

Background to the Foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph & the Establishment of the Woods/MacKillop System of Catholic Education

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Australia has a Catholic Education second to none in the world. Our country owes this to the vision, energy and hard work of a great many people over the past two centuries. In particular, we acknowledge the courage and foresight of those two great Australians, Mary MacKillop and Julian Tenison Woods, and of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph which they established in South Australia in the 1860s. Woods and Mary did their most important educational work in that state and the religious congregation they founded was shaped and nurtured by the particular ethos of its people. A glance at its early history will help the reader to come to some understanding of the background to the founders' work and why it developed as it did.

South Australia was a colony with a difference. White settlers arrived there in 1836, fifty years after Captain Arthur Phillip and the convicts had laid claim to New South Wales. Those who came to South Australia were free men and women whose aim was to create a society where all might enjoy the religious and political freedom denied them in the British Isles. Hence, they were utterly opposed to any form of state aid to religion. They refused to allow the establishment of a government-sponsored Church such as existed in the old country and decreed that the members of each religious denomination should provide their own places of worship support their own ministers and pay for the education of their children.

This voluntary system of support for religion worked well enough for the better off, and the members of most denominations were able to build churches in the larger centres of population and support some clergy. It did, however, cause hardship for the poorer sections of society, which included most of the Catholic settlers. The majority of these people were Irish and had come to the colony to work as labourers or servants in the hope that, in the long term, they would be able to buy land and establish farms and businesses of their own. Consequently, they had little or nothing to contribute towards the upkeep of the Church or the education of their children.¹

The arrival of Bishop Francis Murphy in November 1844 marked the formal establishment of the Catholic Church in South Australia. With Murphy's support and encouragement the people erected a number of small church buildings, using mostly voluntary labour, while, from his own meagre resources, the bishop employed a Catholic couple to take charge of an elementary school he opened in the city in 1845.

The Catholics found the going hard but they were not the only ones struggling to operate under the voluntary system. In fact, by 1845, it had become evident that the working people, few of whom could read or write, were unable, or, in many cases, unwilling, to provide educational facilities for their children. Consequently, in 1847 Frederick Holt Robe, a new governor who was unaware of the strength of the colonists' commitment to the voluntary system, made money available for religion and education.² Several churches, including the Catholic and Anglican, accepted all that was offered them. Thus Bishop Murphy gained several grants of church land and opened three or four schools in the city and other large centres.

The Nonconformists³ violently opposed Robe's move. They refused to accept government money and did all in their power to have the new ruling revoked. Their opportunity came when they

gained a majority of seats in the colony's first elected Legislative Assembly, which met in 1851, the year that gold was discovered in Victoria. The Assembly abolished state aid to religion and ruled that the government should assume responsibility for the education of the young. They decreed that:

*In schools established under the provisions of the Act, the aim shall be to introduce and maintain good secular instruction, based on the Christian Religion; apart from all theological and controversial differences on (sic) discipline and doctrine, and that no denominational catechism be used.*⁴

It might appear that those responsible for this piece of legislation were against any form of religious instruction in the schools. There is good reason to believe, however, that their real aim was to ensure that all citizens, and particularly the members of the many small religious denominations represented in the colony, might enjoy a fair share of government resources.

Murphy, who had neither the finance nor the personnel to maintain his existing schools or to establish new ones independently of the government, faced a dilemma. On the one hand, work was scarce and much of the male population had gone to the Victorian goldfields. On the other, he was well aware that, as the Australian bishops were to put it several decades later:

*from her very beginning the Church, this holy Mother, has caused schools to be erected wherein children might be instructed in the knowledge of God and divine things, and brought up in fear, love and discipline of the Lord.*⁵

At first, Murphy considered the option of operating independently of the government. While the Education Bill was being debated he wrote to the Colonial Secretary stating that, if denominational catechisms were forbidden and the term Holy Scripture was substituted for Christian Religion, he would have to refuse Roman Catholic children permission to attend these schools.⁶

The bill became law but, after due consideration, the bishop did not carry out his threat. Instead, he advised his teachers, all of whom were married with young children, to join the new system and thus ensure that they had a regular income. The price of this move was that they had to work according to government regulations. It seems, however, that they maintained the Catholicity of their schools by enrolling only Catholic children and offering them religious instruction outside the regulation school hours.

