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Dear Friends

As Christmas comes and another year draws to a close we look back over a very eventful year. So many times we are asked, Sister what do you do all day? There are times when if we wrote it all down, no one would believe it.

Coming up to Christmas last year we were preparing to welcome Sr Marie from Firhouse Carmel to our Community. She joined us for Christmas but as the sale of the Monastery had fallen through a month earlier she had to return and await a new buyer. We happily welcomed both Sr Marie and Sr Breda (who in the months of waiting had made the wise decision to join us here) on 24th August. So many people who have had a long connection with the Community over 190 years have been saddened by the closure but unfortunately due to the lack of vocations it was inevitable. Our Sisters come with all the wisdom of a long life in Carmel and beyond. Sr Breda comes with her missionary experience in Australia – she was a Nazareth Sister in a former life and Sr Marie has spent all her missionary life in Firhouse (60 years), praying for the local community and those further afield. Although they have moved they haven't gone too far and their friends will not have far to come. While they gradually recover from the trauma of leaving their beloved Firhouse we hear them continually praising God for His abundant love and care for them in their new home. Some of the Firhouse furniture came too so the Chapel, parlours and community room have had a new look and is a link with their roots.

The Sisters were both relieved and delighted when they received the news that their church furniture had travelled safely and had arrived intact at its destination in Zimbabwe for use in a new Carmelite Monastery

At the end of last year it became evident that work needed to be done on the boundary wall. The dashing was coming loose and falling out onto the path and the pillars of the gate were cracked and in danger of falling. It took a long time with builders coming and going but thankfully it is now safe and secure.

Successive plumbers have been warning us for the past couple of years that our heating system has had its days and we need to upgrade. Of course we had been putting it on the long finger for as long as possible. We had leaks here and there and got them mended and waited for the next one, in the hope of getting as much out of the old as possible. Early in the year the plumbers told us we had a leak on the heating system underground. When you can't see it, it's easier to ignore it! However one morning the carpet in the staff room was soaked and it transpired that the radiator had sprung a hole. That was it. The heating had to be replaced. A leak in the Chapel could be the next and we wouldn't be replacing the floor there. Thankfully we didn't realise that we would be living on a building site when we began. However it was an advantage to be in situ and we were able to change our minds on how many radiators and where the pipes could go etc. etc. We are now reaping the benefit of the new system as the pipes are all over ground and the house much warmer.

When builders and other tradesmen move in there is always a skip to accompany them. These men brought a gi-nor-mus one. We asked if we could contribute to it and as soon as we got the go ahead we started. Attics, spare rooms, stores and each Sister was invited to donate what suitable material she had in her room. Soon Mick, who keeps his JCB here was asked to shove the load down and we filled it again. And Mick came again. No chance to recover anything that might have got in there by mistake, it was well squashed. We filled again and the men called whoa! the lorry won't be able to lift it!!!

In June we had a welcome break to the activity when we had our Retreat. Sr Michelle from Glencairn directed it and her gentle self and knowledge of Community living helped us to relax and begin again anew as St Teresa insists again and again. We attended the Youth 2000 festival in the Cistercian Abbey Roscrea and again were inspired by the enthusiasm of the young people for their faith.

Our cat Tuppence took to visiting the neighbours across the road and went missing for a couple of days. When we found her under the hay she had met with an RTA (veterinary term for road traffic accident). She had been hiding and her injuries were all to her face and mouth and had become infected. She had treatment and in due course had eleven teeth removed. She has recovered well but when you go a hunting without your teeth..... Abby accompanies her and comes to the rescue. Abby is a small cat with a very strong hunting instinct. When she is on patrol she looks so fierce if she were any bigger you would call the zoo and tell everyone to stay indoors. She has a liking for fresh meat, especially squirrel. The same puss loves to hop on your shoulder, lick your face and say her purrs in your ear. For those who are interested cats have twenty teeth and some have twenty two. Tuppence is not among those with twenty two!

Sally Ann our thirty three year old donkey and her companion Lady have been enjoying free range on the lawns and orchard throughout the winter months. Their free ranging was curtailed in early summer when they walked through the dahlias intended for Chapel! The sacristan was not pleased. The apples would have been a big temptation also and too many would not have been good for their tummies. They are again enjoying their freedom and when you turn the corner for the garden you know they have reached the herb garden when the smell of mint wafting on the air fills your senses. Who said donkeys have bad breath? Not ours certainly, mint fresh assuredly. And what about the rosemary?

On 16th July we were joined by the Sisters of the House of the Mother, a new religious order started in Spain with a house in Roscommon. Some Irish girls have joined, notably Sr Clare from Belfast who was killed in the earthquake in South America while bringing school children to safety. The Sisters brought a group of girls from Spain for a pilgrimage and

summer camp and started their pilgrimage with Mass in our Chapel. At the end of Mass they treated us to some beautiful singing. A hymn to Our Lady, it being our feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and a hymn in Spanish to St. Teresa. It was a lovely sunny morning and our lodge lady Oonagh treated them (all fifty something of them) to breakfast in her garden. Srs Maria and Teresa then departed for New Ross for a wonderful celebration of 200 hundred years of Carmelite presence in New Ross.

Sr Christine from the Carmel in Le Harve in France visited us and spoke about their response to the dearth of vocations. They have a couple of houses of welcome where sisters who are no longer active and whose monastery has closed can retire to and have the help for living that they need. The work of these sisters now is to pass on the wisdom they have gained over their years of living the contemplative life to the younger generations. Unfortunately all over Europe, Monasteries are closing while in Africa and Asia there are new foundations and plenty of vocations.

We are so grateful to Margaret Cartright for her enthusiastic ongoing work to promote a culture of vocation. She is so energetic in all she organises to this end and when she asked us to help with the ploughing championships we were only too glad to do so. You might wonder what involvement we might have, and rightly so. Margaret had seen from other years that farmers look for blessed salt for the land. It was a tradition in the spring for the Priest to bless salt to be sprinkled on the land to protect crops and animals. So Margaret decided to provide the salt. We packed about four thousand little sachets with a special prayer for the land and the animals and Margaret went off to the mud and floods of Screggan with it. Life in Roebuck is certainly varied, no time for boredom.

We continue to keep you in our prayers, we know that some of our friends have been ill and are still unwell, some have gone to their eternal rest and we have made new friends. Welcome to all. We wish you a very blessed Christmas and pray that the coming year will be one of blessings for each one.

We leave you with a little reflection for Advent and Christmas.

The gift of gifts

It's taken for granted now.
The giving of gifts each year,
Costly or cheap, large or small,-
That they must be given is clear.

Does anyone stop to think,
"Is there really a reason why?"
As they rush from store to store
To look, to compare, to buy?

The very first Christmas gift
Was given so long ago,
In a town called Bethlehem
To a world that did not know.

The gift was sent from heaven
In the middle of the night,
Announced by angels of peace,
And a star, so luminous bright.

It was given by God Himself,
Through a maiden, pure and mild,
A treasure beyond all price, -
A tiny, God-man Child.

So this year as you wrap your gifts,
And unwrap those you've been given,
Remember to thank your Father above
For the gift He sent from Heaven.