

Opening the door to a saint ...

The Sisters of the Good Samaritan, founded in 1857, began their work of service to the poor in Sydney, guided and led by Mother Scholastica Gibbons, a Sister of Charity who had been appointed to that task by the first Archbishop of Sydney, John Bede Polding. They were the first congregation of women religious founded in Australia, but the Irish Sisters of Charity and the enclosed Benedictine community at Subiaco were both well-established in Sydney when Polding's tiny new community was begun.

Mother Mary MacKillop's work began in Adelaide in 1866, she and her sisters being the first religious women to serve the church in South Australia. Separated in their foundation dates by just under a decade, both of these fledgling home-grown congregations were destined for recognition as truly Australian, their charisms as they emerged showing a difference between them and the older European and Irish orders. Unlike these older congregations, a dowry was not a pre-requisite for acceptance and few of the original Good Samaritans or Josephites could claim links with people in high places in Rome or Dublin. As active, unenclosed congregations, the Josephites, Sisters of Charity and Sisters of the Good Samaritan, all enthusiastically embraced their work with the poor and did so from the beginning but, over time, the Sydney congregations expanded their ministry to a wider group. In Mary's congregation, the mission was to serve the poor and disadvantaged exclusively and this ideal was scrupulously adhered to.

Polding's Sisters of the Good Samaritan and Mother Mary's Sisters of St Joseph were each a true local product situated in their own place and time. Each congregation had a sense of starting out with potential to grow in step with a missionary church and a young nation; each attracted in their early years women who represented a good cross-section of the less wealthy but highly respected Catholic families of the Australian church and a good cross-section of the country's lower to middle class citizens. That there should develop an affinity between them was predictable from the start. ¹

To look back now at the first meetings of the founding women of these two Australian institutes is salutary for us. We find in their interactions warmth,

understanding, spontaneous recognition of and attention to need, hospitality, co-operation, everyday feminine practicality. Their brief encounters provided relief and a welcome contrast to the hardships and sufferings their work required and to those imposed on them at times by men of power in the church of their day.

It was wet and stormy the day Mary arrived in Sydney, leading a small group of four young sisters all just in their twenties, their number added to by a postulant who joined them there. Mary had left Adelaide with her companions on 8 December 1869 having made her final vows that morning. The journey to Melbourne had taken eight days. From Melbourne she had begged further passage for the group and travelled another four days to reach Sydney on Thursday, 20 December 1869. She was not well:

I do not know when I have spent such a day of real illness. From early morning I have been so sick.²

They were penniless, strangers in a strange town but 'with some difficulty' found their way to the residence of the Benedictine Rev Austin Sheehy, Polding's Vicar-General and a good friend to Mary, to announce their presence. From there they planned to find Mary's cousins, the Camerons who lived in Parramatta, and to stay there while they begged their passage to Brisbane. Cab drivers were then what they still are it seems. Sick, wet, tired, and probably hungry, their cab driver took them to an empty house. At this point, Mary tells us:

a cab drove up with two nuns in it who at once came to our aid and insisted on taking us back to their convent. This they did and got us lunch and then sent for Mrs Cameron who soon came over.³

The party seems to have split into two groups of three, one group staying at the convent of the Good Shepherd in Pitt Street and the other at the convent connected to the orphanage at Parramatta for which the Good Samaritans had been responsible since 1859. 'She [Mother Scholastica Gibbons] invited us to stay with her sisters at the orphanage where we were made very welcome and received every kindness until after Christmas.'⁴ Here Mary would have met Sister Magdalen Adamson, an older woman and a great religious who all her life, from the time of that first meeting, maintained a deep personal friendship with the younger Josephite superior.

Mary confided to Fr Woods that she was worried about one of her young companions who seemed to be spiritually tormented. Perhaps she also confided this to Scholastica or Magdalen because she met at Parramatta a priest who was able to console and strengthen her and her troubled sister.

Everything he said breathed the spirit of our Holy Rule and had I searched all over Sydney, a better...could not be found for Sr Francis de Sales. He would be a nice confessor for us. He is quite a young priest; his name is Carroll or O'Carroll, I forget which.⁵

As women do, the sisters must have discussed the merits and demerits of Fr Carroll/O'Carroll because Mary writes that 'some of the sisters at Parramatta convent think he is too particular.' The Good Samaritans' liturgical practices brought their special graces.

I thank God for letting us hear them [recite the Office] for now I know what you mean by intoning the Office. Will you, dear Father, give our sisters some more instructions upon this and frequently renew them?⁶

Midnight Mass shared with the Good Samaritans and the children at the Orphanage was an experience to cherish:

I shall never forget the Midnight Mass at which the dear little children sang so sweetly. They came into the chapel in their bare feet, dressed in lilac print dresses; they looked so sweet and innocent.⁷

Mary saw this fortuitous meeting and the time spent with the Good Samaritan sisters from the 20th to the 29th December 1869 as a sign of God's love and care. She wrote:

... the good sisters both here and at Parramatta have been so kind to us. May our good God reward them for they have been true to his holy inspirations, else they could not have been so kind to us. O dear Father, if I could only tell you how God's goodness seems to speak in everything. Blessed be his holy will and name for indeed he is good to us, his poor helpless children.⁸

There is one other comment which Mary makes about the Good Samaritans she lived with during those 9 days: 'They do not seem to have had all the advantages we have had.'⁹ A remark to tease. What did she mean?

