

# *Women on the Move*

## MERCY'S TRIPLE SPIRAL

A History of the  
Adelaide Sisters of Mercy  
Ireland to Argentina 1856-1880  
to South Australia 1880

Anne McLay



WOMEN ON THE MOVE:  
MERCY'S TRIPLE SPIRAL



*Madonna of Mercy (statue in Museo Nazionale, Florence)*

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Anne McLay

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Visual on front cover by Sr Patricia Feehan, RSM.

Photo on back cover is of Cloisters, Angas Street Convent.

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## About the Author



Anne McLay is a Sister of Mercy of the Brisbane Congregation. She has an M.Ed. in the History of Education and a Ph.D. in History. She has published a number of articles, research reports and books in the areas of education, history and spirituality. She wrote the final text of the revised constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy Australia and, immediately prior to this present work, the history of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia.

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of it or the whole, whether they returned comments or not. I assumed that if they did not the text was reasonably accurate. I wish to mention, however, Sr Patricia Pak Poy who read the whole and gave very valuable suggestions and whose version of the second half of my title was the one finally adopted. Ms Stephanie Burley, lecturer at the University of Adelaide, with interests in the history of women in education and religion, helped me put my argument more forcefully, as did Sr Margaret Press, RSJ, historian of the church in South Australia. Sr Marie Foale, RSJ, diocesan archivist and Josephite historian, read the manuscript and cleared up some points for me.

I had, during the work on this book, four opportunities to present something of my research and/or developing methodology. The History of Women Religious Conference in Tarrytown, New York, in 1992, gave me a much broader picture of women's religious life than the purely Australian scene, and also the chance to lead a small discussion. I was able to present a short report on research in progress and then a full-scale paper at two successive conferences run by the Institute of Religious Studies in Sydney.<sup>1</sup> The continuing support of Sr Carmel Leavey, OP and Sr Rosa MacGinley, PBVM, of the Institute of Religious Studies has been remarkable. I must thank Rosa also for help in clearing up some of the mysteries of the Mercy Argentinian experience. Finally, I was led to articulate my methodology much more clearly by presenting a paper at a conference at Robert Menzies College, Macquarie University, on the Study of Australian Christianity in 1994.<sup>2</sup>

The beginnings of my research began with a visit to the Mercy communities in Detroit<sup>3</sup> and Argentina. Sr Rose Mary Charron of Detroit welcomed me to North America and helped me in very substantial ways and charmed me with her creative individuality. She accompanied me to Argentina. I feel much indebted to Rose Mary. In Argentina, I met and lived with a wonderful group of Mercy women. I thank especially their archivist, Sr Bernadette O'Leary, now deceased, their historian Sr Ana Maria McGuire, their regional leader Sr Christina Mira, and, above all, that lover of Argentinian and Mercy history Sr Isabel McDermott, who helped me track down so much more material than I had been led to expect. Archivists Srs M Hermenia Muldrey in New Orleans, Magdalena in Dublin, and Norah Boland in Brisbane shed light on a few items but, more importantly, gave encouragement. As did always my past teacher, long-term friend and companion, Brisbane historian Sr Frances O'Donoghue. Thanks also, once again, to my Brisbane congregation – and, in particular, to Mary, Mary, and Margaret at Enoggera – for their continued support and affectionate interest.

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1. Report on Research in Progress (1994) and Paper on *Women on the Move – a Triple Spiral of Mercy Sisters of Mercy: Ireland to Argentina to South Australia* (1996) published as Conference Papers by the Institute of Religious Studies, PO Box 280, Strathfield NSW 2135.

### *Acknowledgements*

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2. Published in *Long Patient Struggle Studies in the Role of Women in Australian Christianity*, eds. Mark Hutchinson & Edmund Campion, Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1994.
3. The Argentinian Mercies are now part of the Detroit Regional Community of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.



*Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Institute of Mercy*

## INTRODUCTION

# The Myth of Difference

THE Adelaide Sisters of Mercy have their roots in Ireland and Argentina. They began in Australia in 1880, with the movement of a whole Mercy Congregation from Argentina to South Australia. That flexibility has remained within their group ethos. To many observers, they have seemed to be *Women on the Move*.

The flexibility which was manifested in their ability to move between continents was part of the answer, though only part, to the intriguing question with which I began the research for this history. The Adelaide Mercies had somehow acquired the reputation – at least among the Australian Mercies – of being, in the words of Parramatta Mercy historian, Dr Sophie McGrath, ‘always one step ahead of the rest of us’<sup>1</sup>. The myth of their difference among the Australian Mercies was, in fact, one of the reasons for my accepting the task of writing their history. It was the kind of historical puzzle that never really permits a definitive answer. Yet I found myself intrigued with the thought of discovering what had led to this reputation. Were they really one step ahead of the rest of us, and if so why? I started to test my image of their group personality, to test this myth of difference.

Sister Kath Burke, past congregational leader of the Brisbane Mercies and past president of the national Mercy Institute, told me that there had been, for her, always something new and different in the Adelaide story. There had been a freshness which engendered in her some excitement. It was not so much what they were doing as it was a matter of style, how they presented themselves, who they were as women. On first hearing about them and reading their newsletter, Kath had had a feeling that they had taken some distinctive character among the Australian Mercy group, that something different was happening among them, something which excited her.

In Adelaide itself, I tested out the image with others, Mercies and non-Mercies. Yes, the Mercies did feel themselves different, ahead in some things at least, though the sense of their own difference had begun to be articulated

only in later decades with wider and closer contact with other Mercies on the national scene. They began to conclude that among themselves there seemed to be a readiness for change, a great acceptance of sisters as individuals, and an encouragement to develop their own talents and stand on their own feet.

Some non-Mercies affirmed my image. Marist Brother Austin Stephens of the Catholic Education Office was one, and added that Mercies elsewhere had said it to him. Historian of the church in South Australia, Sister Margaret Press, felt they had had a different collective experience which had led to a greater sense of independence and confidence. An old scholar of St Aloysius, Jill Ritson, who had just been appointed deputy principal there, saw her past teachers as very progressive, forward looking. She loved teaching there now. She, too, thought it had something to do with the Spanish influence, which was in their story.<sup>2</sup> Julia Lloyd, a Mercy associate, quoted Mercies in another Australian state as saying: 'Adelaide Mercies are trendsetters'. A woman in a group at the Sophia spirituality centre said to me: 'The church in Adelaide would lose its flavour if there were no Sisters of Mercy.'<sup>3</sup>

Searching through the Adelaide Mercy archives, I found further confirmation. At the time of their centenary celebrations in 1980, a number of friends and colleagues had sent their congratulations. Sister Mary Stephen Carney, provincial of the Gunnedah Mercies, wrote: 'In so many ways you have blazed the trail for others less daring, and have truly reminded us all of what Catherine McAuley [foundress of the Mercy Institute] would be about in our day.' Women and men from other religious orders wrote of the inspiration and leadership and friendship that the Adelaide Mercies had provided. Sister Mary Reardon, South Australian provincial of the Sisters of St Joseph, summed it up when she claimed that they were prophetic women in our midst, in the world, in the local churches. 'We need', she continued, 'your courage and your vision. Particularly ... your special leadership in a society where there is so much injustice and failure to recognise the dignity of men and women.' And, finally, an anonymous admirer had this to say:

It seemed to me that the Adelaide Mercies led the Nuns' revolution, i.e., gave away the habit, went into small communities, closed boarding schools, deserted the classrooms. At first I was a bit cynical about the whole thing and saw it as a branch of Women's Lib and a comfortabilizing of the religious life but on closer association with the whole scene I am now more inclined for admiration of their courage and envy of the sincerity with which they discern their role in the Church. Well done, Mercies. Keep it up.

Researcher Ann Ross-Smith, who had been involved in a national organisational study of the Mercy culture and who continued it with an analysis of the

organisational documents of five of the Mercy congregations in Australia, concluded that

the Adelaide congregation emerges as being essentially the same as the organisation as a whole. Its individuality emerges, however, from its younger profile and the apparent closeness of its members and the indication of a more proactive approach to future directions.<sup>4</sup>

Now, as I prepare this history for publication, I find myself adopting the title of *Women on the Move*. Their story is one of moving on when old places and old ways no longer proved appropriate.

There seems to have been a number of reasons for this flexibility and creativity. South Australia, and Adelaide as a city, have themselves been trend setters in some ways. Adelaide, in particular, has always had a sense of its own difference.<sup>5</sup> The local church in Adelaide has had a sense of self-esteem; observers felt that they took some different stances, saw themselves as leaders of the Australian church, creative, different, committed to social justice.<sup>6</sup> But, more significantly, the Mercy experience had been unusual. They had had a somewhat exotic origin in Argentina, and their experiences there had become embedded in their founding story, their creation myth. As a kind of pre-history, this had become an important part of their group psyche.

Argentina itself was an unusual context for Irish Sisters of Mercy, since most Irish immigrants settled in English-speaking countries. Arriving in Buenos Aires in 1856, the sisters had to break new ground. They were welcomed by the authorities for their works, but they were not readily accepted as *bona fide* religious. The Mercy Institute, founded in Dublin in 1831, had already been a new kind of thing. Its members had earned for themselves the name of 'the walking nuns'.<sup>7</sup> But they did not have to deal with the ramifications in civil law that existed in European countries such as Spain, and were operating even more stringently in Argentina. The Argentinians found these women even stranger than had the Irish. Proper nuns did not have such a flexible rule of enclosure, did not tend the needy in their own homes and the public hospitals, did not walk around the streets in religious habits. It would be almost two years before they gained legal recognition, and even then, they could exist only as a private association. The decree granting them this recognition was, however, a legal and ecclesiastical landmark, for it permitted numerous other congregations of simple vows to establish themselves freely in Argentina.

This was not the end of their difficulties. Their endeavours were dogged by a seemingly non-ending stream of obstructions 'and frustrations'. What was probably the most serious was the lack of support and even outright opposition from among their compatriots, from the city Irish who had money and influence. Many of these, antagonistic to the existence of separate Irish

institutions, boycotted those run by the sisters. But Irish factionalism was not the only cause of their anxiety. There was ever present hostility within sections of the civic society, hostility which came to a climax in a 'Reign of Terror' early in 1875, and continued to provoke other harassments. Finally, the sisters withdrew from the country and settled in South Australia, all twenty-four of them. Eleven were Irish by birth, the rest Argentinian.

This pre-history became an important part of the group psyche of the South Australian Mercies. The Mercy story in Argentina was truly a story of moving on. It shows the willingness of a small group of women to observe the signs of their times and to move as the situation demanded. In the gospel sense, they could shake the dust off their feet from a place which did not welcome them and go to where they were more welcome. They showed an ability to take risks, a reluctance to be limited by present structures, a refusal to compromise their principles and ideals. Above all, they showed a profound trust in a loving Providence – a trait handed down to them by Catherine McAuley. This ability to take risks was operative, also, when six of the original sisters returned ten years later to re-found the Mercy Institute in Argentina, and, in 1898, when one of the Argentinian-born sisters led a group to Coolgardie, at the height of the western goldrush. It is perhaps significant also that in the era of great change in the 1970s, both Mercy groups – Argentinian and South Australian – showed an unusual ability to respond to the signs of that time. While there was no longer direct influence between the two groups, there had been a common originating experience implanted in their group psyches.

In South Australia, their founding event became firmly embedded in their group mythology. It is revelatory that their version of the founding story focussed on the political aspects of the tale, on the flight from revolutionary violence, giving it a hue somewhat more romantic than that cast by that other – and, I am inclined to think, more instrumental – reality, the lack of support from many of their compatriots. For the purposes of interpreting their history, however, what is more important is what they believed to have happened, and the form in which they retold the story of their origins. As that story was retold to successive generations of young Mercy aspirants, it fed into their self portrait.

The sense of difference that ensued was more fully brought into group consciousness in the 1950s and later, when the various Australian Mercy groups began to combine together nationally. It became a vivid reality when the Adelaide Mercies began to write a new story of moving on during the immediate post-Vatican II decades. Their sense of freedom led them, then, one step ahead of most Australian religious communities, into a wonderful flowering of creativity.

There were other questions to put to my historical data.<sup>8</sup> I believed that the telling of a group's story could be, in the words of Australian religious analyst

Mark Hutchinson, 'a tool for self-redefinition';<sup>9</sup> or, as American theologian Sandra Schneiders put it, was transformational rather than informational.<sup>10</sup> Mindful, then, that the contemporary questions or horizons of the current group of Adelaide Mercies were of the utmost importance in the determination of my themes and selection and interpretation of data, I tried to ensure that the questions I asked of my historical text were their questions, not just my own.

The questions fell into three categories: questions concerning the liberation of women, in education, in internal organisation, and in relation to the church, especially; questions of power, as in authority and leadership, community and friendship; and, thirdly, questions concerning the nature of Mercy and the nature of God.

The first was consonant with the Mercy charism, stemming from the vision of Catherine McAuley that work for the liberation of women was the most important work of Mercy the sisters could do. I found here, in particular, a striking example of the way in which convent schools were paradoxically conservers of the status quo and seedbeds of the women's movement.

My second set of contemporary questions might be grouped under the heading of 'changing understandings of sisterhood'. Again, the Adelaide Mercies were on the cutting edge. Earlier than with other Mercy groups, one can discern a major shift in the patterns and structures of relationships among them. While the prevailing ethic of control within religious life had been operative, there had always survived within the Adelaide Mercies enough 'dangerous memories' to encourage an alternative ethos of risk.<sup>11</sup>

In tracing the outlines of this shift, I became especially interested in the place of friendship in religious communities. A number of writers have examined the phenomenon of women's friendships, including those within convents. Mercies internationally are adopting the symbol of circles of Mercy as a way of imaging their organisational networks and other structures. The concept of friendship circles certainly resonates with their Irish founding charism. The question I asked was how significant was the phenomenon of friendship in the Adelaide Mercy history?

Finally, to adapt the words of a contemporary writer,<sup>12</sup> the Adelaide Mercy history has been one of a progressive hermeneutic of the nature of Mercy – the story of a progressive hermeneutic of the nature of God. The understanding of the nature of divine mercy had expanded in new and surprising ways. Most significantly, it had become compassion, a suffering with.

Understandings of the inner life also had altered significantly. Changes in life style, including the collapse of many traditional safeguards to a prayerful atmosphere, led to attempts to develop more appropriate paths of contemplation. Underlying this exploration was an even deeper, more radical search for who was God. Historically, this search, with all its twists and changes,

could be traced surprisingly easily through a variety of documents, as well as through oral sources.

The second image within my title – Mercy's Triple Spiral – kept on suggesting itself to me. The Adelaide Mercies have assuredly expressed themselves in a triple spiralling movement, outwards in the works of mercy, inwards in the quest for the divine, onwards as they continue to be women on the move. The triple spiral is an image beloved of the Irish Celtic race. Given an intensely Irish flavour to the early history of the Mercy Institute in Argentina and in South Australia, it seems an appropriate image for the ongoing historical movement of the Adelaide Mercies.

This ongoing historical movement is rooted firmly in their origins in Ireland and Argentina. Within those origins, they developed their leadership qualities. They had learnt to survive. By the time they came to Australia, they were confident women, prepared to take risks, toughened particularly by the negativities within their Argentinian experience. Then, in South Australia, they found a colony which perceived – and continued to perceive – itself as different from (and superior to) the other colonies within the continent. This burgeoning perception combined with their own pride in their different origins to create an Adelaide Mercy tradition which seems to have permeated their own consciousness and, probably, what they taught to their students.

Among those students were some who were exceptionally talented, forward looking, even radical in their approach to the capabilities and the status of women. No doubt these young women would have so developed in most environments; but they were Mercy students, and this cycle of students added another and potent dimension to the Adelaide Mercy myth of difference.

As I present their myth and their story, I may seem repetitious, involved in too much detail, too celebratory. It has been difficult to avoid being so. Although I have personally known many Adelaide Mercies for many years before being commissioned to write their history, I have been captivated by the width and the depth and the style of their achievements. At several points in my research, I have felt exhilaration. I have decided to keep the detail, as valuable historical data, and have tried to contextualise their doings within the wider social situation. I need also to remind myself and the reader that these women were subject to human frailty as much as any of us. I have indicated some of these frailties from time to time; but, on the whole, I have concentrated on their achievements rather than their failures.

In three of the chapters especially, I have moved more directly into analysis and reflection. This is, indeed, where my interest lies. However, the external setting is important, both as the subject on which the analysis and reflection had to be based, and as a more or less straightforward account of just what

did take place. In the last chapter, I have delved into the heart of the story, the inner journey without which the outer journey of external achievement would have been impossible.

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1. To author.
  2. She mentioned having been taught by Sisters Carmel Bourke, Deirdre O'Connor, Deirdre Jordan, Kath Preece.
  3. Mary – , who knew Sisters Janet Mead, Gabrielle Travers, and Pat Kenny and had been a member of the last named *Hesed* community for a while.
  4. *Organisational Communication and the Analysis of Organisational Culture. A case study using organisational documents in the analysis of the culture of a religious organisation*. February, 1990. Copy in Adelaide Mercy Congregational Library. The original study was the work of Elizabeth More, John Tulloch and Ann Ross-Smith, *An Organizational Culture Study*, Macquarie University, 1987.
  5. Derek Whitelock, *Adelaide 1836-1976 A History of Difference*, University of Queensland Press, 1977. Even under the long-lived and morally and socially conservative Playford Government there had been a number of radical reforms.
  6. Sister Margaret McKenna, RSJ, to author, re the church in general. She had been provincial of the Josephites in South Australia for a term. She also claimed that the South Australian Josephites were considered by their sisters in other States to have the ability to find creative answers, to make the very best of what they had. The Dominican Sisters at Cabra had also been seen among the Australian Dominicans as the first to move. (Rosemary Kinne, OP, to author).
  7. This was also applied to the Irish Sisters of Charity, who were founded some years before the Mercies.
  8. For my theory of history, see my chapter 'Writing Women's History: One Feminist Approach', in Mark Hutchinson and Edmund Campion (eds.), *Long Patient Struggle Studies in the Role of Women in Australian Christianity*, Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1994.
  9. *Long Patient Struggle*, 6.
  10. *Living Word or Deadly Letter? The Encounter between the New Testament and Contemporary Experience*, CTSA Conference, Pittsburgh, June, 1992; see also *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, New York: 1991.
  11. Phrases taken from Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Augsburg: Fortress, 1990. The phrase 'dangerous memories' was first used by Johann Baptist Metz.
  12. Constance Fitzgerald, quoted in Elizabeth Johnson, *Review for Religious*, Jan-Feb, 1994.



*Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick, Mercy foundress in Argentina and Adelaide*

## CHAPTER ONE

# A Story of Moving On

‘WHEN THEY PERSECUTE YOU  
IN ONE CITY FLEE TO ANOTHER’

**F**OUNDATIONS were endemic with the Sisters of Mercy during most of the nineteenth century. Catherine McAuley, their foundress, once wrote: ‘Hurrah for foundations! Makes the old young, and the young merry!’ Responding to new and demanding challenges, being ready to move onwards and outwards, became Mercy tradition.

Founded in 1831, they began with a House of Mercy for women of good character who were in dire need of somewhere to live. In the House of Mercy, these women could learn various domestic skills to gain employment. However, ‘mercy’ was – from the beginning – seen as a response to any person in any kind of need. The Sisters of Mercy soon earned for themselves the name of ‘the walking nuns’ as they walked through the streets of Dublin, visiting the poor, the sick, and the dying. They also moved on with great speed to walk the streets of other towns. Before the death of the foundress, they had set up schools and hospitals and homes for women and for children throughout various parts of Ireland and had ventured into England. Later, they went into Scotland. Eleven years after they had commenced in Dublin, they moved into the New World, at Newfoundland in North America, and, after that, to the United States. It was still only 1846 when they arrived in Perth, Western Australia, and 1856, ‘the silver jubilee year of the Institute’, when they reached South America.

The Mercy story in Argentina is truly a story of moving on. It shows the willingness of a small group of Mercy women to observe the signs of their times and to move as the situation demanded. They could leave their own continent to establish themselves in another, and, then, when circumstances there seemed to indicate it, move on from that continent and find new beginnings in a third. In the gospel sense, they could shake the dust off their feet from a town which did not welcome them and go to where they were welcome.

They showed themselves able to take risks; able to make decisions, and make them – given the distances and the slowness of nineteenth century transport – in a relatively speedy fashion. Yet they did so only after much prayer and counsel. There is a continuing note of awareness, in the decision-makers, of the value of people over institutions, of a reluctance to be limited by present structures of church and society, of a refusal to compromise their principles and ideals. Above all, the Argentine Mercy story shows a profound trust in a loving Providence, that quality of faith so telling in the life of Catherine McAuley.

This demanded sacrifice and meant pain, uncertainty, fear, and years of having to live with ambiguity and some internal dissension. Nevertheless, the final resolution of conflict resulted in a strong and courageous movement towards a new beginning in a new country, to new horizons not anticipated when the decision was being made. Some of the internal dissension persisted, and the movement back to Argentina of six of the group seems to have been distressing for some who remained. Yet there is no gainsaying the effects of that original decision to shake off the dust of Buenos Aires<sup>1</sup> and move to a new place where their services would be welcomed. From that move, there resulted four flourishing Mercy foundations: the first two in South Australia, at Adelaide and Mount Gambier, the third in Western Australia, at Coolgardie, before the end of the decade, and then, within ten years of departure from Argentina, once again in Buenos Aires.

Argentina was an unusual context for Irish Sisters of Mercy. They were to be the first and only group of Mercies in South America until the second half of the twentieth century. They were the only one in a non-English speaking country until a foundation was made in the British Honduras in 1883. They went to Argentina with no knowledge of Spanish and basically continued as English speakers. During their initial period of twenty-four years in the country, the new members they attracted came, almost totally, from families of at least part Irish origin, with English as their mother tongue.<sup>2</sup>

The Mercies had a compelling incentive to go to Argentina in 1856. They were following in the footsteps of their compatriots who had settled there in relatively large numbers, consequent to the potato famines and other troubles afflicting Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Many of these compatriots found themselves in almost as dire physical distress in their new land. Those who settled well were in need of educational and religious services.

Situated at the southernmost part of the American continent, Argentina, in 1856, was a country with great natural resources. There is some controversy over the origins of the names 'Argentina' – the land of silver – and 'Buenos Aires' – the city of good airs. A common tradition is that Argentina derives from the Latin *argentum* for 'silver', which is in Spanish *plata*, because of the Rio de la Plata, the widest river in the world. Whatever the origins of the

names, Argentina, in 1856, was just on the brink of an era of immense wealth. But cholera and yellow fever were endemic still, and poor people abounded.

Conquered and settled by the Spanish in the fifteenth century, Argentina now celebrates 25th May, 1810 as its independence day. True constitutional government was harder to achieve, however, and the nation long retained some very archaic economic and social structures, inherited from colonial times. Politically, as in all Spanish American societies of the nineteenth century, the use of force to secure power seemed as legitimate as the use of the ballot. The *caudillo* system – regimes of arbitrary personal power – prevailed in Argentina as elsewhere in the continent. It was only in 1852, that the Argentine Republic, united in its present form, came into being, and, until 1880, there was a continuing struggle between various sections of the nation. In 1856, the date of arrival of the Sisters of Mercy, the province of Buenos Aires was still a separate unit from the confederacy joining the rest of the country. The city, set on the banks of the Rio de la Plata, did not become the political capital of the whole country until the late 1870s.

Nevertheless, with the promise of democracy, the spread of universal education, and the growth of friendly relations with the United States, Britain, France and Spain, the resultant flow of commerce began to help create the wealth for which Argentina was to become noted. The British were especially significant with their control of shipping routes and markets.

Argentina attracted immigrants from various parts of the world, resulting in colonies of foreigners, including an Irish colony. The population's essentially creole nature – Argentine-born of Spanish origin – was being transformed into a mixed society, with a strong Italian element and a dwindling number of native South American Indians. This society looked to Europe rather than to the rest of South America for inspiration and support. Yet commentators noted that the creoles, with their lively manner, their air of independence, lack of servility, and pleasing personality, influenced the manners and ways of the descendants of the later settlers. Buenos Aires, the city of 'good airs', was still quite small when the sisters arrived. By the end of the century, it was a beautiful modern city, with magnificent public and private buildings, lovely parks, squares and boulevards, the Paris of the southern hemisphere. Behind the city stretched the enormous plain of the Pampas, extending for hundreds of miles. Although flat and almost treeless, the Pampas were one of the most fertile expanses in the world.

The Irish were particularly welcome in Argentina, with the historic friendship between the Spanish and the Irish peoples, and the involvement of Irish individuals in the struggles for independence in the early nineteenth century. Admiral William Brown, founder of the Argentinian Navy, was a Mayo man. His tomb in the Recoleta cemetery is an eye-catching Irish monument.

Many of the Irish immigrants settled in the city, but the majority went to the rural areas where they could get work on *estancias* or sheep and cattle stations. Between 1810 and 1860, some ten thousand Irish had emigrated to Argentina, many of them driven out by the famine years of the 1840s. With them came, for their spiritual health, a number of successive Irish chaplains.

From about 1840, for the next fifty years or so, the Irish immigrants went almost entirely into sheep farming, which had been booming from the early 1830s. With extensive fertile *pampas* or plains, watered by three rivers, the Parana, the Uruguay, and the enormous Rio de la Plata, the districts around Buenos Aires were the centre of Argentine agricultural wealth and the birth-place of the legendary *gauchos* or cowboys. Some of the Irish sheepfarmers became 'more *gaucho* than the *gauchos*'. Mounted on horseback, with expensive saddle, solid silver stirrups and pommels, and the typical Argentine poncho draping their shoulders, the Irish-Argentine *estancieros* made a splendid sight. They tended to congregate in certain localities, such as Chascomus to the south of Buenos Aires, Mercedes to the west, and San Antonio de Areco to the north-west. Some of them became quite wealthy landowners. The list of subscribers to the Irish Famine Relief Fund of 1847 shows not only the generosity but also the burgeoning prosperity of the Irish-Argentines.<sup>3</sup> This rural nature of much of the Irish immigration was to be a significant factor in the history of the Sisters of Mercy in Argentina, and, in another way, in South Australia.

The father figure of the Irish-Argentines was Anthony Fahy<sup>4</sup>, a Dominican priest, who arrived in 1844.<sup>5</sup> He acquired a house on Merced Street (today called Congallo) and turned it into an Irish Immigrant Infirmary in 1848. It served a desperate need, for many of the Irish immigrants of the 1840s were extremely poor and suffering from famine-derived disease. Needy families from the rural areas, unable to procure medical assistance, were also treated.

Under the leadership of Anthony Fahy, Irish national spirit continued strong. A harp and the word *Erin* stand out on the signet ring he adopted when made a Canon of the Cathedral. Until his death from yellow fever in 1871, Fahey was at the heart of the Irish community. Loving the land, most of the Irish went to the *camp*, onto the *pampas*, where they were often very isolated. They were good at spinning yarns, especially to enliven the monotony of caring for sheep on endless and lonely *pampas*, and many legends grew up around Father Fahy. He is said to have told them where to go when they arrived in the country. Then he visited them as their doctor, lawyer, banker, match-maker, and, above all, spiritual guide. No doubt the tales were embellished with dramatic imagination, but it is sure that he enabled the Irish to retain their identity more easily than did their counterparts in North America.

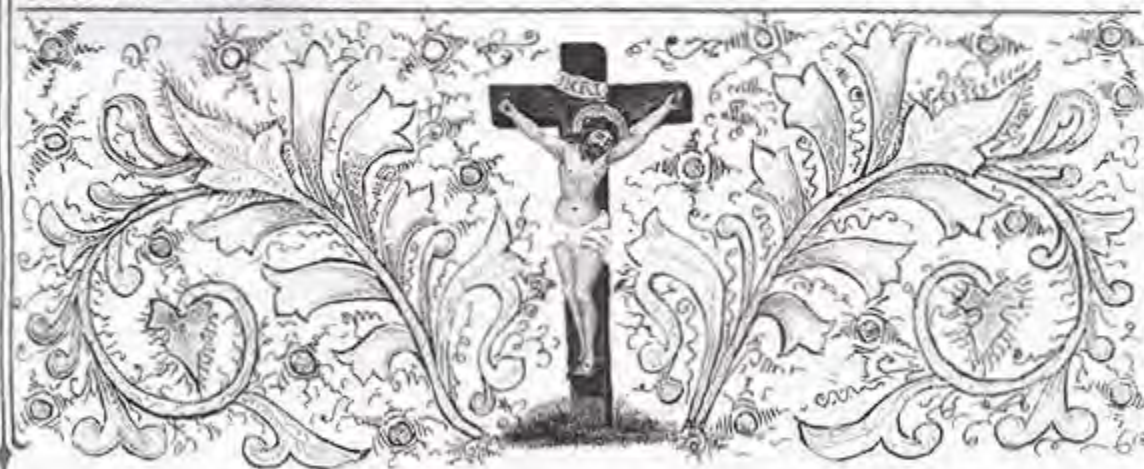
By contemporary accounts, he was rather severe in countenance, but was,

## Sister Christina Fitzpatrick



**D**AUGHTER of Thomas and Catherine Fitzpatrick of St. Nicholas's Parish, Dublin, entered the Convent September the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1848; received the holy Habit March the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1850; and made her Religious Profession on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, 1852; being called in Religion Mary Evangelista.

Died 29<sup>th</sup> June, 1886.



Illuminated page from Dublin Register for Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick



*First Convent of Mercy in Argentina,  
at 650 Calle Rio Bamba, Buenos Aires*



*Father Anthony Fahy, OP, who  
arranged for the Sisters of Mercy to  
go to Argentina*

nevertheless, unfailingly cheerful and easy to converse with despite his bluff exterior. He lived an austere frugal life, worked extremely hard, displayed excellent judgement, and related to others with simplicity. He described himself 'as ugly as sin', and seems to have been something of a rough diamond in his manner. But there is little doubt that the Dominican priest was a benevolent patriarch among his people. To the Sisters of Mercy, he was their great friend and supporter, their advocate in a persistently anxious environment.

Dublin Archdiocesan Archives show that Fahy wrote requesting Sisters of Mercy for Buenos Aires as early as 1844.<sup>6</sup> Fahy had several ties with the Mercies. Catherine McAuley, on her way to open a convent in Galway, had stayed overnight at the Carmelite convent there, where lived one of Fahy's sisters, Matilda. Another of Fahy's sisters, Mary, was a Sister of Mercy, who helped found several Mercy Congregations in the United States. However, he was unable to procure Sisters of Mercy for Buenos Aires at this time. Then, in the mid-fifties, Fahy tried to get some Sisters of Charity from North America, some of whom could speak Spanish, to take care of the Irish Infirmary (and the hospital he intended would replace it). They could also develop the education of the children of the Irish-Argentines, especially those in the *camp*, that is, rural districts. However, it was the Mercy Institute which this time responded to his plea.

Reverend Mother Vincent Whitty and her Assistant, Mother Xavier Maguire, of Baggot Street Convent were willing to allow volunteers to go to Buenos Aires. Both these Superiors themselves had missionary longings, which were to be fulfilled within a few years. Mother Xavier left for Geelong, Victoria, in 1859; Mother Vincent for Brisbane, Queensland, in December, 1860. Another member of the Baggot Street Convent governing council, Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick, was chosen to lead the first foundation in Argentina, and, in preparation, made a retreat with the Sisters of Mercy of Belfast.<sup>7</sup>

It was 8th January, 1856, when the first small group of sisters left Dublin for South America. On 2nd December, 1855, the Baggot Street Convent Chapter had chosen their recently appointed Mother Bursar<sup>8</sup>, Mary Evangelista (Christina) Fitzpatrick, as Mother Superior of Buenos Aires. On 2nd January, 1856, Paul Cullen, Archbishop of Dublin, had confirmed her appointment, and that of Sister Mary Baptist (Caroline) MacDonnell as Mother Assistant. The actual foundation day is celebrated as 24th February, the day they arrived in Buenos Aires on the Rio de la Plata.

There is some confusion about the actual membership of this founding group. Both the Dublin and the Buenos Aires records (the latter now in Adelaide) contain some inaccuracies or omissions, and may have been written some time after the event.<sup>9</sup> However, by combining these two sources

and also some pertinent entries from the annals of the Convent of Mercy, Harewood Avenue, London – where many Sisters of Mercy received a kind welcome en route to other parts of the world – we can reach a fairly certain list. The women comprising the very first founding group from Baggot Street Convent, Dublin, in all probability, were:

Reverend Mother M. Evangelista Fitzpatrick  
Mother M. Baptist MacDonnell, Assistant  
Sister M. Catherine (Elizabeth) Flanagan, Professed  
Sister M. Angela (Elizabeth) Rowland, Professed  
Sister M. Joseph (Caroline) Griffin, Novice  
Esther Foley (later Sister Rose Mary), Postulant  
Margaret Doran (later Sister Lucy Mary), Postulant.

In October of that same year, the founding group were joined by five more pioneers:

Sister M. Liguori Griffin (sister of Mary Joseph), Professed  
Sister M. Gertrude O'Rourke, Professed  
Sister M. Berchmans Fitzpatrick, Professed  
Anne Coffey (later Sister Margaret Mary), Postulant  
Mary Maloney (later Sister Martha Mary), Postulant.

It would be interesting to have glimpsed the visions in the eyes of these first Sisters of Mercy in South America, to know what emotions stirred their hearts, to hear the questions in their minds as they found themselves in the midst of a strange culture with an unknown language and unfamiliar customs, to have watched them as they encountered for the first time, a country, a people, a city so different from their own. But they had little time to indulge any sense of isolation as they also swiftly encountered the needy reality of the people.

The first group were met at the ship by Father Fahy and some of his congregation glad to welcome Irish religious women into their midst. A boat landed them opposite their first convent, in the house of the Irish Immigrant Infirmary, on Calle Merced. It was near Father Fahy's own residence and four blocks from the parish church of Our Lady of Mercy, La Merced, a welcoming sign of their own reason for being there.

Built at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the Spanish Mercedarian Order of knights and priests, and consecrated to Our Lady of Ransom, *La Merced* church was magnificent baroque, lavishly ornamented in wood, gold leaf and marble. It was certainly different from the poorer churches of Ireland. But side altars with statues depicted all the 'Mercy' saints to whom Catherine McAuley had urged community devotion. An ancient statue of Our Lady of Mercy in satin clothing, rich crown on her head, and sceptre and orb in her hand, held pride of place in processions. It

made a fortuitous and fitting symbolism for their beginning in a new land.<sup>10</sup>

The newcomers commenced immediately the characteristic Mercy work of visiting the sick and the poor and the dying in their homes. But Calle Merced was meant to be a temporary stopping place. Father Fahy had already purchased land on the outskirts of the city, facing the streets Tucuman and Rio Bamba. Fahy and Evangelista planned to build there an extensive complex which would house a full-scale hospital (as distinct from an infirmary), a convent, day and boarding schools.

However, they met an unexpected setback. Despite the admiration already aroused for their work, the Government was reluctant to acknowledge them as proper religious. Even Bishop<sup>11</sup> Escalada, though he had graciously called the day after their arrival and had Mass celebrated in their new home, hesitated to allow the sisters to have the Blessed Sacrament reserved until he was assured that this privilege could be bestowed on a congregation which did not observe strict cloister. Most of the Argentinian Catholics found them strange, these women who were not really 'nuns' but not quite lay women either. Real nuns did not walk around the streets in religious habits.

The Mercies were the first community of their kind in Argentina. There were two convents of cloistered nuns already in Buenos Aires, Franciscans and Dominicans. Cloistered nuns took public or 'solemn' vows, and rarely left their convents. A large proportion of their time was devoted to prayer and contemplation. Except for the lay nuns<sup>12</sup>, they all came from upper-class families, and so brought substantial personal dowries. In Europe, after the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century, there had been strong pressure for all communities of women to become nuns.<sup>13</sup>

Their property arrangements were often of intense interest to the state. The vows they took were made publicly – as were marriage vows – and so established them as religious in the eyes of society and church. By these public vows, the nuns were incorporated not only into the ecclesiastical structures of the church but also the civil structures of society. These legal understandings continued in predominantly Catholic countries until modern times.

The Argentinian authorities had maintained the Spanish precedent.<sup>14</sup> The Franciscan and Dominican nuns, in Buenos Aires, were recognized as legal corporations with certain privileges and juridical status. While communities of women who engaged in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy had become more and more common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, especially in France, they were considered essentially lay communities. They were not restricted so much in movement as were nuns, but they received local recognition only, were forbidden to wear traditional religious dress, and took private or 'simple' vows, which carried no legal effects. They were regarded with much ambivalence by clerics and others, sometimes even with hostility.

While, in British countries after Catholic Emancipation, the canonical prohibition against their wearing the recognised religious habit became more or less irrelevant, elsewhere the prohibition continued to have effect. Such reluctance to afford formal recognition to the newer groups was only gradually broken down, though by 1900 there was fairly unqualified formal and informal acceptance.<sup>15</sup> In Argentina, in the mid-nineteenth century, the dress and behaviour of the members of the Mercy Institute would have confused the authorities and, perhaps, aroused suspicion of deception.

The Mercy Institute, founded in 1831, was, in fact, in the forefront of the freer development within English-speaking countries. The Sisters of Mercy had a much more flexible rule of enclosure. They were active in a number of works for people in distress of various kinds, and for this they usually had to leave their convents. They took simple vows, and were quite likely to have come from a less well-to-do, though usually middle-class, family.

In Argentina, the situation was made more complex by the opposition of the popular press, which instigated a fierce campaign against them. Influenced by nineteenth century European liberalism and freemasonry, with its sometimes virulent anti-religious and anti-Catholic propaganda, the press and the government officials proclaimed that the sisters were foreigners and were illegally in the country. They were violating the law.

It would be almost two years before the Mercies gained legal recognition in Buenos Aires, with a licence granted by the ecclesiastical and civil authorities on 3rd March, 1858. Even then, they could exist, own property, perform charitable works, only as a private association.

Unwittingly, neither Fahy nor Evangelista had requested or received express permission from the government to establish the Mercy Institute in the province. To obtain civil licence, the sisters were required to present their Constitutions for approval. From 30th April, 1856, these were published in the Spanish language journal, *La Religion*, over a number of issues.

Evangelista wrote to the authorities, asking permission for the establishment of a new religious house of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy. She declared the purposes of the Institute as:

... the instruction of young women in a manner suitable for all states and conditions of life, the moral instruction of young women whom unfortunate circumstances or their own weakness might have led astray, the training in the most precise manner to prepare others for domestic service or for raising families, the assistance of the sick of both sexes, the visitation of prisons and houses of correction in order to teach the Gospel maxim of morality and to apply remedies for both spiritual and corporal infirmities and all that the practice of Christian charity includes...<sup>16</sup>

She also wrote to Bishop Escalada that 'the charitable work of the Sisters is for all society without distinction of country or nationality'.

Escalada supported the request of the sisters, but the government would not respond affirmatively. It was not until eighteen months later, when two young Argentinian women asked to join them, that the matter was resolved. One of these, Victoria Zapiola, was the daughter of General Jose Zapiola, the then Minister of War for the province. Her mother was Irish-born.

By this time, the political authorities had changed. Their response was positive in so far as the sisters were declared 'ordinary persons' – unlike the other convents then existing – and were free to join together in religious association without any other authorization, to fulfil the religious ends they proposed. This decree of 3rd December, 1857, was a legal and ecclesiastical landmark, for it permitted numerous other congregations of simple vows to establish themselves freely in Argentina.

Victoria Zapiola did join the young establishment and received the religious habit on 24th June, 1858. However, the Convent Register shows that she left two years later. Other women came and stayed, several from Ireland, several Argentinian born, practically all of Irish origin. Between 1856 and 1876, the number of sisters who remained, and were buried either in Argentina or Australia, was thirty-five.<sup>17</sup> It seems as if the number could have been greater, but for Fahy's sense of nationalism. The Dominican was something of a benevolent autocrat with the sisters as much as with the Irish people; he is said to have forbidden them to take some would-be entrants because they were not Irish. In addition, the Register shows a considerable number of women who entered and were either dismissed or left voluntarily before profession. It also suggests that the community did not take any postulants after 1876, at which stage they were growing more and more uncertain of their future in the country.

In 1858, the sisters moved from Calle Merced to their new convent in Calle Rio Bamba. In the same year, a yellow fever epidemic was devastating the city and the sisters took charge of the *Lazaretto* established at the Recoleta by the authorities. The weekly journal, *La Religion*, praised their immediate response:

Some of them headed by Mother Evangelista arrived at the [Pest] house immediately, giving themselves over, with their whole attention, to make the place ready, and to receive and care for the victims, of both sexes, sent to them. Everybody admired their selflessness, their activity, their readiness to undertake the administration of the establishment, the very name of which inspired so much horror . . .

The *Lazaretto* remained in their care, under the leadership of Sister M. Liguori Griffin, until 1859.

At the Irish Convent in Rio Bamba Street, there were soon established a number of institutions: the Irish Hospital, to replace the old Irish Immigrant Infirmary; a free day school for poor children of all nationalities, including Indians; and a paying day and boarding school for children of Irish parentage. On the block, also, separating the hospital from the school, was built a spacious public chapel, facing Rio Bamba Street.<sup>18</sup>

After a number of years, it was found necessary to have a separate Primary Boarding School, St Anne's, for the children of those in the *camp* who could not meet the heavy costs of St Patrick's Boarding School.<sup>19</sup> Later, when cholera swept through the *camp*, many orphans were taken into St Anne's, a collection was organised for their support, and the Irish Orphanage came into being. An Irish Girls' Home for young women – an Argentinian House of Mercy – began, temporarily, in an attachment to the convent, and, in 1868, in Calle Chacabuco. It was dedicated to St Philomene.<sup>20</sup> There were always young Irish women separated from their families. Some were immigrants, some had come to the city from the country areas. They looked for help until they could find employment and so gain independence. And so St Philomene's mirrored the original House of Mercy in Dublin.

Calle Rio Bamba was then on the outskirts of the city. Formerly, on the site, was the summer house of a well-to-do Spaniard. It was surrounded by gardens and an orchard. Palms, elms and other trees abounded. The Mercy block took up only part of the total area. In the centre of what became the children's playground was a huge mulberry tree. Along nearby Avenida Callao, which was lined by thick-leaved Indian fig trees, ox-wagons would rumble, carrying their produce to the port or the city markets. Father Fahy would come on horseback every morning to say Mass. The only neighbours were week-end visitors, except for the college for boys, begun, about 1862, by Fahy and run by for a very short while by two Irish priests, and then transferred to the Spanish Jesuit Fathers. Their property bordered Avenida Callao and Rio Bamba and Tucuman Streets, on the opposite corner across from the convent.<sup>21</sup>

The Mercy works grew. In 1861, Fahy could write that the sisters had sixty-five boarders, all children of Irish residents in the country, and one hundred and sixty 'native children'<sup>22</sup> receiving gratuitous education. However, he claimed, this success had been attained after 'a great deal of trouble and persecution from the masonic government.' 'They were', he continued,

on the eve of leaving for Australia when Divine Providence sent us the yellow fever to put a stop to their journey. Not a nurse could be got to attend the sick and then a deputation waited on us entreating us for God's sake to take charge of the hospital. We did so and ever since they are beloved by the people.<sup>23</sup>

Act of Appointment of the  
First Mother Superior & Mother Assistant  
of  
ST JOSEPH'S CONVENT of our LADY of MERCY  
Buenos Ayres

1856

January 2<sup>nd</sup> On this day his grace the Most Reverend Paul  
Cullen Archbishop of Dublin appointed Sister  
Mary Evangelist Fitzpatrick Mother Superior  
of the Convent of our Lady of Mercy Buenos  
Ayres and Sister Mary Baptist MacDon-  
nell Mother Assistant.

+ Paul Cullen Archbishop

FOUNDED  
February 24<sup>th</sup> 1856

This Convent, received the license  
of the Ecclesiastical and Civil authorities March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1858



*Statue of Our Lady of Lujan,  
patroness of Argentina, which  
was in the Coolgardie convent*



*A section of the  
part of the present  
St Patrick's  
College at  
Mercedes which  
was built by the  
Sisters of Mercy  
in 1872. The  
windows above  
were re-formed;  
the ones below  
are the originals*

When, in 1862, Mother Evangelista applied to the government for help in obtaining equipment for the schools, \$10,000 (*pesos*) was granted, a recognition of the part the sisters had played during this plague of 1858.

While the city schools continued to grow, the sisters also felt called to respond to needs out in the rural areas. Around 1865, they opened a school in Chascomus, a sheepfarming district much settled by the Irish, and about eighty miles from Buenos Aires.<sup>24</sup> However, cholera struck the place in 1868, and some of the sisters contracted the disease. One sister seems to have died and to have been buried there. Many of the Irish began to move away from Chascomus to the north of the province; the school numbers dwindled; the sisters found it impossible to get daily Mass and the sacraments, and finally closed the school in 1870.

Two years later, they went to Mercedes, where they again established a school. Sister Gertrude O'Rourke, who had been superior of Chascomus, was again the superior. Mercedes was some sixty miles due west of the capital. It had a long history and was originally called The Fort of the Guard of Lujan. The chapel of the fort was dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy, and in time the town became known as Mercedes. To go there from Buenos Aires, one today passes within a short distance of the great shrine of Our Lady of Lujan, national patronness.

The Mercy convent school in Mercedes was opposite the railway station. A two storied building, it was quite a large establishment for the 1870s, in what was still a very small town. The boarding section attracted children from the *pampas*. It is likely that orphans and young women were also given residence.<sup>25</sup> The population was quite mixed, about seventy percent being native Argentines. The Irish had settled there in considerable numbers, introducing sheep into the region, and many Italians were market gardeners in the vicinity of the town.

The school continued to operate well until the sisters left the country in 1880. The land on which the convent stood had been purchased by the sisters and the buildings had been built partly at their expense. They left their property in the hands of trustees, but no purchaser was found until the Pallottine Fathers, after renting it for a couple of years, purchased it in August, 1888. Part of the Mercy buildings are now incorporated into the present priests' house and *Collegio San Patricio* for boys. The sisters also left behind two of their members in the graveyard.<sup>26</sup>

While their establishment at Mercedes was well supported by the *camp* Irish and others, it was the fate of the Sisters of Mercy in Buenos Aires to be dogged by troubles and anxieties of various kinds. The toll of sickness and death had been heavy among their own community. One of the pioneers, Sister Rose Foley, had died, aged twenty-three, not so long after arrival, and four months after her profession on 5th July, 1857. Her death was the first of

many, totalling seventeen by 1878.<sup>27</sup> Two of these deaths were of women who were in their early forties and who had been professed in Ireland. The rest of the seventeen deaths were all the more poignant in that two, who were novices, were still in their teens and the others were in their twenties. It was an almost overwhelming loss for the young community.

In recognition of the care the order had taken of those stricken by pestilence<sup>28</sup>, the government, in 1864, granted a section of the Recoleta cemetery in the northern part of the city. Until the remains were all removed to Bella Vista in 1965, the narrow and extremely plain mausoleum of the Sisters of Mercy, with its several layers of graves reaching down into the earth, contrasted with the imposing monuments erected to the memory of Father Fahy and the Irish Admiral William Brown, the latter unique with its green decor and silver and brass trimmings.

Yellow fever again struck Buenos Aires in the summer of 1871. It was one of the most disastrous plagues to afflict the city. Among those who died from the disease, coupled with a long-standing weakness of the heart, was Father Fahy. He contracted the fever through attending an Italian woman, whose request he was urged to ignore but responded to, saying 'Charity knew no country'. Apart from the sisters losing their most faithful friend and helper, Fahy's death, on 20th February, 1871, was to have unforeseen consequences for the Irish Hospital.

The hospital had not been receiving sufficient financial support from the Irish in Argentina, and there had been a difference of opinion about whether or not it should exist at all. Father Fahy himself went among the Irish in the various localities, begging for funds for the hospital, as he had done also for the boarding school. A printed appeal made by Fahy on behalf of the sisters in 1864 and again during the cholera epidemic of 1867/1868 met with some substantial donations but, in view of the total need, unsatisfactory results. Some of the Irish chaplains – several of whom Fahy described as 'adventurers' – were sending their compatriots to the British Hospital, which protested about this to Fahy. There was, on the other hand, a movement afoot to consolidate the two hospitals, a move of which Fahy disapproved.

Fahy had appointed a committee of five trustees for the holding of the Rio Bamba property as acquired in 1851, but it had no power in the management of the institutions. In a letter to Dr Moriarty of All Hallows College, Dublin, Fahy stated that he intended to transfer the property to the sisters. It was not, however, possible to do so at that juncture because the sisters still lacked legal or juridical rights, except as private individuals.<sup>29</sup> Fahy now decided to hand over the temporal management of the hospital to a number of laymen, residing in strategic districts, who would be responsible for collecting the necessary finance. On his unforeseen death, support for the hospital waned. Serious disagreement about it was aired in the Irish-Argentine press. Neither

the lay collectors nor the Irish chaplains, who formed its Board of Directors, could agree on the proper means to resolve the difficulties.

Patients and costs had increased enormously during the 1871 disastrous epidemic. At the time of Fahy's unexpected death, there was a substantial debt still owing on the new wing of the hospital. The so-called *camp* Irish responded generously to the pleas of Father J. B. Leahy, successor to Fahy, and Leahy's Report shows that the hospital was being economically managed. However, early in 1873, ill health caused Leahy to return to Ireland. He died en route. This led to a renewed attack on the hospital by those who advocated its suppression.

Prominent among these were wealthy city Irish, whose 'shoneenism' – desire to be considered British or Britanicos – led them to seek the elimination of purely Irish institutions. The *camp* Irish, though they appreciated the sisters, were too scattered for much united action.<sup>30</sup> At the time of Fahy's death, the title deeds for Rio Bamba grounds, convent, chapel, hospital and schools were in his possession, but in the name of five trustees, of which he was one, as designated in 1851. Soon after Leahy's departure in 1873, these trustees, alarmed at the movement against the Irish Hospital and Convent, called a meeting – in conjunction with Fahy's expressed directions – of fifty of the principal Irishmen of the country to discuss the future of the Rio Bamba establishment. As a result of the meeting, an Irish Hospital Committee was formed to relieve the Sisters of the burden of maintaining the hospital. The intrusive activities of the collectors appointed by this new committee, however, incurred the annoyance of both the sisters and the Irish chaplains. The new committee resented this, returned \$30,000 (pesos) to subscribers, and resigned in February, 1874. Collections for the hospital among the Irish ceased. Several wealthy members of the former Irish Hospital Committee turned their energy towards the upkeep of the British Hospital.

The Irish Hospital did not close immediately. It became less exclusively Irish, with English, Scotch and American Catholics and Protestants as patients. This fact caused further division among its supporters, and the institution ceased to exist within a few years.

The orphanage became the focus of Mercy funding efforts after 1874, collections for which had commenced in 1870. Until then the sisters had supported the orphans from their own monies made through fees from the boarding and paying day school. By 1874, the sisters were housing thirty orphans. They were, at this time, also collecting for the Irish Girls' Home, but by 1877 that institution had become almost self-supporting. In the following year, they opened a school on their own account at Calle Solis.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the fact that the sisters had spent their own dowries and other monies in purchasing ground for the hospital and in erecting other buildings on the Rio Bamba site<sup>32</sup>, they found themselves blamed by many for the

closure of the hospital. Anti-clerical writers had already been charging that the priests and the nuns shirked their responsibilities during the plague. In retort, Father Leahy had referred to the sisters as 'heroic', claiming that many of the community, especially among the Irish girls, owed their recovery to the care and kindness of the sisters. Canon Dillon, one of their spokesmen after Leahy had left Argentina, had described them as 'untiring in assisting at the sick-bed and taking charge of poor orphans, giving help and consolation wherever they go.'<sup>33</sup>

Now it was also being said by some of their erstwhile benefactors that the hospital failed because the sisters wanted everything their own way. They were criticized by many among those who had been their friends as well as by those who had been charged with its temporal management. It was the beginning of a boycott that the sisters had to endure from many of their compatriots.

Mother Evangelista had not been happy over Father Leahy's assuming Father Fahy's mantle. She thought Leahy was ambitious and eccentric, and, as Irish Chaplain, likely to claim undue jurisdiction over her community. He did, indeed, cause trouble over the disposal of the land on which was built the Irish Convent. Moreover, the native clergy in Argentina were not so well disposed towards their Irish counterparts. Evangelista was to write of the 'calumny and lies spread by false friends and bad priests, many of Irish descent'. She claimed that they had 'some steady, quiet opposers in those who ought to help us. The Irish as a body are scattered some fifty to a hundred miles out in the *campes*; you see we cannot deal directly with them'.

The Irish citizens of Buenos Aires were also demonstrating, in other directions, their inability to unite for common action. In March, 1873, some wealthy city Irishmen founded an Irish Benevolent Society, St Patrick's Society. The society admitted a number of non-Irish and non-Catholic members. It broke down in less than two years, raising an old cry: 'The Irish can agree upon nothing'. This proved true, also, in the next attempt at an Irish society, the Ladies' Irish Beneficent Society, established in March, 1875. It, too, had important non-Irish members, including the wife of President Avellaneda. Within a short period, a bitter war broke out between the society and its opponents. This time, an attempt to dissolve it did not succeed, through the tenacity of the women.<sup>34</sup>

Father Martin Byrne, founder of the Passionist Order in Buenos Aires, also experienced difficulty in working with the committee entrusted with the Rio Bamba property. He wrote two lengthy articles in *The Standard* of 21st and 22nd April, 1880, stating that the trustees of the convent drove the Irish nuns out on the pretext of getting in better teachers. Byrne strongly refuted such criticism, and denounced the trustees as dishonest in their dealings. He drew attention to the fact that the Sisters of Charity, who were asked to take care of

the orphans, were not considered good enough to be given charge of the Irish convent school. He himself had refused to take over the property for his order on account of the opposition he encountered and the restrictions that were being proposed.<sup>35</sup>

But Irish internal dissension was not the only anxiety for the sisters. The ever-present hostility within sections of the civic society came to a climax in a 'Reign of Terror' of February and March, 1875. The risk to the safety of the sisters and the danger of physical violence became appallingly real.

Anti-clericalism was rife in Argentine society, fanned by Spanish and Italian language journals, and, in particular, by the liberal clubs, the masonic lodges, and the influence of President Domingo Sarmiento, 1868-1874. Continuing immigration into Argentina from Europe, especially Spain, Italy, and France, had brought revolutionary ideologies, of a nineteenth century liberal, socialist, or communist nature. After the French Revolution, many of the intellectual elites of Argentina had been educated in France, where they were influenced by the French Enlightenment. Organised religion was a special target. Freemasonry, as it existed in Europe and was transplanted to Argentina, became especially powerful. It was an accepted, if unspoken, condition for a would-be-president to belong to a Masonic Lodge. While his wife and children could go to church with impunity, if an aspirant to high office were himself a practising Catholic, he would rarely achieve his goal. Sarmiento became a Freemason after a sojourn in the United States, where almost all the Presidents had belonged to a lodge.

Anti-Catholic propaganda of a Protestant cast was also rife, in English-speaking countries, at least. Nuns, in the anti-Catholic imagination of the nineteenth century, were often pictured as diabolical or immoral, female Jesuits or Jesuitesses. Recent research shows that there was organised hostility in the 1830s in the United States towards the Catholic Church. Much was published on the subversive goals of convents, seen as 'priests' prisons for women'. The Mother Superior was usually depicted as barely human, a monster. Often foreign, she was hardened and evil, an 'Amazon Jesuit'. Sometimes, she was a Madam, the other nuns prostitutes. Burnings, riots, boycott of schools, and other forms of harassment were used in attempts to rescue the 'defenceless daughters' of the wicked Mother Superior. Among other similar or worse incidents, a Mercy convent, in 1854, in Rhode Island, was surrounded by men intent on rescuing, from alleged villainy and loss of liberty, a wealthy woman who had entered the convent.<sup>36</sup>

Such ideas were carried to other countries. *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, 1836, was published world-wide. Wandering lecturers, including former nuns and priests, travelled to various places, even reaching Australia. Argentina moved clearly within the European ambit. There were, during the nineteenth century, profound shifts in gender ideology taking place in

Western society. Convents denied the traditional role of protector to men, and the hostility concerning them may well have been one manifestation of the deep underlying anxiety about the changing place of women in society.

As President, Sarmiento sought to bring about progress in Argentina, especially through education. While he declared himself not against the principles of the Catholic religion, he strongly criticized church institutions as not taking part in the progress of society. He disliked the institution of religious life, believing that it denied its members individuality and the ability to judge for themselves. He did not approve of the various establishments run by the Orders, especially the Jesuits. In particular, he did not want the church involved in the activity of teaching.

In 1875, Nicolas Avellaneda became President. He, too, was interested in progress, especially through education. As a Catholic, he received the backing of the archbishop and clergy. However, the anti-Catholic campaign continued in the press, the lodges and the clubs, including the university club. University students, stirred on by members of the Masonic Order and of the European Internationale or International Association of Workers, began demonstrations in the streets and at political rallies.

Archbishop Aneiros had restored the church of Saint Ignatius to its former owners, the Jesuits. This produced a violent reaction in the press and in the popular and the student circles. On Sunday, 28th February, 1875, the students held a protest meeting in the *Teatro de Variedades*, whence they marched towards the episcopal palace, crying out slogans against the archbishop and the Jesuits and demanding freedom of conscience and the separation of Church and State. The archbishop was absent, but the protesters pulled down the national shield from the palace facade, and roared on to the church of San Ignacio, whose contents they partially destroyed.

Meanwhile, another group of the protesters marched on the Jesuit College of San Salvador, which was situated across the street from the Mercy Convent. This college was a magnificent building, accommodating a large number of boarders, an even greater number of day students, and some forty priests and scholastics. The vast hall contained grand pianos and other musical instruments, and a very valuable store of scientific devices. There was an exquisite collegiate church and a priceless library. Most of this was destroyed in the fires set by the invading mob. Some of the priests were wounded, one mortally, and a few of the crowd were killed, in the disarray, by other demonstrators.<sup>37</sup>

The convent itself was threatened, or so it seemed to the fearful sisters. They thought they had heard the words: 'First the Jesuits, and then the Sisters of Mercy.' Community legend asserts that they were saved by a special act of Providence. The French Consul had tried to protect them, but the mob had already broken open the chapel doors when a voice was said to repeat

three times, 'Not here, boys, not here!' Later, the sisters attributed that voice to St Joseph, claimed as a special heavenly friend by the Sisters of Mercy in many parts of the world.

One act of heroism has also been recorded in the community's memories. The Blessed Sacrament had been taken from the college chapel and flung into the street. There it was gathered – in two attempts – by an Italian woman, Maria Lasagna, who carried it to the convent. The sisters, boarders, and residents of the House of Mercy, meanwhile, gathered in prayer for protection during the long day and night of terror.<sup>38</sup>

Responsibility for the outrages was never clearly determined. The government and police seem to have been negligent. The President supposedly had been asked by the Jesuits for protection but had ignored the request, retiring to his country residence for the weekend. A state of siege was declared for thirty days. The chief of police resigned.

Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick stated that 'the mobs were employed by gentlemen (?) [sic], government officials, etc. . . . and the government purposely delayed sending troops to stop the work of destruction till it was too late.' *The Southern Cross*, the Irish-Argentine journal, wrote concerning

the events of last Sunday . . . hundreds of madmen, rushing in one wild horde to scatter around them death and destruction . . . a work of savage violence that for ever blots with infamy the once fair fame of our fellow citizens of Buenos Ayres . . . the tyranny of a mad mob . . . young men of the University Club, puppets set in motion by older and more designing men.

*The Southern Cross* firmly believed that the attack on the Jesuits was to have been the prelude to a movement greater in extent than the public realised.<sup>39</sup>

Thereafter, the sisters continued their works in some trepidation. Their school remained closed until late April,<sup>40</sup> when some confidence had been restored. Yet the unrest and uneasiness remained, the insults and misrepresentations against the church continuing in the press. In May, the Archbishop, in protest, resigned his seat in the National Congress.<sup>41</sup> Young sisters in the streets often had 'the vilest language addressed to them and they were plainly told the fate that awaited them'.<sup>42</sup>

To intensify their distress, the criticism and neglect of the sisters from many of their own compatriots persisted. It was claimed by these opponents that they were neither good teachers nor good nurses; at home, many of them would have been servant girls. The Irish Orphanage, in particular, became a focus of disapproval for those who sought to Anglicize the Irish institutions.<sup>43</sup>

In 1877, Evangelista wrote to her friend, Mother Austin Carroll of New Orleans, that 'it is not only the hatred of the wicked that proves a cross. Were it merely that it would rather serve to reanimate our zeal in the good cause.

But, and especially since the burning of the Jesuits' College, we are left almost powerless for good.' Referring to the opposition of those who ought to be their helpers, she continued:

We have had crosses almost unceasingly. Deaths of Sisters far beyond the average; sickness and deaths among the children; steady, continued calumnies against us; false friends; bad priests. We are in God's hands – that is our comfort. Were you to hear our story you would think it strange indeed. The bad here have a most particular hatred against the Jesuits and the Sisters of Mercy. Why they thus honor us I know not.

Pray for us. Better be turned away than remain in danger of hereafter degenerating . . . We are twenty-six in all. We have a branch at Mercedes, and a House of Mercy beside us. We have eighty poor Spanish and Italian children in one of our schools, who are perpetually coming and going. The infamous state schools now established aim at destroying the morals as well as the faith of the children. And parents are to be fined if they don't send them to these pompous dens of vice. The profits of our boarding-school help us to support thirty poor children.

Mother Austin Carroll's response was an invitation to the community to move to New Orleans. They were also invited to Mobile and Pensacola in the United States. Archbishop Aneiros refused to approve their departure, saying he valued them too much. He, however, was helpless against the continuing opposition, and what Evangelista called 'alternating terrors, surprises, and petty annoyances'. Evangelista considered the archbishop somewhat timid.

One of these terrors or petty annoyances which particularly alarmed Evangelista and her community came from noises they thought they heard under the foundations of the convent building in Calle Rio Bamba. They attributed it to the undermining of the convent by their enemies. The notion of a tunnel connecting – for immoral purposes – female and male convents or monasteries was an ancient one, in Argentina as elsewhere. It was revived in the nineteenth century anti-Catholic propaganda in the United States and other countries, including Australia.<sup>44</sup> It was the subject of rumours about the Mercies and the Jesuits in Buenos Aires, and to Evangelista Fitzpatrick's 'amazement no less than disgust' was very generally believed.<sup>45</sup>

It is difficult to decide whether the convent was actually being undermined for sinister reasons, as Evangelista feared. In late 1875, the city sewerage and water works were being established.<sup>46</sup> In a letter written on 23rd August, 1890, to Mother Baptist MacDonnell, Mother Liguori Keenan, Mother Superior of Baggot Street convent both at the time of Evangelista's visit and again in 1890, expressed doubts about the reality of the noises.

I really believe dearest Rev Mother Evangelist's [sic] nerves got such a shock

that she imagined she heard the noises under the Convent. At all events, the Sacred Heart nuns<sup>47</sup> heard nothing. So I am sure it was only imagination.

The noises were real enough for Evangelista, and a determining factor in her decision to pursue her design to leave Argentina. Later, when it was a question of whether the six sisters in Mercedes should leave or stay, it was noted that there was no undermining of the convent there.

In addition, there was pressure on the community to admit as members persons they felt were unsuitable for their way of life, including one who was not a baptized Catholic. Evangelista refused to be intimidated in this respect, considering that this interference struck at the very character of her religious family.

Such worries, combined with the persistent opposition from within their own ethnic and church ranks, left them, in Evangelista's words, almost powerless for good. She decided to go to Dublin to consult with the 'convent superiors' and the archbishop there.<sup>48</sup> She wrote to her friend, Mother Austin:

I cannot express to you what a consolation your kind letters and sympathy have been to me. Cut off, isolated as we are from other convents of our order owing to great distance, sympathy is to us peculiarly sweet. Prospects are no brighter than when last I wrote, but I have great hopes that things are coming to a climax, and that our dear Lord will, before long, bring us where we may have our works and be delivered from the dangers which threaten us here. As regards what you kindly propose, I will tell you frankly I could not think of undertaking anything of my own will, choice, or judgment. What I intend doing is to get leave from the archbishop to go to Ireland on some business I have there next June. When there I will consult Cardinal Cullen, who sent us here, making known to him all the difficulties that surround us, and following his advice as to whether we shall leave, and whither we shall go.

You may guess how secret I have to keep this. For, suppose Cardinal Cullen tells us to stay until we are driven out, you may imagine the inconveniences that should result from its being known that I consulted him. Father Fahy was a great loss to us. The archbishop is good and friendly, but he is very timid, has little energy, and has seen nothing better than what exists here. The truth is, the poor man can do little or nothing. Continue to pray for us. Prayer is our only hope.

Evangelista had planned to leave on her Irish visit in June, 1878, but it was May of the following year, 1879, before she felt that the situation in Buenos Aires was settled enough for her to leave the community temporarily. On 1st of the month, she and Sister M. Claver Kenny, an Argentine-born member, sailed from the city for Dublin.

Those whom they consulted advised withdrawal from Argentina. Archbishop Cullen was dead, but his successor, Archbishop McCabe,

promised help. Bishop Patrick Moran (later Cardinal Archbishop of Sydney) applied to Rome for the necessary authorization. They advocated that she return to Argentina and, once more, attempt to obtain Archbishop Aneiros' approval.

While still away from the country, Evangelista and Claver met Bishop Christopher Reynolds of South Australia. He offered them the opportunity to make a foundation in his diocese of Adelaide.

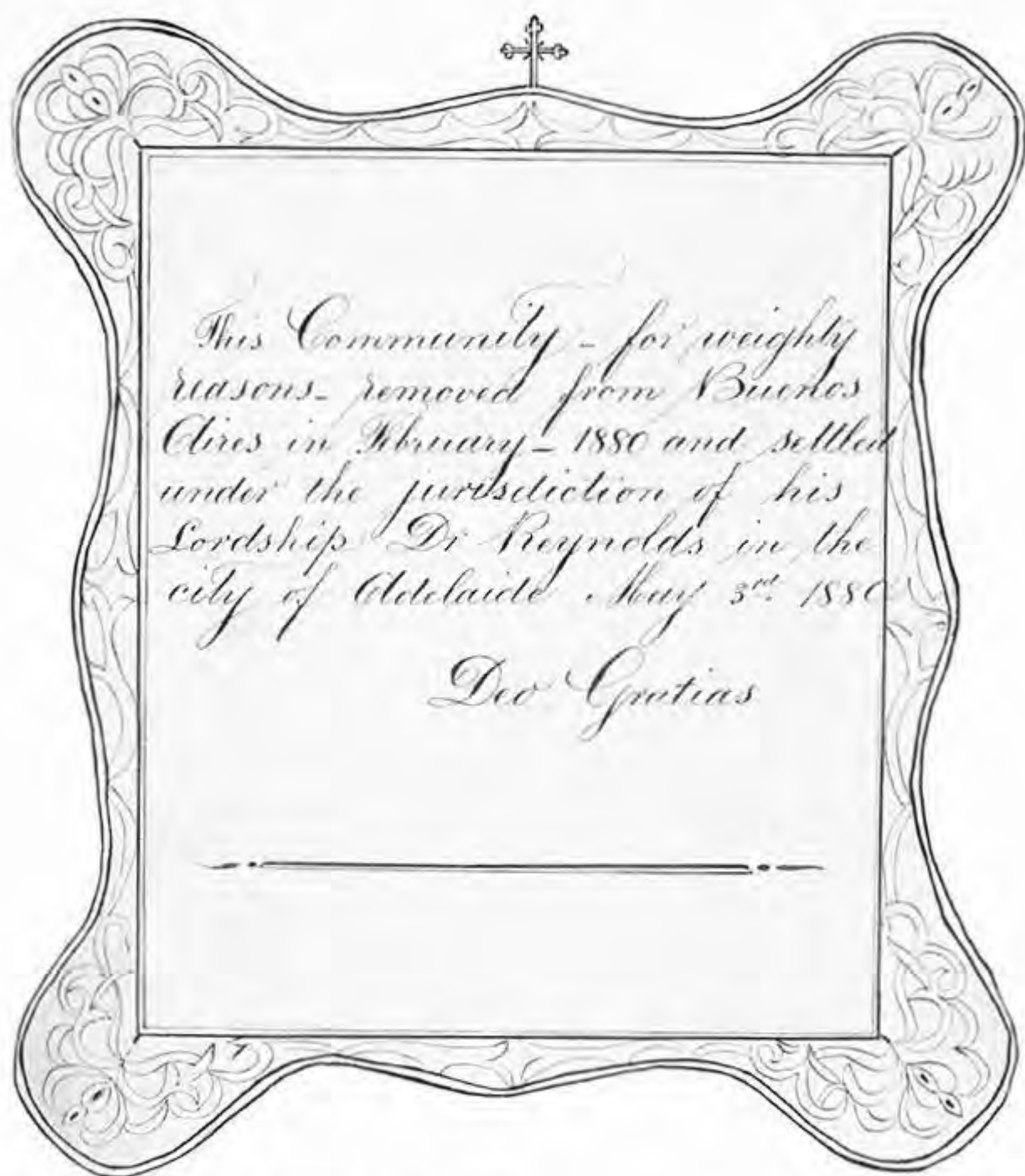
My diocese is very large, and my people are doing their best for the extension of religion and Catholic education. We are surrounded by many temporal difficulties, yet come to us in the name of God! I promise you, for myself and people, and the colonists generally, a peaceful home for your community, and as vast a field for your zeal as Sisters of Mercy as your hearts can desire. Come, then, in God's name.

On return to Buenos Aires, Evangelista and the rest of the community prepared to depart. The total community was twenty-four in number at this stage. There does not seem to have been complete agreement among the sisters as to the necessity to leave. But, after some discussion, it was agreed that all, including the community at Mercedes, should go. The settlement of their property was committed to the hands of two trustees.<sup>49</sup> Arrangements were made for the care of their works,<sup>50</sup> and monies collected for these works were placed in the hands of a committee.

Though Archbishop Aneiros eventually agreed to their departure, he made one last bid to persuade them to remain. In August of 1879, he sent a circular to his parish priests, calling their attention to the imminent departure of the Sisters of Mercy from Buenos Aires and Mercedes. Their being brought out by Father Fahy had led to the impression that their services were exclusively to their countrymen, Aneiros claimed. Fahy's death and the fact that the Irish were widely scattered over the country had resulted in the sisters declaring they had little or nothing to do there.

The archbishop expressed alarm at this, especially as he recalled that the sisters had a charitable and special calling for the education of poor children, visiting the sick and affording protection to unemployed young women of good character. These were objects of the highest interest not only for the Irish community but also for the whole population, which frequently required such good offices, especially with the increasing population through immigration from all parts of the world.

The priests were enjoined to let their parishioners know the great services which the Sisters of Mercy could render. They were asked not simply to read the letter from the pulpit but 'by every means suitable to [their] holy calling endeavour to obtain for the Sisters of Mercy as much employment as they can wish.'



*Entry in Chapter Book, Argentina, 1856-1880*

This action of the archbishop was too late. The sisters had already arranged to go to South Australia. Moreover, some of the works that were offered them they felt bound to refuse. These works were under the control of lay associations, philanthropic societies, the members of which were Freemasons. Or else they were under the control of their wives and daughters, who tended to regard religious women who took charge of the works, as upper-class servants, to be ordered about in the same way as they would order their own servants. The sisters did not think they could 'graft their rules on such houses. . . . To undertake an institution with señoras to dictate to them would have put the Sisters of Mercy in a wrong position, or rather a false one.'<sup>51</sup>

Thus, twenty-four Sisters of Mercy sailed for England on February 8, 1880<sup>52</sup>, on the Royal Mail, *Guadiana*. At the wharves at Gravesend, on St Patrick's Day, 17th March, they boarded the SS *Aconcagua*, an iron steamship, for Australia.<sup>53</sup> They left to the regret – and the surprise – of many.

It was not an easy decision to make. Opinion was much divided regarding their departure. One of the sisters wrote a poem summing it up.

    Their friends say Go.  
    Strangers clamor Stay.  
    Which is the truest love, it needs  
    not Solomon to say.<sup>54</sup>

For the women who were born in Argentina, and for their families, it must have been a particularly sad moment. For the Irish-born sisters, especially those who had carried the responsibility of leadership and decision-making throughout the troubled years, it was a second exile, full of hope but also fraught with disillusion.<sup>55</sup>

Evangelista – 'in a fit of the dimals' – expressed these feelings on the boat to Australia, in response to an insistence by the captain that every passenger should write a poem. Her contribution contained the following stanza.

    O, poor soul weary,  
    In exile dreary,  
How is it nought around thee yields content?  
    Forever restless,  
    Like poor bird nestless,  
Or spirit into alien regions sent.

En route, the boat called into the Cape of Good Hope. There, Bishop Leonard visited them on board and asked for a few sisters to remain with him. Evangelista did not feel authorized to allow this. They had all been commissioned to Adelaide. They would continue as one group.

By 3rd May, they had landed in Adelaide.

Some time later, writing again to her friend Mother Austin Carroll, Evangelista summed up her thoughts on the whole experience:

Buenos Ayres is not a place for our order, and will not be for years to come. Often when ill there (for I had very poor health, owing, I think, to anxiety of mind), I felt I could gladly lay down my life, but for the thought of leaving my beloved Sisters so unprotected in such a country. Now, thank God, I can die with a mind easy on that head. We are really in a Christian land. There were more priests there than here, and ten times as many churches, but the whole state of things was different. To explain all would be simply impossible. Some things on which all the others hinge I am not at liberty to mention. And to give a superficial explanation would be as repugnant to my nature as unsatisfactory to you. We must only let the dead past bury its dead.

We are not as well off temporarily as we were in South America, but our peace and happiness in other ways are beyond explanation. I never look back to our sojourn in Buenos Ayres, save to bless God for His wonderful deliverance of us from its dangers. Our home was undermined by communists. This had nothing to do with our first motive in resolving to leave. But it certainly increased our joy when we got permission, and our gratitude to God when we learned that another revolution broke out shortly after we left.<sup>56</sup>

Eleven of the twenty-four sisters who left Argentina and went to South Australia were Irish by birth. The others were Argentinian. Of these latter, all except two – perhaps three – were ethnically Irish.<sup>57</sup>

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1. The spelling varies – Aires and Ayres. The latter is frequent in the contemporary documents I have consulted, but I shall, for consistency, use the former which is now common usage.
  2. This was the case until recent decades. Present composition – older half, of full or part Irish origin, bilingual; younger half, no Irish background, Spanish speaking.
  3. T. Murray, *The Story of the Irish in Argentina*, New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1919, 147.
  4. Murray, 141, says that Fahey always wrote his name with an 'e'. James M. Ussher, *Father Fahy, A Biography of Anthony Dominic Fahy, O.P., Irish Missionary in Argentina (1805-1871)*, Buenos Aires: G. Kraft Ltd., 1951, having looked through church and other archives, found Fahy used both spellings indiscriminately, but 'Fahy' was the more common. I have adopted 'Fahy'.
  5. Murray says 1843.
  6. James M. Ussher, *Father Fahy*, 205.
  7. Letter, Mother Superior, B.A., to Bishop Meeghan, Belfast, 6.12.1954. Mercy Archives, B.A.
  8. In May of that year. The Mother Bursar was one of the Governing Council of four.
  9. The records of the Dublin Mercy Congregation include, as well as Evangelista and Baptist, Sisters M. Catherine Flanagan and Joseph Griffin as professed sisters, Sister Rose Mary Foley (novice) and two postulants, seven in all. (This total is confirmed by the record in the 'Dublin Tablet', reprinted in the Spanish-Argentine journal, *El Orden*, 26.2.1856. The journal gives five professed sisters and two postulants.) The Dublin records seem inaccurate, however, in so far as the Argentine/Adelaide Mercy annals (Chapter Book and Register) show that Sister M. Joseph Griffin was not professed in Ireland but in Argentina, on July 5, 1857. The Argentine/Adelaide Chapter Book also indicates that Esther Foley was not a novice on departure from Ireland. With Margaret Doran, she received her votes for

reception in Argentina on 17th August, 1856, and the Register records their reception on 9th November, 1856. Hence the more accurate listing would seem to be four professed sisters, one novice, and two postulants.

The number of postulants varies according to the article or book. According to the Register, there were four who came from Ireland and received the habit some months later, either in 1856 or 1857. These four postulants were Esther Foley (later Sister Rose Mary) and Margaret Doran (later Sister Lucy Mary), as in previous paragraph, and Anne (later Sister Margaret Mary) Coffey and Mary (later Sister Martha Mary) Maloney, who received the habit the following year. The Register also notes that, up to 1868, women who were dismissed as postulants were not entered.

Some other accounts mention a Sister M. Angela Rowland, who does not appear in any Argentine/Adelaide records, and, according to the Dublin register, would seem never to have left Ireland. One of these accounts is James Ussher's life of Father Fahy, p.89, and his source is a 1915 letter in the Dominican Archives, Dublin. Ussher does not include her in his booklet, *The Irish Sisters of Mercy in Argentina*, Buenos Aires: The Southern Cross, 1947, but Mother Dolores Barry's copy of this pamphlet has written on the cover 'With corrections made by the author'. Angela Rowland's name is inserted in the list of the foundation group. The handwriting is not Dolores Barry's. None of the other published accounts name her. However, the annals of the Convent of Mercy, Harewood Avenue, London, reveal that Sisters M. Liguori and Angela stayed there en route from Argentina on 14th February, 1857, and three days later left for Dublin.

Sister Ana Maria McGuire, an Argentinian Mercy historian, told me that there was supposed to have been a professed sister who came as Novice Mistress. She had not been able to trace her. Perhaps she was Mary Angela Rowland, who returned to Ireland in 1857.

The English Mercy annals also state that there were two embarkations from London to Buenos Aires in 1856, the founding one and another in October of the same year. These show that Mother Evangelista and four sisters left for Buenos Aires on 8.1.1856, and that, on October 8th of the same year, Mother Vincent Whitty and Sister Mary Agatha accompanied three sisters to Southampton who also embarked for Buenos Aires. Among these three was almost certainly Liguori Griffin. This is confirmed by the Dublin records, which state Liguori, Gertrude O'Rourke, and Berchmans Fitzpatrick were sent to B.A., Feast of the Holy Rosary, October 8th, 1856.

Thus, altogether, seven professed sisters and one novice seem to have gone to Argentina, in two distinct groups, during 1856, the foundation year. In addition, there were four young women, who either had already been or were hoping to be accepted as postulants. These would not have been entered in the Dublin register, and might well have stayed somewhere other than the Harewood Avenue Convent. It seems to have been the practice to take some would-be postulants on foundations, who, if they did not eventually enter or were deemed unsuitable, may have wished to stay in the new country as immigrants.

Liguori Griffin came back to Argentina in 1858, which is probably the cause of some of the confusion in people's memories. The confusion was perhaps intensified because it was the younger of the two sisters, a novice, who first went to Argentina, and also by the fact that, later, Mother Liguori was considered the appropriate successor to Mother Evangelista as Superior of Adelaide.

Other departures may also have increased the misunderstandings. Margaret Doran was received as a novice but not professed. Berchmans Fitzpatrick returned to Ireland, through ill health, in 1858. The third member of the second group of 1856, Sister M. Gertrude O'Rourke, died an early death, in Buenos Aires, in 1876. The next group that came from Ireland, in 1859, comprised Sister M. Vincent Mostyn, who died in Buenos Aires in 1865, and Sister M. Agnes Whitty, who returned fairly soon after arrival, on account of ill-health. After that, it was only postulants who came from Ireland.

10. The dictator Rivadavia had confiscated the monastery of the Mercedarian Fathers some decades before the arrival of the sisters. Later, Evita Peron had her office there. This ensured that the church and monastery escaped the burnings of June 1955. The property was restored to the priests after the fall of Peron, and is now used in part by the Catholic University.
11. Mariano Jose de Escalada became first archbishop in 1866, see C. Bruno, *Historia de la Iglesia en Argentina*, Vol. XI, Buenos Aires: Editorial Don Bosco, 1976.
12. The status of lay nuns or sisters and lay brothers dated from the feudal structure of the Middle Ages, when equality of membership was not possible for the lower classes. They fulfilled a role as servants in

- the monastery, but were usually not educated sufficiently to join in the recitation of the Divine Office which was essential to monks and nuns, and so did not take solemn vows.
13. Rosa MacGinley, 'History of Women's Institutes – Socio-historical Issues', *History of Women Religious Workshop Papers, April 9-10 1992*, Strathfield: Institute of Religious Studies.
  14. John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism*, 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 1969, 4, asserts that in no other country was the State's control over the church quite so complete as in Spain. A papal bull, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, made necessary the State's approval for every church and religious house opened in the colonies. Such control was jealously maintained after the colonies became independent of Spain. Unauthorised monasteries were pulled down, for example, especially in mission areas.
  15. Even then, there was an underlying element of 'kindly' tolerance on account of their good works and virtuous lives. The 1917 Code of Canon Law clearly described them as religious, but differentiated them still from the older communities with solemn vows, who were religious by historic right. (Acknowledgement to Rosa MacGinley for help in sorting out these points.)
  16. July, 1856, full letter printed in Santiago M. Ussher, *Las Hermanas de la Misericordia (Irlandesas)*, Buenos Aires: Domingo Taladriz, 1955, 121.
  17. Numbers calculated using Register of Sisters who entered Novitiate Buenos Aires 1856-1876.
  18. Copy of land tax plan (1863-1875), obtained from de la Salle Archives, Buenos Aires.
  19. December, 1867, according to the printed Appeal from Fahy in T. Murray, *The Irish in Argentina*, 331. St Patrick's fees were \$250 (*pesos*) a month.
  20. *The Southern Cross*, 2.9.1875, 3.
  21. J. Ussher, *Father Fahy*.
  22. 'Native' seems to refer, not to the indigenous Indian people, but to Spanish-speaking Argentines.
  23. Fahy to Fr Whyte 14 August 1861, Dominican Archives, Dublin, see J. Ussher, *Father Fahy*, 95. See also S.M. de Sales Vigue, Dundalk Convent of Mercy, to Bishop Goold of Melbourne, November 5, 1858, as well as correspondence to Goold from his uncle/agent, Bishop J.T. Hynes, 6 and 13th December, 1858, and Goold to J. Fitzpatrick, his V.G., 31.3.1859, Melbourne Archdiocesan Archives.
  24. The secondary sources indicate Chascomus was opened about 1865. The Chapter Book indicates only the appointment of Sr. M. Gertrude O'Rourke (Rorke) as superior in 1867.
  25. Mother Austin Carroll, 'Twenty-four Years in Buenos Ayres', *American Catholic Quarterly Review*, vol. 13, 1888, says that there was an orphanage and a House of Mercy at Mercedes as well as at Rio Bamba Street. Further data is in John S. Gaynor, SCA, *The History of St Patrick's College in Mercedes*, Buenos Aires: The Southern Cross, 1958.
  26. These graves could not be found when the Congregation transferred all the sisters' graves to Bella Vista in 1965. The two sisters were Sr M. Rose (Anne) Geoghegan, died 1875, and Sr M. Xavier (Ann) McKay. See also *The Southern Cross*, 26.8.1975, 3, for account of death of Rose Geoghegan at Mercedes.
- The present very large, very Irish-style church contains another link with the sisters. Sister Mary Rose Fitzsimons, who was one of the six who returned to Argentina from Australia, attended school there. Her family, of nearby Rawson, donated one of the altars in the new church. Rose's recollection of her school days was that there were always more pupils than places, and that almost all the boarders were English-speaking. A current Argentinian Mercy community tradition states that the statue of Our Lady, now in the grounds of St Ethnea's College, Bella Vista, belonged to Mercedes. When the sisters left for Australia, it was given to an Irish family to look after it. Then, when the sisters returned and eventually went to Rawson, in 1929, the family returned the statue. The sisters handed over the Rawson school in 1954 to another religious community.
27. Numbers vary. Ana Maria McGuire, *Resena Historica de las Hermanas de la Misericordia en Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Lincoln Press, Michigan, 1984, takes, from the Argentine/Adelaide convent register, the names and details of fifteen who died in Argentina, two of them novices (not counting Rose Fitzsimons, which is obviously a typographical error). She records two of the fifteen as dying at Mercedes. In the Sisters' cemetery at Bella Vista are headstones for seventeen who died between 1857 and 1880. Of these, three do not appear in Ana Maria McGuire's list – Sisters M. Aloysius Norris (10.2.1867), Agnes Murray (10.5.1871), and Agnes Laffan (1.5.1875). McGuire's list does include Sr. Magdalen Mary Dalton, who, however, died in Adelaide (25.3.1888).

- Given that there was difficulty in finding the graves at Mercedes and Chascomus, when the sisters were removed from Recoleta, and adding all available names, it seems that there were at least seventeen who died in this period.
28. Cholera and yellow fever were both prevalent in Argentina.
29. It was not until 27th November, 1923, that the national government approved the statutes of a new civil association called the Society of the Sisters of Mercy, which had juridical rights. Ownership of the goods assigned to the sisters for education and works of charity was then legally recognized. Ana Maria McGuire, *Resena Historica*, 18.
30. T. Murray, *The Irish in Argentina*, Chapter XVI, claims that the Irish, for the first couple of generations, were anxious to prevent their children learning Spanish and Argentine ways. They thought the natives of the country (i.e. Argentines) were lawless and sexually immoral.
31. T. Murray, *The Irish in Argentina*, 388-9.
32. Statement by Sr M. Claver Kenny. See also T. Murray, *The Irish in Argentina*, 369. The sisters had no legal power over the property they had purchased since it was put in the name of Fahy and the other trustees. A notebook, dated 1880, and bearing the names of Christina Fitzpatrick, Julia Murphy, and Anne Kenny, states that they presented to the Trustees in Buenos Aires on 13th May, 1873, 155,363 pesos. 'The Hospital ground cost 80,000 pesos. 200 [sic] of this ours.' MASA, 150/27.
33. Quoted in T. Murray, *The Irish in Argentina*, 350,353.
34. Murray, Chapter XXI. When the sisters returned to Argentina in 1890, there was still much controversy over the Rio Bamba property. Murray, Chapter XXIV, outlines the divisions which undermined attempts by the Central Committee of what was by then called the Irish Catholic Association to sell the property. It was finally sold to the Christian Brothers de la Salle, in 1895. Despite their claims, based on the fact that they had bought part of the land and had erected much of the buildings at their own expense, the sisters were finally given only 25,000 pesos for the building of a new convent and school on the corner of Estados Unidos and 24 de Noviembre Streets, on property which would be in the name of the Mercy community.
35. T. Murray, *The Irish in Argentina*, 372.
36. Maureen McCarthy, Rutgers University, 'Nuns in the Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Imagination – Amazon Jesuits and Defenceless Daughters', talk at Benedictine Conference, *Five Hundred Years of Women Religious in the Americas*, College of St Benedict, St Joseph, Minnesota, 1992.
37. My main verifications for these events are C. Bruno, *Historia de la Iglesia en La Argentina*; G. Furlong, *Historia del Colegio del Salvador de Bs.As.*, vol.I, 1868-1943, Buenos Aires: Cardif, 1944.
38. Letter of M.M.Evangelista Fitzpatrick to Archbishop Aneiros, 7.3.1875, printed in G. Furlong, *Historia del Colegio del Salvador*, 105.
39. Editorials, 4.3.1875, 11.3.1875, archives of newspaper office, Buenos Aires.
40. *The Southern Cross*, 22.4.1875, 3.
41. *The Southern Cross*, 20.5.1875.
42. Evangelista Fitzpatrick to 'My Dear Lord', 1879.
43. There may have been some grounds for criticism in what Mother M. Clare Murphy (born in Buenos Aires) later claimed as 'not the least' of their difficulties, viz., 'their complete ignorance of the Spanish tongue, the language of the Argentine for the most of the inhabitants at that time.' (Interview, 1922).
44. Today, the former Mercy site is occupied by a large college for boys, run by the de la Salle Brothers. In conversation, 1992, with de la Salle Archivist, Brother Domingo, (interpreted by Sister Isabel McDermott), I asked about the existence of a tunnel. Brother replied that, some 50 years previously, the older boys had a story about a tunnel connecting their school and the Jesuits across the road. He had not investigated, thinking it was just a legend and not knowing the earlier story connected with the sisters.
45. Evangelista to 'My dear Lord', 1897.
46. *The Southern Cross*, 30.12.1875.
47. From Chile, who took over the convent when the sisters left and remained there until they returned in 1890.
48. Strictly speaking, she was not obliged to do this. Each new foundation became independent in government. The Mercy Rule did name the bishop as the ecclesiastical superior, but this would have

been Archbishop Aneiros of Buenos Aires. However, given the momentous nature of the step and the extreme reluctance of Aneiros to bless their departure, it seemed a wise thing to seek the help of the Dublin ecclesiastical authorities, who had initially legitimated their mission to Argentina.

