

Reflections on the Life of Sister Helen O'Brien RSM (Adelaide)

BY Teresa Flaherty RSM

It is my privilege to be standing here as we gather to say our farewells to our sister, Helen Therese O'Brien. We each remember her as a dear friend, sister, relative, or companion and while these memories are vivid in our hearts, and we hold and treasure them, we know that we have come together with a particular purpose today. It is to acknowledge that Helen has now entered into the fullness of eternal life, where she lives in the tender communion of the Trinity, experiencing life in Jesus – "through, with and in whom" she trusted as she passed through the journey of life, with its sufferings, joys and mission. We gather in solidarity, knowing that Helen is at peace in the company of Mary, the saints and those familiar to her who have gone before – family, friends and sisters and who are there to welcome her spirit.

This is a time for remembrance and thanksgiving. By way of introduction, my knowledge of Helen goes back to childhood at the parish primary school at St Joseph's, Whitefriars at Woodville. Margaret and her little sister, Helen, were at the same school, in the junior classes, so to them, I was one of the 'big girls'. Helen used to ride her bicycle from the other side of the railway line from Woodville to Woodville Park in all weathers. After that we shared a similar history in that Helen followed me to Mt Carmel Girls' School for secondary education, then to St Aloysius College for matriculation and the novitiate of the Sisters of Mercy at Angas Street.

Some years later in 1978 Helen came to Goroka in Papua New Guinea. Though in different places, with Helen mostly in leadership and formation and myself in education, we continued to experience a shared history of 25 years – till we both left PNG in 2003. In these reflections, I will draw threads together to honour Helen and will include tributes made by others, some of whom are here today. Other dear friends of Helen's are unable to be here, and they are very much here in spirit.

Helen was nurtured in a loving, spiritual and happy family and had a great love for her father and mother, her two older brothers Jack (deceased) and Peter and sister Margaret. Helen maintained a love and devotion to her family, and her extended family as it grew into a small clan, and we saw the richness of this bond at Helen's 70th birthday celebrations.

Helen received her Teaching Diploma at the Adelaide Teachers College, followed later with a Bachelor of Arts Degree from the University of Adelaide. Helen taught at St Aloysius College, Mercedes College and at Mater Christi College (now Tennyson College) in Mt Gambier, where she was Deputy Principal. Helen proved herself to be a most thorough and competent teacher, showing care and being available to the students. She took a keen interest in whatever was offered in each school, contributing in her own beautiful way, including the school sports and boarders' church choir. Helen maintained loyal relationships with her students and colleagues and this faithful interaction continued throughout life. We are very pleased to welcome some of them today and at last night's Vigil.

During those 20 years of teaching in Mercy schools in South Australia, Helen was seen to have an innate concern for those less fortunate, and she developed a passion for justice and equality. One example of this was when she helped to set up a Justice Conference in Pt Augusta with a special focus on the rights of Indigenous Australians.

In 1978, Helen went to PNG as editor to the publications of the Melanesian Institute, which had been set up to research and implement the social, pastoral, and cultural changes recommended by Vatican II. She quickly settled into the ecumenical setting there and was valued for her practical, determined, intelligent and professional approach to work. Three early members¹ of the Melanesian Institute offer their tributes, promise of prayers and condolences to the sisters and Helen's family. They are Wendy Flannery RSM, Fr Ennio Mantovani, and Fr Jim Knight.

¹ Two SVD priests – the former Director, Fr Ennio Mantovani from Italy now in Melbourne, academic staff member, Fr Jim Knight, now in Alice Springs and Vicar General of Darwin, and former Deputy Director, Sr Wendy Flannery, now working for justice and peace in Brisbane.

Three years later, in 1981, Helen was elected by the four groups of Mercy Sisters in PNG – Goroka, the Western Highlands and Enga Provinces, the vast Wewak diocese and the nursing community in Aitape – to be the first national leader of the sisters. Helen quietly went about encouraging the sisters from different foundations to join together to form one united group, and particularly for the Highlands and Coastal sisters to intermingle.

Sr Mary Stallard from Longreach in the Rockhampton Diocese, originally from the Coastal group, sent an email recalling how Helen had called for volunteers to go to the Highlands, and Mary had gone to her privately to offer. Mary concluded: "It is Helen I have to thank for her trust in me and for my memorable years at Rosary High School Kondiu from 1987 to 1990".

Some of the sisters who formed the early Leadership Team with Helen are here today, and their names have been mentioned by our Congregation Leader, Helen Owens.² Other interstate sisters who formed the community during Helen's Leadership Terms (1978-84) and (1998-2002) are with us as well as those from the Adelaide Congregation who were in PNG. Many other sisters, as I mentioned are here in spirit and prayer.³

The second major task Helen faced was the formation of the indigenous sisters of PNG. Young women were keen to enter the Sisters of Mercy and Helen set about this task with skill, patience, and cultural sensitivity. Her open, receptive, respectful approach, the mutually enriching and trusting relationship – these were her special and unique gifts – to the sisters themselves and their families. Starting from a small group of three postulants, the PNG sisters have grown slowly but steadily, and today number 20. Because of the stable growth, fostered by the trust and responsibility given by Helen and succeeding leaders, the status of being an Autonomous Region of the Sisters of Mercy of Papua New Guinea was eventually granted by Rome.

