

May 24 – a significant day for Sisters of Saint Joseph in Tasmania

May 24 has been a significant date in Catholic history since 1815 when Pope Pius VII declared it to be the feast day of Our Lady Help of Christians—marking the date of his release from imprisonment by Napoleon during the French occupation of Rome in 1814.

In 1844 the bishops attending the first provincial synod of the Church in Australia decided that it be placed under the patronage of Mary, Help of Christians. This happened at a significant time in our history. British settlement was just over fifty years old, the transportation of convicts was coming to an end, and the first elections in Australian history had been held in the previous year. Issues of land, immigration and education had begun to surface and the Church was becoming involved with these social problems.

The infant church in Australia had a special reason for turning to Mary. The British Government had forbidden priests to come to the colony at the time of settlement in 1788. The first Catholic priests, who arrived as convicts in 1800, had been convicted for "complicity" in the Irish 1798 Rebellion. One of their number was conditionally emancipated and permitted to celebrate Mass under strict conditions for about one year only. The first resident priests, John Joseph Therry and Philip Connolly, arrived in 1820. During those long years of deprivation of Mass and the sacraments, it was largely the Rosary that kept the faith alive.

For the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Tasmania, 24 May has an extra significance. It was on this day in 1887 that Sisters Francis McCarthy, Stanislaus Doyle, Joseph Eather, Patrick Nolan and Teresa Prendergast arrived in Westbury. They had travelled from Perthville (Bathurst) to Sydney by train and then by ship to Launceston before arriving at their final destination - without doubt a long and often uncomfortable journey.

Sister Francis who was 37 years old had come to Australia from Ireland to enter the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Bathurst 13 years earlier. Sister Stanislaus was 25 and had come from County Wexford to Bathurst as a young child with her family. She had been a Sister of Saint Joseph for five years. Sister Joseph, from Newcastle, NSW, was aged 27 and had been finally professed as a Sister of Saint Joseph only two weeks before she left for Tasmania. She had been known as Sister Mary Bernard for the previous eight years but changed her name to Sister Joseph so that the tradition of having a Sister Joseph in each new group could be maintained.ⁱ Sister Patrick, from Kerry, Ireland, was aged 60 and had been a Sister of Saint Joseph for only 12 years. Sister Teresa, possibly a niece of Sister Stanislaus, aged 21, was from Victoria and had been a Sister of Saint Joseph for four years.ⁱⁱ

These Sisters had come to Tasmania at the request of Archbishop Daniel Murphy of Hobart, and they no doubt appreciated the significance of their having arrived at their destination on 24 May. After all, their Rule of Life stated that *Our Lady Help of Christians* was a *first class day* to be celebrated with a holiday! They prayed the Rosary daily and were instructed to speak to the children in their care of devotion to Mary as the Mother of God. Besides all this, they had taken *a vow to do all in their power to promote the love of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, in the hearts of the little children.*ⁱⁱⁱ For these Sisters and the people they served, devotion to Mary Help of Christians as the Patroness of Australia was quite new and would have generated much interest and support among them all.^{iv}

The Tasmanian group remained faithful to the Original Rule written by Father Julian Tenison Woods in Adelaide in 1867 and revised by him at Bathurst in 1878. Sister Francis McCarthy corresponded with Father Woods during 1887 and his advice became the basis for their interpretation of the rule for daily living. As he said

I think the time will come when all St Joseph's children will be brought back together again and be what they were in the beginning...The "great days" of the Institute are yet to come and therefore my dear sweet children, be faithful, for a great responsibility is attached to you. The Institute is still in its foundation stones, therefore strictly keep your Rule, love your Rule in the letter and in its spirit.^v

Thus, in the 1888 Westbury diary we find that the Rule was being kept:

Thursday 24th Feast of Our Lady "Help of Christians" No School. Mass at 9 followed by Procession through grounds after which several aspirants to the "Chil. Of Mary" were received & consecrated by Rev T. M. O'Callaghan. E(vening) devotions at 7 p.m.^{vi}

May 24 has continued to be an annual day of celebration for the Sisters in Westbury, although the tradition of having a holiday was replaced over time with longer recreation time. For example, in 1908 we read:

The 21st anniversary of the opening of the school was kept with éclat, the children being feted as well as their teachers, and a goodly supply of buns, sweets, fruit, etc being provided for the youngsters, and games indulged in by all present. The school was tastefully decorated with bunting and flowers and at 3 o'clock in the afternoon a number of ex-pupils assembled for the purpose of offering their congratulations to the Sisters and of making a little presentation. This took the form of an ornate bookcase and a supply of suitable books as the nucleus of a school library^{vii}

To mark the centenary year of the Tasmanian foundation, on 24 May 1987 the Sisters of Saint Joseph were joined at Westbury by a huge crowd gathered from all over Tasmania and beyond. The weather that day was extremely inclement – a powerful reminder of the faithfulness of the foundation community to go wherever there was a need, no matter what.

May 24 2012 was chosen as the day to mark the official celebration of the fusion of the Tasmanian congregation with the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart. This took place in Westbury.

On 24 May, 2019, we give thanks that the Sisters still live and minister in Westbury continuing to be with the Church as it faces issues of land, immigration and education as in 1844 when Mary, Help of Christians was proclaimed our patron.

ⁱ Sisters from Bathurst had previously been sent to make foundations at Wanganui, New Zealand 1880, Goulburn, NSW 1882, Lochinvar, NSW 1883.)

ⁱⁱ Reference: Josephine Brady, *St Joseph's Island*, ATF, 2012 pp 17-27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Julian E.T. Woods, *Rules of the Institute of St Joseph for the Catholic Education of Poor Children*, Adelaide, 1867, Article 4.. It is interesting to note that in the *Customs and Practices of the Institute of The Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart of The Archdiocese of Hobart*, Melbourne, 1940, "as much recreation as is convenient is allowed"

^{iv} After Angelus a prayer for the conversion of Australia invoking the intercession of Mary, Help of Christians, was part of the Sisters' daily routine.

^v Letter JET Woods to Sister Francis McCarthy, August 1887.

^{vi} 'Westbury Diary', in *Sisters of St Joseph Archives, New Town Tasmania*, 1887.

^{vii} *The Monitor* 29 May 1908