Given the poverty of the diocese and its lack of resources, Murphy did what appeared best at the time. He compensated by providing the adults with a plentiful supply of Catholic reading matter for sale or loan. There is evidence that many of his religious books were read aloud to small groups or passed from hand to hand in the different Catholic communities.⁷ At the time of his death in 1858, the diocese of Adelaide could boast twelve priests, twelve churches and approximately 14,000 Catholics. There were, however, no communities of nuns or brothers and, strictly speaking, no Catholic schools.

Murphy's successor, Patrick Geoghegan, was appalled at the poverty of the Adelaide church and its lack of schools. For the previous twenty years he had been ministering to the Catholics of Melbourne, where he was the first resident priest. The Victoria he left behind was a colony where the government still provided financial assistance to religion and supported denominational as well as state schools. Thanks to the gold rush, the Church had acquired considerable wealth and

property. It was well staffed and had a large number of churches and schools. The proportion of Catholics was treble that in South Australia where, in 1861, they comprised only one tenth of the total white population.

Over the years, Geoghegan had been involved in what were sometimes heated debates over the question of Catholic education. In 1852 he had represented the Church before the Victorian Select Committee on Education and, as part of his evidence, had given a complete exposition of the Catholic views respecting the roles of the Church, the family and the state in education.⁸ Hence, he was well aware of the Church's position on this important matter and saw it as his duty to rectify the situation in Adelaide.

As a beginning, he addressed several Pastoral Letters to his people. The first, which appeared in September 1860, was on the subject of Catholic Education.⁹ Another, which he published three years later, was a plea for finance to bring much-needed priests to the colony.¹⁰

The Pastoral Letter, *On the Education of Catholic Children*, runs for over 5000 words and falls into three main sections. In the first, the bishop declared his belief that the existing state system was *a gigantic machinery for propagating Protestantism and for disaffecting or proselytising the Catholic children unhappily coming within its influence from the religion of their parents*,¹¹

Next, he pointed to *the crying want of Catholic education unhappily pervading the entire diocese*,¹² and concluded by stating that *separate schools under Catholic control (were) the best and only one(s) that (could) educate Catholic children and ground them in the principles and habits of good and useful members of society*.¹³

He explained the Catholic position, borrowing most of his text from the *Pastoral on Public Education* published by Archbishop Polding of Sydney in November 1859. In particular, he stressed Polding's argument that:

*We must not have the National (state) System for our children (because though) they must learn reading, writing and arithmetic and history and whatever else may be thought desirable, they must learn as Roman Catholic children learning these things, and this they cannot do unless they are constantly breathing the atmosphere of their religion.*¹⁴

Geoghegan concluded his letter by demanding that priests and people reject all connection with the state system and made an impassioned plea for action. *Wherever there is a Pastor and a Flock*, he wrote, *we implore you to make a commencement of a Catholic school. Let each do what he can.*¹⁵

The priests of the diocese took Geoghegan seriously. They publicised his Pastoral letter and called meetings of their congregations to arrange for the establishment of separate Catholic schools. As well, they drew up and had the people sign several of what proved to be unsuccessful petitions asking that the government give them a share of the moneys earmarked for education.¹⁶ The bishop himself undertook a series of *education missions* throughout the diocese and urged the clergy to do likewise.

Almost at once schools sprang up and by the end of 1861 there were nine or ten in widely separated parts of the colony. Gradually, parents began sending their children to these schools

and several of the ten or so Catholic teachers licensed with the state Board of Education resigned in order to carry out the bishop's wishes. To finance the whole project, Geoghegan set up a Central School Fund which was helping support at least fifteen schools by 1863.¹⁷ As well, he applied for supplementary assistance from the head office of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons, France.¹⁸

The founding of an independent school system without any financial backing was a daring and radical move. It succeeded because Geoghegan had fired the enthusiasm of his priests and people. Then, once it had begun, this movement towards a separate system gathered its own momentum and carried on without further pressure from him. He left the diocese for Rome early in 1862 and died while overseas. Consequently, Adelaide was left without a resident bishop for four and a half years. Yet, during that time, the number of Catholic schools increased at a steady rate.

When Geoghegan's successor, Lawrence Sheil, arrived in 1866, there were nineteen Catholic schools under the direct control of the clergy and four run by private teachers. None of these schools was in receipt of government money. All the teachers were lay persons of whom twelve were qualified and eleven were not. They did not have a recognised system of organisation or teaching. The quality of their textbooks varied greatly and some were not Catholic in character. They were paid by school fees, which, in most cases, were subsidised from funds raised by the local church congregation or guaranteed by the parish priest. Most school buildings and equipment were substandard and less than a quarter of the Catholic children of school going age were enrolled in them.¹⁹ As well, a number of Catholic teachers were still working within the government system and several of these were breaking the law by giving religious instruction during school hours.²⁰

It fell to Bishop Sheil to bring order out of this chaos and establish a new, well-organised system. That he achieved this was due, in no small measure, to the vision and energy of Father Julian Woods, his Director-General of Catholic Education, and to the dedication and hard work of Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of St Joseph.

