

# **30th Anniversary of the Ascent**

**An address given by Mrs Paula Conrad (Focolare Centre - Welwyn Garden City, Thurs.14th October 2010)**

It is with great pleasure that I stand here today and I want to thank Kathleen and her team most sincerely for preparing this wonderful celebration for us. Dear Bishop Howard, Father Vlad, Margaret our president and all here present I cannot tell you what enormous joy it gives me to see so many people gathered here to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ascent Movement. I only wish all our members could be here to enjoy this momentous day in the life of our movement.

It is always fascinating to look back over ones life and recall the numerous experiences and events, both happy and otherwise that have occurred along the journey. Together with our journey of faith and how it has brought us to this moment As I was preparing this talk about the history of the Ascent it set me thinking about not only the very early beginnings of the movement but how maybe my early life influenced my attraction to its ideals.

My early life or until I was 17, was spent in a house in Sydenham that belonged to the Brompton Oratory; it was the community retreat house of the Oratorian Fathers, standing in 10 acres of land and particularly treasured by Fr Frederick Wilfrid Faber. Fr Faber was a contemporary of Blessed John Henry Newman who was there at the solemn opening of the property and who stayed at St.Mary's on a number of occasions. The hallowed atmosphere of the house and grounds, including the cemetery, imbued us and I am sure instilled in us a deep sense of God. This has never gone from my heart. I have always loved my faith and nothing has ever given me more joy than sharing the love of God with others.

Born well before me, Andre D'Humieres was born in France in 1888. He became a tea planter and travelled extensively. He served as an officer in the French Air force and commanded a fighter squadron in the First World War. Later on he put all his energies into Catholic Action in Europe. Having retired from active life he would

enjoy meeting other catholics to pray and reflect on the Word of God. It was not his intention to set up a group for older people but he was nearly 65 and the others were of a similar age. Between 1951 to 1961 similar groups were set up in Paris and in 1962 Andre approached Bishop Stanislaus Courbe of Paris telling him of his intention to create a spiritual and apostolic movement for older people. Andre was given the green light to go ahead. In 1971 after an audience with Pope John 23<sup>rd</sup> the movement received its title La Vie Montante. It had two strengths it was now known and unofficially approved of by the Holy See and it was the first movement to recognise the importance of older people, their value to the Church and human kind and their unique mission.

During the 1970's it flourished in France and throughout the French speaking world including French Canada.

I have now prepared the canvas in order to paint the picture of the Ascent in the United Kingdom.

In the late 70's Fr Harry Pownall, a parish priest in Liverpool, had heard about La Vie Montante and was very keen to see it start in England, full of optimism he had the handbook translated into English and had 1,000 copies printed but before he saw the fruits of his labours he was suddenly called from this life.

Sr Mary Cairns was a young Ursuline sister and teacher who would often meet Fr Harry but she said " he would go on about this group he wanted to start for old people and I just wasn't interested. It wasn't until his requiem that I came to realise all that Father had been saying and in time I started our group in Liverpool"

In May 1980 I represented two parishes at the Liverpool Pastoral Congress and on returning home I prayed " please God send me something that you really want me to do, I will do anything for you as I do not want to go to work." Miraculously, three days later I met 3 people who were to change my life. Madam Francoise Nouvel, Sr Marie Benoit(a sister of the Community of Our Lady of Fidelity) and Fr Andre Tanguy had travelled from Paris in order to speak about Vie Montante at the Pastoral Congress but had not booked places there. Fortunately Our Lady of Fidelity convent Upper Norwood took them

in and promised to find someone who might be interested in what they had to say. Let us say, by chance, I decided to call into the convent after seeing my 5 children off to school and asked Rev. Mother Mark if I might tell the sisters about my experience at the Pastoral Congress she replied "Of course and can you stay and have breakfast with us as I have some people I would like you to meet?" this meeting was the beginning of the Ascent's journey in England. The French VIP's also visited Maidstone, Oxford and Dun Laoghaire and before the end of 1980 the first groups started to meet.

All literature at that time was in French so it was very hard to know if we had got it right. But with God's help we persevered. It was when I needed some more handbooks that I got to hear about a Dominican priest, Fr Gerard Meath, who out of the blue had been given the care of Fr Harry's handbooks. We started to communicate and in time this wonderful priest became our spiritual advisor. Over the years we were able to turn to him for guidance and practical help and his input in all manner of ways was enormous. After visiting The Upper Norwood group in 1983, Fr Gerard wrote "The ecumenical aspect is good also: what I liked was how we all accepted one another just as we were and especially how real prayer quite naturally wove itself between the tea and cakes".

In 1982, I was invited to represent our country at La Vie Montante's pilgrimage where 10,000 members met in Rome. Pope John Paul 11 addressed the gathering and outlined what he saw as the ethos of the movement, Spirituality, Apostolate and Friendship, which have become the key aims of the Ascent. I felt very lonely as I had no French and only a little German, but the exuberance and joy of the members was infectious and I felt that the experience was worth it. It was here that I agreed to take responsibility for the movement in England.

