

Sisters of St Joseph in the Sale Diocese

Acknowledgement 31st January 2023

It is a great honour for me to speak on behalf of the Sale Diocese to express our gratitude for the presence of Sisters of St Joseph within the Diocese over the past 120 years:

gratitude for your presence among us; gratitude for the shared prayer, parish life and ministry which so many of our parishioners and priests have experienced; gratitude for the many Primary Schools under your care; gratitude for the many Sisters involved in pastoral ministry in our parishes;

gratitude that the extraordinary life of St Mary of the Cross became a source of great blessings for us, perhaps countless unknown blessings received through the intercession of St Mary to this day;

gratitude for her co-operation with Fr Julian Tennison Woods in the founding of a new Congregation shaped by the very faith of the people of Australia and its vast and beautiful and often remote countryside Like many of our own small rural parishes, Penola was not, and is not near any major city;

gratitude for the presence of hundreds of Sisters that has left a vast and enduring legacy within our Diocese which continues to this day;

gratitude for the vocations to the Sisters of St Joseph that have come from within our Diocese, some of whom are with us today;

gratitude to God for all this, and much more.

It is a great honour and, also, quite daunting.

It spans the years of every Bishop of Sale, from Bishop Corbett, our first bishop, to the present time with our tenth bishop, Bishop Greg.

The first schools opened by the Sisters in the Sale Diocese, at Traralgon, Morwell, Maffra and Omeo, were during the lifetime of St Mary MacKillop, and the Sisters have been present in the vast majority of the parishes of our Diocese. Through you Sr Sue McGuinness, Regional Leader of the Sisters of St Joseph in Victoria, and you Sisters present, we extend our gratitude to all the Sisters who have served the families and people of Gippsland.

In a very personal sense, I and my family live with a great gratitude to the Sisters of St Joseph as my three sisters, Anne, Julie and Fiona, and my youngest brother, Kevin, were all adopted from the Broadmeadows babies home. We have been very blessed. Many Gippsland families would have similar experiences.

My earliest memories of Religious Sisters were not Josephites, but my dad's two sisters who both joined the Brigidine Sisters, following the footsteps of their aunt. I remember their rare visits to our farm at Hallston.....and the strange memory of them climbing steps to peer through the windows of our home to see what it was like inside.....they were not allowed into our home....I wonder if that applied to the Josephite Sisters?

I remember visiting my aunts in their convents. The convents were huge and seemed to be inhabited by a great number of Sisters.

50 years ago, in 1972, there were about 130 Sisters living in the Diocese of Sale, nearly half of them Josephites.

In 1972 there were:

25 Sion Sisters in Sale, and

12 in Warragul;

12 Brigidines in Traralgon;

11 Presentation Sisters in Bairnsdale, and

12 in Moe,

7 in Pakenham;

5 Good Samaritan Sisters in Korumburra.....

And then there were the Josephites in every corner of the Diocese, in small and sometimes very remote towns:

3 in Cowwarr

2 in Fish Creek

5 in Iona

2 in Koo Wee Rup

2 in Lakes Entrance

3 in Leongatha

4 in Maffra

5 in Morwell

6 in Morwell East

5 in Newborough

2 in Omeo (68 children in school)

4 in Orbost(218 children in the school)

3 in Trafalgar

6 in Wonthaggi

2 in Yallourn

3 in Yarram

In more recent years, the Josephites maintained a presence in quite a few places with only one Sister in residence.

Many of these parishes were quite small, and the presence of even a small community of Sisters was a large and cherished presence both within the parish and the larger community.

The Sisters had previously been in Sale, Bairnsdale and Traralgon, and they would in the future be in Churchill, Cranbourne and Narre Warren.

Indeed, the tabernacle for our new Church of St Thomas the Apostle in Clyde North comes from the old Fish Creek convent.

For many years the Sisters had no cars; they relied on public transport and other people to drive the.

At the beginning of the school year, as the Sisters were returning home, I am told that they would fill up the greater part of a carriage on the train from Melbourne to Orbost, with little numbers disembarking at various stations along the way.....was that some of those here?

And then they had to travel to their convent.... Omeo was very remote. In 1921 a writer described the journey from Bairnsdale to Omeo by public transport: "The traveller leaves Bairnsdale at about 7.00am and arrives at the City of the Alps by about 2.30pm."

My own memories of the Josephites begin at St Laurence's School Leongatha. I had started school at Hallston Primary, which had a total enrolment of 13 pupils from Prep to Grade 8, and one teacher. St Laurence's seemed huge.

The Sisters were marvellous; the whole school had only one teacher who was not a Josephite. There was always a natural prayerful atmosphere; faith was nurtured and the Sisters were constantly in demand by families for prayers and encouragement. But I also remember to this day their love for Australia, Melbourne Cup Day, and ANZAC Day, with the annual telling of a humble and courageous story of service, Simpson and his donkey at Gallipoli.

I remember great teachers, Sisters Bernadette (Senior and Junior), and I finished my primary schooling with Sr Josepha, who left a great

impression with me. We were nervous when my brother Paul presented to Sr Louis a project on Louis the fly! And we learnt about Mother Mary of the Cross....after a few years at a Josephite school you almost felt as if you knew her.

