

**Kempsey Convent
Closing Ritual
April 27, 2008
Address given by Sister Barbara Bolster RSM
Congregation Leader, Sisters of Mercy Grafton**

Bishop John, parishioners, sisters. This is an historic day for Kempsey as the sisters take leave of the convent where we have lived since 1900. As we take this next step in the history of the Sisters in this parish of Kempsey I would like to reflect a little on the history of the parish and our involvement here.

From 1882 to 1887 Father P.J. McGuinness was the pastor of Kempsey, and in those few years the parish was provided with a presbytery, convent and school. The first nuns to come to Kempsey were the Sisters of St Joseph from North Sydney who came in 1884. Owing to the isolated situation of the parish, and the great difficulties of communication with their Mother House at Sydney, the Sisters of St Joseph, after accomplishing excellent work, were obliged to relinquish both convent and school. A community of Presentation Nuns from Lismore then arrived in Kempsey, but the same set of circumstances made it impossible for them to remain any length of time. For eighteen months the community was without religious teachers. Father J. Buggy, the pastor, endeavoured to keep the children occupied in school, but the situation became impossible.

A community of the Sisters of Mercy had arrived from London in 1884 and established their Mother House at Grafton. In August 1884 Mother M. Stanislaus Simson, the Grafton foundress, had received a telegram from Bishop Torreggiani asking if she could send sisters to Kempsey. At the time this was not possible. It wasn't until the beginning of the year 1900 that they were able to accept this invitation to Kempsey.

The first group of Mercy women to come to Kempsey included Mother M. Veronica Duggan who had come from Bermondsey to Grafton as one of the foundation sisters. Mother Veronica had two appointments to Kempsey. Writing in a letter to Bermondsey in 1909 of the impending death of Mother M. de Sanctis, another of the founding sisters, she said: "I can thank Our Lord that he has heard my prayer for while away from her a 130 miles (branch House) for years I used to pray He would allow us to be together before we died. I was with her for a few days only 2 years ago when she was ill and had to leave her for this distant branch not knowing whether I should ever see her again. It was a real sacrifice." (GL 39: to Reverend Mother Camillus 23.10.1909) There is something in this account that reveals the missionary spirit of the early sisters who believed so strongly in their call to extend the sphere of mercy while holding on to their tradition of affectionate concern for each other.

Others in the original group to Kempsey included **Sr M. Xavier Scanlan**. Apparently she was later in Smithtown where her very Irish accent caused some confusion as she tried to warn people about a bull in the paddock! **Sr M. Angela Joseph** (surname) went to Kempsey and **Sr M. Joseph McAuliffe**, who once had asked and received permission to ride a horse and sulky from Grafton to Kempsey. The trip took 4 days and proved somewhat traumatic for her companion who had to sit on the horse's head while Sr Joseph removed the pony's harness after the animal had fallen. Apparently the permission was not repeated! **Sr Margaret Mary Morrissey**, a Clarence River woman, was the fifth member of the founding group. It is interesting to note that since these women established a Mercy presence in Kempsey, more than half the women who have been part of the Grafton Mercy Community have spent some time in Kempsey.

The Sisters travelled by steamer from Grafton to Trial Bay and then by coach to Kempsey. Their Convent home was a cream stone, one storey building, standing on the site occupied by the present Catholic Church. At the back of the Convent was a wooden dormitory for boarders. In years to come, that dormitory was used as a music room. The school where the Sisters were to teach was situated on the site of the present Catholic Presbytery. The first Catholic School in Kempsey was built before 1884.

Father Terence Maguire was appointed to the Kempsey Parish and he had a new Presbytery erected. The old presbytery was given to the sisters and it now forms what might be described as the middle section of the present Convent. When the sisters occupied it the ground floor comprised a parlour, music room, small hallway and a spiral staircase which went up to the next storey comprising a workroom, a couple of sleeping apartments and a balcony all around this storey. A detached kitchen, laundry, toilets, etc. were at the back of the Convent. In 1912 a new wing for boarders was added to the Convent. When Father Tom Morris was made Administrator of Kempsey Parish, in 1923, further extensions were made to the Convent and boarding school.

The Secondary School, up to Intermediate standard, commenced in 1925. On 8th December that year Monsignor Maguire returned to Kempsey to lay the foundation stone of the newly erected Convent Chapel. In 1941 Father Morris built the high school at the rear of the Boarding School. Further building took place in 1954 when Father Tom McEvoy saw to the building of the brick Primary and Infants School to replace the former wooden structures. He also saw to the equipping of a Science room in the Secondary School.

The Macleay women who joined the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Mercy who served in the Macleay Valley were all formed and influenced in some way by the people of Kempsey and its surrounds. As we recall the Sisters who shared community here, we look also to the community that welcomed them. It was mainly a rural community where hospitality, care of each other and family values were at the heart of daily life. The sisters were included in the community and experienced the support of the Macleay people. In that context some remarkable work was done as Mercy women in their turn formed and influenced the people of this area.

As we look back on the Sisters who kept the Mercy spirit alive in the Macleay valley we see some remarkable women of enthusiasm, drive, hospitality, compassion. We are inspired by women who believed in the value of education, who worked long and hard to ensure they were adequate for the task of educating the young people of this area; we are grateful for their commitment to fostering the dignity of each person, their recognition of the need to educate girls and affirm the value of women in family and society. When we remember how many religious women throughout this diocese and well beyond received their education from Sisters of Mercy who lived in this house, we are struck by the blessings that flowed from a community founded on prayer, sacrifice, and constant efforts to be true to the Gospel and the Mercy way.

Over the last 108 years there have been many changes in Kempsey and the Mercy community here. Today, we are moving on to the next stage of our Mercy story in Kempsey. This old building was our home for a long time; as we close its doors, we look outwards to new horizons, and new ways of continuing the Mercy story that began in Kempsey in 1900. Loretta, Maureen and Cabrini will continue to live the vision of Catherine McAuley and give life to the dreams of Bishop Torriggeani who invited the Sisters of Mercy to come here as early as August 1884. At that time they could not oblige him and when they found it possible Kempsey was no longer in his diocese.

However, our Sisters have always been inspired by a desire to nurture the faith of the people and give them and their children the best options in life. Our three Sisters in Kempsey will continue this tradition. As we say farewell to the 'old convent' we thank God for the contribution we have been able to make since the first five Sisters arrived in 1900. May we continue to live our charism with the same faith, courage and untiring energy.

At the conclusion of Mass we will conduct a ritual of leaving the convent, you are all invited to join us in this ritual. After that there will be a 'comfortable cup of tea' to enjoy in the hall.