regular basis with the intention of encouraging people to join the religious orders. We held them in very high esteem. The nuns were beautifully dressed, they seemed to glide along, and they discussed the benefits of a religious life which was to serve God and to do God's work and that you were blessed to be called. It was a privilege at that time for a family to have a priest or a nun. At thirteen years of age I admired how they dressed, the clothes set them apart and you got the feeling of status and recognition, of self-esteem, they looked distinguished and it also gave me an opportunity for further education. So, at thirteen I went off to Mullingar to a nice

convent⁴, as a boarder, coming home only on the holidays. That, to begin with, was very lonely, and I was sad. I remember really looking forward to going, yet when I went into this beautiful convent in the Midlands with a lake and big halls, parquet flooring, when my mother went off I felt very sad. I remember when the first letter came from home and I was walking around the beautiful grounds and I couldn't open it because I knew I would have just cried and cried. I had to wait until I was on my own so that I could have a cry.

So you chose to go to the school? What was the conversation at home about that like? Were you the first one in the family to do that?

JOANNE: I was the first one to do that and I remember that they tried to put me off, Mammy and the others, so I wasn't pushed into it by any means. It did cross my mind whilst playing out in the fields what was I giving up but for some reason I really, really wanted to do it. Once you were in, though, in those days it was frowned upon to leave, not as free as it would be today. It was the first step to a religious life and it was my intention, 100 per cent, to continue in that life. I enjoyed praying and in the convent there were a lot of prayers. What I loved, thinking back now, was how you imagine going on a retreat and having that quietness and I remember going into the chapel and the peace and the quiet was lovely. Whilst there I got to learn to play the piano as they picked up that I was fairly good at it. At that time we didn't pay anything for being there, some years before there had been a dowry,⁵ but for the piano lessons it was £100, which was an awful lot of money at the time. Because of that I didn't want to do it, I didn't want

4 The Bloomfield Convent School. Currently, it is the Bloomfield House Hotel, Leisure Club and Spa, Belvedere, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath.

5 It had been traditional for the family of the sister to pay a dowry equivalent to that as at the beginning of a conventional marriage. This would be held in a fund and the interest could be used by the order although the initial payment should have been protected on account of the possibility of the sister deciding to leave at some point in the future.

them to pay that money at home. But the nuns must have seen a bit of potential and they insisted I did it and eventually I got my first certificate and played on a beautiful big grand piano.

What religious order was it?

JOANNE: The Franciscan Sisters.

Is the convent still there?

JOANNE: No, it was sold and it's a hotel now. A lot of the nuns were American and the English we were taught was often American spelling and so on. I was there until I was sixteen and in that period I was well educated and although it wasn't a proper school working for exams, we were being prepared for a religious life. It was a good education, with Latin, we did some Shakespeare, algebra and geometry, which I'd never touched on before, so I wouldn't have had that opportunity if I hadn't gone, because schooling normally ended at fourteen for us.

What was classroom life like?

JOANNE: I remember the discipline and if a nun, the teacher, went out of the room one of us would be picked to walk up and down and you were so proud! I was picked a couple of times and, my goodness, did you walk with your head in the air. That type of thing was encouraged. It did encourage a bit of telling tales on each other because you wanted to be the good one in the eyes of the nuns. It was a very strict regime and there was total silence all day apart from the classroom where you could speak up. You couldn't communicate with each other, apart from the recreation hour, not even meal times. I remember on one occasion I said something and someone went and told a nun. But I was good, I was one of the 'goody goodies' in a way. I was fairly self-conscious, still am I suppose, but there were punishments

so that if you broke the silence, for instance, you were made to walk up to where the nuns all had their meals and up to the Reverend Mother and go down on your knees and say you were sorry. They had picked up that I would want the floor to open up under me, so they were fairly sensitive towards me. But some girls didn't care and were always breaking the rules and they'd have to go marching up and go down on their knees and say sorry. So they had very strict discipline. Then at sixteen I went off to Rome.