Tributes have come from the first Novice Mistress, Ursula Gilbert, "Helen led the sisters very beautifully, through the goodness of trusting people. Like with myself. She gave me a responsibility and she trusted me to do it". On behalf of all the leaders of the Mercy Congregations in Australia, Sr Nerida Tinkler, Leader of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea sends condolences and tributes for Helen's significant contribution to the congregation.

In the light of Helen's role in the growth of the Sisters of Mercy, PNG, I think the very presence of Sr Theresia Tina, the present PNG leader and Sr Claudia Apelanda, Council Member, who represent the Sisters of the PNG Region and bring their prayers and gratitude, expresses more than can be said in words.

Helen had sterling qualities of conviction and prophetic insight as she forged the way ahead in the changes in religious life after the Vatican Council. It seems she felt an extraordinary spiritual call to service and mission that enabled her to overcome difficulties of poor health, danger on the roads, and facing the unknown. Some of this – the challenge and the fulfilment – is captured by the title of her PNG biography: From strangeness to revelation. Completing the biography⁴ was something that was very important to Helen, to be passed on to her family and the sisters.

Sr Gwen Garland from the Goulburn Congregation, who regularly visits PNG as financial consultant, attributed her own early learning in cross-cultural ministry to Helen's influence. "She taught me so much about cross-cultural ministry, and I think that had a lot to do with my taking on the work I am doing there now. She always welcomed us as people who were genuine in our searching for a way to be with the PNG people, especially our sisters".

² Sr Val Cervetto, formerly of Wewak and Sr Joan MacGinley the leader who succeeded Helen in 1988, both from Brisbane, and Julie Anne Ryan from Melbourne.

³ RoseMary Baker, Agnes Murphy and Ellen Dunn from Melbourne, Jenny Bailey from Sydney and Joan Adams from Singleton. From the Adelaide Congregation are Romley Durrman, Bernadette Marks, Marie Britza, Sr Cynthia Griffin (who is unable to be with us today) and Tess Flaherty.

⁴ A service of Mary Potter Hospice, carried out by the dedicated biographer, Mr Tony Carey.

Helen's contribution to the Church in PNG spread further than the Sisters of Mercy. Religious life was dear to her, and a large part of her dedication and energy was spent in fostering the national group of women religious – the Conference of Women Religious in PNG and the Solomon Islands. In time the religious orders of priests and brothers combined with the sisters to form the united body of the Federation of Religious.⁵

Fr Kevin Hennessey, Order of the Passionists, former President of the Federation, paid tribute to Helen's effectiveness in her work for and with national religious, in recognising and respecting their rights.

Sr Mariska Kua, the first PNG leader of the Sisters of Mercy and currently Director of Mercy Works in Goroka, recently told me by phone that while the Federation of Religious was holding its national meeting last week in Goroka, they received word of Helen's passing, and offered their prayers and tributes. Mariska commented that this was not surprising, as the Federation of Religious had originally been a particular dream of Helen's.

Sr Therese MacNamara of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH), now in Sydney, has extended her sympathy to the family and sisters. Similar messages have come from so many of Helen's friends in Australia and overseas.

I conclude with the most recent years of Helen's life. Since returning to Australia in 2003 with ill-health, Helen has faced diminishment, restriction and suffering with extraordinary generosity of spirit. Helen claimed: "I will do everything I can while I can" as she set off for the Musica Viva concerts in the Adelaide Town Hall, or the WOMAdelaide Festival. She also claimed: "I can no longer be in ministry, but I can be the kindest person I can be" – reminiscent of Catherine McAuley who claimed that religious people should be known for their kindness. And I leave it to many of you to picture examples of these things and Helen's hospitality and domestic and homely talents.

Helen was fully involved with her Mercy Congregation – leading the previous Chapter Planning and Reconfiguring Committees and being a delightful and faithful contributor to the Formation Committee. As one sister said, "Helen would appear now and again at our celebrations and gatherings, when we thought she was too ill and we would never see her out again". Such was Helen's call to life and mission, as she faced a life of constant suffering. Yet, there was an underlying deeper pain that Helen felt most keenly – that of leaving those she loved so much.

Dear Helen, your tears and anguish are now over, and we will feel your loss well beyond today. In some places in PNG⁶ there is a saying that when a loved one dies, the heavens open to send down the rain and as it softens the earth, so too does it soften the hearts of those that are left behind, to let the loved one go. So in the coolness and freshness may we gently allow Helen's spirit to soar towards fulfilment.

Helen, we mourn your passing, we give sincere thanks to you for the inspiration, understanding and comfort that you have brought to us and bestowed upon so many. We give thanks to our God who created you and called you to us and our world, and the Who is the One who brings you home safely to eternal life.

Helen – our dear sister, friend, relative, companion – you lived with peace in your heart. Now rest in Peace in God's tender Mercy.

⁵ The Association of Clerical Religious Superiors, and Conference of Religious Brothers.

⁶ Sr Veronica Lokalyo told me this of this saying last year when rain fell at the time of mourning the death of the first PNG Sister of Mercy, Petronia Maree Gawi.