A big turning point came during a parish visitation when Bishop Howard Tripp asked me to tell him about 'the Ascent' because by this time we had adopted the anglicised title Fr Harry had given the movement. After a further meeting with Bishop Howard he said he would like to see the idea spread throughout the country and kindly added " just put down good roots just where you are and trust in the Holy Spirit, you will see it will surely spread". It was a concern to me

that I should be doing all I could to promote the movement but I had no secretarial skills, every letter was written in long hand and I often spent all night composing and writing letters to Bishops, priests and sisters, in fact anyone who might be helpful, but sadly there was rarely a single reply. Thank God I had a wonderfully understanding husband and mother to help me. And yes, the Holy Spirit was at work all the while, calling not only many, many people who would do exceptional things and be leading lights, but countless other devoted men and women who would bring their own precious, prayerful selves to the movement; each a blade of grass making the glorious lawn in our picture. I am afraid of mentioning anyone in particular as there have been so many outstanding people who have made their special mark over these 30 years.

It was in 1986 when we decided to hold our first conference at West Croydon that I met Sr Mary Connor. Our meeting was very exciting because sister was in the Westminster diocese and she was incredibly enthusiastic. From that moment, Sr Mary took hold of the Ascent and with great zeal and love she has continuously sought to inspire others and encouraged them to start groups. Joyce Neill, who died this year, was a gifted French speaker who was an answer to prayer and who was our International representative. Her contribution was invaluable. She also translated two books of meditations from the French. One of the evergreens in my picture is Helena Thias, who set up the Kensington group, way back in the 1980's. Helena was on our original Planning Team, representing us abroad and translating and interpreting for the movement.

Unfortunately money is always necessary if more is to be achieved. Apart from the cost of promoting the movement, the Ascent was now a part of an international movement and it was important for us to take a full part in this. Through prayer and action wonderful and extraordinary things have happened and been possible. An unknown lady in Upper Norwood left £3,000 to Vie Montante in her will just after I had promised to give the European Fund £100. A policeman raised £300 by running the marathon and we were awarded £200 from the police from money raised from unclaimed property. So much was raised to send representatives to Panama that we were able to publish a new handbook as well.

We have represented our country at most European meetings : Fatima, Rome, Belgium, Barcelona, Poland and the Czech Republic also in Panama, Miami, Dakar and Bangkok. England did not attend the World Meeting in Canada this October as it was difficult to raise the money in these uncertain times.

Memorable occasions abound. We celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Vie Montante at St Georges Cathedral in 1987. In 1988 Fr Vladimir dipped his toes into the Ascent when he came to our 'Sharing our Faith' conference in Upper Norwood and he is now the spiritual advisor to the Westminster region. Sr Marie Benoit was at the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary when Bishop Howard Tripp celebrated Mass in the crypt of Canterbury cathedral. 1991 Archbishop Derek Worlock was our key speaker when we hosted the European Congress at London Colney. It was a great success. Archbishop Gordon Wheeler welcomed us to the Little Sisters in Leeds in 1992 when we launched the movement in the North. This was also the year that my husband Mike designed the official logo and badge for Ascent. 1995 was our 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in Liverpool. The Decree of Official Papal recognition came in 1996. In 1997 Molly Hukin, who was an incredibly dynamic and gifted lady, took over the reins from me and totally reorganised the Ascent setting up the regions, retreats and publishing a professional Journal. Through Molly the Ascent became a member of the National Council of the Lay Apostolate.

Kathleen Venting, who became Vice president and then National Secretary is one of so many of our treasures. In 1999 The International Year of Older Persons, the Church issued a document for study called "The Dignity of Older People" and we made a valuable contribution to this document. Ripon was the venue for the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and our 25<sup>th</sup> was celebrated in Birmingham. As you can see by this time the North was truly on board. 2001 Sister Margaret Brown was the next President to brave it at the helm with Sister Kathleen as her Vice President. They steered the Ascent beautifully into the next decade. Now we have our President, Margaret Snowdon, in her second term of office guiding our precious movement into a new and exciting electronic future. Don't forget to look at the website: [www.ascentmovement.org.uk](http://www.ascentmovement.org.uk). Sr Janet, our Journal Editor, is doing a grand job producing two valuable journals a year and do keep sending her your contributions. Marie Ryde is our superb National Secretary.

I can never thank God enough for sending me this work to do for Him and for all the inspired, prayerful and unique souls who have also been called to use their gifts and love, to enrich others lives. Over all these years I have kept many treasured memories and keepsakes. Looking through the archives I found a precious letter written by Sister Mary McEvoy. She had just set up a group in Islington but sadly she was killed, crossing the road at Kings Cross one morning. She was on her way to the 7.30am Polish Mass. In her last letter to me, she closed it with these words “This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvellous in our eyes”. I really could not find more appropriate words to conclude this 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary reflection.