In the early history of the Good Samaritan and the Josephite congregations, parallel situations emerged. Both foundresses, Mary and Scholastica Gibbons, experienced wrongful, slanderous accusations, extreme in Mary's case, vindictive in Scholastica's; both went through periods where they were rejected by their own sisters. Both institutes grew in numbers and expanded across states and into remote territories;

in their welfare and educational ministries they worked in similar institutions - refuges for women, orphanages, schools; both struggled to have Rome formally ratify their Rules which provided for transdiocesan centralisation of government.

Respectful co-operation and recognition of mutual need between the religious superior and the local bishop was always the preferred option of Josephite and Good Samaritan superiors but the vital feature of centralised government meant that, where such cooperation failed, in matters pertaining to the internal concerns of their congregations and its members, the authority of the congregational superior had precedence over that of the bishop. Mother Mary was required at great cost to defend this power more than once – in Bathurst under Bishop Matthew Quinn, in 1876 and in Queensland under Bishop James Quinn, 1876-78.¹⁰ The Rule of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan was not formally ratified until 1932 but as early as 1899, Mother Berchmans MacLaughlin brought all her diplomatic skills into play to protect the principle of central government and counter the plan of Bishop Maher of Port Augusta diocese who sought to have the diocese ‘colonise the community’ at Port Pirie by which he meant have it take in and train its own postulants and become a centre from which branch convents might eventually be established across the very large Port Augusta diocese.¹¹

As their work progressed the individual spirit of each congregation, nurtured by the founding sisters, became clear. Early bishops recognised it and required both congregations at times, to move out of an area where they served the poor in order to make way for ‘real nuns’ better suited to teach ‘the children of the upper classes’. This was, for example, the reason Bishop Murray required the Good Samaritans to give way to the Dominicans in Maitland in 1864.¹² The Josephite congregation, founded specifically for the education of the poor, did not deviate from that ideal whilst the Good Samaritan education ministry expanded early to include fee-paying convent schools which catered for a wider cultural secondary school curriculum. The Good Samaritan superior, Mother Berchmans McLaughlin, acknowledged this difference in relation to the work being done in Hughenden in North Queensland in 1905. For a variety of good reasons, she was on the verge of withdrawing the sisters from that area. She felt the scene - declining enrolments, a community impoverished by drought and the flight of its population from the town – was better suited to the Josephite sisters and put forward this view in a letter she wrote to Cardinal Moran:

... the average attendance in the school is only seventy. Many are unable to pay anything and as the sisters have to depend on the school and music fees, they now find it hard to procure the necessities of life. A small number of the sisters of St Joseph could manage better there. The convent is furnished and we have not contracted any debts.¹³

As it happened, the Good Samaritans did not leave Hughenden; adjustments were made and they stayed on for another hundred-plus years.

The friendships between Mother Mary and her sisters and the Good Samaritans which began in 1869, never died. In a letter to Mary in 1879 Mother Magdalen Adamson, now Superior General of the Good Sams since 1876, expressed her 'fond love' and signed herself 'Your ever loving friend'.¹⁴ A year later, on the 7th May, 1880, Mary's sisters stepped off the boat at Wollongong en route to their new mission at West Dapto. The Good Samaritans were waiting for them and looked after them until their departure 5 days later. There was obviously a cooperative spirit between the two teaching groups and warm friendship, as the Josephite Provincial, who accompanied the newcomers to West Dapto, indicated:

... The Dean does not want us to take any child that could go to the Good Samaritans in Wollongong, 8 miles distant. ... The sisters there were extremely kind to us on our way up ...¹⁵

The depth of Mary's love and loyalty towards her 'ever loving friend' is powerfully revealed as Magdalen neared death in 1896. In response to Bishop O'Reily's plea, Magdalen and her council had opened a foundation at Port Pirie, a thousand miles from Sydney and a lonely ride for those chosen to work there. From the very beginning of negotiations with the Bishop, until the inauguration of a community of Good Samaritans in Gawler in 1902 - again due to Mother Mary's generosity - that weary train journey was broken in Adelaide and the Good Samaritans found respite and hospitality there with the sisters of St Joseph. It was their welcome and kindness which made it possible for those early pioneers to make that journey and bear that isolation.

In 1894, Sr Gertrude Byrne succeeded Magdalen as Mother General of the Good Samaritans and immediately Magdalen herself moved to Port Pirie. In 1896, she suffered a cerebral haemorrhage. The word reached Mary at a time when she was visiting her sisters in their small remote communities across South Australia. Without hesitation, she interrupted this important task to make the journey to Port Pirie to be with her friend - no mean effort given the transport difficulties of the

period. Gertrude Byrne had also made the journey to accede to Magdalen's wish to be taken back to the convent at Pitt Street to die where her Good Samaritan vocation had been born and nurtured.

