

## **HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP MARK COLERIDGE ON THE OCCASION OF THE SESQUICENTENARY OF THE GOULBURN SISTERS OF MERCY**

**Sts Peter and Paul's Old Cathedral, Goulburn  
Sunday, 25 October, 2009.**

**Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52**

Today we celebrate the hundreds of women who have been at the heart of the story of the Sisters of Mercy in this part of the world for 150 years. Each of them is a name and a number, but each of them is much more than that. Each of them is a story unto herself, a mystery known only to God, but let me speak only of three.

The first is Frances Anne Murphy. She was born in Westport, Co. Mayo, in 1820. She was orphaned young and raised by relatives who weren't Catholic. Against the odds perhaps, Frances entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1854 and was given the name Sister Mary Ignatius. Five years later, on 28 June 1859, she left Ireland for the far ends of the earth – as Superior of a new foundation in Australia's first inland city, Goulburn. She sailed with five other Sisters, touching down at Melbourne, where she met the unforgettable Mother Ursula Frayne, and at Sydney, where she was greeted by Archbishop Polding, who accompanied the Sisters to Goulburn. They arrived on 28 October 1859. The Parish Priest vacated the presbytery for them – though I should add that the presbytery was no more than four rooms with a dirt floor. It was too small for a residence and school, so the Sisters also used the stables as well.

On 17 July 1868, Mother Ignatius set off once again to become a foundress once more. This time it was Albury. She and her Sisters journeyed from Gunning to Yass where they spent the first night. On the second night they stayed at Jugiong where they were given a purse of sovereigns and were guests of the Sheahans, who are still mightily in evidence in the town. It took them three more days to reach Albury – and all this of this in yards of black serge and starched wimples. In 1901, Mother Ignatius died of cancer and is buried in Thurgoona, near Albury. May she rest in peace and rise in glory, Frances Murphy.

Then there is Eliza Fielding. She was born in Rochfortbridge, Co. Westmeath, to a family that was Church of Ireland. Her mother, who was deeply devoted to the poor, died when Eliza was 14, and when she decided to become Catholic at 18 she was disowned by her father. In 1861, Eliza entered the Sisters of Mercy in her home town and was given the name Sister Mary Paul Joseph. In 1875 she volunteered for a new mission to Yass of which she was made Superior. She and two other Sisters left Ireland on 21 August 1875 and arrived finally in Yass on 29 December. There they were met by an Indigenous elder named Queen Julia in the days when Aunties were Queens. Very charmingly, the local Indigenous people called the Sisters “the sacred ladies”. In time, Mother Paul became a foundress once more as she headed to the mining town of Wilcannia, travelling by train, river-boat and another boat which she described as “an old tub filled with onions and rats”. She died in 1905 and is buried in Wilcannia. May she rest in peace and rise in glory, Eliza Fielding.

There is also Ellen Hartnett. She was born in 1862 in Westbury, Tasmania – so she is the first Aussie born of the trio. In 1887 she entered the Sisters of Mercy in Goulburn where she was given the name Sister Mary Brigid. As a novice, she taught music in Gundagai, which brings to mind how important music was as a contribution to the life of the communities they served. In 1907, at the direction of Pope Pius X and under the eye of Bishop John Gallagher, there was an amalgamation of the Sisters of Goulburn, Yass and Albury; and at the first Chapter, Mother Brigid was elected the first General. She served as General from 1907-1919 and then again from 1923-1935. She favoured a loose amalgamation rather than strong centralisation, and she presided over a time of extraordinary growth. By 1935, there were no less than thirty-four Mercy foundations in the province. Mother Brigid died in 1938 and she is buried in this city. May Ellen Hartnett, Mother Brigid, rest in peace and rise in glory.

These three women stand for hundreds of “walking nuns”, women who set forth on a great and humble journey not only as daughters of Catherine McAuley but of Abraham and Sarah as well. They went where others would not or could not go – into schools, hospitals, orphanages, prisons, homes and a thousand other places. They became the prime evangelisers of South-Eastern New South Wales; and they were a mighty humanising force in what was at times an inhuman world. They were loved by the people wherever they went, and they were extraordinarily close to the people, even as they lived the great separations of convent life in other times. That is one of the paradoxes of this story.

Yet the facts as I have recounted them are only the tip of the iceberg. It is the word of God that takes us beneath the surface and reveals the full measure of the mystery we celebrate today. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of exile and homecoming. These were women who left home, who became exiles, in order that others might find their way out of the desert and home to the garden of God. The Sisters knew the truth of what Irish immigrants said – that you are never far from home if you can say your prayers, if you can pray to the God who makes his home in us and who is our true home. In that sense, the Sisters were never far from God and they brought a host of people home.

The Gospel of Mark speaks of Jesus touching the eyes of the blind beggar, and through 150 years the Sisters have touched the eyes of the blind to make them see. They have brought people, all of them beggars in one way or another, to a new vision of possibility. They have taught people to see with the eye of hope, even in situations that seemed hopeless. They have opened the eyes of the blind to see Jesus who alone reveals the full scope of human possibility, the true grandeur of Christian hope.

As the Letter to the Hebrews would have it, the Sisters have entered into the limitations of human weakness, embraced human weakness wherever and however they found it. This is what it means to call them Sisters of Mercy: they embraced human weakness in order to transfigure it. For them, this involved the sacrifice of which the Letter to the Hebrews speaks – the sacrifice of their lives so that others might truly live. This is what has made their service a truly priestly service, even if they were not ordained. In them we see a brilliant aspect of what it means to call the whole Church a priestly people.

In Archbishop’s House in Canberra there hangs a picture that was a gift to me. It is an utterly stark outback scene painted in tones of red. There are three figures in this red moonscape. There is a nun in full habit – almost certainly a Sister of Mercy. She is swathed in black and her veil hides her face. Only her hands appear from the habit. With her are two Indigenous boys, both dressed as altar-boys in red soutanes and white surplice. The costumes of all three are incongruous, even absurd, in the outback setting. At first sight, the painting can seem to be reflecting upon the absurdity of what the nun is doing to the boys. Yet the incongruous dress of the three says that they are all in same boat, each of them a victim of the incongruity. But there is more. One of the boys holds a processional cross. A small cross is raised high over the blazing red outback scene. The cross rises above all the incongruity – the foolishness of God rising high above all human wisdom. But the key to the painting is this: it is the nun who has given the cross to the boys. The faceless nun has given the boys not just an incongruous costume but a vision of hope that rises above all, the hope of the cross. That is why today we offer to God overflowing thanks for all that “the walking nuns”, “the sacred ladies”, have given to the Church, the nation and the world through 150 years.