



Farewell to Sisters of Saint Joseph and Sr Helen Barnes, from Wonthaggi

Address by Sue McGuinness rsj

Bishop Greg, Father Darren, invited guests, parishioners and friends of the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

I am sure the sisters who are present here today, and especially those who have lived here in Wonthaggi, are experiencing some degree of sadness, but also recalling with great affection and deep gratitude, their years ministering in this community. The story they would be recalling, I am sure, would consist of many wonderful memories of shared experiences – some joyful, others less joyful but nonetheless significant. Above all, they would be recalling the many people who touched their lives as they ministered among you. They would acknowledge the many lessons they learned from the acceptance, generosity, commitment and selflessness they witnessed. They will remember with thanksgiving in their hearts those who have died since their years here

It is no accident that the story of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, researched and told by Jill Barnard, was entitled “From Humble Beginnings.” In 1890, about the opening of the first Josephite foundation in Victoria at Numurkah, our co-foundress, Mary MacKillop, wrote, *“This is a splendid opening for St Joseph’s children, a humble beginning of a great work...”*

This description could also have accurately described the story of Wonthaggi. There were indeed humble beginnings here, but primarily the thread running through the story of this foundation is one of co-operation and collaboration between the parish community and the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

When the Sisters of Saint Joseph arrived in Wonthaggi in 1912, just prior to the First World War, the town was in the centre of the black coal-fields. Many Catholic immigrants had settled here to participate in the mining industry which was essential for powering Victoria’s rail network and developing steam-powered industries. By 1912 the task of providing the opportunity for every Catholic child to receive a Catholic education was uppermost in the mind of the then Archbishop, Dr. Carr. The response to his need was found in the burgeoning young Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart.

On 24 March 1912 Archbishop Carr blessed and opened the Church-school and in May of the same year the Convent was blessed. Thus began the 108 year long relationship between the parish, the school and the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

The first community of sisters came from Bacchus Marsh and were welcomed by the parish priest, Fr O’Sullivan. They lived in the Presbytery while the Convent was completed. Father slept in the sacristy of the Church which was a large building holding 800 people. It was fitted with moveable glass screens which were used to form three classrooms.

In those early days, the staff at the school included three lay teachers and five sisters. One of these lay teachers became a postulant, Sr Remy. She taught music with Sr Irene. The first community of sisters was Sisters Irene, Julian, Gerard, Everilda and Carmen Sullivan.

In accordance with the curriculum and the Rule established by Fr Julian Tenison Woods and Mother Mary MacKillop, school was held between 9.00 am and 4.00 pm. After school and on Saturday afternoons the children could learn painting and fancy-work and Sr Irene taught music. The sisters visited the hospital and homes. The information from our archives records the fact that “the children’s balls, which were held in the Church, were an annual highlight. First Communion Day was also a great eventThe First Communion breakfast was for everyone, a real parish celebration!

In the early days, the sisters took in teenage boarders from the country who worked in the town. Mr Donovan drove a horse and cab, often taking the sisters on visitation.”

We can see that the custom of bringing together the parish family and assisting the sisters in their ministries was established early on in Wonthaggi. It is obvious that this continued for the following 108 years. Sisters who have ministered here experienced wonderful support and encouragement in their work in the school and when they visited families. In true Josephite spirit the sisters involved themselves in the lives of their students and their families and supported them at significant moments on their life-journey.

As time has passed, however, many of you have seen how the ministries undertaken by the Sisters of Saint Joseph have changed. These changes were prompted by the reforms which followed Vatican Council II and by varying State and Federal Government legislation. From the sixties on, professional, competent lay people were able to staff and administer the parish school while the sisters assumed more supportive roles and became increasingly involved in parish ministry and spirituality, or simply offering their interested, active presence. It is one of the characteristics of our Josephite charism that we stand in solidarity with the people, especially with the battlers, and walk beside them in their struggles, their achievements, their joys and their sorrows.

As was Mary MacKillop’s intention, where there was a need, the sisters would do their best to respond, to see that needs were being met and then they would move on, to meet another need, or to support another community. In this sense the Sisters of Saint Joseph were enablers of the community, affirming the many gifts of the people and supporting them so that all these gifts were made available for the common good.

Today we gather at another milestone moment in the Wonthaggi story. As you farewell Sr Helen Barnes we know you send her from your community with your love and your prayers for her, your gratitude and your support. The Sisters of Saint Joseph thank you all for the way you ministered to Helen during the last four years.

As members of your Josephite family, Helen, we acknowledge your enthusiastic, committed Josephite presence here and we too thank you.

While it is indeed sad that our physical presence is no longer possible here, it is very obvious that this is a vibrant community, built on solid foundations and continuing to flourish in the Josephite tradition, in the spirit of St Mary MacKillop and Julian Tenison Woods.

On behalf of all the Sisters of Saint Joseph, especially those who have ministered in this place, I express our sincere gratitude for your acceptance, your encouragement and your support of all our endeavors here in Wonthaggi. We thank you for the privilege of working beside you and amongst you.

We assure you that this community will not be forgotten. Your story will be a strong, vibrant thread firmly woven into our Congregational story. We pray for all those with whom we have ministered. We commend now all your intentions, your needs and desires into the watchful protection of our patron and true guardian, St Joseph.

Sue McGuinness rsj
Regional Leader (Victoria-Tasmania)
17 January, 2021