49. Mother Austin Carroll, 'Twenty-four Years in Buenos Ayres', says that the property was eventually sold for the equivalent of nearly \$150,000.
50. The orphans were transferred temporarily to the Sisters of Charity; the Río Bamba schools to Sisters of the Sacred Heart from Chile, the Superior and some of her companions being Irish-born. The convent was leased to them, and the Sacred Heart Sisters took over the care of the paying and free schools and the orphanage.
51. Austin Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, vol.IV, New York: P.O'Shea, 1895, 138.
52. The 1880 notebook in the Adelaide Mercy Archives says that they left Buenos Aires Feb. 7, reached England March 6, left England March 17, landed Adelaide May 3.
53. Details are taken from notebook of Sr Carmel Bourke, MASA 150/24, researched from State Archives and old newspapers, including *The Adelaide Observer* and Lloyds' Shipping Lists.
54. From newspaper clipping belonging to Mother Austin Carroll, New Orleans archives, copy in MASA, 150/1.
55. Eleven were Irish born; 10 born in Argentina of Irish parentage; 3 born in Argentina of Spanish-French origin.
56. Avellaneda's Presidency ended in 1880.
57. Mother M. Evangelista Fitzpatrick, Mother M. Baptist MacDonnell, and Sisters Mary Catherine Flanagan, Mary Lignori Griffin, Mary Joseph Griffin, Margaret Mary Coffey, Martha Mary Maloney, Mary Bernard Foley, Mary Teresa Casey, Mary Claver Kenny, Mary Magdalene Dalton, Mary of Mercy Moore, Mary Raphael Connoughton, Alfonsa Mary Ronan, Mary Clare Murphy, Lucy Mary Le Content, Mary Antonia McKay, Mary Stanislaus Harrington, Josephine Mary Lovell, Mary Evangelist Vian, Mary Gabriel Romero, Mary Angela Windle, Mary Cecilia Cunningham, and Mary Rose Fitzsimons.

Some of the surnames are spelt in various ways. I have taken what seems to have been the more recent version.

## CHAPTER TWO

# A Colony with a Difference

### 'A LAND OF PEACE AND LIBERTY'

AS the SS *Aconcagua* sailed into Port Adelaide on Monday, 3rd May, 1880, the Mercy women on board were arriving in a country which was, in many ways, quite similar to the one they had left. They were moving from one southern outpost of European civilization to another. Yet there were striking differences.

Argentina, in the nineteenth century, was a nation newly born from a lengthy period of Spanish colonization. Its culture was Latin, and its dominant language was Spanish. Australia was still a collection of British colonies not yet one hundred years of age, and with another twenty years before nationhood would be achieved. It began as a gaol for unwanted British prisoners<sup>1</sup> and its free settlers were still predominantly British.

In the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants – technically British citizens, at that time – had been numerous in both countries, yet were very much minorities in both. The language of Australia, however, was English, and the culture one with which the sisters were more familiar. It was also a culture in the formation of which the Irish, still laden with memories of British oppression, were playing a role more influential than their numbers might suggest.

In both countries, there were indigenous people who were harshly treated by the colonizers and who had been severely decimated in numbers. To the Australians these were the 'natives'. To the British and Irish in Argentina, it was the descendants of the Spanish colonists who were 'native'. On both continents, the truly indigenous people who had survived the process of extermination now lived in remote areas.

In both Argentina and Australia, the climate and the landscape were novel for Irish men and women. They were lands still largely undeveloped in Western terms, containing vast tracts where sheep and cattle could roam, or wheat and other grains could grow. Each was heavily dependent on European trade for a viable economy. Even Argentina, at this period, relied greatly on British connections.

However, South Australia, the colony to which the women were bound, had had a much quieter history than Buenos Aires, and, indeed, than other Australian colonies. Political revolutions of the South American type were unknown anywhere within the Australian continent. British parliamentary institutions had been transferred, and, in a situation where – theoretically at least – the Irish were equal to everyone else, were cherished by them. In addition, the colony of South Australia had not been established as a penal base, as had colonies in the eastern half of the continent. It had arisen through the enterprise of free settlers.

'Verily', said Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick, as she began once again the task of founding the Mercy order in a city and a country so different from her own, 'Australia is a land of peace and liberty'. Their co-religionists welcomed them with effusion, wrote Evangelista to Mother Austin Carroll. Those who differed from them in creed were kindly disposed towards them, and not unwilling to aid their efforts for the relief of suffering and the enlightenment of the ignorant.<sup>2</sup>

#### SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND ITS 'SENSE OF DIFFERENCE'<sup>3</sup>

South Australia had begun in an unusual way for an Australian colony, and it seems to have always felt a 'sense of difference'. Often calling itself 'province' to distinguish itself from the colonies with origins in the convict system, South Australia sprang from a novel proposal for 'systematic colonization', and was the only British colony whose initial establishment rested on an act of parliament – a compromise, in 1834, between the promoters and the English Government. Although its promoters praised the site highly, they were in almost complete ignorance of the territory and its people. The land possessed, in reality, relatively sparse natural resources, though its physical setting was, in many ways, quite lovely. The region was declared to be 'waste and unoccupied', except for 'a few strolling savages' whereas, in fact, there was a not inconsiderable Aboriginal population.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the founders entertained lofty ideals, a strong belief in the value of work and personal integrity, and lots of imagination, at times quite whimsical and unconventional. They laid the groundwork of a society which has produced a number of remarkable individuals, and has more than once embraced political, social and economic policies which were not in vogue at the particular period.

In one way, its story originated in a romance. Edward Gibbon Wakefield was in an English prison for abducting an under-age heiress. While there, he was visited by his cousin, Elizabeth Fry, well-known for her role in prison reform. Her visit led him to devise a scheme for penal reform, through

colonization, which was based on Utopian idealism and its principles of freedom. He was helped assiduously in his campaign to promote the scheme by Robert Gouger, a young prospective immigrant, whom he also met through prison. They managed to attract some would-be colonists of enough means to buy land or to establish themselves in business.

The South Australian Association and its various manoeuvres with the British Government, and the eventual establishment of the colony, in 1836, was accompanied by much publicity and propaganda. The radical philosopher Jeremy Bentham had suggested it be called 'Felicitanian' or 'Liberia' to reflect the idealism and the so-called scientific principles of its planning. Through social engineering, a new model society was to be established which would become 'a middle-class paradise in the southern seas'.<sup>5</sup> The British Government would not allow it complete self-government but agreed to the setting-up of a 'province', which was to be self-supporting. Robert Gouger was appointed the Colonial Secretary.

The theoretical basis of its economics was a certain relationship between the price of land, the cost of labour, and the return on capital. There were to be no convicts allowed in the colony, and immigration and trade were to be free. There would be honest, hardworking labourers or artisans, who would be brought out through the proceeds of the sale of land, and who would themselves eventually have earned enough money to acquire property.

Thus, South Australia was to be different from New South Wales and Tasmania (and later Queensland). These latter were designed originally as convict establishments, and were, subsequently, in large measure, divided up by land hungry squatters. South Australia was also to differ from Victoria, where the beginnings of settlement were unregulated, and from Western Australia, also based somewhat on Wakefieldian principles, but now likewise viewed as the domain of Mammon. In this new colony, Wakefieldian theorists and pious businessmen would establish a harmonious balance between God and Caesar.

The capital, Adelaide, was extremely fortunate in its first Surveyor, Colonel William Light. Son of an English father and Eurasian mother, he was a person of talent and flair. His town plan for Adelaide was exciting, a model of delight and design. Enough of it survived during the encroaching years to leave the city centre and the district of North Adelaide with beautiful tree-lined streets, green squares, gracious buildings and houses, and a swathe of spacious parklands around both districts.

So, in 1880, when the Mercies arrived in Adelaide, they found a pleasant, small town of about forty thousand people. Situated on the extensive plain stretching between the hills and the waters of the gulf, it had been called *Tandanya*, the place of the red kangaroo, by the *Kaurna* people who had previously inhabited the area. Its ambience was still rural on the European

style. The aspect was park-like. Fruit, vegetables, and flowers thrived. Houses were built from attractive local materials – honey-coloured stone from the hills, slate and bluestone, with decorative cast-iron lacework on verandahs and fences. In the late 1870s, the Torrens River had been dammed in the city area, forming the decorative Torrens Lake. About this time also, the charming Adelaide villa developed, with its front bay window, sloping iron roof, and iron-laced tiled verandah. Brush fences abounded.

Foremost among the founding fathers was George Fife Angas, a devout Baptist and an able merchant banker. Angas and his fellow evangelical Protestants did much to give South Australia its distinctive ethos of moral and social conservatism mixed with political radicalism. Their strong dissenting principles – together with the liberal views of some of the Anglican leaders – helped determine the separation of church and State. Angas himself selected many of the early immigrants, ensuring that they were pious, sober, and industrious.

As usual, reality did not quite meet the promises. The reality was rather a mix of strong self-interest and some social idealism. But South Australia did progress gradually, mostly in pastoral and agricultural activity. It attracted immigrants from other countries besides Britain, especially a number of German Lutherans who complemented the strong moral and hard-working qualities of the dissenters from Britain. The colony also remained somewhat true to the Wakefieldian radicalism of its origins, in so far as it achieved a number of political firsts in the English-speaking world.<sup>6</sup>

Adelaide became known as the city of churches and culture. The spires of the many churches were to dominate the city landscape – as the Lutheran spires still dominate the Barossa Valley. Anglicans were the most numerous, enjoyed a certain social standing, but were never allowed to become dominant. After them, were the Methodists. Reinforced by the Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Congregationalists, who together also outnumbered the Catholics, they gave Adelaide an almost puritanical streak.

Catholics never achieved the numbers and the influence they did in the eastern states.<sup>7</sup> They were predominantly Irish. Their percentage among the original settlers of the first decade had been less than six percent, and almost all of them had been working people or shopkeepers. The diocese was heavily in debt. However, by the 1881 census, the total population included about fifteen percent Catholics, a large number of whom lived in Adelaide. There were groups of Catholics dispersed throughout the country districts, as farmers, labourers, transport workers, or inn or shop keepers. These formed the basis of a developing and viable parish system.<sup>8</sup>

Cultural activities in South Australia were considered important from the first. In keeping with the flavour of the settlement's origins, they were of a respectable nature. The colonists demonstrated much interest in

schooling, which, consonant with the founding dissenting and liberal principles, was primarily private or voluntarist in nature. The issue of State aid was uppermost in the first election for the Legislative Council in 1851, and, with the new Council, South Australia became the first colony in the British Empire to separate completely church and State.<sup>9</sup> The late 1870s and the 1880s saw a number of important government contributions to culture and education, including a network of primary schools. Voluntarism also led to libraries and institutes of adult education being opened in several districts, giving the working classes a chance to participate in intellectual pursuits.

#### THE MERCIES ARRIVE IN ADELAIDE (1880)

Having arrived in the youthful city of Adelaide, the twenty-four sisters were received by Frederick Byrne, as Episcopal Vicar, in the absence of Bishop Reynolds, still in Europe. They dined at the Bishop's House, West Terrace; then visited the Dominican Sisters from Cabra, Ireland, who lived in Franklin Street in the city; and were given accommodation by the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, an Australian Order, at their motherhouse in the suburb of Kensington. Their goods were brought up from Port Adelaide in a spring cart, lent to Fr Byrne by the father of ten year old Mary Anne Howlett, a prospective pupil.<sup>10</sup>

The newcomers remained with the Sisters of St Joseph until the following Saturday, 8th May. During the week, Mother Mary MacKillop, foundress of the Sisters of St Joseph, offered Evangelista 'the Port' Catholic primary school for their ministry. However, teaching boys was an unfamiliar task for the Argentinian Mercies, and they preferred to accept the well-established Russell Street school, St Romuald's, generously offered by Mary as an alternative. In addition, Mary, mindful of the main purpose of her congregation – education – handed over to them their 'Providence' at No. 121 Gouger Street, as a temporary residence. The Providence was at that stage operating primarily as a female servants' home, and Mary was cognisant of the Mercy tradition of operating Houses of Mercy for such women.<sup>11</sup>

Evangelista and her companions were very grateful to the Sisters of St Joseph for such help at this crucial point of their beginnings in Adelaide. Mother Mary, in a letter describing their arrival, commented that they were nice sisters and that there was work and room enough for all. Her sisters would be able to take care of some of the poorer schools. Nevertheless, she considered that 'the Vicar would not have done anything to encourage them if I had not come forward – he is such a strange matter-of-fact man.'<sup>12</sup>

Byrne was not completely to blame. Initially, the bishop had meant them all to go to the South East, where their mother house – with a school and a

hospital – would be in the country town of Mt Gambier, and a branch house in the nearby village of Millicent. Moreover, the Irish and Roman authorities negotiating their transfer had not anticipated their move to Australia until the end of that year. Reynolds had hoped that his letter to Byrne explaining the matter would have arrived before the sisters, so as to save Byrne some of the predicament of their early arrival. The situation was made even more embarrassing for Byrne by the refusal of the parish priest of Mt Gambier, Timothy Murphy, to accept the whole party of sisters<sup>13</sup>. On his part, Bishop Reynolds also felt somewhat perturbed that the new plan to offer them the Port school would be attributed to the worst of motives on his part and would redound to the discredit of the Sisters of St Joseph.

Notwithstanding the confusion and lack of preparation, twelve of the group had moved, by the beginning of the next week, into the rented two-storeyed house at No 121 Gouger Street.<sup>14</sup> The remaining twelve, on May 14th, sailed down to Mt Gambier, three hundred miles south. In charge was Evangelista's assistant, Mother Baptist MacDonnell.

#### THE FIRST DECADE IN ADELAIDE (1880-1890)

In Adelaide, the first few months proved extremely busy. By June 5th, the Mercy community had purchased a pleasant two-storeyed house at lot 374 Angas St, near the eastern edge of Victoria Square. It had been built for Eliza Forester in 1870-1871 and later acquired by George Dutton-Green. It cost the Mercies £4,500, 'all the money we had'. The positioning was appropriate, as it adjoined the Cathedral land.<sup>15</sup>

The Dutton-Green house became their convent and also a select or fee-paying school. On June 18th, the Sisters commenced their annual spiritual retreat of eight days, and then prepared to open the Convent of Mercy School in July. The school would take pupils from primary through to senior classes. By August 12th, the stables and coach house were converted into a House of Mercy. *The Catholic Record* of August 6th, 1880, reported: 'At this institution Ladies will find good servants and girls of unblemished reputation will find a comfortable home.' Within its first four months, sixty-two young women, in need of accommodation and of help in finding employment, had passed through the House of Mercy.

A number of changes took place during the next few years. At the beginning of 1882, the Russell Street School was handed back to the Sisters of St Joseph. The Mercies were now teaching the pupils of the non-paying or 'poor' school in the Cathedral Hall. The poor school was dedicated to St Angela, as was the Select School. On March 20th of that year, St Angela's Select Intermediate School for Girls was transferred from a room in the convent to upper rooms in the multi-purposed hall.

On the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy, 24th September, 1882, the bishop laid the foundation stone of St Philomene's House of Mercy, on a portion of cathedral land adjoining the convent.<sup>16</sup> The new House of Mercy was blessed and opened on the same feastday, the following year. It was to be much more than a residential hostel. It was to serve also as 'a training school for those who wish to improve themselves in cooking, laundry or needlework, accounting, etc.'<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, a two-storeyed building, constructed at the back of the Dutton-Green house, extended the convent quarters. It provided a chapel and community room on the ground floor, and bedrooms above, and was named St Agnes' wing. There was a single-storeyed verandah on the western side of the extension, and an arched cloister and balcony on the eastern.

A beautiful cedar staircase led to the chapel, which was decorated by 'the deft hands of the sisters themselves, including the gilding at the back of the altar and the painting of the floor.' The latter was done in small squares so as to have the effect of inlaying. The chapel was also used by the pupils of the select school and later by the boarders. Pretty enough as it must have been, the boarders, who went there for daily morning Mass, remembered it mostly for its airlessness and lack of comfort.

The extra space was a genuine necessity. Their first new member, Kate (Sister M. Philomena) Fitzpatrick, niece of Mother Evangelista, had joined them from Ireland, in 1882.<sup>18</sup> Their first Australian-born member, another Kate – Sister M. Agnes Rogers – from Kapunda, entered two years to the day after.<sup>19</sup> There were to be thirty-one novices in the first twenty years in Australia. The annalist noted that it had been exactly the same in Argentina. Most of the new members joined in their early twenties, although one was just fifteen years and three months, and another was thirty-nine. Seven were South Australians, nine were Irish, one American, and the rest were from the eastern States of Australia.

On 29th June, 1885, there was the sorrow of Mother Evangelista's death, after a short illness of eight days. Three months later, her niece made her vows of profession. Evangelista was succeeded in the role of Reverend Mother by her Assistant, Mother Liguori Griffin. Liguori was elected in July, 1885, 'for the time being'. Most of this 'time being' – which turned out to be eighteen months – she spent in acute physical suffering. She died on 25th April, 1887, and was buried in West Terrace Cemetery, side by side with Evangelista. Both had been worn out by a lengthy period of hard work and heavy responsibility in Ireland, in Argentina, and in Australia.

Jane (Sister M. Liguori) and her sister Caroline (Sister M. Joseph) were the daughters of an Irish doctor. Their father's cousin was Gerald Griffin, a well-known Irish Christian Brother who was poet and novelist. Both girls had been well-educated, at Loreto Abbey, Rathfarnham, and became gifted and



*No. 121 Gouger  
Street, Adelaide,  
former Josephite  
shelter and first  
Mercy convent*



*Dutton-Green property in Angas Street in the late 1870s*



*Sr M. Agnes Rogers (L), first Australian-born member, with Sr Lucy Le Couteur*

cultured women. Liguori had had some years of nursing and administrative experience in the Jervis Street Hospital in Dublin, experience which had proved invaluable in Buenos Aires. She was also admired for her magnificent soprano voice, of great range, power, and sweetness.

At her death, her position of authority devolved onto Reverend Mother Clare Murphy. Clare was assisted by Mother Claver Kenny. Mother Antonia McKay was Bursar, and Mother Cecilia Cunningham was Mistress of Novices. It was the first governing council composed totally of Argentinians. Clare, Claver, and Cecilia were to set much of the ethos and tone of the growing community over the next important decades of expansion and consolidation. Towards the end of the century, Antonia was to lead a foundation to the goldfields of Western Australia, where she established a community with a unique spirit.

Further additions, fronting Angas Street, were erected, in 1889, on the paddock east of the Dutton-Green building. The land had been bought, in 1888, for £1,300. This second wing was also a two-storeyed building, and housed a new community room<sup>20</sup> and offices on the ground floor, with bedrooms for twelve sisters above. Boarders could also be accommodated, as well as novices in a novitiate dedicated to Our Lady of Peace. The facade of the new wing was constructed in the same style as the Dutton-Green facade, a refined Italianate design.

At the laying of the foundation stone of this wing, termed the Boarding School, the reporter claimed that Archbishop Reynolds was so inspired by the Mercy Nuns' work for Catholic Education, that his eloquence far transcended His Grace's usually fine oratory as to enthral all who heard him. 'Progress followed progress', concluded that commentator, 'in the work of this Progressive Order'.<sup>21</sup>

From these initial years, the sisters faithfully kept the Mercy custom of visiting sick or needy people in their homes, hospital, or prison, together with the religious instruction of adults as well as children. *The Catholic Record* noted:

The Sisters of Mercy have more freedom than some of the Religious Orders, their work being outside wherever destitution, disease or spiritual want exists. Creed or nationality stand not in their way.

In 1889, a 'missionary school' was opened at Parkside, a suburb of Adelaide going towards the hills. A new church 'mission station' had already been established at St Raphael's, Parkside, then part of Goodwood parish. Two sisters travelled to Parkside daily from the convent in Angas Street. There were one hundred and thirty children in daily attendance by the September of its opening year.

On 1st January of the next year, 1890, they took over the charge of St Vincent de Paul Orphanage, at Goodwood, another suburb of Adelaide.

The orphanage had been operating since 1866, under lay management and then under the Sisters of St Joseph.

The first decade of life in the city of Adelaide had then been completed. It had embraced busy and fulfilling years for the new foundation of Mercy. It had also contained many obstacles and problems. In an effort to liquidate debts, a week long 'Floral Fair' was held in the Adelaide Town Hall. There were seven stalls, each named and decorated for a different country, and each served by a Sister of Mercy. Life in the city of Adelaide was the familiar mix of anxiety and fulfilment.

#### THE FOUNDING MOTHER OF ADELAIDE

Evangelista Fitzpatrick, twice-time foundress, was Reverend Mother Superior from the time the original Mercy group went to Argentina until her death in Adelaide, twenty-nine years later. She was born on Christmas Eve 1822,<sup>22</sup> into a family which was comfortably well-off. She was named Christina. Her mother Catherine was prominent in the Catholic social life of Dublin, and her father, Thomas, was something of a scholar, relatively well-known in the city's literary world. Thomas was also involved in political movements for Catholic Emancipation led by Daniel O'Connell. Both parents were religious, and Thomas was active in work for the poor, especially orphaned children. Two sons became missionary priests, one in India, one in the western frontier of the United States. Evangelista's younger sister also became a Sister of Mercy. It seems certain that the family knew Catherine McAuley for some time before Christina entered, perhaps through their charitable work, perhaps through their connection with Daniel O'Connell, a supporter of Catherine's work.

Christina entered Baggot St Convent not long before her twenty-third birthday, on the eve of the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy, 23rd September, 1845. She received the habit on 25th March, the following year, from the hands of Reverend Mother Cecilia Marmion, and made her vows of profession on 28th March, 1848. Mother Vincent Whitty, who had been guided in the religious life by Catherine McAuley herself, was her mistress of novices. In the ensuing years, Evangelista's leadership qualities became apparent, and she was appointed to positions of governance, as Mother Bursar of the Dublin convent and then as founding Reverend Mother of Buenos Aires. She retained the position of Reverend Mother in Adelaide.

Mother Evangelista is remembered as a strong and loving woman, with a rich personality. She had inherited her parents' empathy with those in need, which led to her work for the poor. Even given the hagiographical inclinations of the obituary writers of the period, Evangelista does seem to have earned the accolades they gave her. To her early companions, she was

something of a second Mother McAuley.<sup>23</sup> To those who formed the community with whom she lived and worked, she was their much beloved 'darling Mother'. To one of her successors in the onerous position of Reverend Mother, she was 'in every sense a courageous woman'.<sup>24</sup>

She had been well-educated for women of her time and place, by the Loreto Sisters at Rathfarnham Abbey, Dublin, a prestigious school for girls established about 1822. Christina had inherited some of her father's literary flair, evident in her predilection for poetry and in the articulateness of the few letters which survive. Her longing for good reading material was lifelong. Although she bewailed the difficulty of getting books and periodicals in such an isolated colony as South Australia, she did not allow distance to defeat her. She persevered in sending to Europe and the United States for texts on newer developments in the church and on subjects of special interest to the sisters. She translated several hymns into Spanish and English, including some from the Latin, such as the *Dies Irae*, the *Lauda Sion*, and the verses of St Francis Xavier.

She loved to write poetry herself, and a couple of quite pleasing poems have survived. One of them, 'Sisters, List!', shows her ability to relieve tension by putting into verse the frightening experience of cannon and other gun fire audible at the convent in Buenos Aires during a political upheaval. Another shows her as something of a modern day feminist in nineteenth century guise, committed to the recognition of women's rights to be considered equal to men.

Not woman's treacherous kiss did our dear Lord betray,  
Nor woman's lying tongue that did that Lord gainsay;  
But woman's tears they were that fell on Calvary's road  
And hers the hand that wiped Christ's tears as there they flowed;  
Last when the Apostles fled – by the dark cross to stay,  
First at the Sepulchre on glorious Easter Day.  
To woman first again did our dear Lord appear,  
And woman first was told by Angels 'Not to fear'.  
Then pause before ye scoff – ye lofty men of lore –  
And on this simple truth reflect awhile, once more:  
'When man's the judge – man wins the palm – no doubt;  
When God's the judge – wise man may be ... put out!'

Evangelista could wield her facility with words polemically when needed. Adelaide newspaper cuttings from 1882 show her vigorously defending the qualifications of the Sisters of Mercy to conduct a Servants' Training School. The situation must have seemed *deja vu* for one who had faced similar complaints in Buenos Aires. Now she details the experiences acquired by Sisters of Mercy in various arenas such as the Crimean War, public hospitals,

city poor houses, as well as their own Houses of Mercy and Training Schools attached to the convents. She refutes strongly any hint of these schools being used to proselytise the Protestants who attend. She ends her spirited defence with a grand peroration in the *South Australian Register*<sup>25</sup>

On the one hand I hate tyranny; on the other I hate all feigning and hypocrisy; nor do I believe that unwilling prayers can please that God who sees the heart.

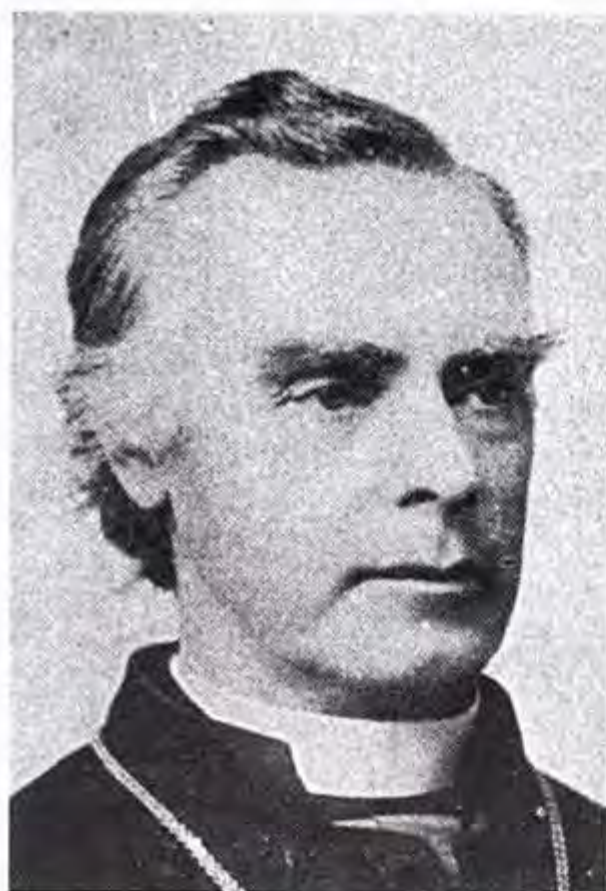
I have an abiding repugnance to enter into religious discussions. On my part it would be unbecoming, and if such discussions are conducted in a captious spirit I believe them to be worse than useless. The only policy I desire is that of Truth and Charity – the policy of doing good to all. I should suppose that any religion worthy of the name would teach the same. May God grant to me and to all that sweet spirit of charity which thinketh no evil.

In keeping with her literary talents, the illuminated page in the Dublin Mercy register, recording details of Evangelista's membership, shows St John the Evangelist, writing his scriptures on the Isle of Patmos (Rev:1).

Evangelista's friend in New Orleans, Mother Austin Carroll, herself a most prolific and successful author<sup>26</sup> gave a kind of short potted biography of Evangelista. She described not only Evangelista's literary abilities, but also her 'unlimited charity' and her 'tender piety'. 'As a novice', Austin Carroll wrote, 'she exhibited the virtues characteristic of her long religious life – solid, unaffected piety, self-denial, charity, and exact observance of rule'. Before leaving for South America, she had spent much time working in the hospital and in visiting the sick in their homes. During the 1849 cholera epidemic, she had nursed its victims at Glasnevin. Later, in Argentina, she entered the homes struck with cholera and yellow fever in the too frequent epidemics which afflicted the city. She herself was attacked by yellow fever in the disastrous 1871 outbreak, in which Father Fahy died. Despite her increasing ill-health and never-ending concern for her community, it was observed that her usual manner was 'patient, cheerful, even gay'.<sup>27</sup>

There is some indication of her physical appearance in the memories of Sister Anthony Burns, dictated in her later years to Sister Kevin Kennedy, then congregational secretary. As a very young Irish woman, Julia Burns had been in the Adelaide House of Mercy and the Children of Mary, and had grown to love Mother Evangelista. She was, Sister Anthony recalled, fairly tall, with an in-between complexion. Not at all like her niece, Sister M. Philomena Fitzpatrick. Philomena was shortish, with dark eyes and much energy. Her aunt Evangelista, on the other hand, was very stately and dignified.

Sister Anthony Burns remembered distinctly some of the instructions which Evangelista gave to the Children of Mary. One was a reflection on a



*First two Archbishops of Adelaide: Christopher Reynolds, John O'Reily*



*Memorial in  
West Terrace  
Cemetery, Adelaide*

favourite virtue – mortification. Using the analogy of an architect building a house on solid foundations, she urged her young listeners to build their own spiritual lives on solid foundations, and ‘to water it with little acts of mortification’. Otherwise it would never bear much fruit.

Julia and others were certainly impressed by Reverend Mother Evangelista’s reputation for sanctity. Sister Anthony had retained the precious memory of having been the last Child of Mary to whom Evangelista had spoken before her death. A certain mystique now surrounded the woman who had guided the community for so many years. Sister M. Alfonsa Ronan claimed that there was a beautiful light shining over Evangelista’s head on her deathbed. The sisters thought that she had had a vision of St Joseph, a favourite saint of all Mercy communities. One sister, afflicted with a bad attack of rheumatism, claimed to be cured when she applied an article of Evangelista’s clothing.<sup>28</sup> Two Children of Mary were alleged to have received vocations to the religious life, while praying beside Evangelista’s coffin.<sup>29</sup>

Evangelista died, 29th June, 1885. Her funeral procession walked from the Cathedral at Victoria Square to the West Terrace Cemetery. It comprised – among others – the Bishop and twenty-four priests, children attending the Mercy schools, and members of the Children of the Sodality of Our Lady of Mercy, founded by Evangelista herself four years previously.<sup>30</sup> Her obituary pronounced that her talents for government were of the highest order, and she was beloved – nay, almost idolised – by all who came in contact with her.<sup>31</sup>

Mother Angela Windle, of the Mt Gambier community, chronicled that, at the moment of her death, they were talking of her and wondering would she come and see them again. On the Saturday previous, Evangelista had made a huge effort and written a telegram expressing her joy that the sisters had received the bishop’s permission to leave Penola, where they were able to attend Mass only once a fortnight. When they heard of her death on the following Monday, their grief, as Angela recorded, was proportioned to the love they bore her, which was very great.

Evangelista had returned their love. She was very sensitive to any expressions of love and affection, not only from among her community but also from without. She was touched by others’ care for herself and her sisters, and by the several offers of hospitality they had received when unsure of their future. In her turn, she had been more anxious for her sisters in their trials than she had been for her own safety and comfort. When she decided to return to Buenos Aires from Dublin before moving to Australia, it was because she could not ‘bear to be away from [her] Sisters in their present difficulties’. When, from Australia, she wrote describing how her health had been adversely affected in Argentina, she added,

Often when ill there, I felt I could gladly lay down my life, but for the

thought of leaving my beloved Sisters so unprotected in such a country ...  
Now, thank God, I can die with an easy mind on that head ...

Perhaps her most outstanding quality was her quality of trust in Divine Providence, an attribute very prominent in the spirituality of Catherine McAuley, as it was also in that of Mother Vincent Whitty, her erstwhile novice mistress. Although Argentina had been a place of continuous trouble, and of very real fear for the safety of her beloved community, and although she had continued to seek to assist the people they served there, she also believed that 'God writes straight on crooked lines'.<sup>32</sup> She found consolation in and was not afraid to carry out the injunction of Jesus to his disciples: 'When you are not welcome in one town, shake the dust off your feet and go elsewhere'.

It must have required another deep act of trust to go to Australia and start once again in an unknown and largely uncultivated country. Such trust was based in her belief that the divine purpose for herself and community would be revealed through those from whom she sought advice and through the decision of the sisters. '... I will ask His Grace's advice about going to Adelaide', she wrote from Dublin,

and whatever he says I will do. It seems to me there is no real opening in Ireland and there is in Australia, although we may naturally like Ireland better, yet, as we have renounced our country and friends for God, there is no use in going back to these feelings now ... In Dr Dorian's diocese there would be work for 4 or 5 ... I will write the Sisters and let them choose, but I know the greater part of them would not mind at all where they go, so that they could do good, and have Irish priests and Bishops.

Her own life – in the scriptural image she presented to her young listeners in the Children of Mary – was a house built on solid foundations. It was also a tree, which was watered by the pain of suffering and darkness of spirit, as well as by the love and joy of community and service and religious consecration, a tree which bore much fruit. That branch of the Mercy Institute she had initially founded in Argentina was to rise again like a phoenix from its ashes. That which she established in Australia was to increase and multiply in members and in good works.

#### THE FIRST DECADE IN MOUNT GAMBIER (1880-1890)

##### **'Paradise' in the South East**

Meanwhile, the branch house at Mount Gambier was also being established. Mount Gambier, itself, may have seemed to some observers a 'paradise'<sup>33</sup> in

the south east, but the conditions there, for the Sisters of Mercy, were – initially and for some time – quite harrowing.

Three hundred and five miles from Adelaide and three hundred from Melbourne, Mount Gambier was the principal town of the south-eastern portion of South Australia. European occupation of the region had begun in the 1840s with the coming of ambitious pastoralists. Men such as the Henty and the Arthur brothers arrived from the east of the continent, and Robert Leake moved south within the colony itself. These explorers found lakes and lagoons, timbered mountains and plains and richly grassed flats, a seeming paradise. They were the first of a squattocracy which gained a monopoly on the South East, and hindered the efforts of the government to promote close settlement of small but independent farmers.

The paradise of the great squatters was not, however, without severe problems, including the resistance of the original inhabitants of the area, the *Bujandik* people. Conquering the South-East bush and making it conform to European practices was also far more difficult than the early settlers had anticipated. Robert Leake, for one, acquired a pastoralist empire but never came to love it. It was not 'sweet pasture' like the lands of Europe. Only the rich volcanic land around Mouth Gambier could be readily moulded to European practices.

Some small farmers did arrive, mostly Scots from the east and Germans from Adelaide. A considerable number of Irish young women were sent to the area as servants. Within two decades of occupation, a number of townships had been built, including those at Robe, Grey, Mount Gambier, Penola and Naracoorte. First established as a private town, 'Gambiartown', in 1854, Mount Gambier eventually became the main centre. The mountain from which it drew its name – as also nearby Mt Schanck – was once a volcano, and the volcanic activity had left a soil very good for agriculture and dairying. Crater lakes, including the Blue Lake, noted for its vivid change of colour each summer, gave the township of Mt Gambier a picturesque setting. Its centre was a cave, possessing an ample supply of fresh water in its depths. The green countryside around was beautiful.

Catholics in the district were mainly of Irish, Scottish, and German origin.<sup>34</sup> Small Catholic schools operated in Penola and Mt Gambier. In 1866, the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart had been initiated in Penola, by teacher Mary MacKillop and priest Julian Tenison Woods. Then, in May, 1880, Mount Gambier experienced 'a real flutter of excitement', when the twelve 'South American Spanish-speaking Sisters of Irish descent' arrived to open a day and boarding school.<sup>35</sup>

In 1880, Mount Gambier had been a municipality since 1876. Its population in the census of that year was given as 4,874. Coach and mail services to



*First Mercy Convent in Mt Gambier, No. 90 Commercial Street*



*First Catholic Church in Mt Gambier, Crouch Street*

Adelaide took three days. There was to be no rail connection to the capital until 1887, and no gas or electricity until the next century.

Sister Mary Angela Windle reminisced about the morning of their departure from Adelaide. It was, she wrote,

a sad morning, and many a gushing tear was hastily brushed away, that others might not be afflicted. We had ... suffered so much together, that a separation seemed harder than nuns generally think it. Many missions had been refused that we might stay together, but God ordained it otherwise.

Angela seemed particularly desolate at the eventual prospect of having to part with 'our darling Mother' Evangelista.

Meanwhile, it was on 14th May that twelve of the twenty-four foundresses, together with Mother Evangelista and Sister M. Catherine, passed in silent procession down King William Street, 'to the amazement of the Adelaidians, who were however, too polite to stare'. At the railway station, they caught the train to the Port. There they took a small steamer, *Coorong*, bound for the south, and landed at Beachport, where they had the experience of being shifted from boat to beach in a tub. It was pitch dark, and the landing and walk along a very narrow jetty made them feel nervous. They spent the rest of the night in a hotel. After breakfast, wrote one of them, the Argentines longed to try what walking up a hill was like, never having mounted one in their lives. Some soon tired, but found even greater difficulty in coming down.

The journey continued by train to Mt Gambier. Frederick Byrne had accompanied them, and had enlivened the tedious journey with engaging accounts of his travels. They were grateful for the priest's attempts to shield them from inquisitive country people, who gathered at the railway stations to peep at the nuns. At Mt Gambier, they were met by a great crowd.

Again, no accommodation had been prepared, but, this time, a hospitable parishioner, Mrs Keon, gave them room in her boarding house for a month. By then, a property on Commercial Street had been acquired. Their finances had been exhausted and so Mother Evangelista learnt 'how to buy a house without money'. Mr N.A. Lord's house was acquired for £1,000<sup>36</sup>. When Evangelista returned to Adelaide, she left just £20 for housekeeping, and the heavy burden of a loan. The Catholics in the area could do little to help except send their children to school, and hold the occasional bazaar. When Angela Windle remembered their first days in Mount Gambier, she claimed: 'My heart gets a pinched feeling even now, when I think of it.' The burden of debt, and the consequent poverty of the new foundation was a recurring theme in Angela's reminiscences.

Nevertheless, the inconveniences caused by restricted funds did not dampen their spirits. Angela herself was an energetic worker, bright and

encouraging in personality. All the sisters began immediately the work they had come to do.

Firstly, they took charge of the 'school' at the corner of Crouch and Sturt Streets. They had thought that, at least, this establishment would be ready for their services. To their surprise and dismay, they found a very dusty church and a complete lack of equipment. Mr John Besley, its former very competent schoolmaster for more than eight years, had left the school two years previously.<sup>37</sup> The sisters had agreed to teach boys, but only small boys and until they had made their First Communion. To their amazement, 'big boys' turned up, 'as if they had a perfect right to do so'. So the sisters, unaccustomed to such tall lads, gathered their courage and their patience.

When they moved into their residence in Commercial Street, they cleaned up one 'big dirty room, used for curing bacon', so as to accommodate a Select Girls' School. They waited to begin classes until a bazaar was held at the beginning of July, and used the interim to make their annual eight days' spiritual retreat.

Their newly purchased home had been erected in 1856/7, and had begun its existence as W.A. Crouch's store and residence, No. 90 Commercial Street East. It was the first two-storeyed building in Mount Gambier and, it was claimed, the first such erected south of the River Murray in South Australia. It was built by local tradesmen from stone and timber, with a galvanised iron roof. The stone was unusual in that it was of limestone formed by ancient deposits of fossilised marine life. Creamy white in colour which discoloured in weathering, it was soft but could withstand great pressure. It had been used as a store until 1880, although its ownership had changed twice<sup>38</sup>.

The opening of the select school in this former store, on Monday, 12th July, was as disappointing as the opening of the parish school. Since the people had had a chance to know them by then, they had expected a rush of pupils, but only three turned up. The curriculum consisted of 'the usual branches of a solid English education' with 'every species of Plain and Ornamental Needlework.' The fees were Two Guineas per Quarter, with extras – Music, French, and Painting – 21s. and Drawing 15s. Payments were to be made quarterly in advance. Payments were probably slow, however, as, by the end of a month, the fee for English and Needlework had been reduced to £1.10s.<sup>39</sup>

The student population grew. Twenty-eight names (sixteen girls, twelve boys) were recorded by the end of the first year, in 'faultless copper-plate script'.<sup>40</sup> From 1881 to 1885, a Preece child was enrolled each year, except for 1884, when there were the twins, James and Jane. The docility and the intelligence of the children in both schools consoled their teachers. And made up, to some extent, for their parish priest's lack of interest.

Dean Timothy Murphy, they thought, was kind but uninterested as he was

expecting to return to Ireland. In fact, the priest had been rather averse to their coming to Mt Gambier. He had been taken aback when he had received a letter from His Lordship stating that twenty-two[sic] sisters were on their way to Mt Gambier from Buenos Aires and that he was to look out for a house and furnish it for them. The sisters were likely to pay the expenses of the voyage, the bishop wrote, but they should supply a house and furnishings for them. Reynolds was confident that the people of the South East would soon build a convent, and also anticipated some special help from Rome, which had acted as intermediary.

Murphy had written in consternation to Father Byrne, claiming that five or seven sisters would be quite enough for some time. As to their opening a branch at Millicent, the farmers there were in a bad way after crop failure. He was very glad, the priest stated, that the Sisters of Mercy were coming to South Australia, and he would assist them in every way he could. But he did not think they would find work enough for such a number in the South East.

Murphy's tolerance soon began to grow even thinner. Some of the leading Catholic people were unhappy about having to support over twenty sisters, he claimed. Murphy himself was in debt, owing – he claimed – to mismanagement of Church finances by his predecessor. He was relieved, eventually, when it was decided that only half the total number of sisters were to come to Mt Gambier. He was prepared to let them have the Deanery until he could get them a suitable house, but was determined that the sisters would be responsible for the cost. Or, if they did not have the money, that Father Byrne, as Vicar General, would carry the burden.

When they arrived in Mt Gambier, the sisters promised to pay for the house and other expenses, and borrowed money from him in the interim. On this loan, he charged them interest at the same rate as the bank, nine per cent. There was some delay in taking over the premises purchased from Mr Lord, and this caused him further frustration. It was costing £1 a week per sister to keep them, meanwhile, and his available monies were coming to an end. If the house was not vacated by 4th June, he declared, he would pay nothing.

On 3rd June, Murphy wrote to Byrne formally giving up charge of the Mt Gambier and Penola missions. He particularly resented the fact that Byrne would not allow the sisters to mortgage their newly acquired property in Adelaide, so as to support the sisters in Mt Gambier, but expected him to mortgage Church property for that purpose. The Vicar had spent all the sisters' money in Adelaide, he claimed, and so should either have kept them there or provided a house for them out of his or their own funds. As from the Monday, he declared, he would consider himself freed from all responsibility as to the temporal affairs of the mission. And, on the Friday week, he would give notice to the person with whom the sisters were staying that he would no longer be responsible.

Byrne arranged matters somehow, and, on 23rd June, received word from Murphy that the nuns were now quite settled down. The priest continued to refuse to give financial help, nevertheless, and insisted that the sisters must meet the rent. He had done too much for them already. A year later, Murphy was still complaining about the financial arrangements with the sisters. He thought Mother Evangelista 'rather cool' in ignoring her liabilities, especially with respect to the interest he had charged.

Murphy had left the parish by October, 1881. Unhappily for the sisters, his successor, Father Michael Hennessy, was no improvement. He, 'being a little peculiar', in the opinion of Angela Windle, 'gave us something to suffer'. It was to their great joy that Fr Hennessy, his health failing, was replaced, in February, 1883. Dean Michael Ryan had from the first befriended them. But even he, engrossed in erecting a new and much needed church, could give them no financial help. They had to 'struggle on paying an immense interest for the money [they] owed for the purchase of the house'.

The year 1882 opened with promise. On Wednesday, 11th January, the first School Picnic was held in connection with Mount Gambier Roman Catholic School. The children marched in procession from Crouch Street to the cricket oval, headed by Ward's band. A number of foot races were contested and a couple of pony races witnessed. Tea and edibles of various kinds were dispensed to the children and parents.<sup>41</sup>

With new school rooms and a dormitory, the sisters were ready to admit boarders. The boarding school was not only to serve the people but was also to help with convent finances. Terms were set at £3 per month for Board and English Education, and five shillings for laundry. Extras were as for the day school. Again their expectations exceeded reality, with just two children enrolling in the boarding school, one six years of age, the other sixteen. However, friendly neighbours and parishioners brought presents, which helped greatly.

In February, Bishop Reynolds was in the district, and administered the sacrament of confirmation to two hundred and ten applicants. On 2nd February, he blessed the Convent of Mercy and received addresses from the children and from Miss Mary Byrne of the Children of Mary Sodality.<sup>42</sup> The bishop talked about his health cure at Lourdes. An altar was set up in the schoolroom of the convent, and at it the bishop said Mass. Mr Besley presided at the harmonium. After the service, ten young ladies were enrolled in the Children of Mary, receiving the blue ribbon denoting membership, while eight received the probationer's green ribbon.

The first public examination of the pupils attending the Convent School in Commercial Street East took place in December of that year. The local newspaper reported that 'the gentle bearing of the children was a feature that attracted attention and indicated careful and tender training had been

bestowed upon them.' A concert followed the examination and distribution of prizes. Their work, which was exhibited, was pronounced good.<sup>43</sup>

The local news also contained a report of a picnic which the Roman Catholic Sunday School held on the cricket oval, on Wednesday, 24th January, 1883. Out-of-school religious education, for both children and adults, was obviously a feature of Mercy ministry in Mt Gambier, as it was everywhere. The spiritual direction of the Children of Mary Sodality was another Mercy tradition to which they faithfully adhered. Their ethnicity was displayed when, at St Patrick's Day Sports and Concert, the Catholic children marched in the procession from the church to the Agricultural society's ground.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, despite their very difficult financial situation, the sisters were diligently pursuing the traditional works of Mercy, through the schools and the preparation of children and adults for the sacraments, through spiritual guidance, especially of young women, and through their regular visitation of people 'in trouble and sickness'.

Dean Ryan may not have been able to give the sisters much financial aid for their support and liquidation of their large debt, but he did help them considerably when they were assessed for rates on the convent in Commercial Street. He appealed, in November, 1883, to the Corporation on the grounds that it was used as an oratory, chapel and school, and so was an institution established for charitable purposes. As such, it was not liable to be assessed. This first appeal was unsuccessful, the sisters being required to pay £50 per year, instead of the proper amount of £85. A further appeal, by Dean Ryan, a couple of weeks later, was upheld, and the sisters were saved what would have been a crippling cost, at this stage of their foundation.<sup>45</sup>

In 1884, on account of the difficulty in maintaining contact at such a distance, and in keeping with the Mercy Rule, the Mount Gambier convent became independent from the Angas Street community. The bishop had been in favour of such a separation, and had interviewed each sister about the leadership of the new community. Accordingly, he had appointed Baptist MacDonnell as Mother Superior and Joseph Griffin as Mother Assistant. *The South-Eastern Star* duly reported his 'ceremonial visit to the Sisters of Mercy in accordance with a decree of Council of Trent'. The formal installation took place Sunday morning, 9th March, 1884.<sup>46</sup>

With a large debt continuing, the conditions of the new congregation remained spartan. This did not deter other young women from joining the community. With separation from Adelaide, it now had its own novitiate, and received its first entrant, Mary Byrne of Mt Gambier, in its first year of autonomy. On 21st April, 1885, Mary received her religious habit and the name of Sister Mary de Sales, in the new church just after its opening. On the same day, a second young woman entered the community. This second



*First and second entrants into the Mt Gambier Mercy Congregation: Sr M. de Sales Byrne (L) and Sr M. Agnes Paula Wells*

postulant was Alice Wells, who became Sister Mary Agnes Paula. She was a convert, who with her sister had been placed in the boarding school on the death of their mother. They became Catholics, to the disgust of their father, who took them away from the school.<sup>47</sup> Although, after a few months, he allowed them to return, the sisters felt that news of their conversion had proved somewhat detrimental to the progress of the school. Yet Alice Wells and her sister, who also joined the Mercies, as Sister M. Joseph, firstly in Adelaide, and then transferring to Mt Gambier, were to prove great assets to the struggling Mt Gambier community.<sup>48</sup>

Those first two postulants were to become long-term leaders of the Mt Gambier community. Sr M. Agnes Paula Wells was its third Mother Superior, a post she held several times. Sister M. de Sales Byrne was founding superior of their first permanent branch house, at Millicent, and later was Novice Mistress. By the end of the decade, five other young local women had followed Mary Byrne and Alice Wells into the Institute.

Life continued for the Mount Gambier congregation as a blend of encouragement and sadness. The annual midsummer exhibition and distribution of prizes in the Convent (that is, Select) School attracted a large attendance, according to *The South-Eastern Star*.<sup>49</sup> The Lady Superior, and the Sisters under her charge, must have been highly gratified, the newspaper stated, at the result of the exhibition, which reflected the greatest credit, not only on the teachers, but also on the pupils who had profited largely by the care and attention bestowed on their education.

Between the teachers and pupils there appeared to be a bond of love and sympathy pleasing to witness, while it was evident that the difficult task of training the youthful mind in those branches of study necessary in every day life, as well as in the accomplishments which tend so much to brighten and make the home cheerful and happy, could not have been entrusted to more accomplished teachers than the Sisters of Mercy have proved to be.

After a lengthy programme of music and recitation, and the distribution of prizes, the audience were invited to inspect the pupils' work displayed in the adjoining classroom. This included a number of carefully executed drawings and paintings; specimens of mapping, writing, and composition; and a varied display of needlework.

In April, 1885, at the request of Bishop Reynolds, the sisters took charge of the school at Penola. The bishop had promised that there would be Mass in Penola every Sunday and once or twice during the week. In fact, it was celebrated just once a fortnight. This was not to the wish of the sisters, who viewed the deprivation of Mass as 'one of the greatest evils that could befall' them. Accordingly, they received permission to retire from the town. Their joy at this 'escape' was modified by the death of Mother Evangelista, in Adelaide.

In the winter of that year, their new chapel – forty by twenty feet – ‘a very neat structure and admirably suited for the purpose’<sup>50</sup> – was erected on the eastern side of their dwelling. It was finished in time for their second ceremony of Reception, on 21st November, 1885, that of Sister Mary Agnes Paula Wells.

In 1887, there was mourning at the death of Sr M. Joseph Griffin’s sister, Mother Liguori, in Adelaide. On the positive side, Liguori’s successor, Mother Clare Murphy, helped the Mt Gambier community pay back some of their mortgage. She lent them, at little interest, a recent inheritance of one of the Adelaide sisters. News that the convent in Mercedes, Argentina, had at length been sold also lightened the heaviness felt from the burden of debt. Mother Baptist was confident enough to build a new refectory and adjoining rooms.

These additions were made doubly necessary by the illness of Sr Magdalene Mary, who could no longer mount stairs. Born Honor Dalton, Magdalene was the first of three entrants in Argentina from Westmeath, Ireland<sup>51</sup>. She had entered in Buenos Aires on 15th August, 1862. There and in South Australia, she worked in house duties. Magdalene died, after a long illness, in 1888, on Palm Sunday, while most of her companions were in the church. She was under fifty years of age.

The next year, Mother Mary of Mercy Moore died. Mary Moore had also been an early entrant into the Buenos Aires convent, joining it on 4th April, 1864. She was somewhat older than the typical postulant, having been born 30th April, 1832, in Buenos Aires, ‘of a most religious family’. She was part of the Governing Council of the Buenos Aires convent, acting as bursar from 1872 to 1880, and briefly also as Novice Mistress. She died in Mount Gambier on 4th December, 1889. She had undergone an operation for cancer, which seemed to be effective. When the cancer returned, she sent a last message to her family and friends in Argentina:

I am on my death bed. I could not be happier – I did hope to return to Buenos Aires, but it is not the Will of God. However, when the Sisters do go, I beg you will be kind to them.

It was not long before some of the Mount Gambier sisters did return to Buenos Aires. In May, 1889, news of an exodus of Irish immigrants to the city had led to the proposal that some of the Mercies return to the Argentine. Irish people in Buenos Aires sent money for the fares. After a period of reflection and consultation, Mother Baptist MacDonnell and five other sisters departed for South America, on 20th May, 1890.

One of these six, Sister Mary Stanislaus Harrington, claimed that Mother Mary Baptist may be regarded as the second foundress of the Argentinian Mercies, as it was mainly through her that the sisters returned to Buenos Aires. Archbishop Aencios of Buenos Aires, who had fought against and had never been reconciled to their leaving his diocese, had written to Baptist,

asking her to return with a few sisters. The same request was made by several of their friends and relatives.<sup>52</sup>

At first, according to Stanislaus, 'no one thought of accepting the invitation, but our friends in Buenos Aires, including the Archbishop Dr Aneiros, were so insistent that at length M. M. Baptist put the question before the community, some of whom agreed at once to go.' Baptist had also sought advice from Mercies in Australia, Dublin and elsewhere, as well as from spiritual counsellors in Australia. Most seem to have favoured a return to Argentina. One from whom she had sought advice was Mother Vincent Whitty of Brisbane, who had helped them go to Argentina from Dublin in 1856. Vincent encouraged them to return in 1890.<sup>53</sup>

Indirectly revealing something of her own thoughts and feelings, Stanislaus Harrington described their leave-taking from the sisters remaining behind in Mt Gambier, including those seven young Australians who had joined them. 'The sacrifice on the part of our dear, young Sisters whom we were leaving must have been great, indeed, as they were losing their beloved old M. M. Baptist, who had been all to them.'

Archbishop<sup>54</sup> Reynolds was not happy, either, at losing the sisters and unwillingly gave them permission to exit his diocese. The Adelaide Mercies also seem to have opposed the move. When the travellers went to Adelaide from the South East, they stayed with the Dominican Sisters rather than at Angas Street Convent. The Mt Gambier convent chronicle states that this was because the Adelaide community were in an interregnum between two superiors. Mother Baptist recorded more privately that they had had to go to the Dominican Convent on account of the 'violent opposition of our Sisters in Adelaide.' She added:

Poor darlings, they could not face the thought of our returning here and as His Grace only gave us leave on account of the letter from Propaganda they felt bound I think to show their dislike of our leaving Australia. Nevertheless Dr Reynolds behaved most kindly, gave me my appointment in the chapel of the Dominican nuns (I did feel that and our own convent so near) and gave us each his blessing, a little stiffly to be sure, but I think he felt it too much to dare to be anything but stiff. The former V.G., Dr Byrne, put us on board *The Orient* which brought us safely to Tilbury.<sup>55</sup>

In Buenos Aires, the little group lost no time in providing a 'House' for the Irish girls and the task of finding situations for them. At the beginning of the next year, they were able to return again to their old convent and schools – for boarders, poor children, and orphans. By September of that same year, 1891, they had more than doubled their numbers, with four novices and three postulants. The re-foundation of the Mercies in Argentina was well under way.

A month after the departure for Argentina, Sister Margaret Mary Coffey left Mount Gambier and went to join the Adelaide congregation. She had been, it seems, lonely for her great friend, Sister Martha Mary Maloney. Margaret and Martha had been the two postulants, of the original four of 1856, who had remained with the Mercy Institute. Anne Coffey had come from Drogheda, north of Dublin, at the age of nineteen. Mary Maloney, also nineteen, had come from Athy. The two young women had been received and professed together. Both were occupied in house duties.<sup>56</sup>

Though the departure of seven experienced members must have been a set-back to the fledgling foundation, it did not deter those left behind. The community now numbered twelve again – five of the original twelve, and the seven Australians. Mother Mary Joseph Griffin was appointed Superior and Mother Mary Angela Windle her assistant.

Mother Joseph, the younger of the two Griffin sisters, had been among the first chosen to go to Buenos Aires, in the earlier part of 1856. She suffered in Ireland from a weak chest, and it was thought the warmer climate would help. In Mount Gambier, she was first the assistant to Mother Baptist and then her successor. She held this position for two terms of three years, and then again that of Mother Assistant, for a few months before her death in 1896.

#### THE FOUNDING MOTHER OF MOUNT GAMBIER MOTHER BAPTIST MACDONNELL

Mother Baptist MacDonnell and her sisters had needed to be strong women if they were to establish their community fruitfully in the South East. The Mercies came to the area with several decades of an effective educational tradition behind them. They were women whose experience was relatively wide, covering as it did the establishment of cities and schools in Ireland and in Argentina. Nevertheless, there were many factors operating against their success.

In 1880, the scattered Catholic population of the South East was only around the two thousand mark.<sup>57</sup> The previous decade had been one of internal factionalism within the South Australian church. Memories of dissent among both clergy and laity over the activities of Father Julian Tenison Woods and the Sisters of Saint Joseph remained. Moreover, the little Catholic schools at Penola and Mount Gambier were where the new religious order had started.<sup>58</sup> The collapse of Woods' centralised educational system meant that local effort was now the chief determinant of the Catholic school endeavour. Little help could be expected from central church funds. The diocese as a whole was, in fact, heavily in debt, and the 1875 Education Act had seemingly closed the door to any hope of State aid.

Mother Baptist MacDonnell was a strong woman. She showed stalwart leadership qualities in three Mercy foundations: Assistant to Reverend

Mother Evangelista on the foundation in Buenos Aires, the first Reverend Mother of the foundation in Mount Gambier, and the first Reverend Mother of the group which re-founded the Mercy Institute in Argentina.

Mother Baptist had been born Caroline MacDonnell on 7th April, 1826.<sup>59</sup> Her birth occurred in Cape Town, South Africa, where her father, James, was an army doctor at the time. Her mother was Eleanor. Caroline was educated at the Convent of Mercy, Baggot Street, Dublin, and joined the order there on 2nd February, 1848. She was professed 14th January, 1851, and held the posts of superior in both Athy and Booterstown, before going to Buenos Aires as Mother Assistant. After her term as Assistant, she held either the post of Novice Mistress or Bursar, until the elections of 1871.

Baptist has been described as a brilliant and cultured woman, possessing a beautiful, strong, complex nature.<sup>60</sup> She was remembered gratefully by Archbishop Aneiros for the way in which she cared for him when he was struck by yellow fever in 1870. It is possible that she may not have always seen eye-to-eye, in decision-making, with Evangelista, another strong woman. After the first term of three years in Buenos Aires, Baptist was replaced as Mother Assistant by Sister M. Gertrude Rorke, a new arrival from Ireland just three or four years professed, although she remained on the governing council for four more terms.

Her leadership qualities were again recognised, however, when she was appointed Mother Assistant of the contingent to South Australia and then Superior of the branch house of Mt Gambier in 1880 – an extremely difficult post. She was elected Reverend Mother when it became a separate foundation in 1884, and remained so until 1890. In that year, when she was sixty-four, she led the restoration of the Mercy Institute in Argentina. The decision seems to have been largely hers and it was a spirited and courageous decision to return, knowing the difficulties they had once fled from and those that would now face them, and experiencing the resistance to the move from the bishop and the sisters in Adelaide. She was not quite thirty when she left Ireland for Argentina. She left Australia to return to Argentina at the age of sixty-four, 'an act of true heroism'.<sup>61</sup>

The Irish-Argentinian church historian, James M. Ussher, greatly admired the courage of those sisters who returned from Australia. Writing some sixty years later, he commented that the membership of the new group had then reached one hundred and twenty (seventy-four dead, forty-six alive), and described them as a community that exhibited 'the beautiful traits that adorn Sisters of Mercy all over the world.'

These characteristics are solid unaffected piety, constant self-denial, all-embracing love of the poor, unalterable patience in the presence of annoyances and difficulties, and an exact observance of their rule.<sup>62</sup>

Ussher's comments on their life and work can be translated into a portrait of a group of women who – both now and in the last century – have tried to be with and to serve people who are poor and distressed in any way. In the beginnings, Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick had expressed to the Archbishop of Buenos Aires that the sisters not only came for the Irish but for all who had need, without any distinction. It was Mother Baptist MacDonnell whose energy and decisiveness made possible the continuation of that service in Argentina. The sense of a great kindness, generosity, and love for the very poor has survived, among the Argentinian Mercies, to the present day.

Baptist may be considered elderly when she led the group back to Buenos Aires. Her life had been one of having to face exacting situations, and now she faced another. The Irish people in Argentina were caught in circumstances of suffering and misery, a condition caused or intensified by political instability, the prevalence of disease, and crises in employment and money.<sup>63</sup> Baptist also suffered from long-standing bad eyesight, with severe cataracts in both eyes. During her years in Mt Gambier, she had been obliged to visit an oculist in Melbourne to try to prevent the possible loss of sight in her right eye.

On the occasion of the visit to Melbourne, a tender side of Baptist was displayed. The Mt Gambier annalist recorded with sensitivity the affection shown by Baptist towards former companions in Ireland. She took with her Sister Mary Rose Fitzsimons, the youngest of the Argentinians, and, on the way, visited Ballarat and Geelong. In both towns, there were many women with whom she had been through the Novitiate programme in far away Dublin. The reunion in Geelong was particularly poignant. The annalist wrote that it was a meeting of old friends after twenty-seven years' separation, whose hearts had been united in the same work and the same love for a dear departed Superior, Mother M. Xavier Maguire. Unable to bear it, Mother M. Baptist had sat and wept, while the dear kind faces of old friends were bedewed with tears. However, the tears did not continue for too long, and 'the merry laugh was soon substituted'.<sup>64</sup> In Melbourne, at Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, they had a long chat, on arrival, with Mother M. Ursula Frayne, foundress of both the Perth and the Melbourne Mercies.

Before her death in Buenos Aires, on 16th March, 1894, Baptist had become almost completely blind. She had been visited the previous day by her old friend, Archbishop Aneiros. Her going left a great void in the community. A non-Catholic paper of the time wrote that she had been 'a most gentle, gracious Christian' and would be remembered within 'a circle far wider than the church she loved and served so well.' A modern Argentinian Mercy historian claims that Mother Baptist MacDonnell was a valiant woman, intelligent, of noble virtue, a woman of her times, strong and great.<sup>65</sup>



*The six sisters who returned to Argentina, 1890. (L to R: Srs M. Baptist MacDonnell, Stanislaus Harrington, Teresa Casey, Bernard Foley, Gabriel Romero, Rose Fitzsimons)*



*Memorial in  
Mercy cemetery in  
grounds of St  
Ethnea's College,  
Buenos Aires*

THE OTHER SISTERS  
WHO RETURNED TO ARGENTINA

We do not know much about the Mt Gambier life of Dublin-born Sister M. Bernard (Eliza) Foley.<sup>66</sup> She had first gone to the Argentine in December, 1857, when she was not quite twenty-nine years of age. The return to Buenos Aires in 1890, gave her the opportunity to see some of her family, her sister and nephew, who met the party at Tilbury Docks and helped them through the customs there. In Argentina, she was part of the first governing council of the re-founding group, with the role of Bursar.

Likewise, Sister M. Teresa Casey was a silent worker. Anna Casey was born in Buenos Aires, and lived for only four years after their return.

Sister M. Gabriel (Estaurofilla) Romero was also born in Buenos Aires,<sup>67</sup> and died there, not quite seventy-five years of age.

The youngest of the Irish women was Mary Harrington, Sister M. Stanislaus. She hailed from Cork, entered in Buenos Aires in early 1869, left for health reasons before she had completed her novitiate, but re-entered before two years had elapsed. She died in Buenos Aires on 22nd December, 1910, after a life full of good works.

Having returned to Argentina from Australia, Stanislaus Harrington had become Assistant to Reverend Mother Baptist MacDonnell, and replaced her on the latter's death. She proved an energetic leader. The following year, 1895, under her guidance, the community – unable to recover the deeds of property belonging to them on their old site at Rio Bamba Street – decided to set up new headquarters in another part of the city. On an extensive site at the corner of 24 de Noviembre and Estados Unidos Streets, Mater Misericordia Convent and Academy were erected by 1897. The convent became the headquarters of the expanding Congregation.

Stanislaus wrote a lengthy account of the departure from Argentina. She passes over in silence her years in Mt Gambier, except to note Archbishop Reynold's reluctance to allow them to leave his diocese where they had 'worked with such success for ten years'. She comments that the grief on 'both sides in the sacrifice', when they finally departed, was assuaged by the thought that it was made for the greater honour and glory of God.

Her chronicle is full of human touches. It is a woman's tale, concerned with small details of daily existence. She is quick to appreciate any sign of friendship and connectedness. She has something of the artist's eye, as she describes the sights along the way during the long sea voyages from Australia to England and thence to Argentina. It is also a story told by a nineteenth century nun, glossing over any controversy over their departure or any hint of disapproval from the sisters in Adelaide, but rejoicing to return finally to

'our dear old convent' in Buenos Aires. The missionary instinct of the period is strong. She expresses sadness because the majority of the strange peoples seen or encountered along the way have no 'right knowledge of the true God'.

Sister M. Rose (Martha) Fitzsimons was another native of Buenos Aires. She died there, a very old lady, in Buenos Aires on 19th February, 1953. Her long life and her great love for Australia, expressed in an enduring correspondence, made her a strong reminder of the common origin of the two communities, so distant geographically from each other.

Though but recently professed when she came to Australia, Rose was appointed Novice Mistress when the Mt Gambier community separated from Adelaide. She was Novice Mistress to the young Sister M. Liguori Besley who joined the community in 1886, who had volunteered to go to Argentina but was not chosen, and who remained to exercise a profound and long-lasting influence on the Mt Gambier community. Rose was again Novice Mistress in Argentina, and guided nineteen young women to profession in the first five years. Subsequently, she took an active role in the leadership of the Congregation, as Reverend Mother or as Mother Assistant.

Historian James Ussher made her the sole exception to his resolve not to single out individual sisters for special mention. Writing his history when Rose was almost ninety years of age, he explained:

Her case is unique. Always a model nun, the admiration of her companions, she is yet, after seventy-one years of religious life, as lively, active and energetic as ever, in the full enjoyment of her intellectual faculties, and the present superior of the Irish Girls' Home.

Communicating with Mother Dolores Barry of Adelaide, a couple of years before her death, Rose reminisced about her time in Mt Gambier. The beginning was very poor but they were very happy. The country was beautiful; the scenery enchanting; and the people were kind, generous and good. Their Superioress was a most loving and kind person. When they left they had built a school and all debts had been paid. £300 was in the bank. Their friends in Buenos Aires had helped.<sup>68</sup>

Some of the older sisters in the community in Argentina remembered that Mother Rose had told them that she had not wanted to leave Australia. They recalled seeing her weep when she received a letter from there. She had really loved Australia, and when chosen to come back had expressed the wish to remain. The Superior (Mother Baptist) had then said to her, 'Well, who asked you, dear, what you want to do? You're going!' It was surmised that her family were pressing for her return.<sup>69</sup>

At the time of her Golden Jubilee of Profession, her erstwhile compatriots still in Australia – Clare, Claver, Cecilia, and Margaret Mary – together with other South Australian Mercies, cabled their good wishes. The Argentinian

press commented on those voices from Australia that joined with those of Pius XI, Argentinian dignitaries, clergy, and hosts of pupils and friends, to swell the generous chorus of praise, appreciation and congratulations.<sup>70</sup>

On receiving the news of Rose's death, in 1953, at the age of ninety-four, the Adelaide Mercies grieved at the loss of 'the last living human link between Australia and Argentina.' However, they rejoiced that 'the golden chain of Sisterhood and sincere affection between the two still remain. Not even death can sever this bond of pure affection'.<sup>71</sup> One of the Buenos Aires sisters, Sister M. Patrick, wrote to Adelaide in similar vein.

The old chain which united Australia and Argentina has worn out. Let us hope we may be able to forge a new one, which will keep the family friendship alive while there are Sisters of Mercy in both countries.

Sister M. Patrick herself promised to continue these relations which had always existed between them and which she knew

all those great old souls who were the founders of both our communities would wish to continue even though they are now all gone.<sup>72</sup>

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1. South Australia was an exception, in that it never received convicts.
  2. Austin Carroll, 'Twenty-four years in Buenos Ayres', *American Catholic Quarterly Review*, vol.13, 1888, 478-489.
  3. Phrase taken from Derek Whitelock. The following analysis of South Australian history relies heavily on standard texts, especially Derek Whitelock, *Adelaide 1836-1976 A History of Difference*, University of Queensland Press, 1977; *The Flinders History of South Australia, Political History*, ed. Dean Jaensch, and *Social History*, ed. Eric Richards, Netley: Wakefield Press, 1986; Helen Jones, *In Her Own Name Women In South Australian History*, Netley: Wakefield Press, 1986; Douglas Pike, *Paradise of Dissent: South Australia 1829-1857*, Melbourne University Press, 1957.
  4. Flinders' *Social History*, 283, gives minimum of 10,000, perhaps two to four times that number.
  5. Douglas Pike, *Paradise of Dissent*.
  6. Manhood suffrage; triennial Parliaments; secret ballot; payment for politicians; votes for women; compulsory arbitration; legal recognition to trade unions. (Whitelock).
  7. In the 1881 census, Anglicans were 27.1%, Methodists 22.6%, the other Protestant churches combined 21.9%, and Catholics 15.2% (i.e. about 41,000). See table 8.1, compiled from censuses, 1844-1901, *Flinders Social History*, 229.
  8. Margaret M. Press, *From Our Broken Tilt South Australian Catholics 1836-1906*, Archdiocese of Adelaide, 1986, 264. The Catholic population of Adelaide, according to table compiled by Marie Foale, archdiocesan archivist, was 21,073 in 1891, out of a total of 47,179. (Press, Appendix IV).
  9. *Flinders Social History*, 202.
  10. Later Mrs Schulze. Mary Ann was one of the first pupils and was entrusted with some very valuable, fragile furniture when the sisters moved. She was strong and big for her age. She often repeated this story to Sister Kevin Kennedy. Mrs Schulze died 24th Sept., 1953. Mary O'Mahoney, Gouger Street, sister of Rev Fr O'Mahoney, was also one of the first pupils.
  11. Marie Therese Foale, RSJ, *Providence 125 Years of Josephite Aged Care 1868-1993*, 11. The Providence had been in a rented house. The Josephites took the few elderly ladies with them.

12. Margaret Press, *From Our Broken Toil*, 209.
13. See later in chapter.
14. Demolished c.1958.
15. It was bought on the advice of Miss Elizabeth (Bessie) Baker of Morialta, a convert to Catholicism and author of *A Modern Pilgrim's Progress*.
16. He promised to arrange that the sisters would retain legal possession of it, for the offering of one candle a year – a promise not fulfilled by the time of his death.
17. Advertisement, 1882, copy in MASA, 300/20.
18. Born 1861, entered 2.2.1882, professed 1885, died 1905.
19. B. 1862, ent. 2.2.1884, prof. 1887, d. 1945.
20. This community room was relatively large but was only a small part of the present community room (1996).
21. MS. on Catholic Education and Sisters of Mercy, copy, MASA, 150/3. Foundation Stone of the Boarding School was laid 12.3.1889.
22. There are various dates given, I have taken the date in the Dublin Mercy Archives. It is confirmed by her age at the 1869 census in the City of Buenos Aires, 46 years. (Eduardo Coghlan, *El Apóste de los Irlandeses a la Formacion de la Nacion Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 1982.
23. Annals 1880-1966, MASA, 150/31.
24. Bernadette O'Leary, RSM, *Sisters of Mercy A Short History of their Presence in Argentina 1856 ... 1992*, mimeographed, n.d.
25. June 30, 1882.
26. Sister Mary Hermenia Muldrey, R.S.M., *Abounding in Mercy – Mother Austin Carroll*, New Orleans: Habersham, 1988.
27. 'Twenty-four Years in Buenos Ayres', *American Catholic Quarterly Review*, vol.13, 1888.
28. *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, vol.IV, New York: P.O'Shea, 1895, 149.
29. Julia Daly, who went to the Sisters of Mercy, Mt Gambier, and Mary Shanahan, who entered the Dominican Order, North Adelaide.
30. 24th September, 1881.
31. *The Catholic Monthly*, August, 1885, MASA, 300/8.
32. Taken from a talk by Sister Isabel McDermott, RSM, 'Brief History of the Sisters of Mercy in Argentina', at the celebration in Pittsburgh in 1994, of the 150th anniversary of the first U.S. foundation of the Sisters of Mercy, reprinted in *Listen*, Journal of the Sisters of Mercy Australia, 1994, vol.3, no 2.
33. Robert Leake, quoted in Leith MacGillvray, 'We have found our Paradise': The South-East Squattocracy, 1840-1870', in *Insights into South Australian History*, vol. 1, Historical Society of South Australia, 1992. Some of the content about the South East comes from this publication also.
34. Margaret Press, *From Our Broken Toil*, vol.1, 70-1.
35. Les Hill, *Mount Gambier the City around a Cave*, Leabrook: Investigator Press, 1992.
36. Allegedly passed in at £800.
37. *South-Eastern Star*, 14.5.1878.
38. Crouch's store was sold to Dolamore, Ramey & Co. in 1870. They sold it two or three years later to N.A. Lord & Co.
39. *South-Eastern Star*, 9.7.1880, 10.8.1880.
40. *Border Watch*, 11.11.1995.
41. *South-Eastern Star*, 13.1.1882.
42. One to two years later, Mary joined the community as their first postulant. Percy Rowan gave the address of welcome from the boys at the Catholic School.
43. *South-Eastern Star*, 22.12.1882.
44. *South-Eastern Star*, 20.3.1883.
45. *South-Eastern Star*, 16.11.1883, 30.11.1883, 4.12.1883.
46. *South-Eastern Star*, 11.3.1884.
47. *South-Eastern Star*, 2.9.1884, reports the baptism of two Misses Wells, recently pupils of Convent School. Another source says there were three sisters at the school and all three became Catholics. There was fifteen years difference in age between Alice and Nora, so there might well have been an intervening sister.

48. Alice Wells, b. 1855, ent. 1885, prof. 1887, d. 1940; Nora Wells, b.1870, ent. Adelaide 1887, prof. 1889, transf. to Mt G. 1902, d.1947.
49. 19.12.1884.
50. *South-Eastern Star*, 22.9.1885. Its dimensions were 40' by 20'.
51. The other two were Sister M. Alfonsa Ronan, who also came to Australia, and Sister M. Frances Harne, who died in Buenos Aires at the age of 26.
52. Bernadette O'Leary, RSM, stated to the author that some of the sisters had never been in favour of leaving Argentina.
53. Baptist MacDonnell to Sister Mary Claver, Brisbane, 14.9.1881, on occasion of Mother Vincent's Jubilee, Brisbane Mercy Archives.
54. He became archbishop in 1887, with the creation of the diocese of Port Augusta.
55. Baptist to SrM.Claver, Brisbane, 14.9.1891.
56. It is possible I may be wrong in stating that it was Sr Margaret Coffey who went to Mount Gambier at first, not SrMartha Maloney. Sources are conflicting.
57. 1,589 in 1866; 2,929 in 1891; 3,267 in 1901, Appendix I, Margaret Press, *From Our Broken Toil*, from list compiled by Sister Marie Foale, Archdiocesan Archivist.
58. A school was begun at Mt Gambier at the same time as the Penola School where Mary MacKillop taught. The Mt Gambier school was run by Blanche Amsinck (later Sr M. Xavier) and Lexie MacKillop.
59. Dates differ. This is according to the Dublin register. In the 1869 census, her age was recorded as 44 years.
60. Austin Carroll, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, vol. 2, New York: P. O'Shea, 1883, 157.
61. Bernadette O'Leary, *Sisters of Mercy ... in Argentina*.
62. James Ussher, *The Irish Sisters of Mercy in Argentina*, 26.
63. Baptist to Claver, Brisbane, 14.9.1881.
64. Angela Windle's written Memoirs, MASA, 150/33. Mother Xavier Maguire had been Superior of Baggott Street and later foundress of the Mercy Institute in Geelong.
65. Ana Maria McGuire, *Recent History of the Sisters of Mercy in Argentina*.
66. Born 2.10.1829; received 24.6.1858; professed 16.7.1860.
67. Gabriel Romero was obviously Spanish on her father's side, but could have been Irish on her mother's. Three of the more senior members of the community in Buenos Aires, in 1992, had Spanish or Italian names, but were bi-lingual, because their mothers were of Irish origin and English was spoken in the home.
68. 5.6.1951, MASA, 305/5.
69. Interviews with Sisters M. Ita Corby and Bernadette O'Leary, Buenos Aires, 1992.
70. MASA, 171/3.
71. MASA, 171/3.
72. 11.3.1953.

### CHAPTER THREE

## Angas Street: Effective Use of Resources

#### CONVENT OF MERCY, ANGAS STREET – DEVELOPMENT AFTER 1890

THE gradual but rich material development of the Angas Street convent and school complex is a striking symbol of the effective use of limited resources. The Convent of Mercy, Angas Street, grew in phases, until it became a prominent and historical landmark in the city streetscape, especially as the other early residences gave way to commercial houses.

The convent itself was somewhat unusual in design for Australia, linking, as it did, two former Italianate residences with a series of additions in similar style. The whole eventually made a U shape, formed by a simple classical cloister of Renaissance style around a quadrangle, bright with rose trellis, flowers, and lawn. The cloister and quadrangle also set the atmosphere and scene for a small but superb chapel modelled on the design of an Italian Renaissance basilica. A variety of materials were used in the construction of the complex. The nineteenth century buildings were of bluestone with concrete rendered dressings. Later additions were of brick.

Initially, the convent – the former Dutton-Green residence – stood on the western end of the future complex. Gradually, it was extended eastwards as well as northwards. Adjoining the convent was the school, St Aloysius College<sup>1</sup>, located in a number of buildings constructed in several stages. Historically, it is well-nigh impossible to separate the growth of the convent and that of the school, as they were intimately intertwined from the beginning.

#### CONVENT LEADERSHIP

The new leadership of the congregation was durable and very able. Clare Murphy was perhaps the most outstanding and gifted of the Argentinian-



*Convent leaders from 1887: (L to R) Mothers M. Clare Murphy, Cecilia Cunningham, Claver Kenny*



*Mothers Clare Murphy (L) and Catherine Flanagan, before 1911*



*Mother Antonia McKay, taken at Coolgardie*



*An early Angas Street community*

born sisters who came to Adelaide.<sup>2</sup> One of her successors in office, Mother Dolores Barry, wrote simply but tellingly: 'We loved Mother'. The *Southern Cross* newspaper stated that she was responsible for much of the remarkable development and extension of the original Mercy foundation. 'For thirty years', the newspaper declared, 'though the sky was not always clear from clouds, this lady wisely guided the community's destinies. Under Mother M. Clare, success followed success'.

Mother Clare (Julia) Murphy was not quite twenty-nine on arriving in Adelaide. She possessed many talents and used some of them to teach music and train choirs. However, her greatest gifts were in administration, and she held positions of authority for almost forty years. She had continued to occupy the positions of Superior or Assistant – apart from two periods, when she could not be re-elected<sup>3</sup> – until 1932, four years before her death at the age of eighty-five.

Mother Claver (Anne) Kenny was part of the governing council for thirty years, either as Mother Assistant or Mistress of Novices. She had been in charge of the Novices in Buenos Aires, from 1874 to the time of her departure. As one of Evangelista's council, Claver had voyaged with her to Ireland in 1879, the journey which had resulted in the decision to leave Argentina. The novices in Adelaide were also placed in her care, in 1881.

The third member of Clare Murphy's council was Mother Cecilia (Honorina)<sup>4</sup> Cunningham, a second cousin of Mother Claver. She was the second youngest of the twenty-four foundresses, being about a month older than Rose Fitzsimons. She was thus only twenty-one when she came to Australia, and just two years professed. While still in her twenties, she was elected Mistress of Novices, and spent many years in that position, as well as alternating, at other periods, as Mother Superior or Mother Assistant. She was the first 'Mother General' when Adelaide and Mt Gambier were re-united in 1941, an office she resigned when she was in her eighty-eighth year. She died on 2nd August of that same year, 1945.

The final member of this 1887 leadership group was Mother Antonia (Catherine) McKay – 'a very remarkable woman'.<sup>5</sup> Antonia was elected as Mother Bursar. When, in 1890, the Mercies assumed responsibility for the St Vincent de Paul Orphanage at Goodwood, Antonia was placed in charge. In 1897, she responded to a plea from Bishop Gibney of Perth, Western Australia, for sisters to come to the goldfields. Antonia was selected as the superior of the new community.

When Antonia became superior of Goodwood orphanage, her place as Bursar was taken by Mother Catherine (Elizabeth) Flanagan. Elizabeth was a Dubliner, had been professed at Baggot Street, and was part of the initial Argentinian foundation. In Dublin, she had volunteered for the Crimean War service but had been thought too young, to her very great disappoint-

ment. In Adelaide, she was in charge of St Anthony's Boys School for some years, and was sacristan and music teacher at other times in her life. In a large portrait which survives, she looks a quiet, unassuming person, as steady as her long life as a Sister of Mercy in three countries undoubtedly was. When she died in 1911, aged over eighty years, the school magazine spoke of her 'utter unselfishness, deep humility, warm Irish nature, and sympathy to the poor and sick'.

#### G R O W T H   A T   A N G A S   S T R E E T

Judging from the expansion that followed the initial decades, the convent leadership made wise decisions. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Select School, St Angela's, had to lease more rooms in the cathedral hall. The sisters used the hall and some of the attached rooms of the two-storeyed building. The arrangement proved very inconvenient, however, as the building was frequently used for other purposes during the day. The number of boarders had reached twenty by the turn of the century, and was increasing, as was the number of sisters.

By 1901, despite the 1890s drought which caused much economic hardship in the colony, there were one hundred and one girls in the Select School, including thirty-three boarders. In this year, the select school gave up the title of St Angela's and took on that of St Aloysius', in honour of Aloysius Gonzaga, the young saint who had been declared patron of youth on the bicentenary of his death. There were two hundred and ninety children in the two non-fee paying schools in the hall – St Angela's Primary School for girls and St Anthony's School for younger boys. Fortunately, the children could play in the cathedral grounds, for the convent school yard was not much larger than a tennis court.

To ease the accommodation problem, a three-storeyed block was built in 1904<sup>6</sup>. It was situated on the back section of the convent property and adjoined St Philomena's House of Mercy, whose kitchen it shared. The new block was given the name of St Aloysius High and Boarding School, and provided both classrooms and boarders' accommodation. The adjoining end of St Philomena's became a dining room for the boarders. The rest of the space between the two buildings served as an open playground, roofed by the second storey of the school building, and with a northern exit into the cathedral grounds. There was one unusual feature – a lookout, or roof promenade, on top of the third storey. After negotiating a spiral staircase, one could see, from the lookout, the Mt Lofty Ranges as well as the coast. The lookout was blown over many years later in a storm.

This 1904 school building was made possible by a legacy from Mother

Clare Murphy and a donation from Sister M. Joseph Long, an Australian-born member. As in Buenos Aires, it was a feature of the sisters' commitment to the people that several of them – while still living – donated quite sizeable legacies to the convent, though they were not obliged to do so. Mother Clare, accompanied by her assistant, Mother Claver Kenny, had returned to Argentina in 1901-2 to procure her legacy. They also brought back a postulant, Rose Kenny. Rose was a niece of Mother Claver, and became Sister Margaret Mary. The other legatee, Sister Mary Joseph (Anne) Long, had spent more than the first half of her life caring for her parents and crippled brother. On their deaths, she had entered Angas Street Convent, aged fifty-five. More than £2,000 was available, from the two donations, for the construction of the 1904 school building, the first separate school block.

This layout remained unchanged until the 1920s. Most of Angas Street, in 1920, was still residential, tree lined and quiet. Opposite the convent were some very fine examples of the Adelaide villa, stone houses with wrought-iron balconies. To the east, along Angas Street, were the Acraman and Barr Smith residences. Mrs Robert Barr Smith was very friendly with the community, particularly Mother Clare Murphy. Each year she donated a gold medal for the dux (academic) of the school.<sup>7</sup> Next door to the west, along the street, was 'Eringa Hall', home of the third generation of Gunsons, Dr J.M. Gunson and family.<sup>8</sup> The Gunson children attended the school and would hop over the dividing wall to go to class. The boarders' washroom windows faced onto the Gunson yard, and the boarders loved to scratch the whitewash off the windows to look at parties in the Gunson grounds. Dr Gunson medically treated sisters and boarders free. His brother, George, was part of the law firm of Gunson and Culshaw, who acted as legal advisers to the sisters. There was usually a Gunson prize for sports each year.

#### FURTHER EXPANSION AFTER 1920

In 1920, expansion, on a fairly large scale, together with a degree of economic independence, became possible. The intermarried Kennys and Cunninghams had become wealthy *estancieros* in Argentina. In 1920, Mother Cecilia Cunningham procured an inheritance, from her mother, of almost £120,000, after a delay of several years spent in negotiation (1911-1919). She immediately put it at the disposition of the community. This was a sizeable sum of money, part of which was spent in purchasing the two properties in Angas Street, immediately to the east. Nearest was the Acraman residence, bought for £4,500, and beyond that the Barr Smith residence, which cost them £8,500.

The Acraman two-storeyed house had been built in 1867-8 by Alexander Cunningham.<sup>9</sup> By 1899, ownership had passed to E.M. Cunningham, who

married A.C. Acraman in 1905. This building did not protrude as far towards Angas Street as did the convent, so it was given a new frontage and connected, by an extension of the two-storeyed 1889 wing, to the existing facade, in a similar style.

Robert Barr Smith was a very wealthy pastoralist and businessman. Robert and Joanna Barr Smith had built, in 1902, the one-storeyed house beyond, a sprawling yet charming building complete with some unusual features, including a ballroom and earthquake-proof walls of double canite. The design was heavily influenced by Robert Barr Smith's observations during a tour of South Africa. The walls of cavity brick and the terracotta tiled roof were in marked contrast to the solid stone residences usual at that period. The walls were lined with seaweed for insulation and covered with beautiful wallpapers. Chimneys were curved. Joanna and Robert and their extended family also loved William Morris wallpapers, tapestries, carpets and other furnishings. They were, during the 1880s to the 1920s, the largest single purchaser from Morris and Company outside of Britain. They set a fashion in Adelaide.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Barr Smith died at No. 40 Angas Street in 1915. Joanna died in October, 1919. Their residence was for sale. The archbishop of the time, Archbishop Spence, wanted to buy it, so as to live closer to the cathedral, but the sisters' agent, from Gunson Solicitors, had outbid his agent. It was rumoured that the nuns, though ignorant of the archbishop's intention, were not all that regretful of the result. 'Just imagine', they are reported to have said, 'if His Grace lived there and made our yard his pathway to the Cathedral!' In 1920, the Mercy community were not in Spence's good graces, consequent to misunderstandings occurring over the long sojourn of Mothers Clare and Cecilia in Argentina, during the settlement of the Cunningham estate.<sup>11</sup>

The Barr Smith house was used as convent and novitiate for new members, and then as convent and school.<sup>12</sup> It was connected to the main convent building by a covered walkway at ground level. The back section of the Acraman house was demolished, so that the internal cloister could be extended and the Cunningham Memorial Chapel built. This was done in 1922, mostly on Acraman but partly on Barr Smith land. The chapel was joined to the convent by the east and south cloisters, the west cloister being already in place. A boarders' side chapel was added to the northern transept. There was now a three-sided arcaded cloister, enclosing a lawn, open to the school playground on the northern side. The chapel featured a bell tower.

Mother Cecilia Cunningham had been disappointed in the poverty of churches in Australia, as contrasted with the ornateness of their Latin American counterparts. She had made one request about the disposal of her large fortune. She would like some of it to be used for a convent chapel which would be worthy of its sacred purpose. Much care went into its construction and



*Mother Cecilia Cunningham with novices and recently professed sisters, c.1898*



*House of Mercy, c.1911*



*Barr Smith house, Angas Street, 1903*



*The remaining Argentinian foundresses in Adelaide, c.1910*

its decoration, 'a mix of overseas and Australian materials and craftsmanship'.<sup>13</sup>

The final result was an exotic beauty. The altars were made colourful by the skilful use of varied coloured marbles. The high altar was of pure white Carrara marble, with columns of dark green Polcevera and pale green French marble. There were panels of warm African and pale rose Siena marble. The gilt bronze doors of the tabernacle were flanked with little shafts of rare African red onyx. The front of the high altar was sculptured to depict the Last Supper, minutely wrought from one block. On each side stood angels. The two side altars had shafts of Polcevera green and inlaid panels of pale yellow and peach blossom marbles. The sanctuary was paved in a design of dark green, terracotta, and white marble. The crucifix, candlesticks and altar cloths were from Argentina.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the design was the ceiling. It was made ornate with octagonal and square panels, together with scrolls and flowers of Roman acanthus ornament. The background was deep rose-red, lapis lazuli blue and black, and the rest of the design was in plaster painted with gold leaf. During the decorating, a former pupil remembered, the boarders would sneak in and look for little booklets of gold leaf interleaved with fine tissue, discarded by painters of the lovely ceiling.<sup>14</sup> This type of decoration was new to Adelaide at the time, but was characteristic of Roman basilicas, though the particular design was distinctive. The walls and columns were also decorated in tinted plaster or applied gold and colour, the prevailing tones being buff and subdued blues. Thus the eye was led gradually to the ceiling. The floor was laid in parquetry of Australian oak, with decorative borders in jarrah, rosewood, and oak. There was a series of stained-glass windows. Saints depicted included Cecilia and Clare.

In many ways, the chapel became the heart of the whole network of buildings. The sisters spent many hours within its walls, and their students paid frequent visits, on special occasions or for a passing visit. Boarders went there for Mass each day at 7 a.m., for regular choir practice of the hymns sung weekly at Mass and Benediction, and each evening for Night Prayers, at 9 p.m., led by a sister.