GABRIELLE: I didn't go into the order until I was seventeen. I was in primary school until I was fourteen and then worked in a shop in Roscommon. I had the chance to go to the Tec in Roscommon, but I wanted to earn some money! But I wasn't that good in the shop and eventually moved in with my sister to help look after her children. At that time I started going to the shrine at Knock,⁶ it was a bit like Lourdes, and helping out there. We got to wear a special dress and a little veil and all. I was talking to somebody and I said I'd like to do this working for God and my sister's husband had a sister who was a nun in the order I joined in the end, and she lived in Banagher. So, we went to see her and they gave me a great welcome and I thought it was lovely. So I said I would join and they arranged everything for me. I had to go to London to train as a novice. Four of us met in the station at Athlone and a sister brought us up to Dublin, where we met up with some others so that there were eleven of us in the end, on the boat over to Holyhead. I remember I'd never been on a boat before and I was terribly sick. They got us a berth so that we could sleep, and if I stayed on the bed I was fine! The boats were very bad in those days, no stabilizers and everyone was sick all around you and looking at them would make you feel sick. We got the train down to Euston Station.⁷

6 The Knock Shrine is a Roman Catholic pilgrimage site in the village of Knock, County Mayo, Ireland. It is claimed that in 1879, there was an apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, John the Evangelist, angels and Jesus Christ witnessed by some fifteen people.

7 The Holyhead-Euston train and Holyhead-Dun Laoghaire mail boat were key transit routes for Irish emigration to London.

When we got to Euston Station, there was a big crowd of the Legion of Mary there from Ireland trying to get you to join them. They met the Irish and would offer to find you accommodation and if you joined them, you would have to go around people's houses and get more to join them. But when they discovered we were off to the convent in Highgate, they were 'Oh that's fine, so' and let us on our way. So we arrived in the convent on Highgate Road.⁸

And you were seventeen?

GABRIELLE: Yes, seventeen, the 8th September 1961 we had to be there. A great welcome but soon after we got in, our clothes were taken and we were given this black pinafore and white blouse and a small veil. I remember the first morning I was so worried about getting this dress and veil on right. I didn't sleep at all! I was up at five to be dressed for seven o'clock mass. We slept in big dormitories and my elbows were nearly hitting the one next to me it was so narrow, and this was in the big convent in Highgate! Everyone used to say 'oh, look at them in the big convent! Aren't they well off!' But we were in little pokey rooms. There were boarders at the school and they got the good rooms. It was a lovely spot. We overlooked Parliament Hill Fields, and tennis courts, and I often thought how nice it would be to go out, but we weren't allowed out without permission. They had a lovely orchard that is still there, and you (pointing to Joanne) used to come and we would go down there walking and we loved that. It was basically enclosed; it was more or less self-sufficient really, and anything else was brought in bulk and we had cooks.

How many nuns were there then?

GABRIELLE: About fifty. Then twelve junior and another ten coming up for profession. There were teachers at the school who came from outside and

8 Currently, it is La Sainte Union Catholic School, Highgate Road, London NW5 1RP.

we would see them in the corridor. A lot of silence and after seven o'clock in the evening you couldn't speak. We weren't allowed to talk to the professed nuns,⁹ the older ones, not at all. We were told to just smile at them and that was all. And we had to use a different stairs as well. There were the big stairs, the posh ones, and we had to use the side stairs. We had mass and prayers in the morning then breakfast in silence whilst a bit of the bible was read out. We were all young and giggly and there was one who was terrible for mimicking! She would mimic the one reading and we would laugh and then get into trouble. If we wanted extra bread, we had to make this sign on the table [finger drawing a line] and jam then this [finger in a circular motion] and someone would pass it up. Then, in the evening, instructions again. Some were already teachers, some had Leaving Certs and some A-levels. Most were from Ireland. The ones that didn't have qualifications were given extra tuition, up in a room at the top, a garret. In between we had jobs to do, dusting and scrubbing stairs, but we made it fun. There were twelve of us in a room with a Novice Mistress at the front.

Out of the twelve, how many went on to join?

GABRIELLE: Nine I'd say. About three left. We still meet up, all of us. We all did very well having good jobs and responsibility.

So, Joanne, you went on to Rome?

