By Peter Bugden

FOR a young Annette Arnold growing up in Rockhampton in central Queensland, the name “Joseph” was to be key in the unfolding of her life.

The eighth in a family of 10 children, she grew up in the cathedral parish of St Joseph. “The significance of that has not been lost on me – my grandfather was Joseph, my father James Joseph and my great-aunt entered the Sisters of St Joseph,” said Sr Annette Arnold, who is now regional leader of the Sisters of St Joseph for the Transpacific region, covering Queensland, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Peru and Brazil.

As she gathered this weekend – at Brisbane’s Cathedral of St Stephen on the feast of St Joseph (Saturday March 19) – to celebrate the Josephites’ 150th anniversary, she looks back in awe, gratitude and excitement on the blessings of following in the footsteps of the order’s founder St Mary of the Cross MacKillop.

Reflecting on her own vocation, Sr Annette recalls the influence of the Josephites she knew in her youth, then Bishop of Rockhampton Francis Rush and the spirit of the times.

She said, in hindsight, she could see that Bishop Rush – who was then “basically our parish priest in the cathedral parish” and who went on to become Archbishop of Brisbane – had a great influence on her.

She remembers his homilies: “It was on the cusp of the (Second) Vatican Council and it somehow sparked in me both the call to connect with the Divine and to respond in service to the world,” Sr Annette said.

It was then the turn of the Sisters of St Joseph to show her the way.

“I was educated by the Sisters of Mercy until my last year of primary school when we moved to the northside (of Rockhampton) and I met the Josephites,” she said.

“As a teenager in the sixties I was surrounded by young, enthusiastic, happy, intelligent, grounded, realistic, folk-singing, Gospel-centred Josephite women – my teachers. I loved them, had great fun with them and was stirred by them.

“It was in the peak of the enthusiasm of the call and challenge of the Vatican Council and I gobbled it all up.

“It was an exciting time indeed. It enthused me, inspired me.”

Even before joining the Josephites, the young Annette was stirred to action.

“I was the youth representative in the very first council of the Josephines at Rockhampton and I met the Josephites, she said.

“Sr Annette said the call to religious life was "like anyone who has made a life commitment, it is a constant recommitment."

“It’s not at all static but an evolving recommitment, response to an initial call to the source of life, the One who is, to the God who desires to be one with me and all creation,” she said.

“The other aspect is that religious life is, by its very nature, communal.

“One vows to live in community and I stay because of that too.

“None of us can go it alone and it is in the ‘throwing your lot in’ with the group that one finds myself, more and more saying, ‘I want to be like you when I grow up’.

“So, in response to need, those most vulnerable, including Aboriginal people, I find myself, more and more saying, ‘I want to be like you when I grow up.’

“‘Go forward in courage and hope ... God will always provide.’”

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“This is what I heard her saying: ‘Listen, don’t hold back, respond with full hearts and all your resources to the call of the people of today ... to stretch and be stretched beyond your comfort, to ensure those most vulnerable are a priority.’

“Don’t be complacent, don’t be too careful as the needs are as urgent today as they were when Julian (Tenison Woods) and I started in Penal.

“In one sense the needs are far greater and you have a greater responsibility as you have more capacity than we ever had to make a huge difference’.

“But you won’t make that difference unless all that you do is drawn from, centred in, fulfilled by the hospitable, loving heart of your God.

“Stop, stop very often and listen to the heartbeat of God.

“If you cannot listen to the heartbeat of God and out of that, respond, you are like gongs clashing.

“Go forward in courage and hope ... God will always provide.”

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