



# The Ursulines: Pioneering Women

To celebrate their coming to Ireland 250 years ago, **John Scally**, theologian and author, pays tribute to the educational heritage of the Ursulines in Ireland and abroad.

It is not an easy time to be a nun in Ireland today. Writing in the *Irish Times* the noted Patrick Kavanagh scholar, Sr Una Agnew, captured the feelings of many religious: 'The derision with which the word "nun" ... has been spoken on Irish television has cut to the heart of many who have put their lives on the line for values that are foundational to human flourishing.'

Against such a backdrop many religious sisters experience feelings of diminished energy and even demoralisation. To many nuns it seems that faith in Ireland has become like smoking – relegated to the private sphere.

Yet, this year the Ursuline Sisters celebrate with pride the 250th anniversary of their coming to Ireland. Two qualities have marked the Ursulines' ministry: sacrifice and dedication.

The story of the Ursuline school in Thurles contains a powerful parable of the dedication of the Ursuline sisters in Ireland. In the nineteenth century, when Ireland was hit by the ravages of famine and disease, the nuns went hungry to ensure that the pupils in their boarding school were fed.

From the very outset Ursuline schools were centres not only of academic excellence but of producing pioneering women. Their very first student in Cork was Mary Ryan, who

would become the very first female professor in Ireland.

In Waterford the Ursulines broke the glass ceiling with their emphasis on science and on higher education for women. A training college for secondary teachers was established as an affiliation to Cambridge in 1897. Sisters and pupils were prepared for degrees at the Royal University. The first College of Domestic Science in Ireland was opened there.

In 1926 the introduction of the Ursuline Montessori school in Waterford attracted great praise. William Butler Yeats visited the premises to see it in his capacity as a senator and a member of a government committee appointed to investigate the state of Irish education. Indeed, as a result of this visit the Ursulines in Waterford can claim to have left an indelible mark not just on the Irish educational landscape but also on the Irish literary landscape. The visit to their Montessori School is credited as the inspiration for Yeats' famous poem, 'Among School Children'.

The Ursulines in Sligo continued to be at the cutting edge of curriculum reform. In 1966 the first female Young Scientist of the Year, Mary Finn, came from the school.

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in Ireland fundraise to help their sister schools in Kenya. To take one example, they provide the seed capital for local women to start up small businesses such as the growing and selling of vegetables. This is their golden ticket. Effectively the Ursulines in Ireland have created a new entrepreneurial class in the desert of Kenya.

Now more than ever our increasingly fear-filled world craves good news. Through their mission and their unique service of word, worship and witness the Ursulines have been and continue to be a good news story – for the Church and the world. They can stand tall knowing that they have

made and continue to make a significant contribution to the advancement of society. They have done so without fanfare but in a quiet way, often hidden from the eyes of the world.

Across the infinity between the living and the dead the Ursulines are incarnations of messages of hope and new beginnings. They are living their mission by building God's kingdom and collaborating with laity, other religious, other faith communities and groups of civil society. They are anchored by their encounter with God's presence dwelling within them and by a shared commitment to living the Gospel. 