JOANNE: Yes, 1958, aged sixteen, I went to Rome because that was the progression which we knew at the beginning. They had a house in Rome, close to the Vatican, a convent where you went and became a novice, with the white veil, the professed nuns had the black. It was more formal. So, we went off on the plane all together with ten or twelve of us and a nun taking us. My

9 The stages of training are: Postulant, (six months to two years), Noviciate (two years), Temporary Profession of Vows (three to six years), Perpetual Profession of Vows.

first time on a plane. A lovely convent in Rome with a veranda at the top of a spiral stairs, and we would be able to look over the local houses and see families out on their balconies. Overall it was a lovely feeling.

Have you ever been back there?

JOANNE: No, never been back. I went there in 1958 and Pope Pius XII died whilst I was there. We watched the smoke every day and we walked around the coffin while he was laid out in state and we were this close! We visited the churches and I saw Michelangelo's ceiling and the chapels and so on.

Did it feel really different then? You were in Italy and a different language and so on.

JOANNE: Well, we were very protected by the nuns. I would say that the atmosphere had changed and even though it had been strict before, there had been a little informality whereas here it got serious. This was preparation to take your vows. It took about two years. You wore your habit and the veil. I got to the stage where we were to change our names.¹⁰ We would have to wear a white habit and I felt the ceremony was like getting married to God.

But you didn't get that far?

JOANNE: No, what was happening was that my job then was working in the kitchen. At Mullingar I had worked in the laundry, and I could see how

10 Many religious communities require entrants to take a new name as a sign of their life as a religious.

the girls that worked in places like in the Magdalenes¹¹ felt because it was so hot and stuffy in there with the big ironing presses and machines. Of course, we only did the convent things, nothing was brought in from outside. We got rotated through the different jobs, the laundry, the cleaning, the kitchen. But in Rome I was working in the kitchen which was quite a privilege to be helping the chef. Things just started to go wrong. Things had been perfect up until it got close to the time to be professed. But then I started dropping things, I wasn't sleeping, I got told off for disturbing the others because I was up so much. I was sixteen going on seventeen, and it was getting closer to the naming and the choosing of clothes and that was how it manifested itself. So they took me out of the kitchen, which was a big upset, and I remember feeling that they should be more understanding and find out what was going on with me. It was considered such a privilege to be called to serve God that to leave it I was worried that I wouldn't get to heaven! This was drummed into us. So I was debating in my mind, what will I do? Would I never get to heaven? It was all so serious at the time. But thinking back now, I feel it showed strength of character. Another girl left just before me, and she just disappeared, and we were never told why or anything. So I talked to the nuns and fair play to them, they didn't try and stop me. There was another one who was also leaving and in fact we travelled back on the plane together, but I didn't know she was thinking of leaving and she didn't know about me. I remember thinking that if they had told us, we might have been able to support each other better.

11 Magdalene asylums, also known as Magdalene laundries, were institutions from the eighteenth to the late twentieth centuries to house 'fallen women', a term used to imply female sexual promiscuity. They have been exposed in recent years as sites of brutal and repressive regimes of oppressive containment. In 2011 the United Nations Committee Against Torture (UNCAT) criticized the Irish state's failure to protect the women and called for a thorough investigation and compensation scheme. *The Magdalene Sisters* is a 2002 film, written and directed by Peter Mullan, that produces a fictional account of the experience for four women in the early 1960s.

Was it anything to do with the discipline there?

JOANNE: Yes, I remember a girl that had tried to leave. She had been hiding in the cloakroom and they found her. She was made to kneel outside the refectory and when we all left, and there was a lot of us, well over fifty, she had to apologize to each one of us and say 'please forgive me.' It was things like that, that I knew I couldn't do and if that was the life, I couldn't do it. If you didn't get into trouble and conformed, then it was alright, but if you broke the rules, then there were all these different punishments which to me were degrading. Nothing physical, more humiliation and emotional. They always said it was about humility in the eyes of God. For me there was no sign of any abuse, as such, but it did make me have a different view on the priests and nuns, and when people back home talked about how good they were, it often came out in a bit of anger, I suppose, towards them. So at seventeen I did leave, and of course it was frowned upon. There were no telephones in those days and so I told them at home by letter. But they were pretty good about it and although there would have been some worry about what the neighbours thought, I fitted back in okay. I knew it had been the right decision for me and that it was too much for me to give up. I never had any regrets. In a way it stood me in good stead.