At its opening, there was one ironic touch. It was the sisters' money, ingenuity, and artistry that had resulted in this beautiful building. Yet the custom of the time demanded that they leave it to Fr J.A. Gatzmeyer to welcome the Archbishop on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy, and invite him to formally declare the chapel and also new school extensions open.

The Cunningham inheritance had permitted the extension, at the same time, of St Aloysius High School and Boarding School to the east, across the rear of the grounds. The additions were constructed in the same red brick as the original. This not only gave extra classrooms, but also dormitories and other much needed facilities for the boarders. In November, 1920, some

blocks of land, facing Wakefield Street, were bought for £10,355, to be used as a sports ground. A tennis court had been constructed earlier, in 1907, on the then existing property. Now, there was room for four basket ball courts.<sup>15</sup>

By the early twentieth century, the numbers in the House of Mercy had dropped considerably, and it had become mainly a boarding house for young women from the country, attending Teacher Training or Business College. Then the opening, in 1922, of the Catholic Women's League Hostel obviated the need for this service. In the late 1920s, the former House of Mercy was renovated and became an adjunct to the boarding school.<sup>16</sup>

In 1925, St Cecilia's Primary School and Concert Hall was ready for use. To construct this, the sisters had procured, in 1922, three small properties to the east of the Barr Smith house and west of Chancery Lane, for £7,000.<sup>17</sup> In the first two months of 1923, they bought two more small blocks for £3,405.<sup>18</sup>

It was the Cunningham legacy which was used to construct St Cecilia's Primary School and Hall. The foundation stone was laid on 27th September, 1924, and the building was blessed and opened on 8th August of the following year. A thousand people attended the opening. The contracted cost of the building was £11,000.

As a concert hall, it could seat eight hundred people. As a school, the floor space was divided into two, by folding doors. There was an ample stage and a proscenium (the part of the stage in front of the curtain) as well as a room at the rear of the stage – all available for classes. There were side galleries for the children and a public gallery reached through the entrance up jarrah staircases. The whole interior was of 'warm and cheerful colouring'. The floors were of oiled jarrah, the dadoes or lower parts of the walls were of red cement, so that they could be used as 'blackboards'. The room at the rear was entirely surrounded with blackboards of blackened cement.

The girls from the former St Angela's Primary School moved into the new building. St Anthony's School for younger boys had been closed since 1915. With the opening of St Cecilia's, boys from the Cathedral parish were again admitted.<sup>19</sup> Now the 'upstairs' and 'downstairs' schools were both on the convent property, though St Cecilia's continued to operate as the cathedral parochial school.

This was the situation, for both school establishments, until the mid-1950s.

#### **'A VERY WARM ATMOSPHERE' <sup>20</sup>: EDUCATION FOR WHOLENESS**

A school report for 1907<sup>21</sup> reveals what was taught at that period. The report gave results from a mid-year exam, and students were examined in Christian Doctrine, Scripture History, Arithmetic, Algebra, Spelling, Geography, English, French, Latin, History, Composition, General Knowledge, Reading,

Writing, Freehand Drawing, Home Lessons, Home Work, Special Subjects – Music, Needlework. Attendance and Conduct were also noted. The Mercy archives also contain a Good Conduct Certificate for 1901, awarded by the 'School of the Sisters of Mercy, Angas Street', to Miss Edith Richards.

Quite a comprehensive curriculum! Yet the report and the certificate both fail to reveal what was the most important facet of Mercy convent education, an aspect which continued to be a special characteristic. The long years of growth and consolidation were fruitful not only in material development, but also in the warmth of many human relationships that nourished both teachers and taught. A pupil of the years 1917-1920 claimed that 'the lovely thing about being educated in a convent is that the nuns loved children a little bit more than their own parents do.'<sup>22</sup> At the Mercy Centenary Celebration of 1980, another former pupil wrote: 'A hundred years ago, twenty-four Sisters of Mercy came to Adelaide and loved the people they met the same way you showed me love – acceptance of a person for themselves as individuals, but also as one of God's children'.<sup>23</sup>

Something of this long-standing care for the individual was made possible by the friendly atmosphere of the school. Not only were the convent and school buildings interconnected, so, too, were the two communities that inhabited them, during the important decades wherein was shaped the ethos of the school. More than buildings were shared. The staff of the schools were almost totally members of the convent community. In some periods, the same sisters administered both organisations. Quite frequently, there were family relationships among sisters and pupils. Consequently, a strong community atmosphere prevailed in the school, especially the boarding unit.

The boarding school played a disproportionate role – numberwise – in the total school. In some ways, the boarding school was the school. Boarders were routinely appointed as head prefect of the whole school, until Monica Marks became the first day scholar head girl, in the 1940s. It was also predominantly the boarding school that led to religious vocations. To a significant degree, the boarders lived like little nuns. To offset the possibly harsh discipline of this style of boarding school life, there were family-style relationships between sisters and girls. Relatively speaking, the school was small, the environment and material facilities rather sparse, but the overall morale strong.

There was something of a Mercy tradition in this type of establishment. 'Pension schools' for girls went back to the initial decade of the Order in Ireland. Mother Frances Warde had opened the first in Carlow, in 1839, with the approval of Catherine McAuley. Both Catherine and Frances judged correctly that such schools would be welcomed by those who could not afford the more expensive boarding schools then available.<sup>24</sup> The schools would also prove a source of vocations to the Institute, as well as an opportunity to educate middle class families in their duty to help less fortunate people.

Frances's biographer<sup>25</sup> claims that Catherine founded more tuition schools than she did Houses of Mercy for working girls. Her vision of Mercy was very flexible, the needs of the locality determining her response to a large extent. Later, in some districts, there was some dissension within the Institute over pension schools. But Catherine had truly believed that the education of the middle class was of utmost importance. It was a nineteenth century concept of working towards structural reform. In the United States, where Frances later founded the first Convent of Mercy there, some of the pension schools also developed courses at tertiary level.

The school motto was *Loyal en Tout*. Irene Heenan wrote in the 1912 school annual:

May we then imbibe the spirit of our motto, may we at all times uphold the honour of our school, and ever 'keep ourselves loyal to truth and the sacred professions of friendship'.

Her sentiments were reprinted as the frontispiece of the 1980 Centenary Journal.

In 1920, the Angas Street school was still small and homely, and the boarding conditions rather primitive.<sup>26</sup> Living quarters were very cramped, fees were low, the convent was poor, the sisters just as badly housed, and the food was monotonous. There was no electric light or hot water. As most boarders were from the country, they did not find that so extraordinary. The spirit was strong. There was a feeling of comradeship and cheerfulness. They often had a dance before going to bed, especially in the colder months to get warm. There was music and singing, with a nun or one of the girls at the piano.<sup>27</sup> It was an environment in which some deep friendships with sisters and other boarders could develop. Many of these friendships persisted into old age.<sup>28</sup>

The boarding school horarium was rather like that of the nuns. Rising time was 6 a.m. Retiring time 9 p.m. In between, a mix of study, prayer, and sport. Mother Magdalene Carroll was something of a fanatic on the last, and a great believer in walking – since the space for sports was very limited. The Rosary was recited while walking in 'crocodile' fashion around the school yard, and there were two outside longer walks a week. There were frequent trips out, to the sea at Henley Beach, where they could use the sisters' bathing box and have tea on the beach. Or to a matinee music recital at the Town Hall or the Conservatorium. It was an environment to expand the horizons of the majority of the girls, daughters of farmers or country school teachers, or hotel keepers or small business owners. Most were of Irish descent. None were wealthy, some were comfortable, but many were struggling.

The boarders wore white dresses on Sundays during summer; black velvet



*The three Briggs,  
Srs M. Augustine,  
Gabriel, de Pazzi.  
A fourth, Sr M.  
Josephine, entered at  
Coolgardie. They were  
great-aunts of  
Srs Ruth and Marita  
Mullins*



*St Aloysius' girls, 1900s. In second row, first left, is Francie O'Loughlin (Sr M. Colette); third left, Nellie Kelly (Sr M. Ignatius)*



*Orchestra, 1912*



*Mother M. Magdalene Carroll and her niece Gertrude, c.1922*

with white or cream lace collars during winter. There were some non-Catholics among the boarders. All had to attend daily Religious Instruction, but went to their own church or synagogue at the weekend. Among the non-Catholics were the four Wirth sisters, from the renowned Wirth's Circus. Sister Mary Dominic Henderson became a great friend of the Wirths. On one occasion she visited the circus. Her companion, Mother Magdalene, was greatly entertained by the sight of Dominic walking around, holding hands with the orang-outang. They were somewhat similar in shape, Magdalene thought.

St Aloysius High School had always been academically minded, though it was many years in existence before it had facilities to offer science. A continuing emphasis was on discipline, good order, good manners, and 'lady-like' behaviour – topics for endless school assemblies. Strict observance of all the rules was required. In the earlier decades, at least, there was an elaborate reward-and-punishment system of 'bad marks', especially in the boarding school. Corporal punishment was eschewed. Instead, there was constant exhortation to be a 'convent-bred girl' – one with good manners, quiet demeanour, and good deportment. Overall, one past pupil judged, 'quaint times, but also happy and wholesome times!'<sup>29</sup>

This was a pupil of the 1920s, Elma Bourke. Elma's sojourn there lasted for seven years, from 1920 to 1926, so she was able to experience the new expansiveness and vitality made possible by Mother Cecilia's inheritance. She was one year too early to benefit from the much more solid course and better all-round education that developed as a result of changes in the Public Examination system from four to five years of secondary schooling. Elma spent three years as a pupil of the school, till Senior Public, two years on a scholarship to Adelaide High School as preliminary to Teachers' College, and two years at Adelaide Teachers' College. During the later years, when she was not a daily pupil of the school, she continued as a 'parlour boarder', learnt piano and singing at the convent, was a member of the school choir, and hence attended all school functions as well as all the boarding school activities. On her graduation as a teacher, she taught for four years in schools of the South Australian Education Department, and boarded privately, but continued to attend St Aloysius for music and singing. In 1931, she joined the Congregation, and became Sister Mary Carmel.

The meetings of the Children of Mary sodality were for some pupils, including Elma, among the strongest experiences of the spiritual life of the school. It was an honour to be invited to join as an 'aspirant' – usually at about Senior Public (third) year. Mother Magdalene was the chaplain, and led the fortnightly meeting through the recitation of the Little Office of Our Lady, together with other prayers and hymns, and a homily. The blue ribbon and medal of the fully accepted member – or the green ribbon and medal of

the aspirant – were worn proudly when the girls received Holy Communion.

Pious devotions were interspersed throughout the school day and year. There was a prayer before each lesson, a *Hail Mary* when the clock struck, the *Angelus* at noon, and a hymn at the close of the day. May devotions were a special delight. The whole school was assembled in the open classroom on the ground floor. A special flower was selected for each day, as an emblem of a virtue to be practiced, and placed at the foot of Mary's statue at a given moment. Young impressionable hearts were touched by the symbolism. Other feast days were remembered for other devotions, and sometimes for the 'long play' or the early finish to the afternoon's schooling.

Until the 1920s, there were no uniforms. However, some consistency of attire had gradually developed. The Senior and Higher Public classes wore navy or dark long skirts, reaching mid-calf, white or pale long-sleeved blouses, called 'shirt-waists', and a tie. The younger pupils wore a navy blue tunic with three box pleats front and back, a white long-sleeved blouse with collar and navy tie. The very small girls wore frocks of any colour and style, with crisp white pinafores trimmed with broderie anglaise. By the mid-1920s, the navy blue pleated tunic had become the uniform. The hats were of white panama or straw for summer; navy felt for winter – 'small, round, and hideous'. The hatband was navy. The crest was a metal badge sewn onto the front. For a couple of seasons, 'straw boaters' or 'deckers' were worn in winter, but these did not receive permanent approval.

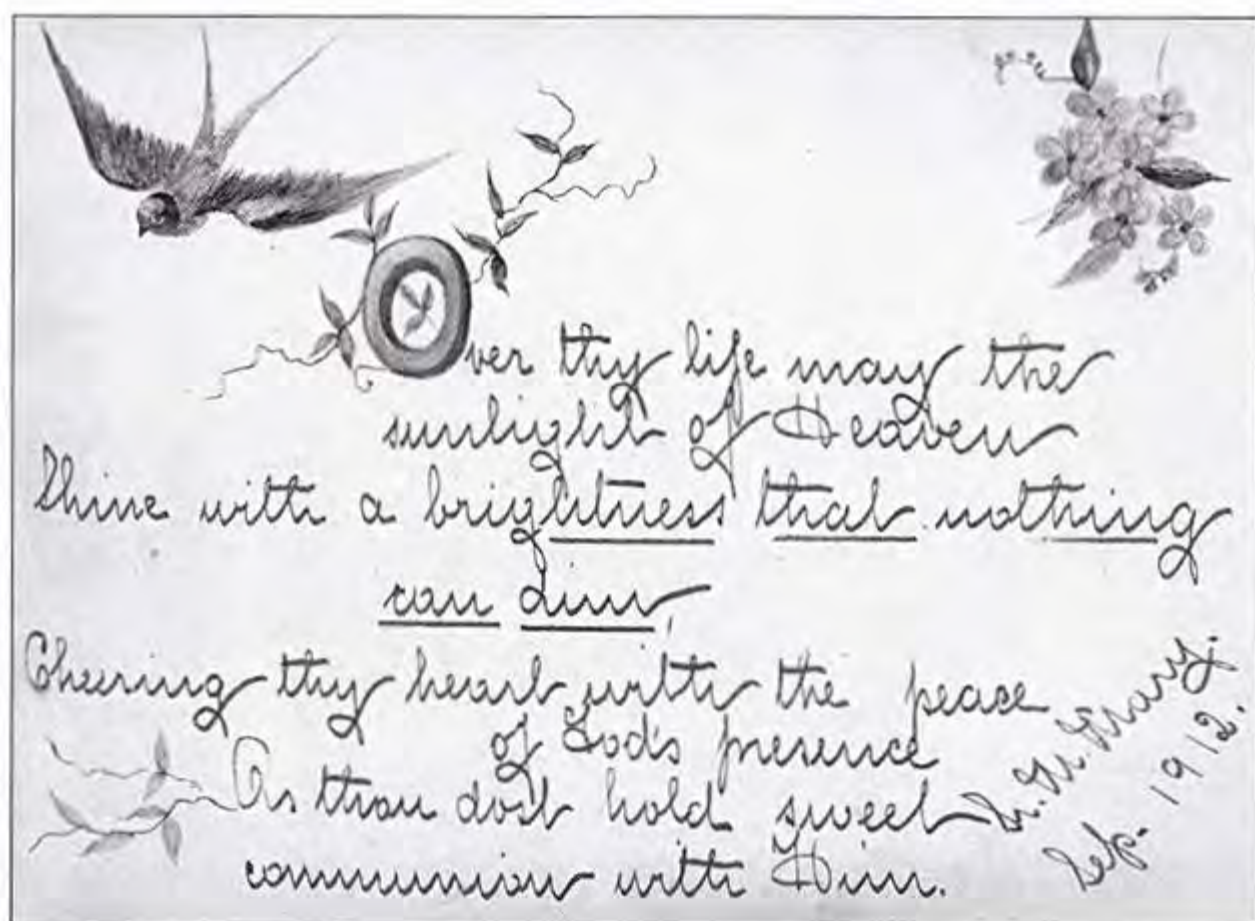
It was not until the early 1930s, when the worst part of the depression was over, that the school adopted a distinctive uniform. In winter, it was a fawn woollen three pleated tunic (a 'drillie'), with fine pinstripes of the college colours – violet, mauve, and gold. The blouse was white. The tie was likewise striped in the school colours and the school crest was woven into the hat band. The hat was a straw in summer and fawn velour in winter. The summer dress was also fawn, short-sleeved, of a light silky material, with fawn stockings and brown shoes. Hats and gloves were essential.

Another pupil who joined the convent – in 1915 – and also left us some memories of school days, was Annie Kennedy (Sister Mary Kevin). Annie began and finished school at Angas Street. Sister Kevin sketched one delightful vignette of herself as a small child, an unconscious illustration of the easy atmosphere prevailing in the school. Father McEvoy, of the Cathedral staff, used to give her a ride on his horse if she sang for him on the spot – the highest step of the sacristy. She had to sing 'Holy Angel, watch over Father McEvoy'. The ride would be for a few yards in the pebbly Cathedral grounds.<sup>30</sup>

Annie Kennedy had been taught by four of the sisters from Argentina – Clare, Cecilia, Claver, and Raphael. On leaving school, she studied commercial work at Remington College, before joining the community. She



Pages in a student's  
autograph book –  
Srs Camillus Murphy and  
Margaret M. Kenny





*Sr M. Teresa Dunlevie, third principal of  
St Aloysius' School*



*Sr M. Dominic Henderson with two of the  
Wirth Circus family*



*Sr M. Ignatius Kelly with her family*

employed her secretarial skills both in teaching and as secretary to the Congregational Superior.

In the 1940s, there was a specially upgraded Commercial Class, with some progressive touches. The Publicity Officer of the PMG Department gave fortnightly lectures in postal, telegraphic and telephonic facilities. A Montessori Kindergarten was also opened, in 1938, the first of its kind in South Australia. This was under the guidance of Sister Carmel Bourke, who had trained in early education before her entrance into the convent. It occupied the verandah, the site of the present laundry, and catered for some twenty-five children, boys and girls, aged three to five. It served not only its young pupils but also a number of young sisters who learnt to teach through it. When Carmel soon moved into secondary teaching, she was followed, as its director, by Sister M. Owen (Joan) Farrell and then by Sister M. Damien (Carmel) Hennessy.

A school brochure of this period offered weekend visits to the Star of the Sea Convent at Henley Beach (presumably for boarders), hikes through the hills, excursions to Victor Harbor and other beauty spots, scientific excursions to places of geographical and geological interest, attendance at concerts and lectures of cultural and educational values. The academic curriculum now included sciences – physics and chemistry, botany and physiology – as well as mathematics and foreign languages. The Art class taught freehand and plant drawing, colour and design, as well as commercial art and handicrafts.

There was ‘every branch of music’, as well as weekly lessons in Dalcroze Eurythmics. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Sr M. Ignatius Cousins had been a skilled music teacher. She was followed by Sisters M. Mercy Connell, Dominic Henderson, Colette O’Loughlin, Angela Kelly, Agatha White, Kevin Kennedy, Regis Noble, and others. Sister Regis was noted for her remarkably beautiful singing voice.

Most girls learnt to play the piano in those more leisured times. The first music-teaching sisters had gained their qualifications before entry; there was no opportunity to do so after entry. By the 1920s, however, there was a clear need for qualifications. It was still not considered appropriate for sisters to attend external tertiary institutions. Instead, the community employed specialist teachers, from the Elder Conservatorium of the University of Adelaide, for example, as tutors. Sister Claire Lynch, a talented pianist, was the first of several sisters to attend the Elder Conservatorium.<sup>31</sup> Claire continued to teach piano and theory throughout most of her many years of religious life.

The administration of the school underwent few changes. For the first decade of its existence (1882-1890), the Mother Superior of the sisters had acted as official – if partly nominal – head of the school. There were two such

head mistresses, Mothers Evangelista Fitzpatrick and Clare Murphy. Then began the era of the specialized administrators.

By the mid-1940s, St Aloysius had had two long-serving principals – Mother M. Magdalene Carroll (1891-1914) and Sister M. Teresa Dunlevie (1918-1944). The short interregnum of three years was held by Sister Aloysius Grant, who resigned on account of ill health. Sister Teresa was the first old scholar of St Aloysius to become its principal, as were most of her successors, beginning with Sister Carmel Bourke (1945-1953) and then Sister Mary Campion Jordan (1954-1968). The stability of administration was one feature which operated to keep the essential ethos of the school remarkably consistent.

In 1944, the annual school report was composed by Sister M. Ignatius Kelly, in the absence of Sister Teresa through sickness. Her report clearly indicated the philosophy of the school. While stressing the aims of Christian education, she enjoined parents and students to free their minds from the idea that the gaining of a certificate was the hall-mark of sound education. It was, however, important that girls should be educated in the best manner possible. She would like to see a type of education in which the essentially feminine qualities were developed. This implied more attention to the cultural side, more attention to the cultivation of fine arts, than to science and commercial subjects. Special mention was made of 'Home Crafts', which the Mercy sisters were hoping to make possible in their schools in the near future. They had six sisters in training and two who had completed their training in Home Crafts. Despite Ignatius' emphasis on the arts, she also helped widen the academic curriculum when appropriate.<sup>32</sup> In late twentieth century terminology, the goal would be described as a holistic education.

The school offered assistance in other ways apart from the normal activities. Boarding and day scholarships were advertised regularly, as were weekend retreats for Old Scholars and other ladies. In the 1940s, at least, these retreats attracted between eighty and ninety ladies. The Young Christian Students association began in 1943. This was based on the See, Judge, Act methodology of Catholic Action, a worldwide and influential movement within Catholicism at that period. Foundation president was Kath Preece and treasurer Deirdre Jordan, both of whom joined the Mercy Institute later. Meetings were very serious – the goal was 'to change the world' for Christ.<sup>33</sup>

Inter-Collegiate Debates took place in the 1940s. During the war years of this decade, the school contributed to concerts by the South Australian Junior Catholic Women's League, in its drive to acquire funds to provide amenities for soldiers.

Sport was fairly significant in the school timetable but not obsessive. There were four teams for the competitive items. Sports days were held first in the



*Sr M. Brigid Walsh (R)*



*Archbishop Robert Spence, OP, opens chapel and new wing, 1922*



*Mothers Clare  
and Cecilia  
in front of  
new chapel*



*Interior of new  
chapel*

school yard, with watchers on the top verandahs. Later, they were transferred to the sports ground facing Wakefield Street. Exhibitions on such days included maypole dancing, percussion band items, drill, and Dalcroze Eurythmics in the hall. The last – a disciplined and graceful if rather sedate movement to music – was the fashion for a while, and was taught by Mary Jolly (Lady de Crespigny). The girls wore a mauve sports tunic and blouse.<sup>34</sup>

Professional education received more attention from the 1930s on. In that decade, Father William Russell, the then Director of Catholic Education, organized a number of educational conferences. In 1953, a Catholic Teachers' Institute began with Father James Gleeson as Director of Catholic Education, and lasted until 1960. A number of young Mercy sisters and Dominican sisters from Cabra and North Adelaide received teacher training. Sister Elizabeth Miller, B.A., Dip.Ed.(Prim.), was on the staff. Practice teaching was carried out at more than one Mercy school, including St Aloysius. When Elizabeth went to Papua New Guinea in 1956, her place was taken by Sister M. Cecilia (Monica) Marks. When the sisters began attending external Teachers' Colleges, the Institute was no longer needed.

#### UPSTAIRS – DOWNSTAIRS: CLOSURE OF ST CECILIA'S PRIMARY SCHOOL

In 1956, St Cecilia's Primary School was abolished as a separate institution from St Aloysius's College. The closure marked the end of an era, when 'select' or paying schools were distinct from 'poor' or non-paying schools.

In the years when both schools occupied the Cathedral Hall, St Angela's Primary School was labelled the 'Downstairs' school. It was for the poorer city children. The Select School, on the top storey of the hall, was the 'Upstairs'. The name 'The Downstairs' persisted, even when St Angela's Select School moved to its own building on the convent grounds and was renamed St Aloysius High School and Boarding School. There were connotations of social class attached to the label.

Although the Mercy Institute was against conducting 'very fashionable or high class young ladies' schools', leaving these to other religious orders, their pupils – and, to some degree, the sisters themselves – were not free of class distinction. New pupils entering either school were soon aware of the difference in social status between the two establishments. One small pupil in St Aloysius' School in the early 1920s remembered the different smell that would assail her nose when her class went to the Cathedral Hall for singing lessons. She concluded that the children in the other school must have been really neglected.<sup>35</sup>

While the Institute of Mercy was dedicated primarily to helping those who were poor, their concept of Mercy was flexible and covered education of the

middle class. And, as women of their times, the sisters had more or less accepted the social status quo. The Institute itself comprised two classes. The higher class were the choir sisters who were among the better educated and came with a dowry (although Catherine McAuley waived this if she considered the applicant a suitable prospective member). The lower class were the lay sisters. As in the mediaeval institution of monasticism, nineteenth century lay members were usually of the working class. They would have possessed no property or dowry, and may well have been illiterate, hence unable to recite the divine office, which the active orders retained. The custom persisted canonically until well into the twentieth century, although the advent of popular education had largely spelt the demise of illiteracy. Later, lay sisters had mostly had a basic education, and some were relatively well educated but chose to perform house duties.

There was a need for domestic workers within the Mercy establishments, not only in the running of the boarding school, House of Mercy, and orphanage, but also to relieve the teachers and administrators of having to do a triple shift. These latter were already doing a double shift with their teaching or other duties as well as their spiritual exercises, which occupied a considerable portion of each day. The internal class division, however, that persisted at a time when more democratic notions of social status had spread widely within the Western world, and especially in a colonial society such as Australia, had become invidious. There were minor but significant distinctions in dress, together with separate times for meals and recreations (doubtless, often but not always required by divergent duties). Lay sisters were ineligible to take part in community elections or to be appointed to positions of leadership within the congregation. The white apron, of practical purpose but also a sign of class distinction, was finally eliminated in the Angas Street community in 1921. Even when the category of lay sister was abolished,<sup>36</sup> vestiges of the old differentiation remained. In a community so focused on education, sisters working at domestic duties could feel undervalued and second rate. Equality of opportunity for further study and for sabbaticals helped eliminate possible causes of a sense of inferiority, though it was not until the 1970s that these were available.

It is helpful to realise the historical context of the social structures and conventions that lay members typified within a religious order as did also the existence of the two schools at Angas Street. An editorial in the *Melbourne Catholic Advocate*, in 1883, articulated what was the generally accepted position on schooling in the second half of the nineteenth century. 'It is both foolish and injurious', the editor wrote, 'to force on the working classes an education of a higher character, which they are most unlikely to be ever able to turn to good account, and which may lead them into temptation.' Working class Catholics were to be trained into socially useful occupations.

This attitude devolved from long-standing social structures and a utilitarian ideal. While Australia was theoretically a land of equal opportunity (for the free settler, at least), the tendency of a new country – as English visitor, R.E.N. Twopenny, commented – was towards practical knowledge.

St Aloysius had continued to be called the 'select school' in the convent accounts until 1932, despite its official title of High and Boarding School, and its most frequently used name, 'Convent of Mercy'. Yet the Account Books also show that the fees were relatively low, and that many families were helped with individual arrangements concerning their payment – or non-payment. Sister Teresa Dunlevie, it is said, regretted that almost all the Cunningham legacy went on land and buildings. She would have preferred that some of it be apportioned to providing scholarships for poor girls for further study.

A letter from Mother Dolores Barry, as Mother Provincial<sup>37</sup>, to Fr J. Gleeson, Director of Catholic Education, explained the reasons for the amalgamation of the two establishments in 1956. The sisters were anxious for more facilities for secondary pupils in St Aloysius College, she wrote. They had to refuse girls admittance. There was also a need to release one classroom for novices, who were also increasing in number. It would improve the teacher training which was offered, she claimed, if the college could make all their primary classes just single grades – instead of the number of double grades currently operating. Under the present arrangement of grades, lay teachers could not be appointed to St Cecilia's. St Aloysius' was thereby forced to pay for lay teachers in its own classes.

Although it was supposedly the Cathedral parochial school, there was no direct assistance from the Cathedral parish. The whole financial burden of St Cecilia's fell on the sisters, including the upkeep of buildings, payment of taxes, etc., a very heavy burden, Mother Dolores asserted. The fees, in no adequate manner, compensated for all that was involved. In addition, there were thirty-eight children (twenty-two boys, sixteen girls) coming from other parishes, who could possibly be fitted into their own parish schools.

The whole of the Convent of Mercy establishment (Convent, Noviceship, Training School for teachers<sup>38</sup>, payments for University students, providing a home for Aged Sisters) was dependent on the fees of the pupils at St Aloysius College, she continued. Pupils must unfortunately be refused because there was no room. Senior grades (Leaving and Leaving Honours) were not a paying proposition. Many were kept on because they had been in the school a length of time and wished to complete their education, but could not pay full fees. Others were kept on, as they wished to enter the convent. They had always taken a large number free or at reduced fees in the Secondary grades, especially girls from St Cecilia's. They hoped to be able to continue to do so.

Dolores, therefore, proposed that, as from December, 1956, they cease operating St Cecilia's as a separate school. They would enrol boys to Grade III only. The sisters were prepared to assist pupils with difficulty with full fees and with uniforms, as they were doing at present. The St Cecilia's student figures for third term of 1956 were eighty-seven boys (sixty-three from city, twenty-four from suburbs) and eighty-one girls (sixty-one city, twenty suburbs).

The amalgamation took place, and the school year of 1957 opened with St Aloysius' College the sole school on the Angas Street site.

#### ANOTHER CLOSURE: THE BOARDING SCHOOL SHIFTS LOCATION

The 1950s saw the closure, also, of the boarding school at Angas Street, and its transfer to a more commodious site at Springfield. This property was the second that had been purchased with a view to shifting the boarders out of the increasingly overcrowded city area.

In 1948, a very lovely property had been procured at Erindale<sup>39</sup>, a suburb near the foothills. It was intended to build on it a day school as well as boarding school. The property of more than twelve acres was bought from Dr H.M. Jay for £9,000. It consisted of a two-storeyed house with a very extensive garden, which included a lawn court and terraced walks. A small creek ran through the grounds. However, it was decided, eventually, that the home was not spacious enough for the proposed schools. Instead, a Juniorate was established, for girls who were considering entering the community but were too young to enter upon religious life proper, and were in need of further education.

A few years later, a day and boarding school, Mercedes College, was established at Springfield, another gracious suburb at the foothills. The name Mercedes – Spanish for Mercy – was chosen on account of its two-fold association. To create Mercedes College, a spacious property of eighteen and three quarter acres was obtained in mid-1953. Mercedes quickly became a significant institution in its own right.

#### INDELIBLE MEMORIES

The Convent of Mercy, Angas Street, had grown from tentative beginnings in the 1880s to the flourishing school of the mid-twentieth century. Many factors were involved in this growth, none probably more significant than the work of the sisters who had made it a reality. For their students and their companions, many of these women bequeathed memories that survived, indelible memories of personalities that were varied, sometimes unique,



*St Cecilia's Hall viewed from stage, 1925. The school was through the doors at the back*



*Angas Street convent 1928, showing part of Dr Gunson's house to the left*



*Tennis team, early 1930s. Joan Farrell (Sr M. Owen) is front row, end right*

other times idiosyncratic, yet invariably informed through and through with the compassionate spirit of their Institute. External traits may have obscured this spirit at times from the eyes of their young charges, but the basic charism was there and would finally prevail.

Looking back on her school days at St Aloysius during the 1920s, Dame Roma Mitchell stated that the nuns must have been much more compassionate than any of the girls realised at the time. In her time, there were five non-Catholic children who boarded at St Aloysius, 'all born out of wedlock'. No one in the school knew this. Two of them were 'rebellious girls'. 'I expect', she said, 'a lot of schools wouldn't have taken them in, and so they were a lot more broadminded than they let on. We thought at the time that they were narrow, but they weren't as narrow-minded as they gave the appearance'.<sup>40</sup>

#### ANGAS STREET AND THE ARGENTINIAN LEADERSHIP

Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick, founding superior, had learnt well the McAuley lesson of flexibility in fitting works to local needs. She also bequeathed a great spirit of compassion. To some extent, she was worn out by the time she settled in South Australia, but her energy and commitment did not desert her. Under her, the Dutton-Green house had been purchased, the select and the poor schools established, and the House of Mercy built for working girls. After her death and that of her short-lived successor, Mother Liguori Griffin, leadership had passed to Argentinian-born sisters. This was of much significance for the Congregation.

For the next three or four decades, the sisters from Argentina contributed a very cultured, elegant, and music-loving note to the Angas Street ethos. Though almost totally of Irish origin, and reared in something of an Irish ghetto, they showed the strong influence of the Spanish-derived culture in the land of their birth. Even if they were not all linguistically fluent in Spanish, there were hints of the manners of grand ladies, which introduced 'a very high tone' into the more democratic and casual Australian setting. Some of them, it seems, could appear arrogant to the Australians. They could be 'haughty and aristocratic', 'with Spanish tempers'. Used to the idea of servants on the great *estancias* or estates, they often expected the younger members of the community to wait on them. They did not take kindly, either, to being questioned or contradicted by direct and outspoken Australian youngsters. Clare Murphy and Margaret Mary Kenny were especially 'very cultured'. Even the unassuming Cecilia Cunningham possessed 'the high tone' for which they are remembered.

The community had had an adventurous history of initiative, from Dublin

to Buenos Aires to Adelaide. It had established successful social institutions in all three cities. Because of its religious status, the sisters could do this without having to challenge directly the prevailing ideal of domesticity for women. Yet challenge it they did, they and their successors, by the very fact of the independence of their lives, and by the formation of other young women to even higher levels of education than they themselves possessed. They were strong women, creative women of faith and compassion.

In their foundation years and early years of consolidation, they were operating in an environment where the pattern of religious membership was quite different from that in the east, with Catholics in a much lower proportion of the total population. Yet, among the Catholics as among all the church congregations, there was a healthy sense of life and growth. Adelaide was earning its sobriquet of 'the city of churches', 'the holy city', and the Catholics were not behind in preaching the city of God's love.

Politically, Irish Catholics were appreciative of the British institutions and the freedom they gave them (unlike in Ireland) in their new land. Responsible government had already been achieved. The decade of the 1890s was concerned with the movement towards national political federation. It saw also the formation of a Labor party in the South Australian Parliament, a party which was to grow in strength during the next century and to attract largely working-class Irish Catholics. In all denominations, there was

a never-ending round of social activities and fundraising functions ... Literary societies, which flourished in Roman Catholic as well as in Protestant churches, debated such questions of the day as the White Australia policy, women's suffrage, compulsory versus military training, and 'Which has done more for the civilisation of the world – the pen or the sword?'<sup>41</sup>

For the sisters, the burning contemporary question was the development into fullness of life of all women. This included not just their spiritual well-being but also their daily living. At the turn of the century, most women were occupied in the homes and often also on the farm or in the dairy.<sup>42</sup> They spent their days in unpaid tasks such as housework, cooking, child rearing, laundry work, dairy and farm work. Some worked for wages in factories, as domestic servants, dress-makers, shop assistants, teachers (including music teachers), and as nurses. Many were grossly underpaid and all earned less than males in comparable situations. The availability of servants enabled those women who were financially wealthier to engage in cultural pursuits such as playing the piano or other instruments, reading, painting, needlework, and the like. Some did voluntary charitable work. The House of Mercy and the schools, both 'poor' and 'select', offered what was, according to the class structures of the day, considered appropriate training in these female occupations. However, in the Mercy ethos and in the democratic atmosphere of the country, all women were theoretically equal.

### **Clare Murphy**

One of the strongest of all the leaders of these strong Mercy women was Mother Clare Murphy. Although most of Clare's attention was given to administration, she was not only a persuasive leader of women but also a visionary, which trait she exhibited in building up the Angas Street school complex. Greatly interested in education, she expanded her horizons by visiting schools in other parts of Australia and the world. With Sister M. Magdalene Carroll (Headmistress) and Sister M. Philomena Fitzpatrick, she journeyed in 1897 to Victoria, visiting schools there. Philomena was in charge of the boarding school, and also a musician. She could produce great concerts. She could also fascinate her young listeners by playing the piano and organ with one hand. Mother Clare believed in giving her talented people broader educational experience.

In 1901, with Mother Claver Kenny, Clare returned to Argentina on 'business connected with the Order'. The business included the acquisition of her own legacy, which was then used towards funding the 1904 school building. In Argentina, the two women received a most hearty reception, which was a 'welcome surprise'; the good nature and hospitality of the Argentinians seeming quite unparalleled. They found also the Mercy Order thriving, the convents increasing in number, with new, beautiful and substantial structures. This trip provided another opportunity to study education, in Argentina, and also in England and Ireland, all three countries having introduced new systems.

One of the highlights of this twelve month visit was a private audience in Rome, with the Pope, Leo XIII. They conversed quite freely in Spanish, the pope making minute enquiries about the Mercy works in Australia, and showing great interest in all, especially education. The two women were much impressed with his lively personality and fatherly manner. They were given a rare privilege of a visit to the Vatican gardens, library, and many magnificent rooms. All of this was related to the sisters, and much of it to the school children, on their return.

In 1904, Clare went to Coolgardie, Western Australia, to visit the former members of her community there. She brought back Sisters Gabriel Briggs and Baptist Wade, 'two able and willing helpers', who had been lent for a while to the new congregation. In this way, schooling in the western part of Australia could be compared with that in South Australia.

Then, in 1912, she began the last of her journeys undergone to enhance the work of the Institute. She and Mother Cecilia Cunningham voyaged to Argentina, to make arrangements for the transfer of Cecilia's large inheritance. Before they departed, they went down to the school to say goodbye. On the actual day of their departure, it was school holidays; but a few of the girls were at the station and Outer Harbor to wave them on their way. During their travels, the two nuns wrote to the girls.

It was a trip which would cause a painful misunderstanding with the archbishop, Dr Spence, but would also provide finance for a vital expansion of their educational and other works. Once again, Mother Clare seized the occasion to visit Mercy convents and schools in London and Dublin, before embarking from Southampton for Buenos Aires. On their return to Adelaide, in the first week of school, 1920, the two travellers toured the various classes, to be received with singing and cheers from the pupils.

Clare's primary or immediate interest was the convent community, but she never missed an opportunity to further the well-being of the schools. She was an accomplished player of the piano and organ, and used these talents to teach music to the senior pupils of St Aloysius', for some years. She taught class singing, including four part choral work. She trained the sisters' choir, which became noted for the beauty of its choral music at important liturgical events. There is reason to believe that some of the musical pieces performed were her own compositions. Her love of music and ritual, together with her administrative concerns, drew her to close friendship with Dr John O'Reily, himself a skilled musician and composer. O'Reily was Archbishop of Adelaide from 1895 to 1915. Clare was also an artist. In the Mercy Archives is an illuminated address from the priests of the diocese to Mgr Byrne in 1910, which was her work.

Clare, who was largely responsible for the interior design of the new chapel of 1922, presided at its organ during religious services. Elma (Sister Carmel) Bourke, as a senior pupil and member of the school choir, was among those boarders chosen to augment the sisters' choir for special occasions. She much admired the gifted Mother Clare, whom she then had a chance to see and hear in action.

The school pupils responded to Clare's continuing interest in their welfare. The first issue of their magazine, *Golden Wattle*, in 1909, reports that on the feast of 'our beloved Reverend Mother', she came to the convent school at the urgent request of her children. The latter gave her a handsome pair of pictures and several smaller gifts. The girls and boys of the Primary School also presented gifts – a silver lunette case and a silver coffee pot. At 10 a.m., there was a concert in St Francis Xavier's Hall, at which were clerical guests and the Reverend Mother and two sisters from the 'Nursing Sisters'.<sup>43</sup> After light refreshments, the children were awarded a half-holiday. Doubtless, most of this would have been organised by the sisters in the school, not the pupils, but the sense of connectedness between convent and school, the appreciation of women who could play significant roles in significant organisations, must have been fostered by such happenings.

Though she appears to have been a particularly gracious lady, Mother Clare was quite capable of speaking her mind when justice demanded it, for the sake of either sisters or students or both. In 1904, she wrote to the arch-

bishop, stating that she had a grievance. The year after their arrival, she claimed, Reverend Mother Evangelista, at the request of Bishop Reynolds, had consented to take over the charge of the cathedral altars and to keep the vestments, linen, etc. in perfect repair. In return, instead of paying for a chaplain, there was to be Mass in the convent every day, Sundays included.

We have most faithfully fulfilled our part of the Compact – all these years – and here the grievance comes in – the Sunday Mass was stopped about eight years ago and we have been – and are being frequently left without it on weekdays. ...

I now beg to inform Your Grace that unless the original arrangement be strictly adhered to -i.e.- that we get Mass every day, Sundays included, I shall resign the Charge of the Altars, etc. – and as we have so many delicate Sisters who would be unable to go out to Mass, I shall pay for a Chaplain provided we get Mass on Sundays. May I ask Your Grace to let me have a reply at your earliest convenience.

Then, probably with no conscious irony, in the phraseology of the period, she signed herself 'Your obedient child in J.C.'.

Clare Murphy had a generous spirit. Dr O'Connell, a Catholic doctor in the city, once found an Irish woman, a former member of a religious community which had been disbanded in New Zealand, now living in Adelaide. Mother Clare could not bear to leave her thus, invited her into the Mercy community, and insisted on everyone treating her with the greatest respect. It was a risk on Clare's part, as – in the words of the chronicler – she might have been an imposter or a sower of discord. However, as Sr M. Stanislaus Dooley ('very thin and tall and long of face') she became an able music teacher. She was the first to be in charge at Parkside convent, justifying Clare's trust in her.

Clare behaved with dignity in a long period of misunderstanding with Archbishop Robert Spence, OP, successor to John O'Reily. It was 1912 when she and Mother Cecilia Cunningham had journeyed to Argentina in order to make arrangements about Cecilia's family legacy. They had done so with the blessing and support of Archbishop O'Reily. It was to be early 1920, however, before they returned from Argentina.

More than seven years had elapsed, a most unusual occurrence for both the Reverend Mother and the Mother Assistant to be absent from their duties over such a length of time. Their terms of office had expired in May, 1914, but they had been elected in their absence to the new governing council, Clare as Mother Assistant and Cecilia as Bursar. O'Reily had died in 1915, and his successor, Archbishop Spence, had appointed substitutes for them in January, 1916, declaring that their election had been uncanonical.

Despite the widespread belief in Clare's wisdom and good judgment, Spence considered the situation too peculiar. The change in archbishops; the

two women's misunderstanding of Spence's somewhat ambiguous directions; the long-protracted legal difficulties over the settlement of Cecilia's inheritance; the outbreak of World War I and the consequent danger in travelling; the difficulties in such a long-distance communication between the two countries: these factors had all contributed to an extremely painful situation for the wanderers. When, finally, the war had ended and the Cunningham estate had been settled, the two lost no time in returning to Adelaide.

There they were ignored by the still irate ecclesiastic, who resented the apparent contempt of his authority and declared them unauthorized to be out of the diocese. He repeatedly snubbed Clare and Cecilia, as well as the other sisters at Angas Street. He forbade the other members to vote for either woman in the 1920 conventual elections. He did not relent until after many attempts at reconciliation on the part of Reverend Mother Magdalene Carroll. Not only Clare and Cecilia, and Magdalene who had to bear the main brunt of his displeasure, but the other sisters in the community were much grieved by the archbishop's aloofness and coldness.

Throughout this time of episcopal ostracism, both Clare and Cecilia went simply and unpretentiously about the business of community living and the relatively humble tasks allotted to them. So quiet were they throughout the whole contretemps, that Mother Magdalene expressed to the archbishop her great concern that the newer members of the community, not knowing Clare and Cecilia, would believe that they had really acted in disobedience. Notwithstanding, the sisters demonstrated their continuing trust in Clare by re-electing her as Reverend Mother at the elections of 1923.

The community had also rejoiced at the celebration of her Golden Jubilee in 1921. This feast was made even happier by the presence of Mother Antonia McKay on what was to be the last of her visits to Angas Street. It was the year of Antonia's Golden Jubilee, as well. She had been professed less than four months after Clare.<sup>44</sup> The Jubilee celebrations likewise included those of Sister Lucy de Couteur, who had spent long years caring materially for both sisters and boarders. The Old Scholars of St Aloysius School showed their fondness for their 'Dear Nuns' with the gift of a beautiful, golden, jewelled monstrance.

However, it was to be another seven years, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Mother Cecilia Cunningham, before any kind of a public apology for his mistreatment of Clare and Cecilia was made by Archbishop Spence.<sup>45</sup>

Clare Murphy died in 1936. Over the years, she had developed an aristocratic bearing, with an air of seeming to accept the homage and respect of all as a natural response. Her many years in positions of authority contributed to her mien and her rather aloof manner. No one would easily joke with Mother Clare, but she was much loved and revered. She retained her alert mind with

its astuteness and clarity, and her assurance of manner in the exercise of authority, until the end. Small and slight in stature, her frail appearance was no indication of her strength of spirit.

In her fifty-six years in Australia, Clare had seen South Australia develop from a small, barely populated colony to a flourishing State within the Commonwealth of Australia, established in 1901. She had witnessed, by the end of the nineteenth century or within the first decade of the twentieth, the coming to Adelaide of electricity, efficient water supply and drainage systems, electric tramways, a suburban land boom, and much improved communications through telegraph, and post, and railways. Motor and air travel – and airmail – became realities before Clare died. The cinema and the wireless provided entertainment for the people. There had been the extension of the vote, and women's increasingly obvious entrance into the public sphere.

She had experienced also the effects of war as well as of economic depression and the crippling effects of both. There had been the droughts of the 1890s. Australian troops had paraded in the streets of Adelaide, in 1899, before embarking for the Boer War in South Africa. The drought of 1914 had coincided with the beginning of World War I, during which war Clare had been out of the country. She had returned, though, to experience something of the devastating and long lasting depression of the late 1920s and 1930s. During the latter, at its peak, almost one half of the working population of Adelaide was unemployed, with all the human misery that that implied, especially in a State where the founding ideals had included those of thrift and hard work. There had been a Labor government in power for three years from 1930; it was replaced in that year by a new coalition between the Liberal groups and the Country Party. This won the elections of 1933, and initiated a basically conservative reign that lasted for the next thirty-two years, notably under Thomas Playford.

Despite all the droughts and depressions, Adelaide and South Australia had both grown steadily during Clare's long life. Secondary and primary industries had developed, though South Australia remained essentially primary producing. From 1921 to 1927, South Australia's population rose steadily, especially within Adelaide, through immigration and free passages offered by the British Government. By 1927, the population of Adelaide was more than 300,000 out of a total State population of not quite 570,000 – a proportion greater than that of any other State. School populations increased as the general population grew.<sup>46</sup>

Clare did not lose her enthusiasm for education as she aged and moved out of positions of responsibility. During 1936, in her mid-eighties, and the year in which she was to die, she followed with interest the preparations and the progress of the week-long Catholic Education Congress. Held in

November of that year, it celebrated the centenary of South Australia's settlement by the colonists. Clare died the following month.

A remarkable pioneer, 'this grand old nun' was described by Archbishop Andrew Killian as 'leaving an indelible stamp on the Catholic community in South Australia'. But the greatest proof, one other writer claimed, of her singularity and accomplished personality were the hundreds of women she educated, who never forgot to give her the 'loyalest love and affection. She had instilled into them the lofty and noble principles which lead to success, and to love and serve others because of their own love of God and His Holy Catholic Church.'<sup>47</sup>

### **Cecilia Cunningham**

Clare Murphy's companion for so many years, Cecilia Cunningham, was another gracious lady. She acquired an aura of romance on account of her Argentinian legacy, but she remained simple and warm. Unlike Clare, she preferred to work behind the scenes.

It was, nevertheless, Cecilia Cunningham's generous disposal of her considerable family inheritance which had opened the way for the quite extensive material expansion of the works of the congregation. A period of vitality, and a scale of development otherwise not possible, ensued. The injection of Cunningham money gave the community much confidence and a greater degree of independence.

Cecilia also taught, from time to time, at the school. She, too, taught mainly music; but concentrated on the 'beginners', being content to hand them on to others when they became more proficient. She may not have possessed as much musical talent as Clare and others among her colleagues, but she had the patience and kindness to persevere with her small pupils. Her humility, though an heiress, greatly impressed some of the boarders.<sup>48</sup> Other past pupils remembered her for more homely things. Annie (Sister Kevin) Kennedy recalled Mother Cecilia bribing her with an orange – unsuccessfully – to stay in Grade I. Annie politely ate the orange and then crept over to Grade V, where her sister was working out 'terrible' sums. Other boarders related how Cecilia enlivened their dull weekends by playing cards with the seniors. She would always lose and pay her opponents a shilling.<sup>49</sup>

In 1896, Cecilia was in the position of Reverend Mother. Cecilia's retiring disposition did not hinder her from being direct and forthright, when the good of the schools or of the community demanded it. She showed this strength in her dealings with the archdiocesan Church Commission in 1896. The latter found they were not dealing with a submissive or inexperienced female.

In that year, she wrote at length to the Reverend Gentlemen of the Church

Commission in reply to their letter stating that the site of the House of Mercy was church property. Cecilia informed them that the sisters were of the opinion that it had belonged to Dr Reynolds, who had given it to them for the House of Mercy. This House was for the protection of poor girls of irreproachable character, and as a safe home for them when out of situation or employment. Up to the present, they, by their hard earnings, had contributed to make the Establishment self-supporting. None had been – or ever would be – refused admittance if they could not pay. The site was of little value on account of the situation. According to the present valuation of the property, the Sisters considered £60 just value. They were prepared to pay on receipt of Title Deeds which must be legally [underlinings hers] drawn up to secure against future misunderstandings.

Concerning St Francis Xavier's Hall, she continued, and the three classrooms they had free use of for educational purposes ... She thanked the Commission for this concession. However, she wished the Reverend Gentlemen to take into consideration that they occupied them only from Monday till Friday weekly for 9 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. and one night in the year for a concert. They had over fifty children in their Intermediate School whose parents were not in a position to pay the school fees, and if not taken free, would be sent to the State schools. Within the last two years, they had expended over £30 in getting the interior of the Hall and the classrooms renovated. On occasion of elections, and meetings of the delegates of the different societies, the hall or the classroom adjacent, must be given up and the children taken out on the verandah or dismissed for the day. Taking the above circumstances into consideration, the Sisters fixed the amount of £15 per annum to be paid for St Francis Xavier Hall and the classrooms.

She also begged respectfully to state that, since they were expected to pay for the use of the above mentioned rooms, some arrangement must be made to prevent elections and meetings being held in them during school hours; also that, in future, they would not pay for any repairs, or improvements in the interior of the hall, or classrooms occupied by them, and an agreement to that effect had to be given to them in writing. Subsequent to this letter, a Memorandum of Lease of St Francis Xavier Hall and classrooms was drawn up, with an annual rental of £26. The Commission promised to let the hall for public purposes during school hours only in grave necessity.<sup>50</sup>

In the following year, 1897, Cecilia was again driven to express herself forcibly to church authorities. It was a period when church law was still ambiguous about the extent of authority the diocesan bishop could exercise over decentralised religious institutes such as the Sisters of Mercy. Dr O'Riely's barrister, P.McM. Glynn, of Queen's Chambers, Pirie Street, Adelaide, wrote to him stating that the Mother Superior of the Convent of Mercy, Angas Street, objected to a proposed change in the Mercy Rule, namely, that the

bishop may at any time appoint to remove the Mother Superior. Cecilia claimed that the Bishop had no such power of appointment, unless there were less than seven sisters, or on three ballots with an equality of voting. The Private Rules confirmed her statement. The sisters wished the Rule excised.<sup>51</sup>

Mother Cecilia's best work was probably in the formation of the novices to the community. She had been elected to that position in her twenties, and spent many periods in the role. A short, rotund, cheerful and kindly lady, she appeared always pleasant and unassuming. Sister Carmel Bourke became a novice under Mother Cecilia, and found her mild and placid in temperament, though aroused to anger when the occasion demanded. She was very kind, but somewhat outmoded – at least, so thought her novices of later years – in her ideas of formation. On the other hand, some of the professed sisters considered her discipline too lax.

It would seem, however, that her charges did learn from her the principles of religious life, chiefly from the example of her own practice of it. She was a woman at ease with her self, both her limitations and her gifts. Cecilia, in the community, was thought to be a model of prayer, very humble, very unassuming, and very patient. Her example and guidance made a great impression.

To the novices she spun many fascinating tales of Argentina, especially about the long voyage to Port Adelaide and settling down in Adelaide. She would recount incidents from her home life on the large *estancia* at Sarmiento in the province of Buenos Aires, memories of a clearly very happy childhood with her parents and brothers and sisters. At times, she would lapse into Spanish as she recalled their adventures. While indulging in such reminiscences, she was not idle. She would sit darning her clothes or the sisters' serviettes or other house linen, with beautiful fine needlework. Her spirit of poverty led her to vastly different ideas from those of her novices as to when clothes were worn out.

Cecilia had great devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, and spent much of her free time, especially in later years, in the Cunningham Memorial chapel. It was typical of Cecilia that, having requested 'a more beautiful house for her Lord', she left it to Mother Clare Murphy, with more artistic flair, to plan the new chapel.

In the contretemps with Archbishop Spence, Cecilia had persevered in her quiet refusal to spread resentment and hostility, and 'sweet charity' (the special legacy to the Order of Catherine McAuley) had eventually prevailed. The archbishop eventually became a good friend again, and expressed his regret, for his conduct, publicly, in 1928, at Cecilia's Golden Jubilee Dinner in the convent refectory. With about forty priests present, and also the sisters of the community, he spoke very feelingly of any sorrow he had caused the community.<sup>52</sup>

Cecilia was eighty-three when she became, in 1941, the first Mother General of the re-united Adelaide and Mt Gambier communities. By then, she was the last survivor of the Argentinian group in Australia, and was holding the post of Reverend Mother of Adelaide. With long experience of leadership, she was seen as a fitting symbol of unity, an appropriate person to bring about the harmonious uniting of the two groups which, though stemming from a common origin, had had separate existences for nearly sixty years. Her selection was welcomed by her sisters with much affection. She had been Novice Mistress to many of them, and her deep wisdom and her personal goodness were appreciated by all. She was seen as a woman of great peace and modesty, yet of indomitable strength.

Always the dignified, courteous, accomplished lady, as well as the meek, humble and self-forgotten Religious. She had a most loving heart, and was particularly distinguished by her benignity and generosity of nature.<sup>53</sup>

Cecilia resigned her office as Mother General at the beginning of 1945. She was then an old lady, in her eighty-eighth year. She died on 2nd August of the same year.

### **Claver Kenny**

The other Argentinian community leader who had a continuing impact on both convent and school was Mother Claver Kenny. She, too, taught – class work – throughout her years in South Australia, as well as being Mother Assistant or Mistress of the Novices for most of them. Known as a kind and gentle person, in her old age Mother Claver liked to wander down to the school and chat to the boarders.

As Assistant Reverend Mother, Mother Claver was also in charge of St Angela's Girls School in St Francis Xavier Hall. There was, in fact, quite an intricate network between the administration of schools and of convent over a long period. In a relatively small community, there were numerous examples of duplication of roles. Mother Augustine Briggs, as community bursar, was in charge of St Anthony's Boys School. Mother Magdalene Carroll, though Mistress of the Novices at one stage, was also in charge of St Aloysius High School and Boarding School, a post she held for many years.

## **A U S T R A L I A N   L E A D E R S H I P**

### **Magdalene Carroll, First Headmistress of St Aloysius**

'To everyone who had ever been to school there, Mother Mary Magdalene Carroll was 'Angas Street'. So wrote Sister M. Ignatius Kelly after Magdalene's death.<sup>54</sup>

As soon as she had made her religious profession, Sister Mary Magdalene Carroll had been given charge of St Angela's Select Intermediate School, together with the Boarding School which began the following year. Born Julia Carroll, in Geelong, Victoria, in 1863, she had taught before joining the Convent of Mercy, Angas Street, where she was professed in 1890 at the age of twenty-seven. Her older sister also joined the Angas Street community, was professed in 1891, as Sister Mary Gertrude, but died two years later. A third and younger sister was professed in 1897, also as Sister Mary Gertrude, and volunteered, almost immediately, for the Coolgardie foundation.

Magdalene Carroll was elected Bursar two years after her profession, then was elected Novice Mistress twice, Bursar three more times, Reverend Mother Assistant three times, was Acting Reverend Mother 1912-13, and was elected Reverend Mother 1914-1919 (two terms). Only when she had to fulfil the role of Mother Superior did she relinquish being headmistress. Her twenty-three years of principalship were very significant in shaping the ethos of the school, as were the twenty-six years of the third headmistress, Sister M. Teresa Dunlevie. Together, their policies and personalities dominated for half a century.

Despite being principal and member of the governing council of the community, with all the accompanying administrative tasks, Magdalene taught a full day's school. Almost singlehandedly, she taught the Junior and Senior classes. Her pupils thought her a wonderful teacher, extremely just, yet kind and considerate. She was endowed with much commonsense, and a contagious enthusiasm. Having educated herself in several new subjects, she then enjoyed passing on her knowledge. A lover of choir singing, she trained the boarders' choir, which sang each Sunday in the Cathedral at the nine o'clock Mass. A great believer in physical exercise, boarders not only went on their twice weekly walks but were also instructed by her to walk around the school yard when studying.

Her discipline was not always so very effective in producing orderliness, but she was determined that St Aloysius would be a school worthy of its teachers' and students' pride. This, together with her rather gruff voice, rapid speech, and swarthy complexion, made her somewhat awesome to some of her pupils, but many old scholars thought of her as a wonderful woman. Clare Sparkes Harris considered her really a rather wonderful personality, always in a hurry. Stella Cazneaux thought her a beautiful woman, with beautiful big brown eyes. Roma Mitchell remembered her as quite funny, not at all formidable. One of her injunctions was 'Girls, inhibit that cough. You will ruin the delicate membranes of your throats'. She also hated whistling, it was not womanly. Roma loved whistling and was pleased to read that Queen Mary did, too. Magdalene's response to that information was to state, 'Well, I suppose people have their faults'. Her standards of dress were stringent, if somewhat behind the times in the opinion of her pupils. Some of these recalled her saying

that she hoped never to see any old scholar walking down the street in 'shacks'.

Mother Magdalene founded the Old Scholars' Association<sup>55</sup> and continued to be its binding force. She never missed a meeting until her death in 1939. The Old Scholars' Association proved to be an effective organisation in preserving relationships between school and past students, and in forming networks among the students themselves. For many, many years, the Old Scholars had their own key to part of the school, and used it as a kind of clubroom.

Magdalene Carroll also influenced the branch houses with her educational and administrative expertise. For several years after her terms as Reverend Mother, she was the Supervisor of Mercy schools as well as being in charge of finance as the Bursar. As such, she visited the other Mercy schools at Parkside, Henley Beach, and Goodwood. On these visits, three a year, she was usually accompanied by one of the younger sisters, preferably one who had taught in State schools before entering. Magdalene would examine the various upper classes in reading, spelling, and arithmetic once a term, leaving Grades I and II to her companion.

After being relieved of her duties as Reverend Mother, the indefatigable Magdalene again took charge of the Angas Street Boarding School. She interviewed parents, made admissions, gave permissions, and did other tasks of management, officially allotted to other sisters. These did not always take too kindly to some of her decisions. She arranged the regular walks for the boarders; she took them on Sundays to Mass in the Cathedral and to Stations of the Cross in the afternoon, followed by a talk. She also took classes in the school, Intermediate French and Geography, Leaving English, Physiology and Modern History. She taught all the singing in the school as well as the boarders' choir.

As well as the Old Scholars' Association, Mother Magdalene had charge of the Sodality of the Children of Mary, a pious association for young women, which included both present and past pupils. She visited sick children or their relatives, as well as sick relatives of the sisters, day or night.

Then, in 1929, she was elected Mother Assistant to Mother Clare Murphy. The latter was now advancing in years, and her responsibilities fell more and more onto Magdalene's shoulders. The results were not all that good for Magdalene's teaching duties, or for her exercise of leadership during the 1930s. She herself was in her sixties. At this stage of her life, some past scholars remember, she was not at all the 'model teacher and rigid though just disciplinarian' that her obituary of 1939 called her.<sup>56</sup> However, there seems little doubt that her long and totally committed service to education was a significant factor in the growth of the Mercy schools. In the words of the same obituary, 'this great nun' was one who gained for Angas Street and the

Mercy nuns the highest reputation as successful teachers and was, withal, 'the humblest of humble nuns'.

It was left again to Ignatius Kelly to pen something of the feelings aroused among her companions by her death.

It would be hard to describe the feeling almost of desolation that pervaded the Convent after she had gone, the old nuns were heart-broken, and a feeling of helplessness seemed to take possession of everyone. I never realised until she had gone how very surely everyone looked to Mother Magdalene in any and every emergency; and they never looked in vain, she was always so wise and so prudent. There is no doubt that she was an outstanding personality ... It would be hard to describe the profound grief that Mother Magdalene's death has inspired.

She was an old nun, seventy-six last October ... yet she seemed to be as strong and wise and prudent as ever until a few months ago.

### **Camillus Murphy**

Magdalene Carroll was helped in the early years of teaching the higher or secondary classes by three other sisters. They were Camillus Murphy, Teresa Dunlevie, and Evangelist Vian.

Sister Camillus (Winifred) Murphy was very versatile, a gifted all-rounder, but classics, music, and art were her special loves. She was educated at South Melbourne College, to which she had won a scholarship. There she gained honours in Greek and Latin, with first prize for Latin. She taught before entering, and was probably attracted to Angas Street Convent from Victoria, by her older sister, Mary, who had been professed at Angas Street, in 1904.

Mary (another Sister M. Gertrude) died at thirty-nine, only four years after Camillus was professed. Another sister was a member of the Mercy convent in Lilydale, Victoria. The whole family were great lovers of art, literature, and music. Her father had worked at the *Argus* newspaper in Melbourne, then as a teacher, then again with newspapers, and finally as proprietor of a number of country newspapers. Her mother was described as having 'quiet and cultured tastes', and as being 'a good judge of painting and the beautiful in art and nature'.

Sister Camillus Murphy joined the Angas Street community in 1906 and was professed in 1908. Her work was primarily as Grade III teacher until 1910, when she was appointed to replace Mother Magdalene in the secondary school. Magdalene had broken her nose in a buggy accident while visiting a sick pupil. The nose had not been properly set, and, even when Magdalene returned to school, her work load was lessened for a while.

From 1908, as well as her Grade III class, Camillus had been teaching Senior Latin and Physiology, the only science taught until the early 1920s. She continued with these, after Magdalene's return, but also remained full-

time in the Secondary department, teaching several subjects to the Junior Public class. Later, she taught Leaving Honours, if there were any, and Latin and Ancient History to the Leaving class. Under her tutelage, Roma Mitchell gained first place in Latin in the State, a feat for a girl in those days. Camillus also taught some drawing and painting; at first, only water-colours, in deference to Sister M. Evangelist, the reigning expert. Painting was also her hobby, and her talent for beautiful illuminated printing was displayed in certificates distributed at Annual Prize Givings of the school. Her Latin classes were sometimes combined with her art classes, with the smell of burnt wood accompanying her demonstration of poker work. Camillus also played a vital role in the founding of the Catholic Girls' Sports Association in 1928.

Former pupils of Sister Camillus remembered her as pretty in appearance, very accomplished, 'a good and provocative teacher'. She was, one said, 'a clever little thing, short, dainty and quite attractive, with a slightly superior air'. 'She did not', said another, 'just try to cram knowledge into us but would draw us out, allowed us to express an opinion of our own.' She gave some an appreciation of literature that remained one of the joys of their lives.<sup>57</sup> She was 'a woman of her age – a pretty broad-minded nun for those times'. Her broad-mindedness had limits, though. Pupils were told to translate 'nudae nymphae' as 'nymphs in light attire'.

Later, Sister Camillus moved to Star of the Sea High School, Henley Beach, where several of her paintings used to hang. She also taught for a brief time in the High School at Parkside.<sup>58</sup>

### **Evangelist Vian**

The chief teacher of the French and Spanish languages, Sister M. Evangelist (Elsearina) Vian was ethnically a Basque. She spoke both languages fluently, though with what seemed a peculiar accent to her Australian pupils. Her English remained quite broken to the end of her life.

At St Aloysius College, Sister Evangelist – 'Vange' to several generations of pupils – taught sewing and intricate French needlework, as well as French to the higher examination students. She was not a conventional teacher, but she was a memorable one and many of her pupils labelled her 'a darling'. Very gifted and very eccentric, her uncertain English did not lead to good discipline, and she found it hard to adjust to Australian girls. To her pupils she had a brown, foreign complexion and beady eyes. They were very near-sighted eyes and she would bring the article of sewing right up to her nose. She would say: 'I have not the sight, but I have the hearing' (or 'the nose'). She could hear, she would claim, 'the grass grow in Flanders', or she could smell the orange or the quince being passed around the class. At times, while she took sewing classes, another sister would sit on the rostrum and read to the class in an effort to maintain good order.

Her death notice described her as 'a polished lady in mien and manner, artless yet highly cultured, natural yet possessing the graces of one trained to move in high society.' To Mother Dolores Barry, she was 'a dear little French nun whom we all loved'.

### **Margaret Mary Kenny**

The other Argentinian on the staff was Sister Margaret Mary (Rose) Kenny. She was the niece of Mother Claver Kenny and had come to Adelaide with her aunt and Clare Murphy, after their 1901 visit to Buenos Aires. Margaret Mary fascinated her students. Her accent when speaking English was, to them, a 'Yankee twang'. She appeared more attractive because of her South American background and her ability to speak Spanish fluently.

Margaret Mary was marvellous at fostering talent in drama and speech, as well as music. For the annual concerts, she produced operettas and cantatas. Colourful Spanish dances were, at times, incorporated into the operettas. Always they were a most enjoyable and spectacular part of the evening's entertainment. In addition to all this, she was the regular teacher of the first two infant classes.

She was a perfectionist, and some of her budding performers found this difficult to take. Her temper could be sudden, and the ruler was sometimes brought out as an aid to discipline or to encourage effort. Nevertheless, the tradition she set of high standards of musical and dramatic entertainment persisted.

In her later years, she could seem aloof and withdrawn. One past pupil remembered how thrilled Margaret Mary had been when a student who had lived in Argentina came to the school briefly. It brought home to her poignantly that the sisters from that country were living in a land not their own. They virtually had nobody to talk to about Argentina.<sup>59</sup>

### **Xavier Dalton**

From 1902, for almost two decades, the sub-primary classes of the school were the domain of Sister Xavier Dalton. Annie Dalton was a Victorian, who had attended the Loreto Sisters' Catholic Training college in Ballarat, taught in a Catholic school for a short while, and then moved to Adelaide to enter the Mercies. There she exerted an important influence, educationally.

As Sister Xavier, straight-backed and rather frail looking, she was quiet but decisive, and a thorough if somewhat dull teacher. On the other hand, she could display also a certain breadth of vision, a lack of fear of change, a commitment to higher education, and an ease of adaptation to a changing world. She was particularly mindful of young girls from small country schools, who may have had gaps in their knowledge. These she would coach after school. Ursula Cock was one of these and she remained very grateful all

her life to Sister Xavier.<sup>60</sup> On the surface, she could appear dry and colourless. But those who got to know her well discovered much warmth. Her contemporaries judged that she had a 'singularly honest mind' and a capacity for forbearance in time of stress or excitement. She was ever ready to praise and encourage; ever slow to blame and condemn.

As well as teaching at Angas Street and Parkside, she was given charge of novices in 1914, a post she held until 1922, and then, later, from 1926 to 1929. In 1920, she was elected Reverend Mother of the community, and re-elected for a second term in 1923.

### **Liguori Renehan**

In the primary school also taught Sister M. Liguori (Henrietta) Renehan. Liguori came from Victoria. One of her sisters had become a Sister of Mercy at Monte Sant'Angelo, North Sydney, and Henrietta had entered a Victorian Mercy convent. She had left this and was later accepted at Angas Street. She taught the Primary or Grade VI 'examination' class. The students studied for a SA Education Department examination leading to a Qualifying Certificate. Some bursaries were also awarded by the government.

In 1912, Liguori moved to Parkside, where she built up the small secondary department. She was replaced at Angas Street by Sister Aloysius Grant.

Some of Sister Liguori's past pupils recalled that she could be quite emotional and even waspish, at times, and given to having favourites. However, a surprising number remembered her with gratitude for her dedication to what she saw as their welfare.<sup>61</sup>

### **Teresa Dunlevie, Third Principal of St Aloysius**

Sister Teresa Dunlevie began at St Aloysius as the second adjunct (with Camillus Murphy) to Magdalene Carroll in the higher grades. She was also to be the third headmistress of the school, from 1918 to the end of 1944, taking over from Sister M. Aloysius Grant (1915-1917). The latter had succeeded Mother Magdalene, but had administered the school for three years only, until ill-health forced her resignation.

Teresa Dunlevie's environment as headmistress was one that was in many ways quite different from that of Magdalene Carroll. The year she took over the administration of the school was the year in which World War I was to end. The war had caused changes in the position of women within the workforce, with the advent of more single women into paid employment. There was the beginning of an uprise of women in commercial and professional occupations. Women had to begin to enter the State Public Service during the war and to hold various public official positions. They were being employed in clerical roles also in private businesses, sometimes in preference

to men. In Adelaide, the percentage of women within the female work force who were employed in commercial or professional positions rose from 14.2% in 1881 to 50.7% in 1921.<sup>62</sup> Such a drastic change began to be mirrored in the school curriculum.

Such changes did not, however, destroy the force of the prevailing ideology of women's role being primarily that of child-bearing and child-rearing. In fact, the loss of men during the war worked to reinforce it. As did also the post-war moves to increase the population of the country. There was, in this period, little notion of women doing a double shift of home duties and paid employment, except in dire necessity. The traditional dichotomy of private and public spheres still endured. Middle-class women, in general, approved of the emphasis on their role in the home since it tended to increase their power base in the private sphere. In 1922, a Dominican nun told a conference of teachers that the female ideal was that of 'free, disinterested and unselfish devotion to the honour, the happiness and the interests of her husband and family.'<sup>63</sup> The fact that South Australia had been the first Australian State to allow women to vote did not mean that its citizens departed to any marked extent from this general conviction.<sup>64</sup>

The depression years of the 1930s meant that women's employment was actively discouraged. Those jobs that were available were the prerogative of the boys and men. From 1927, the State Education Department articulated a policy of giving preference to male trainees. Girls entering the Public Service were appointed to lower paid and lower prestige jobs. The onset of World War II, in 1939, with Teresa Dunlevie still head of St Aloysius, led to an influx of women into the work force to fill the vacancies left by men going to the war. Such women tended to stay on after the war had ended, yet there had been no real modification of the dominant climate of thought. The true place of women was still considered to be the home. Nevertheless, St Aloysius, in the latter part of Magdalene Carroll's period as principal and in that of Teresa, somehow managed to nurture a number of students who became professional 'firsts'.<sup>65</sup>

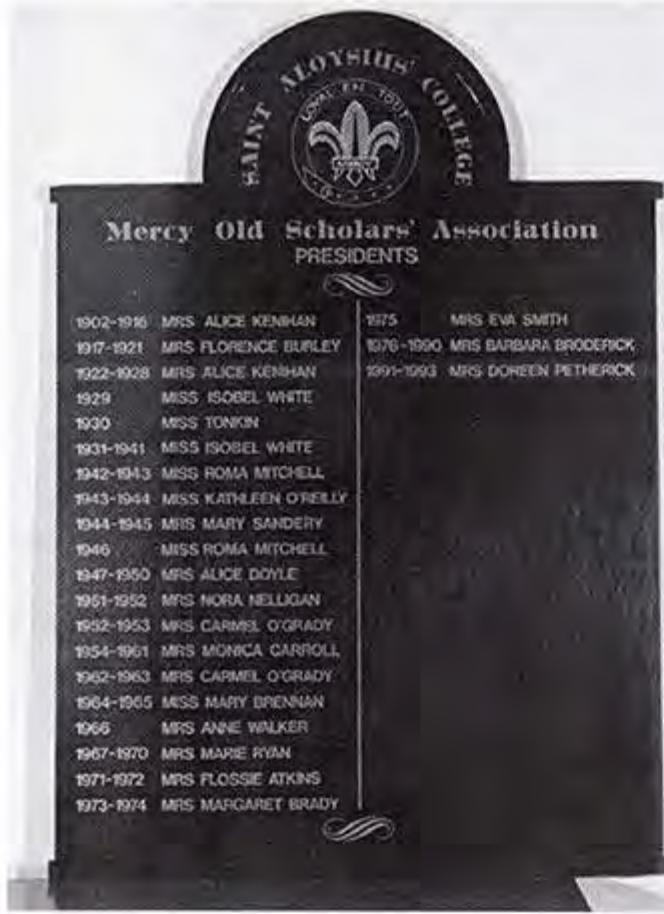
Nellie Dunlevie had taught for seven years before her entry into the convent, when she became Sister Mary Teresa. Nellie had been a pupil of St Aloysius for all her school days, where she was noted for her cleverness and immaculate neatness, and for winning the school prize for Mathematics. She had attended Adelaide Teachers' College, and then joined the South Australian Education Department, rising to the position of senior woman assistant of Hindmarsh Public School<sup>66</sup>. She had almost completed an Arts Degree from the University of Adelaide at the time of entry, having obtained top place in First Year Mathematics and several other credits. On entry into the convent, she became the first nun to gain a Bachelor of Arts degree in South Australia.



*Geology excursion to Hallett Cove, 1934. L to R: Srs M. Ignatius Kelly, Carmel Bourke, Margaret M. Kenny, and SAC students*



*SAC Prefects, 1941. In back row, L to R is (first) Mavis McBride (Sr M. Philip), (second) Joan Gaskell (Sr M. Augustine), and (fourth) Deirdre O'Connor (Sr M. Stanislaus)*



*Old Scholars'  
Association Presidents.  
Margaret Woods,  
President 1994-96*



*The 1957 Angas Street community on the visit of the Apostolic Delegate, taken in front of the cloisters*

As principal, Teresa Dunlevie was an excellent administrator. A very strong woman, she had a propensity to run everything and she exerted a potent control. Her air of being formidable was the way she controlled the school.<sup>67</sup> Though quiet and seemingly unobtrusive, she achieved her aims; no one dared to disobey. Her work of administration was accomplished in an era when the headmistress taught almost every period of the school day, and when there was no office or secretary or telephone. She shared responsibility with Mother Magdalene as Mistress of Schools – a probably somewhat difficult collaboration. The boarders, who were Magdalene's special love, felt that Teresa was not so interested in them. Some of them, however, remember her insistence on manners, at Sunday dinners, and her uncomfortable pokes in their backs for inappropriate handling of knife and fork. Singing classes, in slight disarray under Magdalene's somewhat more lenient hand, would instantly assume great order when Teresa entered the room. It was Teresa who designed the school's distinctive uniform.

Teresa was a skilful teacher. Despite the lack of facilities, she ran the school most efficiently, and, at the same time, taught her pupils very well. Her brilliance at Mathematics did not hinder her from teaching the subject effectively to very ordinary students – though one pupil remembers that Teresa's insistence on logic, rather than intuition, made her feel tired. Latin pupils were dazzled when she would read a text and add, 'But in Greek we say ...' She re-introduced Art into the curriculum after it had lapsed for a while. She was a foundation member of the Catholic Teachers' Association and, with Camillus Murphy, a prime mover towards the formation of the Catholic Girls' Sports Association. She introduced the annual sports day at the school, as well as eurhythmics in an attempt to introduce the girls to graceful deportment.

Underneath her reserve, her propensity to be straight-down-the-line, and her strictness of discipline, was a sense of good humour, which her students were rarely allowed to see. She could not tolerate schoolgirl horseplay, which she considered vulgar. Students consequently tended to consider her very straight-laced. In truth, Sister Teresa Dunlevie possessed a sensitive heart, and a great underlying kindness and concern. She may have been somewhat snobbish in that she favoured girls from 'good' families and those from families with a tradition of attending St Aloysius. She may have been somewhat strict in restraining refractory girls. But she was always fair and never harsh. With her as principal, the school ran more methodically and systematically than before. She encouraged other sisters on her staff to pursue further studies and, in an era where there was very little specialization in disciplines, took whatever opportunities arose to allocate to them the teaching of subjects in which they excelled.

Teresa mellowed considerably as she grew older. Her sense of justice and straight-dealing gained her the admiration of the school community. Under

her direction, the school grew in numbers and in competence. Something of her own strength and toughness and dedication permeated the school ethos, setting its tone of and reputation for industry and soundness and integrity. There is little doubt of the truth of these words of her obituary: 'She exercised a signal influence in the cause of religious education in South Australia'.

### **Brigid Walsh**

There were two past pupils who became teachers at their old school and were remembered for their excellence as educators. Both were influential in widening the curriculum in ways which reflected the changing role of women in the workforce during the decades before the World War II. They were Brigid Walsh and Ignatius Kelly.

Sister M. Brigid (Irene) Walsh had attended a Business College on leaving the school, had obtained a first class certificate, and had worked for several years as private secretary in a city business firm. She introduced commercial subjects, and an alternative commercial course, into the college, in the late 1920s. Prior to that, there had been one academic course, consisting of English Literature, Latin, French, Mathematics I and II, Physiology, and History (Modern). Now, Bookkeeping, Typing, and Shorthand were added possibilities. Brigid became famous for her Geography field excursions and school camps. 'A great, lively teacher, very good, indeed!' was a common verdict. After forty-eight years of continuous teaching, she took as sabbatical 'a geographical venture' of touring Australia by bus to look at various land-forms throughout the country.

### **Ignatius Kelly**

Sister M. Ignatius (Ellen) Kelly had attended Adelaide Teachers' College. She spent about ten years teaching in the State Education Department schools, almost completed an Arts degree through evening classes, and then entered the convent. In 1934, Ignatius became the first woman diplomate in Secondary Education in South Australia, 'a very forward step for nuns at that time'<sup>68</sup>. She obtained credits in seven subjects, winning first place in three. A contemporary commentator described her thesis, 'The Part played by Nuns in Education in South Australia', as courageous. Considering the cult of anonymity surrounding religious women of her time, it was, indeed, courageous.

Her family was noted for their intelligence and her own interests were highly intellectual. She loved study and she loved teaching Latin, French, and Ancient History. It was Ignatius who introduced Geology into the curriculum, her students gaining top places in the State Honour Lists year after year.<sup>69</sup> As they did also in Ancient History. She built up collections of varied texts in Latin and Ancient History, so that her students gained a wider introduction to

these subjects. She could be tough on lethargic students, but also very witty. She could tell a good story, and her lessons could be fun. She was in close touch with contemporary educational life, and her students' results were very good. Past pupils Roma Mitchell and Aline Fenwick, both pursuing law, were frequently the subject of conversation for the classes of later years.

As a school girl, she had been very pretty with red hair. As a nun, 'Iggie' was something of a character. She relished the fact that a novice had once told her that she was Peter Pan. Her readings from the Martyrology, at convent meals, were always delivered with much relish. One of her non-intellectual interests was football. She had been known to sneak a member of the Port Adelaide team, Jeff Motley, into the upstairs quarters for an exciting conversation. Another time, she herself had gone upstairs to find out, on the radio, who had won the toss at cricket. Unknown to her, the public address system was switched on, and the whole campus heard it, too. Reverend Mother Xavier, looking for the perpetrator of the disturbance, knew in advance the identity of the culprit. The story allegedly ends with Mother Xavier asking Iggie, 'Anyway, who did win the toss?'

Her thesis on the role of nuns in education in South Australia, although now dated in its language and, to some degree, its philosophy and theology, shows a keen mind, one interested beyond its own limited sphere, and mindful of the richness of the tradition and the age-old European culture she had inherited. Writing about the founding members of the Adelaide Mercies, she said:

All of these nuns were fluent speakers of French and Spanish,<sup>70</sup> and were held in high repute on account of the training they gave in modern languages. In the early days of these nuns in South Australia, business and professional men and women came in numbers to the Convent of Mercy to learn the French language from the French nun who had arrived with this band and who was so well known in educational circles until her death six years ago. At the present time it is not at all unusual for business firms to send their Spanish letters to the convent for translation.

Adding that the first sisters taught the ordinary school subjects, together with Painting, Drawing, Music, Singing, and Elocution, she continued: 'Their successors today, making due allowance for the change engendered by modern conditions, are still working on the old traditional lines.'

For Sister Ignatius Kelly, education to true knowledge was the goal of St Aloysius' School. True knowledge was the ability to ask the right questions, and from the answers to form a right judgment. Somewhat ahead of her time, she rejoiced in the growing intellectual nature of the education of girls, which she declared had been 'in the past not on the same solid lines as that of the boys'. Notwithstanding this belief in the value of intellectual growth, she

also claimed that there must be time for tranquil development and a balanced curriculum. She saw the education of the girls by the nuns as rendering them the accomplished and gracious women so typical of the past generation. The 'convent bred' girl was marked by her accomplishments. A too feverish and unbridled pursuit of truth, for her, hindered the full expansion of the intellect, and prevented that full stirring of the heart, that the perception of truth should arouse.

### **Dominic Henderson**

Sister Mary Dominic (Violet) Henderson taught music. A big woman, she had a vibrant personality which made her pupils remember her. They also remembered that it saved trouble if they got their notes right. Wrong notes could be rewarded with a cane across the knuckles, though Dominic was not really very intimidating. She loved poker work and would do it as she taught. There are a couple of tables with her lovely work preserved in the convent archives.

One example was a wooden cigar box decorated with poker work and given by her to Marion Wilson in 1914. It had the St Aloysius badge on top and on the two sides. On another side was 'Greetings True' with ribbons; on the fourth side a swastika. Inside the lid were pictures of the German Kaiser Wilhelm. Carmel Bourke saw this production as an example of Dominic's 'sardonic wit'. Marion was supposed to get a fright when she opened the box.

Marion was the youngest of four Wilson girls who were pupils at St Aloysius between 1900 and 1916. All learnt music and painting from Sister Dominic. Their mother, Matutina Brazill, had been a pupil of the school in its first years. Marion's own two daughters, Shirley and Betty Mitchell, attended the school between 1935 and 1945, and Shirley's two daughters, Mary and Brigid Coome, were at Mercedes in the 1960s. It was this kind of constancy that helped build up the Mercy school ethos.

Dominic and Xavier Dalton were companions, though opposites. Dominic with her great body was a direct contrast to Xavier, who was tall and lean, almost just skin and bone. Xavier could be heard to remonstrate: 'Oh, Dominic, don't say that!' To which Dominic would unfailingly reply, 'Well, it's the truth'.

### **H O U S E   C A R E R S**

The sisters who worked in house duties in both convent and boarding school could sometimes have a deeper impact on their young charges than did their teachers. 'These often had an air', one past pupil declared. 'You got your love from the lay nuns'.<sup>71</sup> There were three such sisters among the founding group, whose memories have survived. They were Margaret Coffey, Martha Maloney, and Lucy Le Couteur.

### **Margaret Coffey and Martha Maloney**

These two Irish-born sisters came out together to Argentina in the foundation year of 1856, and lived and worked together all their lives, except for a while when one was in Adelaide and the other in Mount Gambier. They were very close. In old age, in Adelaide, these two young postulants of 1856 had become revered original foundresses.

Sister Margaret (Anne) Coffey came from Drogheda, north of Dublin. She was born 1st October, 1838, and so was not quite twenty when she went to Buenos Aires, where she received the religious habit on 13th September, 1857. She was professed 2nd October, 1859. Sister Martha (Mary) Maloney, was born in Athy on 20th July, 1838. She was received and professed on the same days as her companion. Both were lay sisters. Margaret Coffey went to Mt Gambier with the first contingent there, but returned to Adelaide in 1890, a month after the six Sisters returned to Argentina. She was, it seems, lonely for her great friend, Sister Martha.

Margaret Coffey died in Adelaide 19th February, 1922. Some of the boarding pupils of the early 1920s spoke of her as an old nun. She had spent her working years in domestic duties in the convent or the House of Mercy or the boarding school. Small of stature, with very rosy cheeks, she was, one recalled<sup>73</sup>, always very friendly and cheerful, with a 'soft spot' for the boarders. Another recalled her monthly doses of oil, and especially the cupful of oil she was given the day before a music exam, an exam she consequently had to miss. Margaret's requiem was the first in the new chapel at Angas Street, and the boarders were taken to see her laid out in full religious garb. The young girls were awe-struck by the peace and serenity on her little wrinkled old face.

Martha had already died, on 4th February, 1917. She had worked in house duties at Angas Street, and was a memorable portress. A friendship had developed between her and the postman, who declared himself as sadly missing the small nun when she died.

### **Lucy Le Couteur**

Sister Lucy Mary (Adelaide) Le Couteur was born in Buenos Aires, in 1852, of French descent. In Adelaide, her chief domain became the boarding school kitchen and the House of Mercy. A tiny, very slender person, 'like a little bird in her quick movements', Lucy possessed a goodly amount of authority within her own small world. She was able to issue a sharp reprimand when required, and both school boarders and inmates of the House of Mercy learnt to respect her. They experienced, too, her gentleness and kindness, especially when they were sick.

In the 1920s, she looked after Ruby and Bib and Maria, last of the women at the House of Mercy, with a loving heart, exercising in a hidden but very

devoted way, the first work of Catherine McAuley. She continued her duties right up to her death at Angas Street, in 1938, at the age of eighty-six. Described, by those who remembered her in later years, as 'a sweet little nun', her obituary also termed her 'the Little Saint'.

#### THE DECADES IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING WORLD WAR I

When Teresa Dunlevie was succeeded as principal by Sister Carmel Bourke (1945-1953) who was, in her turn, succeeded by one of her former pupils, Sister M. Campion (Deirdre) Jordan (1954-1968), it was a very different world – and Adelaide – that was emerging. For much of this period Sir Thomas Playford was Premier of South Australia, 1938-1965. Playford was the architect of South Australia's industrial revolution. He combined a social and moral conservatism with what has been called 'business dash and legislative audacity'.<sup>73</sup> Much radical change and relative prosperity occurred as a result.

Historian Derek Whitelock states that Adelaide had 'greatly changed from the sober little agricultural service centre of a city which had ambled into the twentieth century.' There was a 'hectic growth' in population, largely through the 'extraordinary' assisted immigration scheme of the Federal Government. Adelaide itself was expanding in all directions beyond the parklands. There was a much more varied and complex industrial and commercial dimension to the city and State. Women – including married women – were participating in the labour-force on a much larger scale than hitherto.<sup>74</sup> Changes in patterns of production and the growth of knowledge meant that the physical and natural sciences were assuming a much larger place in the school curriculum.

The immigration policies of this period signalled what was to become a highly significant trait in the composition and activities of St Aloysius College up to the present day. Australia was becoming a multicultural society. Many of the migrants came from countries such as Italy, Spain, and Malta, where the culture was Catholic. The Australian Catholic Church helped many settle into their new land. One avenue of this help was through the schools. Over the next decades, St Aloysius was to develop creative ways of helping students from non-English speaking countries, especially, including the later waves of Asian migrants.<sup>75</sup>

#### **Carmel Bourke, Fourth Headmistress of SAC**

Sister Mary Carmel (Elma) Bourke was another outstanding past pupil and teacher of the 1930s and later decades. Carmel had joined the Sisters of Mercy in 1931. She had only two subjects left to complete her BA degree, which she then finished. She had trained in Early Childhood Education (pre-

primary); however, it is as a secondary teacher that she is most remembered. Her many talents flourished. She was not only an inspiring teacher, especially of religion and of literature, but she was also a gifted choir mistress, and herself a singer and pianist of talent. Altogether, she spent thirty very happy and satisfying years at St Aloysius, years rich for her in memories. Angas Street was for her a good place to be. It was also a good place for those girls she taught.

At the end of 1944, Sister Teresa Dunlevie had retired as principal of St Aloysius and Carmel had succeeded her. By the end of World War II, Adelaide had grown beyond its initial character as a small centre servicing the agricultural industries. The suburbs now incorporated light industries and a much more complex infrastructure of commerce. The population expanded rapidly and the entry of women into the workforce increased dramatically, though women's role was still viewed primarily as parental.

Carmel administered the school for nine years. In 1948 she received an OBE in recognition of her leadership in the school's support for victims of World War II, especially children and refugees. In 1954 she became the superior of Angas Street, teaching part-time in the secondary school. She was also a member of the provincial council between 1950 and 1960, and again later for another period. In 1960, she went as superior to Springfield community and as principal of Mercedes College. There she remained until the end of 1969, returning full-time to the staff of St Aloysius until the end of 1972. At this time she was elected to the General Council of the Australian Union of Sisters of Mercy, for six years.

The life of this quietly remarkable woman is evidence of the education towards full womanhood that she received as a pupil of the school, and also of the opportunities for and the richness in service that convent life offered to women. Angas Street archives contain her personal account of life at St Aloysius High and Boarding School, as pupil, teacher, and principal. As one historian of education has written, these memoirs reveal 'an eye for considerable detail, a lovely command of the language, and a refreshing indication of warmth, understanding, humour and human foible'.<sup>76</sup>

Carmel Bourke died in 1995. The responses to her death and the numbers of past pupils and other friends at her funeral was proof of her profound influence on many. She had spent most of her eighty-six years helping to liberate women through teaching and administration.