In 1860, when Bishop Geoghegan issued his *Pastoral Letter*, Woods had charge of Penola, one of the poorest and most extensive parishes in South Australia. He accepted his bishop's challenge and in 1861 he opened a school in Mount Gambier, even though the parish could barely support him and his assistant, Father Daniel Fitzgibbon. A young male teacher whom he had engaged at great personal cost, refused to stay in such an out-of-the-way place and Woods soon discovered that it was impossible to get good, reliable teachers to go there.²¹

He had become so committed to the provision of Catholic schools in his area, however, that he next considered bringing in religious sisters from overseas, even though he could not afford to pay their fares or provide them with suitable housing and facilities. Then he had a flash of inspiration! Why not found his own religious order to suit the needs of his parish? Its members would live in the strictest poverty²² and hence, would not be a drain on parish resources. Because of their vow of obedience they would stay in lonely and isolated places if sent there by their superiors. As well, it could be expected that they would have a genuine concern for the spiritual and material wellbeing of their pupils.

Woods was sure that this was a wonderful idea. Because people might think him crazy, however, he dared not tell anyone,²³ that is, until 1861 when nineteen-year-old Mary MacKillop came to

Penola to work as a governess. She wanted to be a nun and work among the poor of outback Australia and hence, seemed a heaven-sent answer to his prayer. He confided his dream to her and they became firm friends. By the beginning of 1866, Mary was free to accept his invitation to manage a school at Penola according to his ideas and so to form the nucleus of his new Order. Hence, by the time of Bishop Sheil's Episcopal Consecration in the following August, the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart existed in embryo in Penola.

Sheil, who had long been interested in education, was delighted to learn of Woods' innovative ideas regarding the education of the children of the Penola region. Because he felt that these ideas could be adapted for use in the whole diocese, he invited Woods to Adelaide as Director-General of Catholic Education and Inspector of Schools. The two men produced a blueprint for the organisation and funding of an independent Catholic school system. Woods' task was to make it work.²⁴

He began with energy and enthusiasm, working hard to provide suitable school buildings and equipment, ordering Catholic school texts from overseas and, where none was available, writing new ones himself. Success was not instantaneous, however, for some mistrusted his ideas while others were unwilling to renounce all government assistance for good, especially when they had so few resources. It required further episcopal intervention and a positive approach from Woods to convince all priests and teachers that government money and sound religious instruction did not go together.

Another cause of contention was that Woods demanded high standards and dismissed teachers who did not meet those standards. He soon realised that, if he was to succeed in the area of teacher training and support, he needed the assistance of Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of St Joseph. Hence, he brought Mary and one companion to Adelaide in June 1867 and set them up in the Cathedral school in Wakefield Street. There Mary undertook to train lay teachers and young Josephites according to a modified pupil-teacher system.

Mary was a good teacher and a realist. In a situation where most of the parents were illiterate her aim was to have the children read and understand an ordinary newspaper, write simple letters correctly and master the mathematical skills they needed to manage their finances satisfactorily. All was done in an atmosphere where religious instruction held pride of place.

In order to attain her ends, Mary drew up a carefully graded curriculum and timetable, which Woods had printed and distributed to all the schools, whether run by lay teachers or the sisters. She adhered closely to contemporary teaching methods, except in so far as she integrated the religious and the secular in all areas of instruction. She insisted that daily lessons be punctuated by the recitation of prayers that were suited to the children's ages and the singing of appropriate hymns. As well, she ensured that the more important Church feast days were highlighted by the holding of special treats, picnics or other celebrations.

The public response to the Josephites and to Woods' school system was remarkable. By 1869, there were 44 Catholic schools in the diocese and their enrolment stood at almost 3,000 children. The Josephites had charge of 17 of these schools and were responsible for the education of about 1,600 children.²⁵ Young women flocked to become sisters and the Catholic people came to appreciate their work in the schools. The residents of one district informed Woods that they would rather wait until sisters could come than accept the lay teachers he had appointed to their schools.²⁶

Hence, the new system appeared to be working well and the Sisters of St Joseph were well received by the Catholic community on whom they made few demands. However, there were some, especially among the clergy, who felt that they cost too much and were too independent of clerical control. In fact, they were so radically different from most religious in Ireland that many of the Irish priests found it hard to believe that they were nuns at all.

