

Sisters Worldwide Writing Circle

Letters from sisters all over the world to sisters all over the world

Application

Please give your name and say why you are interested in joining the Sisters Worldwide Writing Circle. We will do our best to find you a suitable correspondent.

Name: Emelda Griggs (Member of the Order of St Hilda)

Hello Sisters,

My calling brought me to the Peruvian Andes fourteen years ago to teach and do research among remote communities. I am blessed to stay among wonderfully welcoming people and I never lack company – but I am a team of one. It is very rare to speak English and I haven't met a sister for over a decade.

I am originally from Suffolk and the longer I am in the mountains, the more I miss the Fens! If your organization could find me a correspondent in a quiet country convent, who could share with me the humble details of the daily convent round, I feel certain her letters would sustain me in a way that nothing else could.

I rely on handwritten letters carried long distances by mule train or canoe, so my replies may be infrequent, but any letter I receive will be a treasured and delightful reminder of home.

With love and blessings,

Emelda

Please write to La Hermana Ingles, c/o Convent of Santo Domingo, Santa Maria del
las Rocas, Valdepenas, Peru

1. Sisters Worldwide

Dear Sister Emelda,

Fourteen years of bringing education and prayer to the remote parts of Peru is a wonderful achievement, especially since your Mother Abbess says you left Norwich with £12.60 and one small duffel bag. A solitary calling, especially one that takes you to such mountainous and dangerous places, is immensely inspiring. Our work here in Three Fens seems flat in every way by comparison, but you specified “humble details of the daily convent round” and those I can certainly provide, so here goes.

First an introduction: I am Boniface. I have several roles here at St Winifreda's: I am the qualified minibus driver; I teach English as a foreign language to visitors; I am this year's Sisters Worldwide correspondent for handwritten letters (as you see) and very soon I will be running our new Convent Shoppe. We carried out a 'skills audit' and, although I have absolutely no shop keeping experience, I was hopeless at handicrafts and cookery and only considered good for heavy work in the garden, so it was a process of elimination, really.

The Shoppe is one of the initiatives we have adopted since the arrival of our new Rev Mother, Elizabeth, in the New Year. What a firebrand! She came to us after a re-organisation of the diocese closed three small convents and is determined that St Winifreda's will “re-group, re-fund and re-vivify” – she's a great one for a slogan. We are well-advanced with our plans to convert to sustainable energy, become self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables and generate new income streams (as they call it – we went to a Fenbiz seminar) with guest rooms and a website. It's very exciting.

I am enclosing a pen and ink drawing of St Winifreda's. It's my own attempt, and a bit rough, but will have to do until Father Humbert's ganglion improves (he is our parish priest and a talented artist). Most of the buildings date from the 1780s, apart from the bell tower on the right, which is a 19th century addition. You can just see the Shoppe to the left, and if you look very carefully you can even see the telescope in the orchard.

Sisters Angelina and Merce are our oldest residents at over a hundred, and also our resident astronomers. Our youngest member is a novice, Hermione, in her twenties. We have a very active exchange programme and welcome sisters from orders all over the world, so we're very cosmopolitan. At present we have visitors from Columbia, Sri Lanka, Poland, Albania and Kenya, all bringing their various skills. We also have a retirement home for sisters from many different orders.

As you know, Emelda, sisters never really retire, so until ill health slows them down, most are active and fully involved with the life of the convent. I know them well because I do the driving when there is a visit to the doctor or outpatients; never a dull moment with a minibus-load of them, I can promise you.

I am writing this in the back room of the Shoppe. We all hope it will be a major fundraiser since major funds (and come to that even minor ones) are in short supply. Like you, we have a heavenly banker, so obviously we don't worry about such matters, but every now and then there is a little crisis and the buildings aren't getting any younger. As someone who has travelled the world on a budget of less than £13 you perhaps think us very faint of heart, but last year the damp invaded the dormitory wing so badly that six cells were only fit for growing mushrooms and the surveyor refused to go in without breathing apparatus and a hard hat, despite the fact that Sister

Dymphna was still living there quite happily. She was shot at by Nazis, so a bit of fungus wasn't shifting her.

Anyway, we are squaring up to the challenges of shop keeping very boldly. I have studied Retail for Beginners and Customer Service 1, and Starting a Small Business (all free one day courses and a complimentary pen every time) thanks to the EU Fenbiz initiative.

We found an old doorbell and I have painted, though I say it myself, a very lovely open/closed sign. One of our neighbours donated a handsome till with a very satisfying *ching!* and once we have stocked our few shelves with homegrown produce all will be ready for the grand opening. A quick blessing tomorrow morning and at 8.30am sharp I turn the sign round and wait for the customers to surge in. There is already a sign in the lane: "St Winifreda's Convent Shoppe Opening SOON!" and tonight, just before prayers, I will paste "TODAY!" over "SOON!" Who could resist?

We have a rather small stock at present, mainly eggs, spring greens, broad beans and a few of last year's potatoes. We are not sure what our customers will demand, or indeed who they will be. That was the hardest part of the business plan, really, because we are not near a main road, so everyone except the nearby farmers and the people from the small business units up the lane have to make a special detour to get to us, and we're not sure they will. We'll just pray.

I was also not sure how to set our prices. The only way was to go undercover to Tesco and make a note of a few of theirs. This felt almost like industrial espionage and we had to offer it up in prayers to make sure it wasn't actually dishonest. But Hari Menon, our Fenbiz mentor, said, "Oh no Sister, don't worry, this is not snooping, this is merely good business practice." Hardly a day goes by, apparently without a Tesco

man or an Aldi woman with a notebook sidling into his shops – he has three – but he never gives it a thought. “Ah, the challenge of competition, Sister, so very satisfying and exciting, you will see!”

So the plan is to sell homegrown vegetables and eggs and perhaps soon a few useful household things like soap or dusters. And between customers I imagine there will be plenty of time to write letters and even give a quick English lesson. I hope so because Sister Vlora has been stuck at pre-intermediate for far too long already.

Now I must go and collect the eggs – Carmella is too busy cutting spring greens and Joan of Ark has started laying away again.

I nearly forgot: our Sister Annunziata spent many years in that part of the world and she says watch out for the snakes with the zigzag markings. Most of the others are fine.

Best wishes from us all,

Sister B.

