

## **SR CHRISTOPHER RUTH ANGELL CJ** 17 Dec 1916-28 July 2023

O God, you are my God, for you I long;  
 For you my soul is thirsting.  
 My body pines for you  
 Like a dry weary land without water. (*Ps 62 (63)*)

Sr Christopher spent many years ‘longing’ for the Lord, and now she can say, as she so often did,

‘How marvellous!’

Anyone who visited Sr Christopher in her old age would hear these words – expressions of her constant joy and optimism even in her loneliness and diminishment.

As we know, she lived two lives – one in each hemisphere – and each of more than fifty years. We gather to celebrate these lives – they were, of course, one life - of Ruth Angell, whom we knew as Sr Christopher, and to reflect on what it means for us.

Born in England in 1916, she followed other members of her family into the Catholic Church in 1928 when she was 12. This led her to go to a Catholic school in Cambridge which happened to be run by the Mary Ward sisters.

She obviously excelled at school ending up as head girl and captain of games. But there was a tragedy in her life: her elder brother, who had joined the Royal Air Force, was killed in an accident in 1931 when he was 21. This profoundly affected her and turned her thoughts towards religious life.

On leaving school in 1934, she entered the convent at Ascot and three years later went to Reading University to study science, completing her degree in 1940 shortly after the beginning of the Second World War. She began teaching, that year, in Cambridge at her old school, becoming head mistress in 1949, and remained there for altogether 32 years.

Such are the bare bones of her ‘first life’ – a period of 56 years.

Two of her former pupils pull back the curtain a little on those years. Sybil Leacock, who lives in Canada, writes:

When my father took us to England to escape Apartheid in South Africa, Mother Christopher welcomed me with such warmth and affection when I arrived at PASTONHOUSE as a 17-year-old. She took me privately for Botany lessons, which were such light-hearted fun, in the botanical gardens.

When I returned to England again, after going back to South Africa, she kept me informed about trips to Rome with PASTONHOUSE girls. I still have the picture she sent. I just felt so loved and secure at school with her there. She was always such a joy, with her caring light-hearted nature, and even keeping in contact long after I had returned to England as an adult.

I regret I had not kept in touch after I found out she was in Zimbabwe. My love to her as she rests after all the brightness and love she has given the girls she taught.  
My condolences to you all there.

And another former pupil, Teresa de Bertodano, writes:

Sister Christopher was a great woman, a faithful Christian and a most competent scientist. She had the gift of the great teacher: she could transmit her passions and inspire future generations. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

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So much for her 'first' life – her 56 years in England. As we know, she had a second life in Zimbabwe almost as long as her first.

In 1972, I was excited to be returning to this country as a newly ordained priest. I had worked at St Ignatius already and knew the Mary Ward sisters. I was told there were two 'retired' sisters coming out at the same time as me to join the then small group of Mary Ward sisters here, Sr Joanna Dessain and Sr



Christopher (left in the picture).

Christopher later wrote (in the booklet produced by Sr Mercy of the first seventy years), 'I had mixed feelings about the whole situation. Here I was going to leave Cambridge after a very long time, so I was kind of anticipating and anxious as well.'

We are used to the fact that she came out to this country but we can imagine it was no easy thing to leave a place (Cambridge) where you have been for 32 years and go out, like Abraham, to a

place where you really ‘don’t know where you are going’ (*Heb 11:8*) - at the age of 56!

Both sisters immediately started teaching at St Ignatius College and Christopher taught Chemistry and Maths. She was delighted to be teaching boys and found them easy to teach as they were so eager to learn.

Three years after her arrival, Sr Xaveria Bachmann, the Provincial, asked her to begin the novitiate and Christopher said, ‘How on earth am I going to do that?’ Xaveria replied, ‘You are a teacher, so there will be no problem.’ So she began with the first novices in 1975, one of whom is with us here today, Sr Hildegard.

By 1980, formation work became her full-time mission and I feel sure those present here this evening, who passed through her hands, will echo the verdict of Sybil Leacock, mentioned above, about the ‘warmth and affection’ of her welcome and the moments of ‘light-hearted fun’.

She continued as Novice Director until 1987 and then worked with the Juniors and in the college library. She also made sure the Congregation’s houses had libraries which included spiritual books.

Then in 1994, when she went to Kwekwe where she was to spend the next 24 years, she devoted herself to teaching the novices, giving retreats and spiritual direction. I was one of those whose retreat she directed.

Sr Christopher was a teacher, a formator and, let us not forget, a librarian. We know how much devotion she brought to all three tasks and how much she longed to share with others ‘the treasure she had found in the field’. We know she was a gifted teacher from the words of her students. We know she was a kind and thorough formator who desired to pass on the spirit of Mary Ward. But it is worth noting her passion in building libraries where ever she was. She wanted the sisters to read and expand their horizons and keep up with developments in the Church and in the world. In an age when people are satisfied with brief messages and ‘sound bites’ on social media we can honour her memory by paying attention to this aspect of her legacy.

Sr Christopher was always very grateful when one visited her and her ‘Thanks awfully’, said in a very English slightly upper class (!) way, was sincerely meant! It was an expression of a life lived Eucharistically, that is, full of gratitude.

She wrote, in 2021, ‘I am now spending most of my time in prayer. I find joy and consolation in my prayers. I am praying for good strong vocations and for

all the young ones to continue the work. I pray for each member of the Region every day ...'

And she ends her contribution to Sr Mercy's book, characteristically, 'How marvellous to celebrate 70 years of excellent work in Zimbabwe!'

Her last gift to us was how to grow old graciously, patiently and uncomplainingly.

How marvellous!

May she now enter into the joy of the presence of God when all is revealed to her.

*DHB sj*  
30.07.23