GABRIELLE: I had two years as a novice and was nearly twenty when I took the vows. I had no doubts at the time and I liked it. I had nothing to compare it with being that young and it didn't seem any stricter than anywhere else. Some had doubts and delayed it a while longer to think about it more and until they were a bit older. You make temporary vows first and then in 1967 I made permanent vows after I had come back from Rome where I had been for a couple of years. My family were invited for my first vows, and my mother and father came over on the boat to London. This would have been 1964. We used to get family visits once a month and you (Joanne) used to come. We looked forward to it a lot, just an afternoon. A whole crowd of us in the hall and we could walk in the gardens. Also, our letters were important. They always opened them before they gave them to us. I'm not sure if they read them. We weren't allowed to write home and say we were lonely or anything like that. They wouldn't allow us to do that.

Initially, I had been sent to the convent in Southampton to work in the kitchen because they thought I was good there. One day a week I went to the local college to learn cooking, wearing my habit and all. The chef was very nice to me I remember.

Was it an enclosed order?

GABRIELLE: No, not formally, it was more teachers and community work. I had thought about the enclosed life, but I don't think it would have suited me.¹² I had visited some who had chosen that life and they were happy enough. They were sheltered from the harshness in the world. It was through being more out in the world that we realized how well off we were compared to those who struggled financially and so on. We listened to the radio and Irish music. There were some English people in the convent and they would get fed up listening to the Irish country and western music all the time. St Patrick's Day was big as well. Maybe we were insensitive to the others – we kind of took over! Sometimes we were taken out to the Royal Festival Hall for a concert. So, it didn't seem that strict. We weren't allowed to eat anything outside the dining room and were supposed to confess if we did! Being so close living together, there was sometimes small-minded behaviour, talking about others. We had very little privacy.

How did Vatican II change things?¹³

GABRIELLE: It gave us some freedom. We changed the uniform we wore. We didn't have to cover our hair anymore, and skirts could be shorter than the

12 There is a distinction, if not an absolute one, between enclosed and open orders. Sisters work outside the convent (such as teachers and nurses). Nuns, strictly speaking, live cloistered lives in enclosed convents and typically spend their lives in seclusion, devoting themselves entirely to meditation and prayer.

13 Vatican II, more formally the Second Vatican Council, was held between 1962 and 1965. It sought to bring the Church more into line with the modern world.

floor-length things we had before. A much simpler style, a dress, shawl and veil much the same in summer and winter, so we got rid of a lot of the layers. Some found the transition difficult. We were allowed to go out more, but it took some time to get it all worked out. The emphasis was to make us more approachable to the outside world. They had to give us more freedom to be out and about. I remember wearing the old clothes out in the park and a child pointed to his mother and said, 'Look at the penguins.' It made me think afterwards 'Do we look that foolish?' So, it was great to make the change. I was one of the first to change, others took longer.

How is it today?

GABRIELLE: Now, we can wear what we like. Some even wear jewellery. Living quarters are also very different. Some living in shared houses. Quite a few on their own in apartments. At first that was a big shock and commented on. They had to justify it in some way.

So how long have you been in the order?

GABRIELLE: Fifty-two years! A group of us celebrated fifty years with a trip to Bruges on the Eurostar.

Has your attitude to the idea of serving God stayed the same over that time?

GABRIELLE: No, your ideas change a lot from that time. When we joined there was very little voluntary work that laypeople could do, and you needed to be a nun or a priest to do it. In the last thirty years there are so many lay-organizations that do so much work now. Your idea of church changed completely as you go along and find out more. I've become more liberal and seen the good and the bad and the disadvantages as well as the advantages. If I was to do it today, I wouldn't go into a convent. Not that I regret it in any way, but I wouldn't see the need for it. We did think we

were superior to laypeople, there was a status attached to it. Being out in the community makes you see things. Seeing the sacrifices families make for their children. We never had to get up in the night and so on. As for religion we have become more broadminded. Many of the sisters are more spiritual than anything to do with the church. Even the Catholic Church they wouldn't necessarily go for today.

Migration

So how did you, Joanne, come to move to England?

