



*Anne Murphy is a member of the Programme Board of ALBA*

Last night, there was a party. It was a birthday party; a birthday party with a difference: the ALBA Programme at All Hallows College, Dublin, was one year old.<sup>1</sup>

The President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, addressed the gathering of staff and students eager to celebrate the realisation of an idea which, a few short years ago, was but a twinkle in the eye of Dr Joe McCann and his pioneering group of adult educators. Now, one academic year in existence, the ALBA programme has grown from twenty-five students to over one hundred; it is already showing the *'brassy thunderlight'* of hope for many adult learners who might otherwise, in these recessionary times, be conscious only of *'high, banked clouds of resignation'*, to borrow from Seamus Heaney as quoted by Mary McAleese in her address last night.<sup>2</sup>

W.B.Yeats has said: *'Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire'*.

The President congratulated all those involved in this new programme which allows the adult learner to return to the classroom, not as an empty pail, but as a touch paper ready to be set alight. ALBA students come with a rich reservoir of gifts and skills, knowledge and experience, for which they are given credit in the building of their degree pathway. He or she may be a parent or even a grand-parent, and probably has a life busy with many commitments; some are studying concurrently with their children and fulfilling a lifetime's ambition to educate themselves, having first attended to everyone but themselves. Some study alongside colleagues with whom they have worked for years, but with whom they are now made redundant from firms gone out of business. The programme, therefore, has to be flexible and adaptable to individual backgrounds, giftedness and needs. Crucially, the ALBA student is encouraged, with the guidance of mentors and teachers, to design his or her own curriculum around personal interests and goals. The programme is outcome driven, not content bound; the focus is the student's intellectual growth, self-knowledge and awareness. Each degree path towards personal and professional development is as individual and unique as the student who takes it.

Mary McAleese reminded us that Henry Ford said: *'Anyone who stops learning is old, whether at twenty or eighty. Anyone who keeps learning stays young'*. A noticeable characteristic of a learner is curiosity: curiosity is an energy of the mind and the imagination; it is a hallmark of the child: a child of any age. Einstein dismissed overstatement of his intelligence as unwarranted, saying that he simply asked questions that only a child would ask, and he stayed with problems a little longer than most. By that yardstick, ALBA students have much in common with Einstein:

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<sup>1</sup> ALBA: Adult Learning B.A. accredited by DCU and inspired by a parent programme in De Paul University, Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> As 1 above

full of curiosity and questioning, they are not likely to be easily dissuaded from pursuing the path of higher education which may have been denied them until now. The advocacy of the mathematician and philosopher Jacob Bronowski might appeal to their world view: ‘...to bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.’<sup>3</sup> They do. To great effect. We’re Back to Einstein again.



*President Mary McAleese with the ALBA Programme Board*

The world in these troubling and troubled times is dark with forebodings; much that seemed indestructible in society, and foundational to civil and spiritual life, has crumbled. Heaney’s ‘clouds of resignation’ are a life-destroying option and have the power to suffocate, if there are not prophetic voices to announce other

possibilities for survival. What reverberates around the corridors and classrooms of ALBA at All Hallows is the infectious notion that there is ‘... [this] change of mood. Books open in the newly wired kitchen....causeways across the prescribed texts...paving stones of quadrangles...and a grammar of imperatives.... Intelligences brightened and unmannerly as crowbars’.<sup>4</sup>

It is a privilege to be involved with the ALBA programme, imbued as it is with the Vincentian charism of respect for each individual in reaching out to bring peace, consolation, dignity, and hope to others. This ethos resonates with our RSHM charism; it embraces the gospel call to live in such a way ‘That all may have life’. It is good for us to be here. People are walking taller because of their immersion in the ALBA programme and because of their growing awareness of their own giftedness and of their intrinsic worth. They may be sitting on the grass, now, waiting for the boy with the loaves and fishes; but, they are steadily coming to realise and value the abundance, of a lifetime’s gathering, in their own basket. They will be ready, when the cloudburst happens from the banked clouds, -to paraphrase Heaney’s mesmeric and prophetic lines- after the drought. Their boats will be lifted. They will know that their instincts were right:

*The future lies with what’s affirmed from under*

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Ascent of Man*

<sup>4</sup> As 1 above

<sup>5</sup> Anne is a member of the Programme Board of the Adult Learning BA at All Hallows College, Dublin City University. She is responsible for the development of the Arts and Ideas strand of the degree and teaches some courses of the programme.



