



LEFT: Former Convent of the Sacred Heart Grammar School - now Saint Catherine's College Convent Building.

## Looking back on foundation of an educational establishment par excellence

# Saint Catherine's College celebrates 50 years as leading all-ability school

SAINT Catherine's College is celebrating its golden jubilee as an all-ability school during this academic year.

Fifty years ago in 1973, the Convent Grammar School and the Convent Intermediate School amalgamated to form Saint Catherine's College.

The amalgamation was the brainchild of Sr. Dolores Considine who, in 1966, became headmistress of the Convent Grammar School, quite a small school of 11-18 year old girls, mostly boarders. The educational system in Northern Ireland was new to Dolores and she relied on staff members, particularly RSCJ, to help her. The Society in Armagh was the only provider of education for Catholic girls at second level, with both an intermediate school and a grammar school.

The Convent Grammar School provided for 11+ pupils; the vast majority of Armagh Catholic girls attended the Convent Intermediate School. With her sense of justice, Dolores was not comfortable with upholding this system.

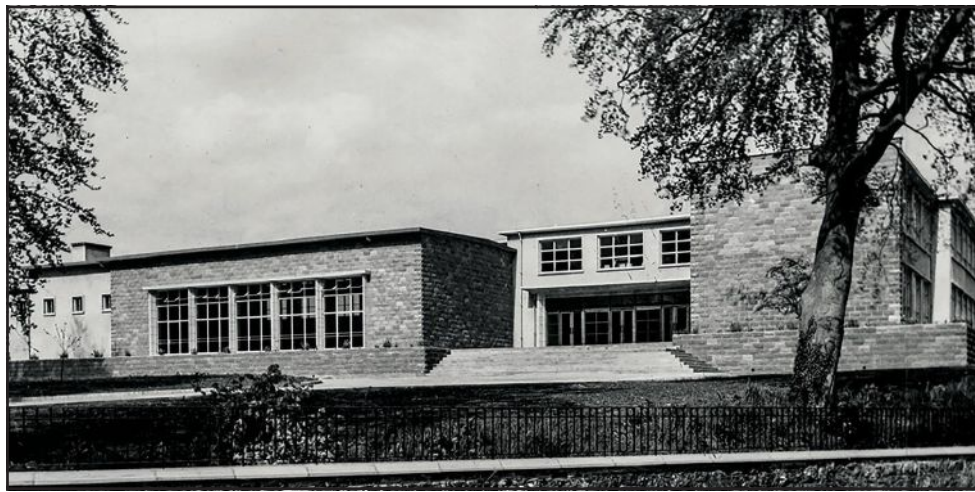
The political and educational context in Northern Ireland was the catalyst to activate Dolores' innate sense of justice for all. She came up with a simple strategy: amalgamate the Society's two schools at second level in Armagh and phase out the 11+ examination in the Society's primary school. In retrospect this could seem an obvious step but at the time it was so fraught with obstacles that no one had ever attempted such a thing before in Northern Ireland.

Seamus Mallon, Newry and Armagh MP and Deputy Leader of the SDLP, was a teacher on Dolores' staff before he went into politics. Over the years he constantly praised Dolores for this decision. To bring about the amalgamation Dolores needed to plan strategically. She got the support of the Provincial and her team, of the Principals of the Secondary School and of Mount Saint Catherine's Primary School, as well as of the staffs of all three schools for her plan. She also got the support of the community in Armagh who would move out of the convent into other accommodation.

The boarding school would close, and the Grammar school and convent building would be entirely renewed and refurbished. A new building programme including a new extension was envisaged. The Society would have to pay for this and later be 80% reimbursed by the department of Education Northern Ireland, Sister Dillon, provincial treasurer, was consulted. The pros and cons were weighed and the Provincial agreed the next step: consultation with parents. Dolores' consultation with parents was not easy. But in the outcome, there was sufficient backing with the majority of parents supporting, and the Society's decision was finalised.

Then there were negotiations with the Department of Education. These were long and complex.

Seamus Mallon said of that time: "She showed Northern Ireland what had to be done. It was done for more than Armagh. I remember one of the inspectors chatting to me. 'She has stirred



Former Convent of the Sacred Heart Intermediate School - now Barat Building (Coláiste Chaitríona).

everything up', he said, 'every single point of detail she mastered'. Department of Education officials would go to a meeting wanting to stonewall; but she knew their regulations better than they did. The impression that she made on them was such that she got most of them on side."

The Department agreed to support the plan and provide extra staffing and new equipment. The new school began in September 1973.

Combining the staffs of the Secondary and Grammar schools required a strong leadership. Dolores invested massively in motivating both staffs. Forty years later, she could write that "the amalgamated staffs were highly motivated and determined to make it work". Those early years of the new school, Saint Catherine's College, were a testing time.