JOANNE: Well, I'd always thought about being a nun or a nurse. When I left the convent, I went to Dublin to work as a nurse's aide governed by the fact you couldn't start training until eighteen. I definitely saw it as a continuation of 'looking after God's children'! I worked there to save money and until I could move to England to train. In Ireland it was much more difficult to get into nursing and there was a big fee to pay. The NHS must have been recruiting.¹⁴ I saw an advert and I could do an entrance test as I didn't have O-levels. We went over and were accepted before we then did the test. No one really failed, I don't think. I chose that part of London because I had family already there, an aunt. So I chose Rush Green Hospital¹⁵ to start in September 1960 and a three-year training. I travelled alone over to London on the boat and was met by my aunt's husband.

14 To address the serious labour shortage after the setting up of the NHS in 1948, a huge recruitment campaign in the former British colonies, primarily the Caribbean and Ireland, was launched.

15 Rush Green Hospital was a hospital located at Rush Green in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham in London from 1900 to 1995.

Were you nervous?

JOANNE: Yes, very apprehensive, going to a strange country. A bit excited but I felt brave, determined to make it. I stayed with my aunt a couple of weeks, and then she took me to the hospital and I started my nurse's training.

How long had your aunt been in England?

JOANNE: She had been there for years. She probably went over when she was eighteen and by then was forty. When I got to the hospital there was a big crowd of Irish nurses, second-years, who welcomed us and looked after us. A mix of nearly twenty of us, Irish, English, a Ceylonese girl,¹⁶ Welsh and a few West Indian, so quite multi-cultural and we didn't feel unusual. I passed the entrance exam and there was a lot of studying. I finished in December 1963 and qualified as an SRN.¹⁷ I remember it because we got our results the day after Kennedy was shot. I was so pleased I had passed, but of course there was no one at home with a phone, so I rang the sister of a brother-in-law who lived in Bromley who had a relation from home visiting, so I rang her and that was how they got the news at home. I really wanted to share with someone my excitement at qualifying as a nurse!

Gabrielle, you were already in Highgate. How did you feel that England was different from Ireland?

GABRIELLE: Well, even on the first train journey I remember seeing all the lights and the big city and feeling impressed. The traffic and the noise on

16 Sri Lanka was known as Ceylon until 1972.

17 SRN is a state-registered nurse and was governed by the General Nursing Council of England. The council had clearly prescribed duties and responsibilities for the training, examination and registration of nurses. There was a distinction between the SRN and SEN or state-enrolled nurse that did not have the same level of qualification as an SRN.

Euston Road was so loud. We were sheltered in the convent but after being out I realized how much more broadminded the English were, in lots of ways than the Irish. They would be less judgemental than in Ireland and I liked that. The freedom of no one knowing you when you went out was lovely. A lot of the people, especially non-Catholic, would not have any preconceived ideas about a religious life and they'd let you be. There was a freedom that was very important. We'd see the Irish in church of course and the community halls. Not to dances but more classical concerts. A lot of Irish would come to the back door of the house. Down-and-outs and that really shocked me because you wouldn't see that at home. A lot of alcoholic men. There was shame there for them and they wouldn't go to the English for help. They had lost contact with home because they were too ashamed at how they had ended up. That was an eye-opener to me to see so many Irish like that. In Kilburn we were next to a hostel for Irish lads, and they would be often in conflict with the police who'd be after them all the time. We tried to keep our heads down though and wouldn't want to be too associated with them really.

So the Church provided a lot in terms of care for the Irish in London especially if they were down on their luck?

GABRIELLE: Yes, especially around there in Kilburn.¹⁸ We helped a lot who had drink problems, but the system didn't help. They would be working for Murphys¹⁹ and staying in B&Bs, and they couldn't be there during the day especially if they didn't get any work some days. They would wait on the corner of Kilburn High Road and a van would pick them up and take them to work, but some days the van never came and they would have to spend the day in the pub. Some earned big money and it all went on the

18 The London borough of Kilburn is highly symbolic for the Irish in London with over 10 per cent of its population born in Ireland (1991 census). See Louise Ryan 'In the Green Fields of Kilburn: Reflections on a Quantitative Study of Irish Migrants in North London,' *Anthropology Matters*, Vol. 5, No 2 (2003).

