

150th Anniversary of Founding of Caritas College, Port Augusta
St Joseph's Convent School – 17 May 1871
All Saints Church 16 May 2021
Bishop Greg O'Kelly, SJ

The farewell promise Jesus gave just before his Ascension to the Father was the gift of the Holy Spirit, to enliven and build the community of the disciples. “.. to enliven and build”. We heard that promise in the first Reading today from the Acts of the Apostles: “...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but ... to the ends of the earth.”

At this end of the earth, the founding of the Sisters of St Joseph was surely an act of the Holy Spirit, an act that transformed the Church in South Australia, and beyond, as the Gospel was taken through the early Sisters to hamlet after hamlet in the pioneer colony. Starting with two young women in March 1866, just five years later in 1871 there were 123 Sisters working out of a staggering number of foundations, more than forty convents in South Australia and already four in Queensland, in just on five years. The power of the Holy Spirit had come into our land, “to enliven and build” the community of disciples.

In the territory of our diocese the Sisters had already opened schools in five towns by 1871, and Port Augusta was the sixth. The number of foundations grew, so that over the next twenty years, little house-convents of two or three Sisters, were active in no less than twenty-seven settlements just in our diocese. We were a pioneering community, and the extraordinary growth of the Sisters' works surely mirrored what we read of the early Church as the Holy Spirit breathed change and growth and life among the first Christian communities. The Sisters were witnesses and signs of the power of the Holy Spirit to enliven and build the Church in the hearts of a people of few resources.

On 17th of May 1871, 150 years ago virtually to the day, the Sisters opened St Joseph's Convent School, in a shed, on a bleak piece of land, in Port Augusta. Only five days earlier three Sisters had disembarked from the steamer, bewildered at first that there was no one to welcome them, or show them where to live. How they must have felt! One was still a novice, aged nineteen, with no previous experience as a teacher. The second had taken her first vows only a month earlier; she was twenty-one. The third was one of the most outstanding women of 19th Century Australia, Mary MacKillop, the saint, co-foundress of the Josephites with Julian Tenison Woods, and herself still in her twenties. On that day their shed-school was crammed with children, and in the evening young men came to learn how to read and write. That was the first day, and here we are, 150 unbroken years later, thanking God for what has been and is being done for others here, and marvelling at how the Holy Spirit breathed youthful life and mission, enthusiasm, and energy, into this Josephite foundation in a remote and straggling, semi-Outback little town, a population of just over 500 souls. You can imagine the excitement of the Catholic people and others at this event, the novelty of the Sisters in their striking religious Habits of the age, providing a service that otherwise would not have been, and drawing such a proportion of the town's people, Catholic and other, on its very first day. Hope and courage and faith in the future, with God's providence, was the hallmark of the spirituality of Mary MacKillop and her

Sisters, and today we rejoice in that legacy, and pray it continues ever strong. Hope and courage and faith could be a motto now for the school as it looks to the future.

The Sisters then and later did indeed live lives worthy of their vocation, as we heard St Paul encourage us in the second Reading. They lived a vocation marked out for them by the Religious Rule composed for them by Fr Woods and Mary, they themselves being poor to serve the poorest of the poor, in love and kindness and commitment. Another motto. They spread the Good News of the Gospel. Christ urged us to love one another as he loved us, an awesome instruction. His love for us was steadfast, sacrificial, and forgiving, and as a school community Caritas has tried to live this. There was the scandal of Church politics which saw the Jesuit Fr Pallhuber, known as the apostle of the north because of his month-long horse journeys through and beyond the Flinders, and who had worked for the Sisters to come to Port Augusta, receiving an instruction from the bishop forbidding him to be present to greet and receive Mary and the Sisters, so there was no preparation for their arrival and accommodation. How crucial was the steadying hand and experience of Mary in setting up this school. The same politics were to see Mary excommunicated four months after the founding of this school. There was financial struggle and hunger at times, and tragedy as in the tortured death through burns of young Sr Laurentia. The Sisters needed those Christ-virtues of steadfastness, sacrifice for others and forgiveness. May those blessings continue.

The Good News then, that the Sisters brought, remains the Good News now, proclaimed by a leadership and staff that is lay, drawing on the legacy of the Josephite tradition and charism, taking out of that treasury things old and new. That tradition teaches that each child is an image of the likeness of God, no matter the background or the simplicity or the poverty of circumstances. It teaches that each child is equal in dignity to any other, as Mary MacKillop demonstrated in the very first days of the first schools by refusing to allocate special places to the children of the Governor of the colony. It teaches that each child is placed upon this earth as a special gift from God, to undertake some role that no one else will because no one else is that child, no one else has that child's thumbprint to place on the world. It reflects that a child is special in the eyes of Christ who when the disciples were in dispute took a child and placed it in their midst, saying that of such is the Kingdom of Heaven, and all teachers in a Catholic school must have that sense of awe, that a child has been placed in their midst, for their care and nurture.

In founding this school Mary MacKillop was working to help the Church live its mission, help it to be true to its purpose, help it to live the baptismal vocation in imitation of Christ and as the Body of Christ in the world, the vocation to preach, to teach, and to heal.

To preach. How many over 150 years have heard the story of Jesus from the lips of their teachers, Sisters and now lay. How many have had their hearts set on fire with the story of Christ's love for them. How many, students and parents, over all these years, through what they have heard and witnessed here, in the words spoken to them and the example shown them, have been and are being deepened in their faith, and guided to live lives of Christian commitment and devotion and compassion and fidelity.

To teach. How many now and over the years have been led out of the darkness of ignorance through the work of the Sisters and lay teachers. How many have been enabled to give

expression to their thoughts and yearnings through the dedication of the staff. Think of the numbers, starting with those 56 children and the young men in the evening on that first day in May 1871, and over the decades since.

To heal. The Sisters never restricted their work simply to the classroom. There were the sick and the distressed to visit. Imagine the harshness and hardness of life in those early days in Port Augusta where for years after the founding of the town many were still living in tents, and where diseases with unknown causes or remedies would wreak pain and illness among families, and where unemployment and poverty restricted ordinary human living, and where the droughts of the 1890s emptied the Flinders of its population who came to Port Augusta in desperation, from ruined farms.

Our Gospel reading today has the exhortation of Jesus that as his disciples we should “go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News to all creation”. This school over all these years has attempted to live that exhortation through its staff of religious and lay, and its families who have supported its work, and whose kindness and generosity towards the Sisters has been a theme in the story of this school.

(personal recollection; story of Aunty Eileen Evans, whose house was next door to the church, taking jugs of iced water to Sr Alphonsus, aka Mary Preston, teaching in Port Augusta summer heat, red as a beetroot, in the tin kitchen adjoining the parish hall. As a boy seeing the nuns coming up in pairs from the convent on their way to Mass, floating in their Habits like immensely dignified Spanish galleons under sail)

The Gospel also describes the growth of the early Christian communities, saying that the Spirit of God worked with them and confirmed the word by the signs that accompanied it. This must be true for this school too, founded with hope and courage and faith and perseverance. May it continue to build and to enliven those entrusted to its care, and may its staff continue to live the legacy the Sisters gave you. “I have come that you might have life”, Christ told us, “and have it to the full”. With Mary of the Cross, who founded you, as your inspiration, and with her driving motives of hope and courage and faith in the future still part of you as a school, and with your eyes, like hers, focussed on Christ the Teacher, may this school continue true to Christ’s name, and live the love for others, the Caritas, with which you have named yourselves.