### **Dolores Barry**

Mother Dolores Barry, as provincial superior, was the community's over-all administrator from 1951 to 1962. Dolores was a paradox, combining a marvellous forward vision with a personality that could be extremely charming but could also be extremely daunting. Carmel Bourke wrote that

she was a woman of great courage and daring, of tremendous vision and great faith in God. Carmel thought her a most gracious and charming lady, very sensitive to others, very delicate in her relationships with people.<sup>77</sup>

Not everyone would have agreed with this verdict. Conservative in her views of religious life, and firm in her judgments and decisions, she found the changes in religious life during the late 1960s and after, very difficult. Living with young professed sisters then, there were at times 'generation clashes'. On the whole, however, the sisters were fond of Dolores Barry and there were tears when she died in 1986. Buried on the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy, 24th September, the common verdict was that she was 'Mercy through and through'.

Dolores Barry came from a family where five daughters became Sisters of Mercy – three in Western Australia, herself in South Australia, and the fifth in Parramatta. As a young sister, she had been in charge of boarders at St Aloysius and of boys at Goodwood Orphanage. She had taught in both primary and secondary classes. She had been local superior, including at Parkside where she was for many years and from where she went, in 1940, to take charge of the novices.

At Parkside, the Coady family had found her extremely understanding and compassionate. Their father was dead, their mother seriously ill, and their two uncles – who lived with them – were unemployed in the depression years. Dolores would encourage the sisters to go over to the Coady home across the road and cook tea for the family. The young Sister M. Francis Coady – at this stage, with temporary vows – never forgot this kindness, and considered that the sisters' support had enabled her to remain in the Mercy novitiate.

As the main administrator, Dolores was concerned to offer the sisters the opportunity for tertiary education. She encountered some opposition from within the community from those who feared the sisters would become too 'secularised' or too 'worldly' if they attended state colleges and universities. Dolores realised, however, that higher education was professionally essential. She realised, also, that there were some exceptionally gifted young women in the community and she fought hard to give them appropriate opportunities.<sup>78</sup>

Both articulate and exact, Dolores believed in the force of history and contributed greatly to the conservation of the community's archival records.

### **Sister M. Campion (Deirdre) Jordan, Principal 1954-1968**

In 1967, the first modern major expansion of the Angas Street school facilities occurred. This was the erection of what was later<sup>79</sup> named the Campion Jordan Building, after the principal at the time of its construction. Sister M. Campion was not present for its opening. She had been awarded an Australian – American Educational Foundation teacher development grant

in 1966, for a six months study tour. Before leaving, she had completed her study for a Master of Education degree at the University of Adelaide.

Sister Campion (Deirdre) Jordan had joined the Sisters of Mercy when nineteen, and obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in the same year. She was twenty-eight when placed in charge of SAC – the youngest member of the staff. As headmistress, she pushed for change within the education system. At the college, she worked to treat the school as a community, to break down stereotyping in the education of girls, and to broaden the curriculum.<sup>80</sup> During 1965-66, she was part of a commission to look at the future of Catholic Education in South Australia. In 1966, she was appointed to the first council of the new Flinders University – the first nun to be elected to a university council in Australia.<sup>81</sup> While still principal, she won a Fullbright scholarship to study educational administration in the United States.

The new 1967 building fronted Wakefield Street, on what had been the sports ground. It incorporated administrative quarters, laboratories, and a senior secondary school. One of the laboratories was an innovation – the first language teaching laboratory in a secondary school in South Australia. The other three laboratories were for science – Physics, Chemistry, and Biology. As well as the six classrooms, housing Intermediate through to Matriculation grades, there were special purpose rooms for Art and Social Science. The administrative area included a special office for the business course. Enhancing the new facility was an exterior statue of the Sacred Heart, by acclaimed sculptor Tom Bass. Tom charged only the cost of the materials for this work of art, and that was carried by Mrs Jordan, mother of Sister M. Campion. She signed the cheque of payment the night before she died.

While a Commonwealth grant had helped in the construction of the three science laboratories, a north-east corner block of land had had to be purchased for \$51,600<sup>82</sup>, and the building was estimated to cost \$328,000. This was the first school construction on the site not to be financed basically from convent monies.

The 1920s had been periods of tremendous growth, stated Sister M. Cecilia (Monica) Marks, at the dinner to launch the Building Fund appeal, on February 13th, 1967. That generation of sisters had not stored money, but, with confidence and simple daring, had spent every bit of their legacy in a generous response to the needs of the archdiocese. It was all rather breathtaking at the time, she thought, and rather wonderful that it was all able to be done without any appeal for funds. Over the ensuing three decades, there had been no large capital gift but many people had contributed in relatively small but vital ways to help provide amenities for the school. In 1954, with the departure of the boarders to Mercedes, the old boarding quarters had been converted to classrooms. Now, however, a large capital sum was needed and the parents and friends of the school were being asked to contribute in a more systematic way.

Sister M. Campion, with her educational expertise and dynamic outlook, claimed Sister Cecilia, focussed the whole forward thrust of St Aloysius' College at this time. From the beginning, the sisters had adopted a positive outlook, and an open attitude to society. They had showed themselves flexible, and had offered a curriculum whose breadth was truly astonishing, given the circumstances of the time and the provision by State education then.

St Aloysius was fortunate in having a relatively large group of faithful past students to help with the fundraising required. The Mercy Old Scholars Association had a tradition of contributing to the ongoing welfare of the school. Its genesis appears to go back to 1902, when two ex-pupils, Mrs A. Wood and Miss Cissie O'Leary, had collected money from a few friends to provide a prize for speech night. It seems to have been formalised in 1912, under the sponsorship of Mother Magdalene Carroll, then principal. About 1940, the Old Scholars helped set up a Mother Mary Magdalene Scholarship Fund, one of several scholarships available then for students who needed help with school expenses. Among the list of subscribers were Isabel White (President OSA 1928-1940), Florence Burley (President OSA), Mary Anderson (nee O'Brien, one of the the first pupils), Mary M. Britten Jones (nee Gunson), Anne Gunson, Nora M. Thomas (Topsy Dunlevie), and Aline Fenwick (winner of Government Bursary 1940).

The Mercy Old Scholars Association embraced former students of all schools – primary and secondary – conducted by the Sisters of Mercy. It aimed to encourage the Mercy spirit amongst its members, to provide opportunities for former students to keep in touch with former teachers and with each other, and to raise funds for the works of the Sisters of Mercy. It organised a number of annual events. Members saw themselves sharing in the work of the sisters not only through fund raising but also by supporting their ministries in education, social work, and pastoral care.

A Mothers' and Fathers' Club had also operated, until the mid-1960s, and was essentially involved in fundraising and the maintenance of buildings. However, as Sister M. Campion pointed out in her 1964 Annual School report, the school was being viewed more and more by the community as an agent for passing on culture. Parents' meetings were progressively more oriented towards the needs of parents in the current period of changing cultural norms. It was also important for the parents, she declared, to understand the purposes behind developments within the school. Moreover, in this era of renewal within the church itself, catalysed by the Second Vatican Council, parents could not place themselves to one side of the movement. The Mothers' and Fathers' Club was disbanded with the inauguration of the Building Fund Appeal in 1967, when a Parents' and Friends' Association took its place, with emphasis now on community building.



*Sr M. Justin (Judith) Redden and Helen Densley, preparing deaf children for Nativity Play in St Cecilia's Hall, 1965*



*Staff of St Aloysius' College, 1975. Sisters are L to R: Srs Anne Rivers, Kath Preece, Helen O'Brien, Veronica Courtney*



*Srs Barbara McQuillan and Judith Redden (principal, SAC) at Wake for St Cecilia's Hall, 1985. Sr Barbara was in charge of St Cecilia's School for many years*



*View of St Aloysius' College showing the Tom Bass statue, donated by Mrs Jordan*

At the end of 1968, Sister M. Campion resigned as principal to take up an appointment as lecturer in Education at the University of Adelaide. During her term of administration, the somewhat anachronistic custom whereby the Reverend Mother of the community was the formal principal of the school was discontinued. This helped greatly in clarifying roles. It was a period when the nature of the teaching staff was changing, with the number of lay staff beginning to increase dramatically.<sup>83</sup> It was a period, too, when the immediate impact of theological and pastoral change had crystallised in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, when administrators were being called to read the signs of the times and move accordingly. Sister Campion had guided the college through those years with skill and creativity.

### THE 1970s ON

With the resignation of Sister M. Campion, it seemed as if the practice of appointing long-term principals had ended. After a short term as principal by Sister M. Philippa Ridgway (1969 – July, 1970), Sister Patricia Pak Poy took charge of administration, which she held until May, 1976. Sister Anne Rivers succeeded her, resigning at the end of first term 1979.<sup>84</sup> Anne was followed by Sister Mary Densley, who administered the school until mid-1983. At that stage, Sister Judith Redden took over and the custom of fairly long-term administrators re-commenced.

The 1970s were exciting if not always comfortable years. The true import of Vatican II was being felt more and more strongly in theological and other church matters. There were immense changes within society in general. They were also the years of the Dunstan era in South Australia, an era which seemed to the rest of Australia to be creative or permissive, according to your point of view. Many of these changes are discussed later, in Chapter Seven, where the Adelaide Mercies wrote a new story of moving on, this time through recognizing new poverties that called to be addressed for the first time, and old poverties that called to be addressed in new ways.

At St Aloysius College, the educational scene was being affected powerfully. The rapid drop in the number of sisters experienced during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in employment of more and more lay staff. St Aloysius in 1956 had employed three lay persons; over half the staff were lay in 1970. This ratio was to gradually move towards almost one hundred per cent lay over the next two decades. After some earlier grants for libraries and science laboratories, the Commonwealth Government began to enter heavily, in the 1970s, into the financing of non-government schools. This meant schools could remain viable with the salaries of lay staff being covered by government funding, capital works could be expanded, and educational resources of all kinds could be improved. It also implied greater, if indirect, control. Women

were penetrating more and more into the labour force. In 1977, thirty-five percent of the South Australian work force were women, nearly two-thirds of these being married.<sup>85</sup> They were still in a narrow range of occupations, however, though even this would begin to change gradually.

In 1972, an unexpected civic move caused panic among the Mercy administrators. The town planners were considering a possible extension to Gawler Place, which would cut right through the Mercy property and involve the loss of an appreciable proportion of the convent, including the Cunningham Memorial Chapel. Premier Don Dunstan was invited to visit the chapel and was much impressed by it. The chapel was saved.

Likewise in 1972, Catholic Education administrators were considering the subject of co-education vis a vis co-instruction (classes combining girls and boys from neighbouring schools for certain subjects). The latter was a compromise being employed by orders of religious brothers whose rule did not allow them to run schools for girls. The Mercy answer was favourable to co-education, as also to the proposal for a central co-educational Matriculation College. They saw this as a positive educational contribution, rather than as a mere rationalization of resources.<sup>86</sup>

The Adelaide Mercy Chapter of January, 1972, had set up an ad hoc committee to look at the long term future of both St Aloysius' and Mercedes Colleges.<sup>87</sup> It was clear that some action needed to be taken if both schools were to be maintained. There were a number of options possible, but the one favoured by the then Provincial Council was to offer either school to the diocesan education authorities as a Matriculation School.

This action was not taken. The ad hoc committee – which comprised laymen and sisters – recommended, in August of that year, that both schools continue, and be related in some way to the Sisters of Mercy. Archbishop Gleeson was a member of the committee and he strongly favoured this line of action. The committee recommended the appointment of a lay Headmaster or Headmistress to either school, but considered that Mercedes was the more appropriate choice. Such a move was made at the end of that year.<sup>88</sup>

At SAC – as the school was popularly known by then – there took place a transfer of responsibility from the congregation alone. By November, 1975, an Interim School Board had been set up and mandated to work towards a more permanent body which could be involved in policy making. The board instituted a number of committees which covered the various facets of school life and management, and formalized the contribution many had already been making. In April, 1979, the Interim board was dissolved, to be replaced by the St Aloysius College Consultative Board, with the general aim of ensuring the welfare of the college and its community. In 1982, the college became an Incorporated Body in its own right. The congregation retained

considerable power and hence responsibility. The board, however, had wide scope in the exercise of its powers.<sup>89</sup>

Sister Monica Marks, as Provincial Superior, thanked the foundation members of the Board, and indicated that their term had been very significant in the history of the school. It signified a new development, that from friendly, fundraising, associate parent bodies which the principal could call on for help, to the establishment of an advisory board which was involved in the top level management and administration of the affairs of the college.

There were other positive developments in the decade of the seventies. In 1970, a Library and Junior School Science Laboratories were opened<sup>90</sup>. A General Studies Programme for the Junior Secondary Grades was introduced in 1972, after eighteen months planning. In 1974, a sports store and change rooms were erected at the Southern Park Lands.

According to the designers of the plan for General or Integrated Studies, called at that stage the 'McAuley Programme', the syllabus tried to incarnate what had emerged as the most significant objective of the educative process at St Aloysius' College. This was 'the integration of life experience and self-actualization, of which the acquisition of knowledge is seen as but one set of experiences'. The programme would provide:

1. an integrated programme for the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd high school levels aiming at integration of knowledge and experience.
2. an involvement in and a growing awareness of the implications of social justice throughout the whole school.

Coordinator of the project was Sister Anne Rivers. She was assisted by Mrs Glenda Condon as Curriculum advisor for St Aloysius and for other schools through the Catholic Education Office.

The General Studies programme was highly controversial at the time. One teacher – an old scholar – who came to the college with a traditional teaching style and had to adapt to a school in its heyday of change found it a terrifying challenge.<sup>91</sup> There was 'chaos, but ... organised chaos', coupled with 'so much trust and so much autonomy in the teaching'. They were for her – and it seemed, also, for the children – exciting years, years that made her always stand 'in awe of this school – for having that adventurous spirit, that courage to go in those directions.' Economic conditions and parents' fears had led, she claimed, to a gradual moving away from the freedom of those days, and new conditions demanded new responses. But she remained convinced that what they were doing then, in the General Studies programme, was good educationally.

Everyone was not of this opinion. All parents and all staff did not approve of the 'no homework' concept. The General Studies programme itself was

perceived as a 'mish mash' of disciplines, a somewhat trendy alternative to solid traditional study. Some parents chose to withdraw their daughters and enrol them elsewhere. There was a significant drop in the student population of the school.

The school newsletters of this decade included frequent pleas from teachers or students for parental help – in provision of resources or as aides for various subjects. Students were also being trained, it was claimed, to be resourceful. An editorial in the school newsletter dated 17th July, 1978, was written by a pupil in the Business Course, and outlined practical progress in that area of study. Students did part-time Desk Duty at the College (telephone and reception), as well as some messages for staff. They learned how to approach and deal with people in different aspects of business. They were also involved in producing the annual magazine.

It was during the 1970s that the concept of education to justice became more and more noticeable. The connection between mercy and justice had always been a strong note in Patricia Pak Poy's philosophy. Anne Rivers' report as principal, in 1977, accepted the challenge of Pope Paul VI in the matter of education to justice and peace. 'The social question has become worldwide', the pope had written. 'Solidarity in action at this turning point in human history is a matter of urgency'. Anne's report listed a number of school activities designed to help develop a social conscience in the students.

In this same report, an attempt was made to explain the General or Integrated Studies programme to parents, who, the staff felt, did not really understand its way of working. The traditional model of school as a place where subdued order prevailed was quite clearly not that on which the school had been operating since 1971. Parents – and staff, too, sometimes – became anxious. But, Anne assured them, there was an order which prevailed on which the curriculum and the operation of the school was built. There was high emphasis on individual progression and growth. The traditional model acted against such. Visiting educators were often able to discern the subtle, yet clearly defined guidelines of operation, she claimed. The senior students of the last three years, first products of the new system, had undoubtedly proven themselves in every area, she also claimed. They not only achieved examination results equal to those of past years – contrary to distressing rumours – but they also displayed enthusiasm for their academic studies as well as qualities of resourcefulness, initiative and leadership, and an ability to study and to use resources wisely and fully.

When Anne Rivers resigned as principal at the end of first term, 1979, she was followed by Sister Mary Densley. Mary now faced a crisis in that the normal pattern of enrolments was changing. Her analysis showed that the intake in February, 1979, at Year 8, had dropped from the desirable one hundred and five (achieved during the two previous years) to seventy-eight. The

Matriculation class of 1981 comprised eighty-six students. The school seemed, nevertheless, to be preparing its students effectively for further education. Of these eighty-six, at least sixty-one went on for some form of tertiary study.

There were a number of factors which Mary could identify in an attempt to account for the drop in enrolment patterns: a generally declining birth rate, the provision of extra secondary facilities in Adelaide for Catholic students, and the zoning and upgrading of parish schools and the dezoning of State High Schools. In addition, there had been a lack of public promotion of St Aloysius as well as some apprehension among parents about the General Studies programme, which had not always been successful elsewhere. It was the familiar story of the difficulties of pursuing an innovative programme in a conservative climate, Mary commented. Facilities for sport and physical education were an ongoing problem.<sup>92</sup>

This drop in school population had severe financial implications. Lowered numbers had been a factor in the failure to qualify for a Commonwealth Building grant in 1979. To avoid a financial crisis, the number of non-Catholic girls admitted was increased from eight to about twelve per cent. In turn, this raised questions concerning the ethos of the school and the need for continuing staff formation to respond to the changed situation.

In November, 1981, a discernment about the use of the Angas Street site led to an integrated plan, in several stages, for the convent and school. Sister Nance Munro, congregational bursar, was appointed co-ordinator of the building project. A Commonwealth Grant in 1982 made possible the first stage of the school development, bridging finance was fortuitously available consequent on the disposal of a portion of land at Springfield, and money for convent alterations partly came from a legacy from an old scholar, Winifred Rooney. The convent plan included a congregational library, established by Sister Romley Dirrman, and an archival centre, established by Sister Deirdre O'Connor.

Sister Judith Redden took over the principalship of SAC in May 1983, and competently steered the school in this period of ambitious expansion of facilities.

The Dame Roma Mitchell building of Junior Secondary classrooms and the Carmel Bourke Expressive Arts Centre were both opened in the 1980s. To accommodate the Dame Roma Mitchell building, the old Barr Smith residence was demolished. A block of offices were also erected on the Angas Street frontage, with a view to providing the possibility of another venue for future apostolic works of the congregation. Meanwhile, they were rented commercially.<sup>93</sup> The Church Office also entered into negotiations, at this time, for the former House of Mercy building, then being used by the school as special teaching areas.

To accommodate the Carmel Bourke Expressive Arts Centre, St Cecilia's Hall was demolished. In one way, the substitution was appropriate. Sister Margaret Mary Kenny had produced many memorable school performances in the hall, including a Grand Concert for the 1931 worldwide Centenary of the Mercy Order. First of the 'principal stars' of 'Hiawatha', on that occasion, was Molly Coady – destined, as Sister M. Francis, to be the last headmistress of St Cecilia's Primary School. In more recent times, Sister Janet Mead had also produced some dazzling musicals there. Sister M. Jacinta (Kathryn) Travers had entered plays for the Therry Society Catholic Schools' Drama Festivals. The Therry Society, the Magpie Theatre, the Doppio Teatro, and the Deck Chair Theatre Co were among the visiting companies to perform in the hall.

A 'Wake' for the old hall and former primary school was held one Sunday afternoon before the demolition of this place of many memories. A piano solo was played by Sister Carmel Bourke, who had performed at its opening as a student. Now seventy-eight years old, she arrived just in time for the concert from Samoa, where she had been lecturing at the Mercy Novitiate. The items also included 'A Time to Reminisce', with Sister Barbara McQuillan (long-term principal of St Cecilia's Primary School) and Sister Francis Coady (the last principal, 1951-56).

The 1990s, still under the guidance of Sister Judith Redden, saw further expansion of facilities. On 27th March, 1994, Senator Rosemary Crowley opened a Computer Centre, classrooms to house Reception to Grade IV, and an After Hours Care Centre. The senator had, in her own words, 'travelled very closely with the Mercy nuns in this town and in the Mercy schools since we arrived here.' 'Some of the finest women I know', she declared, 'serve in the Mercy order, and I count them not only as mentors but as friends.' Rosemary was especially interested in the re-establishment of the junior primary school – for 'the Tiddlies'. Her own children, all boys, had started their education at Mercedes College as 'Tiddlies'.

A year later, in March, 1995, the opening of a new and expanded library took place, this time performed by Sister Deirdre (Campion) Jordan, now Chancellor of Flinders University and chairperson of the St Aloysius College Foundation. In the 1950s, Deirdre, as principal of St Aloysius, had been the one to create – out of the former boarders' dining room – the first real school library, from a number of books hitherto existing in a cupboard. It was Deirdre, also, who initiated the acquisition of a government grant for the new library of 1970.

The 1990s were very challenging years in another way. The socio-economic profile of the school population covered a wide range and was skewed towards the lower end. About one third of the families were below the formal poverty line. There were some seventy nationalities among the students. All

in all, it made for a very exciting environment, and one that remained true to its double roots in St Angela's 'poor' school and St Angela's 'select' school, operating together in the Cathedral Hall.

1. The school has had various names. St Angela's Select School became St Aloysius's High School and Boarding School, but both were called the Sisters of Mercy School, or commonly Convent of Mercy. St Aloysius' College (SAC) belongs to the second half of the 20th century;
2. Sister Carmel Bourke.
3. See later in chapter.
4. Or 'Honor'. There is sometimes variation in the form of Christian names on account of the Spanish influence.
5. Mother Dolores Barry, who met her several times on her visits to Adelaide in later years.
6. Western end of the three-storeyed block later known as McAuley House and then renamed Teresa Dunlevie Building in 1995.
7. Joanna Barr Smith was always interested in education. She had been friendly also with Mary MacKillop and had helped the Sisters of St Joseph financially. See M.I. Leggoe, *A Family Affair*, Maryborough: Dominion, 1982.
8. This was demolished in 1926, to make way for a tram barn.
9. No relation to Cecilia.
10. M.I. Leggoe, *A Family Affair*, says the Barr Smiths (her grandparents) moved from Torrens Park to Angas Street after the 1902 earthquake. She also says that the family believed that the love for Morris works arose because Mabel Barr Smith went to school in England with Maie Morris, sister of William Morris.
11. See later in chapter.
12. The Barr Smith house was demolished in the early 1980s to make way for more additions to SAC.
13. A 'Non-Catholic Newspaper' cutting of opening, MASA, 150/30. Much of the following description is taken from it.
14. Elma (Sister M. Carmel) Bourke.
15. The Wakefield site later became the site of the Senior School.
16. It became redundant in the 1970s on account of extensions to the college. In the 1980s it was demolished, and its site is now occupied by diocesan buildings and the college swimming pool.
17. The properties were Painters cottage, Woods Pty., Butchers Shop, for £1500, £2000, and £3,500 respectively. The sisters also gave £1,000 as donation to the Cathedral building fund, £1,000 was given to each of the Mt Gambier and Coolgardie Convents.
18. Lawrences Pty. for £1935 and Painters second cottage for £1470.
19. They were again debarred, in 1956, when all the schools on the site merged into the present college.
20. Clare Sparks Harris to Glenda Condon and Deirdre O'Connor, RSM, interview, 22.5.1992. Clare attended the school between 1917 and 1920.
21. Of Miss Stella Kelly, aunt of Sister Claire Lynch.
22. Clare Sparks Harris, interview.
23. Helen —, Wakefield Memorial Hospital, 3.5.1980, MASA, 170/8.
24. Historian Rosa MacGinley, PBVM, claims that the Mercies and the Presentations never established the 'grand pensionne' type of school, familiar in France and aimed at the upper classes.
25. Kathleen Healy, *Frances Wardle, American Founder of the Sisters of Mercy*, New York: Seabury Press, 1973, 74. See also Carlow convent annals, 16.11.1840, quoted Healy, 88.
26. Much of the following is taken from reminiscences written by Sister M. Carmel (Elma) Bourke. Elma began as a young secondary school boarder in 1920.
27. Stella Cazneaux, interview with Glenda Condon.
28. Clare Sparks Harris, at the age of eighty-eight, had kept lots of friends she had made in her school years.
29. Carmel Bourke.
30. Jottings, MASA, 150/26.

31. She studied for three years towards an AMUA Diploma but could not take her final exams on account of illness.
32. For example, geology.
33. Information re YCS from Philomena Wilkinson, pupil of the 1940s, interview by Glenda Condon.
34. P. Wilkinson, interview.
35. Roma Mitchell to Glenda Condon, interview.
36. The last sister to be professed as a lay Sister in the Adelaide community was in 1946. It was not until the 1950s that Rome firmly directed that the class was to be abolished.
37. When the Adelaide Mercies became a member of the newly established Australian Union of Sisters of Mercy, in 1954, the former congregations were termed provinces.
38. At this stage, the religious sisters in the diocese were receiving primary teacher training in a Catholic Teachers' College. Classes were held at St Aloysius and Cabra Dominican Sisters' College.
39. Postal address of the property later became Wattle Park.
40. Interview, G. Condon.
41. D.L.Hilliard, 'The City of Churches: Some Aspects of Religion in Adelaide About 1900', *Insights into South Australian History*, vol. I, Adelaide: Historical Society of South Australia, 1992.
42. Helen Jones, 'Women at Work in South Australia 1889-1906', in *Insights into South Australian History*, vol. I.
43. Sisters from Calvary Hospital; arrived in Adelaide 1900.
44. Antonia had been received and professed with Ann McKay, who had entered seven weeks after her but was two years younger. They may have been sisters or cousins. Ann (Sister M. Xavier) died in Mercedes, Buenos Aires, less than four years later, aged twenty-eight. Similarly, Ellen Kenny, received as Sister M. Dominica, entered 8 months before S. M. Claver Kenny, but died shortly after her reception, aged 17. It seems clear from Eduardo Coghlan, *El Aporte de los Irlandeses a la Formacion de la Nacion Argentina*, that the Kennys were not sisters.
45. See section on C. Cunningham.
46. Details in these last three paragraphs taken from R.M. Gibbs, *A History of South Australia*, Adelaide: Balara Books, 1969.
47. MASA, 171/3, 40.
48. Carmel Bourke, Roma Mitchell.
49. Ettie Fish, nee Kelly, boarder c.1900-1905, in Joan M. Gaskell, *The Educational Work of the Religious Sisters of Mercy in South Australia with special reference to the Convent of Mercy Secondary School Adelaide 1881-1931*, University of Adelaide, unpub. M.Ed. thesis, 157.
50. The contest over the ownership of land on which the House of Mercy was built was much less speedily settled.
51. 3.11.1897, copy MASA, 300/20.
52. It had been Cecilia's second visit to Argentina. She had already gone back to her home country in 1908, as a result of the death, on New Year's Day of that year, of her unmarried brother, Santiago, in a train accident in Lomas de Zamora. Cecilia did not receive the news until March, but, learning that her mother – who had already lost her eldest son and first-born child, Tomas, at the age of 18 – was deeply grieved by this loss, she and her cousin, Margaret Mary Kenny, sailed to Argentina via England, in May.
53. MASA, 626/32.
54. To Rosie, 7.1.1940, MASA, 150/22.
55. See later in chapter for account of foundation. The foundation date is now taken as 1902.
56. Sisters Joan Farrell and Bet Smith; MASA, 171,/3, 40.
57. Written reminiscences, quoted in Joan Gaskell, *Mercy Secondary Education Adelaide, 1881-1931*, 174.
58. She died in 1965.
59. The student was Molly McCann; interview with Roma Mitchell, G. Condon.
60. Mary Emery, *Portrait of a Catholic Girls' School, Adelaide 1912*, University of Adelaide, 1978.
61. Joan Gaskell, 164, source is reminiscences of past pupils.
62. Taken from Carol Baechi, 'The "Woman Question"', *The Flinders History of South Australia Social History*, ed. E. Richards, Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986. Many of the other background details also come from this chapter.

63. Quoted in Edmund Campion, *Australian Catholics*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1988.
64. South Australia was the last Australian State to elect a woman to parliament, in 1959. In 1955, Nancy Buttfield had been appointed to fill a casual senate vacancy.
65. Discussed at greater length in Chapter Six.
66. *The Southern Cross*, obituary, 1958, typed account, MASA. Joan Gaskell, 187, cites Department Gazettes.
67. Roma Mitchell, interview.
68. Roma Mitchell, interview.
69. Sir Douglas Mawson, famed explorer of the Australian Antarctic on four expeditions, and co-discoverer of the South Pole on the first, was head of the geology department at University of Adelaide.
70. I am not sure that this is an accurate statement. Mother Clare Murphy said that one of their greatest difficulties in the Argentine was that they could not speak Spanish, which was the language of the majority of the inhabitants. They were probably fluent enough in French as it was customary in Irish convent schools to teach French, and several Irish nuns were educated in France. Certainly, Sister Evangelist Vian spoke Spanish and French fluently, on account of her ethnic background. Her trouble, rather, was that she spoke only broken English.
71. Stella Francis, nee Cazneaux, interview.
72. Sr Carmel Bourke, Ms Recollections of Angas Street, 1920-1954, MASA, 150/37.
73. Derek Whitelock, *Adelaide 1836-1976 A History of Difference*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1977, 120, 121.
74. Ibid.
75. See also Chapter Seven.
76. Stephanie Burley, 97.
77. MASA, 616/27.
78. Opposition came, for example, from Mother Patricia O'Neill, Mother-General of the Australian Mercy Union, to Sisters Rosalie O'Grady and Cecilia Marks going overseas to study in 1960.
79. 1983, at the opening of the Dame Roma Mitchell building.
80. *The Advertiser*, 20.6.1994, 27.
81. *The Southern Cross*, 26.7.1966.
82. The grant was \$70,400. Town Acres 339, 374 on Clancery Lane were procured 21.7.1965, MASA, 150/1.
83. From three in 1956 to over one-half in the 1970s.
84. Both Philippa Ridgway and Anne Rivers resigned on account of departure from the community.
85. Carol Bacchi, *Flinders Social History of South Australia*, 426.
86. Mother Cecily Lynch to Archbishop J. Gleeson.
87. Mercedes College is discussed more fully in Chapter Four.
88. Miss Ruth Whitely was appointed principal of Mercedes at the end of 1972.
89. Pre-chapter Review statement, 1984.
90. Partly financed by a Commonwealth Government Schools Commission grant.
91. P. Wilkinson, interview by G. Condon.
92. Mary Densley, Report to Council on SAC 12.6.80, MASA, 626/1.
93. Erection of offices was possible through sale of land at Springfield. The first application to demolish the Barr Smith residence encountered resistance from the Lord Mayor's Heritage Committee, but permission was given, providing a textual and photo record was compiled. There had been no interest in protecting it shown by Heritage bodies over the years, perhaps on account of its 'uniqueness', i.e., it was not constructed according to the traditional methods of Adelaide at the time. The basement was subject to flooding and dampness. Till the 1960s, it had been basically a centre for formation of novices; after 1965 it was used by the school. A link to the convent had been added in 1922, laundry 1923, tearoom for novices 1940. In the 1950s, it provided classrooms and some living space for a few elderly sisters. It was a one-storeyed building.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Beyond Angas Street

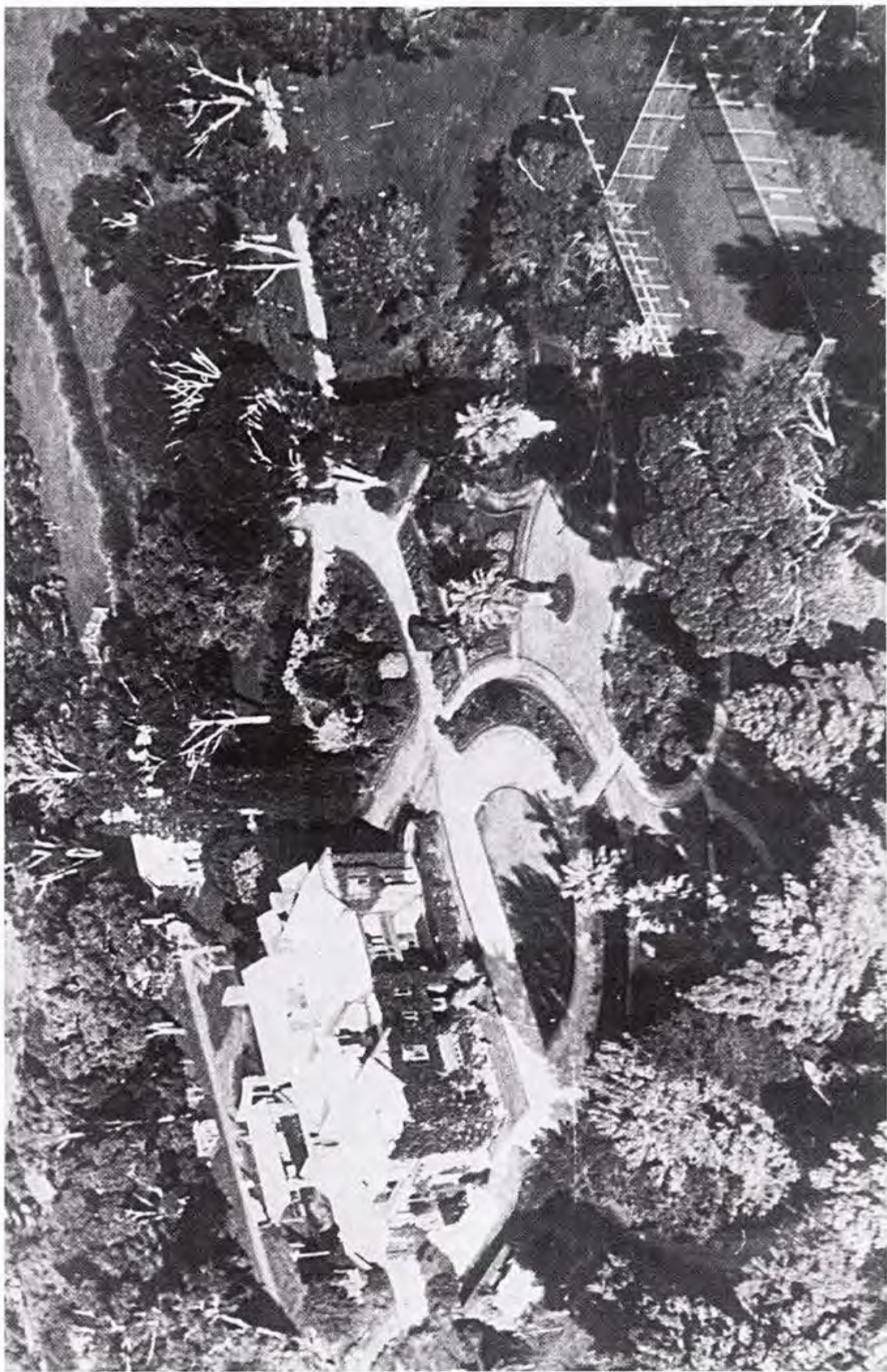
### MERCEDES COLLEGE

THE spacious house and property at Springfield, when purchased by the Mercies for Mercedes College, in mid-1953, had originally been named 'Strathspey' by Sir John James Duncan MLC and Lady Duncan. They had built the house around the turn of the century on an estate formed by the Duncan family in 1889, out of the Brownhill sheep station, which dated back to 1839.

When Sir Walter and Lady Duncan died, the family transferred the property to the Presbyterian Church for a residential college in affiliation with the University of Adelaide. It was now named St Andrew's College, and opened with two students in residence in 1928. The number of students grew over the years, but, without endowments and with only a few scholarships, and in the context of economic depression, the college was forced to close at the end of 1936.<sup>1</sup>

The new owners, in 1939, were Mr and Mrs F.W. Cornell, agents for W.D. & H.O. Wills, tobacco importers. Mrs Cornell made the house and gardens of St Andrew's into a beauty and a delight. The architecture of the house was akin to that of an English mansion, but Australian gums mingled with English trees in the extensive grounds. The mellowed brick-quoined bluestone walls and tall chimneys, surrounded by trees that crept up to the edges of the lawns and terraces, imparted an atmosphere of timeless peace, according to the *South Australian Home and Gardens Journal* of 1943.

Inside, detailed the same journal, the house was very gracious, with a long wide hallway from which, on entering the front door, one looked through a pair of beautiful hand-wrought iron grilles into a paved patio beyond. The patio was sheltered by a high brick wall on all sides, and formed a delightful outdoor room. From it, wrought iron doors led into the main garden. The drawing room was a large L shaped apartment. The dining room was splendidly dignified with a massive beam ceiling, and overlooked a wide bricked terrace with a rose garden sloping away from it. The ballroom had large



*Aerial view of St Andrew's College, Springfield, 1939*

windows at opposite ends. Another room served as a library, and was panelled almost to ceiling height. All the rooms on the ground floor had richly polished floors of cedar. The 'pink bathroom', with its square bath, had possessed the first indoor toilet in the district.

Mrs Cornell was a lover of the arts, especially music. She helped establish the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra by entertaining at Strathspey and raising money. She invited many visiting artists to St Andrew's, including Sir Laurence and Lady Olivier, Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson. The walls of the morning room were adorned by a small art gallery of signed photographs of her talented visitors from the world of art and music. The house and gardens became well known for their elegance and beauty.

So much so, that when it was time for her to sell the property, Mrs Cornell was reluctant to let it go to another school institution. The property had become rather neglected during its tenure as a men's college. However, the spaciousness of the property – thirty-two rooms and twenty acres – was a great attraction for the sisters in their search for a new site for their boarding school.

There is a Mercy legend that Mother Michael Kain threw a medal of Our Lady over the hedge, in order to change Mrs Cornell's mind.<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, the sisters had to resort to a subterfuge to acquire the property. The property was first purchased in the names of two colleagues in the community, under the name Millstone Ltd., formed by Mr Bill Miller, and the builder Mr Baulderstone, both with an eye to future business<sup>3</sup>. It was then re-sold to the sisters. This raised the purchase costs for the sisters. It was a risky action as they had little money. The sole remaining portion of the Cunningham legacy, the last of their capital funds, had been spent in acquiring Erindale.

Mrs Cornell was unhappy about the transfer at first, but as she came to realize that the house and gardens were loved and cared for by the new owners, she became quite friendly towards the sisters. Mother Dolores Barry, who could be particularly charming and gracious, was able to reassure her that her beloved property had passed into gentle and feminine hands. Mrs Cornell visited several times in the early days of 'Mercedes'.

The keys to the Springfield property had been handed over on 7th May, 1953. The new convent was blessed and opened by Dr Beovich on 2nd August of that year, the archbishop commending the wisdom of the sisters' choice and their belief in the providence of God and the generosity of the Catholic people. At the same ceremony, there was the laying of the foundation stone of a block of classrooms, named the Dalton Building after Mother Xavier Dalton. A public appeal was launched, 'the first public appeal by the Sisters of Mercy since their foundation in 1880, though they had opened 14 branches of the Institute'.



*First Mercy community at Springfield, 1954*



*First principal of  
Mercedes College,  
Sr M. Philip  
(Mavis) McBride*



*Sr Carmel Bourke  
(second principal of  
Mercedes) welcomes the  
Mayor and Mayoress  
of Mitcham to blessing  
of third wing of school,  
1968*



*Sr Deirdre O'Connor,  
third and last sister-  
principal of Mercedes.  
Painting donated by  
Mothers' Club*

It had been impossible to arrange a bank loan in the early 1950s. Accordingly, the congregation insured a group of thirty young sisters, taking out life insurance policies, which then enabled them to borrow from the insurance firm. It proved to be a very expensive loan to service, and a 'mill stone around the necks of the community for many years'.<sup>4</sup>

The appeal was launched by Mr H. Alderman, QC, who pointed out – over-optimistically – that a successful result would eliminate the traditional trade in pots of jam, raffles, and cakes. He outlined the history of 'our' nuns – his wife, her mother, and his daughter had all been pupils of Convent of Mercy, Angas Street – and asked not just for money but also for suitable furniture or organ or piano for the new establishment. The appeal attracted a large number of subscribers as well as donations of artefacts for the convent chapel.

Mercedes College opened its doors to boarders on the 8th February, 1954, and to day scholars on the following day.

In the interim, Sisters M. Bernard Ryder and Teresita Lloyd, both retired, had acted as resident caretakers. Other sisters came from Angas Street to keep them company, and commuted back daily to teach, a situation made more onerous by the multitudinous well-wishers coming to view the new acquisition. Getting the new school ready to function had involved many – if not all – of the congregation. Fetes had been held at Erindale annually in anticipation of the move, and an extra large one was held there in late 1953. There was much support from parents, friends, and old scholars, as there was also in early November, when Sister Carmel Bourke, as principal of St Aloysius, involved her pupils in an outdoor entertainment in the gardens at Mercedes – the presentation of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

It was a huge undertaking to organise successfully – choir, ballet, and cast – in a place where no one was really yet in residence. The performance took place on the top level of the lawn in front of the house, the lower level becoming a sort of sound shell on account of the surrounding trees. There also was set up the 'grandstand' to seat the audience. For several nights before the performance, Carmel came out to Mercedes with some of the boys from St Cecilia's School, in order to chalk out a box plan of seating on the floor of the 'grandstand' – only to have rain wash out all their work each night. The rain, indeed, continued, up to the point of interrupting the Saturday matinee presentation for a while. However, it then cleared and the troupe completed the play, a tremendous success. It was a special and apt event to inaugurate the new sister-college, as well as its fundraising programme.

When school finished for the year at St Aloysius in December, 1953, and all the boarders had departed, Sister Mary Marra, who had been working in the boarding school at Angas Street, transferred to Mercedes to prepare the new site. There was great excitement at Angas Street, as a group of parents rigged

up a pulley system to transfer some ninety beds and much equipment. Some of the boarders were so keen to experience life in the new surroundings, that they persuaded their parents to let them return for another year of school.

The first community of sisters – nicknamed ‘the Springfield Eleven’ – consisted of Mother Thomas (Rose) Casey as superior, Sisters M. Bernard, Mary Marra, Agatha White, Philip (Mavis) McBride, de Sales (Nance) Munro, Columba Ferguson, Alphonsa (Elsie) Radford, Vianney (Romley) Dirrmann, Pauline (Patricia) Kenny, and Imelda (Veronica) Courtney – and the first of a succession of dogs, Bart (short for Bartholomew). Bart was a lovely collie.

Mercedes College began with about eighty boarders and about sixty day scholars. The style of their green uniforms with a vertical gold stripe was modelled on that of St Aloysius. The interior of the house was rearranged somewhat, to accommodate its three purposes – day school, boarders’ quarters on the top floor, and sisters’ residence on the ground floor. The ball-room was transformed into a chapel.

There was not enough room for all these activities, and two of the sisters – including the principal – slept outside. Their bedroom at first was the front verandah, until the milkman began coming early, and the chaplain, Fr James Gleeson, expressed disapproval of the possible immodesty. Then they transferred to the patio. Crawlies of all kinds and possums would visit them, attracted by the light. Mother Dolores directed them to wear their veils in bed until lights went out – lest they scandalise boarders observing from upstairs windows. Finally, Father Gleeson erected a tent for them under the wisteria vine. Even then, stormy weather meant a quick retreat inside.

Mother Agatha, in her eighties, and two other sisters slept on the top floor with the boarders. Mrs Moloney, ‘M’am’, a junior school teacher, slept in the corridor on the ground floor, where she shared the one bathroom with the community of eleven sisters. A temporary boarders’ dining room was set up in the old stables, necessitating a long trip for food from the kitchen as well as having constantly to clear it for other uses. School was only open a month when an earthquake struck about 4 a.m., causing some fright and a chapel full of girls for Mass the next morning. Everything was understandably topsy turvy for the first months, until the new wing of the boarding school and classrooms were finally completed, blessed, and opened on 3rd October of that first year.<sup>5</sup>

Sister Philip (Mavis) McBride, the principal-to-be, had been given the news of her appointment by Mother Dolores Barry on her thirtieth birthday, 20th November, 1953. In a pre-consultative age, Mother Dolores had asked Mavis how old she was, and on being told, had commented: ‘That’s not very old, is it? We’re thinking of putting you in charge of the new school.’ When Mavis protested, all she got in reply was: ‘Well dear, it’s either the new school

or Angas Street.' To the newly turned thirty-year-old, the choice was clear, if still unwelcome. Sister M. de Sales (Nance) Munro was given charge of the boarding school.

The latter charge was made difficult by the fact that the boarding school had been opened before the extensions had been completed, so as not to lose enrolments. The large grounds, however, proved a great boon to the peace of the establishment. The girls loved roaming through them. There were homely touches, like the charge inherited from Mrs Cornell of keeping filled the canvas waterbag which hung on a tree at the gate – for the 'trammies' in hot weather.

Despite – or perhaps through all this – a really great community spirit grew up from the beginning, among both sisters and boarders, and permeated to the school in general. The sisters were very concerned to preserve the Mercy tradition in a new place. The Sports Houses were named after their Foremothers – McAuley, Fitzpatrick, Dalton and Barry – a celebration of the work of these sisters in establishing the Mercies and the local community of Springfield.<sup>6</sup> Out of the foundation boarders, three later joined the Adelaide Mercy community – Margaret Adams, Lynette Beck, and Mary Densley, as did Philippa Haslam, a day scholar.

This spirit persisted over the years, throughout a changing context. The material difficulties of the early years, in particular, brought all closer together, in little but significant ways. The parents of both boarders and day girls were friendly and supportive, assisting through various means. The beauty of the surroundings helped to nurture a positive atmosphere. As one sister put it, the scenery – the sunsets, coming out after boarders' study and looking through the trees down to the sea, the moon behind the gum trees – made up for the time and the stress, which was constant.<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite that stress, this same sister claimed her years there as among her best for community. There was a real spirit and sense of support. Working in the boarding school was, in many ways, a strain, but the sisters helped each other out, and created their own fun.

There were impromptu concerts, with many hours spent in singing around the piano. There were long walks with boarders, exploring the beautiful homes and gardens in the surrounding suburb. There was black-berrying in the Hills, and selling them later for welcome funds. There was the sewing, the cooking, and all the other activities associated with fetes.

Part of what made Mercedes special for some of the younger nuns was living with the older sisters, and catching some of their spirit.<sup>8</sup> Sister Bernard had stayed on, and continued to potter around and look after the chooks, the cats, and the like. Bernard did 'lots of lovely little homely things' as well as kept an eye on what was happening in the outside world. She was elderly and frail, but very alert. Sister Agatha, when she was not teaching music, would

often sit in the grounds. Small pupils loved to come and sit around her, and she became a kind of figurehead around the place. Sister Teresa Dunlevie, also very frail after her many years of administration, helped some of the junior students. She 'heard reading' for small groups at a time, in the priest's parlour; prepared a few older children for the sacraments; and met all sports teams coming home on Saturdays with a question – not 'Did you win?' but 'Did you play hard?'. She died at the bottom of the back stairs one morning just before Mass. Her pupils 'just cried and cried'. Teresa had seemed a somewhat scary figure when she was in charge of St Aloysius' College, but in her old age the small girls she taught really loved her.

The sisters who worked in the house – both convent and boarding school – particularly helped to make Mercedes an agreeable dwelling place. Little Sister Alfonsa (Elsie) Radford had charge of the boarders' dining room. She had a cat called Bluey – at least, until Zander, a German shepherd of uncertain temperament, killed it. After that, Elsie hated Zander. Zander (short for Alexander) had been acquired when a number of 'peeping Toms' were worrying the girls in the boarding quarters.

Sister Mary Marra had charge of the school tuckshop as well as kitchen and laundry. Mary was also an African violet expert, as well as a cricket and football devotee. Later, she was involved in the Charismatic spirituality renewal and in GROW. Sister Monica McKee, in later years, was a 'mother to all', especially the sick, and those camping or visiting. She had the remarkable gift for knowing the names of all the boarders, even though she had relatively little to do with them directly. Monica, too, was an expert on cricket, football, tennis, and TV.

When Monica McKee died in 1994, Mercedes College Newsletter carried an obituary notice. She had spent twenty-eight of her sixty-one years of religious life, at Springfield. A past pupil, Ann Wellings Booth (nee Duigan), who knew her as a pupil at both Mt Gambier and Mercedes wrote that Monica 'was a part of my journey!' Ann had reminded Sister Monica of their 'fudge' days and midnight feasts, and Monica's eyes had sparkled with mischief and understanding. 'She leaves me', continued Ann, 'a great example of dedication, love, service and most of all love of God in her humility, simplicity and patience. I feel privileged to have been a daughter of the Sisters of Mercy and shall always aspire to the ideals of women such as yourselves and Sister Monica.' Another past pupil, Pat Chigwidden (nee Miller) had a son Nick, captain of the Glenelg Football Club, who was a great fan of Monica's – and vice versa.

Mercedes was likewise fortunate in having a resident – if part-time – chaplain for a number of years in its beginnings, and then for some time a full-time chaplain from the nearby Passionist monastery. The first was James Gleeson, then Director of Catholic Education, and he was succeeded by

Father Ted Mulvihill, who took his place as both director and chaplain when Father Gleeson became Bishop Gleeson. Ted Mulvihill was, in his turn, followed by Father John Swann of the Marriage Preparation/Family Planning Office. Later, the Passionist Phil Smith became the first full-time, though non-resident, chaplain.

These early chaplains added a distinctive touch to the new establishment. Father Gleeson put great gusto into his role as chaplain, despite his heavy work commitments elsewhere. He had a very helpful grasp of the practical details of organisation. He became a familiar sight in overalls on Saturday mornings, and could, at any time, be called upon to fix something which had gone wrong. He secured a bulldozer for free to level out a sports oval and supervised its grading, planting, watering, and weeding. Most of the latter was done by a crowd of nuns and girls weeding industriously. Father Gleeson played an important part in the unglamorous before and after of events such as the famous Garden Party. In his more formal moments, he presided at Parents and Friends meetings, donated prizes, visited classes on Monday mornings – his day off – and heard the students' confessions. He had Sunday dinner and tea with the boarders, and spent time with them on Sunday afternoons. Among other things, he gave the A Grade Tennis Team some good hard practice, on the one and only tennis court. He helped country girls, in particular, to settle into strange surroundings. He was gregarious and approachable, fond of children and a capable teacher, but always attracted respect.

It was at Mercedes College, Bishop Gleeson said, that he first learned to appreciate Mercy Sisters.<sup>9</sup> When, in 1957, he was appointed auxiliary bishop of Adelaide, the sisters gave a banquet for the clergy in his honour. The whole Mercy congregation, one hundred and twenty of them, came out to Springfield and waited on the tables or did behind-the-scenes work. The college also presented him with his episcopal ring. An appeal was made through the school for old gold to melt down. So many pieces had been donated that a handsome cheque accompanied the ring. Jeweller was Pat McCabe, who brought an amethyst to the fete to show Sister Philip, only to discover it was no longer in his pocket. He had lost it and had to replace it with another stone. The amethyst rests somewhere beneath the present Senior Oval.

Father Ted Mulvihill was also fond of children and a skilled teacher. He too was approachable and friendly, and got on well with both nuns and parents. While having few of James Gleeson's practical interests, he heightened the cultural note, through his own love of music, art, literature and photography. He, too, spent time generously in the class rooms and with the boarders, and he lent his car freely to the sisters – which Father Gleeson would not. Mother Dolores Barry was quick to seek his advice and help in education matters,

especially when young women, bonded through scholarships to the State Education Department, wished to have their bonds waived in order to enter the Mercy community.<sup>10</sup>

The first period of Mercedes College, with Sister Philip (Mavis) McBride as principal, 1954-1960, was necessarily a time of consolidation. It was not an easy time, and, in one sense, because of her youthfulness, Mavis learnt on the job, and – in her own subsequent opinion – was too strict. However, women in later life reflected that her strictness had done them no harm. Certainly, as invariably in convent boarding and day schools of the period, the life style was regimented, there was great motivation to study, and very little free time. The Mercies had the reputation of being very successful in educating rural girls to obtain good jobs or to broaden their outlook and encourage them to go to university.<sup>11</sup> A number of boarders had just stayed on to enjoy life at the new college – which they did.

Pondering her term as principal, Mavis decided that conditions were very difficult but that it had been exciting to make it all work, and work it did, amply. The first students may not have all performed brilliantly, but most did adequately. Sandra von der Borch was awarded a Continuation Scholarship in the 1955 Intermediate, which she passed in eight subjects, with two credits, as well as in Grade V Music with honours. Two years later, Sandra won a Commonwealth Scholarship through her Leaving results, and Mary Densley won a Commonwealth Scholarship at Intermediate. By 1957, the list of examination results showed that there was now also a class for Leaving Honours students.

Most of the nuns, at this stage, were without degrees and/or formal training as teachers, but they displayed much generosity and willingness. In the beginning, the whole teaching staff, from Reception through to Leaving (Year 11), consisted of four or five teachers. Classes were frequently combined under one teacher, and a habit of independence was learned. Mavis reflected, so that some of those early pupils did very well academically in post-school years. Students were far from being neglected – just taught in an unusual way for that time. Those who had entered the school in primary class did do well by the time they came to graduate.

However, in the first few years, Mercedes staffing was inadequate for a full secondary school. It was decided to supplement the curriculum by Year 11s and then Year 12s (Leaving Honours) commuting to St Aloysius' College daily. This continued until Mercedes staffing situation improved. Those girls who had attended St Aloysius later looked back fondly to the days when they belonged to both schools.

Mavis learnt to use resourcefully what little finance was available. There was hardly any money for the day-to-day operating expenses in those initial years. All school fees went into supporting the sisters' living expenses in the

convent, with one shilling and six pence returned for each pupil. The money to run the school basically came from music fees. The library had been established by asking each child in the various Mercy schools to donate a book. Equipment was meagre or non-existent. Each class raised money to buy their teacher a desk. One class had higher ambitions, and acquired a glass cover on the desk of their room.

There were gradually a number of outside teachers employed, and a wide range of extras provided. Mme Dupuy came to teach oral French, at first on Saturday mornings, and then during the week. Almost sixty per cent of the girls learnt music. Ballet was offered, as was dressmaking to the boarders. Opportunities for a wide range of cultural activities were made. Sister Pat Kenny, Mother Thomas Casey, and Mr John McDonnell, laid the Mercedes tradition of a beautiful school choir, winning eisteddfods, from early years. Mother Thomas was a very gifted accompanist, her large, bony fingers flying over the keys with speed and grace.<sup>12</sup> John McDonnell, son of a past pupil of St Aloysius, was a skilled conductor.

Speech night was held outside on the sunken lawn, in the absence of a hall, and in the presence of midges biting the audience's – and the performers' – legs. An art teacher, who came every Thursday to teach art, had to ring Mavis every time to ask her to meet him at the bottom of the ramp, as protection from Zander, the German shepherd. Mother Thomas used to say Zander had good taste – he concentrated on only a few people. All in all, it was a very happy school.<sup>13</sup>

In 1994, a reunion was held of the foundation students. Anne Wellings-Booth (nee Duigan) recalled her days as a school girl very positively, evidence of how talent and devotedness could triumph over material disadvantage.

The inimitable Sister Helena McComish was, and still is, a source of great inspiration to me ... a great teacher revealing the delights of Shakespeare and other great giants of literature to a group of often disinterested girls. I owe my love of reading and poetry to this woman. She also pushed me in the commercial subjects of shorthand and typing, advising me I should set my sights on Canberra and become a Hansard reporter.

... I think of her often. She was a solitary woman but someone who had tremendous impact on many young lives and one who would not accept mediocrity. Strange how someone who was so apart from everyone else had such a gift for imparting a hunger for knowledge ... She stirred my curiosity and conscience.

Perhaps I would not have survived all this [much wandering, then marriage, children, new careers, then much illness] had I not had the support of my faith which was nurtured as a young woman by the Sisters of Mercy.



*Sr Patricia McAuley  
and students in front  
of a Mercedes College  
building*

## Dinner

TENDERED TO

### *The Hierarchy and Clergy*

ON THE OCCASION  
OF THE

### *Consecration*

OF THE

*Most Rev. James W. Gleeson, D.D.*

AS AUXILIARY BISHOP TO  
HIS GRACE MOST REV. MATTHEW BEOVICH,  
D.D., Ph.D.  
ARCHBISHOP OF ADELAIDE



MERCEDES, CONVENT OF MERCY, SPRINGFIELD, S.A.

TUESDAY, 21st MAY, 1957

## Menu

OYSTERS

### SOUP

CREME OF CHICKEN

### ENTREES

PASTELES SAVOURY BRAIN CROQUETTES

### POULTRY AND JOINTS

ROAST TURKEY ROAST BEEF  
BOILED CHICKEN AND PARSLEY SAUCE  
LOIN OF LAMB HAM

### VEGETABLES

GREEN PEAS TOMATO AU GRATIN  
BAKED POTATOES CREAMED POTATOES  
ASPARAGUS

### SWEETS

APPLE PIE AND CREAM  
PAVLOVA — ICE-CREAM  
JELLIES (CLARET AND PINEAPPLE)

### DESSERTS

SWEETS WELSH RAREBIT DEVILLED ALMONDS  
SAVOURY PRUNES AND CHEESE

COFFEE

WINES AND ALES

*Menu of the dinner in dining room at Mercedes, to celebrate the episcopal consecration of chaplain,  
Dr J. Gleeson, 1957*

Under Mavis's successor, Sister Carmel Bourke, and with the growth connected with the passage of time, the school continued to mature professionally. Carmel was principal from 1961 to 1969. Classes had been offered only as far as Year 10, and extra classrooms were essential if the school was to keep its pupils until Matriculation. So once again, Mercedes went into debt. Buildings went up, the curriculum broadened and lengthened, the staffing improved dramatically, and the whole place flourished noticeably.

Two wings were added to existing buildings, and two removable buildings were placed at the back of the property. Senior classrooms, science rooms, an assembly hall and administration wing were thus added. The science laboratories meant that students no longer needed to go into St Aloysius for Chemistry and Physics, and that the curriculum could be widened to include Geology and Biology. William Drew was commissioned to paint the Mercedes icon to hang in the foyer. It was a period of much liveliness in all sorts of ways, and Mercedes blossomed. Sisters on the staff found it a place with enormous vitality and creativity, and a sense of co-operation among everyone. There were over twenty Mercies with heaps of energy, many of them under thirty years of age. The amount of work was immense, but there was much fun and restrictions were part of the accepted norm.<sup>14</sup>

Sister Carmel Bourke had had a wide experience by the time she took charge of administration at Mercedes. She was not only a gifted educator but was also a lover of the arts. For her the views at Springfield had a special role in distracting one from the mundaneness of life and in inspiring dreams.<sup>15</sup> Carmel encouraged her young staff to engage in professional development. The pupils, also, were now able to be given a much wider range of opportunities as part of their general educational programme.

The fact that Mercedes was a boarding school led to a certain bias in the way it developed under Carmel's guidance. Coming from a small town environment, she was especially interested in developing the cultural life of country students. Opportunities had always existed to learn more about art, music, and other cultural events. Visits to art galleries, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra Youth concerts, plays performed by the Therry Society, and debating were encouraged. Carmel herself, with the music teachers, would prepare students for the more classical programmes of the ASO. She also took a special interest in the school choir, having trained school choirs earlier.

Mercedes was, from the start, a consciously female establishment. It was fitting that some projects were aimed at nurturing a feminine consciousness and grace in sometimes rough and unruly girls. In the lunch hour, students could attend demonstrations of flower arrangements by friends, parents, or past pupils. Mercedes' gardens and the walks through the hills at weekends provided suitable materials. Annual open days were held to display the results of all this cultural fostering.

Another activity of the 1960s was also especially geared towards the boarding school. This was the provision of opportunities for travel – to beautiful parts of South Australia, such as the Flinders Ranges, and later other areas in Australia. Students were prepared beforehand, including a course in polite manners by Mrs Jaye Walton.

In the junior and middle schools, musical skills were developed, even if students were not learning an instrument. Carmel had attended a UNESCO conference on teaching music in Sydney, and had come home determined to introduce the Carl Orff method to Mercedes. She enlisted the help of Mrs Elizabeth Silsberry, a lecturer in music at Adelaide Teachers' College, who came for some months to establish the Carl Orff orchestra of simple percussion instruments, and to teach the teachers and students the skills they needed to launch it. To procure the necessary instruments, Carmel appealed to the parents to go without a few packets of cigarettes in order to send her a dollar.

In the second half of the 1960s, the Commonwealth Government began to offer grants for libraries and science rooms. This led to changes in fundraising at Mercedes, the major one being that the annual fetes ceased. While the sisters heaved a sigh of relief, there was also a certain amount of regret. The fetes had contributed much to the family atmosphere of the school. The Fathers' and the Mothers' Clubs had worked very hard to support the staff, the school had remained relatively small, with day scholars coming from local areas, and the homely and friendly environment of the initial years had been preserved.<sup>16</sup>

Sister M. Stanislaus (Deirdre) O'Connor succeeded Carmel as principal in 1970, after two years as vice-principal. At this stage in its growth, Mercedes had fewer than five hundred pupils, with about two hundred in the primary section, and about two hundred and eighty in the secondary. There was a staff of not quite forty, full and part-time, approximately half lay persons, mostly women. Deirdre's term of three years was the last in which a sister was principal. It also brought in a number of innovations.

As a teacher at Mercedes, Deirdre had worked hard to help her pupils succeed in public examinations. She coached and coaxed them, offering them voluntary lessons on Saturday mornings, and helping them in numerous ways to recognize their potentiality for success. Her efforts were rewarded, the first year her class of thirty pupils doubling the State average for scholarships. As principal, Deirdre applied these same tactics to the overall results of the school, so that by the time she left Mercedes, the average pass rate at Matriculation level was much higher than it was state-wide.

There was growth in other directions. A temporary building of four classrooms was added in 1971, and called 'Strathspey' after the original name

given to the estate by the Duncan family. The junior school building was in great need of refurbishing, and the Fathers' Club were happy to do this. Staff initiatives were encouraged.

In 1970, Sisters Catherine Ahern and Janet Lowe evolved a programme of General Studies at secondary level – the first Catholic (at least) school to introduce such a curriculum. An open class system for Grades I to III was introduced in 1970, with Sisters Patricia Feehan and (later) Margaret Adams, Miss Joan McKie, and Mrs Rosslyn Gill. The school administration freed them and gave them facilities, and they used this liberty effectively, so that each child could progress at their own pace.

The Primary school programme was called *Murikunji* – 'Many Little Whirlwinds' – and was a complete change from traditional grade instruction. The focus was on the social development of the child, given that all education occurs through interaction with others. Problem solving was important. Patricia Feehan, one of the architects of the programme, saw it as stemming also from the spirit of the Mercy community at the time. Catherine Ahern, as community superior, allowed things to happen, and the school administration encouraged the teachers to make it happen.

Sister Margaret Burke put on the first school opera, during Deirdre's term, with help from Tess McGare, an operatic singer living in Adelaide. Sports, drama, and art continued to play an important role in school life, as did camps of various types – geography camps, language camps, etc. There was one week-long marathon camp, with some one hundred and twenty girls from Matriculation and Year 11 classes, in the Flinders Ranges. Organised by Sister Anne Barry, who was the vice-principal, the art teacher, the music teacher, the geography teacher, and the chaplain all contributed to the comprehensive programme.

The Student Representative Council was established in this period, superseding the existing Young Christian Students Movement. Its members emerged as a great help in school organisation, frequently prodding the principal to action. For the girls themselves, Deirdre felt, it proved to be good training for positions of considerable responsibility in after-school life.<sup>17</sup>

Deirdre also undertook the planning of the Senior School Library, opened at the beginning of 1973. She had begun when she was college vice-principal and, with a special love of books, spent much of the summer holidays setting it up. As principal, she engaged a librarian, Margaret Burdon. Audio-visual equipment was gradually acquired.

In 1971, it was decided to phase out the boarding school, a move which took until 1975. Boarders from various areas, including Papua New Guinea, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory, had brought a richness to school life. But cultural and social circumstances had changed, the number

of sisters available for such work had diminished drastically, and a boarding school was no longer viable. For a while, about twenty girls were accommodated at the Girls' Hostel, Concordia College, and commuted to Mercedes each school day.

When the first lay principal, Miss Ruth Whitely, was appointed at the end of 1972<sup>18</sup>, Archbishop Gleeson wrote to Mother Provincial Cecily Lynch congratulating the Sisters of Mercy on their foresight to make this move at this time. They were the first to do so. John McDonald, as Director of Catholic Education, expressed himself mindful of the great contribution made by Sister Deirdre O'Connor.

The community spirit which exists ... is a tribute to Sister Deirdre's active encouragement of Christian attitudes. I am always impressed by the warm, friendly atmosphere which pervades the school. Mercedes offers an educational programme which emphasises individual progression. Sister Deirdre's desire to offer the best possible courses of study for the students has led to many innovations over the past three years.<sup>19</sup>

Ruth Whitely came to Mercedes with wide experience and impressive qualifications. She proved to be an excellent choice for the transition to lay administration (1973-1978). At the Graduation Mass of Ruth's final year as principal, the provincial superior, Sister Monica Marks, stated that Ruth had provided the community of Mercedes with the kind of leadership that had been the embodiment of all that this school had held dear from the beginning – and which is summed up in the very naming of the school – Mercedes – Mercy – loving-kindness, faithfulness, steadfastness, compassion. She had listened with her head and heart, and acted out of the firmness of her own convictions. She had faced difficulties and criticism with a forgiveness that had allowed the other person – adult or student – to come to freedom. Ruth herself stated that she had gained a sense of support, self-fulfilment, and the feeling of having faced and overcome a challenge.<sup>20</sup>

In 1974, Ruth established the practice of parents joining weekend staff conferences. A number of new and alternative activities were offered to students, such as Wednesday lunch time Masses in the convent chapel, and general activities courses. These included squash, ten pin bowling, French cooking, ice skating, self defence, first aid, (these two last offered also to parents), fabric craft, 'Revue', Therry drama, table tennis. Sister Gemma Johnson was backed by Ruth in her drive to have every student learn to type. Gemma also introduced 'reading for pleasure' in small groups, in an effort to help poor readers. At a certain time in the year, and subject to parental consent, matriculation students were given the flexibility to attend school in the morning just in time for their first class. They could leave after the administration period at 2 p.m., if they had no further classes.

However, it was during this period, also, that the ongoing shakiness of the school's financial situation became too apparent to ignore. During 1974, the school had operated at a deficit of \$60,000. The fall was due to the phasing out of boarders, the rising cost of salaries (the staff being now overwhelmingly lay), and the existing financial climate.

At the end of 1974, Monica Marks had written to the then Minister of Education as well as to Jean Blackburn of the Commonwealth Schools Commission asking for advice as to the future of Mercedes. There was, she stated, no hope of the school being financed within the Catholic systemic schools structure. The Mercy community was loath to close the college, its educational ideals and their actual realization in practice approximating most closely to what the Schools Commission was endeavouring to encourage.

School fees were raised for 1975. This did not solve the problem, for it led, in its turn, to a drop in the school population. The drop was not immediately offset by the move to co-education, which was being introduced gradually – beyond Grade III, in which it had always been – in order to allow time for the growth of a climate of acceptance. The year 1976 saw the first sizeable group of boys in Grade VIII. By 1978, the college was fully co-educational.

An Interim School Board was set up for 1975, with Sister Deirdre Jordan in the chair. The school ran at a loss still, for the first half of the year, though government grants reduced it by \$56,060. The Interim Board voted not to raise the fees for the second term, but the Mercy Council warned that the school could not continue to be subsidized by the order. If it could not operate without further indebtedness, then they must consider closing it, perhaps as early as 1976. Fees were increased for the remainder of 1975 by some twenty per cent, with concessions for families in difficulty.

The following year the Council of Mercedes College, Springfield, Inc., took the place of the Interim Board. Composed of eleven persons, it was to be responsible for the management of the college. Foundation members included three Sisters of Mercy – Monica Marks as Provincial, Patricia Pak Poy, and Mary Densley. Mr T.J. Shanahan was chairman. Shortly afterwards, the Council was supplemented by a Board of Governors (the Archbishop of Adelaide, the Director of Catholic Education, and the Mercy Provincial Council) as the final decision-making body to which the Council of Mercedes College was responsible.

The question of the sisters moving out of residence at Mercedes convent arose at various times. One meeting of sisters reflected on the contrasting conditions in which they were living and working. There were the beautiful surroundings in the richest suburb in Adelaide, but never enough money, crowded conditions, temporary buildings, modified plans, debts, fetes, rising fees, and unsure viability. A school like Mercedes, the meeting felt, was

making a valuable contribution to education, and was life giving – but there was a constant tension between economics and ideals. The sisters did not want to hold on nor did they want to run away.

In its turn, the board was telling the community of sisters that they would like the major part of the convent building to be made available for school purposes. Eventually, this is what did happen, as the number of sisters living at Springfield decreased drastically.<sup>21</sup> The convent premises were retracted to include the chapel, bedrooms on the top floor, and what were originally the servants' quarters as common living rooms on the ground floor. The school remodelled the rest of the building for its administrative section.

In 1979, the silver jubilee year of the college, in a feature article in *The Southern Cross*, Mercedes was still being described as a family school. The article identified a number of significant characteristics. There was team teaching in the humanities and a full-time chaplain. There was a widening of the secondary curriculum. Work experience programmes were introduced as also social education and multi-cultural studies. Media studies became an arts elective, together with drawing, painting, sculpture, music, and drama.

There were some more radical changes evident. Sister Joan Gaskell, who returned to Mercedes staff in 1978 after an absence of ten years, found the school members – staff and students – considerably more varied and outward-looking than in her thirteen earlier years. Members of the lay staff such as Liz Howard, later a Federal MP, contributed to what Joan called some very 'high toned' discussions among the staff. The addition of boys to the classes was, she thought, a big improvement. Joan taught multi-cultural studies to Junior secondary grades with lay teacher Susan Lenehan, who possessed an acute social conscience, somewhat to the discomfort of the still basically conservative school. Susan later became Minister for Education in the Bannon Labor Government. Michael Beresford-Plummer injected something which was very unusual through drama and his sense of the oppression in the world. Yet, despite her own developing social conscience, Joan did not feel that Mercedes was an elitist school. Though situated in Springfield, the people there were not all that welcoming of a school in their midst.<sup>22</sup>

Gradually, the school became viable economically. Miss Whitely was succeeded as principal by the first male head, Peter Wallace, principal from 1979 to 1981. Peter Wallace, who had been teaching Mathematics and Physics at Mercedes when Ruth resigned, was optimistic after his first year in charge. The population of the school began to grow, and financial pressures relaxed.

In 1981, a Mercedes College Support Team was set up as a team of consultants. It included Sisters Patricia Pak Poy, Monica Gallivan, and Patricia McAuley, together with Ken Hinkley from the Catholic Education Office, and Bob Leane, executive officer of the Independent Schools Board. They met with parents, staff, and students in Years 11 and 12.

In 1982, Chris McCabe took over the administration. He showed himself to be a determined leader, one able to achieve improvement in both the physical appurtenances and educational programmes. He declared himself committed to maintaining the Mercy ethos of the college, and tried to make this a special feature of his administration.

A number of innovations were introduced. Acting on the belief that education can help provide long-lasting solutions to world problems, Chris McCabe aimed to develop a comprehensive international education system from Reception to Year 12. An overseas student programme was established, together with student exchange and staff professional development programmes. Mercedes became the first Australian school to join the European Council of International Schools. This led to its offering an International Baccalaureate Diploma as part of a pilot project involving twenty schools around the world.

There have been a number of Writers-in-Residence and a well-developed Learning Assistance Programme (LAP), with the volunteer assistants including Year Eleven volunteers. A 'Mercy Outreach Program' included different activities at each grade in an attempt to help students move towards building 'a more just and compassionate society'. Pupils help raise funds for the 'Works of Mercy'. Sister Helen Owens was invited to talk with some 1996 students writing and producing a play on schizophrenia. Helen had worked with people suffering from this disorder. She was amazed by the sensitivity shown by the students and by the general spirit of the college. In the mid-1990s, a new direction – Open Education – was investigated and began to be implemented. Through it, students could be linked by computer to teachers in another school, thus widening the resources and the range of subjects within the curriculum.

A recurrent note in all the reminiscences about and descriptions of Mercedes is that of the beauty of the place. It had been a good move for the boarders and their teachers, from the crowded city environs to the spaciousness of Springfield. What was remembered were:

Sunsets and sunrises ... the moon ... silhouettes of sugar-gums against the twilight sky, especially from the terrace outside the cedar room ... bird songs, especially kookaburras laughing ... the garden that was always changing and always new ... spring blossoms and autumn colours ... the first snowdrops in winter ... the rose garden in October ... the glory of the ash trees and vines in autumn ...

More importantly, the school community itself had continued to flourish. One former teacher wrote:

My most treasured memory is the relationship I had with my students ... there was an honesty in my classes that I now recognise as exceptional. And

yet for all the openness and the sense that learning involved a partnership of minds, my position as the teacher was always respected. In these ways my time at Mercedes has become a 'golden age' in my career.

And these words came from a parent:

The education provided at Mercedes was socially critical. A great deal of effort was directed toward changing prejudice. There was a preference for the 'disadvantaged'. I treasure most the faith, based on experience, and not mere philosophy that my son is receiving in an environment where individual difference, talents, and needs are not merely tolerated, but in fact, prized as a necessity in the everyday life of the school.<sup>23</sup>

#### ERINDALE

As at Springfield where the Mercy boarding school was finally established, the property at Erindale had some interesting historical connections. The ground floor of the house had been designed by an engineer, Alfred Barham Black, for his mother. The house was named Bell Yett (also spelt Bellyett), after a field which had a gate (*yelt*) with a bell over it, at the town of Wigtown, in Scotland, where Mrs Ellen Barham Black had lived with her husband. Widowed, she had emigrated with three of her children. Her remaining daughter, Helen, stayed behind, and later became the wife of Richard D'Oyley Carte, producer of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, as well as manager of the Savoy theatre and hotel in London. Ellen and her son, Alfred Black, occupied Bell Yett in 1879. Alfred later married. His wife, Jessie Clark, was the great-niece of one of South Australia's founders, Sir Rowland Hill, noted also for his postal reform. Alfred's brother, John McConnell Black, was – among other varied accomplishments – an internationally renowned botanist, producing a thousand-page standard study of the flora of South Australia.<sup>24</sup> Alfred's eldest daughter, Dorritt, became a major Australian artist.

Another of Alfred's daughters, Helen, wrote that Bell Yett was

a wonderful place for children, with a creek running from one end to the other through the paddocks and garden; there were two ponds where we used to play a good deal ... One of our favourite walks was up [Stonyfell Road], with lovely wildflowers in the paddocks on both sides. They were not really paddocks but the original bush ... [One] paddock grew many kinds of wildflowers as well as buttercups: blue and spider orchids, billygoat and native primroses and many others, which we liked to pick and bring home. The other side of the road was wilder, with rising ground and more trees ... We practically lived outside ...



*The first class at Mercy Juniorate, Erindale, 1950*



*The drive at  
Erindale, early days*



*Early view of  
house at  
Erindale*

Ellen Black died in 1903, and Bell Yett was sold in 1909 to the Hawson family of Port Lincoln. Three years afterwards, they sold it to Dr Richard Melville Hindmarsh Jay and his wife Clarissa, sister of Edmund Bowman who built Martindale Hall near Mintaro. The Jays renamed Bell Yett, calling it Barton Croft, after Clarissa's childhood home of Barton Vale, Enfield. Dr Jay died in 1919, and four years later, his son, Dr Hubert Melville Jay, added a second storey, in brick, to the stone house. The whole building was then painted white, so that stone and brick would be in harmony. His children also enjoyed exploring the lovely grounds and neighbourhood. During World War II, soldiers were billeted on the bottom floor and in the grounds.<sup>25</sup>

Dr Jay had increased the original acreage from ten to twelve acres. He had wished to retain his residence and some five acres, but the sisters wanted the whole of the property. Jay had already begun selling parts, including the front block, but the sisters were able to buy this back for £2,000, twice what it had been sold for. Sisters M. Bernard Ryder and Veronica Brown lived in the house until the end of 1949, and two sisters from Angas Street went out week about, to keep them company. The first Mass was celebrated there on 12th October, 1949.

It was decided finally not to use the Erindale property as a boarding and day school. Apart from the fact that the home was not spacious enough to transfer the boarders there from Angas Street, discussion with architects and builders had led to the conclusion that it would be too costly to build extensively on the site. In particular, the little creek would have had to have been made into an aqueduct at very great expense.

Instead, a Juniorate was established, for girls who were aspiring to entry into the community when they were somewhat older. It was set up from the beginning of 1950, and lasted until the end of 1962. It began with eleven students. Intake varied greatly, the average being four a year. Some came at the age of eleven or twelve, most were sixteen or seventeen. Parents paid for board and tuition. Not all went on to enter the community, but meanwhile they had continued with their education.

The establishment was organised like a mini-secondary school. Classes were from First Year to Leaving Honours. There was a wide range of subjects. Sisters Gemma Johnson and Kathleen Preece were their teachers during the first year, and when the students went into St Aloysius' College the two sisters also went and taught there. A few young women stayed in the Juniorate and went to Teachers' College or the Conservatorium of Music. In addition, the girls spent 'a small part of each day in a few, simple, carefully chosen Spiritual Exercises'.<sup>26</sup> Mother Dolores Barry proclaimed herself 'particularly pleased with the spirit of the girls who seem to be combining 'happiness' and 'holiness' in a way not usual to girls of this age'.<sup>27</sup>

Erindale, as it became familiarly called within the community, was as magical an environment for the young juniors as it had been for the Black and the Jay children. A few cows, donated by sisters' families, an old wooden churn to turn cream into butter, a vegetable patch, some hundred chickens, and a dog helped to liven the atmosphere of study. The pasturing of horses and cattles on spare paddocks brought in a little income and added to the rural atmosphere. The first year, the sisters planted trees to line the driveway. The students were introduced to Shakespeare under the old spreading oak tree by the tennis court. Hikes to the nearby hills or splashings in the resident creek brought a sense of beauty and helped release tension.

The Juniorate closed at the end of 1962. Already, classes had been discontinued at Erindale, the girls and sisters in the community commuting daily to St Aloysius' College. Erindale served a variety of communities over the ensuing years.

From 1962 to 1969, it was significant as a home of many Junior Professed sisters.<sup>28</sup> These were sisters who had not yet made a final commitment to the community but had taken what was called temporary vows. They were still, therefore, in the process of initiation into the religious life style. In 1963 and 1964, five student sisters lived there and attended nearby Wattle Park Teacher's College. A good relationship arose between the Erindale community and the college. A request to use part of the land for student parking was granted – though never acted upon – because of the 'many kindnesses' shown to the student sisters by the college<sup>29</sup>. Tall stems of pampas grasses from the convent garden graced the college graduation ceremony in Bonython Hall.

Another relationship which gave happiness to both sides was with the Anglican Sisters of the Church, who ran the St Peter's Collegiate Girls School across Stonyfell Road. Especially during the years when Mother Dolores – then retired from central administration – lived at Erindale, there was an ongoing 'dialogue of gifts' between the two sisterhoods. Eggs from Erindale's chickens were sent to the Sisters of the Church to commemorate Our Lady Day (25th March) and to reciprocate afternoon tea and a visit to the college chapel. Grades I and II at St Peter's made chocolate chickens and rabbits for the community at Erindale for Easter, and the Sisters of the Church added a copy of the biography of their foundress, *A Valiant Victorian*. This led to more eggs crossing the street, and later *A Journal of a Soul*, the life of Pope John XXIII. The latter was particularly pleasing to the recipients, as their own bishop had advised them to read it. When twenty Mercy Junior Professed<sup>30</sup> sisters gathered at Erindale for a day, the programme included a visit to the Collegiate Chapel and the Sisters of the Church, the sisters expressing amazement at so many Juniors. Grapefruit from St Peter's were returned as marmalade jam from Erindale. Films at the College were open to the Erindale sisters.

The latter years of the 1960s were also the beginnings of the time of tumultuous change. There were many discussions about religious life and structures during the lengthy period of preparation for the Special General Chapters required by Rome of religious orders, consequent to the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council. Some of the discussions were exciting and opened up new vistas. Others were indubitably painful. It was unsettling for women still in a period of decision-making about their future. Old customs and traditions were being discarded; new structures and practices to replace them – a whole new and very different mind-set – had not yet grown organically out of the past.

In 1971, the practice of sending novices to be trained to the novitiate of the Melbourne Sisters of Mercy – which had pertained for a very short period – was discontinued<sup>31</sup>, and Erindale housed that year, two novices, seven temporarily professed sisters, and two finally professed. It was an era of searching for new ways of formation to the religious life. The two novices joined in study at the diocesan ecclesiastical seminary.

In 1973, the novices moved to Henley Beach convent, although postulants (candidates for entry into the novitiate) continued to live at Erindale and be initiated into religious life. Until 1979, the Mercy community there was shared by an interesting and varied number of people, both lay and religious. Sisters radiated out daily to various ministries: parish and social work, teaching, study, nursing, hospital chaplaincy. A sister from an order in Zambia lived there while studying administration at Murray Park College of Advanced Education, a Mercy sister from Singleton studied for her Bachelor of Education at Flinders University, another from Townsville taught at St Aloysius' College. In 1976, Marion Molyneux – a candidate for membership – went from Erindale to Yemen as volunteer nurse. In 1979, Sister Margaret Burke died at a young age, after a long illness. Her life among them at Erindale – full of love and caring, prayer and music and song – had been 'a celebration of the Word'. Reflecting on her illness, Margaret herself said: 'A whole new area of believing awakened in me ... I am aware of the fullness of living'.<sup>32</sup>

Finance was an ever present problem. Mother Dolores, conducting visitation at Erindale in 1953, had asked for special prayers to be made 'until such a time as our financial affairs are settled'.<sup>33</sup> Apart from renting land for grazing, a small kindergarten had been conducted in the community room for a while, and music had been taught to an external student. Donations from the branch houses and Angas Street helped to maintain the establishment, once the Juniorate had been closed. Commonwealth Government Scholarship Living Allowances for students, after 1968, also helped.

But, by 1965, renovations were long overdue. The walls of the house were damp and crumbling. Mother Dolores, now in residence there, described

the beauty of the garden – almond blossom in full array, jonquils and daffodils out, new roses donning their leaves, plants growing in lovely sunshine and other trees in bloom. 'It's good to be alive 'in the presence of God' in the garden', she added. 'But oh ... He can be so hidden and so very distant in this cramped and cold house!'

In 1969, the southern portion of the land was subdivided and sold. In December 1971, the City of Burnside purchased part of the property, and developed it as a recreation park. Tentative Mercy plans to construct a House of Studies and, perhaps, a small Infirmary for Aged Sisters, on the remainder of the land, never came to fruition. Renovations to the existing building were carried out in 1972.

In 1980, a loan of the property was offered to a Christian charismatic community. Three Sisters of Mercy and a laywoman had been renting a house in Kingswood, as a Christian living and healing ministry centre. They were in association with a small community of men, which included one priest, and a wider group who purchased a property at Norton Summit. In 1980, the three sisters at Kingswood moved into Erindale, together with a Mercy from West Perth and a laywoman. They were later joined by two other laywomen.

Erindale became a meeting point for the various charismatic communities through Sunday Eucharists. It also provided a place for others in search of rest and healing, through the beauty of its surroundings and the ministry of its people. The community adopted the name *Hesed*, a Hebrew form for Mercy.

The Hesed community remained at Erindale for three years, until 1983, when they moved to a rented house at Payneham.<sup>34</sup> After that, until its demolition in 1992, it remained a local community home of the congregation. It continued to be offered, also, to individuals and groups as a place for rest and prayer. A small room, erected at the rear of the house and used as classroom during the Juniorate period, could be used for this purpose.

By 1992, the house had become more and more difficult to maintain in a satisfactory condition. The land was too large for the needs of the community, and the affluence of the surrounding suburb increasingly seemed, to some sisters, an inappropriate environment for a community house. It was, after much reflection, finally decided to demolish the building and subdivide the land for sale. Proceeds from the sale would be available for accommodation which was more suitable for changing needs and an ageing congregation.

Local residents were hostile to this action. The mansion had been listed in the Burnside Council's heritage survey as an item of local character. However, the State Heritage body refused to add it to its listing, and the Burnside Council approved the sisters' plan. It was an occasion of heart-

break, also, for the sisters, for all had enjoyed in some way its natural beauty.

Something of that natural beauty was caught in an informal history of Erindale, compiled by the sisters on the eve of its being lent to the Hesus community. The history opened with photos of the garden around which was written these verses.

Earth holds mystery  
in everchanging season  
in ixia, agapanthus, snowdrop  
You reveal your face

With insistent delicate bird song  
You wake the morning  
and with twilight sunset  
promise another dawn

Paths walked and journeys made  
life shared in joy and sorrow  
new life in unexpected ground  
You teach us Lord your faithfulness.

#### M E R C Y P R I M A R Y S C H O O L S

The branch houses and the schools at Parkside (opened 1889) and Goodwood Orphanage (accepted 1890) grew steadily, as did the independent foundation of Coolgardie (1897). During the 1910s, the Mercies moved into two other areas, the Adelaide suburb of Henley Beach and the parochial school at Goodwood. In 1930, they moved south to another beachside area, the town of Victor Harbor. Between 1949 and 1967, they commenced teaching in parish primary schools in Albert Park (1949), Riverton (1951), Elizabeth (1958, 1961 and 1967), and Henley South (1961). In 1975, Antonio School was opened in Morphett Vale, with a Mercy sister as principal. While the emphasis, in all these areas, was on the primary grades, small secondary schools existed for some years at Parkside, Henley Beach, and Victor Harbor.

#### P A R K S I D E, 1 8 8 9 - 1 9 9 6

St Raphael's, Parkside, the first 'out school' had begun, in 1889, in St Raphael's church hall, with an enrolment of fifty pupils. The dedication took place on 20th January, 1889, an excessively hot day. There was no convent residence, and sisters travelled daily from Angas Street in a horse drawn vehicle. Sister Agnes Rogers was the first principal. Until 1895, the



*First branch house in Adelaide, rented house at Parkside, 1896*



*First convent on Glen Osmond Road, Parkside, purchased 1899*



*Two Cousins sisters – Sr M. Annunciata, superior and teacher at Parkside; Sr M. Ignatius, music teacher at Parkside. They were great-aunts of Sr Claire Lynch*



*Sr M. Dominic Henderson's theory pupils, 1910*

area was part of the Goodwood parish. In 1896, the Passionist Fathers settled in Glen Osmond Road and were given charge of the Parkside parish in August of the following year.

In 1896, a dwelling was rented for a convent, near the school in Young Street. It could accommodate six sisters, though not very comfortably. They were Sisters M. Stanislaus Dooley (Superior), Joseph Wells, de Pazzi Briggs, Gabriel Briggs, Madeleine Lill, and Ignatius Conlon. It was reputed to be haunted. Footsteps were heard running through the corridor at night, and some sisters reported waking up with a feeling of pressure on their body. Mass was said in the house, and the alleged ghostly visitations ceased.<sup>35</sup>

In March, 1899, the convent was transferred to a house (Macklin's), in Glen Osmond Road, which was purchased for £825. In the same year, the erection of a school building cost £900. This housed the girls of the 'poor' school as well as the 'select' school. The latter, St Philomene's Select School for Young Ladies, carried on the Mercy custom of a fee-paying school as distinct from the school for poorer pupils. The 'young ladies' were taught elocution, ballroom dancing, and music apart from the more utilitarian subjects offered in both schools. Choral work and concerts were considered an important part of their education. Catherine McAuley's prediction that middle class schools would prove a source of vocations to the community was vindicated at Parkside. Sisters M. Mercy Connell and Winifred Connell, Rose (Sister Thomas) Casey, Mary<sup>36</sup> (Sister Teresita) Juncken, Mollie (Sister Francis) Coady, and Joan (Sister Owen) Farrell were all pupils of St Philomene's who entered the Sisters of Mercy.<sup>37</sup>

In 1921, there were eight sisters living in community. Sister M. Aloysius Grant was in charge of the convent and the older girls within the select school, now sometimes called the Ladies' Academy. Sister M. Gonzaga Nash had charge of some sixty older boys comprising St Raphael's Boys School, in Young Street, a role she carried for fifteen years. Sister M. Annunciata Cousins was in charge of the primary school. Sister M. Aquin McMahon looked after the younger girls of the select school. There were several lay teachers at this period. School fees in the paying school were one shilling per week for secondary, sixpence for primary.

Older boys continued to be taught in the church-school, which retained its dual purpose until a new church was constructed in December, 1905. The sister most remembered by her 'old boys' – for her very firm hand – was Sister M. Gonzaga Nash. Sister Gonzaga, through her vigour, was a power in Parkside. She used the Mercy practice of visitation to persuade Catholic families to send their children to the school. One unfortunate father was caught hiding from her in his bed, under the coverlet with his boots on. The children came to the school. Among her old boys was John Coady – father of Molly (Sister Francis) – and Terence Pierce – father of Kathleen



*The 1922 convent on  
Glen Osmond Road*



*Convent school pupils, Parkside, 1912. Rose Casey (Sr M. Thomas) – first from left, back row; Nell Fox (Sr Marie Therese) – third from right, second row; Mary Juncken (Sr M. Teresita) – second from left, front row*

(Sister Gertrude). George Fahey became the Public Trustee; Reg Kiernan the Crown Solicitor. This practice of teaching older boys separately from the girls continued until a large new convent was available in 1922,<sup>38</sup> together with additions to and renovations of the existing school. The primary, or what is now termed parish, school then became fully co-educational.

