

**Farewell to the Sisters of Mercy St Patrick's Parish South Grafton April 11, 2010
Address by Barbara Bolster RSM (Congregation Leader, Sisters of Mercy, Grafton)**

Today we celebrate the blessings of 121 years of Mercy presence in the parish of St Patrick's, South Grafton. However, the influence of the Sisters of Mercy goes right back to 1884 when "all the little children in South Grafton" were able to attend school at the Convent in Grafton. We know, too, from Mrs Alice Pidcock, (Fitzhenry) who knew Mother Stanislaus and Mother Angela (both had died by 1888, before the school opened at South Grafton) that "There was great excitement in the little church at South Grafton, which was attended by the country people from miles around, when the nuns came on Sundays to hold catechism classes and give instructions after Mass."

In letters to Bermondsey, we discover references to South Grafton. On 14th September, 1884 Mother Angela Curtis wrote to Reverend Mother in Bermondsey:

Everyone is so kind to us, even the Protestants. We had not been here long when the government ordered that we should have a free passage in one of the steamers all up the Clarence. All the little children in South Grafton can come across in the little steamer or punt free to the Convent School.

Even earlier, in July, Sr M Aloysius had remarked in a letter: "When they get late for school the excuse is 'Please Sister, the punt stopped in the river'". So we know that South Grafton and its people were part of the earliest history of the Sisters of Mercy in this area.

From 1891, when the new school opened in South Grafton, the sisters took charge of the school and themselves went twice daily on the punt – first to the school and then home again. Their lunch was brought over to them on the punt! This continued until the Grafton Bridge was opened in 1932. Sisters still alive who went to St Joseph's in the 1940s and later, remember catching Schwinghammer's bus in Grafton in the morning and returning home by bus in the afternoon. Sr Marcia Grant was at South in 1942, Sr Margaret Hogan in 1944 and Sr Patricia Smith in 1947.

At a later stage, the Parish Priest decided the sisters should travel by taxi and this they did until a convent was provided for them in Bent Street in 1979. As to their lunch, Sr Ann Joseph prepared it in the Convent kitchen and sent it to South Grafton, in a port, on the bus. One sister remembers a 6th class boy collected it and took it to the school where the sisters ate it in their lunch room. Maureen Knox, still a parishioner here, remembers going to the bus to collect the port and being cheeky and looking to see what was inside. Occasionally the sisters had potato mixed with custard but generally the system worked well! Sometimes, the pupil who went to the bus was late and the bus finished its route around the South Hill before he managed to collect the lunch port. We imagine it would have been a meal such as the Israelites had before they left Egypt, when the Lord said: "You shall eat it like this: with; a girdle around your waist, sandals on your feet, a staff in your hand. You shall eat it hastily." (Ex 12: 11)

The classroom was not the only area where the sisters were involved. From the earliest days they cared for the church and trained the choir for Mass and Benediction. Visitation of parents of the school children was a most important part of their ministry. Vocations come from strong Catholic families and in 1910 Elizabeth Geary of Ramornie was professed as a Sister of Mercy. Over the years she was followed by Sisters Barbara McEvoy, Loyola Thornton, Sybil Colborne, Patricia Brown, Margaret Amos, Clare Murphy, Colleen Rhodes and Elizabeth Jabour. There have been others who lived elsewhere when they joined the Sisters of Mercy but had spent some part of their lives in South Grafton. Sisters of Mercy were responsible, too, for the early education of Fr Brian Murphy (RIP) and Fr Peter Jones who both attended St Joseph's School in South Grafton.

Of course, vocations to the religious life and priesthood are not all there is to Catholic life. There are countless families in the district that have been strengthened in their faith life by former

pupils of the sisters. These girls and boys, as mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles, provide a wonderful faith environment for their families.

As we mark the end of a specific Mercy presence in the parish, we look now to our associates and those who have experienced the Mercy spirit to continue to embrace it and see that it is carried into the future, to be blessing for the people of this parish.

The Sisters of Mercy thank you for your hospitality to us over the last 121 years; we thank you particularly today for the way you have taken Sr Margaret into your hearts and your lives. We wish you God's blessing on your families and your life as the People of God in South Grafton. Thank you for enabling us to be part of your lives and the history of the Church in this place.