In my seminary years I came to appreciate the Joeys in a new light when Sr Doreen and Sr Christina, and others, would join with the seminarians and a few others to run Christian Living Camps in the Sale Diocese. Friendships were formed. Sr Doreen Dagge became involved with youth ministry in the diocese, including with Brendan Hogan, now parish priest at Narre Warren.

As a priest though, in Omeo and Yarram, where I worked closely with the Sisters, I came to a deeper appreciation of their powerful presence, and the charism of being a Josephite. We shared meals and prayer together every week. We laughed and relaxed, enjoyed day trips away, and loved our time in the parishes. The convents were places of great hospitality for priests and parishioners. The Sisters have had a wonderful ability to meet and welcome the humblest people, the poorest people, with the same dignity with which they welcomed the bishops to their convents.

Through the convent diaries a record of Josephite Sisters ministry in Gippsland has been kept much more thoroughly, I am sure, than the at times unreliable memory of priests.

My most enduring memory is of the Sisters as companions in prayer, faith and mission. The relationship between the Sisters and priests has been deeply cherished.

Sr Declan Keeghan, a woman of great faith, was a person who had a fun sense of humour and who laughed at the funny side of her own life.....and was the only person I know to get lost in Omeo while walking. She suffered motor neurone disease so courageously. She tells the story of her first appointment to a rural convent and school. In her first week she was preparing the lunch for the Sisters, and

when Friday came, (NO MEAT!), she was asked to prepare omelettes. She didn't know what they were, and searched the kitchen for omelettes. Eventually she decided that the can of sardines must be omelettes, and presented them for lunch on toast, announcing them happily as "omelettes".

Sr Maria Dunell in her ten years at Omeo was also an ambulance officer, in a place that had no paramedics. The ambulance officers included teachers, farmers, and Maria. They received training regularly. On one occasion Maria was driving the ambulance at the bush races at Hinnomunjie, between Omeo and Benambra. In these bush races the ambulance follows immediately behind the horses. Maria missed the start of the race so sped up to catch up with the horses, which she did. Then the other ambulance officer warned her to slow down; he said that if anyone fell off a horse that they would probably run over them. At one stage, I believe the race caller was tipping the ambulance to win the race!

Sr Ellen Lane is a reminder of the marvellous contingent of Irish Sisters who came to the Australian mission. She may have thought that Omeo was remote, but she later went the Balgo Mission on the edge of the desert in northern West Australia, a truly remote place.

Sr Grace Hill.... she loved a beer and a smoke!

Sr Agnes Nunn, who was at Yarram, but had been at Omeo. One of the school children there asked her if her mother was very surprised at her birth when she found that she had a baby nun! She was intrigued one day, at school, to see a boy arrive with two of his fingers missing. He explained that he was holding the chook while his sister wielded the axe!

Today makes us think of the vocations from Gippsland to the Josephites, many of them....there may not be any Josephite Sisters in Gippsland now, but there certainly are Gippslanders among the Josephite Sisters.

The vocations have come from everywhere, including Orbost (Sr Lynette Young), Omeo (Sr Lucia Flannagan) and even Gibbo River, far north of Omeo (Sr Edith Toland).

We think of the involvement in ministry: the motor mission based at Fish Creek, bringing catechetics to tiny rural state schools around South Gippsland; pastoral associates in many parishes; and so on.

We think of the many Josephite Associates throughout Gippsland.

We think of the sacrifices made. Parishioners and friends in the community have been so generous to the Sisters. They have recognized that they lived simply and often in poverty before Government funding for schools began in the 1960's. They kept the schools running at their own cost. It was and is a witness that is much appreciated. People reciprocated....in my years at Omeo people were generous with food and hospitality, and the men ensured that the Convent never ran short of wood for the stove and for heating.

And we think of the struggles and times of tragedy..... we remember the Morwell East Sisters killed in the terrible car accident nearly 50 years ago.

We think of the celebrations along the way: jubilees have been celebrated, and parishes & parishioners have, in a multitude of different ways, expressed their heartfelt gratitude.

In 2009, the church at Omeo was filled with people from the parishes of East Gippsland, together with many Josephite Sisters to celebrate the coming of the Sisters to Omeo a hundred years earlier. It was a joy filled occasions with many happy memories shared.

In Orbost, in the coming weeks, a similar celebration will take place.

One thing that strikes me as we gather today is that quite a few of the small Gippsland parishes no longer have resident Josephite

Sisters or priests. Quite a number of the small churches where we shared ministry together have been closed down altogether, especially in East Gippsland.

I began by remembering back to 1972, fifty years ago, and what a different picture we see today! It has been fifty years that have seen great change.

I am reminded of the words of Pope Francis in 2015 that we live not so much in an era of great change, but in a fundamental change of era.

We are acknowledging a particular moment today, which Bishop Greg described in his homily as moment of sadness for the Sale Diocese, and we feel the loss. But our ministry in the church in Australia continues and we pray the intercession of St Mary to enlighten our way forward.

However, today we wish to acknowledge the extraordinary gift that the Sisters of St Joseph have been to the people of our Diocese over the past 120 years. We thank you, Sisters, who have been able to join us today.

I ask those present to stand and acknowledge our enormous debt of gratitude to hundreds of Sisters of St Joseph by expressing that in a particular way to Sr Sue McGuinness and those Sisters present with us today.

Sisters, we applaud you!

Fr Denis O'Brien
Josephite Sisters farewell
Country Resort, Warragul
31st January, 2023.