The extra space, in both convent and school, was made possible through Mother Cecilia Cunningham's inheritance. A large two-storeyed convent was constructed on the site of the old house, which was entirely removed except for the foundations. Archbishop Spence commented that the new residence reminded him of the grand old edifices he had seen on the borders of Europe's lovely inland sea, the Mediterranean. During its construction, the sisters had occupied temporary quarters two doors down Glen Osmond Road. The move into their new house was not without its sense of adventure. Passionist Father Leonard was parish priest, and helped the manoeuvres by carrying a hurricane lantern along Glen Osmond Road, while John Coady and other men transported the convent furniture. The architect's and structural engineer's bill came to just over £10,000.

As elsewhere, a High School developed out of the former 'select' school. In 1910, there were forty 'secondary' students at Parkside. In that same year, nineteen pupils (all girls) passed Theory of Music examinations. Music was a prominent feature of the education offered at Parkside, and attracted a large number of students of all ages. In 1912, Sister M. Liguori Renehan was transferred to Parkside to help build up the secondary school. This she must have done, for in 1915, there were sixty-eight secondary students, as compared with forty in 1910. Secondary education in general was spreading, and the advent of World War I was also foreshadowing a new era for women. In 1916, Mary Eva Brooke, aged fifteen, gained honours in the Senior Public Examination for English, Latin, and History, together with passes in French, Mathematics, Geometry, Drawing, Physical Geography, and Geology.

By 1921, the number of secondary students had fallen to thirty-six students. The opening of the new convent, in 1922, brought about renewed confidence. In 1926, there were some two hundred pupils in the two schools and the kindergarten. During the 1930s, Our Lady of Mercy Mothers and Friends Association (Mothers' Club) developed<sup>39</sup>, and over the ensuing decades accumulated a reputation for their fundraising work. The Mothers Club eventually became incorporated into a Parents and Friends Association. However, some of the members of the Club continued to meet in each others home's monthly for more than forty years, raising funds for various projects.

In 1929, the allotment next to the convent was bought for a school playground. The secondary school, which had basically offered a general course, was discontinued about 1940<sup>40</sup>. In 1947, an effort was made to retain those

pupils who would otherwise go onto Unley Technical High School and College. A course including Commercial and Domestic Arts components was offered by Sisters Francis Coady and Aloysius (Patricia) Costello, but lasted only until the end of that decade.

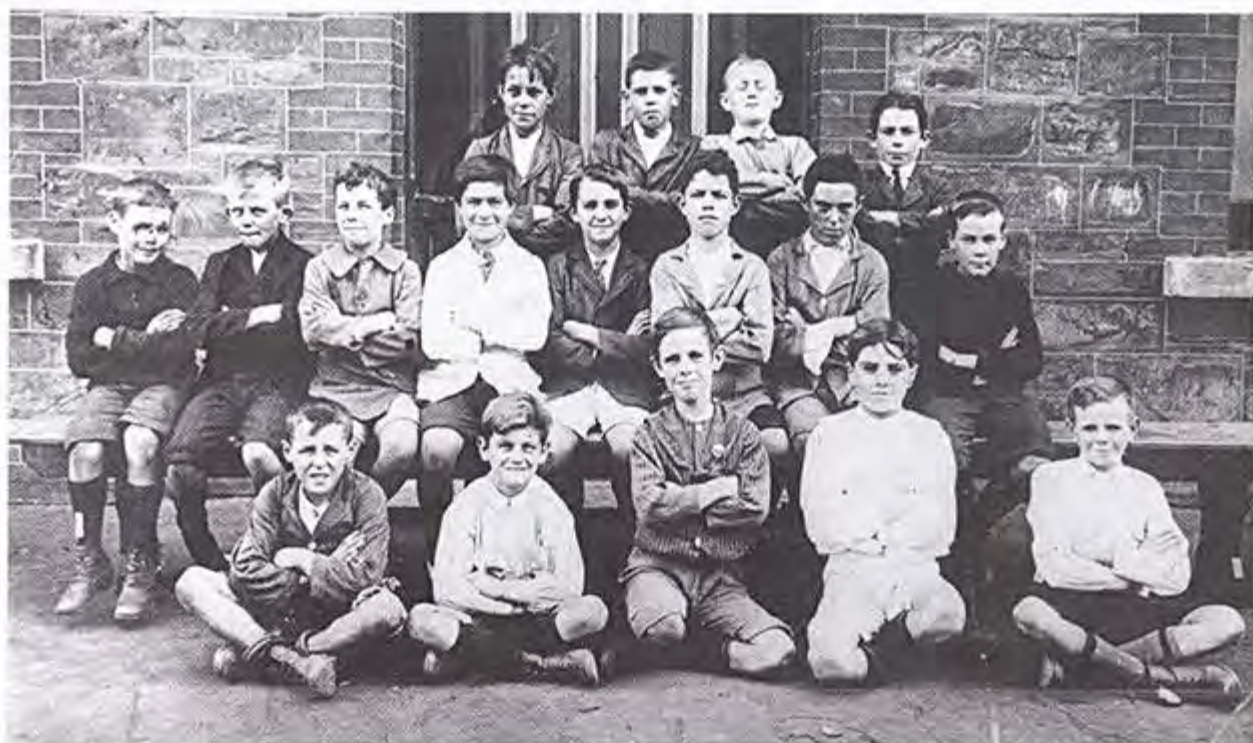
A kaleidoscope of memories come from past pupils. The tall Norfolk pines were a convent landmark in the front garden. A grapevine covered the walk from convent to school, a tempting pathway when the grapes were ripe. There was a large peppertree outside the convent back door, under which Sister Philomene Moroney, at one time, taught knitting. The peppertree was also remembered by students who misbehaved on Sports Days and were dispatched there, to await appropriate punishment. Standards of behaviour were high – convent girls and boys were expected to behave 'that little extra well'. More than one past pupil and their parents remembered the consideration and cooperation of the sisters when the school fees account was overdue. (Fees rose to a guinea in the mid-1940s.) The cream puffs and lamingtons, provided by the sisters, were especially tempting at First Communion Breakfasts. Days on which there was exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in the convent chapel, such as the feast of the Sacred Heart, were made memorable with myriads of candles and flowers adorning the altar.

From the mid-1950s, the socio-economic profile of the area changed greatly. Many migrants, predominantly from Southern Europe, were settling in the area. Many of these were struggling to establish themselves in their new land. The sisters helped them as much as they could, including re-dyeing second hand uniforms and selling them for the cost of the dye. It was a difficult period, for the classes were large and there were few resources for educating children from non-English speaking families.

During the 1950s, the sisters who were in temporary vows also lived in the Parkside convent, with Mother Marie Therese Fox as convent superior and Mistress of the Junior Professed. The first group for final profession included Joan Gillen (Sister M. Perpetua) and Carmel Hennessy (Sister M. Damien), both of whom were to be part of the St Raphael's school and parish community over many years. Joan was principal for nine years, from 1955 to 1962.

In 1961, the next door house was demolished to enlarge the school playground once again. Archbishop Gleeson laid the foundation stone for extensions to the school, a new two-storied building, on September 10th of that year. The cost of the building was approximately £20,000, and, for the first time, the responsibility for the school debt was accepted by the parish rather than the sisters.

The 1970s, when Sister Paul (Pauline) Costello was principal, were a decade of much movement. There were significant changes in methodology occurring in schooling generally. Programmes in multicultural education and special education for slower learners were being developed. Religious



*Sr M. Gonzaga Nash's class, St Raphael's Boys' School, 1919*



*School staff at Parkside. Sr Rosemary Day (centre front) was the last sister-principal in 1984. Back row, Srs Kathryn Travers (third from left) and Carmel Hennessy (fourth from left)*



*Sr Joan Gillen and members of Parkside Convent Mothers' Club at thirtieth anniversary reunion*

education was being explored in a context wider than the school boundaries. In 1975, Sister Veronica McArthur became the first pastoral assistant in the parish who was not a priest. Her brief was to provide opportunities for faith education to the families of children not in a Catholic school, to adults in general, and to catechists.

A School Board was formed in this period, and it took over the setting of school fees. The number of lay teachers increased, which meant a steep rise in school expenses. Parish Priest, Mgr Maurice Bayard, was happy enough for Sister Pauline to improve school resources – provided she raised the money. This was not easy, for the area was now largely migrant working class, with a growing number of single parent families. School enrolments were decreasing. A Commonwealth government grant was made at this time, for the construction of a library and one classroom, the school having to contribute a proportion of the costs. Rita and Kevin Oke came to the rescue, with Bingo meetings twice a week bringing in the money. They continued these for eight to nine years.

The 1980s saw some further advancement. Government grants helped in the development of the school grounds, with an adventure playground, a pergola, a stage in the courtyard, and improvements to the gardens. This decade also saw Sister Rosemary Day become the last Mercy principal of St Raphael's school, and Michael Kenny become, in 1985, the first lay principal.<sup>41</sup> At the end of the next year, Sister Kathryn Travers became the last Mercy sister on the teaching staff – ninety-eight years after the first sisters went out daily from Angas Street.

There was, however, the continuing presence of a Mercy community in the convent. When Sister Pauline Costello retired from the school, at the end of the 1970s<sup>42</sup>, she began, at the age of sixty-eight, a five year period of chaplaincy at Glenside Psychiatric Hospital, then located within the Parkside parish territory. Similarly, but at a younger age, Sister Carmel Hennessy moved from teaching into parish work, and remained in this until the end of 1994. Carmel was the last Mercy sister to work in the parish or school, although sisters continued to occupy the convent.

#### BALAKLAVA, 1906

Towards the end of January, 1906, it was announced that Father Thomas Davis, parish priest of Balaklava, a parish formed in 1889, had invited the Mercies to open a convent school there. Monsignor Byrne and three of the Mercy superiors visited Balaklava and chose the site for the proposed school and convent. A meeting of the parishioners was held, which resolved 'to afford the sisters substantial financial aid for the building of the convent'.

The foundation of a Mercy convent and school at Balaklava was never made. Subsequently, around 1910, the Josephites went there.<sup>43</sup>

#### HENLEY BEACH, 1912-

In 1912, the community was looking for a place near the sea where they could open a school and also spend their vacations or times of convalescence. They approached Fr John Healy of Thebarton, the parish from which the Henley Beach area was then served. With his approval, they opened their convent near the Kirkaldy Railway Station, on 8th December of that same year.

The property ran from Military Road through to Adelaide Terrace. A convent was built on the lower level and faced Military Road. It was a bungalow type dwelling, with wide side verandahs. A school room adjoined. Old Scholars of Angas Street completely furnished the kitchen for the sisters.<sup>44</sup> The builder was Mr F. Fricker. There was ample space on the higher level of the block for the building of a future school or church-school. In 1914, the parish came under the care of the Sacred Heart Fathers who then lived at Hindmarsh.

The bungalow convent and adjacent schoolroom were the only buildings on the property until 1922. The house became a popular summer holiday spot for the sisters. They could sleep in the empty classrooms, take long walks along the beach, and use the bathing-box rented for swimming. In 1916, the school was doing well, and had, in that year, added a secondary high. Mother Magdalene, as Reverend Mother Superior of the congregation, was hoping to offer boarding facilities at Henley Beach. She had already, in 1914, invested £825 at five and a half percent interest, with this project in mind. On this point, Archbishop Spence was not in favour, disapproving of her anticipation of a fortune (Mother Cecilia's) not yet acquired. Moreover, he questioned whether the existing house and site at Henley Beach were really suitable for a boarding school.<sup>45</sup>

When the Cunningham fortune did become available, a new and imposing two-storied convent was built on the upper level. The foundation stone was laid on 16th February, 1922, and the building was ready for occupants later that year. Archbishop Spence, blessing and opening the building in December, expressed 'unalloyed pleasure' because he did not have to pay dearly for the 'aesthetic indulgence, this revelling in the useful, beautiful, and ornamental' buildings that were monuments to Mother Cecilia Cunningham's generosity.<sup>46</sup>

This time the convent fronted Seaview Road, closer to the sea. A one-storeyed school of four classrooms, with provision for a future second storey,



*Holiday-makers in the first  
convent at Henley Beach*



*Henley Beach convent in 1927,  
with part of school to left*



*Henley Beach convent and school after 1960*



*All the girls in the school at Henley Beach, 1925*



*Henley Beach community celebrating Sr Janette Gray's Blessing of the Ring ceremony, 1984.  
L to R: Srs Helen Owens, Bet Smith, Janet Lowe (Balgo), Petrina Morris (Associate-companion),  
Joan Farrell, Shelley Sabey, Doreen Beckett*

was built on the north side of the convent, on the same level. Builder was again Mr F. Fricker. Costs were in the order of £13,700. The original convent and schoolroom continued to be used as an annexe to the school, though Mother Magdalene had declared that the old school room would be renovated as accommodation for boarders from St Aloysius who required a change to the seaside. The sources do not reveal whether this actually occurred, but a later booklet describing the attractions of St Aloysius offered weekend visits to 'Star of the Sea'.

Sister Kevin Kennedy was on the Henley Beach staff as music teacher in the early 1920s. Her jottings have given us a picture of the community then, one of five sisters.<sup>47</sup> Sr M. Baptist Wade was superior and taught Grades IV and V, girls and boys. She was a martyr to rheumatism, according to Sister Kevin, and had to spend two to three days a fortnight in bed. Sister M. Dolores Barry was in charge of the school and taught Grades VI and VII, boys and girls. Sister M. Raphael Guerin – who taught the smaller children – was also a great help in house duties. Sister Anthony Burns – in charge of the house – suffered from acute indigestion. That was from eating too much cabbage, four tablespoons being a mere trifle, or so wrote Kevin Kennedy. There were no convent cars then, but electric trams ran from Currie Street every hour. Mass for the community was in the Henley Beach parish church on Sundays.

In 1923, the first year in the airy and spacious new building, the population of the school reached eighty. The end of the year report indicated that very satisfactory work had been done, and that all music pupils had passed the Music Board examinations. Enrolments continued to increase – to one hundred and four by 1926 – from kindergarten through to secondary. An extra classroom was added to the front of the school in 1928, and the projected second storey in 1960. This storey comprised three classrooms, an outside stairway, a wide balcony, and a corridor connecting convent and school. Further extensions were made in 1965-6.

On this latter occasion, and for the first time, the parish took on the major responsibility, to the extent of £35,000. The sisters took care of the interior. The first issue of a Parish Magazine – July, 1957 – commented on what the school meant to the life of the parish, and in particular the way in which the sisters had 'built up a grand spirit of homeliness'.

Accounts of examination passes indicate secondary numbers were always small, and the curriculum limited. One student passed at Intermediate level in English Literature, French, Ancient History, and Economic History in 1937. The 1946 results showed two students passing Intermediate in English, Algebra (one only), History, Geography, Shorthand and Typing. Two years later the number of successful students had risen to six. In 1965, secondary classes were extended to Leaving, and new subjects were added to the curriculum in 1967. In 1969, came the decision to close the secondary

school. Numbers were small and Catholic secondary education was available within a reasonable distance. The classes were to be phased out over the next two years. The extra resources thus released, by 1971, could be put into the primary school, where each class need now contain only one grade.

The making of the decision to cease offering secondary education was the result of the development of a plan for a regional school in the area. Through the cooperation of the Catholic Education Office and six parishes, a new regional secondary school was opened adjacent to the Our Lady of the Manger parish primary school at Findon. Siena College opened in 1971<sup>48</sup>, with a Dominican Sister as principal. The first vice-principal was a Mercy, Mary Densley. Mary left at the end of second term in 1974, to study religious education in Manila. She was succeeded by Sister Trudy Keur. As there was also a Josephite sister on the staff, the differing ethos of the three religious congregations made for a new kind of atmosphere.<sup>49</sup>

By 1972, the future of the Henley Beach convent building was being discussed, as was also the ownership of the school. The secondary classes had ceased. Sisters who had lived at the convent and had taught at nearby Henley South and Albert Park schools no longer did so, on account of changes in those schools.<sup>50</sup> Any suggestion that the sisters withdraw from Henley Beach was, however, met with resistance by parishioners. The sisters had been a vital force in the community, it was declared, and the loss of their influence would have a devastating effect upon the parish.<sup>51</sup>

Certainly, the primary school continued to flourish. Sister Bet Smith had allowed boys to complete their primary education there.<sup>52</sup> By 1977, the enrolment was just under three hundred. In that year, the Mercy Novitiate was transferred to the convent at Henley Beach and, under the direction of Sister Kathrine Conley, the novices became involved in parish ministries as part of their formation programme. Sister Mary Symonds joined the presbytery staff as a parish worker. The following year, Sister Anastasia Fricker, retired from house duties, began a regular programme of visitation of the sick and the elderly parishioners in the area.

A Mercy principal remained at Star of the Sea until 1992, at the end of which year Sister Rosemary Day was succeeded by a Cabra Dominican sister, Enid Woods. A new administration building had been erected in late 1989, and further renovations were undertaken in mid-1992. The enrolment as at July 1992 was four hundred and twelve. The school site remained the property of the Sisters of Mercy.

The convent itself remained the living quarters of a number of sisters performing various ministries. Patricia Pak Poy worked from it as Director of the National Conference of the Sisters of Mercy during the years 1977 and 1978. Mary Densley conducted the national Mercy Refugee Service from it for a while.<sup>53</sup> Sister Anne Cashen taught various musical instruments and led

school choirs at the adjacent school and elsewhere. Sister Gloria Lord worked as parish assistant within the Henley Beach parish. Sisters Anne Waugh and Pauline Preiss travelled daily to SAC. In their retirement, Sisters Joan Farrell and Bet Smith were significant points of contact for old scholars and parishioners. The convent remained a convenient centre for sisters returning for vacation or other reasons from interstate or elsewhere.

#### GOODWOOD PARISH, 1914-1980

The sisters had been in the Goodwood area, at St Vincent de Paul Orphanage for fourteen years, when they took over the parish school of St Thomas.

There had been a boys' school in the parish since 1910, run by Mr Stephen Grogan. In mid-1914, its enrolment was extended to girls, and the Sisters of Mercy were asked to take charge. Beginning the year with twenty-five pupils, school numbers had swelled to sixty-five within the first six months. Sisters travelled daily from Angas Street. The first were Sisters M. Berchmans Lennox and Francis Maloney, and, shortly after, Philomene Moroney.

By 1926, the population in the parish primary school and kindergarten was about one hundred and ten. At the Goodwood Orphanage, there were seventy-two girls and sixty boys. Eight sisters were on the orphanage staff, though not all of these taught in the school. When the school at the Orphanage was closed, the children attended St Thomas'.

In November, 1980, a Back to St Thomas's School Celebration attracted a large number of past pupils. Some one hundred and fifty signed the book.

Sister Francis Coady was finishing her time on the school staff, after eleven years of teaching there. She was the last sister to have taught at the school. There had been a lay principal, Mrs Margaret White, for most of her time. Margaret had succeeded Sister Claudette Cusack, the last Mercy sister-principal.

#### VICTOR HARBOR<sup>54</sup>, 1930-

The sisters began a school at Victor Harbor in 1930. The seaside town had been the site of the first industry in South Australia, with whaling in 1837. In 1906, the Strathalbyn parish had been formed from the parish of Mt Barker and Willunga. The new parish included the districts of Port Elliot and Victor Harbor. In 1880, the Sisters of St Joseph had opened a school at Port Elliot, living in a small cottage near the church.<sup>55</sup> Both had closed in 1884. Catholic education did not return to the area until well into the next century.

In 1929, the Sisters of Mercy paid £2,300 (cash) for a cottage and an adjoining block of land, next to the church of St Joan of Arc, at Victor

Harbor. A schoolroom was built and named 'Coolock' after Catherine McAuley's former home in Ireland. The sisters saw a synchronicity in the fact that the completion date for the building work was to be 12th December, the foundation day of the Mercy Institute in Dublin. It was blessed by Archbishop Spence on 20th January, 1930, and opened to pupils at the beginning of that school year. Almost thirty pupils enrolled. The first community comprised Sisters Mary Aloysius Grant (Superior), Kevin Kennedy, Benedict Howard, and Teresita Lloyd. The community continued to be constituted of four sisters most years, though sometimes of five, sometimes of three.

The going was somewhat difficult financially, but the Mercy tradition of lowering or waiving school fees continued when families were in need, as many were in the economically depressed years of the 1930s. At the end of the first year, the convent 'coffers' held one and a half pence – in the form of postage stamps. Fortunately, parishioners were generous in their assistance. The reputation of the sisters as teachers attracted non-Catholic pupils also, together with music pupils from the surrounding district. For some years, boarders were taken, mainly from the Goolwa – Hindmarsh area, on a weekly basis. Some high school subjects were taught from the opening year, until 1960, by which time the practice had grown no longer viable.<sup>56</sup>

In the years prior to 1938, the population of Victor Harbor had increased from nine hundred to almost four thousand. Outlying districts were also increasing rapidly under the impetus of a closer settlement scheme. The school enrolment peaked at just over seventy. The growth was not permanent, and by 1967, enrolment was down to forty-two. Economic and personnel restrictions led to the decision to close the school as from December of that year. Two sisters would travel to Victor Harbor each weekend to give the children Religious Instruction and to visit parishioners.

They did so, with variations in emphasis, from 1968 to 1979. Sister Kath Pierce came all those eleven years, with Sister Francis Coady during the last eight. The St Joan's Ladies Guild raised funds to help cover expenses. Apart from Religious Education, the sisters' experience and advice proved helpful in other parish pastoral matters. Father Peter Monopoli wrote appreciatively, and wondered if the parish could be given a full-time parish coordinator, perhaps in conjunction with Willunga parish.

His request was in vain. In 1980, Mrs Monica Davies<sup>57</sup> took on the role of Religious Education Coordinator for the parish. Monica was born in Victor Harbor, and had attended the Mercy school there as well as Mercedes College in Adelaide. During 1985 and 1986, Sister Catherine Seward did become parish assistant. Her work covered three broad areas developed at a parish assembly: prayer and liturgy, learning and tradition, and social activities. The convent building began to be used more and more as a spirituality centre and a school camp-site.



*The two houses that formed the Victor Harbor convent*



*Students of Coolock School, Victor Harbor, the day it closed, 11th December, 1967.  
(L to R): Srs M. Celine (Therese) Maloney, Gabriel (Bet) Smith, Antonia (Lyn) Beck*



*Srs Kathleen Pierce and Francis Coady (R) ready for catechetical work, Victor Harbor, 1978*



*Golden Jubilee of the sisters' coming to Victor Harbor, 1980. L. to R: back row – Miss C. Dillon (first school enrolment), Sr Barbara McQuillan (teacher and superior), Sr Colette O'Loughlin (also superior). Front row – Sr Benedict Howard (foundation staff)*

**A L B E R T   P A R K,   1 9 4 9 – 1 9 6 8**

Sisters of Mercy began the parish school of Our Lady Queen of Peace, at Albert Park. This school was opened in 1949, in a new Housing Trust area. It commenced with Grades I to IV, totalling some sixty pupils. Sisters on the staff lived at Henley Beach convent.

Our Lady Queen of Peace School began in a tent, as the church, which was to accommodate the school, had been burnt down the week before school was due to open. The two classrooms were formed by dividing the tent with a calico curtain. They remained in the tent for the whole of that year. Certain complications ensued. Archbishop Beovich, visiting during a storm, found he had to enter the tent by crawling underneath the lashed down canvas. The rain also had a tendency to lodge on one side, causing that side to collapse. Brushes were used to heave the roof up so that it would not cave in. The main pole caused an opening also for the rain to enter.

Life went on as normal nevertheless. That first school year saw Sports Day and the Sacrament of Reconciliation and First Holy Communion and Confirmation. The two foundation sisters, Gertrude (Kath) Pierce and Paschal Higgins, travelled daily to Albert Park by train. They appreciated the kindness of a non-Catholic woman, Mrs Wright, who lived across the road and who allowed them to use her house for a the equivalent of a staff room during the period of the tent.

As the school increased in size, so did the number of sisters on its staff. The second year of operation saw an influx of migrant children, a development for which the school was not really prepared. Some two hundred and fifty children from over sixteen different countries was not yet a common school situation in South Australia.

One of the foundation pupils gained some fame later by helping Pope John Paul II speak Pidgin, in preparation for his visit to Papua New Guinea in 1984. Roger Mount had entered the Hospitaller Order of St John of God, and had worked in Port Moresby. Later he studied for the priesthood in Rome, where he taught the Pope Pidgin. Among the foundation students, also, were two future Sisters of Mercy – Catherine and Josephine Weatherald.

At the end of 1968, the Mercies had taught at Albert Park for twenty years. Their growing inability to staff the school adequately led to their decision to withdraw. The Sisters of the Resurrection took their place, the school being merged into one unit with an existing Catholic school at Royal Park.

**R I V E R T O N,   1 9 5 1 - 1 9 7 0**

The Sisters of Mercy were nineteen years at Riverton, some sixty miles north of Adelaide. There they opened a convent and school at the beginning of

1951 and withdrew at the end of 1969. It was a withdrawal made with much regret, for the country town of Riverton had been a friendly place in which to work and live. The small settlement was set in lovely countryside, and formed a nicely laid out town.

The first convent and school had been bought by the parish, as early as December, 1949, in anticipation of obtaining the services of a religious community. It was a fine building, in Washington Terrace, the home of John Robins, flour miller, and cost £4,600. The school was in a renovated shed on the convent grounds.

The school year opened in February, 1951, with thirteen pupils. In January, 1954, both convent and school moved into a larger property in Kelly Street. This was the home of Dr Mallen, and was described, with some validity, as 'magnificent'. The residence was large enough to accommodate up to sixteen weekly boarders, boys and girls, as well as the sisters. The garage was converted into two large school rooms. School enrolment peaked at more than ninety, but by the time of its closure had dropped to about fifty-five.

The first community of sisters included Sisters M. Barbara McQuillan (superior and head teacher), Gabriel (Bet) Smith, Rose Kelly, and Joan Lavery. Succeeding superiors were Sisters M. Francis Coady (1957-59), Owen (Joan) Farrell (1960-65), and Marie Therese Fox (1966-69).

The parish community were very supportive of the efforts of the sisters. The move to Mallen's home had meant an outlay of several thousand pounds, in acquiring the property and effecting the necessary alterations. There took place many fundraising events consequently. Most lucrative was the annual strawberry fete, which would bring in about £600.

The sisters became a vital part of the parish and town. They helped with the parish liturgy, with religious instruction of children outside of the Catholic school, and with care of the sick and elderly. On Sundays, they visited outlying areas for Religious Instruction. They organised days of retreat for past pupils and other young women, for mothers of the children and other ladies of the parish, and for the children themselves. During the winter months, Sister Anastasia, who looked after domestic arrangements, made cocoa for the school children. The Ladies Auxiliary supplied the cocoa and the sugar, one of many generous ways of assisting school and convent.

The attendance of several non-Catholics, either at the school or for music lessons, helped foster a strongly ecumenical spirit in the district. One parishioner claimed that the sisters did not realize the strength of their influence – through their activities, the attitude of members of other churches had changed. Local historian, M. Burrows, wrote:

The Sisters made an immediate impact on the local community, who totally unacquainted with Nuns, hitherto, were for the most part, at first hesitant



*March past, Sports Day, Albert Park, 1971*



*Convent at Riverton*



*Srs M. Colette O'Loughlin, Kevin Kennedy, Xavier Webb, on front verandah of Elizabeth convent, 1963*



*Elizabeth community, 1983. L to R: Catherine Weatherald, Margaret Abbott, Denise Coen, Ruth Mullins, Paschal Higgins, Pauline Preiss, Joan Haren*

and dubious. In a very short time, the understanding and compassion, the outgoing kindness, friendliness, and thoughtfulness of the first four 'ambassadors', made them welcome and loved by all who came in contact with them. In very short time the Convent was a centre cherished and honoured by all sections of the community.<sup>58</sup>

On their part, the sisters welcomed the friendliness of the people of Riverton, and the simplicity of the children. They appreciated the way the people of the district worked together, and the efforts of the Catholics to give their children a Catholic education. The school operated like one big family, yet the people of different denominations supported each other.<sup>59</sup> Other sisters liked to make Riverton their holiday house. The beauty and peacefulness of the country landscape was attractive. The paddock behind the convent – where Sister Patricia Walsh had learned to drive a car, using sheep as traffic – became a temporary golf course. The swimming pool, which had a roof over it and was used as classroom during school terms, reverted to its original use in holiday periods.

The last Mercy community in Riverton was composed of Sisters M. Therese Fox (superior), Josephine Marquand, Mary Veronica Harvey and Pieta (Patricia) Walsh. Numbers had dropped in the school. In 1969, there were two sisters teaching pupils in multiple grades: Grades I to III, and Grades IV to VII. Despite the 'sacrifices, generosity, interest and work of the parishioners which have seldom been paralleled anywhere else'<sup>60</sup>, there was insufficient funding to pay the salary of a lay teacher, and the membership of the Mercy Order was then dropping drastically. Mother Provincial, Cecily Lynch, in announcing the decision to withdraw the sisters at the end of 1969, stated that she knew the Faith would continue to be taught at home – which was, she added, far from being the case in their other schools. She regretted that there were not enough sisters available to offer the services even of a motor mission but the sisters were very willing to hold vacation schools, as a supplement to parental faith education.

What happened was that Sisters Catherine Seward and Patsy Bowler visited Riverton fortnightly, during 1970, for Mass and Sunday School. In 1971, the Barossa Valley 'motor mission' of the Sisters of St Joseph offered religious instruction to Catholic children in State schools.

#### ELIZABETH, 1957-

The new city of Elizabeth was planned and developed by the South Australian Housing Trust in 1954, as a satellite city of Adelaide, from which it was about seventeen miles north. The plan was for a city of some fifty-six thousand people on approximately six thousand acres, with a range of

opportunities for employment in local industries. The design incorporated a neighbourhood concept – five to six thousand people to a neighbourhood. Each neighbourhood would be delineated through open spaces. Each would develop its own facilities and, it was hoped, its own personality. About two hundred allotments were made available in each neighbourhood for private purchase. The rest were developed through the Housing Trust. By 1973, of 12,642 houses, only one hundred and ninety-seven were privately built.

The city grew rapidly – from five thousand to twenty-two thousand in seven years. It attracted a large number of migrants, many of them skilled workers, who bought or rented the Housing Trust homes. They included Catholics especially from Britain, Ireland, and Holland.

Mercy involvement began in the last term of 1957. The newly developing city seemed to be one where a Mercy response would be most appropriate.

Sisters Gertrude (Kath) Pierce and Owen (Joan) Farrell visited Elizabeth parish every Sunday morning to prepare children for the sacraments and to gather enrolments for the school, which was to open in February of the following year. St Mary Magdalene's School, situated in Elizabeth South, began with two hundred and sixteen pupils, from Grades I to VII.

The first community comprised Sister Gertrude as Superior (1958-1963)<sup>61</sup>, and Sisters Teresita and de Chantal. They were joined the next year by Sister M. Katrina (Carmel) Christie. The parish priest, Father B. Bowler, vacated his small trust-home presbytery, to provide the first convent in Elizabeth. Other activities of the sisters included the Religious Instruction of Catholic pupils in State schools, as well as of adults, the visitation of patients in the hospital, and the offering of spiritual retreats for women.

In 1960, the city was divided into two distinct parishes. Elizabeth South was the older centre; Elizabeth North the new. In that same year, Sisters M. Immaculata Coffey and Ita (Ruth) Mullins began teaching more than sixty children in a private house within Elizabeth North parish. St Thomas More's School was finished by the end of the first term. As the school grew, so too did the number of sisters on staff. By 1965, the Mercy congregation was planning to give also two sisters to a proposed new school at Elizabeth Park. St Mary's School did not begin until 1967, when, at the suggestion of the parish priest of Elizabeth North, David Abfalter, the two institutions constituted one parish school. Grades I to IV were at St Thomas More's, Elizabeth North, with a staff of three nuns and one lay teacher. Grades V to VII were at St Mary's, Elizabeth Park, with a staff of three nuns. Abfalter hoped that both would eventually comprise seven grades. Another school at Elizabeth Grove, within the parish of St Mary Magdalenes' at Elizabeth South, was also being suggested by parish priest, Pierce Murphy, but there were no sisters available for it.

By 1961, there were eight sisters living in the small trust-home convent. It was grossly overcrowded. At the end of that year, a new convent had been

completed. It was built by the sisters, who had the final responsibility for costs but were helped by contributions from the two parishes. The men of the parish – including the two parish priests – did much voluntary work around the convent exterior and grounds.

Mr Dwight (a non-Catholic), in charge of public gardens in Elizabeth, planned the convent garden and saw to the planting of most of the fifty shrubs and trees donated by the Housing Trust. The convent was on four acres of land, sold by the trust for £1,500. Apart from the convent, it was planned to build on it a secondary school for girls. The archdiocese carried the capital debt for the first fifteen years. Costs ultimately reached over £84,000, half of which had been paid off by December, 1962.

Two sisters had come out to Elizabeth every Saturday to teach music. In 1963, a permanent music sister joined them. The two schools grew steadily. In 1968, school boards were established in both parishes. The extracurricular ministries of the sisters also multiplied. There were retreats at the convent for children, young girls, women and men. There were home groups for Religious Instruction, especially in the preparation of children for the sacraments. There was a motor mission in each parish to Catholic children in the State schools<sup>62</sup>, as well as out-of-school seminars and camps for high school students. There were courses for and ongoing support of catechists for these children. Some sisters were involved in youth work. As time went on, sisters on the motor mission and/or school staff became involved in more general parish work. Finally, Catherine Weatherald and Catherine Seward became full time parish associates.

Membership of certain task forces or committees also increased the sisters' incorporation into the area, while, at the same time, they widened the sphere of influence. Claudette Cusack was a member of a committee working with a mission to Inca Indians in Ecuador. Joan Haren was on a task force looking at the special needs of schools in disadvantaged areas. Margaret Abbott preached on the occasion of a Youth Mass at St Patrick's church, Elizabeth South parish. Ruth Mullins and Joan Haren were both part of the Youth Action scene, in Elizabeth North and Elizabeth South respectively. Margaret Adams coordinated a programme designed to help children unable to cope with school, calling upon aid from a counselling centre, the school medical service, other community resources, and the parish schools. Catherine Seward was sponsored by the Teams of Our Lady to attend a Leadership Training Conference, dealing with the topic of family-based religious education. In June, 1977, Anne Gregory became the first supervisor of the Para Districts Women's Shelter at Elizabeth Vale, with a half-way house added the following year. In 1981, Anne received a Churchill Fellowship to observe women's shelters overseas.

By 1973, there were thirteen sisters in the community. There were eight sisters working in the schools, and three on motor mission. Living with them

was a Marist Sister who was studying at Flinders University and working at the Elizabeth Counselling Centre. The following year, the community experimented internally with a structure of 'co-responsibility' rather than the traditional authority structure of superior and subjects. In a new departure, Kathrine Conley was elected community co-ordinator. Four major areas of responsibility were defined, and members elected accordingly, to help facilitate the smooth running of the group. A weekly community evening was set aside to review the operation.

In 1977, the power to elect a co-ordinator was rescinded by the provincial council, which again appointed a superior to the Elizabeth community. However, the election to the various posts within the community continued, as did the preferential nomination of three sisters to fill the role of superior.

The convent had become a kind of parish centre. In the 1970s, parish groups using the chapel, visitors' parlour, and sisters' community room included members of retreats (organized by the sisters) and other prayer meetings, adults seeking religious instruction, St Vincent de Paul ladies, Catechists, Charismatic Community, Parish Pastoral Council, Therry Dramatic Society, school staffs and children.

By 1978, it was clear that the site purchased with a view to building a secondary school was not now suitable. The land was sold back to the Housing Trust, and the money used to purchase an alternative site at Salisbury. Thomas More College was established there, in 1979, by the Catholic Education Office.

In the early 1980s, Mercies were principals and co-ordinators of Religious Education in the Elizabeth schools, and parish co-ordinators of Religious Education. The number of sisters living at Elizabeth decreased during that decade, so that, in 1988, there were only four sisters in the two parishes. A request from the South Australian Housing Trust, in December, 1986, for a Sister of Mercy to work among the young single pregnant women had had to be refused. Differences in their approaches to ministry between parish priests and sisters, the latter now more up-to-date theologically than were many of the clergy, compounded the problem of shortage of numbers in the Order. Nevertheless, with a history of nearly thirty years of dedicated Mercy service in Elizabeth, the sisters were reluctant to move out completely.<sup>63</sup>

Social analysis of the area pinpointed a number of factors that made their presence very appropriate, in terms of the Mercy commitment. They recognized a number of factors leading to dysfunctional behaviour such as domestic violence, sexual and child abuse, drug and alcohol dependence. Other situations included an above average proportion of single parents, unemployment, low income, cheap housing, isolation from Adelaide and from the support of an extended family. Women's shelters were full, and there were inadequate facilities for the needy aged.<sup>64</sup>

One solution to this situation of widespread need and depleted personnel was to seek among other Mercy groups in Australia. At the beginning of 1988, Mary Lynch, a Bathurst Mercy, took over the principalship of St Thomas More's School from Joan Haren. John MacDonald, as Director of Catholic Education, was happy about such an initiative taken by the Mercies in finding a replacement. Adelaide sisters continued to administer St Mary Magdalene's School and to work as pastoral assistants in one or other of the two parishes. When the sisters moved out of the large convent into a smaller home, the convent became a home for young people.<sup>65</sup>

#### HENLEY SOUTH, 1961-1971

A small school, the 'Blessed Sacrament School', was opened in a church-school building in February, 1961, at Henley South. It commenced with thirty-four pupils in Grades I to III. A new grade was added yearly. First headteacher was Sister Marie Louise (Ruth) Egar. The enrolment peaked at seventy, but a drop in child population, as well as financial problems, led to the closure of the school in 1971.

Although its existence had been brief and its size small, Henley South Catholic school left pleasant memories. 'Small had been beautiful' at Blessed Sacrament School. It was the 'pride and joy' of the people of Henley South, and had been seen perhaps as the greatest single factor in welding the young families together.<sup>66</sup> In its ten years of existence, it had educated four hundred and ten children. Its last headteacher was Sister Catherine Weatherald.

#### MORPHETT VALE, 1975-1982

Antonio School opened in Morphett Vale in February, 1975, with one hundred and twenty pupils, and the enrolment grew quickly. Principal was Sister Marita Mullins. The existence of the school owed much to the generosity of the Antonio family, former farmers in the area. Parish Priest, Robert Egar, acknowledged on several occasions the generosity of brother and sister, Herbert and Ethel Antonio, who had given 'extraordinary gifts in a most extraordinary way'.<sup>67</sup> Marita remained principal until the end of 1982. Sister Mary-Anne Duigan worked as pastoral assistant in the parish between 1978 and 1983.

#### PAPUA NEW GUINEA, FROM 1956 TO ABOUT 1975

##### **Goroka**

In January, 1956, Sister Elizabeth Miller went to Papua New Guinea, as superior of the first Mercy community in that country. The community was

formed by the recently constituted Australian Union of Sisters of Mercy<sup>68</sup>. The four sisters – from Perth, Bathurst, Singleton, and Adelaide – were to establish a school in Goroka, in the Central Highlands of New Guinea. The mission there was run by the Divine Word Missionary Fathers and had been established only a couple of years previously. Goroka was a pleasant town, an administrative centre, with a relatively small and floating European population as well as some more settled coffee plantation owners, together with a large population of indigenous people in the surrounds.

Elizabeth was the first of several Adelaide Mercies to work in Papua New Guinea. She had been Assistant Novice Mistress in Adelaide at the time of her appointment. Even though it was so close to Australia, the venture into a foreign – and ‘pagan’ – country was seen as especially missionary. In Sydney, en route to New Guinea, Elizabeth, as superior, had been given a relic of St Patrick by the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Carboni, who prayed that they would establish the faith in the Highlands as strongly as the saint had done in Ireland.

In 1956, Papua and New Guinea were under Australian administration. The eastern half of the large island had been colonised by the British in the south (Papua) and the Germans in the north (New Guinea). Its situation between Australia and South-East Asia meant an increasing influence from both east and west. Most of the people were subsistence farmers, living in small tribal communities often isolated – and frequently warring – in what was an extremely mountainous land. There were some seven hundred distinct languages. Melanesian Pidgin in the north and Motu in the south bridged the gap to some extent. Foreign missionaries had been active in the country for many decades, and Christianity had been embraced by the majority, often as a kind of magic which would bring the apparent advantages of the western world. Nevertheless, the Christian missions had done much for the physical advancement of the people. Until the end of World War II, when Australia assumed greater responsibility for development, almost all the education and a large percentage of health services were provided by churches.

The Mercy mission in Goroka faltered for the first few years. They had been invited ostensibly to establish a school for European children, but they were sending enough sisters so that they might also work among the indigenous people. This latter work was, in their mind, the true and ultimate reason for their accepting the invitation. However, such was not the intention of the priest in charge of the mission, Father Fontana, an American, nor was it uppermost in the mind of Bishop Noser. The sisters found themselves being wholly absorbed by the school for European girls and boys, also called the International School.

St Mary's School – which did take some ‘half-caste’ children and ‘Asiatics’ as well as the European children – opened on June 11, 1956, and the



*Sr Marita Mullins (principal) and children, Antonio School, Morphet Vale*



*Farewelling Sr M. Elizabeth Miller to Papua New Guinea, 1956. L to R: Sr M. Carmel Bourke, Mother Xavier Dalton, Sr M. Elizabeth, Mrs Margaret Head (Elizabeth's sister)*



*At Adelaide airport, farewelling Srs Elizabeth Miller, Teresa Flaherty and Margaret Clarke, 1964*

building of a boarding school began on 5th November of that year. Father Fontana expressed himself as never having any intention of starting a school for local children, even though both the Apostolic Delegate and Bishop Noser had led the sisters to believe that this would be possible.<sup>69</sup> Father was eager to have a boarding school, and more or less bribed the sisters to open it with the promise that they could also have a class for twenty 'native' children, both boys and girls. They began this class at the beginning of 1957.

Mother Patricia O'Neill, the Mother General of the Union, became concerned over reports of difficulties at Goroka, and visited the sisters in late 1956. She became more favourable towards the establishment of a boarding school, which was finally opened in January, 1958, but did not really prosper. There were never more than twenty boarders at a time, and, financially, it was not a success. Moreover, the sisters continued to feel frustrated that what they saw as their original intent was being obstructed. In a country where the administration was not yet providing schools for local children, there were continuous heartaches as they found it impossible to limit the number of their indigenous students to twenty. They were always in trouble from the priest for taking more. They were also incurring displeasure from some of the parents of the children in the European school, who resented the sisters' giving attention to the local children, and who were anxious that there be no mixing between the two groups.

In addition, provisions were channelled to them through the mission organisation. The male missionaries were used to religious women being somewhat more dependent on the men than were the Mercies. When the bishop told them to put a blanket on at night as, about 2 a.m., the temperature would drop and it could affect the 'leever', the Australian sisters – not used to having conversations with bishops on such topics – were secretly amused. When Elizabeth tried to establish some independence for themselves in the matter of provisions, the mission priest was troubled and told her to wait until the bishop came. The bishop was non-committal, but told her 'to go on and see how much independence [they] wanted'. The sisters had no quarrel with the generosity of either priest or bishop, – indeed, Fontana had vacated his house for them until a convent was built – but they did discover later that the bishop preferred the sisters to be dependent on him. If he did not like them, he could get rid of them the more easily, or so it was rumoured.

After a few years, at the end of 1961, the boarding school was closed. There were just ten boarders, of whom two were Catholics. Mother Patricia had kept writing to the sisters and reminding them of their original purpose, namely, to open a school for the 'natives'<sup>70</sup> and warning them not to write home too much about the European school, as the sisters in Australia wanted to hear about the 'little darkies'. On its closure, the boarding school building

was used for local girls who had finished Grade IV in the mission schools of the diocese.

On account of continuing protests from parents of the European school, the Apostolic Delegate wrote that they were neglecting the children of that school. Elizabeth, who was in charge of the school, believed she was not the best of disciplinarians. The sisters felt they were being pulled from all sides. It was a relief when, at the end of 1964, they withdrew from the European school.

Only ten pupils were enrolled for the following year at St Mary's School. And the bishop had decided to bring out a community of Holy Spirit sisters to 'establish a boarding school for native-girls'. Mother Patricia felt that the services of the Mercies would be better used if they went to Koge, in the Chimbu district, where there were over three hundred and sixty children to be taught. Elizabeth Miller wrote later that 'almost everything they started they gave away in the end, because everything was started without much thought of what was going to happen afterwards.'

### **Chimbu**

Meanwhile, during 1964<sup>71</sup>, Elizabeth had moved to Kup, also in the Chimbu, originally in a holding position while the priest was ill. Her 'holding' lasted some ten years. Chimbu was in a different political province but in the same ecclesiastical diocese of Alexishaven. It was one of the more densely populated areas in the territory. Under Elizabeth's leadership, the Mercies established themselves in Kup, where they took charge of a school already started by a lay missionary, and where the government also gave them management of the hospital. Lay missionaries had likewise begun the school in Koge, where the sisters found themselves teaching four hundred and thirty pupils in the English school – so called because the children were taught in English – and over sixty in the Pidgin school. In 1966, Sisters of Mercy also went to Goglme.<sup>72</sup>

The ten years in the Chimbu at Kup (1964-1973) were, for Elizabeth, the happiest time she had ever had in New Guinea. She did add that most of her time had been happy there really; there had been troubles but they had flowed over their heads a bit. In 1974, Elizabeth was in Koge, and, at the end of that year, retired from teaching. She spent the next five years (1975-1979) as part-time librarian and remedial teacher at Rosary College at Kondiu. When Sister Carmel Bourke, as member of the Mercy Union Council in Canberra, visited Papua New Guinea in 1975, she wrote of Elizabeth's deep understanding of the ways of the people of the Chimbu and her deep love for them.

When Elizabeth retired from Kondiu she moved to Neragaima (1980-1981), where Sister Joan Adams of Singleton set up a hospital at the request

of the local people. In 1982, Elizabeth went to live at Wewak at the novitiate which had been established for indigenous Mercy novices. As well as sharing her wisdom with the young Papua New Guinea women with whom she lived, Elizabeth also gave some religious instruction to about twenty-five younger children from the International School – some Australian, some Chinese and Philippino, but mostly Papua New Guinean children of well-to-do parents. At the end of 1984, she returned to Australia on account of her health.

Sister Elizabeth (Annie) Miller died on 10th November, 1991, aged eighty-three years. She had twice been mission superior, and had lived through some very worrying times in Papua New Guinea, sometimes very lonely times of difficult decision-making. She had spent thirty years in Papua New Guinea, growing old in the service of others, being a pilgrim for Christ's sake as she went with her sisters to the various Chimbu missions.<sup>73</sup> Memorial Eucharists were held for Elizabeth in Papua New Guinea – at Goroka, Mount Hagen, and Wewak. Three sisters from Papua New Guinea were present at her funeral in Adelaide, which concluded with the Hail Mary in Tok Pisin. (Pidgin). The sisters in Papua New Guinea sent flowers in loving memory.

When the Mercies began in Koge in 1965, a second Adelaide sister was part of the founding community. Sister M. Matthew (Teresa) Flaherty went there from Mt Gambier, and taught in Koge from 1965 to 1969. A school and a hospital had already been established in Koge, both staffed by local people. The Mercies established a vocational school. In 1967, a third Mercy community was established in the Chimbu, at Goglme, and Sister M. Patrice (Margaret) Clarke of Adelaide was a member, as she was also of the first Naragaima community, set up in 1970. This school was localised in 1973.

In 1970, Teresa (Tess) Flaherty, still living at Koge, moved into a contract with the Public Service under which she resourced thirty primary schools in the Chimbu. She inspected schools, gave in-service training for one hundred and fifty teachers, and assisted local boards of management. Subsequently, she was appointed, in 1974, to the lecturing staff of Goroka Secondary Teachers' College, a government institution and the only one of its kind in Papua New Guinea.

In 1975, the new nation of Papua New Guinea was born, with complete independence from any colonial power or administration. A process of localisation of all areas of public services had already begun, which speeded up rapidly after independence. A Westminster type of government was inherited from Australia, with the decentralisation of power to provincial governments an important concept.

Some thirty per cent of the people were Catholic, and there was a substantial network of Catholic schools and health clinics of various kinds. Sisters of Mercy continued to work in these areas, with several Adelaide Mercies



*Sr Teresa Flaherty and  
Julienne Kaman,  
lecturers at Goroka  
Teachers' College, 1980*



*Children and sisters at Goodwood Orphanage, 1911*

among them. However, the decades from the 1970s on were to witness vast changes within Papua New Guinea as well as far-reaching changes within the church itself, profoundly affecting religious orders such as the Mercy Institute. A new era of involvement was at hand.<sup>74</sup>

#### GOODWOOD ORPHANAGE, 1890-1975

In October, 1868, on the Feast of the Guardian Angels, ninety children from St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage took part in the Catholic Schools Festival Procession and carried banners declaring 'My Father and Mother have left me'. It was a way, obviously, of calling attention to the sad plight of these children, but it must also have distressed them. Like orphanages everywhere, the Catholic orphanage in Adelaide has always been something of a symbol of vulnerability and an ambiguous or contradictory sign – both for the children and their carers.

The orphanage was an attempt by the church to provide for those children whose father and mother – whether through necessity or through neglect – had 'left' them. It began in 1866, in rented premises and under lay management. Initially at Walkerville, it first moved to a row of cottages in Franklin Street, then to Mitcham, then to Burnside, and finally to Goodwood. In May, 1868, the supervision of the girls was transferred to the newly founded Sisters of St Joseph.<sup>75</sup> Then, on 1st January, 1890, its administration was again transferred, this time to the Sisters of Mercy.

This last transfer could not have been very easy or pleasant for either the Sisters of St Joseph or the Sisters of Mercy. Archbishop Reynolds said that it was 'in the interests of religion and the well-being of my poor orphans'.<sup>76</sup> He gave no more specific reasons. The Sisters of St Joseph were deeply hurt by this<sup>77</sup>, with so deep a feeling of loss that they subsequently obliterated memories of having been at Goodwood.<sup>78</sup>

The episcopal rejection of their more than twenty years of service to extremely disadvantaged children was but one incident among many, that the new order, and particularly its foundress, Mary MacKillop, had experienced at the hands of bishops and clergy, in various parts of Australia. Reynolds had been a friend and support to the fledgling community until the early 1880s. By that time he had grown depressed, grievously burdened in mind and spirit. He became strongly influenced by enemies of Mary MacKillop and her Institute, and turned into a most hostile critic.

Like several others among the Australian bishops, Reynolds also disliked the centralised government on which the constitutions of the new order were based. He tried unsuccessfully to destroy this. Rome finally declared that the sisters were to be allowed to remain under central government, a

judgment that meant that Reynolds had to choose whether or not to allow the Institute to remain in his diocese. He came reluctantly to the decision to permit the sisters to stay in Adelaide, under central government. It was late 1889 before he arrived at this point, and one is tempted to speculate that his action of December of that year, to take the orphanage away from the care of the Josephites, was an unhappy by-product of that decision.

We have no record of the feelings of the Sisters of Mercy who were thus asked, unexpectedly, to take charge. The selection of the first Superior of the Home was, however, a happy one. It was the Argentinian, Mother Antonia McKay, and she remained in charge until the end of 1897. At that date, she went as founding superior of the Mercy Institute in Coolgardie, Western Australia.

When Antonia McKay took over administration of the orphanage, she was in her early forties. She had, therefore, some twenty years of experience in the works of Mercy, ranging from Buenos Aires to Adelaide. Her years at Goodwood must have been happy ones. Five young women who had passed through her care eventually went and joined her community in Western Australia. The relationship between these and Mother Antonia was deeply affectionate. They proved to be – as members doing the domestic work of convent and boarding school – of great importance in the survival of the goldfields foundation, literally keeping the place going at times. Some of them were also unique personalities, leaving behind a store of quaintly comic but endearing tales.<sup>79</sup>

One of these ex-Goodwood children was Lizzie McMahon, who became Sister Veronica of Coolgardie. When she was twelve, she was sent to help care for a family of six children whose mother had died, the J.J. O'Sullivan family. She stayed with this family for thirteen years, and would talk about 'the wonderful orphanage and the girls who were there like princesses, and Mother Antonia was the Queen who was in charge and mother of them all'. Then, when Mother Antonia re-visited Adelaide, Lizzie went to see her, and decided to return to Coolgardie with Antonia. Many years later, one of the O'Sullivan daughters wrote to the nuns at Goodwood, describing how she had kept in touch with Sister Veronica. 'The greatest thing of my life', she claimed, 'was that I did not lose touch with her'.<sup>80</sup>

Apart from caring for the children, who were often, in Mary MacKillop's words, 'tough, neglected little waifs'<sup>81</sup>, Antonia and her successors had to maintain the buildings and help find funds. The orphanage was a diocesan undertaking, without any Government aid, and the religious congregation administering it inevitably bore the brunt of the accompanying burdens. Over the decades, many fetes and bazaars were organised to raise money essential to the continuance of the institution. Souvenirs suggest the creativity put into such events. These include a badge for the 1920 fete; a holy



*St Vincent de Paul's School, Goodwood Orphanage, 1922*



*Goodwood Orphanage the day after its sale to the SA Government, 5th June, 1976*

picture of St Vincent de Paul, patron of the orphanage, for the 1907 'Strawberry Fete', given by 'Aunt Eily' of St Vincent's Club, to 'niece' Susan for 'distinguished service'; a commemorative envelope for the Golden Jubilee fete, 1939, with an injunction – illustrated by a pen drawing – to 'Keep the billy boiling!' At an open day in 1975, one man brought along a prize he had won at a Strawberry Fete in 1923.

In 1890, Goodwood was an outer suburb of Adelaide, on the way towards the foothills. The cottage, 'Holyrood', on a site of thirteen acres, accommodated the sisters but was very cramped. It had been purchased in 1888, largely through a bequest of more than £2,000 from J.F. McBride. The children were housed in temporary buildings. Over the years, the spiralling numbers of children demanded continual expansion and renovation of facilities. The sisters found themselves putting much energy and time into raising money to provide for this growth. Reynold's successor, Archbishop O'Reily, opted for the gradual demolition of the old buildings and the construction of a total new complex. He settled on a Romanesque design, which could be completed in stages.

In compliance with his expressed wish, a Memorial Chapel for Archbishop Reynolds was built in 1898. The dado or frieze on the walls added to the attractiveness of its structure. The sun streaming in through the stained glass windows was to remain a pleasant memory for some of the children over the years.

The chapel was part of the southern wing, which was completed in 1904, giving school and recreation rooms, dormitories, and workroom. There was a wide arcaded verandah on the ground floor, and spacious balconies on the upper floor. The material used was Tapley's Hill bluestone with dressing in double-pressed machine bricks. Sir George Le Hunte, State Governor at the time, visited the establishment in the September of 1904, and was reported to have declared himself 'delighted'.<sup>82</sup> An anonymous donation of £500 enabled a laundry to be added in 1905.

Archbishop O'Reily's published report on the Catholic Charities of South Australia, in 1911, stated that there were then ninety-one 'inmates', the total number since 1890 being 892. There were six sisters on the staff. O'Reily paid tribute to non-Catholic generosity, which had helped establish and maintain the home. The institution was open to inspection by visitors, and the quality of care was evident. The health records were gratifying, 'the most scrupulously tender care' being taken of the ailing, the archbishop declared. During an outbreak of scarlet fever, for instance, ninety-two orphans were attacked but not one died. This was a tribute, he said, to the medical and nursing skill, and to the devotion of the sisters, who gave their time and care untiringly night and day.

The central or western wing, which included a bell tower, was opened in mid-1916. This central portion incorporated the sisters' convent, fronting

Goodwood Road, with the rear bedrooms giving a view of the hills. Apart from the sisters on the orphanage staff, there were also the sisters who taught at the parochial school nearby. These latter had been travelling from Angas Street each day, but now they could form part of the convent community at the orphanage. On the ground floor of the central wing was also the kitchen, office, and a large sewing room.

In 1920, Mother Columba McMahon was in charge of Goodwood, and finding it difficult to make ends meet. Reverend Mother Magdalene Carroll deemed it necessary to write to Archbishop Spence asking for a cheque of £300. 'There are now 126 little mouths to be filled', she wrote, and added: 'That will be sufficient until Your Grace returns from Europe'. She also remarked, however: 'It is just possible that we shall be asking for more room in a year or so.'

In mid-1925, part of the planned northern wing was opened, with toothed stonework showing where the next section was meant to be erected in the future. This wing was never completed. The construction, as it now was, formed two and one half sides of a large and pleasant quadrangle. In the northern wing, there were dormitories on the second floor, and a dining room on the ground. There were other features designed to give grace, strength, and security to the building. These included arched colonnades with pillars, verandahs, balconies, and sleep-out, and the fireproofing of stairs. The balance and elegance of the design of the building could be more fully appreciated from the far side of Goodwood Road.

The total cost of the north wing was over £7,000. By 1920, Mother Cecilia Cunningham's family legacy had become available to the Mercy community at Angas Street. From this legacy, the sisters provided £1000 for the Goodwood additions, as well as £500 for the personal care of the children.<sup>83</sup> This was, as Monsignor Hourigan pointed out at the opening of the wing, in addition to 'sacrificing their lives to the care and welfare of the children'.<sup>84</sup>

The relatively happy atmosphere established by Mother Antonia McKay had continued at Goodwood under superiors such as Mothers Claver Kenny, Cecilia Cunningham, and Columba McMahon. In 1926, when the latter became superior, there were eight sisters at the orphanage, seventy-two girls and sixty boys.<sup>85</sup> A tradition of voluntary services had already been formed, and names such as Gunson (medical and legal), O'Connell (medical), Hamilton (oculist), Eskell (dentist), and Harris (chemist) were associated with generosity towards the home. In Parliament, Mr T. Ryan – a non-Catholic – frequently raised the question of Government aid for the upkeep of the children, advocating ten shillings per child.

In 1941-2, Archbishop Beovich decided to rationalize the management of the Adelaide Catholic orphanages. All the girls from Largs Bay orphanage, under the Sisters of St Josephite, went to Goodwood and the Goodwood boys

went to Largs Bay. Senior boys went to Boys' Town at Brooklyn Park, a newly established institution. The segregation of the sexes continued until the late 1960s. So, from the beginning of the 1940s through to the late 1960s, Goodwood orphanage served girls only.

Mother Columba remained in charge until 1944. Past pupils of Goodwood during her period, revisiting the home in later life, recalled very happy memories of Columba and of the home. Some talked of finding love, kindness, and happiness. Others spoke of appreciating the good work done for them whilst they were there, including being taught a responsible attitude to life. The message was somewhat mixed, nevertheless. It was a hard existence, they admitted, but in those days there was not much money around anywhere. The times were tough for many people. 'Some of the nuns were lovely – really dedicated, dear ladies like Mother Columba', one woman stated. 'Others patently didn't like kids'. 'Life was stark', claimed another, 'but not sadistic'. There was an accent on performing well in school and obeying the rules. If you did that within reason, it was an uneventful life. Even a sister such as Sister M. Dorothea O'Sullivan, a very strict lady who often used the cane, could nevertheless be a favourite with some of the children, especially the boys who were not put off by her severity. On the whole, many of the children had found life in the orphanage good, and the people who looked after them wonderful.<sup>86</sup>

Sister M. Francis Coady and Sister Martha Keane were two other sisters from this period who were also named with affection.<sup>87</sup> Sister Martha looked after the laundry. She and her sewing ladies made special Sunday dresses for the girls, as well as their school clothes. Sister Francis cared for one half of over one hundred girls at this time, besides teaching them in the school within the orphanage. It was just after the depression years and many of the children were brought into the home in a sorry state. Much had to be done to provide for the children and give them as happy a life as possible. In later life, the years with Sisters Martha, Francis, and Columba were remembered as 'really good times!'<sup>88</sup>

Mother Columba was followed by Mother Michael Kain, who was in charge from 1945 to 1950. In July, 1947, Archbishop Beovich visited the home and commented on the excellent work Mother Michael was doing. With great energy and intensity of focus, she had transformed the building, and made much needed improvements.<sup>89</sup>

Columba had used the finances of the institution cautiously. Michael was quick to spend Columba's carefully conserved monies and bring the buildings up to date. She spent as freely as she could, updated the living and working areas, and strove energetically to provide the children with whatever they needed. Her nephew, Anthony, could recall how she had 'conned' their rocking horse out of his family.

Mother Michael was an assertive personality and a strict disciplinarian. She enjoyed supporting the boys in competitive sports, and celebrated Sunday afternoon matches with high teas. She was tough on the boys, but they liked her. The girls found her too blunt. Some of the sisters on the staff felt that they were unduly limited in their freedom to relate to the children on a personal basis.

It was in the last year of Mother Michael's term of office that the most contradictory period of the orphanage's history began, with the arrival of child migrants from England. The social disruption caused by the economic depression of the 1930s, followed by years of war, meant that the late 1940s were traumatic years for most people in Britain. Many children, having lost or being apparently abandoned by their parents, became a charge on the state. The prospects for their future, in the grim socio-economic conditions of Britain, seemed very dim.

The British Government had already devised a policy, with the co-operation of some of its former colonies/dominions, whereby children in the care of the State were received as immigrants into the co-operating country. Australia was one such country. Government-assisted migration of unaccompanied children had begun into Australia as early as 1921.<sup>90</sup> It had been suspended in 1940, but was resumed in 1947. About 1500 child migrants came to Australia before World War II. Another 2500 were sent out, after the war, about half of these going to Catholic institutions throughout Australia.

While earlier British social policy had aimed to rid the mother country of illegitimate, abandoned, delinquent, or physically or mentally handicapped children by sending them to the colonies, the intention of the twentieth century scheme seems to have been more commendable. In the new land of opportunity, it was hoped, these children would find prospects of a life better than that obtainable in Britain. For those, especially, who were illegitimate in birth, little record of their past was preserved, in an attempt to protect them from the negative social consequences prevailing at that period. Legally, the British Children Protection Acts required concealing the child's origins. The relevant church archives contained little more than their dates of birth and of First Communion and of their arrival in Australia. Sometimes the parents' names were given.

With the goal of improving the children's prospects, many voluntary agencies joined in the scheme to transfer children from the homes and orphanages in the United Kingdom to similar institutions in Australia and elsewhere. The children were indentured to the receiving institution for their care, education, and maintenance, until the age of sixteen. The Australian Government encouraged the scheme, as part of its general drive to augment the population of the country. Both governments involved, British and Australia, contributed relatively little towards the maintenance of

the children. The standard of living in orphanages and similar institutions, until the 1960s, was considered satisfactory if it approximated that of ordinary working class people of the time.

Goodwood received an intake of about one hundred assisted child migrants, seemingly in two groups, in 1949. Mother Michael had improved the material conditions of the home, as much as she could, in preparation for the influx. Governor and Lady Norrie had visited Goodwood and had commented on the excellent behaviour and good health of the children. Food was plentiful if plain, with vegetables and fruit from their own garden, eggs from their own hens and milk from their own cows. Beautiful flowers grew in the front gardens. Regular bathings with common velvet soap promoted healthy skins and hair. Dr Kenihan across the road was always on call for a sick child.

Outings and other entertainments were provided, often through the goodwill of local people and clubs. Archbishop Beovich's car was available to help transport sisters and children to picnics in the hills. One movie operator came regularly to show pictures, over a period of several decades. Sunday afternoon concerts were given by players from the Tivoli or the Theatre Royal or by individual performers. Wonderful displays of tap dancing in black shiny shoes with big bows, by girls with curly hair, led to a rage among the orphanage girls. There were other items with dogs and rope tricks. Most exciting were the annual fetes, with tents and strawberry icecream. There were also the times for playing on the swings and the see-saws, and going on occasional walks. The boys and girls were always strictly segregated, but on Saturday afternoons, the girls could watch the boys play football. Generous families would take children out for the weekends or holidays periods. The visits were not always a success story, but some families formed a happy and lasting relationship with children who came to them regularly.

Mother Thomas, who succeeded Mother Michael as superior, in 1951, had a softer personality. She was understanding of personal weaknesses and was easily approached. Several former past children, in Mother Thomas's time, remembered more good times than bad, with many happy memories.<sup>91</sup> They could recall her sitting on the bed of a small sick or lonely child and giving them a warm hug. One, in particular, recollected Thomas's ministrations when she had an appendix attack, and how three of the nuns visited her in the hospital. Another stated that the greatest comfort in the whole of the time she was there was the night Mother Thomas had to tell her her mother had died – 'because she had a way to do it'. To another, 'she was a darling to me, Mother Thomas was – she was very good to me, Mother was'.

Sister M. Thomas (Rose) Casey is an interesting figure in Mercy history. Educated at Parkside convent school, she had been taught music there by Sister M. Ignatius Cousins, who had encouraged her undeniable talent.

Later, as a working teenager, she had formed the 'Rose Casey Jazz Band', which played for dances and went on concert tours for about ten years. At the age of twenty-six, Rose had entered the Convent of Mercy, and continued to enjoy playing the piano till a few months before her death, aged eighty-six.

As a sister, Thomas was on the staff of the Orphanage for twenty-two years. After that, she was founding superior of Mercedes community, Springfield, and then in charge of Angas Street Convent. Her love of and expertise in popular music proved helpful in those roles. She particularly loved dance music and, as superior of Mercedes community, led singsongs around the piano in a way that helped draw the sisters together in a very difficult pioneering situation. At Angas Street convent, she would play dance music for the novices. One sister who learnt music from a lay woman, Audrey Raymond, a great friend of Mother Thomas, remembers Thomas visiting during her lessons and the two older women dancing together around the music room to tunes such as 'Red red robin ...'

At Mercedes, she was a strict superior, following a traditional model of authority in a period when that model was being questioned. Her innate kindness prevailed; boarders and music pupils from her days there still talk about her lovingly. But she was something of a benevolent despot, and some personalities felt 'smothered'. At Angas Street, in particular, she found it hard to adjust to some of the changes happening then, and did not always understand the younger women and their needs and desires. As a member of the governing council, she was frequently caught between the demands of her two roles and the personalities involved.

Subsequently returning to Goodwood, she was very supportive of the sisters there in the efforts to improve the lot of their charges. Her last years were spent joyfully participating in the Charismatic Spiritual Renewal of the 1970s, and in the beginning years of the Hesus Christian community. In these latter years, besides sharing her gift of music, she was for many in that community a true 'wisdom figure', and 'loved many wounded people into life'.<sup>92</sup> Sister Rose Casey died on 30th August, 1987, the year after the death of Sister Martha Keane. These two had had a deep bond of love and friendship for over fifty years, spending many of them at Goodwood. At her funeral, several former Goodwood girls took part. Mother Thomas was, they said, the only mother they ever knew.<sup>93</sup>

Other sisters were also good to the orphanage children. Sister Martha had continued to be a refuge for some. 'Sister Owen (Joan) Farrell who became my carer and teacher in school', wrote one woman, 'was a gentle and loving nun who loved her charges and we adored her in return. [She gave us] two years of quality care'.<sup>94</sup> Mother Barbara (McQuillan), as reverend mother, was 'kind and caring ... and though we worked very hard, at least we were

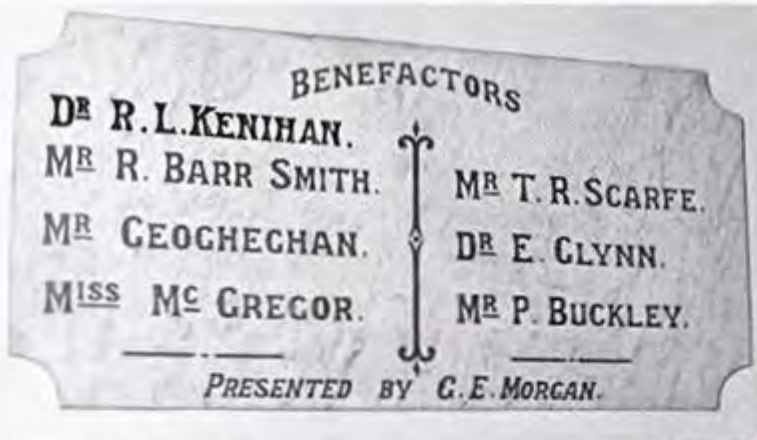
fairly treated'. Sister Paschal (Higgins) was 'lovely' when she put her arms around a troubled teenager as she counselled her.

For some past pupils, the memory was often of strict discipline. When Sister Clare Flynn was transferred from Mount Gambier, where she had been very happy as an extremely successful teacher and boarding schoolmistress, she found it necessary at Goodwood to make precise rules for the fifty older girls in her care. This did not prevent her also caring for her charges, some of whom declared that Clare was 'always there to help the hurt'.<sup>95</sup> Many a night she would not go to bed herself, until every girl was in bed. Since some of the older girls – rebelling against their situation – would pretend to run away, Clare kept often a long and anxious vigil.<sup>96</sup> Until her arrival, the girls did not possess their own clothes. Clare battled hard to change that, so that each girl could have her own individual things.<sup>97</sup> She also taught, or had taught, activities such as cooking, sewing, knitting, the recorder, and dancing. She procured real knitting needles and wool instead of the nails or meat skewers some of the girls had been using previously. One knitter remembered knitting by the street lights in the darkened dormitory, just to please Sister Clare by finishing a garment in record time. Some of Clare's former pupils from Mount Gambier would come and give occasional voluntary help at the home.

There were too many children with problems, however, to give the attention that was needed by each individual. The sisters felt they were always working against time. They did train the children to help one another, which meant that significant relationships were formed among the children themselves rather than with the sisters. Most past pupils graduated with positive memories on the whole, and expressed gratitude. Pupils from all eras kept in touch. But the older ones, especially, talked about being regimented. Segregation of siblings was severe. Privacy was impossible. Modesty was somewhat antiquated for the era.

The children were, in their unfortunate circumstances, for whatever cause, emotionally very vulnerable. There was, in fact, a contradictory situation. A great dependency was demanded within the home and school, and a naivete with respect to the outside world. Yet the orphanage provided refuge from a sometimes horrible family life. And the sisters frequently inculcated in their young charges the need to be independent, to 'stick up for oneself'.<sup>98</sup>

The emotional condition of the British girls who were placed in Goodwood was probably fairly typical of the whole migrant contingent. Many were older girls, aged fourteen or fifteen. Some of these terrified the staff on occasion. They had brought with them memories of sad experiences, a great sense of insecurity, a taste of freedom and excitement from the long boat journey, and a somewhat rude awakening into the reality of life in another institution in a strange land. The sisters did their best to welcome the newcomers, and to coax the Australian children into doing so, also.



*Memorial above front entrance, inside orphanage*

*Sr M. Helena  
McComish with  
girls from the  
orphanage*



*Mother M. Columba  
McMahon (R), superior,  
with Mother Cecilia  
Cunningham, in front  
of orphanage*



*Mother M. Michael Kain, superior of orphanage*

Nevertheless, Goodwood was pushed to its limits by the sudden increase in its population. Differences in nationality and past experience made for an explosive atmosphere, at times. The situation was not always as electric as on the night of the arrival of one group of some fifty girls, when a near-riot broke out. But the possibility of a disturbance – or even a fist fight between the English and the Australian girls – was never far away. To anxious staff, their own physical safety or that of the children seemed more than once at risk. Aboriginal children, especially, were subjected to racist remarks from some of the newcomers.<sup>99</sup>

For the children in general, and to a lesser degree the sisters, it was a closed environment. There was little preparation for life outside the orphanage. Some of the children felt a stigma because of their family situations and a consequent burden of guilt that they carried into their adult lives. Many of the children were hungry for the explicit affection and attention which could promote a sense of identity and self-worth. Those who were older were much more obviously resentful than the smaller children, whom sisters such as Sister Owen (Joan) Farrell grew to love, and whose love was reciprocated. The British children, in particular, had experienced much disturbance in their short lives, and required special help. At this stage in the development of social welfare, there was almost no chance of acquiring that.

The numbers of children to be cared for were very large, and the span of their ages considerable. The carers were relatively very few, and had to work a double shift. They cared for the children in the dormitory and elsewhere, and taught them during the day. This practice continued until the early 1970s. The working day of these sisters was, thus, very long and very demanding. They were on duty seven days a week. For most, it was a traumatic experience. At this period, there was inadequate, if any, psychological training or assistance provided to the staff. A discipline that could border on harshness was frequently the only means available to some carers to bring about order and apparent peace.

The undoubted suffering experienced by many of the children was compounded by the atmosphere of the large institution. In Goodwood, an establishment fairly typical of its era, their individuality was often disregarded in favour of the smooth running of the system. What the home could do – and did do, at least for some among its children, Australian or English<sup>100</sup> – was provide a security that was absent for them elsewhere. Life outside of the orphanage could be disastrous. For some, Goodwood orphanage was a refuge from real abuse of many kinds. For some, it kept their family together. For all, they could receive some assurance when they were sick or worried. There they could learn about love and respect and tolerance and responsibility. In one woman's words, the nuns gave them something to grip onto in life. They were encouraged to believe in what they

were doing and to stand up and fight for it. They were also given opportunities to learn skills which stood them in good stead.

From the orphanage, these pupils had – within the limits of their capabilities and past school experience – received the fundamentals of a good, if basic, education. Most continued up to Year 8 which, up to and during the 1950s, was the average amount of schooling for girls. In the wider society, girls rarely went beyond Intermediate, if that, and the majority of those who remained until then went into the commercial or home economic streams. From the 1950s on, but especially during the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of Goodwood girls continued their education at secondary schools. In her first year of office as superior, Mother Francis Coady visited, with Sister M. Aloysius (Patricia) Costello, several of the Catholic girls' colleges. Attempting to avoid a ghetto-type situation in any one school, they sought entry from each college for a few of the older girls. Interest from shares held by the sisters, on behalf of Goodwood, was put towards such secondary education.

Perhaps the ambiguity of the situation is best crystallised in the following dialogue between some women reminiscing over their time at Goodwood.

... 'No, but we're the best you've got', the nuns would say when we would say, 'You can't do that to me – You're not my mother'. You don't realise until you're grown up.

... By heck, we must have given those nuns hell, but they always came through with smiling faces, understanding, it doesn't matter what time of the day ... No matter how naughty you were, you could always go to one of the nuns and they had a kind word for you.

... That's true.

... It was a very hard and strict upbringing but it was not until you've grown up and have a family of your own that you realise how much love there was and patience. There were 100 or 150 girls and only a few nuns to look after them.

... Nothing bad ever happened to me. 'Bad times' were 'funny bad times'.

... I've never been ashamed to tell anyone that I came from Goodwood Orphanage and never will be.

... I'm taking a course in further education ... I got honours in Maths. (giggling).<sup>101</sup>

Some of the more painful memories held by past pupils surfaced into public attention in the early 1990s through the publication of a book, *Lost Children of the Empire*, and a number of radio and television programmes subsequently. Serious allegations were made against the voluntary agencies which took the children from Britain. The allegations later widened to include the treatment of Australian-born children. Goodwood Orphanage was named in more than one of the media programmes. A couple of these programmes

specifically stated that there were no accusations of sexual abuse at Goodwood, but yet managed to imply that there had been, while also claiming that there were alleged experiences of physical and psychological mistreatment. Several past pupils rushed to the defence of the sisters.<sup>102</sup> The Independent Complaints Review Panel of the ABC upheld the complaint of the sisters against the indirect implication of sexual abuse, and an apology was made publicly by the ABC.

There remained the charge of physical and psychological abuse. At a distance of several decades, and in a changed public consciousness, it is hard to find the exact balance of truth and of justice in circumstances such as prevailed at Goodwood. Moderate corporal punishment was considered normal in many families and schools of this era and later. Parents, or persons in place of parents, were legally permitted to use reasonable force towards a child, pupil, or apprentice in their care, by way of correction.<sup>103</sup> Physical chastisement and punishment through humiliation or deprivation were relatively commonplace right up until the 1950s, at least. 'If the nuns were sometimes cruel, the people in general were cruel'.<sup>104</sup> There was a certain adherence to the philosophy that life was not made to be easy, this is how life is, and how it is going to be.

While the overall Goodwood institutional ethos remained almost unchanged until the late 1960s, the varying personalities involved, among both staff and children, made for varying specific situations. Although many sisters were appreciated for many kind acts, the system did not make for a friendly environment. Smaller numbers were essential, if there were to be more truly individual care.

An awareness of individual differences was growing in the educational world, and child care policy and practice was changing greatly. Government provision of resources increased significantly after the 1960s. It was not, however, really until the 1980s that the rights of children, *per se*, began to permeate public awareness. Until the second wave of feminism had gathered strength, women and children had few legal rights. Women and children were basically the property of the family or the institution to which they belonged.

Then, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, widespread attention began to be paid to the implications of abuse – whether sexual, physical, or psychological – by those in positions of trust over others. People and organisations holding offices of public trust began increasingly to be held accountable for the way in which they handled possible breaches of trust. The media seemed to be assuming the role of scrutiniser of public morals in this, as in other areas.

Previous child care philosophy had emphasised the desirability of removing abandoned or neglected children from their former unfortunate environment, lest they become useless and even criminal citizens. In an insti-

tution such as an orphanage, it was believed, they would learn habits of honesty, self-control, industry, and regularity. Children were children, and under the guidance and control of the adults. As in most homes, they were expected to help with the routine domestic work, and older children with the care of the younger. In a Catholic orphanage such as Goodwood, the staff also considered it their duty to give those in their care a solid grounding in Catholic belief and practice.

In the 1960s, conditions at Goodwood did gradually begin to ease for both children and sisters, even if not rapidly enough. In the later years of the 1960s and the early 1970s, the atmosphere at Goodwood became more personalised and more humane. Numbers were dropping, through changing social attitudes and welfare practices. By 1968, there were sixty girls, ninety per cent of these from 'broken homes'. In mid-1970, there were fifty-two children accommodated, but from that time the numbers gradually dropped. In 1975, there were only about twenty children in residence. Frightened children were, more uniformly now, given 'the warmth and reassurance of love'.<sup>105</sup>

Conditions were still not ideal. The school at the orphanage had been closed and the children now attended St Thomas' parish school. However, the sisters caring for the orphanage children had continued to teach in the school. It was not until 1970 that staff were appointed as full-time carers for the children.

In the late 1960s, some sisters began to receive some specialized training in child care. Joan Gillen and Carmel Christie were the first, but – given their double shift of work – they found they had little time to implement what they were being taught. However, with changing social consciousness, overall conditions, though still within the institutional framework, were beginning to improve considerably.

Sister M. Aloysius (Patricia) Costello was in charge from 1967 to 1970, and is remembered, with fondness, as serving beyond the call of duty. Patricia introduced dances for the bigger girls, with partners coming from Catholic colleges for boys. Boy friends were allowed to visit, under supervision. Older girls were given private rooms, as well as a recreation room.<sup>106</sup> At this time, also, The Lions Club put in a swimming pool. Television sets were introduced into the dormitories and in the separate room for the older girls. All had the option of going to secondary school. If the courses offered at Catholic schools were not suitable for the less academically inclined girls, they went to local high schools offering alternative courses. Those who opted not to go to secondary school were helped to get employment.

In 1971, under the administration of Goodwood by Sister Carmel Christie, the large dormitory living was abolished. More emphasis was being placed in social welfare on the family unit. So, from 1971, boys up to eleven years of

*Brother Phil Costello, 'old boy'  
of the orphanage, favourite of  
M.M. Michael Kain, and  
cousin of Srs Pauline and  
Patricia Costello*



*Mother M. Thomas (Rose) Casey and 'old girls' of the orphanage*



*Srs Lucy McConachie (L.) and Josephine Weatherald with children from cottage home, Westbourne Park, 1976*



*Sr Carmel Christie and children from cottage home, Royston Park, 1978*

age, were again taken at Goodwood, in order not to break up a particular family unit. Within the old buildings, the children were housed in group quarters, being divided into small groups of about nine or ten. Each small group was in the care of a sister who was the 'House Mother'.

In spite of these improvements, the institutional character and the large size of the buildings at Goodwood continued to militate against the development of a homely atmosphere. So, in 1975, the children were moved into cottages off the campus. Already, in 1972, Patricia Costello – anxious about the girls who had no home when they left the orphanage – had opened and managed a hostel for them at Dulwich. One of the children's cottages was staffed by a married couple, but sisters continued to staff the other three cottages until the early 1980s, when the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau decided that it would be preferable to employ all lay men and women.<sup>107</sup>

A couple of decades later, reflecting on her period of eleven years at Goodwood, her ten years in a cottage at Royston Park, and her subsequent years of fostering boys in a suburban house, Sister Carmel Christie gave thanks for the privilege that had been hers of sharing in looking after other people's children when those parents were unable to do so. Times had often been tough, she mused, but there were beautiful times that made up for those. These included occasions such as the reunion of about thirty girls who had been at Goodwood in the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, gathering after many years with a number of the sisters and Father Terry Holland, who had been chaplain. Carmel's dissatisfaction with her work at Goodwood, because of overload of work, was assuaged, somewhat, as she heard the women speaking about all the good times at the orphanage. Some of them were saying that they were the best years of their life. None of them were bitter.

There were also the occasions when she made and decorated the wedding cakes of some of the girls, or was asked to give another away at her marriage ceremony, or was told by another that she had made her wedding day just by being there. She remembered the women who had been present at Sister Patricia Costello's Requiem Mass and Funeral in 1990, and again sensed the strong bond among them. They had, she felt, a spirit that had always given them a strong sense of security and continuity in their lives.<sup>108</sup>

With the transfer of the children to a cottage system, the establishment at Goodwood was closed in 1975. The following year, the site and buildings were sold to the State Education Department, which used it as a teacher and conference centre. At the time of its closure, Archbishop James Gleeson claimed: 'The Sisters created a spirit of loving care. It was greatly appreciated and it endeared St Vincent's to the Catholic people of South Australia'. Goodwood was, the Archbishop continued, together with St Joseph's Orphanage at Largs Bay, really a charitable trust, developed and maintained basically by the constant, loving and self-sacrificing personal work of the

Religious Sisters involved, by their Congregations and well-wishers, by many legacies over the years, and, since the time of Archbishop Beovich's coming to Adelaide, by the Diocesan Charities Appeal.

In consideration of this input by the Sisters of Mercy, both personally and financially, and mindful of their needs for future services to the Adelaide church and community, one third of the proceeds of the sale of the property was allocated to them.<sup>109</sup>

Comments in the Visitors' Book from former residents at Goodwood, at an open day prior to its closure in 1975, reveal a mix of positives and negatives, but on the whole positive. One comment sums it up – 'Some pleasant memories, some not'. Other comments enlarge this view – 'Very good, sometimes bad, but always a home.' 'Hard work, hard rules, good and bad times, good memories are the best.' Several other remarks expressed sadness at the closing of the 'only home I ever knew'. In a letter to the local Messenger Press in 1989, one woman, who was at the home between 1946 and 1957, enumerated all the benefits of Goodwood orphanage for the children in its care. She concluded that the happy times far outweighed the bad times.<sup>110</sup>

The same ultimately positive if mixed picture was presented in the summing up, by the co-ordinator, of an oral history project executed by the State Library. There were interviews with sixteen people formerly associated with the orphanage between 1922 and 1975. The summary went thus:

While most have grievances about specific aspects, their responses are generally positive. Most, from the oldest to the youngest, express gratitude to the Sisters for providing them with a home and guidance in their youth, and many from all eras describe how they maintained contact with the Orphanage after they left.

For the older ones in particular, their regimented childhoods inhibited personal development, but only two spoke of feelings of worthlessness or a sense of stigma affecting their later lives. For the younger, the responsibilities of day-to-day routines helped them become self-reliant and strong. Altogether, there was a conflict between dependency and independence, between an over-reliance on authority and an inner sense of independence. 'Life was so regimented we didn't have to think for ourselves' sat side by side with 'Part of me was very independent on account of the nuns encouraged us to look after ourselves'.<sup>111</sup>

## THE QUESTION OF DISCIPLINE

Much of the ambiguity attached to life in such institutions as boarding schools and orphanages seems to devolve from questions of law and order and the discipline needed to maintain a well-regulated environment. If the atmosphere of the Angas Street boarding school, for example, is examined,

one finds the same kind of mixed messages and ambiguity towards the teachers as has been evidenced at Goodwood.

Ursula Cock, a boarder in an early era at Convent of Mercy, Angus Street, found the discipline very difficult there. She wrote:

I found the discipline of the boarding school very difficult; there was a bell for everything from 6.30 a.m. till bedtime and I had never heard of keeping silence. We had silence for breakfast unless it was a girl's birthday. There was deep silence from after night prayers until after breakfast next morning. Some of us believed that it was a mortal sin if we broke it. One of the nuns, who had charge of the boarders, used to come in at breakfast and ask all the girls who had spoken to stand up. If there were many she would give us silence at dinner. As children we were very suppressed and I think the fact has a lot to do with the present upsurge of so-called permissiveness. Children are individuals, sensitive and impressionable and they also have free-will and dignity which should be respected by adults. They also have long memories; there were events that happened to me when I was very young, some very hurtful, which have affected me all my life.<sup>112</sup>

Yet, Carmel Bourke wrote that the place was 'homely', and other past pupils spoke of the warm and loving atmosphere, and the way in which the nuns loved the children, even more than their parents did.<sup>113</sup> Even Ursula Cock spoke of 'love' between students and teachers, and added:

With few exceptions, they were a marvellous lot of girls in the boarding school, as were those I associated with among the day girls. There was a wonderful spirit of comradeship and loyalty among them.

It may assist in deciphering the real truth behind the contradictory impressions, if one examines the organisational life of the sisters before the changes of the latter twentieth century. There is one aspect of the history of such institutions which is often overlooked. It is the organisational – leading to psychological and, indirectly, physical – violence that may have been experienced by the staff themselves.

A study of the Mercy organisational culture reveals, as in all similar female religious communities of the same period, a system that was itself heavily institutionalised. The inferior status of women within church and society, internalised by the sisters themselves, meant that they tended to accept the injustice and oppression that could result from neglect of the differing needs of the individuals who made up the institution. Many of the sisters, if not most, were to a large extent unconscious of this injustice. The prevailing model of female religious life was highly masculine. This model controlled the consciousness of the members through the control of constitutions and through formation programmes.

A number of factors contributed to the development of this partially oppressive and increasingly dysfunctional system. In 1917, a new Code of Canon Law was issued by the Catholic church, summing up practices considered valid. The new code contained several regulations relating to religious life communities. Its over-all effect was to increase the already prevailing uniformity, so that religious life became even more rigid.

It also reinforced the influence of a particular and long-standing spirituality of suffering with a distorted emphasis on perfection and, in some respects, a glorification of suffering for its own sake rather than for its transformative power. Religious life could be seen predominantly as a life of discipline, self-sacrifice, denial of the body and its pleasures, with a monastic type of withdrawal from the world and its temptations. Concentration on the task at hand, a life of sheer hard toil, order, and steady activity, was the norm. One gave, in the words of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, 'without counting the cost'. Devotion to the suffering Christ and his sorrowing mother could help one through the difficulties but could also assume overtones of sentimentality and even masochism. The harder life was, the more workaholic some addictive personalities could become. Rewards would be, not so much in this life – though the 'hundredfold' was promised even in it – as in eternal life after death.

Much of this ethic was imbibed by the sisters who, in turn, imparted it to the children. 'The devil made work for idle hands' was a well accepted adage. A certain kind of religious life ideal was transferred, in numerous ways, to the daily life of the children in their institutions. The ideal Sister of Mercy was humble, but she was also one of the virtuous, the 'worthy helper' of those less fortunate than herself. At institutions such as Goodwood, children were there to be rescued from poverty and social degradation. There they could be trained and educated for their own social – and, above all, spiritual – well-being, as also that of society and church.

The Mercy ethos of compassion for those who are unfortunate and needy could readily be fitted into this undue emphasis on work, with its lack of a sense of holistic living. The spiritual and corporal works of mercy were the basis upon which the Mercy Institute was founded. The problem lay in the imbalance which could develop. Sisters, in an attempt to respond to the multiplying needs presented to them, tended to overextend themselves.

It was, in many ways, a system that internally functioned increasingly poorly, especially during the second and third quarters of the twentieth century. In addition, the economic depression years of the 1920s and the 1930s, the six long years of World War II, and the immediate post-war years of dislocation brought about a multiplicity of problems for social welfare institutions such as Goodwood.

The accelerated growth of population in Australia through the immigration of the 1950s and later, with a high percentage of non-English speaking

Catholics from Europe, created more difficulties. New professional demands on schools and their teachers, as well as inflated numbers of Catholic school children, stretched the resources of the Mercy Congregation to its limits. The focus on middle-class and parochial education, which had sharpened over the years, and the growth in the number of schools being served, left little extra energy to devote to Goodwood.

