

**Denise Coghlan RSM** was recognised by the Australian Catholic University with an Honorary Doctorate for her contribution to social justice issues on April 15, 2009. The Citation, read by Vice-Chancellor, Professor Gregory Craven, on the occasion of the conferring by the Chancellor, Brother Julian McDonald CFC, of the degree of Doctor of the University (*honoris causa*) follows.

**CITATION: Dr Denise Coghlan RSM, AM**

Sister Denise Coghlan has always had a keen interest in social justice in developing countries, since her early years as a teacher in New Guinea. She is known particularly for her work with Cambodian refugees first in camps in Thailand and, since 1990, in Cambodia, where she has co-ordinated programmes for education, development and for people with disabilities in Jesuit Service, and also played a very prominent part in the international campaign against landmines.

Sister Denise enjoyed a happy childhood in the Brisbane valley with her parents and two sisters, and attended a one-teacher country school before going to board for secondary studies at All Hallows' in Brisbane. She says she was very much influenced by the nuns, her friends and the mystical poets she studied for the Senior Examination.

After schooldays, Denise became a teacher and joined the Sisters of Mercy, with whom she went to New Guinea, where she was part of the first high school for girls in the country. She did her BA and BEd externally from the University of Queensland, studying at night by lantern light, surrounded by buzzing mosquitoes.

Her experience in the New Guinea culture was a very formative influence on Sister Denise's thinking. She says: "I learned to see life from a very different cultural perspective and view of the world; it challenged me to distinguish between the message of the gospel and the cultural accretions that came from its association with Roman culture and influence."

In 1974 Sister Denise was elected to the leadership team of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy, and she found it a very interesting period in Australian religious life, with a very good team. She completed a Masters of Educational Administration from University of New England and then studied in Jerusalem and at Boston Theological Consortium, being awarded a masters degree in theology from Boston College. On return, Denise became the coordinator of adult faith and education in the Brisbane Archdiocese and was active on the Social Justice Commission.

In 1988 she volunteered for the Mercy Refugee Service which was partnered by the Jesuit Refugee Service and went to work in Thailand in refugee camps among Cambodian displaced persons, who had suffered the horrors of genocide and were the victims of the proxy war between USA and Russia/Vietnam.

In 1990 the Jesuit Refugee Service discerned a response to the Cambodian situation which included some members remaining with the refugees in the camps until final repatriation, some working outside the situation for peace and reconciliation and some being asked to pioneer a team inside Cambodia. Denise was in the group who went to Cambodia and, in fact, she was the first foreign Sister back in the country after Pol Pot.

In Cambodia with JRS, later named Jesuit Service, she worked with a Cambodian team Metta Karuna (Mercy and Loving Kindness) for peace and justice and the full human development of a people who have suffered war, exile, aid embargo and genocide.

Both in the camps and in Cambodia, people suffering from landmines and cluster bomb remnants were very visible, since Cambodia is one of the countries worst affected by landmines.

Sister Denise has taken an active role in the international campaign against these weapons, and is a member of the international steering committee. With other staff from the Jesuit Services, she was part of a network of non-government organisations that worked for years, lobbying meetings

of world governments, and arranging for people disabled by landmines to address the United Nations. Their huge efforts met with success when more than 100 countries signed the Ottawa Treaty in 1997 banning the use, stockpiling and transfer of landmines.

In the same year, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. One of the survivors from a mine on the Cambodia-Thailand border received the prize, with the 11-person International Steering Committee, including Sister Denise, in attendance.

At the grass roots level, Sister Denise and her co-workers have been working to help improve life for those who have been affected by landmines. They have worked in vocational training, wheelchair production, education, outreach to people in affected communities and in advocating for land titles and for services for the poorest.

The survivors have also devised their own 12-point plan which calls for housing to shelter their families from the weather; wells within walking distance or wheelchair distance for water for washing and cooking; jobs, education and health.

In her tireless work for the betterment of life for those who have suffered so much in Cambodia, she is well-known for her rapport with the people. As Jesuit Refugee Service lawyer, Raymond Alikpala, says, "People come first with Denise. The project is very important, but the people are most important. She is wonderful with people whether they are government officials, United Nations officials or the poorest people in the village."

*In as much as ye have done this to the least of my brethren...*

Chancellor, I request that you bestow on Sister (Mary) Denise Coghlan RSM AM, Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education (University of Queensland), Master of Educational Administration (University of New England), Master of Theology (Boston College) Australian Catholic University's highest honour, Doctor of the University (*honoris causa*). This award is to honour her contributions to social justice, through the promotion of reconciliation in Cambodia and her tireless efforts in the banning of landmines in that country.