

**Address by Barbara Bolster RSM (Congregation Leader, Grafton)  
Opening of Archives and Heritage Room  
September 26, 2009**

Good morning everyone, you are most welcome. It is a pleasure to have you in our home, the mother house of the Sisters of Mercy of Grafton.

This building still holds part of the original building, which the sisters moved into in 1884. The pamphlet Judith has prepared for you indicates where that section can be found. One thing that fascinates me about that part of the building is that the doorways are lower – people must have been shorter then! Additions were made over the years and the substantial part of the renovations was completed in 1913. On the back page of the pamphlet you can see what the additions looked like. Over the years the balcony was enclosed and that beautiful lace ironwork was lost. In the last twelve months some changes were made giving much easier access to the building for the sisters and visitors. Please enjoy the downstairs of this beautiful building and the views of the mighty Clarence.

Here in this room you will see some photo stories – on this wall are photos of the steam ship “Orient” which brought those nine women from London to Sydney and the “City of Grafton” which brought them from Sydney to Grafton. The painting beside these photos is a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. Apparently while at sea a great storm blew up. The Captain of the Orient, who had become quite friendly with the sisters, asked them to pray for the storm to abate. Legend has it that they lowered this picture over the side of the ship and the storm subsided. The water marks are there to prove it!

Other pictures are of the convents in Eltham and Bermondsey in London. It was at Eltham that Bishop Torregiani met Stanislaus Simson and it was from Bermondsey that the nine women set out for Grafton. On the other side of the fire place is a copy of Stanislaus Simson’s vow formula. Stanislaus was the founding superior of the Grafton sisters.

Some of the furniture you will see as you walk around is quite old. We believe some was brought by the sisters in 1884 but we have no one now who can confirm that. We do know there is a lot of old furniture which has been well preserved.

Over the past 125 years many sisters have worked, consciously and sometimes unconsciously, to preserve our heritage by way of good building maintenance, preservation of records, of books and all the accoutrements of an apostolic religious life, e.g. prayer books, statues, sacred vessels, religious garb, needlework – there is just so much to see which will bring back memories for each of us. In this year of celebration it is wonderful that the work of many sisters, archivists and leaders is coming to fruition.

For some people talk of archives and heritage rooms raises thoughts of dusty tomes and living in the past but we know that archives are far more than that. The archives we open to the public today are the accumulated records of the Sisters of Mercy, Grafton and the Institutions that these women established, served in and managed. They merit preservation because of their possible subsequent value for legal, administrative or personal reasons but also for cultural and historical reasons.

They enrich our selves as women. Photos record how life was over the span of 125 years, they tell a story of a group of women who came from England, Ireland and Scotland, established a congregation of religious women who were dedicated to God’s Mission and the service of God’s people.

I heard somewhere recently that ‘heritage’ is the cultural capital and inspirational power of people. Heritage, we know, is not merely about the past. It is not only about careful preservation

of what was. As the cultural capital and inspirational power of (a) people, it is dynamic. From a religious perspective, and in the language of our faith, heritage continues to enliven our souls and offer us purpose beyond ourselves, beyond the immediate.

Some of the things which can be found in the heritage room and archives are:

- the diary of Sister de Sanctis Collins begun on the journey from London to Grafton
- the original accounts book, (show this) it was begun in 1887 and lists among the provisions – butcher, baker, butter, eggs, fish and wine and beer!
- register of professions
- the programme of the second concert presented in 1885 – it included piano and vocal solos, an operetta – Little Red Riding Hood and a Drama – Lost and Found. Also on display at this concert was 'plain, fancy and ornamental needlework, writing, mapping, drawing and painting.

We also find in the archives the minutes of meetings, correspondence with bishops, priests, Catholic education office, the acts of chapter, the title deeds to property, the personal papers of individual sisters, the constitutions, prayer leaflets, the photographs of community life; photos, videos and cassette recordings of jubilees, professions and special occasions. The list of material saved and preserved is quite amazing. At a time when secular women are largely invisible in history because of the lack of recognition of their role and the absence of records dealing with them, we have in our archives, records of women who managed their own finances, invested in property, built schools and exercised authority in these schools, and moved from our traditional work of education to other ministries where need was recognized.

We will be forever grateful for the work of such women as Srs. Fabian, Chanel, and Philip for preserving our history and patrimony in such a wonderful way. But they could only work with what they had – so much material preserved by superiors and sisters down through the years. In the 50's Sr. Celestine saw the importance of writing the story of the Grafton foundation, her research resulted in *As Gentle Rain*, the story of the first 70 years of this congregation. It is an invaluable resource to us today.

This morning I thank Sr. Judith for the immense amount of work she has put into preparing for today. I know she enjoys what she is doing and she delights in uncovering many new things. Sisters and the Mercy Associates have assisted her in this work, thank you for your contribution.

It is now my privilege to declare the Heritage Room and the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Grafton, open.