

# Celebrating the inspiring life of Sister Deirdre O’Loan



## Early years

Sister Deirdre O’Loan, affectionately known as “Sister D”, was born on 16 Nov 1932 in North Cork, Ireland. Her father, Mr Patrick O’Loan worked in the Ministry of Agriculture while her mother, Ms Elizabeth Blake, was a homemaker. She was the eldest in a family of six children - Father Noel, a Carmelite priest and missionary to Africa, Ann, Pat, Aidan and Fergus.



Photo 1 Mrs O’Loan, Deirdre, Noel, Ann, Pat, Aidan and Fergus, Photo 2 Deirdre with her Mum and her siblings, Photo 3 Deirdre and Noel

She studied with the Mercy Sisters in Kanturk, Co Cork, Ireland and finished her secondary school education but was too young to be admitted to the University. Her father was the Adviser to the Infant Jesus (IJ) Sisters in their development of new forms of farming at Drishane Convent. During that time, she had the opportunity to meet with a few IJ sisters whom she found to be human, friendly and kind. Hence, she accepted her father’s suggestion to go to boarding school and study Science in the Technical School in Drishane while waiting to go to University. During her time as a boarder, she was impressed by the Sisters’ breadth of vision, international outlook and great humanity besides their being wonderful educators. At 18, she begged her parents to let her try out religious life and promised that if she was not suited for it, she would immediately ask for permission to leave.

Sister Deirdre chose to join the Infant Jesus Sisters because she wanted to be sent on mission to the Far East. In her own words, "What drew me to the Sisters was the way they reached out to people - their understanding of human difficulty and frailty," she explains. "It was incarnational - reaching out to others in a very human way with understanding." Another reason was that when she was at school in Ireland, the international dimension of the order appealed to her as Sisters from Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and other countries visited her school and shared with them their experiences.

On entering the Novitiate, Sister Deirdre spent two and half years in the study of Scripture, Church history, Theology and the Spirituality of Religious Life, Prayer and the three vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, and also the Spirituality and Mission of the IJ Congregation. In addition, she studied French and was given exposure to different ministries in her second year of Novitiate. Initially, she found it difficult to keep silence that was observed during most of the day but in later years, she treasured the beauty and value of silence. She felt that young people should be advised to keep periods of silence.

Sister Deirdre made her first profession in 1953 and after an intensive period of preparation with Sisters of different nationalities in the Mother House in Paris, she made her final vows on 8 September 1958.



*Photo 1 Before entering the Convent, Photo 2 First Profession, Photo 3 with her family after her Final Vows*

After her first vows, she entered the University of Cork where she graduated with BA Honours in Latin and English and subsequently she completed her Diploma in Education with Honours too at the same University. Her teaching practice was in some city schools in Dublin.

She had asked to be sent out as a missionary to the East after her one year of teaching secondary school in Drishane but her request was not granted immediately as she was to help teach in the newly established school in Malahide.

After that stint, Mother Charles, the IJ Provincial of Malaya-Singapore, met her in Ireland and told her that she would be sent to her mission in Malaya. She was given a brief introduction and background to that country and granted a few days leave to be with her family before leaving for the East.

The journey by boat on the Laos was a long and arduous one. She travelled with two other Irish missionaries and two returning Chinese missionaries from Dublin to Liverpool to London to Paris, to Lourdes to Marseilles through the Suez Canal to Aden and then down to Colombo to Singapore.

She guessed she first arrived at the Beach Road area where there were remains of colonial institutions. She stayed at Town Convent in Victoria Street for two days and then travelled with another sister by train to Kuala Lumpur. At every point of departure, there was this sense of moving into the unknown. On arrival, Sister Deirdre was attracted to the beautiful Moorish architecture of the railway station.