In addition, the Mercy culture, itself, was a strong or 'thick' culture, demanding a high degree of commitment from its members.<sup>114</sup> Sociologically, strong cultures are slow to perceive the need for change, and if perceived, slow to make the necessary changes. Thus, as the century progressed, an appreciable degree of reduced flexibility had set in.

Religious life was surviving – for the moment – by becoming, in several respects, totally institutional. There was a lack of outside contact, a stress on control, a hierarchical structure of authority, and a certain formality within community which led to impersonality and, for some, loneliness. As numbers increased, the women staffing schools and orphanage could feel themselves treated as an object to fill a slot. Support systems to live a healthy, human life were minimal.

Individual sisters, as much as individual children, could be caught in the system. In places such as orphanages there was – it seemed almost inevitably – some institutionalised violence, not just from carers towards the children, but even from the children themselves – both towards younger children and towards the staff. Sisters seeing the violence could feel themselves powerless to influence.

One respondent to the media reports of the 1990s expressed it in terms of the even wider structural injustice that existed in society and that had led to the need for such institutions as large orphanages. 'My sympathy goes out to both [accusers and accused] – victims of a system. It is a pity it is not the system being called to account rather than individuals and groups.'

Yet, despite all the negativity that was clearly present, for both women and children, many of the latter within Goodwood Orphanage were rescued by it from what was a potentially destructive life situation, and were 'grateful that the Sisters provided an alternative'. And many sisters grew to a fuller humanity and a deeper spirituality in working through their own situation in it all. So that, notwithstanding all the defects, the editor of the journal, *SA Catholic*, seems to have made a valid comment when he wrote that the Sisters of Mercy were, in fact, 'at the cutting edge of looking after kids whom nobody else would look after'.

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1. Robert J. Scrimgeour, *Some Scots were here, A History of the Presbyterian Church in South Australia* (copy of relevant section in MASA).

2. Another story is that Sisters Carmel Bourke and Pauline Costello also threw medals over a fence, only to find out later that it was into Waite Agricultural Research Institute.
3. Extensions were by Baulderstone.
4. The property was transferred to Millstone Ltd. in January, 1953, and then to Sisters of Mercy (Adelaide) Inc. in February, 1953. It was mortgaged to MLC in 1954 and in 1962 to build extensions. The mortgages were transferred to the Commonwealth Savings Bank of Australia in 1966, for further extensions.
5. Extensions included a dining room to accommodate 100 boarders, at the rear of the main building; a classroom block; and the stables enlarged to give recreation room, music rooms, tuck shop, book shop and library.
6. It is interesting that surnames were used, though at that time sisters were not commonly called by these. A visiting bank manager once asked a child for Sister McBride, to be told that there wasn't such a one.
7. Sister Catherine Ahern, interview with Sister Mary Symonds 1990, MASA, 616/27.
8. Ibid.
9. MASA, 330/1.
10. MASA, 330/1.
11. Interview, MASA, 616/27.
12. Marina Magasdi, *Mercedes College 1954-1994*, Foundations Students' Reunion booklet.
13. Interview, MASA, 616/27.
14. Sister Gabrielle Travers, who was on the staff from 1959 to 1962, interview by Mary Symonds, MASA, 616/27.
15. Interview by 'school assessed' English students, Major Project 1985, MASA, 616/24.
16. Interview, MASA, 616/27.
17. Ibid.
18. See Chapter Three, section on SAC, action taken after Adelaide Chapter, 1972.
19. MASA, 616/22.
20. Interview, MASA, 616/24.
21. Novices lived there for a while.
22. Interview by Mary Symonds, MASA, 616/27.
23. Brochure, Mercedes College.
24. *The Cyclopaedia of South Australia*, Vol.1, 1907.
25. Elizabeth Warburton, *The Paddocks Beneath. History of Burnside from the Beginning*, City of Burnside, 1981, 45-48. See also 'Ferguson Conservation Park Management Plan', Department of Environment and Planning, 1984.
26. Juniorate Annual, 1950, MASA, 314/14.
27. Visitation Book, 1956, MASA, 314/15.
28. Sr Gemma Johnson, who had been teacher to the girls in the Juniorate and then assistant novice mistress and then novice mistress in Angus Street, returned to Erindale in charge of junior professed sisters for some time.
29. Mother Cecily Lynch, MASA, 314/1.
30. Sisters with temporary vows. There can be confusion about the term Juniors, which was also used – inaccurately according to Canon Law – for the pre-entry aspirants (i.e. pre-postulants).
31. Teacher trainees were also sent there for a few years, to the Mercy College at Ascot Vale.
32. Interview with *The Southern Cross*, April, 1975. Date of death is 1.11.1979. MASA, 314/6.
33. Visitation Book, 1953, MASA, 314/15.
34. For further details, see Chapter Seven.
35. Sister M. Ignatius Clare Conlon used to be teased for being the Young Street ghost – she walked in her sleep. The house has since been demolished.
36. Or May.
37. Other past pupils who joined from later years included Stephanie Cashel, Ruth Egar, Carmel Christie, Patricia Sims.
38. Begun August 1921, foundation stone laid 15th November, 1921.
39. Originated by Sr M. Bernard Ryder.

40. One girl obtained a pass at Intermediate level in English, French, Latin, Geography, and Bookkeeping, 1939 Scrapbook, MASA, 626/32. The account for 1940 gives passes for Henley Beach but none for Parkside.
41. Rosemary was principal from 1980 to 1984.
42. Principal from 1970 to 1979.
43. My sources do not say why the Mercy foundation was not made, Source re Josephites is diocesan archivist and historian Marie Foale, RSJ.
44. *Golden Wattle*, 1917.
45. MASA, 300/20.
46. Archivist notes from Adelaide Archdiocese 1880-1947, p.17, MASA 171/3.
47. MASA 150/30.
48. Because of the small number at Matriculation level, Siena came to an agreement with the de la Salle College, St Michael's, at Henley Beach, that matriculation girls attend there. Most girls completing primary school at Henley Beach had attended Siena since 1971, and some of them would have been among the girls who went to St Michael's.
49. Trudy Keur later became principal. Sister Margaret Edwards also taught at Siena, 1985-9.
50. See later in chapter.
51. Brian P. Martin, Parish Finance Committee.
52. The de la Salle Brothers had a boys' college in the parish.
53. See Chapter Seven.
54. In some of the older sources, spelt 'Harbour'.
55. Marie Foale, RSJ.
56. In 1948, Intermediate results included four students from Victor Harbor.
57. Niece of Sisters Ruth and Marita Mullins.
58. *Riverton – Heart of the Gilbert Valley*, 1965.
59. Bet Smith, MASA.
60. Fr John Honner, previous parish priest of Riverton, to School Board, 20.8.1969, in a letter expressing his amazement and distress that the Sisters of Mercy were to be withdrawn.
61. Kath Pierce received all her education at St Aloysius, attended Adelaide Teachers' Training College, was professed 1938. She taught at SAC, Goodwood, and Albert Park as well as Elizabeth. The new building opened in 1996 at St Mary Magdalene's, Elizabeth, was named the Kathleen Pierce Building.
62. Began 1968 with Sisters M. Justin (Judith) Redden – Elizabeth North – and Pia (Claudette) Cusack – Elizabeth South. The Archbishop donated two cars.
63. Some past residents of Elizabeth who joined the Mercy community included Doreen Beckett, Sheila Gibbons, Maryanne Loughry and Mary Symonds. On Easter Monday, 1975, Mary-Anne Duigan made her final commitment to the Mercy Institute in the church of St Ann at Elizabeth East.
64. Statement by sisters at Elizabeth at formal visitation of the convent by the congregational superiors, 1983. They felt unease at their continued living in a now overlarge convent, on account of the depressed conditions in the area.
65. See Chapter Seven.
66. *History of Henley South Church and School* by E.B. O'Loughlin.
67. *SA Catholic*, November, 1995.
68. See Chapter Eight.
69. Bishop Noser had asked Mother Patricia O'Neill for two sisters for the European school, Mother Patricia had said she would send four sisters, so that two could open 'a native school'. Those going thought it was primarily for this purpose.
70. Mother Patricia O'Neill, Mother General of the Union, in several letters to Elizabeth, MASA, 620/24.
71. One source says the sisters left Goroka in 1969 when they transferred the school to the Holy Spirit Sisters, MASA, 620/26.
72. Some of these details from Sister Mary Mildred O'Brien: *Mother Patricia O'Neill*, Melbourne: Sisters of Mercy of the Australian Union, 1976.
73. Monica Marks to 'Sister', 19.12.1990.

74. See Chapter Seven.
75. The Institute began 19th March, 1866.
76. To administrator, Sister Maria Skudder, 27.12.1889, Adelaide Church Archives, quoted in Marie Foale, *The Josephite Story*, Sydney: St Joseph's Generalate, 1989, pp.47,176.
77. Mary MacKillop to O'Reily, 26.6.1906.
78. As claimed by Marie Foale, honours thesis, Chapter Four; this hurt was assuaged, somewhat, by their being given charge of a new Orphanage at Largs Bay, in 1906, originally intended for sickly children.
79. Further to this, Anne McLay, *Women Out of Their Sphere A History of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia*, Perth, Vanguard Press, 1992.
80. Helen O'Sullivan to Sister Patricia Kenny, 4.12.1975, MASA, 315/15.
81. Mary MacKillop in Paul Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian, Mary MacKillop*. Mary also wrote that the duties were really revolting; some of the children were more like beasts in their habits than human beings. Sisters working in the home required a sound constitution, a strong motivation, and a strong stomach, she added.
82. At this time, there seem to have been 120 children in residence.
83. MASA, 315/1. Mother Dolores Barry's account, 'gleaned from Senior Sisters and Notes in the Chapter Book', details allocation to Goodwood Orphanage as 'front verandah and balcony, set of clothes', MASA, 150/30. See also account by Sister Atracta, OP, as Diocesan Archivist, MASA, 315/1.
84. 20 July, 1924, MASA, 315/1.
85. Answers to a questionnaire, 1926, MASA, 150/16. Four Sisters went daily to the parish school from Angus Street.
86. Danny Holden, interview, MASA 315/17. Also taped reminiscences of other ex-students, MASA, 315/15. One woman on the tape says that although S.M. Dorothea was hard on her, she was 'always hanging around Sister'.
87. Visitors' Book, 1975, MASA, 315/12.
88. Ibid.
89. MASA, 170/3, 44.
90. B.M. Coldrey, *Child Migration and the Western Australian Boys Homes*, Victoria: Tamanaraik Publishing, 1991.
91. Visitors' Book, 1975; Tape, 7.12.1975; MASA, 315/12.
92. See also Chapter Seven.
93. Patricia Kenny, 'Hesed Good News', Vol.2, No.3.
94. Congregational file, Goodwood Orphanage.
95. Visitors' Book, 1975, MASA, 315/12.
96. Personal interview.
97. Junice Cooper Mitchell, interview State (Mortlock) Library.
98. Public meeting of Historical Society of SA, 1994, Beth Robinson, co-ordinator Oral History Project, Mortlock Library; see also 'Voices from the Orphanage', *Library Liaison*, State Library, July, 1995; reprinted *Lookout*, September, 1995, Adelaide Mercies monthly bulletin.
99. Congregational file; interviews.
100. See, for example, interviews with Monica Whitman, Junice Mitchell, Danny Holden, Mortlock Library for first two, MASA, 315/17 for last.
101. Taped conversation, open day, 1975, MASA, 315/12.
102. Statement at open meeting of Historical Society of SA, 1994.
103. Coldrey quotes from Section 27 of Western Australian Criminal Code, see *Catholic Leader*, Brisbane, July 15, 1992.
104. Oral history project, meeting of Historical Society of SA, 1994.
105. Visitors' Book, 1975, MASA, 315/12.
106. Sister Rose Casey had begun the recreation room for the larger girls, at least by the early 1950s. When the boys moved out, part of the upstairs storey, called the attic, was set up as a recreation room for the smaller children.
107. Sisters were Lucy MacConachie, Josephine Weatherald, Carmel Christie.
108. *Lookout*, August, 1993. At this stage, Carmel had been fostering boys for nine years.

109. The total received from the sale was \$749,961.17. The Mercies received \$249,987.05.
110. Junice Cooper, formerly Mitchell, newspaper cutting, MASA, 315/10.
111. Mortlock Library, report in 'Voices from the Orphanage', *Library Liaison*, 1994.
112. Ursula was at Angas St from 1908-1911. This extract is taken from Joan Gaskell, unpublished M.Ed. thesis, *Mercy Secondary Education Adelaide, 1881-1931*, University of Adelaide, 1972, 170.
113. See Chapter Three.
114. Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia, *An Organisational Culture Study*, Research report, E. More, J. Tulloch, A. Ross-Smith, Macquarie University, 1987.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Rural Mercies – The South East

### MOUNT GAMBIER: GROWTH AFTER 1890

**T**HE small community at Mount Gambier grew slowly but steadily. In October, 1897, it was registered as Convent of Mercy Mt Gambier Inc. The objectives were stated as:

- (a) to educate and instruct children of the poor
- (b) to educate and instruct children and young ladies
- (c) to maintain, educate and instruct orphans
- (d) to visit the sick.

Sealholders were Alice Mary Wells, Mother Superior, Mary Besley, Sarah Windelle<sup>1</sup>, and Mary Byrne, members of the community. In 1899 they felt confident enough to open a branch convent and school at Millicent, twenty-nine miles away, and, in 1903, at Naracoorte, some sixty-five miles distant. In 1908, they opened a new convent in Mount Gambier itself, on Penola Road. On this occasion, the audience were exhorted

to support an Institution that forms the principal ornament of the town, and exists solely to promote the material, intellectual and moral amelioration of the people ... and spreads all over the South East to such centres as Millicent and Naracoorte. People should be glad to lighten the Sisters' anxieties and reduce the debt on the Mother House.

The women of the parish had contributed £250, proceeds of a bazaar, held for five nights during Race Week.<sup>2</sup>

By 1902, despite the loss of six sisters to Buenos Aires twelve years previously, the community numbered fourteen – twelve professed sisters, one novice, and one postulant. They cared for twelve boarders, forty-eight high school and one hundred and seventeen primary school students. Twenty-three women had joined them between 1884 and 1903, nine born in Victoria, four in Ireland, and ten in South Australia.

There were a number of deaths to offset the entrants who came and



*Srs M. de Sales  
Byrne and  
Agnes Wells  
(seated)*



*Dean M.J. Ryan,  
parish priest,  
Mt Gambier*



*Mt Gambier community, 1898*

stayed. Up to and including 1933, with the death of Sister Josephine Mary Lovell, the last of the Argentinians, sixteen sisters died at Mount Gambier. Mother Joseph Griffin, who held the post of Reverend Mother, from 1890, for two terms of three years, died shortly after again becoming the Mother Assistant. Her death took place on December 18th, 1896, following an illness of five days. Others who died included some very young sisters, in their twenties or early thirties. In September, 1894, Sister M. Raphael (Anastasia) Sutton, of Mount Gambier East, died at the age of twenty-four. In 1899, Irish-born Veronica Mary Daley<sup>3</sup> died, aged thirty-two, after two years of fighting consumption. The following year, Sister M. Baptiste (Bridget) Meagher of Ballarat died at the age of twenty-two, having experienced a long and painful illness from an internal complaint. Sister M. Aloysius Dove was twenty-five when she died in 1917, and Sister M. Ursula Brown<sup>4</sup>, from Cork, was twenty-seven at her sudden death in 1922.

Expansion of their works kept the community with a crippling debt for many years. The sisters expended more than £2,000 on each of the branch convents, and more than £7,000 on the mother house. Despite the continuing debt, these expenditures were undoubtedly a sign of consolidation and success. A loan from the State Bank had been procured in 1898 for the Millicent convent. The land there had cost about £135, and fees to contractor and architect reached more than £1,300. Costs at Naracoorte were somewhat similar.

#### A NEW MOTHER HOUSE

The biggest debt was on the new and impressive convent in Penola Road, Mount Gambier. This was officially opened on 1st April 1908, and incorporated the select school within its walls, being renamed St Joseph's Convent of Our Lady of Mercy. The new residence and school was a handsome building of limestone, with large windows of imported glass which let in light and air.

The construction of a suitable mother house had been several years in the expectation. A new church, the Gothic-Italianate St Paul's, had been commenced in 1884, had cost more than £10,000, but had been cleared of debt by 1901. A deanery for the clergy had also been built, on the southern side of the church, in local dolomite with a cast iron lace verandah. This was opened officially on St Patrick's Day, 1901. It was now time for the parish to consider giving support to a convent and school more worthy of its purposes than the old store quarters in Commercial Street.<sup>5</sup>

Local interest and assistance ran high. A meeting of parishioners had been convened after 11 a.m. Mass on 10th September 1902, under Dean Ryan. The proposed convent/school, on two and a half acres of church ground fronting Penola Road, would also cost about £10,000. The money could be

borrowed on reasonable terms and the debt repaid within ten years. The building could be completed within eighteen months. The parish also hoped to erect a Christian Brothers College on the block east of the convent.

However, it was not until 2nd June 1906, that tenders were called for the convent. Mothers Liguori and Agnes Paula had looked at convents in other parts of Australia, and knew what they wanted. Architect Thomas Hall's plans were for a two-storeyed building to contain over fifty rooms, exclusive of cellar, stairs, passages, cloister, and other areas. The style was Gothic, with circular arches and square-topped windows. The walls and partitions were all of local stone, red dolomite with white limestone for the dressing. Ceilings were partly steel, partly lath and plaster; some of the floors were tiled, some in pitch-pine. Frontage along Penola Road was one hundred and twenty-six feet wide. The northern wing was one hundred and fifty-six feet long. Estimated cost was over £6,000. Local tradesmen were employed. The contract was let to J.T. McMahon, who sub-contracted to stonemason Henry Knight, plumbers MacIntosh and Fartch, painters King Bros., and plasterer B.W. Chester.<sup>6</sup>

One of the reasons for the delay in tendering seems to have been disagreement over the ownership and use of the church land proposed for the convent. The archbishop had initially suggested that the sisters be given the land free, but wanted the deeds to be drawn up in the joint names of the Catholic Church Endowment Society and the Sisters of Mercy. The sisters – with previous experiences in mind, no doubt – felt unhappy about such joint ownership. After some months of contention, they presented a draft of an alternative document to the archbishop. On the advice of their lawyer, who did not think joint ownership desirable, they proposed that the land be leased to the Sisters of Mercy in perpetuity, for one peppercorn per annum. This would prevent any selling and would be a guarantee of the lump sum of the sisters' private money spent in construction. If the sisters were to leave, the lessor, the Catholic Church Endowment Society, would pay them the value of any buildings or permanent improvements they had made.<sup>7</sup>

However, the archbishop – or his financial advisers – were unwilling to transfer the land completely to the sisters. In August, 1902, the latter capitulated and wrote consenting to the archbishop's terms. They asked him to complete the transfer as convenient, so that the building could begin. The people were very anxious they should make a start and had promised to help them generously.

Yet the sisters' unease persisted. The following month, September, Mother Liguori Besley again wrote to the archbishop, this time about land for sale which would make a beautiful site for a convent and which would be far preferable to a portion of the church ground. There were ten blocks for sale, six of which would be appropriate for their purposes. The Dean was in favour

of this purchase, and was prepared to buy two of the blocks, a friend the other two, thus procuring the whole block on the hill. It would be a great advantage to have ground on which to extend a building suited to their purposes as Sisters of Mercy. In addition, they would have privacy as well as a healthy and central position. The sisters were not really in favour of building on ground near Penola Road.

This land was purchased, but turned out to be less than desirable for a convent when a large sales yard was erected beside it. Moreover, by January, 1903, the sisters had decided not to build at present on account of want of funds. They preferred to sell the purchased land for a suitable price, and thought that it would be many years before they could go ahead with the construction of a convent.

On his part, the archbishop continued to quibble about giving permission for the project, insisting that all property be purchased in the joint names of the Catholic Church Endowment Society and the Sisters of Mercy. By mid-1904, Mother Liguori expressed her frustration to the archbishop, stating that if he would come down and hold a visitation, she was sure that he would find things very different to what his opinion seemed now to them. She repeated her often expressed wish – that His Grace would come down and hold the visitation – for many reasons.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the work of the schools continued at Commercial Street. St Paul's Church Record for 1907 indicates that instruction in the faith was given at the convent two mornings a week. Music exams were held at both Mount Gambier and Millicent convents. The Children of Mary held a Retreat of three days at the convent. The school break-up at the end of that year included a display of wood carving by the pupils.

When the new convent was opened, the high school – renamed in honour of St Joseph – moved into it with an enrolment of nearly sixty. The parochial school continued in the 'old convent', until that was sold in December of that year to Mrs G. McIntosh, Milliner.<sup>9</sup>

#### CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT AT MOUNT GAMBIER

With the construction of the Penola Road convent, fundraising began in earnest. Final costs of improvements on the land were £8,092/17/6.<sup>10</sup> A fete of five evenings during race week raised £520 in mid-1907. At the same time the next year, 1908, the ladies of St Paul's congregation again held a week's fair, this time netting £300. Some money was also raised through school fees, although these were relatively quite low. The prospectus of 1908 gave fees as £5 per quarter for boarders and £1 for day scholars.

Some indication of the frugality of the sisters' personal lives may be gained



*Convent, Penola Road, Mt Gambier*



*Sr M. Liguori Besley, long-time  
superior, Mt Gambier*



*St Joseph's Convent of Mercy pupils, c.1909*



*Lucy and Tony Sutton of Dismal Swamp. Anastasia (Sr M. Raphael) Sutton was an early entrant into the community in 1888. She died in 1894*

from the financial figures of the 1890s. In June, 1891, when the archbishop's vicar, Frederick Byrne, made canonical visitation of the convent, the sisters had a credit balance of eleven shillings and eight pence. The financial figures for 1895 were:

Income for 1895	£262/2/2
Expenditure	£200/7/5, an average of £12/10/0 for each sister.

As of November, 1914, when Archbishop Spence made a canonical visitation, there was a debt of £2,750 at the Mount and one of £800 at Millicent. However, Spence declared that 'these debts ... apparently large are both within the reach of the community to cope with and need cause no uneasiness to Ecclesiastical Authorities'. The Mt Gambier Mercies were clearly living simply, but were quite functional.

Their schools were also functioning satisfactorily. The 1908 end-of-the-year exams showed the Convent of Mercy school gaining eighty-one percent of the possible marks. At the prize distribution, in January, the Mayor and Mayoress attended. The audience were reminded that they should be proud of the grand building, of the devoted teachers the Sisters of Mercy, and their children. In the following March, at the time of the ceremony of Confirmation, country girls could be accommodated at the convent. In April, the setting was fit for the visit of the Governor-General and the Countess of Dudley. In the words of contemporary commentators, the building was 'spacious, well ventilated and filled with all modern improvements and sanitary arrangements.' Its view of the surrounding countryside was one not to be forgotten.

Girls were prepared for Adelaide University exams – primary, junior, senior, and higher public. Extras included music, drawing, painting (water and oil), French, German, Latin, violin, shorthand, and typewriting. The boarders' clothing list comprised two black dresses, one white dress and blue sash, one red sash, one warm cloak, strong and light boots, three black aprons, one garden hat, and one umbrella.

The numbers in the community had increased, by 1914, to twenty-three professed members and one novice. In the schools at Mt Gambier, there were ten boarders, seventy high school students, and one hundred and six primary. The Millicent and Naracoorte branch schools were also flourishing.

A prospectus for St Joseph's Convent of Our Lady of Mercy for that year shows that the boarding school fees now were £6/15/- with 15/- for laundry. Weekly boarders paid £5/-/-. Fees for the Select Day School were £1/1/- per quarter for English Education. Juniors paid 10/6. Music and other accomplishments were extra, but Needlework and Singing Classes were gratis.<sup>11</sup> An Old Scholars' Association had been formed in 1913.<sup>12</sup> Its motto was Fidelity, Benignity, Duty, and Charity.

There was a shadow side to this success. Archbishop Spence wrote that the sisters were suffering from overwork. The stress was intensified during the rest of the decade, for they received no entrants into the community from 1915 to 1920. On a visitation in 1921, Spence found them still in debt. The Adelaide Sisters of Mercy, whose own financial position had been improved greatly through the Cunningham legacy, came to the rescue and gave them £1,000.

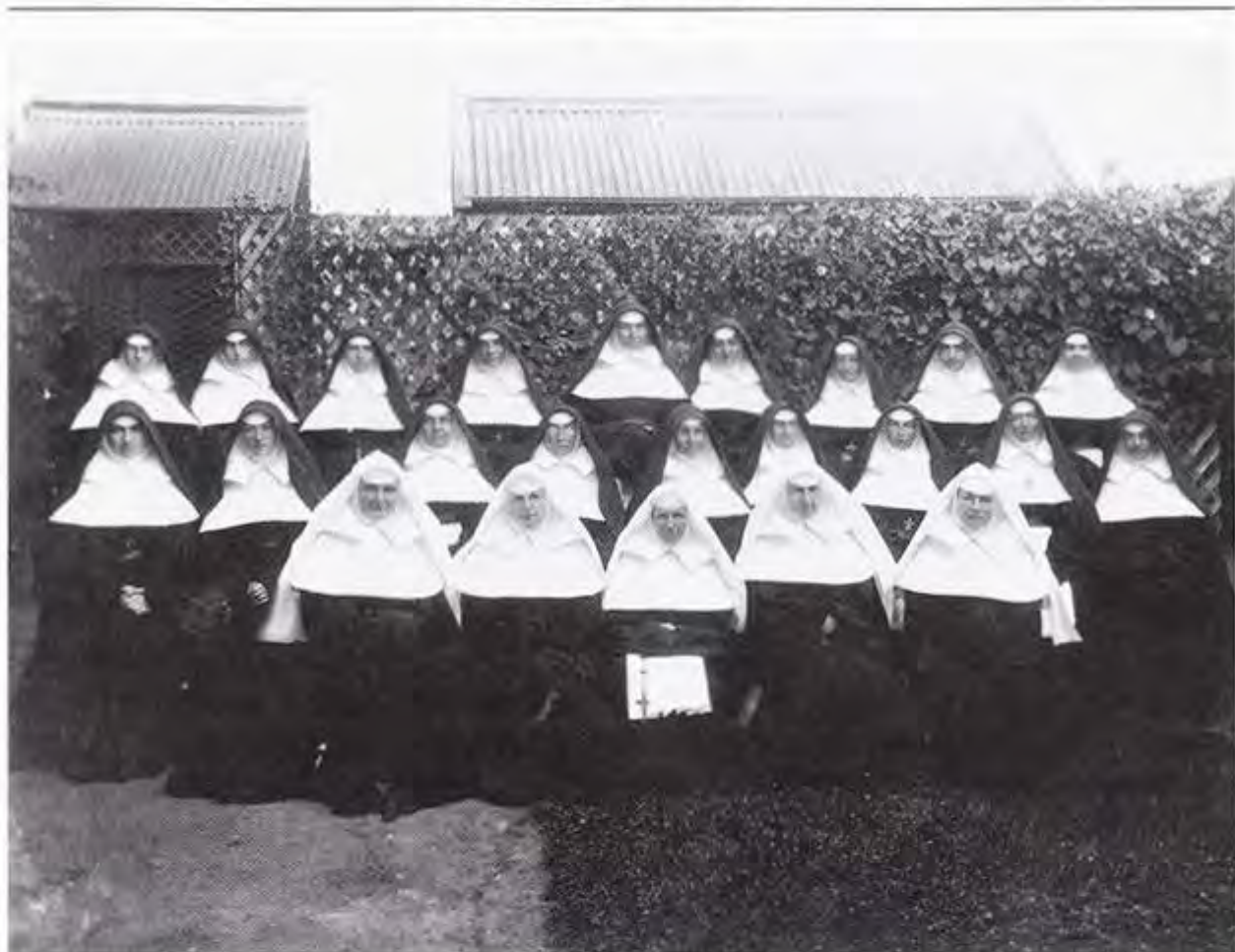
Parish school conditions improved greatly in 1916 when St Paul's School Hall was constructed from the stone of the old church of St Theresa's in Crouch Street. The original plan of the Church Committee had been ambitious – to construct a hall to accommodate one thousand people, and to include stage, supper accommodation, kitchen, and meeting place. It had been proposed also to provide a Parish School nearby to replace the Primary School still being run by the Sisters of Mercy at St Theresa's. However, the cost of the two buildings proved prohibitive, and the foundation of a School-Hall was laid by Archbishop Spence on 5th December, 1915. This was officially opened in July, 1916.

Since the convent school also took pupils of primary age, the existence of two partly parallel schools – as in the Upstairs/Downstairs of Angas Street – continued side by side. Past scholars of that era recollected that there was always a distinction between the two institutions, which did not associate with one another. St Joseph's, the select school, had a uniform. A 1918 photo shows girls in boater hats. St Paul's, the parish school, did not. Mary Marks (nee Sutton) recalled the row that eventuated when she cut through the grounds of St Paul's, instead of going right around to St Joseph's. Mary Lyons (nee Ryan) also retained the memory of the separate yards, though she did not associate any snobbishness with them. Young Mary Ryan liked all the nuns, and thought the convent a castle. She remembered that a lot of non-Catholics went to St Joseph's to 'finish'. There they received some training in etiquette and good manners.

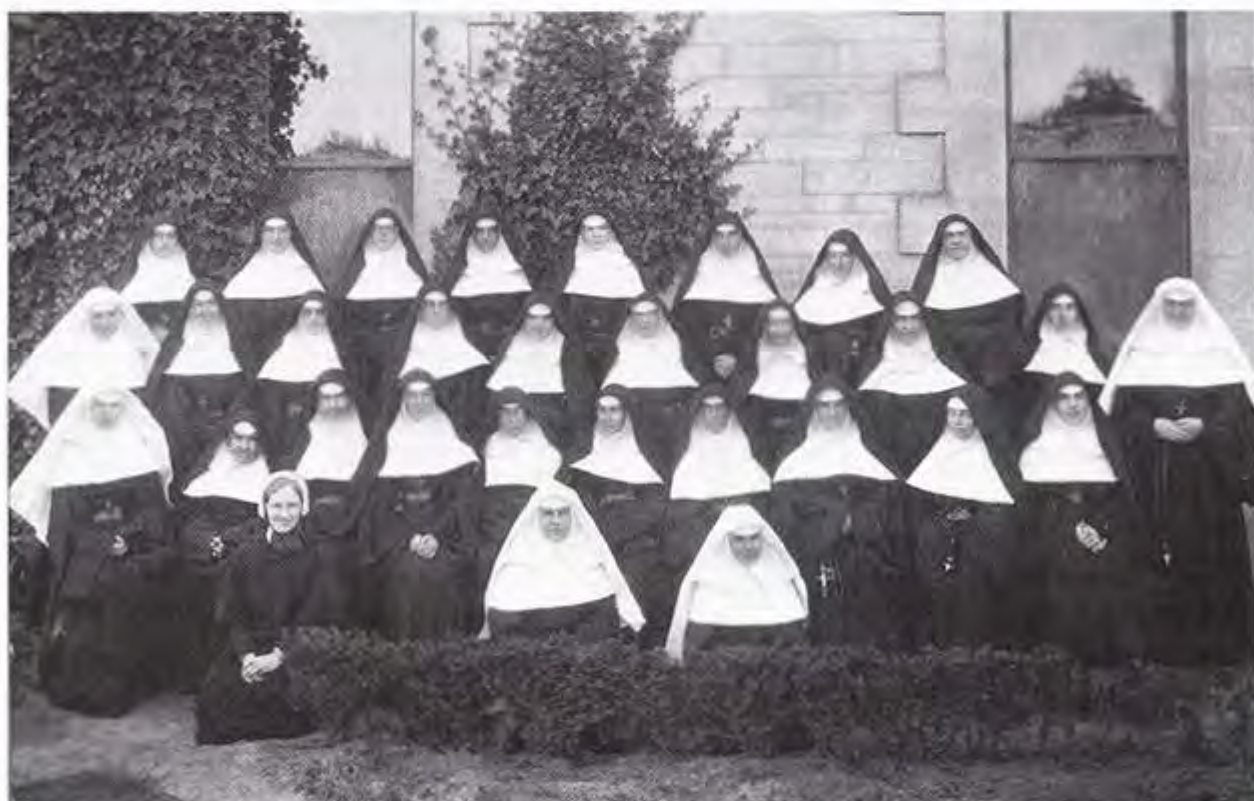
The Sisters of Mercy gave a gold medal each year for punctuality. To win the medal required being in school before roll call at 9.30 a.m. and at 1 p.m., and for two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon. Dean Ryan donated a prize for Irish History, as well as for English Literature and Religion. Photos reveal the existence of a school band. In 1918, St Joseph's School Band was composed of twenty-one boys, wearing white linen hats, long white tunics, sash, and black pants.

In 1919, the first tennis court was constructed at the rear of the convent, in Jardine Street, and was formally opened by Mgr Ryan. Most of the work had been done by parishioners, and much of the material was donated. Mr W.J. Sutton of Wandilo served down the first ball.

Gradually, as with all Mercy and other convent 'select' schools throughout



*Mt Gambier community, 1911*



*Mt Gambier community, 1932. Eileen (Sr M. Dominic) Fletcher is the postulant; Sr Monica McKee the white-veiled novice (front right)*



*L. to R: Srs M. Patrick Flinn, Martha Lockie, Rose Hill, Philomena Stuart*



*First Communion – Sr M. Xavier Webb with Kevin and John Preece, brothers of Sr Kathleen Preece*



*Romley (Sr M. Vianney) Dirrmann as postulant, 1937 – the last member to make first commitment within the independent Mt Gambier congregation*

Australia, the paying school became a High or Secondary school in the present sense of the term, with a primary unit attached. By 1930, the year of the Golden Jubilee of the arrival of the Mercies in Mt Gambier, St Joseph's was teaching both girls and boys in both primary and secondary classes, up to Leaving. In 1931, the Marist Brothers opened a college for the education of boys. Younger boys continued to attend St Joseph's College. A photo for 1946 shows children from Grades I to Senior. There are twenty-one boys in the photo, all small.

To celebrate the centenary of the foundation of the Mercy Order in Ireland, a great musical entertainment was presented in 1931. It included, among many other items, Elgar's March *Honour and Glory* as well as some songs composed by Sisters of Mercy – *Let Exulting Songs* and *Palms and Roses*. There was a garden party at which the orchestra played; a luncheon for the clergy; and a Jubilee Ball, at which four hundred were present, and which netted £105. Mrs Kennedy, for the Old Scholars Association, presented the Sisters with a cheque which they hoped would be used to enlarge the chapel.

The next convent Old Scholars' Ball did not take place until 1936. It, too, was a great success. There was a large and spectacular gathering, and a similar sum was raised at the door.

In 1938, a double-storeyed building was added to the convent.<sup>13</sup> The building was acknowledged as a memorial for the Golden Jubilee of Mothers de Sales and Agnes Paula, the previous year. On the day it was blessed and opened, 30th January, 1938, Romley (Sister M. Vianney) Dirrmann received the Mercy habit in St Paul's Church. She was the second last member to be received into the separate Mt Gambier congregation.<sup>14</sup>

The ground floor of the new building was the secondary school, with Sister Clare Flynn in charge. Clare also had charge of the boarders. The upper floor provided three dormitories, giving accommodation for about forty girls. In 1950, the number of boarders was forty-four. Such numbers were maintained until the mid-1970s, when only weekly boarders were taken.<sup>15</sup> Music was taught in the old building adjacent to the extensions. Grades III to VII were in the old hall, with Grades I and II on the stage.

Examination results in the 1930s and 1940s show a substantial if relatively limited curriculum. Both 1934 and 1945 results reveal that St Joseph's presented five successful students for Intermediate Public Examination. Subjects included English, Latin, French, History, Geography, Mathematics I and II. Typing, Bookkeeping, Shorthand, and Chemistry were also on the curriculum at various times. Music exams from the University of Adelaide and Trinity College were held in singing, violin, piano, perception, and theory. Commercial students took exams at Stott's Business College.

The work of preparing adults and children for the sacraments of the

church had endured throughout the years. Weekends especially were devoted to the ongoing religious instruction of children and their preparation for the sacraments. A 1935 to 1950 notebook recording the reception of First Confession and Communion and of Confirmation at St Paul's shows that a wide geographical area was covered. Districts mentioned included Glencoe, Kalangadoo, Port MacDonnell, Allendale, Mt Schank, Moorak, Sutton Town, Wandilo Springs, Square Mile, and Port Fairy. From the 1940s, summer camps for religious instruction were held throughout the South East.

In 1950, a visit by two Sisters of the Little Company of Mary from Sydney and Melbourne was recorded in the school annual. Their visit to South Australia was of special significance, commemorating the golden jubilee of Calvary Hospital in Adelaide, where many of St Joseph's old scholars had trained as nurses. The editor of the school annual wrote:

Our past pupils in every walk of life are nobly portraying the ideals of Catholic womanhood. To all of these, whether near or far from St Joseph's, we wish to express our admiration.

A list of Old Scholars and their jobs was included. Of special interest in this, and succeeding annuals, were the past students who entered the Convent of Mercy Adelaide. There were a significant number of these.

A number of young Irish women had entered the Mount Gambier community over the years, and especially in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1926, Sisters M. Columba (Margaret) Ferguson and M. Carmel (Margaret) McGlynn came from County Galway, with Sister M. Immaculata (Julia) Coffey from County Limerick in 1928. In 1930, three Irish young women received the Mercy habit in the first public reception ceremony in St Paul's church. They were Sister M. John (Mary) Malone from County Kilkenny, Sister Rita Mary (Honorina) McGlynn from County Galway, and Sister M. Anthony (Brigid) O'Loughlin from Ballyhobin.

Altogether, after the six sisters had returned to Argentina, there had been left from the founding group two Irish and three Argentinian sisters. Of the members after them, thirteen were Irish and thirty-four Australian. Only nineteen of these were South Australian. Eleven were born in Victoria, three in Western Australia, and one in New South Wales.<sup>16</sup>

#### RE-UNION WITH ADELAIDE, 1941

In 1940, Mother Mary Agnes Paula Wells died. In 1944, the death of Mother Patrick Flinn followed, as also did that of Mother de Sales Byrne. The loss of these pioneers was symbolic of the changes that came to the Mt Gambier community at the beginning of that decade.



*Garden Party at convent for Mother Liguori Besley's Golden Jubilee, 1933*



1. St. Paul's Church
2. Junior School
3. St. Paul's Hall and Infant School
4. Senior School
5. Convent and Boarding School
6. Junior Playground
7. Senior Playgrounds

*Aerial view of convent, school and church, Mt Gambier, 1961*

In 1940, Archbishop Beovich did a month's 'strenuous visitation' of the South East. He claimed that he found room for improvement in the parish schools, and that the sisters needed 'the benefit of exchange among wider districts'. The archbishop was on a mission. He had spent many hours arranging the amalgamation of the Mercy nuns in the South East with the Mercy nuns in Adelaide. The Mount Gambier community was being re-united with its source.

The re-uniting was not easy. There had been several overtures by successive archbishops to achieve the same end, but the Mt Gambier sisters had always refused. In March, 1902, Mother Agnes Paula wrote to Archbishop O'Reily, stating that she had spoken to the sisters in Mt Gambier and in Millicent, concerning the possibility of amalgamation. All, with the exception of one, were strongly opposed to it. In June, 1907, Archbishop O'Reily had written to both communities of Adelaide and Mt Gambier communicating the wishes of the third Plenary Council of bishops held at Sydney in 1905. He stated that the bishops had petitioned the Holy See concerning the amalgamation of religious houses of women following the same rule and living in the same diocese. The Mercies and the Presentation Sisters were specifically mentioned. The Holy See had judged it fitting that such an amalgamation should take place, but instructed the bishops not to insist on it. Rather they were to prudently strive to persuade and influence the religious towards such amalgamation.

In the Melbourne Archdiocese, the wishes of the Holy See had already been acted on, and an amalgamation of the various communities of the Sisters of Mercy happily effected, O'Reily claimed. He enclosed three copies of the report of the proceedings, as given by the Archbishop of Melbourne. He declared himself anxious to carry out the wishes of the Holy See in the Archdiocese of Adelaide. He asked them, therefore, to take the opinions of the members of their community.

The Mount Gambier community, so much smaller than Adelaide, would be the most affected. It was not in favour. After fully considering and discussing it, as their Chapter book recorded for August 6, 1907, the motion was rejected by the votes of the sisters, nine against, three for amalgamation. The sisters stated that they deemed it more prudent to wait until they really knew what it meant for the Order and how it worked in other places.

This stance towards greater centralisation taken by the episcopacy needs to be set in the wider context of a world-wide movement towards amalgamation of groups of religious following the same rule. The first Mercy amalgamation had occurred in Ireland itself in 1871, when four independent houses in the diocese of Elphin joined together. Between 1902 and 1905 there had been a series of letters from Rome, seeking to 'regularize' the conditions of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States. In 1905, Rome

attempted to unite all the Sisters of Mercy in that country. Union was not achieved. As everywhere within the Mercy Institute, local autonomy was a very strong instinct and precious tradition.

The subject was raised again in the 1920s. The Revised Code of Canon Law, which was promulgated in 1917, also fostered moves towards amalgamation. The code was overtly in favour of centralised government. In 1918, a revised rule for the Mercy amalgamated houses of Victoria and Tasmania was approved by Rome. In 1922, it approved a rule for a number of North American mother houses united as the Burlingame amalgamation. In 1929, the American Union of Sisters of Mercy was formed, with thirty-nine communities joining and twenty-one remaining separate. Of the latter, nine had joined the Union by 1962.

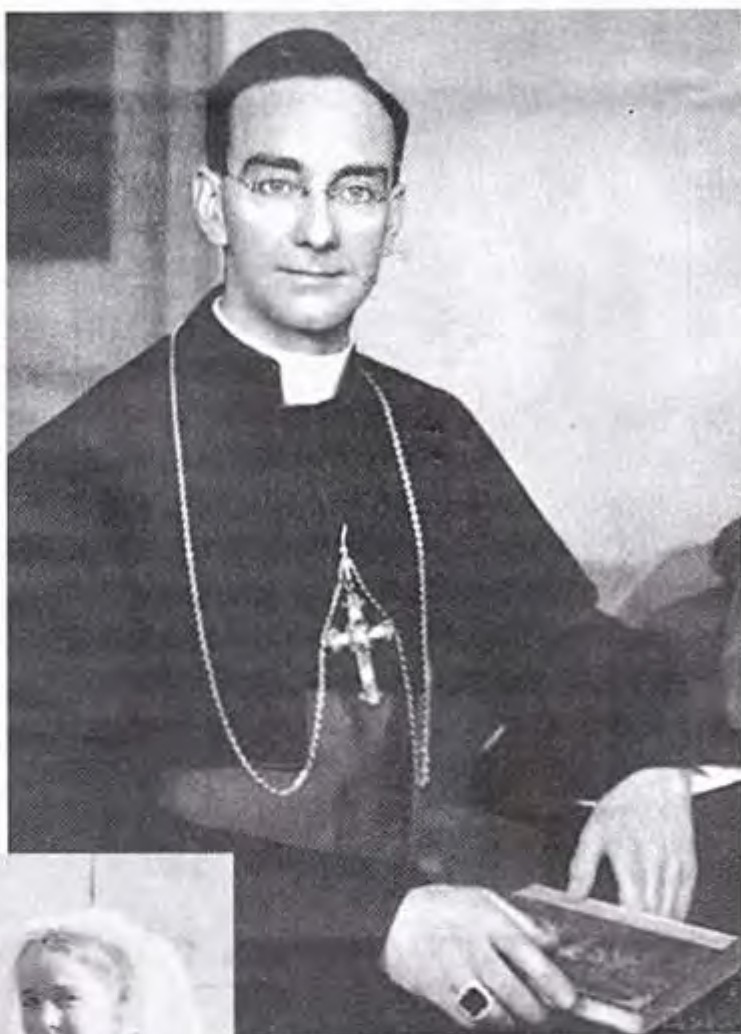
Moves towards amalgamation within the Archdiocese of Perth, Western Australia, were being actively pursued by the bishops there. There were, at this stage, five separate Mercy congregations in the State. Much pressure was exerted on the sisters within these independent groups to join together. But there was no success until 1934, when Victoria Park community joined with the original foundation at Perth. Bunbury followed in 1936, and Coolgardie (founded from Adelaide) in 1938. The fifth community, West Perth, persevered in its refusal to join the amalgamation.

Much of the rationale behind the hierarchy's promotion of such unifications was a concern about the quality of the religious and the professional formation being given to members of small, and frequently isolated, rural congregations. The Victorian amalgamation had proceeded relatively smoothly and rapidly because the government had introduced compulsory registration for teachers. This spur did not operate in other states. And even in Victoria, not all communities had joined.

In 1925, the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Cattaneo, wrote to all the Mercy communities in Australia, saying that their constitutions were to be revised according to the new code of Canon Law. Cattaneo suggested that the revised rule should be the same for all, as all acknowledged Mother McAuley as foundress. He added that 'the best and the most expeditious solution would be to adopt the recently approved constitutions for the Amalgamated Sisters of Victoria and Tasmania'.

The Mt Gambier sisters met in conference to discuss the Apostolic Delegate's proposal. They were unanimous that they wanted to keep the Rule as drawn up by their Venerated Foundress, Mother Mary Catherine McAuley, and they prayed that it be brought into accordance with the new Code of Canon Law. They were also unanimous in asking for a general meeting of the superiors of the different communities together with delegates from each community appointed by the sisters themselves to represent them. This meeting would consider clauses to be added to the original rule.

*Matthew Beovich, archbishop at  
the time of amalgamation of  
Mt Gambier and Adelaide  
congregations, 1941*



*Sr M. Rose Hill and Anne Foale  
at Confirmation, 1964*

# Church Cloak and Recreation Days

## EXTRAORDINARY RECREATION DAYS.

The Feast of the Mother General  
The Feast of the Mother Provincial  
Holy Innocents.

On these days recreation commences at tea on the eve of the Feast and continues until night prayer on the Feast. The Great Silence is always observed. Bells are rung as usual, but the Sisters are free to perform their spiritual duties privately. The Night Prayer bell on the eve of the Feast is to be rung not later than 10.30.

## FIRST CLASS RECREATION DAYS.

The Circumcision  
St. Patrick's Day  
Easter Sunday  
St. Joseph the Worker  
Our Lady Help of Christians  
Ascension Thursday  
Pentecost Sunday  
Trinity Sunday  
Feast of St. Anne  
The Assumption  
Feast of Our Lady of Mercy  
Kingship of Christ  
All Saints' Day  
Foundation of the Order  
Christmas Day.

Feasts of the patrons of the Councils General, Secretary General and Economic General, throughout the Congregation.

Feasts of the patrons of the Provincial Councils, Secretary and Economic, in their own Province.

Feast of the patron of the Local Superior in her own house.

Feast of the Sister-in-charge of a filial house in own house.

Feast of the patron of the Mistress of Novices, in novitiate house only. In some Provinces, its Foundation Day.

The day on which Retreat takes place, in the house in which it was made.  
Diamond Jubilee days throughout Province  
Golden Jubilee days throughout Province  
Silver Jubilee days in houses where Jubilarians reside.

On First Class days the Sisters have permission to speak at all meals, in all places within the Convent and grounds, except sleeping apartments, Chapel, sacristy, corridors and stairs. Recreation ceases at the conclusion of the afternoon recreation.

## SECOND CLASS RECREATION DAYS.

The Holy Name of Jesus  
The Epiphany  
The Holy Family  
The Purification  
St. Joseph  
Feast of St. Joseph  
The Annunciation  
Easter Monday  
Easter Tuesday  
St. Catherine of Siena  
Queenhip of Mary  
Whit Monday  
Whit Tuesday  
Corpus Christi  
Feast of the Sacred Heart  
Nativity of St. John the Baptist  
Feast of S.S. Peter and Paul  
Feast of the Precious Blood  
The Visitation  
The Transfiguration  
Feast of St. Joachim  
The Immaculate Heart of Mary  
The Activity of Our Lady  
Our Lady of Dolours  
Feast of St. Michael  
St. Theresa of Child Jesus  
Feast of the Holy Rosary  
The Motherhood of Our Lady  
Feast of St. Francis Xavier  
The Immaculate Conception  
St. John the Evangelist.

Feasts of the patrons of the Professors Sisters

In Holy Week houses. Ordinary days, in the house in which the ceremony takes place.  
Every Sunday, except Retreat Sunday.  
All school holidays (except in Holy Week).  
The day of a Sister's death and that of her burial, in the house (from which the Sister is buried.)

On Second Class days Sisters have permission to speak in Community room and in other places where recreation is permitted. The Mother Provincial settles at what time recreation commences. It ceases at conclusion of afternoon recreation. The Sisters may speak at meals in refectory, except at breakfast.

## THIRD CLASS RECREATION DAYS.

St. Peter Malabar  
St. Bridget  
St. Matthias  
St. John of God  
St. Mary  
St. Marcellus  
S.S. Philip and James  
St. Angela Merici  
St. Aloysius Gonzaga  
St. Camillus of Lellis  
St. Vincent de Paul  
St. James the Greater  
St. Ignatius Loyola  
St. Bartholomew  
St. Calixtus  
St. Augustine  
The Holy Name of Mary  
Exaltation of the Holy Cross  
St. Catherine of Genoa  
St. Matthew  
The Guardian Angels  
St. Luke  
St. Raphael  
S.S. Simon and Jude  
Presentation of S.V.M.  
St. Andrew  
St. Thomas

All First Fridays.  
Saturdays throughout the year (except during Holy Week).

Church Cloak Days.

On Third Class days the Sisters have permission to speak in Community room and in other places where recreation is permitted, commencing at 10 a.m. and continuing until the conclusion of afternoon recreation. There is no recreation at tea on fast days.

Illuminated list of Church Cloak and Recreation Days, Mt Gambier congregation

They would ask for a trial of seven years before such a rule would be finally adopted by the sisters in Australia. Such a meeting did not take place. The two congregations continued to use the 1926 modification of the original Dublin rule, approved by Rome in 1841.<sup>17</sup>

The matter was finally resolved in 1941, with a decree of amalgamation between the Adelaide and the Mt Gambier communities. During his visitation of the Mercy communities in the South East, Archbishop Beovich had suggested that, in the interests of the diocese and of their own Order, it would be wise for them to amalgamate with the sisters in Angas Street. He pointed out that this would help to remedy two weaknesses, viz., the Novitiate and the Training School in the South East. There was great room for improvement in the schools. Instead of just studying subjects for examination, it would be desirable, Beovich claimed, that the sisters had opportunities of interchanging ideas in teaching, and had practice in class teaching by criticism lessons, etc.

This time the majority of sisters favoured amalgamation. The Adelaide sisters were also in favour. The prospect for progress within the rural community of the South East was clearly somewhat limited. Beovich's own experience of the working of the Victorian Mercy amalgamation allowed him to point out its many advantages. Apostolic Delegate John Panico agreed that 'it would be for the good of the Church and of the Order'. It would, he added, really be 'a blessing of God'. There would be provision, as requested, for the sisters who had been professed for ten years and for those who might have sound conscientious reasons regarding their place of sojourn. Any sister unwilling to be part of the amalgamated community could ask to be dispensed from her vows or transferred to another Religious Congregation prepared to accept her. Any Sister perpetually professed ten years or more might not be transferred from Angas Street houses to Mount Gambier houses or vice versa, unless she agreed.

The Decree of Amalgamation was dated 16th May, 1941. Now the separate congregation of Mount Gambier ceased to exist. The Mount Gambier register contained the names of fifty-eight sisters who had lived and worked in the South East. Twenty-nine of those fifty-eight were still alive, including the sisters in the novitiate.

On 29th May, following the Decree of Amalgamation, Archbishop Beovich wrote that he had that afternoon appointed the first Mother General and her council. Mother Mary Cecilia Cunningham was Mother General. Her council included Liguori Besley and Patrick Flinn<sup>18</sup> from Mt Gambier, together with Xavier Dalton, Columba McMahon, and Gonzaga Nash from Adelaide. The new council were to draw up revised constitutions and when these were approved by Rome, the sisters would conduct their own elections. Such a procedure took place in January, 1945. The archbishop presided at

the first chapter of elections of the amalgamated congregation, and Mother M. Xavier Dalton was elected Mother General.

#### MORE INDELIBLE MEMORIES – AUSTRALIAN LEADERSHIP

It was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that the main governing role at Adelaide passed to an Australian born sister. In Mt Gambier, a trio of strong Australian women had assumed leadership some years before the new century had commenced.

The three names that stand out in the developing years of the Mt Gambier congregation are Mothers Mary Agnes Paula Wells, Liguori Besley, and de Sales Byrne. These three seem to have been behind the relatively contained but, nevertheless, very positive expansion of this rural-based community of women. Given the sparse and scattered population, together with the distance from Adelaide, the growth of the Mercies in the South East is an admirable example of what a small but determined group of women can achieve.

They were more than able administrators. They were women whose hearts had been touched by compassion. Looking back on their own years of life as Sisters of Mercy in the South East, Sisters Immaculata Coffey and Bernadette Dwyer named these three as 'true Sisters of Mercy. They lived the life of Mercy. Wherever misery was, they were.' Immaculata and Bernadette remembered these sisters going up to the hospital after school or visiting poor people in their homes, with basins of hot soup concealed in the big outer sleeves of their nuns' habits.

Both Reverend Mothers – Agnes Paula and Liguori – were respectful but frank in their dealings with church officials. Sometimes, those in high office in the church seemed to act as if to retard rather than promote the expansion of their community. The frustration they experienced, for example, with the archbishop when they were trying to purchase land in both Mount Gambier and Naracoorte<sup>19</sup> was not accepted meekly, but was brought by them into the open.

A statement dated 18th March, 1902, and signed on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy by Agnes Paula as superior and Liguori as her assistant, is quietly remarkable. The archbishop's views in a letter to the Dean (the parish priest of Mt Gambier) are, they claimed, in contrast with his views spoken to them. The two views are entirely different and opposed. They think that if the land proposed for their convent was in the name of the Archbishop and community conjointly, it would be an arrangement altogether unjust to their community. They cannot see any reasons in favour, but see a great many objections and inconveniences.

The statement continued:

If it be of no advantage to the Archbishop to have his name on their deeds, why does he seek to force them to insert it? As for the Archbishop being responsible for their liabilities, their experience of such matters is that they themselves have always, since they came to Australia, had to meet their own liabilities without any aid whatsoever from the Archbishop. As for the land being given to the Sisters free, the Sisters have repeatedly offered to His Grace to buy the land for their convent, that it should be given free was His Grace's own suggestion as he must surely remember. If the Archbishop does not see his way clear to allow the Committee in Mt Gambier to give the Sisters the land for their convent they now make in writing an offer to buy the land for their Convent. All the money and property the Sisters have of their own would be sunk in their new Convent and it would only be just and fair that they should have their title deeds in the name of their Incorporation and of no one else's.

When the Archbishop wrote a 'long letter of fatherly correction', suggesting she might find this severe, Agnes Paula replied that she did think it severe. She was perfectly sure, she added, he would be more sorry to have her act against her conscience or in any way that would cause her scruples in the future.

She and her community continued to try to preserve their independence. In the following July, it was Liguori, now Reverend Mother, who wrote to the archbishop that the sisters desired her to ask him if they might get a written agreement as security for their own private money that would be spent in building the new convent on church ground. As usual, the archbishop was dilatory in responding, and some two weeks later, she forwarded a document regarding the land, which would prevent any selling and which would be a guarantee for the lump sum of the sisters' private money. Their lawyer did not think joint ownership at all satisfactory as a matter of business, and they wished to begin on a thorough business foundation. She felt assured he would not be displeased with her forwardness in sending this document, which clearly represented the sisters' wishes.

The sisters did not win this contest. The archbishop invoked the decrees of the Plenary Council of Australian Bishops against them.<sup>20</sup> The properties were finalised in the name of the Church as well as themselves – a position not reversed until the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the sisters had clearly shown themselves to be more than submissive women. They had preserved their tradition of striving to preserve their independence. They had handed on intact to their successors one of those 'dangerous memories' bequeathed to them by their Argentinian foremothers, one of those memories that would continue to bring life in their enduring fight against misery and injustice.

There were other difficult situations to defuse. As we have seen, hierarchical pressure was exerted on more than one occasion to amalgamate with

other Mercy communities, and on another (1925) to accept revised constitutions. On each of these occurrences, they were clear as to what they thought appropriate, and said so respectfully but firmly.

### **Agnes Paula Wells**

Sister Mary Agnes Paula Wells had been bursar from 1890 to 1896, and was still only thirty when first elected as superior, a role she held for many years.

It was under her leadership that the new convent got under way in Mount Gambier, and that Millicent and Naracoorte opened. At the end of her first two terms of office, canon law required she vacate the position, and she was elected assistant to Reverend Mother Liguori Besley. These two stalwarts held the two top governing positions, in rotation, for several decades. Agnes Paula was obviously the more favoured of the two. Until her retirement, she continued to be chosen for sets of two consecutive terms, with Liguori providing the necessary interim of one term of three years. However, once Agnes Paula was out of the picture, Liguori became the favourite.

She was born Alice Wells, at Yahl (near Mt Gambier) in 1865, into a non-Catholic family. There were four Wells children – Ralph, Alice, Frank, and Mary. Father McGrath and his housekeeper, Miss Murphy, took them and reared them for their widowed father. While boarding at the convent, Alice and Mary became Catholics, despite opposition from their father. Alice treasured a gold watch which had belonged to Mary Mackillop. In 1885 she joined the Mercy community, her entrance taking place on the day the new church of St Paul's opened, a church she loved to keep beautiful with flowers. Their brother became quite famous as an explorer.

Mother Mary Agnes Paula was said to have a beautiful nature. Some past pupils remembered her as very quiet and fairly strict, rather staid and proper. Yet there is little doubt that she possessed several qualities desirable for effective but gentle leadership. She was broadminded, generous to people in need, a good business woman and firm in communicating decisions. After her death in 1940, it was written of her that she was

a gentlewoman of rare and precious gifts of character. Unassuming, humble, affectionate, she was no dealer in harsh words or disciplinary frowns; but she reproved in a caressing sort of way that disarmed the opposition and won the complete confidence of all with whom she came in contact.

One woman, Mrs Irene Francis (nee Kennedy), in her eighties still fondly preserved a card of St Lucie, given her for her twelfth birthday by Sister M. Agnes.

Her sister, Mary Joseph Wells, was quite opposite in personality to the rather introverted Agnes Paula. Joseph was a definite extrovert, with a great sense of humour. She knew everyone in the town. She visited everyone who

was sick, Catholic or otherwise. She was, they all said, 'a true Christian'. Sister Joseph had an unusual pet, a magpie called Joe, who seemed to dislike the boarding students.

### **Liguori Besley**

Sister Mary Liguori Besley had been born, in 1866, as Mary Besley, daughter of the John Besley who had run the Catholic school in Mt Gambier in the 1870s. There Mary had received her early education. John Besley was also musical, playing the church organ and being in great demand as choir conductor. Mary inherited his musical talent, played piano and organ especially, and became a skilled music teacher. The two Besleys, father and daughter, contributed much to the burgeoning cultural life of the town.

Before her twentieth birthday, in 1886, Mary entered the Sisters of Mercy. She volunteered to go to the Argentine in 1890, but was not chosen. As a young nun, she was given charge of novices, from 1893 to 1902. In 1903 she was Assistant to Reverend Mother Agnes Paula, and later her successor. She was to fill all these three roles again at several times during her life. It was not until she had reached the age of eighty that ill health forced her to retire.

Mother Liguori died at the ripe old age of ninety-four. She was remembered by very many of her pupils, especially her music pupils whose careers and lives she followed with great interest. Her various jubilees of religious profession became occasions for much celebrating and remembering. On her seventieth anniversary as a nun, an annual Reverend Mother Mary Liguori Scholarship was instituted at the Convent of Mercy by the organising committee.

Novices found her lovely, wonderful, without resentment for any youthfully wayward behaviour. They found her gentle and solicitous when they were sick, sometimes smothering them with kindness and care. Many young sisters had died of consumption in earlier years, and Liguori made sure later novices remained healthy. Cod liver oil and malt extract, and milk fresh from the convent cow featured strongly in their diet. Colds were promptly treated with mustard poultices, cotton wool and brown paper coverings.

Old scholars also had found her to be exceedingly kind to those in trouble, a great counsellor to the anxious. Her last fourteen years of blindness were years of continuing to lead others – directly and indirectly – along the wise paths of living. Mary Ryan (later Mrs Mary Lyons), whose mother had attended John Besley's school and had found a great friend in his daughter, saw Mother Liguori as the epitome of 'the way in which the nuns did things properly, and taught their charges to be different'.

### **De Sales Byrne**

In 1884, Mary Bryne had been the first entry into the newly independent congregation at Mt Gambier, the town of her birth. As general bursar of the

congregation, she played an indispensable role in the construction of the new convent in Mt Gambier, and guided the finances of the community for many years.

Sister Mary de Sales had been somewhat unhappy after the departure of Baptist MacDonnell and her party to Argentina. Some of the sisters thought that Mother Joseph Griffin was unduly influenced by her assistant, Angela Windle, and that the latter interfered unnecessarily in the business of the other sisters. De Sales had expressed a wish to move to the Adelaide community, but on finding this not possible, had settled down and worked hard for the success of the diminished community.

Under Mother Agnes Paula, she was appointed first superior of the branch house at Millicent, at the age of thirty-seven. She spent four years there. She then became the founding superior of Naracoorte, the second branch house.

Mother de Sales died in 1944, at the age of seventy-eight. In her later years, she was noted for her 'wonderful memory of happenings and events of bygone days', which she often shared with old scholars. Many remembered her as a splendid teacher.

### **Patrick Flinn**

Mother Patrick Flinn was the third Australian-born Reverend Mother of Mt Gambier. Her two terms began in 1935 and 1941. She was thus the last Reverend Mother of the separate Mt Gambier community, and – with Liguori Besley – became a member of the first council of the amalgamated congregation.

Patrick Flinn has been described as a lady before her time.<sup>21</sup> Remembered as a wonderful teacher, both at Mount Gambier and Millicent, she was particularly adept in personal relations, with a lovely way of making the children feel welcome and close to her. She could correct them when needed and make the desired impression, but without harshness. She was very strict about etiquette and table manners, but her sense of humour and her warmth made her remembered with great affection and love. As did also her admonition 'Oh, patience, child!' Mother Patrick was also in charge of novices for some time. She was very strict with them, likewise, but not unkind, and they too found her likeable. They thought her very forthright, but enjoyed her hearty laugh.

Patrick Flinn died in 1944, the same year as de Sales Byrne. Both had helped guide the sisters with kindness through many difficult days. Mother Dolores Barry wrote a moving letter describing the last days of Mother Patrick in the infirmary at Angas Street, when her Irish wit still shone through and the sisters willingly took it in turns to be with her day and night. When one sister added a prayer to the rosary that St Patrick pray for her,

Mother Patrick stretched out and shook hands with the sister. To those who enquired how she was, she was always 'Grand' or 'Tip Top'. When she had not eaten for several days, Dolores asked her if she was hungry. She replied: 'Not a bit that ever was!'

After her death, Dolores wrote:

Mother Patrick is gone, but she is still with us. She lives still in the lovely example she has left behind. Her charity was of a rare kind – peculiar only to Mother Patrick, in fact, it made Mother Patrick what she was. If anyone hurt Mother – and she was easily hurt because she had such a refined and sensitive nature – if anyone criticised another in her presence, she would dismiss it with a little tilt of the head and closed eyes and would 'get off' so as to avoid further hurt or trouble. Dear old Mother Patrick would oblige the youngest sister in the community as eagerly as she would the oldest. No one ever went to her for the smallest thing that she would not get for them; nothing was a trouble. God rewarded her for this, for the Sisters booked their nights to stay with her for days ahead – every minute of the day was literally 'booked' to be at her bedside.<sup>22</sup>

#### A K A L E I D O S C O P E O F M E M O R I E S

Names and comments come quickly when past pupils of the Mercy convents in the South East begin to reminisce. Their teachers obviously made lasting impressions, an impact deepened for those who had spent their adult years in the district. One past pupil stated that they were 'the most wonderful women', whom she held in highest esteem. Without any university degrees, themselves, they were nevertheless wonderful, brilliant teachers. She referred to a radio programme which claimed that feminist Catholic women, educated by sisters, were for a long time leaders of women in Australia. She agreed with this, saying that a lot of the nuns were leaders in being feminists.<sup>23</sup>

Another resident of the South East, who first come in contact with the Mercies at Mt Gambier as an adult, and taught there with them, and had sent her children to Mater Christi College, had found the Mercies to be quite enterprising. They were, she said, willing to move out and to explore.<sup>24</sup>

#### **Margaret Mary McMahon**

One personality not easy to forget was Sister Margaret Mary McMahon. Born at Naracoorte in 1885, she spent her life of ninety years in the South East. She died in Calvary Hospital, Adelaide, in January, 1975, and was buried in Mt Gambier.

Annie Catrine McMahon had been educated at the Naracoorte State School and Agricultural High School, and had taught at the former for a

short time, coming second in the State at the teachers' examination. Having entered the Sisters of Mercy of Mt Gambier in her teens, she spent her active religious life in teaching, more significantly as a music teacher. She spent it mostly at Mt Gambier, but also taught at Millicent for about twelve years, where she was in charge for several years, and at her home town of Naracoorte for about six years. As well as teaching music, she also taught secondary pupils. Among her most outstanding pupils she named Premier Des Corcoran, Mr A.R. Burdon, MP, and Judge Michael White of the Local and District Criminal Court.

She found much happiness in those years. On the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of entry into the convent, she stated that she did not have to go outside her religious surroundings to find pleasure and happiness because this was her life.<sup>25</sup> She claimed that, though there was more freedom then and the religious dress had been modernised, the basic foundation of religious life was still the same as when she entered.

Well into her eighties at this time, she spoke especially of her flower garden, and her ambition to have some flowers in bloom all the year. She was well into recycling, long before the current care for the environment. She provided a huge wool bale for newspapers and three bins for other articles. All the sisters were expected to contribute. Proceeds went to help the foreign missions, especially Papua New Guinea. She visited the sick, elderly, and the lonely. She loved reading and viewing worthwhile TV programmes. In her retirement in Angas Street, Margaret took it upon herself to spend a couple of hours a day with older nuns – to help keep them alert.

Margaret McMahon had the kind of personality which gave rise to stories. She made many friends among her students, especially her secondary and music pupils. These latter she taught to enjoy music. Her art class of 1936 remembered how she had thrown up her arms in horror and sent Our Lady's hand crashing to the floor, when she had found a man employed to clean the church hall drinking the holy water. Girls in her classes also related how she disapproved of short sleeves, and had pinned tea towels around their bare arms. Mary Lyons described how she would pull her skirts up when teaching the girls to dance, and the latter would admire her lovely legs. Some of the sisters recalled that she chewed onions, having been told by 'a woman from Spain' that that gave you a good complexion. Her music room, they said, was 'an incredible sight'.

In old age as in her prime, Margaret McMahon was a battler. She had been great at raising money, and was reputedly brilliant at bargaining with the parish for what she wanted for her pupils. One parishioner, a veterinarian, cut the head off a gander and plucked it for her, meanwhile wearing one of the nuns' blue check aprons. He would not, his daughter declared, have done it for anyone else. The people knew, it was stated, that she would have

done *anything* for God.<sup>26</sup> Margaret produced what seemed to her young charges – who had to practise the whole year – as the most wonderful concerts. People came from all over the South East.

#### O T H E R M E M O R I E S

There are many other sisters, now deceased, whose imprints linger on in the memories of their pupils or their community sisters. There were the two Brown<sup>27</sup> sisters, Sister Gertrude and Sister Ursula. They came from a reputedly clever family, their brother becoming a Doctor of Divinity at age twenty-five. Gertrude, in her eighties and living at Angas Street, Adelaide, returned unannounced from a sabbatical. She found the convent gates locked for the evening, and was helped by the taxi driver to climb over the gate. Sister Dominic Fletcher was 'a lovely soul'. Sister Francis Billan was 'nice and very gentle'. She spoke very slowly, drawing out her words. Sister Teresita Juncken, who arrived at Millicent in 1926 as a white veiled novice, was 'delightful'. She loved the boys and was a 'real mother hen' towards them, as was also Sister John Malone, who taught Grades I and II on the stage at St Joseph's. The latter, though, could also be very strict, as could Sister Philomene Stuart and Sister Anthony O'Loughlin, who died relatively young. Sister Carmel McGlynn – of Millicent walking fame – was a 'dear old soul', 'a saint always'. Some of her expressions – or perhaps her Irish accent – intrigued her young pupils, whom she prepared wonderfully for their first Holy Communion. Sister Angela Malone, who taught music, liked a bet, especially on the Melbourne Cup. She also did much for the spiritual welfare of many. Though diagnosed with malignant cancer, she taught until the last weeks before her death. 'Little Sister Monica McKee was gentle and very humble'. A football and cricket fan, she had always a laugh and a twinkle in her eye. She possessed a wicked sense of humour, and a great humanness.

Sister Rose Hill and Sister Xavier Webb were both music teachers. Irene Thomson-Webb had been a concert pianist before she had entered, and later loved to go to the Festival Theatre for concerts. She had been awarded an Elder Conservatorium Scholarship in 1927 and had won high praise from her teacher William Silver. She was expert at choral work, and gave the girls accompanying the choirs great confidence in their ability to perform. Crippled with arthritis when still relatively youthful, she went on teaching from her chair. People would ask for her as their teacher. At St Aloysius College in the 1960s, her singing choirs won a number of prizes in Adelaide competitions.

Rose Hill was a close friend of Gertrude Brown from novitiate days. She had arrived from Adelaide by train to enter, in 1906, and could not believe that the old convent in Commercial Street was really a convent. Rose was

noted for her hospitality, always giving visitors a great welcome. A great sewer, she loved to do fancywork and crochet. She also found pleasure in caring for Mother Liguori Besley in her last years. On Sundays, she went to the Bay (Port MacDonnell) for Mass in the convent chapel and to teach catechism to the children. She would take breakfast for the priest, for herself and her companion nun, and for an old man whose wife had left him. In 1959, Rose broke her hip and was thereafter invalided.

One of the sisters who had instructed a great many adults for reception into the church was Sister M. Evangelist Gunn. Pauline Gunn was born in Victoria, in 1874, and educated by the Sisters of Mercy at North Melbourne. She had taught with them for a couple of years, before entering the Mt Gambier community in 1896, and had spent her early religious life in class room teaching. Later, she changed to the teaching of music and singing, for which she was particularly adapted<sup>28</sup>. She had taught at each of the convents in the South East, as well as instructing adults seeking to know more about the Catholic faith.

Sister Evangelist may have been the terror of the music pupils, but she achieved results. She was a brilliant pianist, and could hear an incorrect note a block away, according to her past students. Notwithstanding her exacting standards, she could be very kind to her pupils. Little fingers red and swollen with chilblains would be treated gently with a bowl of hot water from the kitchen, and soaked and uncurled before a lesson.<sup>29</sup> Sister Evangelist died on 20th September, 1958. Mary Lyons liked Evangelist best of all the nuns, and reminisced about the lovely coconut ice Evangelist made. This was sold for three pence a piece. Its purpose was to bolster her proceeds for the convent fete. It was kept out in the shed and – in a spirit of rivalry – her pupils were enjoined not to tell the other nuns about its existence.

There were a number of sisters who worked in the convent or boarding school, and helped give the establishments a heart. Sisters such as Martha Lockie, a local from The Caves, who had entered before the departure of the sisters to Argentina, Magdalen McFaul from Adelaide, and Rita McGlynn – sister of Carmel and a wonderful cook – were essential to the smooth running of the schools. They did the work of the kitchen, and laundry, and other house duties, freeing the teaching sisters for their more direct work with the children.

Sister Josephine Lovell, from South America, toiled in the kitchen even as an old lady. She spoke Spanish well, and English with no accent. Sister Columba Ferguson was about six feet tall. She was Irish, with a very deep voice. She was 'delightful', past boarders proclaimed. Sister Martha in the kitchen and boarders' dining room would reward helpful girls with pieces of coconut ice. Sister Gerard Green took her place, and also made toffees and fudge and coconut ice, mainly to raise funds for the convent. Sister Zita

Nolan's milking of the cows remained a picture in boarders' memories. She came from Ballarat, and told many stories about the mines. Sister Anastasia North was a 'beautiful singing nun'. She was very short, stout, and rugged in complexion. She came from Western Australia, and returned there, in 1979, where she died two years later. She had been cook, laundress, seamstress, visitor of sick people, and maker of altar breads.

#### THE LAST MOUNT GAMBIERITES

The last days of the novitiate in Mt Gambier saw a number of interesting women, most of whom worked in the South East for many years, before and after amalgamation. Immaculata Coffey, Bernadette Dwyer, Anthony O'Loughlin, John Malone, Dominic Fletcher, Clare Flynn, Xavier Webb, and Vianney (Romley) Dirrmann made their novitiate in Mt Gambier and were the last to be professed there. Romley made first profession only at the Mount, her final profession being made under the amalgamated congregation. Joan McCourt had not been professed, and chose to continue in the Angas Street novitiate.

##### **Immaculata Coffey**

Julia Coffey, Sister M. Immaculata, arrived in Adelaide from Ireland in 1928 and then by train to Mt Gambier, wearing black and sporting a little red hat on her head. The whole twenty-one sisters in the community were waiting for her at the convent. She was met at the train by the parish priest, a niece of Mother Agnes Paula, and Pat Dwyer, later to be Sister Bernadette. There was great excitement at the meeting between the two prospective postulants, and they began a lifelong friendship.

A poem recited at her Golden Jubilee of profession, in 1980, told, in essence, the story of her active life as a Sister of Mercy.

There once lived a lass in the Emerald Isle  
With a heart of gold and a big happy smile  
.....  
When the Lord came calling she travelled afar  
And came at length to Australia!  
The very next day she began to teach  
For hearts of children she wanted to reach.  
And she taught next morning, whatever her fears –  
And she went on teaching for fifty years.<sup>30</sup>

There were about two hundred present at the special Mass on Sunday afternoon to celebrate with Sister Immaculata. She had taught three generations of some families, and many had travelled long distances to be with



*L to R: Srs M. Carmel McGlynn, Gertrude Brown, Anthony O'Loughlin*



*L to R: Srs M. Bernadette Dwyer, Marie Louise (Ruth) Egay, Magdalene (Kathleen) Preece and Immaculata Coffey, with Sr M. Rose Hill in wheelchair. Her nephew, Rev John Hill, is at back*

her. Her Mass Booklet carried the motto 'Strong and Constant is His Love'. (Jer. 31).

On her retirement, at the end of that year, after more than fifty years of teaching, her principal, Sister Mary Harvey, paid tribute to her constancy in these words: 'It is hard to imagine St Paul's School without Sister Mac, as she is so fondly called by children, parents and staff'. A family donated a scholarship of a year's tuition to the school to honour Sister Mac's work.

Born in County Limerick, Sister Mac had been at school during the troublesome time of the Black 'n Tans. She finished up at Mount Gambier, in response to a letter to her school from Mother Agnes Paula, saying that they might have to close their secondary school if they did not receive more members. She was eighteen when she left Ireland. She landed in Adelaide, 19th June, 1928, spent a couple of nights at Angas Street Convent, and went to Mt Gambier by train. She thought she had come to the end of the world. She remembers the shock of seeing indigenous people standing on the sides of the track. It was all so strange to her.

As a novice, she watched little Sister Teresa Brennan – a gentle lady – bring in the milk from the convent cow each morning, milked by old Ted Lamb. Several young sisters had died of tuberculosis in the old, damp convent, and the current group of novices could not leave the breakfast table without drinking a glass of hot milk. With tongue in cheek, the young novice, Sister Immaculata, shocked her companions by telling Sister Teresa: 'If I met a man as faithful as you, I'd marry him in the morning'.

Before she was twenty-one, Immaculata had been sent to take charge of St Anthony's School at Millicent. For much of her teaching life, she was at one or other of the South East centres, but she did spend some years teaching at some of the Adelaide schools.

Her heart, however, was always in the South East. She felt that she had received so much from the older sisters at the Mount. They had, she knew, so much to give and their example of a life of simplicity and prayer stayed with her all her life. Wherever sorrow or sickness arose, she noted that they were first on the scene. They cared for their own sisters to the end.

The amalgamation meant the end of something very precious. It was the beginning of the end of a convent built by Mother Liguori, Mother Agnes, and Mother de Sales, with all the other sisters in their community. They had done a mighty job, and put a wonderful spirit in it. The loss of this identity hurt. But, for Sister Mac, she loved life, and had lots of wonderful memories.<sup>31</sup>

For many of her pupils, also, Sister Mac had given them some wonderful memories. She had a homely touch, despite an essential womanly dignity. There was the picture of her cradling her pet lamb. She would sit on the wall of the fence, and talk to passers-by. In her lifetime, she had become a legend among the people of the South East, not just Catholics, but persons of all

religious persuasions whom she had helped or visited. She had carried on the tradition set by her foremothers, and, in particular, by Sister Joseph Wells.

### **Bernadette Dwyer**

Sister M. Bernadette (Catherine Patricia) Dwyer was born in Millicent. Her mother died when she was four, and her father when she was about seven. She and her younger sister then went to boarding school at Mt Gambier. Bernadette entered in 1929, straight from school, at the end of the Christmas vacation. From her early years, it was Mother Agnes Wells and Mother Liguori who stood out for her. They saw to everything.

At school, Sister Evangelist had taught her advanced piano and Mother Liguori had taught her the violin. Bernadette anticipated becoming a music teacher, but instead she was put to teach in the upper primary school. She spent thirteen years at Naracoorte, which she loved, and three years at Millicent. The rest of her time in the South East was at the Mount.

When one of the music teachers became sick, Bernadette was appointed to fill the gap. She stayed on teaching music, including four years at Angas Street, after the time of amalgamation. She found it difficult at Angas Street at first because she did not know anyone. From 1957 to 1963, she was in charge of the convent at Henley Beach, and also taught singing (choir) from the little cottage at the end of the school yard. After this she became secretary to Mother Cecily Lynch, as well as music teacher at St Aloysius College. In 1974, she returned to Mt Gambier, where she remained with joy until the closure of the convent in 1985.

Bernadette's years of teaching and administration were significantly efficient and capable, and quietly full of devotedness and devotion. As a hobby, she enjoyed crochet and needlework, and was commissioned to make the gold-embossed altar cloth for the Papal Mass in 1986. She was ever ready to share her skill in cooking, and she loved to help tend the convent garden. One of her precious memories was that of the exquisite gardens at the Mount.

### **Clare Flynn**

Sister M. Clare (Kathleen) Flynn was a definite favourite of some of her pupils. She had come from Western Australia in 1933, was young when at Mt Gambier, and the girls found her lovely and very pretty. They judged her intelligent, and an excellent teacher, especially in commercial subjects. Every Friday, the French students recalled, they spent an hour conversing entirely in French. Clare, on the other hand, remembered the French woman from whom she and Mac tried to learn the right accent. French, in those days, began in Grade IV or V at St Joseph's.

Clare entered energetically into anything she undertook. She remem-

bered refusing, as a novice, to be 'mamby pamby', enjoying herself on picnics at Port MacDonnell during the holidays, recreating enthusiastically, or dressing up with Sister John Malone as foreigners come to play for the sisters. As a teacher, she enjoyed passing on her knowledge, some of it acquired but recently, in after school hours.

When sent to Naracoorte, where the numbers in the school were very small, and her health demanded lighter duties for a while, Clare learnt music and did gardening. She coached the basketballers and the State school lost for the first time. The school also acquired a Library Award for those who banked most regularly. They won £25 and Clare started a library. All this was while she taught Grades VI and VII of primary and First, Second and Third Years of secondary.

Clare left the South East in 1951. But she recalled with affection her time there. There were seven in the novitiate during her period, a 'nice number'. They had 'glorious fun, especially when the novice mistress went to bed with a cold'. They were strict times, good times, happy times, some tears, and plenty of hard work.

#### MOUNT GAMBIER UNDER THE ADELAIDE AMALGAMATED CONGREGATION

The amalgamation ushered in a period of increased possibilities of personnel and resources for the schools and convents in the South East. An extensive building programme ensued at Mt Gambier. In 1948, three new classrooms, called the Memorial block, were constructed by the sisters at the cost £4,202. The year 1952 saw the integration of the two schools, St. Paul's parish school and St Joseph's convent school joining together to constitute Mater Christi College. The parochial school had continued in St Paul's Hall and the parish now built classrooms on either side of the stage. Classes continued in the Hall until the opening of St Mary's School, Mt Gambier East, in 1956, and the Jardine Street complex in 1960, when the new Primary School was blessed and opened. In 1960, also, a new chapel at Mater Christi was used for the first time. Benediction concluded a procession in honour of Christ the King, led by Archbishop Beovich from St Paul's Church. In 1966, a senior science laboratory, store, and classroom cost \$29,862, while a tuck shop, office, and music room cost \$2,849.

In 1955, the foundation stone of St Mary's, Pick Avenue, Mt Gambier East, had been laid, and a primary school began there in 1956, with over sixty children. The suburb had developed as a Housing Trust area. Until the September of that year, when the school was ready for use, the pupils were bussed daily to temporary accommodation in St Paul's Hall. Sisters Immaculata Coffey (head teacher) and Patricia Costello began the teaching

there, travelling daily from Mount Gambier. They were nicknamed the 'Easter Eggs'. The numbers in the school doubled quite rapidly, though they began to decrease somewhat in the late 1960s. Also known as 'Our Lady Help of Christians', this comparatively small school constantly received excellent reports from both the State Education Department and the Catholic Education Office. Under successive principals, it was unvaryingly described as a happy wholesome school, serving the needs of the community. Parent, teacher, and pupil relations were of a high order.<sup>32</sup>

#### MATER CHRISTI COLLEGE, 1952-1971

With the new college operating, the previous 'almost universal' uniform of navy and white had been replaced by a distinctive 'grey suit'. A 1952 photo in the Mater Christi College Annual shows boys up to Grade VI. In this year, classes went to Intermediate only. In 1954, there was one girl for Leaving. By 1956, the editor of the college annual commented on the growing numbers in the school, especially at the stage of Fourth Year to Leaving. More students were staying to complete the fourth year. Fifty students had sat for Public and Diocesan examinations, and fifty also for music exams, with satisfying results. The principal's annual report for 1957 challenged the girls to consider the apostolate of teaching in Catholic schools and colleges. They could receive teacher training at the Catholic Teachers College, Ascot Vale, run by the Melbourne Mercies. By 1963, four girls sat for Leaving Honours, two of whom held Honours Teaching Scholarships.

In 1963 also, the State Education Department gave a report for the year, and commented on the excellent teacher-pupil relationship throughout the school at every level. The Report added that this was a direct result of the wonderful spirit of understanding and helpfulness between staff and parents, channelled to the best possible advantage through the Mothers' and Fathers' Club. In that year, interest was aroused in the country of Papua New Guinea by the departure of Sister M. Matthew (Teresa) Flaherty to the Mercy Mission there. Sister M. Matthew had been a popular member of the staff of Mater Christi for seven years, and had been well known as a football coach and a very able sports mistress.

Enrolments continued to grow, and, in 1968, reached three hundred and seventy-eight for primary and one hundred and sixty-five for secondary. There were also one hundred and thirteen children at Mt Gambier East. The secondary curriculum had also widened, and now included subjects such as Economic History, Ancient History, and Home Science. In the late 1960s, with Sister Mary Marietta (Janet Mead) on the staff, there were some notable musical dramatic productions. 'HMS Pinafore', 'The Gondoliers', 'Mary Poppins', and 'Iolanthe' all featured. Marietta's talents combined with those



*Sr Monica Gullivan, last principal of Mater Christi College and first vice-principal of Tenison College, Mt Gambier, 1972*



*Ian McInnes, president of St Paul's Primary School P & E, presents a cheque for \$6,700 to School Board chairwoman, Mrs Anne Peck (centre) and Sr Mary Harvey (principal), 1982*

of Sister Marita Mullins to produce also some memorable internal – if not always reverent – entertainments for the sisters.

Geography and geology excursions or camps became popular with students. Public speaking had become a specialty, and some successes were recorded. Prudence White, a school prefect and President of the Young Christian Students, won second place in the State final of 'Youth Speaks for Australia' for 1965 – her subject 'The Social and Economic Development of Australia on a National Scale'.

The 1966 annual report of the principal, Sister M. Magdalene (Kath) Preece, stated that eighteen girls were successful in Leaving, with an overall pass of eighty-two percent. Magdalene spoke also about the aim of a true education, and referred to significant American research into Catholic schools which showed the major influence of the home with respect to values. Herself a past pupil of the Mount Gambier Sisters of Mercy, she made, as principal, a very real contribution to the well-being of the college, acting with great diligence and integrity.

In 1958, a Fathers' Welfare Club at Mater Christi had been formed to assist the Sisters of Mercy with the many problems attached to the rapid development of the college. The fundraising efforts of the durable Mothers' Club were especially appreciated. They provided \$2,000 for the financial year ending June, 1968, and the parish gave \$6,000.

School fees ranged from \$13.50 per term for primary students, through \$16.50 for Junior Secondary to \$20.50 for Senior Secondary and \$22.50 for Leaving. Music was \$12 per term for lower grades and \$14 for upper. Boarders paid \$120 per term. Reductions on fees were given for families. There were the salaries to be paid of five full-time lay teachers by then, and two part-time. Mt Gambier East had two full-time lay staff. The Sisters of Mercy had a debt of \$22,000 at Mt Gambier.

Over the years, a number of legacies had been left to the convent. With a few exceptions, notably from members of the Sutton family, these were relatively small amounts.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, even the smallest legacy was evidence of the gratitude of the people for the work done by the sisters, and was received thankfully.

In 1968, moves were made by Mother Cecily Lynch to rectify the title ownership of the sisters' land. A layman had asserted that he had photostats to prove that the sisters did not own the land or convent. Cecily wrote to Archbishop Beovich that the sisters had the title deeds, but would like them to be altered so that they were not held jointly with the Catholic Church Endowment Society. She claimed that such a situation was leading to misapprehension among the people, viz., that the sisters did not own the property, hence it would be easy for them to leave the district.<sup>34</sup>

The matter was not then resolved, continuing to be a subject for negotia-

tion. In 1975, Dean Rice, wrote to Archbishop Gleeson that there was 'no historical doubt about the fact that the property is really owned by the Sisters of Mercy Adelaide Inc.' Eleven months later, in June, 1976, Rice's letter to the archdiocesan chancellor detailed improvements made on the Mount Gambier land. The title deeds were eventually changed.

Amalgamation with Adelaide had increased resources but had brought other expenses for the sisters, expenses necessitated by the cost of administration together with that of increased travel and more advanced religious and professional education. They estimated that they needed just over \$1,000 per sister per annum. The formation of the Adelaide Amalgamation, and then of the Australian Union of Sisters of Mercy in 1954,<sup>35</sup> increased these costs to the extent of a further \$296 for each sister annually.<sup>36</sup>

The costs of formation would not have seemed wasted to the people of Mt Gambier, for several young women from the South East were joining the community, and were being made visible. The 1962 College Annual displayed a photo of eleven postulants who had visited the College from Adelaide. Three of these had been student prefects at the College the previous year. They were Ilsa Neicinieks, Margaret Abbott, and Anne O'Loughlin. The three visited the classrooms, and later returned to the Leaving Class, where they entertained the girls with stories of convent life. That evening, they joined the students for 'a most enjoyable social in St Paul's Hall'. On the Saturday, they visited Millicent, the home town of one of them. The visit was declared a tremendous success, and some of the students again had the pleasure of seeing 'our' postulants in the September holidays during their stay in Mt Gambier. The college annual of the following year featured a double page spread, showing the three local postulants in their various stages – as school girls, as postulants, as brides at their reception ceremony, and finally as novices.<sup>37</sup>

The 1962 annual school report had exhorted present students to let the dignity bestowed by their baptismal consecration show out in their conduct, and to be determined to become efficient and successful in some work before even contemplating marriage. This experience would give them some time to acquire some maturity in judgment and stability of character, qualities which would play a big part in helping them to succeed in their real vocation of homemaking. The careers and marriages of old scholars were noted in the college annuals. The college proudly claimed the Mount Gambier Mayor, Mrs L. Bishop, as a past pupil. Wedding photos of other past pupils were displayed prominently. The 1968 Annual also disclosed the sisters wearing a 'new look' habit.

In 1969, the two schools on the church-convent complex separated once again, with the primary school again independent, and Mater Christi catering solely for secondary students. At the end of 1969, a Catholic

Colleges board was formed by the Archdiocese of Adelaide, the parish of Mount Gambier, the Marist Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy. The board was mandated to administer the finances of the two secondary colleges and to conduct a feasibility study into the possibility of forming a co-educational college. As a result of the feasibility study, Mater Christi College continued until 1971, at which time it was merged with the Marist Brothers' Agricultural College to form Tenison College, the first of its kind in South Australia. Principals of Mater Christi in later years included Sisters M. Peter Byrne, Magdalene (Kath) Preece, Monica Gallivan (last), who all played a significant role in the life of the college.