My stay in Brazil was a truly wonderful privilege and I am deeply grateful. My few days in some communities together with the JPIC meeting were a deep experience of Brazilian hospitality. The general report on the JPIC meeting is found on the General website. Suffice it to say here that there was a marked development in action from each province to counteract human trafficking and towards realising the Millennium Goals. The main speaker, Priscilla Siqueira, a woman of world wide experience of dealing with Human Trafficking and Human Rights, left us both spellbound and full of admiration. We are not responsible for the past, she used to say, but we are responsible for 'the now'.



I spent a week with Kate in João Pessoa on my arrival. Those days opened my horizon to the network of projects Kate has established ranging from bible reflections/study to child care and especially adult literacy. Kate had many stories to tell of some getting to university, others able to keep a job since they can take a message on the phone. Others, perhaps working cutting sugar-cane are able to read their

cheques and avoid being cheated. One woman aged about 50 was one of a large family and due to extreme poverty had to work in the fields but now is very grateful to be learning to write.





During the JPIC meeting we had a lovely evening in the novitiate. The week following the meeting three of us had a week there. What an exciting experience to see five young very able women full of pride in the RSHMs and ever so welcoming. When someone read from the necrology one evening after prayer, I said here are the past, present and future RSHM alive!

Three of us were invited to the Provincial Centre for dinner. We heard about the team of lay people who work with Sr Aparecida on the central 'management' of their schools which are private and do not have Sisters on

the staff.. They audit accounts, fund social projects and keep resources and archives. In this way they keep the RSHM ethos very much alive with a marked commitment to the poor.

My last week was spent with Judith Lupo in São Paulo. While there, I got Maria de Lourdes' recent book and what better context in which to read it. Judith, like so many others, has put into action the call of the 1975 Chapter to work for justice among those with 'no voice'. We visited a men's home where the men sat happily chatting after a shower and a good warm meal, one of many testaments to her respect and care for the people in 'the street situation'. She said that the first night with nine of them, they brought tears to her eyes when she saw their transformation.

Her network of projects goes beyond words. She is the personification of gentleness and yet all her staff work for her through some 'magnetic drive' and would die for her. She has crèches for babies sent from the hospital, left by parents for various reasons and waiting adoption hopefully. Then there are preschool or before and after school groups who have no room to study or play at home. There are training places for older groups in the hope of getting some work.



I wonder how one woman can hold all those projects in hand with all they entail and then be so hospitable. She regularly gives time to Brigid who is bedridden, remembers all the birthdays, even having a lovely cake ready for the celebration. There was great joy when she heard that six of the men in the home got a job in the last two months. The inscription 'Ut vitam Habeant' written on the cross in their little oratory, to me said it all. I will never forget the faces of those babies and the little children whom we hope and pray will be blessed in happy families and never fall prey to the scandals of modern life with its commercial human trafficking.



*So sorry to have kept you waiting for so long to hear about my pilgrimage*

**This poem says it all.**



**TRASNA: the crossing place**

The pilgrims paused on the ancient stones

In the mountain gap.

Behind them stretched the roadway they had  
travelled .

Ahead, mist hid the track.

Unspoken the question hovered:

Why go on? Is life not short enough?  
Why seek to pierce its mystery?

Why venture further on strange paths,  
risking all'

**Surely that is a gamble for fools - or lovers.**



## Why not return quietly to the known road?

Why be a pilgrim still?

A voice they knew called to them, saying:

This is Trasná, the crossing place.

Choose! Go back if you must,  
You will find your way easily by yesterday's  
fires,  
there may be life in the embers yet.

If that is not your deep desire,



Stand still. Lay down your load.

Take your life firmly in your two hands,  
(Gently... you are trusted with something precious)  
While you search your heart's yearnings:  
What am I seeking? What is my quest?

When your star rises deep within,  
Trust yourself to its leading.  
You will have the light for first steps.  
this is Trasná, the crossing place. Come!

***The pilgrimage was a rich experience :  
one of weakness and strength, of dying and rising,  
of travelling and destination, of aloneness and communion.  
Mostly Communion :  
I walked, surrounded by thoughts, prayers, interest,  
encouragement from all of you, for which I am most grateful.  
There was no “going back”,  
the Way is the destination.  
We are, all of us, always on the Camino.***