19 J. Murphy & Sons, set up by John Murphy from County Kerry and based in Kentish Town, London, became one of the biggest construction companies in the UK.

pub because they had nothing else. Of course many other Irish did very well. It was a lot about education as in the 1980s that all stopped, and those that came over were well educated. But England, I always thought, was very tolerant. You always got some individuals, but in general it was good.

So how did the dance halls work and the Irish music?

GABRIELLE: The Irish music and clubs were very popular, although some didn't agree with the fact it was only Irish that were there.

JOANNE: We did go to one in Romford. Near the hospital there was one and everyone went at the weekend. People didn't really go to pubs as such then, especially women. In Ireland you really couldn't, so the freedom to go in England was nice but you still avoided it. But the dance hall was on with no bar. It was dry. Some might come having had a few drinks but nothing in there. There was a mineral bar and if someone asked you if you wanted a mineral, then you knew they were interested in you! A live band that played Irish country and western and also the current hits and so on. It was an event to get dressed up and go in a group. It was mainly Irish men and women that went. And of course going to church. When I first came over, I was very observant and was desperate to get to mass. Once I was at dinner at someone's who had invited me to meet their family and it was a Friday and we didn't eat meat on a Friday, so I remember I left all the meat. It's embarrassing now to think of it! But the religion was not at all oppressive over there, and I remember thinking that people who did go were better because they didn't have to and they had made the choice. I got married in a Catholic church.

So once you had that freedom, I suppose it was not possible to go back to that village mentality of before?

JOANNE: That's right. The anonymity was lovely, just to be able to sit on a bus and not be bothered by other people. There was a freedom and although I was committed to England with my work, I always had a hankering for

Ireland. We lived for our holidays when everyone went home. Leaving to come back to England, there were always tears but we got on with it.

Many migrants talk about how they view their new home as only temporary and as soon as they have enough money, they will go back. Was this the case for you?

JOANNE: I certainly thought about it. Friends and people in my family who had come over did go back to Ireland in the early 1970s, but I suppose I was never in a financial position to do so. I didn't have the money for a house over in Ireland, so where would I live? I think I felt settled in the UK and married, so that was it.

GABRIELLE: I moved from London to Liverpool for a while and was settled in a house there. It never really entered my mind to come back to Ireland. I would see family who came to visit me, and it didn't bother me to not be in Ireland and never felt that I would live here again. I felt at home in England and that they were that a bit more broadminded. Although things have improved here (Ireland) a bit. I have always preferred cities rather than the country. I started training as a nurse when I was thirty-three. There had been other things I had done until then, and there was a lot of religious practice to learn. They weren't keen on us starting the nursing. I was one of the first to be allowed to do that. I moved into the nurse's home and came back at the weekends to the convent. I did district nursing out in the community. If I hadn't done the religious thing, I would have been a nurse. I never wanted to be a teacher. So I got permission to do it even though we were primarily a teaching order. I moved around a bit and got some experiences.

What were people's attitudes like back home?

JOANNE: There was no adverse reaction. They were so used to seeing people go, standing out on the road seeing the neighbours go to England and

America. People were sad to see you go, and I think they thought you are brave but pleased to see you when you came home. Admiration a bit that you were trying to better yourself and there was no jealousy or comments. Sometimes someone might say you had a bit of an English accent and that was frowned upon! We would have come back wearing mini-skirts and that was commented on but nothing too severe.

Gabrielle, did you ever notice a difference between Ireland-based nuns and the English ones?

GABRIELLE: Very little, now. I remember that it was strange to me that some of the English sisters had parents that were separated. Sometimes they would both come to things together and I thought it odd. The English ones may well have had a bit more experience or jobs before they joined and been a bit older, so they often were a little more knowledgeable, being more mature. The Irish often joined younger. Many of the sisters wouldn't dream of coming to Ireland. When I said I was going to Ireland, one of them said, 'If I was asked to go Ireland I'd drop down and die' she said! And she was Irish! She comes home about three times a year but wouldn't consider moving over.

During the sixties/seventies/eighties, was there a difference between England and Ireland in attitudes to what women could do?