In this crisis, Mary's practical feminine kindness took charge. Her letter says so much about her and so much about the lengths she would go to for her Good Samaritan friends.

... I was at Port Pirie yesterday, went there from Gladstone and got back here (Caltowie) after 7 last night I invited the poor invalid Mother to stay at the Providence the night she is in Adelaide and I want our invalid chair to be taken into town for her ...

We all owe a debt of gratitude to Mother Magdalen for kindness to us when we had no convent in Sydney. More than once she and some of her nuns gave up their beds to us in our travels, and this when our sisters came to them unexpectedly and at dead of night. The poor old nun cried with joy when she saw me. The M.G. is over from Sydney to take her home ... In their sorrow and distress what could I do but tell them to consider any house of ours as their own. ... I will try to go down with them, if they let me know when they can leave, and do this even if I leave Clare and Seven Hills for another time...¹⁶

Port Pirie continued to take its toll on the health of sisters who lived there and in 1898 the Good Samaritan superior there was being advised by the Vicar-General, Rev John Norton, that 'the good sisters of St Joseph at Petersburg' would happily accommodate a Good Samaritan sister who was recovering from illness, together with her companion.¹⁷ This kind of hospitality had to be generous when communities were hard worked, financially strained and poorly accommodated but it was offered and gratefully accepted.

The isolation of the sisters at Port Pirie had worried Magdalen and it worried those who succeeded her. Again, it was Mother Mary who lifted that worry from their shoulders. Because of Mother Mary's willingness to help, and supported by Bishop O'Reily, Mother Berchmans McLaughlin was able to open a convent at Gawler in South Australia in 1902, thus lessening the isolation of the Port Pirie sisters and providing a house where sisters could break the journey to and from Sydney and where they could rest, holiday or stay when it was necessary to come to Adelaide. Mother Mary's role in this transaction was crucial and Bishop O'Reily acknowledged the favour she bestowed on the Good Samaritans in Gawler:

That I am able to offer you an opening, I owe to the singular friendliness of the Mother General of the Josephites towards yourself and the Good Samaritans and her wish to oblige me ... Our

new refuge was recently opened and there was need for an increased staff. I suggested that she should withdraw from Gawler and leave the place free for you. She gave a most cordial assent and expressed herself happy in being able to show kindness to the Good Samaritans who, in so many places, and on so many occasions, had been kind to her in the past. ¹⁸

The Port Pirie-Gawler story shows the network through which the church on the ground operated, and how effective genuine co-operation for the common good could be. As for Mary's care of Magdalen in her time of great need and helplessness, that 'encapsulated all that is beautiful about the love that can exist between women in religious life, about the deep, abiding friendships it can develop and about the feminine sensitivity and total care such love can effect between women of great and tender heart'.¹⁹

We are blessed to be here in this joyous year of Mother Mary's canonisation and able to reflect again on the example given by her and the religious pioneers of the Sisters of St Joseph and the Sisters of the Good Samaritan. The relationship between Mother Mary and her Good Samaritan friends was the outcome of warm, generous kindness, mutually given and received. Through their work across rural and urban Australia, in the context of the early Australian church, they found and expressed the presence of God within them, in and through the ordinary experiences of Australian life with its needs and its challenges. They are towering figures of grace yet they breathe a real humanity and the kind of strength which encourages goodness in us all.

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November 2010

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- ¹ (Walsh, Margaret: The Good Sams, Sisters of the Good Samaritan 1857-1969, John Garratt Publishing, Victoria, 2001, p75; Foale, Marie Therese RSJ, The Josephite Story, Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of St Joseph 1866-1893 Sisters of St Joseph Generalate, 1989, pp23-4, 33-40).
- ² (MacKillop to Wood, 20.12.1869, Box 11 GSA)
- ³ (ibid.)
- ⁴ (MacKillop to Wood 22.12.1869)
- ⁵ (ibid.) The priest referred to was probably Father J.J. Carroll, later Vicar-General of Sydney under Cardinal Moran.
- ⁶ (ibid)
- ⁷ (ibid)
- ⁸ (ibid)
- ⁹ (ibid)
- ¹⁰ (MacGinley M. R., A Dynamic of Hope, Crossing Press, Sydney, 1996, pp. 169-71, 177-80)
- ¹¹ (Walsh, pp.222-3)
- ¹² (Walsh pp128-9)
- ¹³ (McLaughlin to Moran, 4.8.1905, GSA Box 585)
- ¹⁴ (Adamson to MacKillop 6 November 1879, GSA Box 11)
- ¹⁵ (Mahoney to MacKillop, 15.5.1880, Mary MacKillop Archives, N. Sydney)
- ¹⁶ (MacKillop to Sr Annette RSJ, 22.10.1896, [copy], GSA Box 11)
- ¹⁷ (Norton to de Sales 20.10.1898, GSA)
- ¹⁸ (O'Reilly to McLaughlin, 6.11.1901, GSA Box 569.)
- ¹⁹ (Walsh, The Good Sams, p.47.)