

OPENING OF THE PHILIPPA BRAZILL RSM DBE LECTURE THEATRE

On this very significant occasion when we honour Sister Mary Philippa Brazill rsm in this way, I would like to acquaint you a little more with this impressive woman who was above all else a Sister of Mercy.

Leaving Ireland and her family as a young girl in 1910, Josephine Brazill arrived in Melbourne excited and enthusiastic about becoming a Sister of Mercy in Australia. On her arrival she journeyed on to Geelong where she was to complete her secondary education at Sacred Heart College. Following this she moved to the Novitiate at Ascot Vale to undertake her religious training as a Sister of Mercy and her teacher training at the Catholic Training College later to become Mercy Teachers' College, Ascot Vale, one of the forerunner colleges of ACU. Sister M Philippa then taught for seven years at both Coburg and West Melbourne.

At this point she was asked to undertake her training as a nurse and so she travelled to Brisbane where she completed her nursing training at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital in South Brisbane. From there she returned to St Benedict's in Malvern, the private hospital run at that time by the Sisters of Mercy. This later became the site of Cabrini Hospital, Malvern.

By the late 1920s the Sisters of Mercy in Melbourne were planning a new hospital in East Melbourne and so at 35 years of age Sr M Philippa journeyed to America by ship with Mother Francis Hanigan to study the latest trends in hospital development and care of patients. Upon her return, she, along with Mother Francis, embarked upon the building of Mercy Private Hospital in East Melbourne. It was here at 'The Mercy' that Sr M Philippa exercised her ministry as a leader in Catholic health care in Melbourne for more than forty years. The hospital continues today to be a very significant contributor to Melbourne's Private Health System.

Following 6 years as Provincial Superior of the Sisters of Mercy in the 1950s, Sr M Philippa returned to the Mercy Private Hospital and from 1959 to 1969 was deeply involved at the highest levels with medical, nursing, university and government authorities in planning for the new Mercy Maternity Hospital which would come to fruition in East Melbourne in 1971. Mercy Maternity Hospital was Public and a University teaching hospital. This Hospital was of course relocated to Heidelberg in 2005 and continues today to be a leader in women's health.

In 1979, Sr M Philippa Brazill was awarded the Order of Dame Commander of the British Empire for her Service to the community, an irony not lost on anyone who knew this strong Irish woman. Then in 1981 The University of Melbourne conferred on Sr M Philippa a Doctorate of Laws honoris causa for a lifetime of public service in Victoria, particularly in her long association with healthcare.

While it is relatively easy to present some of the facts of the life of Sr M Philippa Brazill, our interest on this occasion is much more in the woman herself and her continuing significance for the students and staff at this university.

A woman of deep compassion inspired by her faith, Sr Mary Philippa responded to the needs of her time with great courage and commitment and always for the sake of the mission. The path her life took with its changes and challenges was a direct result of her belief in God's providence as she recognised God's call in each new phase of her life.

Like many great leaders, Sr M Philippa was often strong and direct and could be somewhat daunting to others, but it was this very strength and commitment that enabled her to bring to fruition her vision and that of the Sisters of Mercy for the care of the sick, regardless of their position in society. This clearly resonated with the vision of Catherine McAuley who wrote that we Sisters of Mercy should make some lasting effort towards the relief of the suffering and the instruction of the ignorant.

Sr M. Philippa was a woman of wisdom and action who seized opportunities as they came, demonstrating a great capacity to follow where they led her.

She was a realist with a practical turn of mind and a keen observer who responded to the challenges of her time in much the same way as our foundress Catherine McAuley did in hers. These hospitals were needed and thus they came into being!

Another noteworthy quality was Sr M. Philippa's great capacity to involve people beyond the Sisters of Mercy in this work, always aware that it is for the sake of the mission. This would have been a quite unique approach at that time.

The honing of her personal talents and gifts enabled Sr M. Philippa to achieve great things for the sake of the mission and left lasting ministries for the benefit of the poor, sick and disadvantaged.

Generations of nurses remember her as a compassionate and just woman, always expecting the best possible care for those in need. Amongst the Sisters of Mercy, the extraordinary contribution of Sr M Philippa is recognised, as are her personal qualities.

Sr M Philippa's courage, leadership, compassion and deep faith coloured everything she undertook and as a model for us today, the challenge she issues is for us to find ways which will allow our contribution to be a lasting effort for the relief of the poor and suffering people of our own time - Sr M Philippa Brazill.

Sr Helen Monkivitch rsm
February 1, 2013.

Spoken on the occasion of the blessing and dedication of the Philippa Brazill rsm Lecture Theatre at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Campus.