JOANNE: Oh yes, England was always ahead, whether regarding divorce or attitudes to working women. I remember a married friend that came back to Ireland in 1970 saying that she was penalized with a higher tax rate because she was married to try and discourage her from working. Things were more equal in England and we certainly got used to that!

Do you think things at home in Ireland changed because of returning emigrants such as yourselves?

JOANNE: I would say that they did. People coming back from America opening pubs and people coming back from England.

GABRIELLE: Of course the media has done a lot over the years to change people's attitudes here. Television and newspapers have become so connected worldwide now it has had an effect, I'd say. Maybe some bad as well as good.

So, would you say that the insularity of Ireland broke down through that time partly through the things in the media?

JOANNE: It did, it did. The Church held onto power through people's ignorance of these things and the more educated that people got through the media stories they read and heard on the television, the more open things became and had to change.

GABRIELLE: That's what I think. People have got many ideas, good and bad, through this and they have infiltrated into people's attitudes.

Attitudes to the Irish in England

How would you describe your experiences of being Irish in England through this period? Did you have any negative experiences especially once the IRA mainland bombing campaign started?²⁰

GABRIELLE: When the bombings started, I was working around London at the time. There was one near Hammersmith Bridge and it caused huge

20 From 1973, the Provisional IRA waged a sustained bombing campaign in London and elsewhere. A series of atrocities caused widespread fear and anger that led to

inconvenience with bridges closed and so on. You would hear people talking about it. I was nursing and people would say 'Those Irish' and you'd keep quiet and you wouldn't open your mouth. And rightly so, they'd be right about the traffic jams and inconvenience. I found that it would be older people who would be more critical than the younger ones who were more tolerant. One old man said to me, 'You Irish are never going to give up fighting', but he wasn't a very nice person anyway and I said, 'Oh, there will be peace one day.' The bombings did bring a bad name for the Irish, although it depended where you were. Another time I was working once with a girl who was West Indian, and she said, 'You know, we're not treated the same as the English', and she wanted us to follow it up. I think I was discriminated against and I could have followed it up. Me and this other girl were picked on and they would go behind our backs and report us when they were really the ones messing up. Maybe it was because I was quieter.

JOANNE: Living in the nurse's home, we were protected and it was quite multi-cultural. But it expressed itself in picking up on our different expressions, Irish expressions, like, 'I'm just after coming back from somewhere', and they would always pick up on that and mock us. My main big thing was the Irish jokes. It was absolutely dreadful. Later on in my career, I was a manager of an elderly nursing home in charge of all the care assistants, and we would go to a concert with everyone and every comedian would come out with the Irish jokes. It would make me cringe because you would go back in to work the next day in a role of authority and you felt, with some of them, that the jokes would stick and they would refer to you as thick. It was everywhere, on the television, Alf Garnett, and people would think it was so funny. It had a very negative effect. It undermined your authority and your sense of self, make you very self-conscious of your accent. Our position as professionals protected us to a certain extent, but it was much worse for those who didn't have any status.

the introduction of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1974) and cases of appalling miscarriages of justice against innocent Irish individuals including the Guildford Four, Birmingham Six and Judith Ward.

Was there a change at all in the seventies after the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Birmingham Six when it felt different to be Irish in England?

GABRIELLE: Some people said, 'Be careful what you say when you are out,' as you don't know who you might be next to. But I was never that interested in it so didn't really pay much attention to those who were fanatical about it.

JOANNE: I was always careful about what I said about atrocities. But that was the same in Ireland as well as England. It was important to not voice your opinion especially in pubs, not knowing who was who. Being frightened to speak at times. Some would think that because you were Irish you would support the IRA, like the Irish were all the same. At other times we would be home and I would visit relations in Clare and we were told to not be heard being critical of the IRA. We were just very, very cautious and we advised anyone over on holiday to not voice their opinion. In England it was on your mind that if you fell out with a neighbour then they could report you and the police probably would come. So that was on your mind, but nothing ever did happen that way.