Mrs Margaret Martin writes that she was one of 12 new staff who were appointed at this time and she was "plunged into this melting pot and at a time of huge political upheaval - daily bombs and deaths, the UCC strike of 1974. For me it was eye-opening, life-giving and extremely challenging."

With a backdrop of terrorist activities and intimidation, the sectarian divide and a high level of unemployment, Dolores knew that pastoral care of pupils required an outreach to their parents and sympathetic personal contact. Every teacher was formed to this perspective. Dolores asked the Society to fund a special post for a home-school liaison officer; Mrs Peggy Moroney was appointed and proved a tremendous support for the work of the school and for Dolores personally.

In those early years of its life, Saint Catherine's needed to show that all its students of differing abilities were catered for. Jobs for school leavers and A level results would prove practical yardsticks of its success. Over the years of her principalship Dolores steadily worked both to

diversify the curriculum and to increase the numbers of students staying on after Fifth Year.

What was Dolores like to work for?

"Very nice," says her personal secretary, Mrs Jeanne Minne,

"Very understanding: if you had a difficult day she would always make you think that was ok. She was a disciplinarian, but in a fair way. I was proud myself as I felt she trusted me."

Mrs Minne continues: "Often she looked sad. She kept her difficulties to herself. Very private. I felt she was quite shy. If there were inspectors coming, she tried to have someone else see them! My one picture of her: standing on the balcony straight as a rod, the captain on the ship, watching staff and students come into the school in the early morning. She was a very determined person. That's why she could achieve a lot."

How did all this massive effort affect Dolores herself?

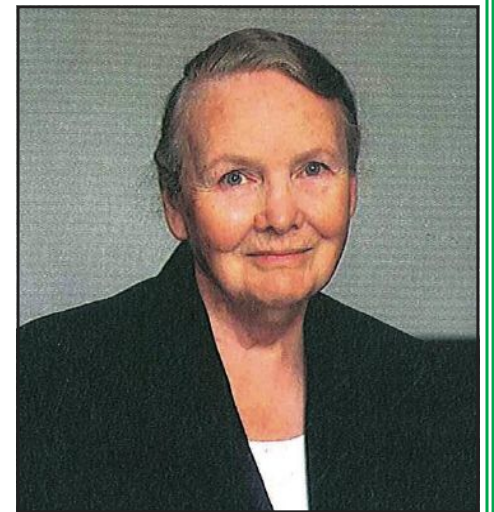
Her Deputy, Mrs Martin, says: "She said to me at one stage when I was talking about those early days, 'my perception was I was always fighting with the staff'."

Her remark is a telling one. It was not the perception of staff, Mrs Martin insists. The staff had tremendous respect for her.

Sister Kathleen Friel agrees: "She was always courteous. She was a presence, wherever she was. But people did not confront her because she was several steps ahead."

By 1981 she began planning for a successor to replace her as Principal and she retired in 1982, aged 61.

Her notes in preparation for the amalgamation and her report on 'Going Comprehensive' which are kept in the school archive, are fascinating. Her research was thorough, including a visit to the USA, followed by visits to schools in Yorkshire. She held meetings, conducted parental surveys and led staff consultations. She wrote a report



Sister Dolores Considine.

summarising the pros and cons and a brief summary of the advantages offered by the present campus concluded the paper:

"It was clearly indicated that such a major change in policy would not be initiated unless acceptable to parents, who were asked: 'Is the proposed scheme to amalgamate the Grammar School and Intermediate School on a Comprehensive basis acceptable to you? Yes/No'.

"A space was left for comments. Slowly the forms came back; the totals were posted daily on the Staff Board. The final count was: in favour - 94.09; against - 5.91. As the boarding school would be phased out in the event of comprehensiveisation, those opposed to the scheme were in the main, though not exclusively, parents of boarders.

"The proposed scheme was accepted by the Governors; the first step in reorganisation was planned for September 1973 when fees would no longer be payable in respect of any child, and the First Year pupils would be organised on a comprehensive basis. Negotiations with the Ministry could proceed."

Sister Considine concludes: "In the end (was it really only the beginning?!), the new school did open in September 1973 - and it is still open!"

Mrs Noeleen Tiffney, current principal of Saint Catherine's College, reflected: "Sister Considine was an educational giant and an advocate for social justice whose legacy reaches far beyond this local area. Her work was consolidated by the three accomplished women who followed her: my predecessors, Sr Aileen Kinlen, Mrs Margaret Martin and Mrs Deirdre McDonald. It is a blessing and privilege to have the opportunity to build upon their work and that of all those who helped to realise Sister Considine's vision on Mount Saint Catherine."