



Sr Mary Cresp rsj and Fr Paul Gardiner SJ

The speech given by Sr Mary Cresp RSJ follows:

"They say a moment can change history. That's true. But have you ever considered how a chance meeting between two people can change history? In your own life, can you remember a seemingly insignificant conversation you had with someone that made a difference to your life? In his Memoirs, Father Julian Tenison Woods tells of one such meeting in his life. He was holidaying in France at the time, before entering the novitiate of the Marist Fathers there in 1853. While exploring the volcanic region of the Auvergne region, not far from Lyons, he met a group of Sisters called the Sisters of St Joseph. Their impression on him was to prove of the utmost importance for us in Australia. He describes these Sisters as "daughters of farmers and humble people", "not highly educated, nor probably very refined, but they lived a life of great edification, and supplied most of the wants which religious communities could fulfil. ... They lived in great poverty and simplicity, and there was no fine ladyism about them." (p 47).

These Sisters of St Joseph had been founded two hundred years before in one of the towns of the region, Le Puy. At the time Julian met them, they had spread all over France and into other areas in Europe, India, United States and Canada. It was their adaptability to respond to whatever was the need of the people that gave them a particular character that astounded Julian. He says, "It was like a new revelation to me to see these institutions. I had been accustomed to regard a nun as one on whom a great deal of money had to be spent, and who must be raised above the laboring classes, both in means and in education. I felt instinctively that a nun to be one with the poor, and a servant of the poor, should belong to the humbler classes, especially as the immense wants of the Church in that direction could only be effectively and abundantly recruited from that class." So when here in Penola some ten years later Julian was faced with the need of simple and poor country folk for education and pastoral care, he thought of these Sisters in France.

Another meeting, this time with the daughter of Flora and Alexander MacKillop, themselves struggling settlers, was to prove another turning point in his life. That he spoke about the French Sisters to Mary MacKillop is obvious from a comment of Mary in a letter to her mother:

"I have such an earnest longing for the Order of St Joseph and know well how hard it will be to get it established here; but unless Sisters come from France, it will be long before there are enough of us for the work that is to be done".

However, neither Julian nor Mary had the money to bring Sisters from France. Julian said he had “formed the idea of the Sisters of St Joseph” from his meeting them in France. So with Mary, so much “one with the poor” that she had only herself to bring, he embarked on founding with her the Australian version of the Sisters of St Joseph. The rest, they say, is history.

Today we celebrate their meeting. And we meet together in this place where we remember Julian spending time with his God as he sat under the gum tree across the road and prayed his Office. People who come here to visit will meet these characters of the past commemorated for us in these wonderful sculptures. We will be inspired by Julian and Mary MacKillop who used the only gifts they had, themselves, in responding to God’s call for the benefit of others. But this is not only a place to record what happened here years ago. This is a meeting place where, we hope, people in our day will come with open hearts to meet each other and their God. Who knows what potential lies here? Will it be a place where the Spirit will move hearts? Edward de Bono says that “A memory is what is left when something happens and does not completely unhappen.” The memories that this place holds must live on into a new time and be taken up by others. I pray that, in the future, someone will write their Memoirs to record that a chance meeting here has made all the difference."