Gabrielle, you knew Sister Sarah Clarke?²¹

GABRIELLE: Yes, she was at the same convent as me. Her work had to be very secretive. She never discussed anything with us. She had her own room and her own phone, which was very unusual then. That would have been the 1980s. She was a very independent person. A couple of times a week she would go down to the kitchen about seven o'clock in the morning and make a load of sandwiches, and I remember saying, 'What are you doing those for?' and she said, 'I'm going out now to the airport and meeting parents

21 Sister Sarah Clarke was a member of La Sainte Union order who worked with Irish prisoners in UK prisons and their families throughout the 1970s and 1980s at the height of the Troubles. She published an autobiography, *No Faith in the System*, in 1995. She died in 2002.

of IRA prisoners, giving them food and finding them accommodation for a couple of nights while they were visiting their sons.' A couple of times she gave out about the prison officers and she said, 'Oh, those officers on the gate I give them a hard time!' She was a real tough lady. 'They ask me all sorts of questions, but I always get in, I know my rights!' she would say. She had rows with the prison chaplains if they didn't help. She was a real strong character. She had been an art teacher for years. She had designed the cross on our gate and some works around the convent. People were a bit suspicious of her and perhaps spoke more under their breath. They were worried, I suppose, that she brought unwanted attention. TV cameras outside the convent wasn't liked. In the end she moved out into a flat of her own, paid for by the families of the prisoners, I seem to remember. Although they were poor enough and the prison would often move a prisoner up north to Liverpool or something, and she would drive them up in her old car. She was very friendly with the solicitor Gareth Peirce, and I would see her come into the convent often. So, that was Sarah. Some liked her, some didn't. We didn't know what she was doing most of the time. But she kept within the law even if the police didn't like her much. I'd imagine her phone was tapped, which was why we got her a phone. She was in her flat up to when she died. She was brought back to Ireland and the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and Gerry Adams went to her funeral. I wasn't able to make it, but it was on television a bit. She was buried in her family plot, which was unusual as everyone was buried in the convent graveyards before. The Reverend Mother gave the sermon in Gaelic. I liked her.

Reflection

The idea of a life-long commitment to a spiritual life is one that has become increasingly uncommon in Ireland since the high-point of recruitment in the early 1960s. In part, this work was inspired by wanting to investigate this aspect of Irish identity that was so central, at one time,

to its visibility. The second aspect of this experience was that of gender and how the attractions of the religious life were bound into providing channels of escape from the confines of the rural, domestic and national limitations imposed upon women in that period. It is clear that there was a strong visual element to the motivations of the two women here and, in a perhaps seemingly odd way, offered something of a glamour that was in stark contrast to the drabness of working and rural life. It certainly offered a status that they would not so easily have been obtained through conventional domestic channels.

The interviews provided an opportunity to recount something of the micro-histories of these women that are full of complexity, desire and ambition, in the particular context of the Ireland-London migratory route of the 1960s–1980s. What is evident, I would argue, is the problematizing of the singularizing assertion of identity against the messiness of lived experience and the often simple, yet powerful, motivations of wanting to escape the limitations of a restrictive space. There is indeed a process of subjectification at work here, as each one describes the multiple ways in which they initiated particular life choices, sometimes driven by ideals of faith and commitment, but always mapped onto an affective realm that was responsive to the cultural structure of the migrants' second 'home'.

Evident within the testimony of the women is also a clear sense of a personal faith sustained through an engagement with the structures and strictures of the Catholic Church. Neither of them can be described as politically active, yet in their own personal ways they articulated a sense of Christian morality that guided their choice to commit to, and even leave, the religious order they joined. But being Irish, a nun or a nurse brought them into contact with those socially repressive forces that defined what it meant to be Irish and a woman in the England of that time. Gabrielle finishes her testimony by describing her friendship with Sister Sarah Clarke, who, driven by those same impulses, took an active stand against the brutal treatment of Irish prisoners and their families who were subject to the worst that the British system could offer. Sarah Clarke in her autobiography

finishes the book with the line that her ‘diaries vibrate with hundreds of lives related to the struggle for justice.’²² It is hoped that the testimony recounted here similarly vibrates with the energy of lives lived in, perhaps, a quite ordinary way yet evident of a key part of whatever an Irish identity actually means.

22 Sister Sarah Clarke, *No Faith in the System* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1996), 207.