

# From the Father Director

## *In Memory of Evelyn*

*Last October, as the Fraternity's first pilgrimage to Rome was taking place, one of our members, Evelyn Dowling, passed away. A personal friend and mentor of Fr John, Evelyn was also the Fraternity's first Oblatory Member, and is the first member of our family of prayer to die. In this column, Fr John reflects on her life and shares some memories with us.*

Evelyn Dowling was one of those unique individuals, people who live quietly in our midst, contribute so much and then are gone. She was a member of our Fraternity – she joined it as an Oblatory Member – a dedicated member who offers their pain and suffering for the Fraternity. She was also one of Ireland's greatest singing teachers. Her many students, and for a number of years I was one of them, can testify to her musical genius. She understood the human voice, not only through learning and experience, but in her gut. She seemed to have had an almost supernatural understanding and could take a voice "in the raw" and produce a magnificent sound. Many times her students have gone to master classes and have astonished teachers, conductors and singers alike with their technique: "Who is your teacher? And why haven't I heard of her?" were common questions. Indeed, why hadn't they heard of her? Well, that is part of Evelyn Dowling's story which I would like to share with you.

Evelyn was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 1930 in Dublin. Her father died when she and her only sibling, Maureen were young. Her family being working class after school she had to go out to work. Her love of music, however, and an extraordinary singing talent led her to study music and voice in her spare time. Despite having a beautiful soprano voice, she did not get the opportunity to study abroad but dedicated herself to developing her talent in Ireland. Evelyn, however, was not happy with what she was being taught and so she found herself going from one teacher to another – something was not right, she later said. Her sister Maureen thought she was just being difficult, but Evelyn was convinced there was more to it. The final straw came one day as she listening to a soprano singing the role of Turandot on a recording. She noticed the soprano 'did something' with her technique to produce a particular effect. Bringing the recording to her teacher, she asked her what the soprano had done. The teacher could not explain it: in fact Evelyn got the impression she did not know. That was it – it was time to take matters into her own hands!



Deciding to do her own course of studies, Evelyn turned to the great teachers of the past, to the *bel canto* tradition. Poring through many of the works and treatises on singing, she began to experiment on her own voice. Her labours bore fruit in what her students often call the 'Dowling Method', a method which is designed to produce a strong operatic voice in the *bel canto* tradition, well grounded and supported in the body, yet ethereal and rich. She often said that a singer should have their voice for life and while age may mature the quality of the voice, it should not destroy it.

She often lamented over the young dynamic singers who blazed to fame in their youth but found their voices failing as they hit their thirties or forties – that is when the voice is suppose to be at its prime, she would explain. Her method allowed for no strain to undermine the integrity of the voice.

Evelyn's singing career was for the most part based in Dublin. Like many others she worked by day and sang at night. She worked in shops and offices, much of it casual work, so she could bring a wage home. Her singing did not bring in a lot – most musicians in Dublin at the time were struggling to make a living. She sang in many operas and operettas and was highly respected by her peers, although she was sometimes called the "unsociable soprano".

While she was always good fun, Evelyn found the post-concert hurrahs difficult – the drinking and subsequent activities did not appeal to her. She preferred to come home to her family and get a good night's sleep for work in the morning and to be in good voice for the following night. This was an attitude she tried to instill in her students: "You owe it to your audience to be in good voice", she would often say: "people are paying money to hear you sing and you show them little respect if your voice is carrying the effects of late night carousing".

Evelyn's vocation was not to the stage, but to preparing others for the stage. When she began teaching she realized that she had found her niche: her calling. To understand Evelyn, we must also understand her faith: she was first and foremost a follower of Christ, and this more than anything else marked her life. I often asked

her why she had not gone to England or the US to teach – she would have been recognized as the great teacher she was if she had, but Evelyn would not hear such talk: this was where God wanted her and this was where she would stay. She was not interested in fame, just in helping young men and women to discover the talent God had given them and to teach them how to use that talent in his service, in the service of music. Service was an important concept for her. The singer serves the music, she said, not the other way around: there is no room for divas. Ultimately we are all called to serve God and singers are called to praise him through their singing: everything is for him. In her work Evelyn lived this and she was content to be hidden away. The way she lived her personal life reflected this simplicity, living in a terraced house in Harold's Cross, surviving on a modest wage. She took one holiday a year and that was to her beloved Fátima.

Evelyn's faith was important to her, and on her journey of faith her sister's death marked a turning point. Maureen and Evelyn were devoted to each other: Maureen was the one who looked after Evelyn. For months after Maureen's death, Evelyn seemed to be lost. It was then, she believed, that God called her to a greater faith. At Mass one day she had an experience in which she had an encounter with him and everything changed for her. The loneliness, the fear and anxiety left her.

It was just after this time that I met her and started studying voice with her: it was a providential meeting because in her God gave me one of my closest and influential friends. The Evelyn I came to know was a woman of deep faith, strong convictions and profound prayer. She trusted in God: he was her strength. I often got the sense that the reason why she was so strong (and she could be incredibly strong) was because she was firmly rooted in God. Sometimes people who struggled with faith and religion found this strength difficult to cope with, and many did not understand her. Her love of Our Lady was extraordinary, and while she had an intimate relationship with many of the saints, St Michael the Archangel was her patron – she entrusted everything to him and she often spoke of how he had never let her down. Observing her on pilgrimage in Fátima – she got me into the habit of a yearly pilgrimage there, she would immerse herself in the presence of the Lord. We stayed at the Irish Dominican Sisters' Monastery, and for most of time there she was to be found in the adoration chapel praying before the Blessed Sacrament. Fátima was her spiritual home. At times she would say to me that she had a real desire to leave music behind and enter the monastery and devote the rest of her life to prayer – but she knew God was not calling her there: she had to stay where she was. Her mission was to her students, to teach them, but also to love them, show deep concern for them, try to help them in their difficulties and guide them.



For the last few years of her life, she was struggling with ill-health, although she kept working. For the most part Evelyn remained silent about her illness. It was only as she approached death that we realized how long she had been suffering. In early summer of last year (2008) she took a serious turn, and she began to go down very quickly. It became clear to us that she could not longer stay in her home. After a couple of frustrating weeks in hospital she was brought to the hospice near her home. Interestingly, she had helped raise the money to build this hospice through her singing. Exhausted, she was by now very frail and almost unable to speak, but now she was praying continuously – the *Hail Mary* was constantly on her lips. And as ever, her smile remained.

She died at 4.10am on the 26<sup>th</sup> October 2008, a few hours after her birthday. At her Requiem Mass her students sang some of the greatest sacred works ever written as a testament to the great gift she had given them through her teaching and encouragement. She was buried in the cemetery not far from her home, with her mother and sister.

I cannot help but be touched and inspired by the life of Evelyn Dowling. Her strong faith, her simplicity of life, her sense of humour, her dedication to her work, her real pastoral concern for her students, her love of God, all of these impressed and humbled me. Her life as an artist, I believe, certainly sums up what we are trying to do in the Fraternity – to promote excellence in the arts in the service of God and the Gospel. Her last words to me as I was taking leave of her one day in the hospice sum up her life for me, "*I love God*", she said, and she did with all her heart. May that Lord whom she loved and served now take her into his heavenly kingdom to share in the joy and glory of Our Lady, St Michael, St Genesius and all the Saints.