Thus, it was some time before the Josephites gained full acceptance as members of a religious congregation whose main task was the education of the children of poor families in rural and inner city areas. They had, however, made a beginning and, before long, bishops of other Australian and New Zealand dioceses invited them to set up schools in their dioceses as well.

The Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart were founded in South Australia in the 1860s because the religious and political climate of that colony was right for the foundation and some among its residents, especially Bishops Patrick Geoghegan and Lawrence Sheil as well as Julian Woods and Mary MacKillop, could read the signs of the times and had the courage to follow those signs in a radical way. The Catholic education system we have today exists because they dared to be innovative regarding both religious life and education in Australia.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Press, Margaret, *From Our Broken Toil: South Australian Catholics, 1836 - 1906*, Archdiocese of Adelaide, 1986, p. 31.
- ² Fogarty, Ronald FMS, *Catholic Education in Australia, 1806-1950*, Melbourne University Press, 1959, pp. 35 - 36.
- ³ Nonconformist was a generic term used to describe those Christians who did not belong to the Church of England (Anglicans), the Church of Scotland (Presbyterians) or the Catholic Church.
- ⁴ *South Australian Statutes*, No. 20 of 1851
- ⁵ *Acta et Decreta Concilii Plenarii Australasiae, 1885*, (Acts and Decrees of the Australasian Plenary Bishops' Council). Cited in Fogarty, p. 1.
- ⁶ Murphy to the Colonial Secretary, December 1851, cited in Fogarty, op cit. p. 171
- ⁷ Press, op cit, p. 71.
- ⁸ "Report of Select Committee on Education", evidence of Dr Geoghegan, *Parliamentary Papers, Victoria, 1852*, no. 2, cited in Fogarty, p. 171.
- ⁹ Geoghegan, Patrick OSF, *Pastoral Letter ... to the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese on the Catholic Education of Children*, Adelaide, 1960, Adelaide Catholic Archives.
- ¹⁰ Geoghegan, *Pastoral Letter ... to the Faithful of the Diocese, on the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus*, 1862, No. 3, Adelaide, 2 January 1862. Adelaide Catholic Archives. It appears that Pastoral No. 2 has been lost.
- ¹¹ Geoghegan, Pastoral, 1860, p. 4
- ¹² *ibid.* p. 3.
- ¹³ *ibid.* p. 7
- ¹⁴ *ibid.* pp. 7 - 12, esp. p. 10. Haines, Gregory et al, eds. *The Eye of Faith: The Pastoral Letters of John Bede Polding*, Lowden Publishing Co. 1978, pp. 261 - 268.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 16.
- ¹⁶ *South Australian Parliamentary Papers: 1860*, no, 78; 1861, no. 96; 1862, no. 115; 1863, no. 84.
- ¹⁷ Fogarty, op cit. pp. 223 - 224
- ¹⁸ Geoghegan to Fr John Smyth, Adelaide, from Dublin, 24 October 1862, Adelaide Catholic Archives
- ¹⁹ *Southern Cross & Catholic Herald*, 20 June 1869, p. 337, Adelaide Catholic Archives.
- ²⁰ Foale, Marie Therese, *The Josephite Story: The Sisters of St Joseph, Their Foundation and Early History, 1866 - 1893*, Sydney, 1989.
- ²¹ Geoghegan to Woods, 29 January 1861; Woods to Geoghegan, 26 October & 17 December 1862, Adelaide Catholic Archives.
- ²² Woods, "Memoirs," unpublished ms. book 2, p. 27, Hayes Collection, University of Queensland Library.
- ²³ *ibid.* pp. 24 - 28
- ²⁴ Fogarty, op cit. pp. 486 - 487.
- ²⁵ Director's Report to Catholic Education Council, *Southern Cross & Catholic Herald*, 20 June 1869, p. 337.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* 20 November 1868, p. 226

Sources:

Adelaide Catholic Archives: Geoghegan Papers, Woods Papers.

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Press, Margaret, *From Our Broken Toil: South Australian Catholics, 1836-1906*, Archdiocese of Adelaide, 1986

South Australian Parliamentary Papers, 1860-1863.

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Southern Cross & Catholic Herald, 1867 – 1869, Adelaide Catholic Archives.

Woods, Julian E.T. "Memoirs", unpublished manuscript, Hayes Collection, University of Queensland Library.