A college annalist wrote that it had been ninety-one years from 1880 to 1971, from St Aloysius' Convent of Mercy School in Commercial Street, to St Joseph's Convent of Mercy School in Penola Road, to Mater Christi College. The college had continued to be an active educational centre. The 1970 report of the principal detailed all the activities of the college during the year. There were many opportunities for sports and public speaking. Other undertakings included streaming of classes, class camps, Y.C.S. (Young Christian Students), cultural activities, parent meetings and other modes of co-operation, and charitable work – just some of the aspects of the life of a busy educational institution. It was a far cry from the small and poverty stricken establishment which had begun in the 'old convent'. As the annalist noted, 'Each new name [for the school] has indicated a further development and an added strength'.<sup>38</sup>

The school at the Mount had, in fact, been always a reasonably effective school, with the advantages of a smaller and more personalised environment. It remained, nevertheless, a country school with the limitations of curriculum and other activities that that implied. Teachers such as Sisters Margaret McMahon and Clare Flynn and others following them were excellent, but the possibilities for combinations of subjects, at secondary level, were few.

The Mater Christi Welfare Club was wound-up in 1971, with the closure of the college. The club presented a cheque of \$500 to principal Sister Monica Gallivan, together with five armchairs and fourteen electric blankets for the sisters at the convent. The committee members and their husbands entertained the sisters at a wind-up dinner.

The college continued to be a reality in the memories of past pupils. Past pupils living in Adelaide continued to meet annually. A Back to the Mount Celebration, in 1975, took the form of a convent garden party, organised by an enthusiastic group of old scholars. One old scholar wrote to the *Border Watch* asking for anecdotes and other mementoes of the convent schools in the South East. She gave her qualification as having gained one hundred percent in composition for her Qualifying Certificate examination. This was in spite of severe indigestion. Mumps or measles or some such disease was



*The Mayor of Mt Gambier, Don McDonnell, farewells (L to R) Srs Francis Billan, Carmel McGlynn, Bernadette Dwyer and Immaculata Coffey*

going around, and they had all been dosed with a few drops of kerosene on a teaspoon of sugar by their teacher.

St Paul's Primary School – with the school at Mt Gambier East becoming St Paul's Junior School – continued at the church-convent base. Past pupils Sisters Ilsa Neicinieks and Margaret Abbott were principal and vice-principal in 1973.

#### MOUNT GAMBIER AFTER THE CLOSURE OF MATER CHRISTI COLLEGE

The assimilation of Mater Christi College into a new entity, Tenison College, signalled the beginning of a gradual withdrawal of the Sisters of Mercy from the South East over the next two decades.

Looking back on the wonderful achievements of the nuns, one past pupil claimed that one of their greatest accomplishments was their contribution to the maintenance of Catholic Education in Mount Gambier. Catholic education could have failed there, if the Mercies had not stayed and got it going. They helped Tenison College to flourish in its early years.<sup>39</sup> Negotiations were tedious and often frustrating, it was a difficult decision to give up independence of operation, but a lasting legacy had been bequeathed to the community.<sup>40</sup>

Opened at the beginning of the school year of 1972, Tenison College was named for Fr Julian Tenison Woods. Sisters of Mercy continued to be part of the administration and staff of Tenison for several years still. There were five Marist Brothers and five Sisters of Mercy on the initial staff. Sister Monica Gallivan, on the staff of Mater Christi for many years and its last principal, became vice-principal of Tenison. She had played a vital role in bringing Tenison College into existence. Brother Julian Casey was principal.

In 1979, the sisters working in the South East met to consider the future of their work in the area. They composed a comprehensive profile of the Mercy and church communities in Mount Gambier and Millicent. An overall reflection on and examination of congregational ministries was to be conducted during the centenary year of the 1880 Mercy foundation in both Adelaide and Mount Gambier. At this time, there were eleven sisters in community at the Mount, engaged in primary and secondary education, and in visitation of aged and sick persons in the district.

Tenison College developed its own identity, with continuing awareness of its origins. In 1980, senior students of the college participated in a twenty-four hour vigil of prayer, organised by the Parish Pastoral Council, to open the parish renewal programme. It was the people's gift to the Sisters of Mercy for their centenary. At this time, there were three sisters on the staff of Tenison.<sup>41</sup> The college annual for that year displayed a photo of early students (girls) sporting straw boater hats – a reminder of whence they had come.

The 1981 Adelaide Mercy chapter gave the South East a priority as long as there were available people and suitable work situations, and selected as one of its goals the exploration of new ministries in the South East. A task force was set up to implement this chapter goal. The task force, together with the congregational administrators, consulted widely with sisters and with parishioners and other interested persons. The task force established a number of priorities:

1. formation of laity, adult education,
2. school, especially staff formation and development;
3. youth work, including post-school and the 20-30 age group.
4. catechumenate.

These priorities were adhered to for most of the decade. The boarding school at the Mount closed at the end of 1981, but the administration of St Paul's primary school continued under sisters – Mary Harvey, followed by Marita Mullins – until the end of 1986. One sister, Gemma Johnson, remained on the staff of Tenison College until the end of 1984, acting as pastoral worker in the parish during 1985. Gemma was also part of the 'Grow' movement. Sisters Loyola Crowe and Marita both investigated adult and family catechesis in England and Europe, and tried to implement it in the parish.<sup>42</sup> Sisters Janette Gray and Ruth Mullins, from diocesan religious education agencies, offered adult religious education to parents and teachers. Sisters Frances Billan, Carmel McGlynn, Bernadette Dwyer, Immaculata Coffey, and Evangelist Cullinan continued the traditional Mercy work of visiting people in distress.

In 1984, a house was purchased as living quarters for three sisters at No. 27 Vansittart Road, Mt Gambier. The downstairs of the convent was renovated to provide living quarters for the remaining five sisters, who lived there until late 1985.

At the beginning of the school year in 1987, St Paul's Primary School opened with its first lay principal, Mrs Irene Hann. The sisters felt confident that the school was in a very good condition, both in spirit and in plant, for the transition to a lay principal. Irene Hann had been on the staff of St Anthony's, Millicent, since 1972.

Irene herself felt that she had imbibed the Mercy spirit from her days at Millicent. She had had the experience there of working under two sister principals, Gabrielle Travers and Margaret Abbott, whom she described as both very creative, and of team teaching with Sisters Rosemary Day and Lyn Beck. She had met with Mercy hospitality there, too. Sister Carmel McGlynn had brought her a pot of tea and vegemite sandwiches after she finished each day.

As principal of Mt Gambier<sup>43</sup>, Irene continued in this tradition of effective schooling and nurturing care set by the sisters at both Millicent and

Mt Gambier. The convent building, part of which was already being used for school activities, was now leased to the school. It was gradually adapted imaginatively to its new purpose.

In 1987, two young sisters, Anne Foale and Pauline Button, both of whom had received some 'modern training'<sup>44</sup> came to work in the parish. Anne (a past pupil) was full-time, Pauline part-time. The latter also worked with the civic community as a social worker. The parish thus received help in a number of new areas or a number of new skills. These were largely in youth work, preparation of liturgy, adult religious education, family counselling, and community development. Anne and Pauline remained in this ministry in the district until the end of 1988. They were the last Sisters of Mercy to work in the South East.

A special Mass and luncheon of farewell was held. Sister Patricia Pak Poy, as congregational leader, told those present that the Mercies were having to look at the reality that they were fewer in number and older. She referred to all the changes in the world over the last twenty years, including the move in the church's mentality from siege to sense of mission. In 1880, the question was how to nurture the faith of the people, and the need was education. In the 1980s, there were new questions. There was still the need for education, but in different ways. The Mercies were continually considering how best to use their limited resources, not in isolation but as part of the whole church. While they wept at this parting – none more than the sisters – they must call each to be actively on mission. The people of Mt Gambier had always heard that call. If they were now true to the efforts and dedication of the past one hundred and eight years, they would make this time a new time in the local church.

Parish priest, Brian Angus, said that the sisters and their work among the people of Mt Gambier would be remembered with affection. The sisters had a prominent place in the history of the life of the church in this district. During their one hundred and eight years they had embraced all aspects of life within the community of Mt Gambier – primary and secondary schooling, visiting homes, hospital, and gaol. The esteem in which they were held was evident at their 1980 centenary and the civic reception then.<sup>45</sup>

Nonetheless, the departure of the sisters from Mt Gambier had not been without its problems. There had been a certain amount of ill-feeling especially around the withdrawal of the sisters still living in the old convent, who had spent most, if not all, of their lives in the South East. These women were seen 'as an integral part of the life of the church in Mount Gambier'. Their departure for Adelaide in 1986 caused a storm of protest.

A number of parishioners and persons from the wider community wrote letters of appeal to the congregational authorities, asking for these older



*Mt Gambier community, 1980*



*Sisters of Mercy graves, Mt Gambier, 1987*

sisters to stay. They, it was claimed, had been making a powerful and much loved contribution. The feelings evinced in the letters were very strong. The St Vincent de Paul ladies wrote that they would be prepared to care for the older sisters for the rest of their lives, if they wanted to remain. The Catholic Women's League wrote in somewhat similar vein, saying that they would always be grateful for the love and help the sisters had given to so many people over the years.

One parishioner who wrote a letter of protest, unwittingly gave a graphic and universal picture of an ideal Sister of Mercy, in her description of the activities of the Mount Gambier sisters.

They visit the sick  
They visit the dying  
They care for the carers  
They comfort the bereaved  
They give good counsel  
They are good listeners  
They visit the lonely  
They are a good influence on the school children just by being in the  
school yard  
They share our joys and sorrows.

'We respect and love them', she concluded, 'and feel our community will be much poorer without them.'<sup>46</sup>

Letters of appeal were not confined to Catholics. The Supervisor of the Day Care Centre, SA Health Commission, stated that many of her elderly clients, Catholic and non-Catholic, were very upset. The void left by the departure of Sisters Carmel McGlynn and Immaculata Coffey, who visited the centre weekly, would be extremely hard to overcome.

The sisters whose role it then was to make decisions about the viability of community works and members, felt somewhat frustrated at their apparent inability to communicate accurately the reasons for their withdrawal. Such a decision, they claimed, had been taken only after much painful consideration, discussion and prayer. The process included the sisters themselves, and with the over-all good of the sisters as the major concern.<sup>47</sup> The notions of a vital community life and of adequate care as the sisters aged were important factors in the decision. The members of the congregational council regretted that they had not found the right language to communicate with the people as to the reasons for the decision.<sup>48</sup>

Undoubtedly, the departure from Mount Gambier included some grief for the older sisters involved, but the over-all well-being and concerns of the Congregation were also their own priority. The fact that their departure was lamented by so many other people within the district was a genuine tribute to

the role that the Sisters of Mercy had played in the life of the community since its establishment there in 1880.

FIRST BRANCH HOUSE: MILLICENT,  
1899-1980

The Mount Gambier Mercy Congregation had opened its first branch house in 1899, at Millicent. The township of Millicent was named for the daughter of the first Anglican bishop of Adelaide, Dr Short. Millicent Short married George Glen, who was part-owner of Mayurra Station, an immense estate occupying the whole of the land upon which the town of Millicent eventually emerged. The township developed on a limestone ridge in the centre of the newly drained Millicent flats, and was formally proclaimed in 1870.

The parish of Millicent had been separated from St Paul's, Mt Gambier, in 1898, with parish priest William McEvoy. On 27th July of that year, the foundation stone of a Mercy convent was laid, on land purchased some walking distance from the church. Quite a large crowd had assembled, despite the rough weather, and the stone was laid by Mr M. Hogan, who had donated £50.

The finished convent, dedicated to St Anthony of Padua, was formally opened on 1st February the following year. This was quite an affair for the Catholics of the South East. The railways granted excursion fares from Mt Gambier. About one hundred people took advantage of these fares and came from the various stations along the way. Dean Ryan, of Mt Gambier, addressed the congregation, which numbered about two hundred and fifty in all. The Dean claimed that the new convent would 'radiate the light of learning, religion and refinement' over the district. Not least, there were the 'good Sisters themselves, whose self-sacrificing work, in schools, in hospitals, and sometimes on the battlefield, had won the admiration of the world.' Reiterating the prevailing idealisation of motherhood, Mr J. Pick stated that 'the hand that rocked the cradle ruled the world', and it was necessary that the girls who would rock the cradles of the future should be educated for the motherhood they were to take up.<sup>49</sup>

Mother M. Agnes Paula had supervised the preliminary work necessary to set up the sisters in Millicent. Architect was Mr T. Hall, and Thomas Kelly was the builder. Years later, the sisters lovingly cared for Kelly's invalid wife, as a boarder in the Mt Gambier convent.

Mother M. de Sales Byrne was appointed first Sister-in-Charge. Her community comprised Sisters M. Antonia, Evangelist, and Berchmans. Over the years, each of these four sisters, together with Sisters Agnes Paula, Liguori, Joseph, Patrick, Margaret, and Rose occupied the post of local superior at some stage, until the re-union of the Mt Gambier congregation with Adelaide in 1941.



*Millicent convent*



*Pupils of St Joseph's Convent School, Millicent, c.1927*

There had already been a Catholic school in Millicent run by a Mrs Galway, in St Alphonsus' church hall. Following the Mercy pattern, two schools were opened in Millicent. The first school building on the convent property was a wooden building called The Academy, formerly owned by Mr Lester. St Joseph's Convent Select School opened with fourteen children, and St Anthony's Intermediate School had seventeen students. Visitation of the parishioners and Sunday preparation for the sacraments of children in outlying districts became regular features of the sisters' work in Millicent.

The two schools established themselves quickly. In 1900, a new school building was constructed. The two institutions were housed in this building, with sliding doors to separate them. The Academy, on the back section of the property, continued to house certain classes for many decades. The *Millicent Times*<sup>50</sup> allotted a full column to the account of their combined prize-giving and concert at the end of 1903. Father McEvoy presented a gold cross to Miss Dora McLaughlin for her University Pass in English, and another gold cross to Miss Meta Tantram for her London Trinity College pass in music, Junior grade. Other prizes included silver serviette rings, silver bangles, a gold brooch, and the more customary books.

The Convent Account Book for 1899 showed a not unhealthy financial state. School fees had brought in almost £130, most of this from St Joseph's. Donations at the opening amounted to over £170, a Cake Fair and Social more than £50, and the concert £11. There were seven loans totalling £950, and the Mt Gambier convent had contributed £1167/3/6. The grand total was £2,485/1/7. Of this, £1,473/10/6 went into purchase of land, building of convent, and architect fees. School expenses and building, including architect fees, were £727/7/1. The living expenses of the four sisters for the year reached £37/13/10. Architect fees for convent and school, combined, were more than this amount – £41/16/0. Cash in hand was £5/13/9.

A breakdown in the year's living expenses of the sisters is interesting, both in terms of the frugality of their lives and the changing costs of food and other household expenses.

	£
Butcher	7/10/3
Baker	5/16/9
Dairy	2/5/8
Grocer	6/17/7
Vegs and fruit	15/3
Sundries	1/3/9
Light and fuel	3/7/9
Laundry	19/2
Clothing	8/17/5

In interpreting these figures, it must be remembered that people in country districts were very generous in supplying vegetables and other home grown food to their local convents. Irishman Thomas McCourt, who died in 1922, was remembered for his organization of the people to see that the sisters had enough food in hard times. At his funeral, children from the convent school lined the streets.

A bazaar to raise funds for the church and convent, held in 1903, was declared big business and unrivalled in attendance, by the *Millicent Times*.<sup>51</sup> An Art Union for the same cause was drawn on 17th March of that year, during the St Patrick's Day celebrations. In July of that year, the newspaper reported on the charitable efforts of the children at the convent school. They annually showed 'their thoughtfulness for the little sufferers in the Adelaide Children's Hospital' by raising funds for that institution. This year a sale of gifts, conducted by the children, was held in St Anthony's Hall. It netted £10, a very successful effort.

If 1907 was a typical year, the school year was not without its regular activities beyond the three Rs. In February, 1907, the newspaper reported that the annual picnic for the local Catholic Sunday School was held in McIntyre's paddock, near the Millicent Rabbit Factory.<sup>52</sup> In February also, the school was visited by a number of MPs, including the state treasurer, Hon. A.H. Peake. The visitors were hospitably welcomed by the Mother Superior, who also gave them 'an insight into the methods adopted in fitting the young idea for a responsible position in life'.<sup>53</sup> In March, there were the usual St Patrick's Day celebrations. A procession of competitors, led by Father McEvoy on his black horse, Midnight, went from the presbytery to Gum Park, for the sports, including 'horses', followed by an evening of 'national' concert. In the same month, a special concert by the convent children, together with several adults, was held in aid of the Catholic Orphanage in Adelaide.<sup>54</sup> In June, music pupils had the excitement of sitting for the examinations of the Trinity College of Music, all of whom passed creditably. In August, the annual children's concert in aid of the Orphanage and the Adelaide Children's Hospital was held.<sup>55</sup> In September, the fair and bazaar for the St Anthony's Hall fund was held, and in October the annual bazaar for the convent. At the latter, the newspaper commented that some of the work was of a rare order, notably the oil paintings and most of the needlework contributed by the sisters.<sup>56</sup> Finally, the year wound up with a prize-giving ceremony and school concert, which included the staging of both a cantata, *Red Riding Hood*, and a drama, *Ernscliffe Hall*.

September, 1918, a skating rink was purchased and became the new St Alphonsus' Hall. A social and dance marked its inauguration, and the proceeds went towards the convent school children's effort for the Red Cross society. It raised at least £10. Father F.J. Gatzemeyer promised to subsidize

this and the proceeds of the children's collection at the rate of two shillings and six pence in the pound.

Even though they occupied the same building, the social separation between the two schools was quite marked, as in other centres. The memory of the division remains in the minds of past pupils, as also does the presence of considerable numbers of Protestant children in the school. It would seem, however, that by the 1930s, the two schools were operating as St Anthony's Primary or Junior School and St. Joseph's Senior School. Grades I and II were housed in the Academy. The large school room was divided into three sections. Desks were on the stage for Grade III. Grades IV to VI were on the lower floor, as were Grades VII and upwards, behind the partition.

Discipline was strict. A 'cane' was visible, generally resting on the front desk. Sometimes it 'mysteriously' disappeared, only to be replaced at the end of the day. The cane was generally reserved for the boys, the teachers having less physical ways of disciplining restless small girls. School days could be long for children from outlying districts. One former student recalls how she and her eleven-year-old brother drove the family buggy to school each day, a journey of more than five miles. They tied the horse up by the pine trees in the town, and then walked up to the school. Darkness had fallen by the time they arrived home in winter.<sup>57</sup>

School concerts in the 1920s and 1930s were remembered by more than one past pupil of those years as 'rather elaborate and wonderful for that time'. They were held in the Institute building. Every student took part whether she or he liked it or not. When roles demanded it, the performers would include some adults. Chief organizer was Mrs Altschwager, whose husband was a local grazier. Mrs Altschwager loved organizing concerts, arts shows, and like events. At times somewhat demanding, she nevertheless achieved marvels.

By 1922, the convent school was recording students' passes in University Public Examination subjects. The students at Millicent convent mostly stopped at Intermediate, though one or two or three went on to Leaving some years. Intermediate classes could reach eight to ten in number. The subjects taught included English, Latin, French, History, Geography, Mathematics, Bookkeeping, Shorthand, Typing, Art, and, of course, Music. The grades and the students' results seem somewhat spasmodic, probably depending on the availability of suitable sisters to teach the upper grades and subjects. Yet many country students received an introduction to, and usually an effective grounding in, post-primary education who would not have otherwise been able to do so. Some went on and became professional men and women.

One such family of the 1930s have recorded their gratitude for such a

grounding, and expressed a special fondness for the little school at Millicent.<sup>58</sup> There were two girls and three boys in the family, and the eldest, a girl, from age nine, drove the horse and buggy to school three miles each day, with the five of them in it. All of the five were educated to Intermediate at St Joseph's, and four of them to Leaving. The other girl in the family did Leaving at St Aloysius, Adelaide.

Other families and individuals have also attributed much of their success in later life to the grounding given them by the little convent school at Millicent. But the record of the White family's results in various examinations is worth relating in some detail, as it gives a glimpse into the rather idiosyncratic working of St Joseph's secondary classes. It is a fascinating glimpse of a response to obvious local need and a vivid illustration of the generosity of that response. In 1935, Peter was one of four pupils who passed a Sub-Intermediate Examination, Dawn was the only pupil for Intermediate, and Joan was the sole Leaving Certificate candidate. The latter passed in English, French, Modern History, Geography, and Drawing, thereby winning a studentship at the School of Arts. The following year, Michael in Grade VI, received percentage marks of eighties or nineties in most of his subjects. In that year, Dawn passed in six subjects for Intermediate, and also obtained diplomas for type, shorthand, and advanced shorthand from the National Business College. Peter also passed in six Intermediate subjects. The following year, Michael won a bursary for the Qualifying Certificate at the end of Grade VII. Peter sat for Leaving. Some years later, both Michael and youngest brother Desmond also did Leaving at St Joseph's.

In later life, Michael White became a judge. Asked to write his recollections of school at Millicent, he related that he had left school in the immediate post-depression year of 1940, half way through his leaving year, to take up a job at the Union Bank in Millicent. Each night, when the bank closed at 4 p.m., he walked to the convent and studied there until 6 p.m. He passed his leaving in the November examinations of that year.

His sister Joan went to board at Angas Street and from there attended the School of Arts, from which she received a Diploma in Fine Arts. Dawn accompanied her to Adelaide as a student at St Aloysius' and eventually topped the State and Commonwealth shorthand and typing examinations, having been initiated into these subjects in Millicent. Their brother Peter, after years of service in a bank, became a solicitor. Michael himself, after service during World War II, did law at Adelaide University, becoming finally a Judge of the Supreme Court. Their brother Desmond did a correspondence course in draftsmanship and engineering, which he used in business.

Michael White felt he owed much to Sister Margaret McMahon. He had private tuition from her after he left school. She was, he said, like a governess to him. A short lady with much energy and ambition for her students, she



*Boys at St Anthony's School, 1930s*



*Sr Margaret Abbott (L), last sister-principal at Millicent with Mrs Irene Hann, her successor, in St Anthony's staff room, 1981*



*Millicent school, erected 1900*



*Millicent school staff, 1973. L. to R: Back – Srs Kathryn Travers, Rita McIntyre, Front – Srs Carmel McGlynn, Gabrielle Travers, Rosemary Day*

urged him repeatedly to push on, to never say he had done enough. She made sure he joined the library and that he read nearly every book in it.

#### MILLICENT POST-AMALGAMATION

In 1944, the State Education Department Inspector commented on the pleasing breadth of the curriculum, the very sound progress and the very pleasing tone within the school, but also on the lack of accommodation. This comment on unsatisfactory conditions was repeated in the following years. St Mary's Infant School building, at the cost of £1,400, was opened in mid-1949.<sup>59</sup> so that by 1950, the school consisted of two sections, and had a population of fifty-six children, eight of whom were non-Catholic.

By 1956, there were one hundred and two children. Religious Education at Tantanoola and Mt Burr reached another fifty-eight children. In her visitation of the convent, that year, Mother Dolores Barry wrote that there was a very happy atmosphere in Millicent. In a report to the whole Mercy community, the same year, the Millicent sisters claimed that the convent was just able to keep itself. With the help of the Mothers' Welfare Club and the fathers of the children, there was some money for school improvements.

In 1957, extensions were added to cope with increasing numbers, and to combine the old and the new buildings. Classes ranged from Kindergarten to Intermediate. Sister M. Vianney (Romley) Dirrmann taught all the children in Grades VI and VII, together with twelve secondary students – as far as Intermediate – all in the same room. This was, the inspector commented, a very heavy teaching load.

The enrolments continued to grow, and, in these decades of heavy immigration into Australia, there was the task of initiating the newcomers to the country into the mysteries of the English language and of Australian education. Nevertheless, reports, from both State and Diocesan Inspectors, continued to be positive throughout the sixties, under what the Inspectors saw as 'enlightened leadership'.

At the end of 1963, the secondary classes ceased, under instructions from Auxiliary Bishop James Gleeson.<sup>60</sup> By 1965, there were five sisters on the staff, teaching from Grades I to VII. Girls numbered ninety-three, boys eighty-one. In 1969, there were one hundred and eighty-two children, and five teachers, and the inspector of that year was still very much impressed with standards throughout the school. Religious instruction at the weekends, guidance of youth groups, and visitation of the sick in hospitals and of other parishioners also occupied much of the sisters' time.

The progressive thrust of the school continued. In February, 1973, renovations to the school buildings were blessed and opened. It was a celebration of the seventy-five years of the school. Under principal Sister Gabrielle Travers,

these renovations made possible a move to an 'open space' method of teaching, with curriculum for each student at their own level.

In 1974, a lay principal was appointed, Arthur Paar. There were two sisters on the teaching staff for the whole year, another for the first term only, and Sister Carmel McGlynn visited parishioners. He was followed by a second male principal, Jack Jordan. In 1978, the principalship reverted back to the sisters, with Margaret Abbott, who had been on the staff for two years, assuming the role. At this stage, it was felt that a woman's style of administration might be more appropriate to the prevailing ethos of Millicent Convent School.

Her appointment was significant for the little school of St Anthony in another way, as well. One of its past pupils had taken over the administration. Sister Margaret Abbott had attended the Millicent Convent School from 1950 to 1959. She wrote that it was somewhat 'with tongue in cheek' that she became principal of her old school. She brought rich memories and an experience not to be easily forgotten. But there were few similarities between the two eras for her.

Now, she continued, the staff was predominantly lay, the secondary section of the school had been closed for years, and the curriculum, including religious education, was very different. The old building had been renovated in 1973 and now had a lower ceiling, carpets covered the once shiny floor boards, and the whole was a very attractive classroom. An adventure playground, an organic garden, a much improved library, school camps and other excursions, Masses at the school itself, assemblies open to parents, parent interviews throughout the year, weekly staff meetings, piloting the new Social Studies curriculum – these were some of the things that now kept St Anthony's a vibrant and creative place in the late twentieth century, as it had been in its different way earlier.

In 1979, Sister Carmel McGlynn celebrated her Golden Jubilee of religious profession.<sup>61</sup> The whole town took part. Carmel (Margaret known as Maude) McGlynn had arrived in the South East from Galway, Ireland, in 1926, at the age of twenty-one. She became something of a legend in Millicent, and was not infrequently seen walking along the road miles out from the town, on visits to needy parishioners. One gentleman christened her 'Sister Caramel' – she was a sweetie, he declared.<sup>62</sup>

Carmel's Jubilee proceedings opened with her tolling the old convent bell, now resident in the Millicent museum. Carmel, at this time, was seventy-three years of age, but still a great walker and visitor of the sick, particularly those in hospital. She had taught also at Mt Gambier and Naracoorte, and was well known throughout the whole district. From gifts received from parishioners and others, she was able to donate £500 to St Francis Xavier's Seminary for the education of a young priest.

In 1980, a new school administration block was constructed. The parish had raised almost \$11,500 towards its costs, and the Commonwealth Government subsidised it to the tune of \$22,100. At its opening were representatives of several four-generation families who had attended the Millicent convent schools. The whole four generations of the Newberry family – Bern, Betty, Josie Rogers, and Katie Scanlon – were present, with great-grandfather Bern, aged seventy-nine, reminiscing about his early education in the old timber building to the rear of the first stone building.

1980 was also the last year of the sisters living in the convent. The following year, Sister Margaret, now the only sister on the staff, commuted from Mt Gambier. At the end of that year, the administration again changed into the hands of a lay principal. This time it was a woman, Mrs Irene Hann, and under her able administration, the school continued to prosper.

At the thanksgiving Mass and dinner<sup>63</sup> for the sisters who were leaving Millicent, parish priest Jack Boog homilised that the evening was 'a graduation ceremony. After guiding the parishioners for eighty-two years, the sisters felt their work was done; it was now up to the parishioners to go it alone, now that their training was completed. ... Sister Margaret Abbott was the last in a line of faithful and greatly loved principals. ... The key emphasis of Sister Margaret's leadership was to encourage parents to feel welcome and take part in the day to day life of the school'. They had walked behind in the sisters' footsteps, Boog said, and with the sisters, side by side, and now they were called to walk on their own. The sisters had made this possible. Present at the dinner were two foundation members of the original Mothers' Welfare Club, Mrs Edie Bellinger and Mrs McRostie.

Irene Hann later reminisced about her years at Millicent as teacher and principal, during the 1970s and 1980s. St Anthony's was a small school, and the staff had worked together on many projects within the school and as contributions to church and civic activities. The government was offering grants and the school took advantage, in order to develop the best opportunities for the children. It was a collaborative and a very feminine mode of operation. There was also a lot of good fun.

#### NARACOORTE, 1903-1973

The second branch house from Mount Gambier convent had been established at Naracoorte in 1903.

The history of the Naracoorte parish is bound up with that of Penola, which Peter Powell, the first resident priest in the South East, had made his centre in 1854. He was followed by Julian Tenison Woods, who remained in the South East for ten years. During that time, Tenison Woods travelled widely in the district, pursuing not only his pastoral duties but also his

burgeoning interest in geology. A tree on the road between Penola and Naracoorte is still identified as 'Fr Woods' tree'. Legend has it that he would celebrate Mass and recite the rosary beneath its branches. It is also alleged that he performed a wedding ceremony there.<sup>64</sup>

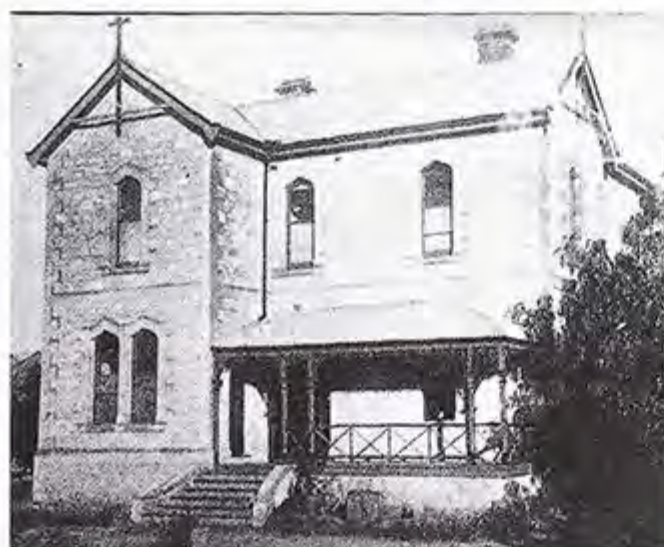
It was in the beginning of the 1880s that the presbytery was transferred from Penola to Naracoorte, which had become a more convenient centre, especially with the construction of the railway between Naracoorte and Kingston. A church was erected and opened in February, 1884.

The Sisters of Mercy arrived in Naracoorte, to establish a school, in 1903. Mother Mary de Sales Byrne was in charge. Her community comprised Sisters Mary Patrick, Joseph and Gerard. Parish priest was George Pierce. The foundation stone of a convent was laid on 9th August, 1903, and the completed building was officially opened by the Vicar-General, Mgr Byrne, on 9th March, 1904. It stood on a high position in the centre of Naracoorte, near the church. It was a two-storeyed building, with stone steps.

The same kind of delay exercised by the archdiocese with respect to the building of the new Mother House in Mt Gambier had also arisen in conjunction with the opening of the branch house in Naracoorte. In the early part of 1903, the sisters were in the midst of negotiations to rent a house. This was Scriven's house, in the vicinity of Michell's skin store, near the church and in a very private situation. Rent would be for eight months at 10/- per week, with right of purchase within that time for £300. The sisters were to take possession of it on 14th February. The sisters promised that, if the school at Naracoorte prospered, they would build a convent there.

This was in February, 1903. By the next month, they did ask permission from the archbishop to build a convent and school at Naracoorte. The rented house could not accommodate all their pupils. They felt that they had a very good prospect before them, the people already having proved their generosity to the community. The parishioners were anxious to help the sisters to build, and would give sand gratis as well as the carting of the stone for the building. The government was selling stone from Magarey's station at half price. It was the best stone. A bazaar was arranged for the immediate future, and the laying of the foundation stone, as well as a concert, would help raise funds.

The main consideration of the archbishop and his agents, to the sisters' view at least, seemed to be that the sisters agree to joint ownership. The sisters were willing, if not completely happy, to comply with this requirement, but they pointed out that they sometimes had to act quickly, without his express direct approval, in order to ensure a good bargain, though not without the approval of the local parish priests. Despite the sense of frustration felt by the sisters, they went about the construction of the Naracoorte convent and school. W.A. Seagrim of Woodside won the contract to build.



Naracoorte convent

Advertisement,  
Naracoorte school  
before 1911

## ENTERTAINMENT

— BY THE —  
Pupils of the Convent School.

St. Anthony's Hall, Naracoorte,  
Tuesday, December 19.

### Programme:

Overture—"The Storm"	Miss Blanche Wright
Recitation—"How Jimmy landed the baby"	Master G. Gibbs
Chorus—"God bless the Friends we love"	Misses B. Wright and S. Roth
Pianoforte Duet—"Grande Galop"	Misses N. Roth and H. Woodall
Violin Selection—"Mazurka"	Piano, Miss B. Wright
Recitation—"A Baby's troubles"	Miss D. Macmillan
Song—"The Kangaroo"	Junior Girls
Dialogues—"Aunt Matilda's Collar"	Miss M. McManon
Miss Matilda Dindity (a funny old maid)	Miss S. Roth
Three } her nieces	Miss A. Hitchcock
Bertha }	Miss F. Leitch
Mary }	Miss M. Hayne
Three } servants	Miss B. Wright
Miss Crisp (the charwoman)	Miss E. Hayne
Song—"The Dead Bell"	Miss S. Roth
Pianoforte Solo—"Dance of the Fairies"	Junior Girls
Orchestra—"The Royal Hunt"	Misses B. Wright and S. Roth
Chorus—"The Bell Bird"	Misses B. Wright and S. Roth
Violin Selection—"Kilmerney"	Miss H. Woodall, N. Roth, M. O'Reilly, and S. Roth
Recitation—"A Misunderstanding"	Miss N. Hitchcock
Pianoforte Solo—"Home Sweet Home"	Miss B. Wright

### Drama "KATHLEEN."

ACT I.—(Kathleen's Mission is assigned to her.)	Miss A. Hitchcock
Pianoforte Solo—"Amarotte"	Miss S. Roth
ACT II.—(Granny Gilligan surmises Zola is Mrs. Royaltan's lost child.)	Misses M. Hayne and K. Neale
Pianoforte Duet—"Grande Galop"	Miss K. Neale
ACT III.—(Mrs. Royaltan's niece plots against Kathleen.)	Miss M. Hayne
Pianoforte Solo—"Moonlight on the Murray"	Miss M. Hayne
ACT IV.—(Kathleen is arrested and proved innocent.)	Miss M. Hayne
Pianoforte Solo—"A Birthday Greeting"	Miss M. Hayne
ACT V.—(Kathleen's Mission is fulfilled.)	Master Annet Nephew
Recitation—"Thanks"	Master Annet Nephew

### DRAMATIS PERSONÆ:

Kathleen	Miss Moyna McMahon
Mrs. O'Connor (mother to Kathleen)	Miss A. Hitchcock
Mrs. Royaltan (aunt to Kathleen)	Miss A. Hitchcock
Ethel } (niece to Mrs. Royaltan)	Miss S. Roth
Lucille }	Miss F. Leitch
Granny Gilligan	Miss B. Wright
Zola (Mrs. Royaltan's lost child & friend)	Miss N. Hitchcock
Lola (Italian girl, rescuer and protector of Alma)	Miss A. Wells
Fanny (a frisky little negro maid)	Miss T. Hitchcock
Magistrate	Master G. Gibbs
Police-man	Masters E. O'Leary and L. Hutchison
Monks	Master A. Jarrett

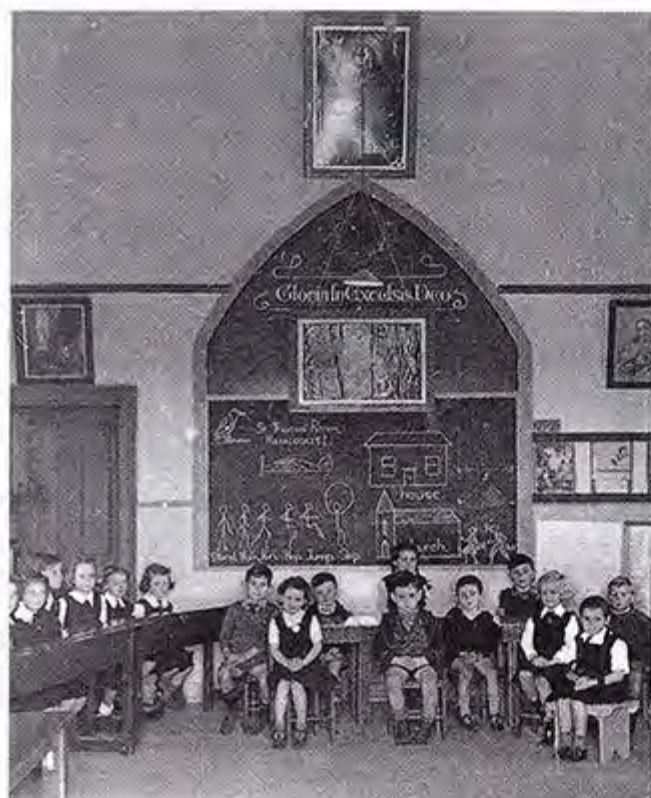
To commence at 7.30 p.m. Admission, 1s.

Pupils Distribution of Prizes and Display of Work  
Wednesday afternoon at 2.30 o'clock.

Naracoorte Herald Print.



Pupils, Convent School,  
Naracoorte, 1911



*Grade One, classroom in  
old church, Naracoorte,  
1940s*



*First Communicants, Naracoorte, 1953. Margaret Burke is in the front row, first on the left*

The opening of the convent became a gala occasion for the small town. A devout Wesleyan Methodist woman – opposed to gambling – won the ‘dressed fowl’ in a guessing competition.

One young woman from Naracoorte, Annie, daughter of Mr and Mrs Thomas McMahon, joined the Mt Gambier community in September of that first year, 1903. Annie was the first postulant from that town. Her mother had been one of the women actively helping the sisters to establish themselves. As Sister Margaret Mary, she became the long remembered identity of the Naracoorte convent, as also of Mt Gambier and Millicent.

The initial school building was called St Thomas’ Hall. The school was south of the convent, and consisted of one large classroom with sliding doors and raised platform. Class and music rooms led off from this. The main entrance faced Penola Road, and was of Gothic design. The usual school subjects were taught, together with painting, needlework, and music, which attracted outside pupils from surrounding districts. Some came from as far away as Lucindale, by train, then a considerable journey.

The convent school rapidly became a significant part of the rural community. Fund raising was an avenue for community events. Many women in the parish helped organise a bazaar and several small dances annually. Convent concerts became quite popular entertainment, with standing room only, even when they moved to the venue of the Town Hall. One pupil, who began school in 1919, remembered the ‘whole school’ being present at the opening of the Naracoorte Ice and Cold Storage Works. Each child received a half pound block of ice. Nuns were called ‘Mam’s’ in those days, fees were six pence a week, slate pencils were supplied, music fees were £3 a quarter.<sup>65</sup>

Lack of money was always – as everywhere else – a continuing concern. When Father Pierce died about 1924, he left a legacy of £300 to the sisters, stating it could be used as they wished. Mr T.P. Davis objected to Archbishop Spence when the money was allegedly used on the convent at Mt Gambier. He maintained that morally it belonged to Naracoorte, as the sisters were always expecting help from the parish, and indeed had had that help for the last twenty years. The resources of the place were too small for the needs of the convent and parish to be met with success at the same time. Father Pierce’s expectation had been the money would only be used elsewhere if the Naracoorte debt had been wiped out. Archbishop Spence agreed with Davis, and the money went to Naracoorte convent.

In 1933, Reverend Mother Liguori requested permission from Archbishop Spence for the sisters at Naracoorte to raise money to build classrooms for the higher grades in the secondary school. Even if the church furniture were not in the classroom, it could only accommodate the primary classes. She suggested a coin collection throughout the Naracoorte district every alternate month. Spence agreed to the fundraising but not to a coin collec-

tion. When the new church was built in 1937, the old church was used as a classroom.

Additional classrooms became necessary in the mid-1950s. The school enrolment was about one hundred and eighty in 1963. As at Millicent, the secondary grades were discontinued at the end of that year.

In August, 1963, Auxiliary Bishop James Gleeson had written to the parish priests of both Millicent and Naracoorte concerning the discontinuance of the secondary classes. With future trends in secondary education, and a wider range of subjects necessary, it was not effective to continue to cater for secondary students, in the same class as primary pupils, as was happening. Moreover, the number of primary pupils was increasing. Secondary classes were to discontinue at the end of that year. The sisters would help in religious instruction in the State High School.

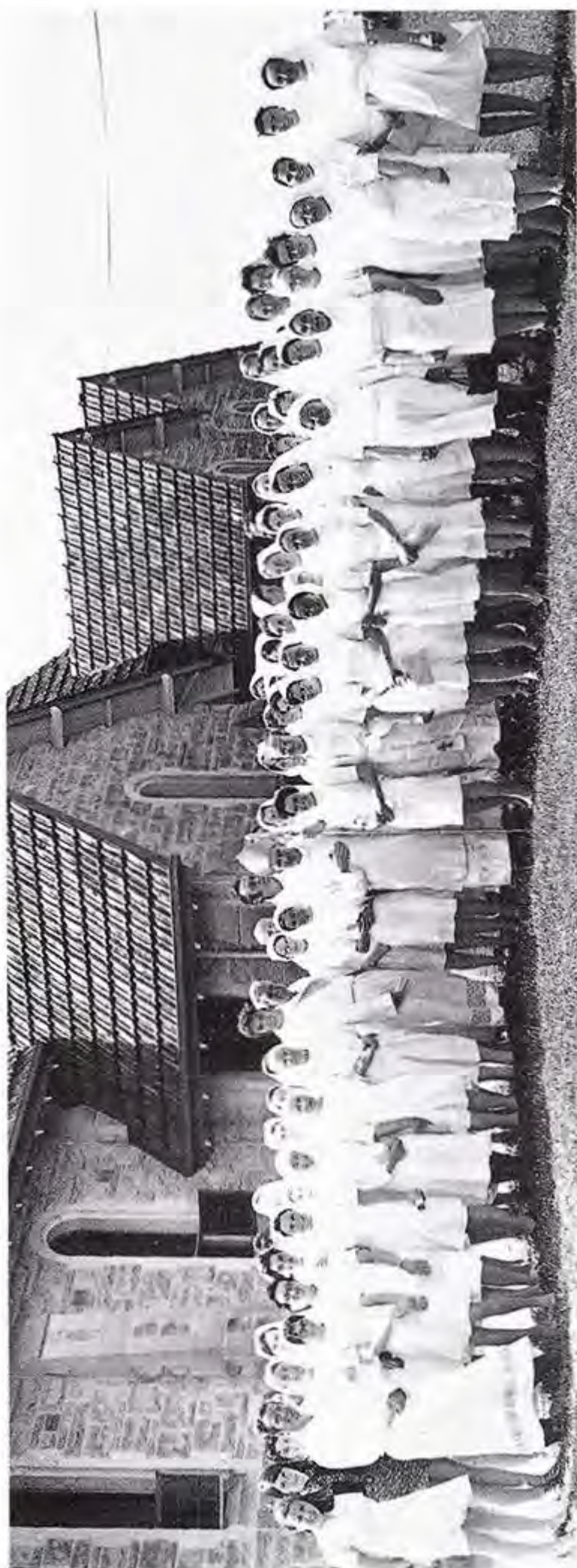
Fr A. Boylan of Naracoorte was not happy about the discontinuance of the secondary classes. He wrote to Gleeson saying that lower income girls in the country were getting a good Catholic secondary education. The secondary classes were a strong influence for good in the primary section. If they were discontinued, the school might lose some of its primary pupils also. The added years with the sisters were invaluable safeguard against the dangers present in the country or away from home.

Bishop Gleeson replied, in effect, 'Sorry, but ...'. The sisters would hope to continue their influence on young people through religious instruction in the High School, and probably through the Young Christian Students movement. The latter, and an annual retreat for secondary pupils at the High School, could foster an apostolic spirit among the Catholic pupils.

In the years 1967-8, almost two hundred Catholic children at State schools were given Religious Instruction, half of them being students at Naracoorte High School. A Youth Day, planned by the Social Committee of the parish, which invited three girls and three boys from Naracoorte High to help with the planning, brought together some hundred pupils from Mater Christi and Marist Colleges at Mt Gambier with the Catholic young people of Naracoorte.

The help given by the women in the parish was constant throughout the life of the school. During the 1967-8 financial year, for example, the Convent of Mercy Welfare Club (all women) raised \$700 for school teaching aids and equipment. Mother Mary Peter Byrne arranged a visiting day for parents to see and use them.

In mid-1971, Mother Cecily Lynch notified the Naracoorte people about the possible withdrawal of sisters at the end of that year. She stated that it was no longer possible for the congregation to provide four sisters in any urban or country primary school. Naracoorte was a rather isolated area, and it was difficult to provide enough sisters for a satisfactory community life there.



*Sr Margaret Burke's final profession, Navacoorte, 12th January, 1972*



*Srs Peter Byrne (L.) and Teresita Juncken at Centenary of Naracoorte Church, 1982*

Cecily realised that the country people were being penalised once again, but she could see no alternative.

Both Archbishop Gleeson and the parish priest, Father P. Ward, wanted to preserve the school if possible. The people of the parish promised maximum cooperation, with maximum enrolments and some increase to school fees. Mother Cecily agreed to make every effort to keep two teaching sisters in Naracoorte for the next two years, at least. This she did.

Financial considerations were vital after that time, however. In September, 1973, Archbishop Gleeson reported to Father Ward that the school could remain open the following year, with a fully lay and genuinely Catholic staff, if an enrolment of ninety could be guaranteed for the beginning of the next year. Unhappily, the potential enrolment was less than seventy. The necessary payment of lay teachers' salaries meant that such a small number was not enough to make the school viable. Thus the departure of the two sisters also meant the closure of the Naracoorte convent school.

The last Mercy community in Naracoorte consisted of Loyola Crowe and Catherine Weatherald. With a December temperature of 37° Celsius that year of 1973, the long grass in the convent back yard burst into flames. There was no damage, but it was noted that 'the Sisters were certainly going out with a flourish, in a blaze of glory'. At the closing Mass on Sunday, 9th December, the final school reports were presented to the children.

Many years previously, during the 1922-3 school vacation, a boxthorn hedge that had surrounded the school yard had been removed. When school re-opened the next year, Sister Gertrude Brown had asked the children to bring a tree for planting. This had led to trees everywhere, but, by 1973, only the very large peppertree, planted by Edward Pluckhahn outside the front door, had survived to witness the sisters' departure from Naracoorte. It stood as a reminder of the school and the sisters.

Another kind of memento lay in the identity of the new occupants of the convent building. Mrs W. Munro had given the sisters their first meal in Naracoorte. It was her great grand-daughter, Mrs Pauline Fitzgerald, who eventually bought and occupied the convent with her family.<sup>66</sup>

The Naracoorte parish had also given three women to the Mercy Institute. Sister Margaret McMahon was joined, in later years, by Sister Dominic Fletcher, and later again, by Sister Margaret Burke. Sister Dominic (Eileen) had come from Robe, once part of the Naracoorte parish, and had joined the Mercies in 1932. After teaching for many years in the South East, she had completed a special course for teaching mentally retarded and slower learners at the Melbourne State Teachers' College. She then used her new skills in teaching at St Patrick's School for the Handicapped, at Dulwich. She died in 1989.

In November, 1972, Sister Margaret Burke, a past resident of Naracoorte, made her final commitment to the Mercy Institute in the church there. This

was the first time such a ceremony had taken place in a small country parish. Archbishop Gleeson, some two hundred parishioners, seventy nuns, and some priests were present. Margaret's life as a Sister of Mercy was short. She died in 1979, aged thirty-three years.

The memory of the sisters lingered on in Naracoorte parish. When it celebrated its centenary in November, 1983, ten years after the sisters had left, Sister Bernadette Dwyer was invited to address the Ladies' Luncheon, organised by the Catholic Women's League, in the Town Hall. She reflected on the eighty years since the Sisters of Mercy came to Naracoorte. They had lived and taught there for seventy years. She outlined the new apostolates that the sisters had taken up as a result of the Vatican Council.

'For each of us – you and me – self-fulfillment is necessary', Bernadette continued.

Women are very important in today's world. The saying is 'A Christian woman's power is not in her intelligence but in her heart'. It is certain that in women the heart predominates. ... But life in the world today demands us to be more fully involved in topical issues. We need to have well-informed minds ... We need to be aware of the lowering of standards in public morality ... We need faith – a living faith – expressed in our personal commitment.

The years that Sister Bernadette had spent in Naracoorte were very happy ones, she claimed.

#### P O R T M A C D O N N E L L, 1 9 1 8 -

In 1918, a holiday house for the sisters was acquired at Port MacDonnell, with a block of land sufficient for a school if that could eventuate.<sup>67</sup> The house was convenient, meanwhile, for offering religious education and, especially, for preparing the local children for the reception of the sacraments. Sister Margaret McMahon was one who loved Port MacDonnell and raised funds to keep it in the community's possession. The 'Bay Fete' was a notable event. When on holidays there, she would use her free time to visit local parishioners. Many a long beach picnic became possible for both sisters and boarders from the Mount.

The school did not become a reality, and the extra land, facing Jeffries and Milstead Streets, was sold in 1980. The house, *Mercedes*, continued to provide the sisters with a place for welcome breaks in busy lives.

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1. Elsewhere spelt Windle or Windell.

2. 'St Paul's Record'.

3. 'Daily' in convent register.

4. Variouslv Browne.
5. Refer Chapter Two.
6. 'Into the Past', *The Border Watch*, 10.6.1986.
7. Draft document, 27.7.1902, MASA, 320/44.
8. See also later in chapter, 'Indelible Memories'.
9. It became a butcher shop, a second hand shop, flats, and an outlet for a dry cleaning firm. After being unoccupied for several years, it was pulled down in the 1980s, MASA, 320/5.
10. Dean Rice to Chancellor, 5.6.1976, MASA, 320/26.
11. MASA, 320/5.
12. 1913 is the year given in current documentation. Mary Marks, nee Sutton, said her mother was first secretary of the Old Scholars, formed in the 1890s.
13. Cost is unknown as records are not now available.
14. See later in chapter re amalgamation of Mt Gambier with Adelaide.
15. The boarding school closed at the end of 1981.
16. Register does not indicate place of residence at time of entry.
17. The archives show that Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy Adelaide SA were finally approved in 1953. Fr Osmund C.P. was canonical adviser.
18. Flynn in Register, but the more commonly used is Fliinn.
19. See earlier in chapter re Mt Gambier; later re Naracoorte.
20. This letter was 1902. Plenary councils had taken place in 1885 and 1895.
21. Mrs Pat Abbott to author.
22. MASA, 320/2.
23. Ms Margaret Kennedy to author.
24. Mrs Pam O'Connor to author.
25. *The Border Watch*, 17.4.1873. See also *ibid.* 28.1.1975, on occasion of her death.
26. Mrs Bernie Sheldrick, nee Nicholls, and Miss Margaret Kennedy to author.
27. Or Browne.
28. Her sister, Kitty Gunn, taught ballet in Mount Gambier.
29. Mrs Rosemary McCourt, nee Thompson, written account 'School Story'.
30. MASA, 320/3.
31. Much of this taken from interview by Sister Ilsa Neiciniaks.
32. MASA, 320/31.
33. MASA, 320/27.
34. MASA, 320/26.
35. See Chapter Eight.
36. Statement 1967/8, Sisters of Mercy South Australia, MASA, 323/5.
37. Other past pupils who joined the Mercies, at least for a time, after these three included Frances Marsh, Patricia Hogan, Jan Bermingham, Anne Geraghty, Chris O'Connor, Mary-Anne Duigan, Barbara Broad, Carmel Breen, Megan Williams and Pam Jennings.
38. Mater Christi College archives, at Tenison College, lent by Mrs Pam O'Connor.
39. Sisters on the staff at various times were Monica Gallivan, Mavis McBride, Cynthia Griffin, Janet Lowe, Margaret Edwards, Catherine Ahern, Jennifer Pike, Patricia McAuley, Gemma Johnson, Catherine Seward, and Janette Gray.
40. Meeting with Mrs Margaret Considine, nee McDonnell, Miss Margaret Kennedy, Mrs Mary Marks nee Sutton, Mrs Bernie Nicholls, nee Sheldrick.
41. Sisters Gemma Johnson and Janet Lowe, with Cynthia Griffin Vice-principal until Easter of that year.
42. Patricia Pak Poy, 'Some reflections on our mission in the South East, 1981-4', MASA, 320/34.
43. Until the end of 1994.
44. Patricia Pak Poy, minutes of meeting with parish priest, 20.7.1985, MASA, 320/38.
45. *The Border Watch*, 24.11.1988; news cuttings, *The Australian*, *The Advertiser*, n.d., MASA, 320/37.
46. Patricia Osborne of Donovans via Mt Gambier, 17.8.1885.
47. Patricia Pak Poy to Brother Graeme Lawler, Tenison College, MASA, 320/38.
48. Patricia Pak Poy, 'Reflections on mission in South East 1981-4', MASA, 320/34.
49. *Millicent Times*, 4.2.1898.

50. 19.12.1903.
51. 7.3.1903.
52. 8.2.1907.
53. 22.2.1907.
54. 5.3.1907.
55. 6.8.1907.
56. 27.9.1907; -10.1907.
57. Mrs Pat Abbott, nee Bellinger.
58. M. White to principal, St Anthony's school, 16.4.1986.
59. *The Southern Cross*, 12.8.1949.
60. For further explanation, see below in account of Naracoorte.
61. *Naracoorte Herald*, 19.6.1979; *South East Times*, 2.7.1979.
62. Margaret Kennedy to author; the gentleman was her brother-in-law.
63. 28.8.1981, in *South East Times*, 3.9.1981, 7.9.1981.
64. Mary Palazzo, 'Naracoorte Parish, Centenary Feature'.
65. Centenary booklet, MASA, 323/8.
66. After the sisters left Naracoorte at the end of 1973.
67. MASA, 320/7.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Mercy Convent Schools – Seedbeds of the Women's Movement or Conservers of the Status Quo?

THE Mercy Institute envisaged education as a much broader concept than that of schooling. It included, from its early days, the provision of industrial schools, the training of teachers and nurses, the religious catechesis and spiritual formation of both children and adults. These components were all present within the South Australian Mercy works, with the exception of nursing training. However, it was on Catholic schooling that most of the energy had been focused until the impact of change, in the second half of the twentieth century, resulted in their offering new forms of education. Many of these new forms are described in the following chapter. Here we take a pause in the historical narrative to reflect on some questions that have arisen from our later perspective in time.

What was the relation to the late nineteenth century and twentieth century women's movements, movements which have given impetus to one of the most significant paradigm shifts in society? Were the Mercy convent schools, especially the secondary schools of the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, centres where women learnt to be more in control of their own lives? What was the attitude of the nuns teaching in those schools to the women's movement? Were they aware of it? Were they unconscious or incipient or even covert feminists? What were the effects of their own somewhat paradoxical situation? On the one hand, they were women who took public vows of consecration within a church that taught the ideal of woman as wife and mother, submissive and obedient to her husband; self-sacrificing and nurturing of her family; docile and loyal to her church, without any real role in it or other public spheres. On the other hand, they were women who built, established, administered and staffed schools, hospitals, and other social welfare institutions, with considerable authority, power, and prestige. They were spiritual guides for many, and some of them were leaders and administrators within their own religious communities.

How did the Sisters themselves negotiate their double lifestyle, their two-fold environment? Within both their public institutions and their private communities, sisters had the opportunities to acquire leadership, communication, and other living skills, to develop friendship networks, and to establish a power base for their works of mercy. Yet in many ways they continued to be officially marginalised in both the wider church and society. Their often quite extraordinary strength and power was within narrow limits, limits largely prescribed by others. Was there a consequently ambiguous message that their pupils had to negotiate in their own lives, during school years and later? How did this affect both themselves and their pupils, as the decades passed by, and society itself experienced the beginnings of a fundamental change in the relationships between men and women?

The organisational culture study of the Australian Mercies conducted in 1987 suggested one possible answer to this last question when it claimed to have identified one particular cultural trait.<sup>1</sup> The research findings indicated that many sisters felt that they 'lived in two worlds'. Unconsciously, they seemed to have a sense of themselves as 'worthy helpers' and those they helped as 'exotic others'. From these 'exotic others' they needed to retreat regularly into their own 'safe environment'. Was it the ambiguity of the double life-style, of the double environment, that had led eventually to this alleged cultural trait?

On a broader scenario, a number of other questions arise. Did the existence of religious orders such as the Mercies delay the growth of feminism among Catholic women in general? The 1890s were a decade of great social changes in South Australia, especially the enfranchisement of women. While the 'first wave' of feminism, in the late nineteenth century, may not have assumed all that radical a character in South Australia, as some historians suggest,<sup>2</sup> the suffrage campaign there was one of the first to achieve its aims. It was a progressive movement for social change. Yet Catholic women do not appear to have been prominent. To what extent did the work of the sisters, in establishing various social welfare agencies, delay the growth of social action among the laity?

Much of the material proffered in these pages may be seen as highly celebratory – though negative notes do appear. Nostalgia for the past, for one's childhood days, probably tends to make us forgetful of many of the shadows in our 'age of innocence'. Our enthusiasm for its innocence may lead us to gloss over its darker aspects. Yet such undoubtedly one-sided reports still have historical value and in this instance, it would seem, a fair degree of validity. The Mercy story in South Australia will not provide full answers to the broader questions raised in this chapter, but it may contribute to an answer for those interested in pursuing it.

## SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ETHOS AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The social environment of South Australia, in the late nineteenth century, was favourable to moderate adaptation of the public status of women. Historian Helen Jones<sup>3</sup> writes that the South Australian ethos was less bound by tradition, with many South Australians open to the equality of men and women. Certainly many women had always exercised power within the family, and some were also able to translate domestic skills into money. Women conducted small private schools or taught music. Others gained income by writing. Some had influence within the civic society.

South Australian women who were ratepayers had been able to vote in municipal elections from 1861. But it was not until the 1880s and 1890s, that there was a marked change in the nature of women's participation in public activities, a change which was reflecting the gradual shattering of traditional stereotypes of women's role and place in society. In 1883 South Australia passed the first of the Married Women's Property Acts, giving married women the same property rights as unmarried women. In 1894, South Australia became the first Australian colony to allow women to vote in the colonial legislature, being one of the first places in the world to do so. The act also made it the first democracy in the world to give women the right to be elected to parliament.<sup>4</sup> The University of Adelaide admitted women to lectures from its establishment in 1876, and to degrees in 1880, the year the Mercies came to South Australia. The first woman graduate took her degree in 1885, in science. The first woman graduated in medicine in 1891. The earliest State secondary school, with a strong academic bias, was The Advanced School for Girls, in Adelaide, the first of its kind in Australia. It opened in 1879.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, there were still obvious signs that the old attitudes were not to be altered without a great deal of effort. Women continued to be seen basically as homemakers. Legal and economic restrictions on the equality of women remained. The general Catholic posture towards women's rights remained earnestly patriarchal.

Mainstream Catholic attitudes were blatantly evident in the late 1880s, when a Roman Catholic petition against a Divorce Extension Bill led to a meeting in St Francis Xavier Hall, with Archbishop Reynolds in the chair. The men clearly saw themselves as guardians of the rights of women. Women were to be protected from the darker aspects of human behaviour. What the women thought was not recorded, as they were not present. Reynolds had especially asked the ladies to absent themselves, and declared that he was very glad they had done so.

The men were the only defenders of women's rights – (cheers from the audience) – for they had put women in their proper position on account of the incarnation of their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave them Mary Immaculate as His Mother . . . If they said they would not protect women from a measure that would facilitate adultery, they were a disgrace to the human form divine.<sup>6</sup>

## CONVENT SCHOOLS AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

That meeting of Catholic men was in 1888. About a century later, some Australian professional women, who went to schools run by various orders of religious women, have gone on record as stating that 'the nuns got it right' in the decades around the mid-twentieth century. Convent schools had offered them a strong academic curriculum and had motivated them to perform well in a variety of areas. They had developed in many of their pupils a keen social conscience, and provided important role models for girls approaching womanhood. Despite what would now be seen as a lack of adequate professional training, the nuns taught everything, they did everything, they were the bosses. The net result was to instil in the observant schoolgirl, a conviction that women could do everything.<sup>7</sup> Past pupils report differing – and contradictory – memories of convent girlhoods. Yet a sizeable number consistently state that they were exhorted not to be submissive, rather to be strong characters, to stand up and be counted, to use their own powers of intelligence, to seek their own truth.

When, in South Australia, did the Mercies 'get it right'? How early in their history was it that the Mercy select schools changed the traditional emphasis on 'accomplishments for young ladies' to a more academic curriculum, as transformations occurred in society? Did they ever really fail to offer the basis of an academic education? When the academic content increased, did they, then, neglect those 'accomplishments' that might continue to provide a more holistic education? Did they neglect the many who did not wish to opt for academic subjects? How did they adapt the curriculum in their primary schools to the needs of the times?

Reminiscences and other sources indicate that the nuns were, indeed, important female role models for their pupils, especially through their use of so-called 'male' skills in their schools. Within the prescribed limits, religious women were women relatively free from clerical interference. They not only administered and staffed their schools but frequently built them unaided by the official Church agencies. Many women with extensive schooling in Catholic convents entered the public world of work, where they frequently challenged accepted notions of womanly behaviour.

The focus of this reflection will be the secondary school at Angas Street, Adelaide, mainly through the first fifty to sixty years of its existence. Undoubtedly because of its location, it was by far the larger establishment and was more immediately influenced by movements for change than the other Mercy secondary schools in South Australia. This is not to discount the sisters' role in the community of the South East, which has been described in Chapter Five. Their contribution to education and to culture in the isolation of the country should not be underestimated. There is less testimony available for the same earlier period, but what is accessible, shows the strong influence of convent schooling.

Likewise, the tradition set at Angas Street continued at Mercedes College, when it was established in the 1950s, and where past pupils of achievement equally were remembered in oral and written accounts.<sup>8</sup>

In Adelaide, the building of a climate in which girls could aspire to moving out of the narrow places set for them by society and church was, without doubt, begun in the Mercy foundation story and in their early years of consolidation. Women could be flexible and creative, could take risks, could move beyond their allotted sphere. The teachers of the 1920s and the 1930s seem to have solidly reinforced this climate of belief, a belief that was further consolidated throughout the 1940s and the 1950s and that has persisted.

Joan Gaskell, in an epilogue to her research thesis on the secondary work of the Sisters of Mercy in South Australia up to and including the 1930s,<sup>9</sup> claimed that the sisters evidenced independence of outlook, a capacity for taking risks, and – with the Cunningham legacy, particularly – buoyancy and confidence. She wrote:

I hope I have shown that, in most cases, power came into the hands of the most able members and that they had scope for their talents ... As a group, the sisters seem to have been remarkably adaptable from the beginning – at home in Argentina, they became no less so in South Australia; the most able of the early Australian postulants, Julia Carroll (Mother Magdalene), certainly took the initiative during the period when girls' education was changing in response to the new opportunities in tertiary studies, and this trend was maintained during and after World War I by the most brilliant student among the early recruits, Winifred Murphy (Sister M. Camillus).

During the twenties it was an ex-pupil of St Aloysius', Nellie Dunlevie (Sister M. Teresa), who showed herself an innovator by completing her BA in the face of the great difficulties occasioned by her commitments as headmistress and, no doubt, by the prejudices of her superiors and companions. Her success gave her sufficient prestige to be able to persuade the former to allow later entrants to do the same. It so happened that Nellie Kelly (Sister M. Ignatius) and Elma Bourke (Sister M. Carmel) had entered in the late twenties and early thirties respectively, with some BA subjects

already completed. That they were both permitted to finish their degrees during their years as postulants, novices and young professed sisters, when no other religious order of women would have allowed its new members to enter the 'dangerous environment' of the Teachers' College or University, suggests that the capacity for taking calculated risks is no new development, but has been a constant factor. The success of this particular venture ... led to other Mercy sisters being permitted to do the same ... contrary to general practice in the Catholic Church at this time ...

In a study of St Aloysius College and two Dominican girls' secondary schools in Adelaide, from 1880 to 1925, Stephanie Burley agrees that the sisters had a freeing influence on their pupils. She finds also, however, a contradiction in the double role the sisters had to play, and in the double messages consequently received by their students. 'Girls learned', she writes, 'paradoxically to be good Catholic women on the one hand, and to follow their single independent role models, the teaching sisters, on the other.'

Burley, however, also raises the question of the broader challenges over time by such female orders to clerical patriarchal authority. On this latter aspect, she cites the work of Noeline Kyle, who studied the education of women in New South Wales. Kyle claims that the teaching nuns were numerically the most dominant intermediary force between church hierarchy and Catholic youth. She says that

in such a crucial position they were not weak, ineffectual, and submissive, but rather the practice of the convent schools, dominated by pragmatic innovative female religious, was demonstrably different from the esoteric rhetorical descriptions put forward by the largely [sic] male Catholic hierarchy.

There is data from the history of various groups of teaching sisters in Adelaide, including the Adelaide Mercy history, to support this view. Perhaps the best known is the story of the early Sisters of St Joseph, who began their work in South Australia and persevered amongst tremendous – at times seemingly incredible – difficulties. While initially concentrating on primary education, they provided in particular a model of a strong woman in Mary MacKillop, an image which was to gain more and more public credence. Mary had kept to her vision despite the 'totalitarian vigour'<sup>10</sup> of various hostile bishops and clergy and lay people, a stance which was finally vindicated by the spread and success of her Institute.

The Dominican sisters at North Adelaide were felt by past pupils to have been 'of enormous significance' in their lives, through their Dominican spirituality, their educational endeavours, and their cultural pursuits. The early sisters had experienced considerable freedom in areas we would not expect. They had had to demonstrate remarkable adaptability in changing from hospital work to education, on their arrival from England in 1883.<sup>11</sup>

They manifested leadership qualities and business acumen in maintaining and developing their various institutions. They showed 'independence of spirit, power in their actions, and a broader range of knowledge and skills than many of their lay counterparts. As such they are complicated and interesting models for their young Catholic students'.<sup>12</sup>

The Cabra Dominican sisters also had a history of enterprise on which to reflect, a history reflected in the image they continued to model for successive generations. It was an 'image of friendship, a love of learning and enthusiasm for life'.<sup>13</sup> Arriving in South Australia in 1868, seven young Irish women had found themselves unwelcome and without support. Within seven years their foundress was dead, as a community they had been subjected to investigation by church authorities, one of their members had been sent home, another disappeared into the bush, and the bishop had threatened to send them all back to Ireland if they did not behave themselves. Yet in this same period of seven years, they had opened three schools as well as a boarding school and had begun preparing young women for university matriculation. Their endurance and solidarity was mirrored in the questioning of the Dominican community in the 1950s and 1960s, as they sought to change oppressive structures in their life style, to name their own experience and their own spirituality.<sup>14</sup> It was mirrored in the decision of the group, in the late 1980s, to set up a feminist spirituality centre, *Sophia*, which provided another avenue of education and another set of role models for women seeking to grow.

Some past pupils of the Mercies at St Aloysius College have said that they intuitively received something from the sisters that even very good Government schools did not have. In trying to spell it out, one Old Scholar felt that it was an understanding of God's work in the world. Though very much coloured by pre-Vatican II values, the sisters helped them to understand this. In addition, they saw the sisters in total control. They seemed strong women, happy in their vocation, with status, and seen as special by the Catholic community. The sisters were always encouraging their pupils to do everything they could. There were no limits set by the sisters because their pupils were girls. There were certain careers for women – but this categorising came from society, rather than from the teachers.<sup>15</sup>

An unexpectedly synchronistic confirmation of this view came during a brief presentation of the research for this history at a Religious History Conference of the Institution of Religious Studies in Sydney in June, 1996. Another speaker, Carmel Walsh O.P. from New Zealand, had grown up with her mother's firm injunction that 'women could aspire to anything'. Her mother, Irene Walsh nee Ryan, had imbibed this belief from the Sisters of Mercy at Angas Street, where she had been to school during the 1930s. When her teacher training had to be aborted on account of the death of her mother, she had shown she could do something; she had gone into the

management of a small business in Adelaide, before moving to South Africa and thence to New Zealand. Her daughter had never forgotten her mother's love for and praise of her teachers, and their encouragement of their pupils to try for whatever they desired.

On the other hand, the sisters were undoubtedly concerned to pass on the church's message of 'back to the kitchen/raise a family'. Sister M. Ignatius Kelly's 1934 university thesis shows this dual aspect of promoting careers for women while teaching the ideology of motherhood. In it, she rejoiced in the 'expanded life' of the typical modern woman, whereby she enjoyed legal, educational, occupational and political freedom. Yet she felt that many women of that generation were exhibiting a lack of balance in handling these new freedoms. 'After a long and successful battle for expanded opportunity', she wrote, 'modern womanhood needs re-emphasis upon the spiritual factors which make not so much for extension as for depth'.

She continued:

It is the aim of the nuns to train the girls under their care in individual initiative, to develop in them independent judgment and self-control so that they make take their place in political affairs, in the professional ranks, or in any other sphere for which they are fitted by their energy and intelligence in such a way as to wield a telling influence for good.

Despite this, she felt that 'the duties of woman ... offer an insurmountable barrier to public life'. Foremost came her vocation as mother and helpmate.

Even the message of a religious vocation was not unduly pushed. Those pupils who were interested in religious life were counselled in making their decision, and the sisters were skilled at approaching possible candidates. It was, nonetheless, in the general context of all women being called to a life's vocation. Religious life was one option.

Nevertheless, despite their continuing adherence to the ideology of motherhood, it is clear that influential members of the sisters' community were alert to changes in society. Catholic education was seen as a great cause and a means of social change; overall, the girls received a sense of service and dedication.<sup>16</sup> There was a realistic appraisal of the difficulties involved if women were to pursue an active career and, at the same time, run a household as wife and mother.

Roma Mitchell was one of the Convent of Mercy School pupils who did actively pursue a public career.<sup>17</sup> Roma presented a paper 'Self-Education for Social Service' at the Catholic Education Congress in Adelaide in 1936. In it, Roma urged Catholic women to take a greater personal interest in the poor. She stated that her own very strong social conscience was inherited from her mother. The sisters had reinforced it. They were good at that. One of her strong motives in studying law had been to improve conditions for women.

She had never married: at her age – in her time – she could not have done what she had done if she had married.

Another past pupil, of the early 1940s, who had seriously considered joining the community but had married, reinforced this conviction from a different standpoint. She reminisced that it would have been a very beneficial step for her if she had joined the sisters. Her intellectual progress would have been a lot more positive. She had joined the staff of St Aloysius in the mid-1970s, as a married woman, and had remained for nearly twenty years. She would have liked to have been part of the Mercy advance in those years.<sup>18</sup>

Stephanie Burley says that one consequence of the dual message of motherhood and personal career was that many pupils also worked a double shift, carried a double load.<sup>19</sup> Ambitious girls studied 'male' knowledge and skills, yet also had to prove to their parents and to society that they could also excel in traditional female accomplishments. They had to prepare for both home and world. It was a 'divided aim'.<sup>20</sup>

## THE WIDER CONTEXT OF MERCY EDUCATION

### **Mercy Education in Ireland**

In exploring the educational philosophy of the Mercies in South Australia, it is helpful to look at the wider context of Mercy education worldwide. In its turn, the educational orientation of the Mercies worldwide was strongly shaped by Irish educational practices, and, in particular, by the ideas and policies of Catherine McAuley and other members from the foundation decades of the Institute.

Looking back on more than a half century of the existence of the Institute, Catriona Clear<sup>21</sup>, in her study of nuns in nineteenth century Ireland, sees the Mercies as extraordinarily popular because of their lack of enclosure. She depicts the nineteenth century Mercy Institute as attracting many women of the more well-to-do class, yet they were, first and foremost, women of their time, Irish women workers. Their work was mainly with the poor, and their pay schools were for the economically comfortable rather than the wealthy.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Mercies gained control of teacher training for women teachers. Through their various types of educational institutions, working girls were helped to become teachers or to get a 'good situation'. Middle class girls were enabled to break free of the stranglehold of ornamental idleness. Clear, however, does judge that the nuns' monopoly on social welfare, including education, delayed the emergence of the women's movement among Catholic women in general, and also the development of lay social action. Perhaps because there was engendered a feeling of leaving it all to the nuns. Perhaps because many of the

most activist among the women of that era found convents to be one of the few effective arenas wherein to exercise their energy.

Researching for her history of the Mercies of Bathurst, New South Wales, Mary Ryan unearthed some fascinating material about the Mercy (and other religious) industrial schools of Ireland, which constituted an 'Irish Convent Industry'.<sup>22</sup> Following the near total destruction of Irish cottage industries after the Great Famine of the 1840s, religious industrial schools re-introduced small businesses to the people. Catherine McAuley had led the way by selling the products of the women in the Baggot Street House of Mercy. The Mercies began setting up industrial schools, often in conjunction with an orphanage. In Charleville, County Cork, about 1855, there were sixty to eighty female pupils daily, together with several young matrons. They traded with a gentleman in North America until the American Civil War interrupted the trade. In Skibbereen, the Mercy Industrial School in the 1880s revived the local weaving industry. In Foxford, County Mayo, the Sisters of Charity set up what became a full-scale – and still operating – woollen mill. All in all, the sisters showed the Irish people that it was possible for Ireland to get back into industry. They invested their own monies, skills, and time, and put the profits back into the industrial schools.

### **Mercy Education in United States of America**

The histories of other Mercy communities in the New World reveal the same kind of strength and practicality as evidenced in Australia and in Ireland. The characteristic combination of a certain independence of spirit and a pragmatism in practice appears very vividly in the Mercy story in the United States, where Mercy convents, schools, and other institutions proliferated.

James Kenneally in his *History of American Catholic Women* includes a chapter on 'Lady-like' Nuns: Social Activists.<sup>23</sup> The sisters are shown as appearing to conform to the Catholic perception of ladies while consciously or unconsciously undermining it. They were under male leadership, which often treated them as child-like. Yet they were among the most liberated women in nineteenth century America. They were self-supporting property-owners, well-educated, holding administrative positions, and living in a community of women free from dominance of husbands and responsibility of motherhood. They were often hailed by businessmen for their acumen; envied by Protestant women for their independence. On the surface, they appeared to reinforce traditional values, but their very lives revealed a class of women who chafed under clerical conventions, and were dangerous to the century's norms.

Two Mercy examples stand out, though there are many others who either operated on a smaller scale or who have not yet found a biographer. Mother Frances Warde was one of the initial associates of Catherine McAuley and the founder of the first Mercy community at Pittsburgh in the United States. In the

north-east of the country, she was responsible for founding some twelve autonomous Mercy groups, from which stemmed numerous schools, academies, night schools, and other health and welfare institutions.<sup>24</sup> Mother Austin Carroll, another amazing woman, was likewise a founder of numerous convents, especially in the American south, and, as well, biographer, historian, annalist, essayist. She was a regular correspondent of many people throughout the world, including Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick, whose troubled Argentinian community she had invited to join her in New Orleans.<sup>25</sup>

Single-sex education appears to have encouraged the development of specific goals for girls. In the nineteenth century, these emphasised preparation for marriage, the nurturing attributes of a lady, and the social graces. Nevertheless, the American academies ('select schools' in the Australian Mercy context) achieved a scholarly reputation. To be an effective Catholic mother denoted more than social graces. It required a well-educated, stronger, confident female. 'Non-ornamental' subjects were introduced as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. In their less expensive day schools, students were introduced to a 'practical' curriculum by pragmatic nuns. But, as future mothers, responsible for ensuring education of their children, they were also introduced to 'liberal' studies. Their 'industrial schools' were even more challenging to female stereotypes. In them, girls of the working class learnt skills useful to society. The Mercies were renowned in this area, especially Mother Baptist Russell, educator and social activist on the West coast of North America.

Another American historian, Eileen Mary Brewer, studied the relationship between nuns and the education of American Catholic women during the decades of the 1860s to the 1920s.<sup>26</sup> She concentrated on four groups of religious women in the mid-west, which she saw as dominating female Catholic education in that area. They possessed excellent reputations as teachers and were among the best educated sisters in America. One of the four were the Chicago Mercies. Founded by Frances Warde, the Chicago Mercies had adapted the most thoroughly and with little hesitation to local conditions. More than the others, they identified with the diocese, concentrated resources, and attracted the largest numbers of students. While the Mercy Rule did not specifically mention secular education, but developed the concept of religion as forming the core of women's education, the American Mercies stressed the importance of secular subjects as well. They were convinced that a sound training in academic subjects was an indirect but very powerful way of attracting children to God.

### **Mercy Education in Australia**

The same basic themes thread through the history of Mercy education in Australia.

There, the first foundation was at Perth, Western Australia, in 1846, under the leadership of Mother Ursula Frayne. The colony was a mere seventeen years old when they arrived on the isolated western coast of the southern continent. They settled in amazingly quickly, opening schools, visiting the people, instructing adults in the faith, helping prisoners, and befriending little Aboriginal girls brought to them by Spanish Benedictine missionaries. So efficient were they in making things happen in that extremely poor environment, that an irate cleric fumed that they had out-stepped 'the proper bounds' for women by getting 'out of their proper sphere'. Despite many pressures to conform, these women remained individuals. Several of them retained a uniqueness of personality, with a strong sense of their own identity. Sometimes, especially among the later generations of sisters, they may have developed temperaments bordering on the idiosyncratic, but they were, at the least, colourful.<sup>27</sup>

Ursula Frayne moved onto Melbourne in 1856, where she established the first of what were to be numerous Mercy convents throughout Victoria and in Tasmania. For some decades after that, most of the Catholic community favoured an education for domesticity. However, dissenting voices were raised, and these came, predominantly, from religious women, who possessed a tradition of schooling which did not confine itself to domestic service. These religious women favoured a curriculum which was intellectually demanding as well as aesthetically satisfying. A male writer of the era, on visiting the Sisters of Mercy school in Sandhurst, Victoria, declared that it was the first time he had seen ladies learning algebra. He had 'never witnessed more real ability displayed in a school ... in teaching the theory and practice of arithmetic; also geography and English grammar.'<sup>28</sup>

The Mercies were first established in Queensland, at Brisbane, in 1861, under another great and loving woman, Mother Mary Vincent Whitty. Mother Vincent had a teaching qualification from the Irish National Board of Education. Her long experience in leadership in Dublin – longer than that of any other member to that time except Catherine McAuley herself – proved invaluable in the colonial context. She established what was to be the first permanent secondary school for girls in Queensland, and which – especially under one of her successors, Mother Mary Patrick Potter – grew into a luminous educational establishment. As in the other States, the Queensland Mercies also organised their social services in a variety of ways, especially through hospitals and homes.<sup>29</sup>

The writer of the 1975 centennial history of Monte Sant'Angelo College in North Sydney, Sister M. Baptista Rankin, is herself an example of the woman that a Mercy school can and does produce. She had gone to Monte as a boarding pupil in 1912, had won an Exhibition to the Sydney University, and had gone on to a remarkable academic career. In 1926, as a Sister of Mercy,

she had attracted media interest when she was awarded her Master of Arts with honours and shared the limelight with Prime Minister Bruce, who received a Doctorate in Law. In 1946, Sister Baptista became headmistress of Monte Sant'Angelo, where she had taught brilliantly in Latin, Greek, English, and Ancient History. She remained in charge for twenty-six years, bringing to Monte 'the multiple activities that are integral components in modern education' and also bringing it into contact with schools in other systems. During this time, she also served for six years as first assistant to the congregational superior as well as being in charge of the sisters' local house at Monte. Even after her retirement as principal, she continued to teach Latin, instilling in her students a joy for that somewhat difficult subject.<sup>30</sup>

The Parramatta Mercies arrived in New South Wales from Callan, Kilkenny, in Ireland, in 1888. Their schools of the early period did much more than concentrate on accomplishments. With a series of brilliant teachers, they consistently fostered academic education, while continuing to emphasise music as well. Right from the beginning they successfully sent girls for public examinations in both areas. There was a strong academic emphasis, but the traditional accomplishments were also maintained.<sup>31</sup>

There were several other autonomous Mercy convents established in Australia during the second half of the nineteenth century, either from Ireland or England or from communities within Australia. They formed a complicated network of Mercy convents throughout much of the continent. The sisters were located not just in the capital cities, but wherever the colonists went in some numbers, be it mining town, rural farming or grazing district, or coastal or river port. The pattern everywhere was flexible but similar, manifesting the remarkably enduring influence of the founding charism.

One of their foundational realities was the highly masculine nature of the Australian society that was developing. The penal nature of the initial establishment, the overload of males compared with females among the population for many decades, and the seeming harshness of the landscape to European migrants: all this contributed to what was to become a unique ethos. Its elements included a will to dominate nature with a paradoxical nostalgia for the bush and a secular worship of the sun and the beach. There was an addiction to competitive outdoor sport, a relative devaluing of the intellect and of religion, and a downgrading of women and of the more feminine aspects of living.

Through their work with women, the Mercies contributed towards re-fashioning this Australian society and towards re-defining the spheres within which women might operate. They did this particularly through their schools, as important agents of social change for women. In the parochial primary schools, which were a major focal point of Australian Catholic life, and of which a large proportion were administered by Sisters of Mercy, and

in their 'select' convent schools, which later evolved into secondary schools, the Mercies educated girls for a career as well as for the home. They motivated individuals to perform well in a variety of areas. Their schools were centres where women learnt to be more in control of their own lives.

As adjuncts to their schools, the Mercies opened numerous boarding schools – larger ones in the capital cities or bigger towns, smaller ones elsewhere. It was a constructive attempt to help girls, and frequently smaller boys, who were educationally disadvantaged by the isolation of outback and rural Australia. Their schools were often centres of culture and community that helped give life to a country district.

These aspects of their schools were, to some extent, reinforced by their safe houses for women and children, in varying forms. While their Houses of Mercy did, to some degree, accept the class distinctions of their era, they provided a woman's space which was greatly needed. The industrial schools often attached to the Houses of Mercy taught valuable skills. Their orphanages also provided safe homes and basic education for children who would otherwise be neglected. Their hospitals gave safe nursing care and many developed teaching schools within them. Their schools, hospitals, and homes, to varying degrees, possessed an atmosphere which revealed a basic loving kindness and care for the individual.

All in all, their works of mercy, by being oriented towards those most underrated by society and church, presented a challenging view of what it is to be human. This challenge was affirmed, for the perceptive observer, by the life and community of the sisters themselves, by the very existence of Convents of Mercy, life-giving spaces into which women could step out from conventional spheres. They developed in many of their pupils a keen social conscience, teaching them not to be submissive but to seek their own truth.

Mercy institutions were all-female organisations, and thus the sisters became important role models for discerning young women. They provided female images of leadership. They displayed administrative and financial expertise, and a very efficient use of scant resources. They were adaptive and often innovative. They frequently retained an individuality and a strong sense of their own identity, despite the growing conformism demanded of women religious by the church. Their lives contributed to the gradual shattering of traditional stereotypes of women's role and place in society.

### **South Australia – focus on Angas Street**

In South Australia, the two focal points of Mercy educational endeavour were, as we have seen, the Convent of Mercy, Angas Street, Adelaide, and the Convent of Mercy, Mt Gambier. These two convents were the living quarters of members, as well as administrative headquarters, training schools, sources of staffing, of educational supervision, and of material resources.

One researcher of St Aloysius College, Marie Crotty, has written that 'the personal educational charism of the founding sisters comes across clearly', and especially in the curriculum.<sup>32</sup> Catherine McAuley's ready acceptance of educational standards set by the Irish National Board had led to a firm tradition of entering students for external examinations. This tradition, and that of flexibility of action, operated in Australia and meant that the sisters had entered easily into the public examination system instituted by the University of Adelaide. Already established by 1876, and admitting women to degrees by 1881, the university had promoted the academic education of girls. Both the Advanced School for Girls, founded in 1879, and the later government secondary schools offered an academic curriculum to girls. Nevertheless, Crotty claimed that there had been, at St Aloysius' School, a drift from the beginning towards the major shift to an academic curriculum that could only be said to have occurred generally after World War I.

Her research demonstrated for her

... an approach that stood out significantly against the 'typical' form of girls' schooling whether in England or Australia. The change that was to come about after the First World War in Australia generally was anticipated at St Aloysius' College. If we seek reasons then they must surely lie with the unique character, formation and ethos of the founding Sisters of Mercy who introduced into the Australian educational stage a most significant cast of educationists.<sup>33</sup>

A degree of involvement in the public examinations was evidenced in 1891, at the latest. In that year, there were two special prizes for university passes. One, a gold bracelet, was presented by Sir Henry Ayers. The other, a gold Maltese cross, was donated by Mrs Barr Smith. The evident value of these awards, it would seem, was increased by the high social status of their presenters. The 1909 school magazine shows that by 1908 there was quite an extensive participation in the university public exams, together with what was, for then, a wide spread of subjects. By 1912, the priority of the academic curriculum seemed assured. In addition, Magdalene Carroll's particular interest in sports had led to the earliest prospectus including a physical education curriculum which was 'a far cry from the more delicate training of girls elsewhere'.<sup>34</sup>

The same researcher commented that these directions were all the more remarkable given the prevailing social Darwinistic ideas of the time. Darwin's evolutionary theory of 'survival of the fittest' had been applied to the social sciences and had led to various – and often contradictory – theses concerning the education of girls. What triumphed in the end was the view that the intellectual education of girls at a higher level would make them unsuitable for their 'true' role, that of motherhood. As Herbert Spencer put it: 'That absolute or relative infertility is generally produced in women by mental

labour carried to excess is more clearly shown ... Most of the flat-chested girls who survive their high pressure education are unable to [breast-feed].<sup>35</sup>

The newspaper, *The Observer*, of 10th September, 1881, had put it this way:

Now, the object to which parents look forward for their daughters as a thing without which life is not complete and the destiny of nature is not fulfilled is marriage ... But marriage does not fall to the lot of all ... It is fortunate, therefore, that the same teaching which makes a woman most suited to be a wife makes her also the more happy and useful and pleasant if she is fated to be an old maid. That which the girl has to learn is, to put it shortly, what society has the right to expect of her.<sup>36</sup>

Archbishop Reynolds, in 1889, was also reserved about the effects of higher education on girls. 'University honours', he claimed, 'instead of being an advantage to their sex, very often destroy or at least tarnish those virtues which should form the chief characteristics of the Catholic gentlewoman'.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the sisters' early and expanding move towards a solid academic curriculum showed the degree to which they were able to form their own philosophy of education. As Sister M. Ignatius Kelly wrote later, the Dominican Sisters and the Sisters of Mercy came to South Australia at a time when there were no public High Schools and very few of any kind catering for higher education for girls. They brought an age-old European culture. They distinguished, however, between education and instruction. Education, as understood by the nuns, strove to develop all that was best in human nature. They offered a mental training, the aim of which was to hold the mind to a given line of thought in spite of the attractions or distractions of irrelevant considerations.<sup>38</sup>

A second researcher into the education offered at St Aloysius in the year 1912, Mary Emery, also highlighted the difference in the way in which the sisters viewed their educational task. She claimed that the attitude of the college was: 'To be accomplished and feminine was not enough - academic merit was equally valuable.'<sup>39</sup>

Accounts of academic successes were guarded jealously. Much coaching had gone into the preparation of prospective winners. Nellie (Sister M. Ignatius) Kelly, pupil between 1909 and 1912, wrote about one such occasion in which she herself was involved:

The [primary] class had 28 pupils. I was one of 10 chosen to sit for the primary examination in August. Sister was a zealous teacher and gave intensive care to the 10 chosen candidates. All passed, as well as 2 others who went independently. A photo was taken of the successful pupils. The 2 independents were allowed to be in the group of successful pupils. Eileen McGann refused to be in the group because her father (a photographer) had not been chosen to take the photo. Gwen Shearer, one of the 18 who did

not sit for the examination was put into the group to be photographed and the name Eileen McGann was given to her when the photo appeared in *The Southern Cross*.

The school may have appeared, particularly in retrospect, conservative and restrictive, according to Mary Emery, but it somehow allowed individuality to exist within its rigid uniformity. In 1912, the year of her study, it may well have been, she concluded, a most progressive school. She was 'left overall with an impression of a productive, busy school run by ladies of talent and charm, in their own way, as they thought most valuable.'

