

Following the way of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop ‘Joseph’ was a sign

By Peter Bugden

FOR a young Annette Arnold growing up in Rockhampton in central Queensland, the name “Joseph” was to be key in the unfolding of her life.

The eighth in a family of 10 children, she grew up in the cathedral parish of St Joseph.

“The significance of that has not been lost on me – my grandfather was Joseph, my father James Joseph and my great-aunt entered the Sisters of St Joseph,” said Sr Annette Arnold, who is now regional leader of the Sisters of St Joseph for the TransPacífico region, covering Queensland, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Peru and Brazil.

As she gathers this weekend – at Brisbane’s Cathedral of St Stephen on the feast of St Joseph (Saturday, March 19) – to celebrate the Josephites’ 150th anniversary, she looks back in awe, gratitude and excitement on the blessings of following in the footsteps of the order’s founder St Mary of the Cross MacKillop.

Reflecting on her own vocation, Sr Annette recalls the influence of the Josephites she knew in her youth, then Bishop of Rockhampton Francis Rush and the spirit of the times.

She said, in hindsight, she could see that Bishop Rush – who was then “basically our parish priest in the cathedral parish” and who went on to become Archbishop of Brisbane – had a great influence on her.

She remembers his homilies.

“It was on the cusp of the (Second) Vatican Council and it somehow sparked in me both the call to connect with the Divine and to respond in service to the world,” Sr Annette said.

It was then the turn of the Sisters of St Joseph to show her the way.

“I was educated by the Sisters of Mercy until my last year of primary school when we moved to the northside (of Rockhampton) and I met the Josephites,” she said.

“As a teenager in the sixties I was surrounded by young, enthusiastic, happy, intelligent, grounded, realistic, folk-singing, Gospel-centred Josephite women – my teachers.

“I loved them, had great fun with them and was stirred by them.

“It was in the peak of the enthusiasm of the call and challenge of the Vatican Council and I gobbled it all up.

“It was an exciting time indeed.

“It enthused me, inspired me.”

Even before joining the Josephites, the young Annette was stirred to action.

“I was the youth representative in the very first parish council in our parish – I think it was the first in the diocese,” she said.

“I was very active in YCS (Young Christian Students) and the YCW (Young Christian Workers) when I left school.

“My Gospel/social conscience had been stirred by these (Josephite) women – not just these women but my family as well, my mother (Margaret) in particular.”

Sr Annette said the call to religious life was “sheer mystery”.

“It was something I had to do,” she said.

“I remember Mum saying, ‘Why do you have to go to Sydney (to join the Josephites) and not just go up the to the Range (Rockhampton) and join the Mercies, like your sister?’

“I had no idea, and she and Dad gave me the freedom to go.

“From then on in I rolled with it all, not with-

out great questioning at times, and I made my life commitment in my home parish church of Our Lady Help of Christians at Park Avenue in January 1979.”

After joining the Josephite order as a teenager in 1971, Sr Annette spent her first six years in novitiate in Sydney, taking her first vows and studying to become a teacher.

Then it was back to the Queensland province, teaching in primary and secondary schools “from Brisbane, to Quilpie, Julia Creek and Mount Isa”.

After more post-graduate study, she worked in counselling and adult education in personal growth and development.

Living and ministering with Aboriginal people led her into a ministry of community development.

Sr Annette spent many years in social justice ministry with Brisbane archdiocese and the Social Action Office of the congregational leaders of Queensland’s religious order.

For the past 14 years, she has been involved in leadership ministry for the congregation.

Pondering her answer to the question of why she has remained a Josephite, Sr Annette said “like anyone who has made a life commitment, it is a constant restating the ‘yes’”.

“It’s not at all static but an evolving recommitment, response to an initial call to the source of Life, the One who is, to the God who desires to be one with me and all creation,” she said.

“The other aspect is that religious life is, by its very nature, communal.

“One vows to live in community and I stay because of that too.

“None of us can go it alone and it is in the ‘throwing your lot in’ with the group that one makes sense of the mystery of this call and the combined effort, sharing of life and resources that enables our collective response in participating in God’s Mission.

“I love being a Josephite; it’s my family, these are my sisters and so often these days when I encounter each day our older, wise, elder women, I

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“They are extraordinary women and they are a tremendous witness to God, life, love, fidelity and commitment.”

Sr Annette said what drove her as a Josephite today was the same as what drove her when she entered the order 41 years ago – “the call of God who is Holy Mystery, the invitation to be One in and with God and all of creation”.

“That is the essence of religious life ... it’s not about what we do but more about the call into God. It’s simple.

“It’s also the expression of that call in responding to need, those most vulnerable, including our planet.”

Asked what she heard Mary MacKillop saying to us today, Sr Annette said she recently spent a couple of days “sitting with Mary in Rotorua in Aotearoa New Zealand, where she lived for some months trying to regain her health”.

“I walked the streets that she walked, bathed in the mineral springs that were healing for her and tried to listen to her voice to me today,” she said.

“This is what I heard her saying: ‘Listen, don’t hold back, respond with full hearts and all your resources to the call of the people of today ... to stretch and be stretched beyond your comfort, to ensure those most vulnerable are priority’.

“Don’t be complacent, don’t be too careful as the needs are as urgent today as they were when Julian (Tenison Woods) and I started in Penola’.

“In one sense the needs are far greater and you have a greater responsibility as you have more capacity than we ever had to make a huge difference’.

“But you won’t make that difference unless all that you are, all that you do is drawn from, centred in, fulfilled by the hospitable, loving heart of your God’.

“Stop, stop very often and listen to the heartbeat of God’.

“If you cannot listen to the heartbeat of God and out of that, respond, you are like gongs clashing’.

“Go forward in courage and hope ... God will always provide.”



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