Its qualities must appear all the more remarkable when one considers the on-going persistence of the prevailing Catholic attitude. While there was little trace of a Catholic ghettoism evident in the school<sup>40</sup>, they were operating publicly as a church institution. In 1915, Reynold's successor, Archbishop O'Reily, still saw female suffrage (attained in South Australia some twenty-one years by then) as 'something which unsexed and vulgarised those to whom every chivalry was due.'

#### A D E P T B U S I N E S S W O M E N

It may be the provision of material resources which shows most clearly the energy and drive and skill of these women.

The ingenious garnering and wise deployment of the economic resources of the community – originating both from family inheritances of individual sisters and from approaches to the public through appeals of various kinds – involved those in leadership in making major decisions about economic matters. There was property to be purchased and to be managed. Though seeking and listening to advice from businessmen, who often voluntarily gave their services, the main responsibility lay with the leaders of the community itself. Their success in managing affairs is a further proof of the manner in which women in a religious institute were stretched in their capacities. It was to an extent beyond that permitted to most women in this period.

The sisters were generous in handing over monies inherited from their families to the community, even though their vows of profession did not bind them to do so. Legacies from sisters were not enough, however, to fund all the capital works of the community. Public appeals through newspapers and other available sources comprised one method of collection of monies. Such collections were not without unpleasantness. The 1882 appeal for funds to build the House of Mercy was successful, but it was also the catalyst for a display of anti-Catholic sentiment in the pages of the *Protestant Advocate*. The editor of the journal was suspicious of the proposed House of Mercy as a centre for the efforts of 'the Sisters of Mercy and Jesuit directors' who 'best knew how to attract Protestant girls to their church'.<sup>41</sup>

The sisters largely ignored such sentiments, and continued single-heartedly with their benevolent endeavours. Fetes, bazaars, lotteries, and numerous combinations and permutations of the same, were employed to raise necessary finance. Sometime during the 1880s, the cantata 'The Children's Queen', was produced by the Sisters of Mercy School, in St Francis Xavier Hall. The newspaper editor judged that the 'funds of the institution should be benefited by the large attendance'.<sup>42</sup> 'No one', declared Lady Galway, the Governor's wife, on opening a bazaar for the sisters, 'can make a penny go as far as they can'. The success of their efforts over the decades can be judged from the words of the parish priest of Parkside at the laying of the foundation stone of new schoolrooms in 1961. Mgr Bayard declared that he could thank the Sisters of Mercy especially for the fact that, during the last seventy years, they had not asked the parish for money.<sup>43</sup>

The Mt Gambier branch house had started with no money and a pastor most unwillingly accepting them in his parish. Sister M. Angela Windle wrote feelingly, some years later, about their hazardous finances. When Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick left them settling into Mt Gambier, they had only £20 to begin their housekeeping with, and a debt of £990 to pay the interest for. Yet, by 1941, when Mt Gambier had had fifty-seven years of separate government from Adelaide, and had itself opened branch houses, it could be stated that all houses were financially sound and free from debt.<sup>44</sup>

Sabine Willis introduces her collection of essays from a number of writers, *Women Faith and Fetes*<sup>45</sup>, by asking about the role that the lamington drive or the welfare bazaar has played in the socio-economic scene in Australia, and whether church work in these and other directions provides women with political experience or merely reinforces their traditional role. In one essay, Beverley Kingston claims that the essential nature of fetes – in their diverse forms – is the same: the conversion, by the application of intensive female labour and the use of very particular female skills, of inexpensive ingredients into saleable items. She adds that the ultimate relationship of fetes to faith may be far from frivolous, but may be at the very heart of questions about the nature of religious experience and religious activity.

There is no doubt that this latter relationship was far from frivolous for the Mercies in South Australia. It was not only their expression of personal religious faith and love; it was a vital element in the financing of their works of mercy. While personal legacies provided some capital funding for building purposes, everyday maintenance was an ever-pressing burden in an era of minimal government aid.

Such dedication and financial expertise, of a peculiarly female genre, was not unique to the Mercies or to Catholic women, in general. Other churches were also happy to garner their finances in this way. Recent research into the role of women from other denominations, in both building and maintaining

churches, reveals a story not so very different – in its basic features – from that of Catholic women.<sup>46</sup>

### A S E N S E O F C O M P A S S I O N

Their financial acumen did not destroy their compassion. Needy children were helped, even in the fee-paying schools. These schools also offered a number of scholarships, naming them after noted teachers such as Magdalene Carroll, Cecilia Cunningham, or Liguori Besley. The five non-Catholic daughters of the Wirth circus family were admitted as boarders at Angas Street despite the fact that they were children of a *de facto* relationship, 'a lot more broadminded'<sup>47</sup> action than was usual at that time. Children from overseas were always very well received. Another pupil was always assigned to look after them.

Extant copies of a handwritten manuscript, 'The Customs and Community Observances', include two paragraphs which indicate the largesse of their compassion.

All the works of Mercy belong to us as Sisters of Mercy. Therefore any work of Mercy may be undertaken by us unless it interfere with the characteristic works of the Institute or with Regular Observance.

Pension Schools may be undertaken whenever it would be a work of Mercy to do so. The profits, if possible, ought to be applied for the benefit of the poor.

### P A S T P U P I L S A S R O L E M O D E L S

There was one very natural and affectionate way of encouraging their students towards looking at more open possibilities for their futures. Those former pupils who had moved beyond their allotted spheres as women were presented to the present generation for admiration and possible imitation.

Chapter Three of this history has given a series of 'potted' biographies of several of the sisters who, as teachers and/or administrators, revealed themselves to be strong and talented women, women of faith and compassion. It was not, however, within the sisters' life frame of reference to promote themselves as models for students who wanted to move out of old stereotypes of women's role and behaviour. While their very strength of purpose and often personal charisma did mean that they were exemplars for many of their pupils, even for those who would not choose their way of life, it is unlikely that such a procedure would have suggested itself to them.

This next section focuses on Saint Aloysius' School from the 1910s, when the school magazine gives us written data, to the 1940s, when the struggle for

an education for girls equal to that for boys was assuming greater dimensions. What is very apparent, from the historical data available, is that the sisters did seek to open new avenues and careers for their students. They did this directly by encouraging their present students towards academic success. They did it indirectly by holding up, for emulation, former students who had achieved success in their careers. These old scholars were a living and vivid revelation, to the present students, of what women could achieve.

One important vehicle for this was the School Magazine. St Aloysius' College produced *Golden Wattle*, inaugurated in 1909. Although it appeared irregularly to begin with, it generously featured the successes and the doings of present and of past pupils. The network between teachers and past pupils resulted also in the latter contributing several articles to the initial issues. The teaching sisters preserved their traditional anonymity. While they freely contributed to its contents, their names never appear in the *Golden Wattle*. However, visits to the school by the community's superiors were recorded, as well as entrances of past pupils into the convent community.

When the magazine began, in 1909, the school was still small and rather intimate. School spirit was strong. The religious flavour predominated. Nevertheless, academic achievements in university public examinations were well under way, with such examinations occurring at the end of each of the four secondary classes, except the first year. There were also numerous entrants in the examinations conducted in music by the University of Adelaide and Associated Board, and Trinity College, London. Results of successful candidates were written down with glee.

The second, 1912, issue opened with a quote from Ruskin:

Let a girl's education be as serious as a boy's. You bring up your girls as if they were meant to be sideboard ornaments and then complain of their frivolity.

Some past pupils were exhibiting little frivolity, but society was not always favourable. Women in South Australia could not practise law until 1911. So ex-student Mary Cecil Kitson, as the only lady LLB student at the University of Adelaide, was given prominence in this issue, as was Mary Winifred Jeffery, A.Mus., TCL, [sic] who won a three year scholarship to the Conservatorium and was then in her third year of Mus.Bac. Ursula Cock was also a first, in pharmacy. Early in the pages of the next, 1917, issue was a full-paged and quite striking photograph of Miss Marie Charlotte d'Erlanger, pupil from 1914-1917. Charlotte was the Governor's stepdaughter. His wife, Lady Galway, herself something of a scholar who published several literary works during her lifetime, had chosen St Aloysius' High School for her only daughter on account of its excellent academic reputation. Charlotte did well, gaining a Senior Public Pass with honours in French, German, and History. She contributed an article on Versailles in the same issue.

## Impressions of University Life.



**T**HERE is an idea prevailing among Australian youths that life in a University is exceedingly dull and laborious; but this, experience has taught me is utterly false. Certainly, the standard of the Adelaide Varsity is a high one, so that there is ample scope for the student, whether gifted with engineering, scientific, medical, or artistic faculties.

Students are required to attend at the "Alma Mater" only when the Professors are delivering lectures; but as the literary atmosphere at the Varsity is often preferable to the social one of the home, earnest students avail themselves of the use of the Barr. Smith Library out of lecture hours. As the days set aside for the terminal examinations gradually approach, this room is so quiet and the students so tranquil that the proverbial pin could be heard if it fell, even on the carpet!

Now to return to the lectures, which constitute so important a part of the year's work. Interest and instruction they naturally abound in; but it is sometimes difficult, in taking notes, to keep pace with the lecturer; indeed, the papers of some of the students after an ordinary lecture present nothing but a mass of Chinese characters or hieroglyphics.

A fortnight is left before the final examination commences with no lectures to attend, so that the students can recapitulate the year's work. This is rather an arduous task; and for this period the drain on the midnight oil is excessive. But at last, the hour the minutes, nay, the "paper" itself arrives, and one by one the examinations become a thing of the past.

The transition from excessive toil to rest is so sudden that eventually the student must find an outlet for the pent-up energy of that memorable fortnight.

*Article on University life from the first issue of St Aloysius' School magazine, Golden Wattle, 1909*



Kathleen O'Dea

Winner of the Elder Scholarship, 1912

*From the second issue of Golden Wattle, 1912*



Mary Cecil Kitson,  
who passed Senior and Higher Public last year, and has begun her study for the degree of LL.B.,  
being the only lady student doing that course.

*From the second issue of Golden Wattle, 1912*



*SAC pupils and Srs M. Michael (L), Dolores and Campion in Supreme Court, the day Roma Mitchell was made QC, 1962*

In this issue, also, was an account of the school Speech Day. Archbishop Spence had held up Miss Kitson as an incentive to study. It should be, he told his young audience, their ambition to follow in her footsteps. He hoped many would follow her example, and also as a medical doctor or even a doctor of music. To wear the headgear of a sister was, of course, especially commendable. At the speech day, the Convent of Mercy had presented, on behalf of the students, to Adelaide's first lady lawyer, 'a pretty address of greeting and congratulations', read by one of the girls, together with a bound volume of Longfellow's poems. It is rather ironic that one of the clergy responded on Mary's behalf.

Mary Kitson herself contributed an article, 'Woman's Work in War Time', in which she described how woman had 'put her hand to greater things'. An essay by Kathleen Kitson, entitled 'Aims and Ideals', for which she had won a gold medal, was reprinted. 'Every girl', Kathleen wrote, 'should form, at the outset of her career, the solemn purpose of making the most and the best of the powers ... God has given her.' She then asked: 'Why do so many girls of early promise fail to distinguish themselves in after life?' They are, she replied, 'unwilling to devote themselves to that discipline of mind and body, which is the keynote of true success'.

The 1928 School Report commented on changes in the curriculum, claiming that the modern school curriculum was a rather formidable programme. However, results were very gratifying. Music successes totalled one hundred and sixty-six (fourteen honors and fifty credits). Margaret Urlwin had gained her L.A.B. degree. Dorothy Woods had won a £50 scholarship for three years at the Conservatorium to do a Bachelor of Music degree course. Frances Walsh had won a prize of ten guineas, given by the Hibernian Society of Sydney, for her essay on the Life and Work of Cardinal Moran, as well as a one guinea prize for her essay on the League of Nations. There were many past pupils in the University degree examinations list, their names being dutifully recorded. The Catholic Girls' Schools' Sports' Association was formed this year. St Aloysius won second place in A Grade basketball, and the championship shield in A Grade tennis. At the Old Scholars' Association's social function, Mrs Allan Morris presented a scholarship of twelve guineas.

By 1930, in the Golden Jubilee magazine of that year, St Aloysius could boast that seven of its old pupils were graduates from Adelaide University.<sup>48</sup> Three of these were lawyers – Mary Kitson, now Mary Tenison Woods, Claire Sparkes Harris, and Sheila Maddeford. Four were Arts graduates – Alice Monahan, Marie Child, Margaret Miller, and Isabel White.

The pioneering model of 'lady lawyer', set by Mary Cecil Kitson (later Mary Tenison Woods), must have seemed confirmed when she, as part of the United Nations Status of Women's Commission, worked to remove legal

disabilities from women. As official chief of the commission, she was advisor to the Human Rights Division of the United Nations and other organisations on all matters referring to women. Mary had begun to practise at twenty-one, but experienced much prejudice and mistreatment because she was a woman. With Dorothy Somerville, she had formed, in 1923, Adelaide's first female law partnership.<sup>49</sup> She was the first woman in the British Empire to be made a Notary Public. Mary had practised law after graduating in 1916, but when she applied for appointment as a public notary, she was precluded as a woman under the term 'persons' in the Public Notaries Act. This led to legislation removing such sex disqualification.<sup>50</sup> Mary had a special concern for child welfare reform, and received a Carnegie research grant to pursue this interest. Her work was influential in bringing out fundamental improvements in child welfare practice and administration in New South Wales. In 1950 Mary was awarded an OBE, and in 1959 became a CBE.

Historian Edmund Campion highlighted Mary's work as a pioneer feminist and women lawyer.<sup>51</sup> He described her as a warm, sympathetic champion, tireless in her advisory work, skilled in her argumentative strengths and her use of the press. Her friends were Catholic women like herself, in law, social work, or economics. When the Australian bishops issued a social justice statement in 1944 on 'The Family', they wrote to Archbishop Gilroy of Sydney and noted the absence of the woman's point of view. They cited ignorant and romantic references to 'the dignity of domestic servitude' and 'homemaker courses'. They criticised the statement's lack of enthusiasm for nurseries and its masculinist discussion of divorce. They were very courteous but clearly not impressed, wrote Campion. Gilroy did not respond. The group of women continued to meet, and in 1946 became part of the St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, an international Catholic women's movement. Gilroy denied them the blessing they requested, despite their references to the pope's call for women to play a more active part in public life. *The Catholic Weekly* refused to publish their releases. Mary's dedication to the cause of women and her qualities of leadership, however, received secular recognition with her appointment to the Status of Women office at the United Nations secretariat in New York.

It was a matter of pride that a Tennyson Medal in Senior English was won by a St Aloysius' pupil in 1921, 1924, and 1931; and that in 1939 Mildred Pierce (nee McCarthy) had her first novel, *Leaves in the Wind*, accepted for publication.

Another cause for congratulation was the 1940 appointment of Clare Sparkes Harris to the Ministry of Information in the British Government, and later to the Foreign Office, as well as Legal Correspondent for the famous London newspaper *The Times*. Clare had obtained a Qualifying Certificate bursary at the tender age of ten. She had also won government



*First Australian-born leader of Ladies of the Grail, Adelaide Crookall, with Sr M. Gertrude (Kathleen) Pierce and Margaret Kelly*



*Sarah Gunter, St Aloysius' pupil early 1880s.  
The first of five generations of SAC pupils*



*Miss Australia (Margaret Rohan) receives a congratulatory welcome at her old school, SAC, c.1966. Sr M. Virginia (Patricia) Pak Poy is walking with her.*



*Sr M. Campion (Deirdre) Jordan receives an MBE for distinguished service to education in SA, 1969*

bursaries in Intermediate and Leaving, and had been the only pupil, in 1920, to sit for the Higher Public Examination. She had passed in five subjects, with second place in the State in History and third in French. She was also Senior Boarder while at school. She had been, in the eyes of the young student, Elma (Sister Carmel) Bourke, a very brilliant scholar, who sat all day quite absorbed in her studies. She had been, said Carmel, 'something of a heroine to my young mind – I longed to emulate her'.<sup>52</sup> Clare did very well also in her law studies, where she graduated with honours at the age of twenty-one.

Clare was given all sorts of responsible jobs in her British positions. She found that English girls were envious of her education. In their families, education had been for the sons only. She claimed that you had to know your stuff to survive in that environment. Law had trained her mind, and she had had superb training in the Foreign Office.<sup>53</sup> One of her specialities was French. Sister Evangelist had 'made her love French', once giving her 110% for a French exam, so that she might get the prize over another pupil (a Protestant) who scored 104%.

Aline Fenwick, who did Leaving Honours in 1939 and graduated in law in 1944, also worked for the United Nations. There she was employed in a legal capacity in the Human Rights Division. Aline had achieved first place in Ancient History and first place in Geology in the State, in Leaving Honours, gaining tenth place on the General Honours List and a government bursary to the University. She was then only sixteen and had been a pupil of the Sisters of Mercy for eight years. Aline was also remarkably successful in music.

Despite her own exciting career, Clare Sparkes Harris claimed that she had had no real aptitude for law. In her opinion, Mary Kitson, Roma Mitchell, and John Bray were the outstanding legal minds of her time. Roma Mitchell was also a pupil of Angas Street, from the age of six. Described as 'the most intellectually gifted student in the history of the College',<sup>54</sup> she was to achieve a surprising number of legal firsts, so that she was dubbed 'Roma the First'.<sup>55</sup> Roma was to become the first female Queen's Counsel in Australia (1962), the first woman Supreme Court Judge (1965-1983), the first Chair of the Human Rights Commission (1981-1986), the first woman Chancellor in an Australian University (Adelaide University, 1983), and the first woman Governor of an Australian State (South Australia, 1991-1996). The SA Equal Opportunity Commission sponsored an annual Mitchell Oration and Equal Opportunity Achievement Awards in recognition of her work. The University of Queensland awarded her an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws for her distinguished contribution to the law and higher education in Australia.<sup>56</sup> Talking herself of her own experience as a woman in the public sphere and of her involvement in women's issues, she described herself as 'a conservative sort of feminist'.<sup>57</sup>

A sociable and warm-hearted person, Roma as Governor of South

Australia opened up Government House so that it came alive. She forged what many believed was a new path, making her role more relevant to the community.<sup>58</sup> She travelled throughout the State, meeting all kinds of people, and acted as patron to an Aboriginal woman's council. In her writings and speeches the 'feminist governor'<sup>59</sup> spoke often about the need for women to keep up their careers. In her turn, Roma more than once expressed her gratitude to the Convent of Mercy for her basic education. When she was appointed to the Supreme Court, and was given a commission, among the packed audience in court were a number of sisters and some senior students. This surprised her but touched her deeply.

Dame Justice Roma Mitchell's address at the 1962 Speech Night of her old school highlighted the forward thrust of SAC. For her the speech night was an 'epoch making occasion'. It was the first time the school principal had presented her own report, instead of having it read by the male chaplain. It was also the first time a woman had presented the prizes.<sup>60</sup> 'This school', she asserted, 'has always been fortunate in the breadth of vision of the Sisters who run it, and such breadth of vision was demonstrated in Sister M. Champion's report ...' She had always been grateful, she went on to say, to her mother who had for her time advanced views upon the desirability of higher education for girls. She quite deliberately chose this school as the school which would give her daughters not only a Catholic education but also an education to fit them for higher studies. She had spent very happy years there and was most grateful to the sisters who taught her for providing her with an education which was an excellent background to her future life.<sup>61</sup>

Roma continued to express publicly this kind of appreciation. Interviewed in the 1980s by Philip Satchell for *Made in Australia The People*<sup>62</sup>, she stated that St Aloysius' principal and staff had always been forward thinking, had always thought differently. It seemed to her that they were even more forward thinking now. The College was busy organising a one-day seminar which she would chair, to discuss the problems which beset society, including the problems in educating children to take their place in society. 'Quite a big project', she commented, 'but I think it's very forward thinking.'

In her time at the school, she had had, she continued, very good teachers. It had educated the first woman lawyer in Mary Kitson, admitted about 1916, a long time before most States. The nuns were geared more towards arts and teaching at that stage, but they went along with her plans; they were very much career oriented in a time when a lot of girls' schools were not, when it was not uncommon for girls to leave school after Grade VII. When Roma was awarded a doctorate by the University of Adelaide, and gave the occasional speech at the conferring of the law degrees, she recalled the distinguished history of that first woman graduate in law, Mary Cecil Kitson.

In the decades around and especially after the war, the college was able to

boast of a wider range of professions into which its students were entering. There were a surprising number of first places in various subjects at school and undergraduate levels. Arts attracted the most women but science, medicine, physiotherapy, social science, education, and music all featured.<sup>63</sup> By 1939, the count was fifteen pupils securing subjects in Law, Arts, and Medicine or the Diploma courses in Massage, Education, and Social Science.

In 1942, Shirley Mitchell was the winner of the Archibald Mackie Bursary to the Adelaide University for four years in the Diploma of Commerce course. Helen Devaney won one of the R.W. Benner prizes for Law in 1945. Maeve Burnett worked at the Waite Institute. In 1940, Barbara Warhurst was appointed as geologist in Commonwealth Munitions Supply. She had obtained a BSc with honours at Adelaide University and had begun research in paleontology at the South Australian museum as well as for a MSc degree. Geology seems to have been a speciality of St Aloysius at one stage. A number of students over various years obtained first place for the subject at intermediate, leaving, or leaving honours levels. With Sister M. Ignatius Kelly as teacher, Joan Gaskell (later Sister M. Augustine) won the trifecta, gaining first place in geology at all three levels. In Joan's leaving honours year, the second place in the State for geology was also won by a St Aloysius' pupil, Margaret Hogan.<sup>64</sup>

Music and elocution were proving to be much more than 'mere accomplishments'. They were providing a profession for several women. The visit of Miss Amy Castles, who charmed both students and staff with her glorious voice, was written up, in an early *Golden Wattle*, as of especial interest because she was a past pupil of the Mercy Convent, Bendigo. The diarist wondered whether 'our convent' would produce a singer like her. The 1912 issue noted that past pupil Eileen Rooney (professionally known as Eileen Redmond) was playing in 'Our Miss Gibbs' and bid 'fair to make a name on the operatic stage'. Maudie Plunkett, one of the 'Blue Bird' company, had displayed an early talent at elocution which had made her friends prophesy a brilliant future for her.

At one period in the school's history, budding musicians and actors among the present pupils were sometimes given a chance to entertain the whole school during a short afternoon break. Among the singers was Kathleen O'Dea, who later won the Elder Scholarship at the South Australian Conservatorium, enabling her to study for three years at the Royal College of Music of London. Her success was worthy of a page in the *Golden Wattle*. The 1930 *Golden Jubilee Wattle* chronicled a visit to the sisters by Kathleen from Italy. After her studies in London, she had had engagements in England, the Continent, and South America, and had married an Italian. Her rich soprano voice made her concert at the Adelaide Town Hall, on this visit, 'a great success in every way'.

The three Meegan girls, who attended the school during the early twenties, used their musical education to find employment. Mary was a piano teacher. Kath was a permanent first violinist in the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. Alice, a brilliant pianist, who also won an Elder Conservatorium scholarship, was much in demand as accompanist at public concerts and taught at the Conservatorium.

Eileen Sayers won an Elder Scholarship for 1939. Eileen possessed a very beautiful lyric soprano voice. Patricia Howard was seventeen years old when she sang at an informal school concert in 1940, an event which led to her becoming eventually a radio star. The sisters had invited some distinguished guests to hear her, including a noted tenor Lawrence Power, who encouraged her to continue her studies. Patricia also won an Elder Scholarship to the Conservatorium of Music, where she was studying when she sang at the Convent of Mercy for Dr. Percy Jones, an eminent priest musician. He was impressed and arranged for her to go to Melbourne, where, in 1947, she won the Professional and Amateur Parade. This led to study in the United States and a career as a singer. Her teacher at St Aloysius was Sister M. Mercy, who accompanied her at the piano for both of those two influential recitals.

Visiting musicians other than past pupils were sometimes happy to come to the convent and entertain the sisters and their students. The year 1924 was a red-letter year. Lady Bridges, wife of the Governor, brought Dame Nellie Melba to the convent. Nellie invited all the nuns to any or all of her operas. Some of the members of her company also visited, and entertained their hostesses with a programme of operatic excerpts, ballads, and instrumental trios on piano, violin and bassoon. Dame Nellie was delighted, she declared, with the convent – it brought back memories of Rome and Milan. She was much amused at the sisters' knowledge of her songs, name and fame. They reminded her, she said, of nuns in Paris for whom she often sang when she visited their convent.<sup>65</sup>

However, it was not just academic and cultural talents that were described with interest in the school magazine. Vocations to religious orders, especially to the Mercy Institute, comprised a reason for much rejoicing. By 1916, twelve old scholars had become Sisters of Mercy. As sisters themselves, many past pupils had fulfilling professional lives as teachers, principals, and convent administrators. In later years, their expertise led also to rewarding openings in wider fields.

Other former students had become teachers, secretaries, or nurses – the most common occupations for women in that era. 'What a noble work that is for old Mercy girls!', enthused the *Golden Wattle* editor about nursing. Some attracted a degree of renown. Decades later, Matron Irene Kennedy of the Royal Adelaide Hospital was another exemplar for the present students. Having received a Florence Nightingale International Foundation scholar-

## OLD SCHOLARS GRADUATE

### UNIVERSITY NURSING



Patricia O'Donohue, Bachelor of Music.

### DEGREES IN MUSIC



Anne Rivers (Sr. Marianne), Bachelor of Music, is continuing an Honours degree in music this year.

### OTHER GRADUATES:

Ursula McGowan (Stanek) has completed her M.A. and is now beginning her Ph.D. She has been awarded a 2-month scholarship in Germany next January for work on this.

Catherine Millard gained her Honours degree in Classics, and a David Murray scholarship for two years at Oxford University where she will do a Bachelor of Philosophy Degree in Greek and Latin Literature.

Bice Della-Putta (Franchiucchi), B.A.

Maureen Ryan, B.A.

Helen Thompson, B.A.

Janice Gaffney, B.Sc.

Geraldine Hanna, B.Sc.

Anne-Marie Matson, B.Sc.

Diplomas in Arts and Education were gained by  
Doreen Beckett (Sr. M. Edel),  
Kathleen Hynes.

Diploma in Education:

Therese O'Brien, B.A.

Diploma in Physiotherapy:

Sick Ching Wong.

Diploma in Social Studies:

Diane Barry.

Elizabeth Hiskey.

Vanessa Rohan.

### NURSING CREDITS



In the final nursing examinations this year, five old scholars who have trained at Calvary Hospital gained their first certificates. Above are Susan Daley (right) who obtained second place in the State examination, and Cheryl Sly, who gained fourth place. Others who passed were Jillian Connelly, Louise Morgan (Nicholas), and Nadia Pianezola.

ship to study as a nursing tutor in London, she had set up a Training School for probationer nurses on her return. Moira Byrne and Gertie Travers were two other two old scholars who were noted for having won gold medals in their final nursing exams.

Irene Kennedy had been a pupil of Parkside and Angas Street convents. She, too, expressed her pride in the school. At the St Aloysius' Building Appeal dinner of 1967, Matron Kennedy spoke of her school days there.

I remember as a schoolgirl here the pride with which Sister M. Teresa and Mother M. Magdalene spoke of Miss Pike, of Beatrice Childs, and later of Clare Harris and Mary Tennyson [sic] Woods, girls who have become not just national but international figures. Probably the school's history in this respect was crowned with the elevation to the Bench of the Supreme Court in this State of Justice Roma Mitchell. We were tremendously proud of that day and we are very proud of her.

We have always loved coming back to the nuns. We have always loved their interest in us and they have always managed to give us – each one of us – the feeling that they are interested in us.

They know about us, about our families and it is amazing that even although all those nuns that we knew best are no longer with us the young nuns coming on seem to know us almost equally well.

Eily Carpenter was Infant Mistress at the Normal School in Pretoria, South Africa. Minnie Collins was a most successful infant teacher at Kalgoorlie Public School, and her sister Lena nursed in that town. Another sister Mary (now married) resided in Perth. Ettie Kelly held a very good position as typist 'in one of the shipping offices in Melbourne.' Isabel White was first assistant at Strathalbyn Public School. Mary Laintoll was in charge of Warooka School, on the Peninsula, and Gertie – presumably her sister – was teaching only five miles away.

In the 1930 *Golden Jubilee Wattle*, from which the above details of old scholars who had kept in contact are taken, Isabel White contributed an article on 'Life in the Highlands on Royal Deeside' where she had apparently lived for a year. There was, in fact, a number of articles in the various successive school annuals, contributed by past pupils travelling or living in other countries, together with accounts of overseas visitors to the school. All of this must have had a broadening effect on the young readers.

When Isabel White retired from teaching with the Education Department in the 1940s, she gave voluntary services to the college. She supplemented the secondary teachers, taught commercial subjects, and took over French from Sister M. Evangelist Vian, now elderly. Isabel, at this time, was also president of the Old Scholars' Association. Pupils remembered her as a familiar sight, a very big lady with bright red hair and wearing a skirt fastened with a great safety pin.<sup>66</sup>

Eileen Holmes (nee McFarlane) received her Bachelor of Arts in 1943, when working as Assistant Adjutant – Section Officer rank – at the RAAF Hospital in Frome Road, Adelaide. She worked later as Flight Officer in Melbourne. In 1962, she received a Diploma in Education from London University. She expressed herself as very grateful for the help given her by the Sisters of Mercy at SAC. She wrote of singing Gregorian Chant and early church music. She had not forgotten the Latin she had learnt from Sisters M. Teresa, Carmel, and others. She had been good friends with Sister Evangelist.<sup>67</sup>

Adelaide Crookall became the first Australian born leader of the Ladies of the Grail, a women's community which had been founded in Holland and had come to Australia in 1936. It was based on the idea that women could work as lay apostles for the church. One of its major works was the formation of young women in a 'colourful, humane, enthusiastic Catholicism'. They stressed the significance of women's contributions to the church and urged each to take responsibility for their own spiritual life. Adelaide Crookall, according to historian Edmund Campion, resisted clericalism in the church courageously and intelligently.<sup>68</sup>

Marriages – and, later, births and deaths – were all faithfully recorded. As were also the reunions of the old scholars and the many individual visits of the ex-students to their 'alma mater'. There were one hundred and forty women present at the 1912 annual reunion of old scholars. Even the failures to visit were recorded: of those who were re-visiting Adelaide from their home elsewhere; of those who lived in Adelaide but were wont to neglect their former teachers. All in all, the convent school network of teachers and students remained a living reality for many women in their after-school years.

One group of students of the 1930s even established a Memorial Trust to honour the memory of one student at St Aloysius from 1931 to 1939. Betty Kitson had loved art, literature, and history, so one-sixth was to buy books; the rest was for students of special need. Betty had had great compassion for new refugees and those of migrant background.<sup>69</sup>

*Golden Wattle* provided the present and former students with a surprisingly ample amount of information about the Mercy Order, an aspect that must have played some part in fostering vocations to it. The chronicle, 'Our Doings', included the celebration of various saints' feast days, especially those of 'Our Beloved Reverend Mother' (Mother Clare Murphy) and 'our beloved principal (Mother Magdalene Carroll). On both these days, concerts were given, with some of the clergy present. Mother Cecilia Cunningham and Sister Margaret Mary Kenny were welcomed home after eighteen months in South America.

The opening issue featured a photo of and article about Mercy foundress Catherine McAuley; an account of 'An Impressive Ceremony', namely, the profession of three 'of our boarders' as Sisters of Mercy, with many former

boarders in the congregation; a detailed and glowing account, by a student, of 'Our Retreat' of three days, in preparation for the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy; 'Words of Wisdom for Our Girls' – by an unnamed author, probably a sister – which included three sayings from Catherine McAuley, among others.

The 1930 *Golden Jubilee Wattle* was very enthusiastic about the Sisters of Mercy, not only in South Australia but in other parts of the world. There were articles about and photos of convents in Chicago, Mafeking, Dublin, Perth, and London, as well local ones. There was an article and a sketch depicting Florence Nightingale with the Sisters of Mercy at Crimea. There was news of old scholar Eileen Madden who had joined the nursing staff of 'the big Mater Misericordiae Hospital (Sisters of Mercy)' in Dublin, in order to continue her studies and gain experience in certain branches of nursing. Roma Flinders Mitchell wrote an article on Mercy foundress, Catherine McAuley. Accompanying the article were photos of Catherine and her tomb at Baggot Street.

The mix of academia, religion, and community continued. The constant reminders of the existence of the sacred were no accidental insertions. The sisters' attitudes towards education were a mix of forward and conservative thinking, with a constancy of purpose in their religious and spiritual goals.

That this atmosphere persisted is apparent from the appraisal given by Mrs Diana d'Este Medlin, speaking at a commemoration address at a university degree ceremony in 1985. It was the centenary of the first woman graduate of the University of Adelaide, and Diana reminisced about the impact on her of her teaching years at independent girls' schools in Adelaide. The calibre of the headmistresses for whom she taught was outstanding, she declared. They were 'brilliant women academically and exceedingly able and creative organisers'. There was also a degree of humanity and humaneness in some of these schools which she had never forgotten. She named, among others, Deirdre (then Sister M. Champion) Jordan, and singled St Aloysius out for further comment.

I still think of ways in which the Sisters and the whole staff handled their students – as people with rights and with feelings. The atmosphere at St Aloysius' College was unbelievable, very academic, very caring and totally trusting.

As a married woman with two children, Diana stated that she could never have followed and furthered her career without the understanding support of the Independent Schools system as a whole, at a time when women in the State Education Department were seen as dispensable.

Sister Deirdre Jordan herself gave credit to the 'strong women' at SAC who had helped shape her self-identity. She was an old scholar as well as its



*Opera singer Patricia Howard,  
SAC Annual, 1953*



*Prefects, St Aloysius' College, 1955. Five of them joined the Mercy community, at least for a time*



*Postulants visit Mater Christi College, Mt Gambier, 1961*



*Helen McEvoy (Miss South Australia), old scholar of Mercedes, with Srs M. Thomas (Rose) Casey and Bernadette Dwyer, 1964*

principal for fifteen years. She was, according to Professor L.F. Neal, one of the best headmistresses he had seen in Australia or Britain.

She was also another past pupil who possessed 'a formidable list of firsts'.<sup>70</sup> She was the first nun to lecture full-time in an Australian University. In 1974 she received a Master of Arts from London University, and a PhD in Sociology of Knowledge, in 1983, from the same institution. Having already received an MBE, she was the first South Australian woman to receive the Companion of the Order of Australia, in 1989, for services to education, the community and Aborigines. On her retirement from Adelaide University, she became Chancellor of Flinders University. As educator and as nun, she pushed continually for change and the breaking down of stereotypes about women. She worked to bridge 'the cultural and gender divide'.<sup>71</sup>

In 1994, Senator Rosemary Crowley opened extensions to SAC. The facilities she was currently opening were entirely consistent, she claimed, with what the school had always been about – and entirely consistent with two great events of that year, the Centenary of Women's Suffrage and the International Year of the Family. St Aloysius' had been there, she continued, for that whole century and had been offering opportunities, haven and shelter and support, backing up the women in their struggles for equality, equal access to opportunity, to be heard, to be properly educated, to be recognised as fully human.

#### GROWTH OF FEMINISM AMONG CATHOLIC WOMEN IN GENERAL

There is a final question to be considered. It is tied up with the consideration of the effects that the sisters' dual message – of home and career – might have had on their pupils. More specifically, we might ask whether the existence of religious orders such as the Mercies delayed the growth of feminism among Catholic women in general? To answer this question satisfactorily would require a study of its own. But it may be useful to look briefly at the history of one Catholic women's organisation which went beyond the purely spiritual or social concerns of sodalities such as the Children of Mary or the women's conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society, which aimed at relieving economic distress. This organisation was the Catholic Women's League.

The Catholic Women's League in South Australia was founded in Adelaide in 1914, the second branch in Australia, and was unusually active from the beginning.<sup>72</sup> The impetus for this energy was World War I. It is true that the Catholic laywomen of Adelaide had been slower to act than had the laywomen of other Christian denominations, but when they did they did so very effectively. One hundred and fifty women attended the first meeting in Saint Francis Xavier's Hall, the first of its kind in South Australia. Their aim

was 'to unite Catholic women in a bond of friendship for the promotion of religious and intellectual interests and social work'. By the end of 1915, their membership had reached nine hundred and fifty nine.

Much of their effort in the first years went into war work. They raised funds for the Belgium Relief Fund and for amenities for Australian soldiers on recreational or convalescent leave. During this period they also raised funds towards a new wing at Goodwood Orphanage. Pupils at St Aloysius were aware of the activities of the League. Through it they sent a large parcel of goods to soldiers in Egypt, and donated to funds being raised for other League projects. Not just St Aloysius but also the other Mercy schools at Angas Street, Parkside, Goodwood, and Henley Beach contributed.<sup>73</sup>

In 1916 the League opened St Mary's Hostel and Club, which took on something of the role played earlier by the House of Mercy, especially when in the 1920s they tried to help young women migrants in various ways. In 1926, they helped set up branches of the Girl Guides in convent schools, the first Catholic company being formed by Miss Barbara Carozzi, an old scholar of St Aloysius. The 2nd Adelaide (St Aloysius') Company was begun in 1929. Molly Gunson, Acting-Captain, contributed a three page article (including photo) on Girl Guiding to the *Golden Jubilee Wattle* of 1930. Old Scholar Glen Kenihan (nee Hewitt) also did great work for the Catholic Girl Guide movement.

About 1929, the League established junior branches of their own organisation, for immediate past pupils and present senior pupils of the convent schools. The St Aloysius' Branch of the CWL commenced in 1930, and an article in the Jubilee magazine by Frances Walsh claimed that such a society would have been very near to the heart of Catherine McAuley. It began with forty members and grew during the year. It had 'steered a merry course of intellectual and social activities', which included presentation of papers, debates, impromptu speeches, the making of garments, a musical evening, and a jubilee gathering par excellence.

It was not until World War II that the League lost its initial strong impetus. It had not been incorporated into the national Catholic Action plan of the 1940s and later; Mothers' Clubs set up in schools during the 1930s and 1940s took some of their membership; single middle class women began to be drawn to wider-based organisations: all of which contributed to a drastic decline in membership from one thousand plus in 1946 to five hundred and sixty in 1955. Vatican II, however, led to a reconstitution and a new energy and vision.

How much influence did convent education have on the women who formed and consolidated the League? The women who led it in its initial decades were middle-class educated women. They were the type of women who had been educated in convent secondary schools such as St Aloysius. Lady Galway, who was the wife of the governor and whose daughter was a scholar at St Aloysius, was their unofficial patron in the beginning, a connection which



*Professor of Medical Ethics, Margaret Somerville (nee Ganley), Magill University, Canada, visits her past Mercedes teachers, Srs Patricia Kenny (L) and Deirdre O'Connor (R), 1987*



*Old Scholar of Mercedes College: Mary Ann Bin-Sallik, graduates Doctor of Education, Harvard, 1989*

gave them confidence. Their ranks included some forward-looking women who achieved much more than they have been given credit for.<sup>74</sup>

It took the crisis of a world war to get them moving, but they were the second on the national scene to do so. A relatively high proportion of Catholic women (*vis a vis* comparable groups of other Christian women) attended their first meeting. They demonstrated the same kind of initiative, business acumen, and leadership qualities which we have seen displayed in the sisters. They frequently prompted episcopal action in areas where they considered it had been overlooked. They helped break down sectarian divisions by cooperating with other community efforts, thereby gaining a recognition for Catholic women and becoming part of a more general women's movement within Australia.

#### SEEDBEDS OR CONSERVERS?

Was, then, the Mercy convent schooling of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries a seedbed of the women's movement or a conserver of the status quo? The reports offered in this chapter have emphasised the movement towards a more academic curriculum for girls, so that they might have a greater chance of equal opportunities with boys. To this movement towards equal opportunity the sisters did contribute. However, they also continued to preserve the status quo by repeating much of the usual rhetoric about women's role in society as wife and mother. They did not moderate, what historian Stephanie Burley termed, 'the intense environment of cultivated religious femininity.'<sup>75</sup> Moreover, not all girls opted for future careers based on academic success.

How did these girls fare? It is evident that they were given offerings that could lead to alternative paths. The continued strong interest in music and drama led to professions for some of the more talented, while art was also an avenue for others. Commercial courses advanced in sophistication and probably gave most of the girls their entry into the world of employment.

All in all, the curriculum offered by St Aloysius School was more than adequate for the varying demands of the varying times. The sisters may not have been consciously feminist but they were committed to the growth of women towards wholeness. Our notions of wholeness may be more expansive, but the Mercy schools offered some tools for critical thinking, and some role models for those who wished to step beyond the status quo.

The sisters exercised leadership and helped develop leadership among their pupils. They showed themselves to be resourceful and initiatory, to be independent, outspoken and dynamic women, women of much strength and authority, and – despite the restrictions of their chosen life-style – of much individuality. Their students' responses to their leadership was inevitably

multiple, but leaders did emerge among them and they, in their turn, challenged their status quo.

On the whole, their students learnt, paradoxically, 'to both conform and resist', to embrace the existing attitudes and values and at the same time to critique them. Many, indeed, learnt to 'create their own lives in their own patterns'.<sup>76</sup> To what extent both teachers and taught queried and effectively moved the education system itself towards a greater wholeness is another – and perhaps – less successful story. It is a story, however, whose eventual outcome has been made more hopeful, given dynamics set in train by the Mercy convent schools. As an SAC booklet of the last years of the twentieth century put it, in the words of a Year 12 student:

The emphasis on independence has created a community of assertive young women. We know we can enter the future with confidence, high self-esteem and the ability to determine the paths our lives will take.

1. Elizabeth More, John Tulloch, Ann Ross-Smith, *Institute of Sisters of Mercy Australia, An Organisational Culture Study*, Macquarie University, 1987.
2. Stephanie Burley does not see the suffrage movement in SA as radical a movement as that in England, for example. She claims that the women were helped by some men who saw it would suit their purposes. *None More Anonymous? Catholic Teaching Nuns, Their Secondary Schools and Students in South Australia 1880-1925*, MEd thesis, University of Adelaide, 1992.
3. *In Her Own Name. Women in South Australian History*, Netley: Wakefield Press, 1986.
4. Catherine Spence stood for election as a delegate for the Federal Convention. Apparently there was a woman parliamentarian in the American State of Wyoming in the 1860s. She took the place of her husband, who had died. (Oral testimony at State History Conference, Adelaide, 1994).
5. In contrast, the University of Queensland was not established until 1910 and the first State High School after that. Students wishing to matriculate took examinations through the University of Sydney or sometimes Melbourne University.
6. *The Advertiser*, 5.9.1888.
7. Anne McLay, *Women out of their Sphere. A History of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia*, 1992, 411.
8. For example, Margaret Somerville, lawyer Meg Taylor who became a professional mediator in Papua New Guinea – a unique role in her country; Mary Ann Bin-Sallik, Judith Henley, an opera singer of some renown.
9. Thesis for degree of Master of Education, University of Adelaide, 1972.
10. Margaret McKenna, RSJ, 'Early Josephites in Queensland', Religious History Conference, Institute of Religious Studies, Sydney, 1996.
11. Sophie McGrath, 'Beyond Florence Nightingale and Caroline Chisolm: Women in Nineteenth Century Australian History', in Mark Hutchinson & Edmund Campion (eds.), *Long Patient Struggle. Studies in the Role of Women in Australian Christianity*, Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1944, 62.
12. Stephanie Burley and Katherine Teague, *Chapel, Cloister & Classroom. Reflections on the Dominican Sisters at North Adelaide*, North Adelaide, 1993.
13. Susan Sullivan, 'Convents: Hot Beds of Feminism?', *Women-Church, An Australian Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, No.16, Autumn, 1955.
14. Ibid.
15. Joan Gaskell, pupil 1937-1941, interview with author.
16. Ibid.
17. See also section on past pupils later in chapter.

18. Philomena Wilkinson, interview with Glenda Condon.
19. *None More Anonymous?*, 107.
20. A. MacKinnon, *One Foot on the Ladder: Origins and Outcomes of Girls' Secondary Schooling in South Australia*, University of Queensland Press, 1984, 46.
21. *Nuns in Nineteenth Century Ireland*, Dublin: 1988.
22. Paper at the Conference on Religious History, Sydney, 1996.
23. *The History of American Catholic Women*, New York: Crossroad, 1990.
24. Biography by Kathleen Healy; see also Mary C. Sullivan, *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, Dublin: Four Courts, 1995.
25. Sister M. Hermentia Muldrey, *Abounding in Mercy – Mother Austin Carroll*, 1987.
26. *Nuns and the Education of American Catholic Women, 1860-1920*, Chicago: 1987.
27. Anne McLay, *Women out of their Sphere. A History of the Sisters of Mercy in Western Australia*, 1992.
28. Maurice Ryan in *Footprints*, Journal of the Melbourne Diocesan Historical Commission, June 1993.
29. Frances O'Donoghue, RSM, *Mother Vincent Whitty, Woman and Educator in a Masculine Society*, MUP, 1972; *Beyond Our Dreams*, Jacaranda Press, 1961.
30. *The History of Monte Sant'Angelo College*.
31. M. S. McGrath, *These Women? Women Religious in the History of Australia: The Sisters of Mercy, Parramatta 1888-1988*, Sydney: 1988.
32. *The Issue of Women and Schooling in a South Australian Catholic College*, M.A. thesis, University of Adelaide, 1981, 18, copy of relevant chapter in MASA, 704/22.
33. Crotty, 22.
34. Ibid, 18-21.
35. *Principles of Biology*, London, 1876, quoted in Crotty.
36. Quoted in Crotty, 7.
37. *The Southern Cross*, 27.12.1889, 6, quoted in Burley, 133.
38. *The Part Played by Nuns in Education in South Australia*, Dip Sec Ed thesis, 1934, MASA 701/1.
39. *Portrait of a Catholic Girls' School, Adelaide 1912*, University of Adelaide, 1978.
40. Emery, *Portrait of a Catholic Girls' School*, 15.
41. *Protestant Advocate*, after June 26, 1882. MASA newspaper cuttings, 300/20.
42. Newspaper cutting, n.d., MASA.
43. S.M. Kevin Kennedy, Jottings, MASA, 150/26.
44. MASA, 150/16.
45. *Essays in the History of Women and the Church in Australia*, Dove Communications, 1977.
46. Talk at conference run by the Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, Sydney, 1992.
47. Roma Mitchell, interview by Glenda Condon, SAC Archives.
48. Sister M. Ignatius Kelly, in her thesis of 1934, claimed that there were at present studying at the University about thirty ex-pupils of the three convent schools which catered for secondary education of girls. Almost every academic course was represented, including Arts, Law, Medicine, Education, Science, Dentistry and Commerce.
49. Diary 1994, Women's Suffrage Centenary SA 1894 – 1994.
50. Helen Jones, *In Her Own Name*, 262.
51. *Australian Messenger*, December, 1990.
52. Written Memoirs, 2.
53. Interview with Glenda Condon and Deirdre O'Connor, SAC Archives.
54. Sister Carmel Bourke.
55. *The Weekend Australian*, 25-26 May, 1996.
56. *Contact*, University of Queensland Alumni Association, Winter 1992, 19.
57. *The Weekend Australian*, 25-26 May, 1996.
58. *The Advertiser*, 24.11.1996.
59. *The Advertiser*, 30.3.1994.
60. The opportunity was seized when the traditional presenters, either of the two bishops, were both overseas.
61. In interview with Glenda Condon, Roma also expressed gratitude for having learnt music from c.6 to c.16 years of age. It gave her an appreciation, though she never now played.

62. Hardacre, Finney, Appleton, Savvas Pub., 1987.
63. Scrapbook of newspaper cuttings, 1935–, MASA, 626/32.
64. Apart from Joan and Margaret, Aline Fenwick was first in Leaving Honours in 1939, Deirdre Jordan in 1942 Leaving, and Julia Preece in 1945 Leaving Honours. Ancient History was another subject in which students in several years obtained passes near the top of the State.
65. MASA, 171/3, 30.
66. Philomena Wilkinson, interview by Glenda Condon.
67. Article in Golden Jubilee book of 1943 Graduates of Adelaide University; see also letter to Sr Carmel Bourke, MASA.
68. *Australian Catholics*, Penguin, 1988.
69. Trust was established by Eileen Coombe, Patricia Tomaszewski, Patricia Conielewski, letter dated 1985; Betty Kitson won 3rd place in a SA Catholic Schools essay competition; Aileen Fenwick won 1st place.
70. *The Advertiser*, 20.6.1994, 27.
71. *Ibid.*
72. This account is largely taken from Ruth Schumann, 'Charity, Work, Loyalty': *A History of the Catholic Women's League in South Australia 1914-1979*, B.A. Hons. in Soc Sc thesis, Flinders University, 1979.
73. Article, 'Our Bit', *Golden Wattle*, 1917.
74. Schumann cites Patrick O'Farrell as disparaging their achievements.
75. *Entrenched or Emancipated? Responses to Catholic Girls' Secondary Schooling, South Australia 1880-1925*, paper at conference of History of Women Religious network, Milwaukee, USA, 1995.
76. Stephanie Burley.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# A New Story of Moving On

### A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS – NEW POVERTIES

THE decades constituting the second half of the twentieth century ushered in substantial changes in our ways of understanding reality. Our world was engaged in what has tellingly been called 'a whole systems transition'.<sup>1</sup>

Scientists and theologians were re-writing the account of creation, articulating a new mythical story of the origins of the universe and of humankind. With its emphasis on interconnectedness and its expanding cosmic perspective, a new vision of wholeness was emerging. There were also new understandings of what it is to be human; new insights concerning patriarchy, power, and leadership; new patterns of human social living. The second wave of the women's movement was leading to changed relationships between women and men. The technetronic revolution resulted in global communications of diverse kinds. The movements of migrants, refugees, and tourists were bringing new appreciations of other races, other cultures, other faiths. It was a time open to new possibilities, a time demanding new forms of spirituality.

It was also a time of new poverties, and of old poverties newly recognized.

Post-World War II Australia saw an influx of migrants, largely non-English speaking. They came first from Europe, then also from the Middle Eastern countries, and then increasingly from Asia. Australia was an affluent country, and – in the 1950s and 1960s particularly – was tied into the current Western ethos of optimism and steady growth. Many of the 'New Australians' were fleeing from countries devastated by war or other forms of oppression. Multiculturalism gradually became an accepted value, at least in its rhetoric.

The myth of 'progress' was, however, to reveal much of its shadow side from the 1970s on. Money and what it empowered a person to do seemed to constitute a major preoccupation for many Australians<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, unemployment figures in Australia began to rise steeply, with resulting loss of morale for those unemployed in a society where having a well paid job conferred high status. A culture of welfarism, and a relative disappearance of

the so-called Protestant work ethic, were also appearing amongst some of those with low paid jobs and those largely dependent on social security services.<sup>3</sup> The burden of a history of conflict between original and colonial Australians lay heavily on the nation, as the content of that history became more widely appreciated, and the situation of so many Aborigines remained deplorable. The continuing threat of war, especially nuclear, brought new anxieties. The damage to the environment caused by the successes of a mechanistic technology demanded a radical ecological sensitivity. Moral issues of life and death appeared in different forms. The deepened perception of our universal connectedness brought about a fresh alertness to the persistence of poverty and hunger throughout the world, as well as our responsibility to future generations.

The social and psychological development of the individual, *vis a vis* the organisation, meant increased responsibility for one's self, with a comparable lessening of the role of authority. Pluralism became more and more of a value to be cherished, but with it came also a loss of certainty and, for many, a loss of a sense of reality. A greater capacity for freedom was accompanied, too often, by a more intense feeling of alienation as also a more shallow spiritual receptivity. Australians have had a reputation for hedonism, and the good life seemed still good enough to forestall that deep alienation which can bring about profound change.<sup>4</sup> The explosion of knowledge and the growth of industrial capitalism entailed professionalism and complex specialisation, together with the centralisation of control, in business and other areas. The enormous social shift effected by feminism was bringing its own problems. For many men and women, but especially for many women, a transformation in imaging the divine has accompanied a postmodern, feminist experience of God, often with disaffection from the institutional church.

In this rising new consciousness, full of exciting vistas but also full of deprivation for many, the roles adopted by women religious in both church and society began to alter. The institutional church itself was engaged in reforming and renewing itself, the rate of which was enormously accelerated by the 'opening of the windows' that occurred when Pope John XXIII decided to call the Second Vatican Council of bishops to deliberate on church teaching and policy. Perhaps the most significant result of the council was a new attitude to the world, one which sought to embrace it as the locus of the sacred rather than to reject it as the source of temptation to evil. The group which took up the challenge of Vatican II most enthusiastically were the women religious. For them 'search has become a way of life'.<sup>5</sup>

Religious orders had always been seen as part of the church but had not been as restricted by the current ethos of the institution as were the clergy. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, like Jesus himself, they had in many eras seen themselves called to remind the people of the true meaning of

their lives. This meaning may have been interpreted somewhat differently, according to the horizons of the time, but the obligation of proclaiming what they saw as the true way was, on the whole, accepted seriously.

In the nineteenth century, women formed together in religious communities in large numbers, women who had seen themselves called to proclaim Jesus as redeemer through their spiritual and corporal works of mercy. In many areas of social reform, they were on the cutting edge, offering educational, health, and other services that no other agency was then prepared to provide. The Sisters of Mercy had been in the forefront of this movement in the English speaking world, both in the Old World and the New.

The Mercies who went to Argentina and thence to South Australia were steeped in this tradition and in personal experience of being on the cutting edge. They had learned to take risks. Now, in the opening decades of the second half of the twentieth century, they felt themselves called to move on again, to walk in the 'dangerous memory' of what their predecessors had done and had achieved, and to let go of much of their established work so as to tell a new story of mercy. With their sisters worldwide, they began to move beyond the confines of church institution; they re-defined traditional ministries; and they created entirely new ones. Their hitherto strong focus on schooling shifted as they experienced a surge of creativity and a widened empathy with those most clearly victimised by the times.

The 1970s under Premier Don Dunstan have been called South Australia's 'golden era'. They may be said to be the golden era also of the Adelaide Mercies. It was the period when the Adelaide Mercies really were 'one step ahead of the rest' of the Australian Mercies, and probably of most, if not all, groups of religious women in Australia. They became a pointer, a prophetic witness, not just in Mercy circles but also in the church of Adelaide.

Their driving thrust was mobility for mission. In this new story of Mercy, they were to search for other ways of being in school and for other forms of education that seemed appropriate to the altered times. They were to widen their scope and engage in ministries that were different in shape if not in essence, from those to which they were accustomed. And, to support themselves in the midst of the resultant transformations, they would experiment with ways of governing and of living together, with ways of expressing their personal and communal quest for the sacred. They were articulating new expressions of 'being and doing Mercy'. Ironically, it was in an era of continuing – even increasing – demand for their services while they experienced a severe decline in membership.

At their 1980 celebrations of the centenary of their arrival in South Australia, the Mass booklet used the prophet Isaiah's image of the terebinth or turpentine tree. The terebinth is a low-lying desert tree, providing some shade for those who sit under its low, embracing branches. It is a little tree,

close to the earth under which people can gather for shelter. The Adelaide Mercies saw themselves as what the prophet called 'terebinths of integrity, planted by Yahweh to glorify him'. Inspired by this image, they hoped to provide some shelters for the ever more wide-ranging oppressed peoples of their world.

#### WORK WITH AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

One of the areas where this risk-taking showed first was their movement into work with Australian Aboriginal people in which they adopted a number of underlying principles behind their operation. When Sisters Patricia Walsh and Joan Gaskell began to teach at Davenport Aboriginal Adult Training Centre, at Port Augusta, they clearly enunciated these principles. Joan Gaskell had applied for the position on the understanding that 'if somebody ought to try it, probably we Mercies are as good as anyone.' It was the time of the beginnings of black control, she claimed, and only greenhorns like themselves were game to work for them under their direction. Experienced missionaries probably could not do it. Yet it was crucial for the blacks that some whites would stand by them and let them make their own mistakes and work for them on their own terms. Groups of missionaries could not help avoid projecting the image (and developing the mentality) of outposts planted by the dominant culture. Only individuals mixed in with the locals in a non-institutional setting could avoid their alien image.<sup>6</sup> Patricia Walsh believed that the benefits gained by the students in developing a stronger sense of personal and group identity far out-weighed the discomforts and embarrassment a white person must inevitably face when facilitating an Aboriginal studies programme with adult Aborigines. Both women gained inspiration from the writings of the South American educationist Paulo Freire.

There does not seem to have been much awareness of the sorry plight of the Aboriginal peoples among the Mercies when they first established themselves in South Australia. This may have been because, coming from Argentina, for them the 'natives' were the descendants of the early Spanish settlers as distinct from the few survivors of the American Indian tribes. More likely, it was because of the scarcity of Aborigines in the settled area of South Australia when they arrived. Certainly, this apparent lack of awareness contrasts with the concern and interest that were displayed by Ursula Frayne and her companions in Perth three or four decades earlier. Or with the desire to help improve their conditions expressed by Mother Vincent Whitty in Queensland in the 1860s and 1870s. Or with the enduring ministry of the Irish sisters who arrived in Yass, New South Wales, in 1875. As well as the usual

cavalacade of colonists in country districts, the sisters were met at Yass by a group of Aborigines led by a woman dressed in white who greeted 'the Sacred Ladies'.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1880s, the Adelaide Aboriginal tribe had been more or less wiped out. It has been estimated that before European colonization there were, at a very minimum, ten thousand<sup>8</sup> Aborigines in South Australia. Many lived on the tribal lands of Tandanya, now known as the Adelaide Plains, and belonged to the Central Lakes culture. Smallpox, which came down from New South Wales via the Murray River, was but one of the many disastrous accompaniments of European settlement. By 1856 the Aboriginal population in an area of 2,800 square miles around Adelaide had declined from six hundred and fifty to one hundred and eighty.

Writing in 1879, J.D. Woods claimed:

The Adelaide tribe is extinct and so are those who dwelt near Gawler, Kapunda, the Burra, the Rufus etc. In none of these places can a single trace of them be found. They have left no memorials behind them, and their language as a language exists no more ... it is as if the Adelaide tribe had never existed.<sup>9</sup>

In other areas of the colonies, the same picture could be traced.

The initial policy of assimilation into the white society had soon proved unacceptable to the Aborigines and impossible to implement. By the time of the Mercy arrival, there had been a break with this policy and a move towards segregating the surviving Aborigines within separate settlements. This policy persisted for many decades. The 1961 census showed that forty per cent of the identified Aboriginal population of South Australia still lived a life of almost complete segregation in missions or reserves. The last person of full descent of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains (a woman, Ivarityi) died about 1930.

#### HOLIDAY PROGRAMMES

It was, then, a striking sign of a new consciousness when, in 1971, two Adelaide Mercies went during the summer university vacation to relieve Sisters of St John of God working in an Aboriginal mission station at Balgo Hills, in the Kimberley district of Western Australia. The initiator of the scheme, Sister Cynthia Griffin, continued to spend her summer holidays in this way for ten years, financing costs through the correction of Matriculation Geography exam papers. Her initial companion, Sister Catharine Ahern, was the first of many volunteers, who later included students from Mount Gambier and Marist Brothers.

Cynthia had requested to go to Papua New Guinea for her holiday programme, where the Sisters of Mercy had been working since 1956.



*Srs Patricia Walsh and Joan Gaskell with students at Davenport, c.1977*



*Sr Margaret Adams at Balgo, WA*



*L to R: Srs Anne Foale, Barbara Broad, Karen Gillespie, Margaret Adams at Coober Pedy, 1985*

Distance was thought to preclude that area, and she chose to go to the Kimberley instead. The scheme signified the first tentative shoots of what was to become a new form of ministry within the group. It was a ministry to the most marginal group of people in the country, marginalised by the legacy of European invasion and the continuing reality of racism.

At the beginning of 1972, the sister in charge of the province, Cecily Lynch, wrote to Bishop John O'Loughlin of the Northern Territory, asking for his advice concerning the movement of her sisters into working in more underprivileged areas. Archbishop Gleeson and others had told her that the Australian Bishops' conference of August of that year had called special attention to the Church's responsibility to Aborigines. The Mercy Union General Chapter around the same time had envisaged missionary teams of Mercies working for Aboriginal welfare and for our Asian neighbours. Cecily stated that many of the Adelaide Sisters had, for some time, been anxious that they should have more active involvement with underprivileged people, especially Aborigines. As well as the summer holiday programmes, several sisters were active in Aboriginal welfare associations in the city. Cecily felt that it would be some time before the Union missionary teams were achievable, but a preliminary move by the Adelaide Mercies could be helpful to the whole. In particular, the 'climate' of her group was favourable, and one of the sisters, with teacher training and some basic nursing experience, would be prepared to spend some time in some area of underdevelopment.

Bishop O'Loughlin, on his part, was desirous of furthering her aspirations – sisters could transform communities – but did not readily conceive a project where one sister could operate alone.<sup>10</sup> However, despite this temporary set-back, other events were to bring the Adelaide Mercies quite firmly into a commitment to working with Australian Aborigines. The ministry devolved, eventually, around four centres: Kimberley, Port Augusta, Alice Springs, and Adelaide.

In January, 1973, a group of sisters made their first visit to Davenport, an Aboriginal community (originally Umeewarra Mission) on the outskirts of Port Augusta, north of Adelaide. The previous year the Aboriginal Community there had requested help in a Creative Activity programme during the school holidays. This resulted a school holiday programme which involved sisters and senior students from a number of Mercy schools, including St Aloysius and Mercedes Colleges in Adelaide and Tenison College in Mount Gambier, and from parishes at Elizabeth and Morphett Vale. Programmes were conducted in the January, Easter, and May breaks over the years 1973 to 1975, and attracted some fourteen sisters over the three years.

In 1974, Sister Joan Gaskell chose to spend her year's sabbatical teaching at Holy Rosary School in the town of Derby, on the coast in the West

Kimberley area. Joan's decision gave a decided impetus to the growing sympathy for the situation of Aboriginal people.

#### DAVENPORT / PORT AUGUSTA

The holiday programme in Davenport led to an invitation to Sister Patricia Walsh from John Thomas, the Aboriginal Superintendent at Davenport, to come as permanent teaching staff. This resulted in a Mercy congregational reflection in November, 1974, a very significant event in the life of the community. There was a definite and novel sense of a group decision having been taken, and a group sponsorship of the movement of Patricia Walsh and Joan Gaskell to staff the Adult Training Centre from the beginning of 1975. The centre offered programmes to Aboriginal adults of varying ages and from differing life styles – tribal, rural, urban – in personal development, community education, and community development. It helped build identity and culture, and played a vital role in educating Aboriginal persons to be successful in the workplaces around Port Augusta.<sup>11</sup>

A number of sisters became involved in Port Augusta, at first primarily at Davenport. Joan acted as co-ordinator of the Adult Training Centre until the end of 1977. She was followed by Patricia who, at the end of the next year, was replaced by an Aboriginal person. Claudette Cusack (teacher) and Anne Foale (nurse) joined the staff as part-time helpers a few months after Joan's departure. Anne's stay was to be only temporary, as she was enrolled to do a community health course in Adelaide. Claudette became full-time at the Adult Training Centre the following year. Barbara Broad acted in a variety of programmes. Most notably, she tutored adult Aboriginal students training as teachers, and taught at and later directed the Tji Tji Wiltja Aboriginal Kindergarten until an Aboriginal woman completed teacher training. Marie Britza spent 1977 helping to set up a Women's and Children's Emergency Hostel in the town. Lucy McConachie contributed to making the convent a centre of warm hospitality as well as becoming involved with the people of the town parish. Sisters working in Adelaide and elsewhere helped take children for summer holidays, including to the beach in Queensland.

Port Augusta is approximately three hundred kilometres north of Adelaide. In 1980, the population of the town was about fifteen thousand, which included some fifteen hundred Aborigines from many areas. About four hundred lived in the Davenport community on the fringe of the town. At first, the sisters had lived in a flat on the reserve, then in a Housing Trust flat within the town, and finally in a congregationally owned house, No.68 Stirling Road. Port Augusta is situated at a central locus for travel to Alice Springs and the north, to Western Australia, to south-west Queensland and New South Wales in the east, and the Flinders Ranges and Adelaide within

South Australia. With the sisters seen as specifically standing with the Aborigines, the house became a meeting place for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal visitors from all over Australia.

When a change in government policy led to the abolition of the adult educational services at Davenport, and to the programme being incorporated into courses at the Port Augusta TAFE<sup>12</sup>, there was a need to re-think the Mercy contribution in the district. At the beginning of November, 1982, congregational leader Patricia Fox wrote to the Davenport Community Council requesting guidance as to the nature of their possible future offering to the people. Sister Monica Marks was deputed to consult with key members of the Aboriginal community and their advisors, as to how Sisters of Mercy might continue to contribute service in the triennium beginning 1984. It would be mainly in the areas of educational bridging programmes for Aboriginal children and in health education/Home Visitors programmes.

In her report, Monica warned of the danger of losing credibility if they sowed the seed around that they wanted to be of service, but were never able to provide anyone when they were contacted. She suggested that they more clearly articulate a theology of evangelisation that might underpin their ministry, that sisters going there have some kind of practical insertion into the community, and that they receive some preparation beforehand.

Barbara Broad's contract with the Tji Tji Wiltja Kindergarten ended with the second term of 1983, and the convent – then housing herself and Lucy McConachie – was closed for the rest of the year. A new kind of project began at the beginning of 1984, with four sisters. Two of these would obtain employment to support themselves, while the other two would be involved more directly in evangelization. The congregation was concerned to be part of the diocesan endeavour. Prior to 1984, the main aim of the Mercy endeavour had been to be of service. Now they felt the need to take a more direct role in the church's mission of evangelization.

The bishop, Peter de Campo, welcomed the proposal and actively supported their efforts. He offered the services of Father Paul Bourke of Port Pirie to help in their initial days of planning and reflection. Father Burke, on his part, appreciated that the Mercy presence, congregation and mission, was 'at last' being well received and acknowledged by the parish there.<sup>13</sup> The parish agreed to give some material support to the two sisters who would not be in paid employment.

While the work of the sisters might have not been so readily accepted by the white population of Port Augusta, and although 'it hadn't often been easy' – in Paul Bourke's words – there is no doubt that the work of the sisters on the Davenport campus had been much appreciated by the people there. There was a strong note of friendships having been forged. When Pat Walsh left, it was 'a sad time for everyone' there; she had been not only a teacher but a friend.

When Claudette withdrew in December, 1981, she was presented with a book of original prose and poetry, entitled *Farewell to a Friend*. One of the pages ran:

It would be impossible to mention in this little farewell booklet the affect [sic] that Claudette has had on this Centre and the people who have passed through its doors over the past three years.

I can only say that without Claudette's knowledge, assistance, and wonderful personality the Centre would be just another learning institution and not the friendly caring place it has become.

Claudette's wide range of personal contacts helped broaden the students' horizons – her visits from people she knew from all over the world – her leaving to work with South American Indians in Ecuador – and also, more mundanely, her skill as 'a master tradesman'. Always interested in horticulture, she had set up an organic garden at Davenport.

Some of the teachers' learnings from the 'Davenport Encounter Programme' were shared with a wider group of Sisters of Mercy of Australia, when the Adelaide Mercy Social Justice Committee organised a conference. Participants also included four lay people, two of whom were Aborigines from near Kempsey, NSW. The conference touched on what they had heard the Aboriginal people saying, and the implications for themselves. It was a consciousness raising exercise, rooted in their present reality, especially through visits to places and direct sharings, requiring constant work on their prejudices.

With the new thrust of 1984, Anne Foale began work in the Pika Wiya Aboriginal Medical Service, originally founded in 1976, and then revamped, in 1984, after a governmental enquiry into Aboriginal health. As well as her previous temporary period at Port Augusta, Anne had had experience working with Aborigines at Lombadina in Western Australia before her entry into the Mercy congregation. From mid-1984 she operated as a registered nurse based at the Davenport clinic. She saw her role as encouraging growth and learning in the health workers so as to increase their confidence and competence. A Chinese saying displayed in the clinics was a source of inspiration for her:

Go to the people  
Live among them  
Learn from them  
Love them  
Start with what they know  
Build on what they have,  
But of the best leaders  
When the task is accomplished  
Their work is done  
The people all remark 'We have done it ourselves'.

Margaret Adams had been teaching for four years at Billiluna, in the Kimberley. Her work there and in Port Augusta was separated by a course at the Pacific Mission Institute in Turrumurra, New South Wales, followed by a programme organised by the Australian Conference of Major Superiors for religious working with Aborigines. She now embarked on a long-term stay in Port Augusta, doing many things over the following years: acting as chaplain to and tutoring of prisoners at various educational levels, communicating with Aboriginal people in the town, tutoring in Arid Lands Horticulture at TAFE, and helping to establish and initially managing an Aboriginal Women's Centre.

Margaret was to find that she liked living in Port Augusta. She spent some of her time just being with the Aboriginal community – offering hospitality at the house, or in going out around the town to those places where people congregated in groups to sit together drinking. She listened to the stories of the women, now alcoholic, who once worked as domestics on the stations or who grew up in station communities or were taken from their parents (as half-caste children). She listened to the men's stories of sheep and cattle and stock camps. She found racism a living issue in Port Augusta, but she was hopeful, for while Aboriginal people were seen around the town, the non-Aboriginal people would have the opportunity to confront their own ethnocentrism and racism.<sup>14</sup>

The Centre for Aboriginal Women which Margaret helped initiate – and whose first Aboriginal co-ordinator Isobel Taylor she trained – became an alive, homely place. It was not just a drop-in centre. Women could engage there in a number of activities as well as leave their children for creche and occasional care. Artistic activities became a feature, taught by great-grandmother Millie Taylor. A number of the women from the centre went to Adelaide in 1993 for a business organisation course, with a view to improving the operation of the centre.

The two sisters who were to be more directly involved in evangelisation in the area were Barbara Broad and Karen Gillespie, a Sister of Mercy from Melbourne who had been working with Aborigines in Bourke, New South Wales. In the first part of 1984, they made contact with Aboriginal people in Port Augusta, Riverland, Alice Springs, Coober Pedy, and Oodnadatta. Plans were made for them to move to Coober Pedy after mid-year. Coober Pedy was a small settlement north of Port Augusta, on the way to the Northern Territory. It was noted for its buildings created under the ground because of the heat. One such became the sisters' quarters after a while.

There Barbara taught in TAFE as Aboriginal Community Educator, while both she and Karen mixed around the community, in the hope of bridge building between the church and Aboriginal people, between white culture and black culture.<sup>15</sup> The two remained at Coober Pedy until mid-1988, when they withdrew for a period of rest and renewal.

Claudette Cusack had returned to Port Augusta in 1987, when Anne Foale had withdrawn. She and Margaret Adams were instrumental in finding a home and funding for the Aboriginal Women's Centre. Claudette worked for the Department of Community Welfare, particularly in a programme aimed to reduce the incidence of drug-taking among Aborigines. She also tutored in the Aboriginal section at TAFE.

In the first part of 1985, Father Tony Pearson of the Otherway Centre in Adelaide, took part with the sisters and the congregational superior (then Patricia Pak Poy) in a review of their work. He concluded:

I am deeply impressed by the dedication to the Aboriginal people and their future that these Sisters show. The Catholic Church throughout South Australia was slow to become involved with Aboriginal people in a formal way, and the life and love that these Sisters, along with Bishop Peter de Campo, show is a real sign of hope.

Bishop de Campo, on his part, had commented that there were so few Aborigines in his diocese who were Catholic, and that the only organised contact was the Mercy one.

#### A L I C E   S P R I N G S

When Joan Gaskell left the Davenport Adult Training Centre, it was to return to Adelaide as a member of the provincial council and as staff member of Mercedes College. Then, in 1981, she joined the staff of the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs. This had been established by the Uniting Church in 1970, to assist community development for Aboriginal people and to provide cross-cultural education between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society. At the time of Joan's joining the staff as co-ordinator and teacher in a new Community Education Programme, the director was J.Y. (Yami) Lester, a remarkable blind Aborigine.

Joan had had a choice of where she might continue her work with Aboriginal peoples, and had chosen Alice Springs. Aboriginal groups in South Australia used it as a resource centre and she felt a strong commitment to working with those of her own state. Joan's presence in Alice Springs was also a support to other Mercies desirous of doing the Institute's course in cross-cultural communication, either as preparation for their own work with Aboriginal people or as a consciousness-raising exercise. Her understanding of the educational situation of Aborigines was useful for her role as consultant to some National Mercy projects, including the schools in the Kutjungka region (Kimberley). Joan's presence in Alice Springs was also a help when the Australian Mercy Institute held there, in 1989, a national meeting for sisters engaged in the Aboriginal Apostolate.

Outside of Alice Springs, at Pine Gap, was a huge American military



*First class of Community Education Programme, Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs, 1981*

intelligence base. Joan became involved in the local peace movement, frequently being called upon to present the 'Christian View of World Peace'. The Alice Springs Peace Group acted as support group for the Australia-wide *Women for Survival*, who staged a headline-making camp protest at Pine Gap in November, 1985. Joan was also involved in a woman's spirituality group which studied meticulously, over two years, feminist scholar Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's scriptural text *In Memory of Her*<sup>16</sup>.

In 1985, Joan retired as Co-ordinator of the Community Development programme but remained for some time as a voluntary tutor for English and Mathematics. She became involved as tutor in the courses for the Associate Diploma of Arts (Aboriginal Studies), the diploma being granted through the University of South Australia and Batchelor College, Northern Territory. In 1988, she talked at the graduation ceremony, and that same year, the Principal of the Institute wrote that it was very clear from the response of the students that they regarded her work as a major contribution to their success.<sup>17</sup> A photo of the 1991 graduation at Alice Springs includes Joan and Mary Ann Bin-Sallik, the latter in her Harvard Doctor's gown, as head of Aboriginal Studies Teacher Education Centre at the University of South Australia. There was some synchronicity in this juxtaposition, given that Mary Ann had been a boarder at Mercedes College, Springfield, and Joan had been – among other roles – in charge of the boarders at the time. In 1994, in her seventieth year, Joan retired to Adelaide, where she became congregational librarian and, in the following year, a member of the Congregational Leadership Team, a position she had already held three times.

#### K U T J U N G K A / K I M B E R L E Y

Some years after Cynthia Griffin initiated the first Mercy entry into the Kimberley, Western Australia, the parish priest of Balgo, Pallottine Father Ray Hevern, requested the Adelaide Mercies to staff a school – pre-school and junior primary – to be opened at the beginning of 1979, at Billiluna, an Aboriginal community in the Balgo Hills area. Mulan (Lake Gregory), another small community in that area, was to be staffed by Singleton Sisters of Mercy, one of whom, Colleen Kleinschafer, had been working there for the last eighteen months. The Aboriginal communities had themselves requested sisters, and it would be appropriate if Sisters of Mercy staffed the two schools. They could form their own community at Balgo during the weekends in the larger house that would be built there.

Balgo was on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, about a thousand kilometres east of Broome on the coast, and about two hundred and eighty-eight kilometres south of Halls Creek on the northern highway. It was one of the most isolated settlements in Australia. There was vista upon vista of flat land.

an enormous area of red soil, low spinifex grass, and stunted trees. It had a beauty, particularly through the clarity of the atmosphere and the contrasting colours of red, blue, and drab green, but its beauty was harsh. After some abortive attempts at settlement, beginning in the 1930s, the Pallottine mission had eventually settled, in 1964, at Balgo around a supply of good water. There was now a population of between six hundred and fifty and nine hundred in the Wirrumanu (Balgo) community which had its own Council. The pioneering St John of God Sisters ran a pre-school and hospital.

Two out-communities had also arisen. Mulan or Lake Gregory and Billiluna were two properties purchased by the government to run cattle, and administered by Aboriginal Councils. The Mulan community had been formed by some one hundred and sixty people moving from Balgo to return to their own tribal lands, those of the *Walmatjiri* people, and to set up their own station. The composition of the Billiluna community differed. Its people were largely from Halls Creek and Hooker Creek. Their tribal origins were somewhat different from those at Mulan, but there were relationships.

In 1962, the Sisters of St John of God had ceded the school at Balgo to the government. However, the two newer communities wanted their schools to be set up by sisters. Adelaide made a contribution when, at the beginning of 1980, Margaret Adams began a four-year term at the school at Billiluna.

By 1982, the Wirrumanu community at Balgo was asking for a Catholic school, and Bishop John Jobst requested the de la Salle Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy to open a secondary school. After some period of indecision and tensions within the community and the European staff at the settlement, the school was finally opened in 1984. By this time, the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia (ISMA) was functioning, and the idea of a national Mercy contribution to the project was put into operation. In 1983, Sister Janet Lowe from Adelaide was one of the two Mercies appointed to the staff at Balgo, to begin in 1984<sup>18</sup>. During 1983, Janet prepared for this new work by undertaking the missiology course at the Pacific Mission Institute in Sydney, courses in cross-cultural communication and the Pintubi language at the Institute for Aboriginal Development at Alice Springs, and a three week course at Nungalinga Theological College in Darwin and the Catholic Mission at the Daly River Aboriginal Community. With two sisters at each of Mulan and Billiluna, the Mercies would now number six. Janet was appointed to the role of Mercy community co-ordinator. The sisters became very closely involved, not only in the schools, but also in the religious lives of the people, preparing adults for the sacraments and helping develop liturgies appropriate to the local people.

In October, 1982, Sister Deirdre Jordan provided background material for the annual meeting of the Mercy National Plenary Council, with a paper entitled 'Cautionary Tales for Balgo Project'. In the following August, she

visited Balgo to animate and facilitate the planning of the sisters and brothers who were to work in the school, and later helped them review the achievement of their aims. Deirdre's own research at the University of Adelaide and her membership of a number of committees on Aboriginal welfare had enlarged her understanding of education in cross-cultural situations.<sup>19</sup> She had a special interest in the dynamics of reconstruction of an Aboriginal identity. She was a valuable consultant to Mercy projects, not only in the Kutjungka (Balgo) region but also in Papua New Guinea and Pakistan.

Sister Barbara Broad joined the Balgo community in 1989, where she co-ordinated the Wirrumanu Adult Education and Training Centre (formerly St John's Adult Education Centre), until the end of 1992. The centre, among other things, prepared students to receive a certificate in Basic Child Care, to become eligible for entrance into university, or to train as teachers. This latter programme was conducted through a Remote Area Teacher Education programme of four years, through Batchelor College in the Northern Territory. In Barbara's final year there, she worked towards the introduction of a formal Health Worker Training course. In 1996, after a period of study in theology in Melbourne, Barbara returned to the Kutjungka region, as adult educator in the Bililluna community. In that year, also, her experience in local justice issues led her to being invited to attend as an Australian representative at an international Mercy meeting in Dublin.

The conditions under which the Kutjungka Mercy project were conducted varied from year to year. By 1989, a number of serious tensions had arisen. In May 1989, Patricia Pak Poy, as one of the congregational leaders with sisters working in the project, wrote to the Minister for Health of the Western Australian Government, about the lack of health care personnel at Balgo Hills. Sisters there were being called to make decisions about health without medical or nursing training. In August, 1989, as member of the Adelaide leadership team, Joan Haren visited the region. There were lots of tensions in the community, and Joan wrote a perceptive report on her visit. She asked the question what has white Christian society done for these people. She saw two kinds of ways of acting – the old style missionary model, and a newer community development model – working with the people so that they could take responsibility for their own lives. The simultaneous operation of the two models was leading to a clash of ideologies. This needed to be addressed, Joan stated, with the people and with future sisters going to Balgo.

#### G R O W I N G   A W A R E N E S S   A T   H O M E

Meanwhile, those sisters who were not working directly with Aborigines in far away places were also becoming more aware of the predicament of the original Australians. In the 1976 Adelaide Chapter, concern for people on the



*Sr Margaret Adams (first right, back row) at Women's Centre, Port Augusta, 1993*



*Tea and sugar train, 1976. Miss Beryl Schiller (L) and Sr Anne Gregory*

fringe of the dominant society came through strongly. Over the previous and the ensuing years, there had been and was a progressive involvement in this area. The Adelaide Mercy committee on Social Justice concerned itself with the spread of awareness about Aboriginal situations. Joan Gaskell had been secretary of the committee of the diocesan Pastoral Council promoting liaison with the Adelaide Aboriginal community. Joan and Catharine Ahern undertook Aboriginal Studies at the College of Advanced Education in Adelaide. Deirdre Jordan's educational and sociological interests provided on-going constructive insights. At a day's inservice, for example, Deirdre spoke on the 'Worlds' of Aboriginal People and also the nature of 'missioning'. Patricia Fox and Joan Haren described administrative policies and the then current endeavours. Participants then reviewed the latter in the light of Deirdre's input. At the 1980 Mercy Centenary celebrations, Deirdre gave a keynote speech on the identity of a religious group. At this she gave something of the rationale for the changes in apostolate that were happening within the Adelaide Mercies. The sociological insight of the 1980s, she claimed, was that it was not enough to serve people and improve their circumstances. What was needed was to help them to gain power over their own lives. Educators themselves were being called to educate themselves in examining the assumptions underlying their work, and then to help those they were working with to establish or to hold onto a sense of their identity in a world of disintegrating values and social structures.

Patricia Fox, as congregational leader, was involved in a 1981 Search Conference on the churches' role in Aboriginal Education, organised by Community Development students of the South Australian Institute of Technology. Many sisters were members of the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Support Group. After leaving Davenport, Patricia Walsh was part-time teaching at the Aboriginal College in North Adelaide and spending one day a week at the Nungas Club in Murray Bridge. An Inter-Order Planning Workshop for Women Religious involved in the Aboriginal apostolate had Joan Gaskell as its Mercy delegate. Joan Haren and Joan Gaskell were members of the planning committee for the 1989 national Mercy meeting in Alice Springs. Several Mercy school principals encouraged the growth of awareness about Aboriginal situations among their staff. Joan Haren was one who was active in this, visiting the Nepabunna reserve in the north of the State to observe conditions at first hand.

Money not spent from sisters' salaries at Davenport since 1978 was put into a separate fund for the Aboriginal apostolate, instead of being put into the general charities fund. The Adelaide Mercies also donated, in 1984, more than \$13,000 to the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs. This was used mainly to allow the continuation of a home management programme for women from the town and the bush communities, when its continuance was threatened by withdrawal of funds. They also contributed to the building of the central convent in Balgo.

In 1982, Deirdre Jordan put forward a proposal to the Adelaide Congregational Council for an 'Aboriginal Enclave' at St Aloysius College, to begin during 1984-5. Her research into the drop out from schools of able Aboriginal students led to her proposal to set up a unit at SAC, especially for Aboriginal students who wished to proceed to tertiary education. Her research had shown the paramount importance for Aboriginal people of the construction of an Aboriginal identity. An integrated situation did not allow for such building. She argued for an enclave situation at secondary level, on the basis of its proved success elsewhere. An Aboriginal Studies programme would be part of the normal school curriculum. There would be an ongoing Adult Education programme for parents (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) concerning the project, together with on-going staff development. A qualified Aboriginal teacher was to be employed in 1984 as a regular teacher, and a qualified Aboriginal counsellor, home/school liaison person, would commence the third term of that year. Deirdre would commit herself to be available as consultant/facilitator/reviewer for the next decade, 1984-1994.<sup>20</sup>

In 1981, the Mercies gave strong and public support to the attempts of the Aboriginal Community College to transfer from its cramped quarters at North Adelaide to the former orphanage of the Sisters of St Joseph at Largs Bay. A letter of support to the local Member of Parliament was signed by seventy-two Sisters of Mercy. It was also sent to the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and distributed to *The Advertiser*, *The Australian*, and the *Southern Cross* newspapers. In the letter, the sisters claimed that the Aboriginal Community College had become an educational institution unique in Australia in meeting the needs of the Aboriginal people. Their letter was quoted extensively in Parliament by the Shadow Minister for Education calling for support for the move. However, the Port Adelaide Council, declaring they were acting on the wishes of the majority of the residents of the area, decided against the application of the Aboriginal Community College. The Mayor expressed 'sadness' at the sisters' publication of their letter, and accused them of supporting Aborigines at the expense of Southern Cross Homes (Catholic homes for the aged). On the other hand, Josephite Provincial, Sister Mary Reardon, thanked Patricia Fox for the sisters' support 'so well and so publicly in our attempts to make Largs Bay available to the Aboriginal Community Council', and consulted Patricia Pak Poy on the draft of her letter of protest to the Prime Minister Mr Fraser.

#### OTHER CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

The 1970s were very significant years. A number of other events, not directly concerned with Australian Aboriginal peoples, during that decade, contributed to the broadening cultural consciousness of the group. They

helped to bring about a climate which, in turn, allowed for more such things to happen.

Catherine Seward and Patricia Fox went to Indonesia during the summer vacation of December, 1970. Patricia's particular purpose in going was to broaden her cultural experience in preparation for working with Mercy novices. They were part of a work team of twenty or so students from Australia, which was sponsored by the National Student Christian Movement Conference. The project's emphasis was on improving Indonesian/Australian relationships. In a village in Bali of eighteen families, thirteen of whom were Christian, fourteen miles from the nearest town, the team helped build a multi-purpose five-roomed clinic. Meanwhile, they experienced a way of life totally unlike anything they had ever known.

Sister Anne Gregory's involvement with the 'Tea and Sugar Train' project of the South Australian Education Department was another such experience. The Tea and Sugar train brought supplies weekly to the families of the Aborigines, stockmen, and railway fettlers living along the East-West railway between Port Augusta and Kalgoorlie. In late 1975 and during 1976, Anne, with experience not only in teaching but also in community development and social work, was part of a Remote and Isolated Children's Project. Its aim was to provide assistance to mothers to develop stimulating educational environments for their pre-school children, and to offer help in health and social problems. Anne, together with a nurse, was based in Port Augusta and travelled along the East-West line as far as Hughes. The two women provided health services and helped the mothers to establish play groups for their small children. The families that responded were mainly those of railway employees. A three-day camp organised at Pichi-Richi during August, 1976, attracted fifteen women and seventeen pre-school children. As well as Anne herself, four other Mercies helped with the programme: Carmel Hennessy, Veronica Courtney, Marie Britza, and Claudette Cusack.

Some sisters spent part of their sabbaticals or undertook courses in so-called developing countries. Sister Mary Densley was the first Adelaide Mercy to attend the East Asian Pastoral Institute (EAPI) in Manila, Philippine Islands.<sup>21</sup> With a student class of twenty-nine nationalities, it was a significantly formative experience for Mary, then aged thirty-two. She was to value the experience even more in later years when she worked with refugees, both in Australia and South-East Asia.

Sister Helen O'Brien, on the staff at St Aloysius College, was active in the ecumenical movement, Action for World Development. In the summer holidays of 1974-5 she undertook, through it, an educational tour, visiting EAPI, Singapore, and Papua New Guinea. Helen helped Mary Densley process the latter's experience at EAPI, and was herself to move into work in Papua New Guinea some time after. Reflecting later, Mary Densley felt that

going to EAPI had been an enormous step forward in the growth of cross-cultural consciousness, just how big a step no one had realised at the time.

The activity of a number of other persons fed into this growing consciousness. Doreen Beckett campaigned against racism in South Africa. Some were active in the anti-Vietnam War protests of the early 1970s. There was a ripple of shock through the congregation when Monica Marks (then a member of the leadership team) spoke at a rally. Monica and Doreen Beckett became involved with the work of Rosemary Taylor, a Mercy past pupil and congregational member for a while. Doreen went to work in Saigon at an orphanage set up by Rosemary.

Marion Molyneux, who had also worked with Rosemary Taylor in Vietnam, had just been admitted into the Congregation in late 1975 when she left for Yemen. Yemen, in the Middle East, had been devastated by drought and famine. There Marion nursed for a year in the paediatric ward of the Yemen Arab Hospital, under the auspices of Catholic Relief services. She had been overwhelmed by her farewell at the airport on departure for Yemen.<sup>22</sup>

In the early 1980s, Claudette Cusack's work at Milagro, Eucador – including a programme in appropriate technology there – and her continuing connections with Eucador also contributed to the climate. Claudette had reflected on the discrepancy between Eucador's potential for self-sufficiency and abundance and the widespread poverty, social disruption, and economic exploitation that existed there. Her experience in Eucador had forced her to think about life and the way it is lived, to query 'when was enough enough?'<sup>23</sup> The visits of her colleague in Eucador, artist Jan Gallagher, whose paintings and the other artefacts she brought to Australia to sell for mission funds, helped stimulate the imagination and keep alive the foreign flavours.

Medical doctor Damian Mead, of the Romero Community of which Sister Janet Mead was part, also worked on the Milagro project when Claudette was there. Formed in 1979, the Romero Community were involved not only with the marginalised people of Adelaide but also in raising money for refugee and other projects in South America, South-East Asia and elsewhere. Their presence was a continuing influence. Patricia Pak Poy's connection with the Australian Jesuits' Asian Bureau in 1979 was another reminder. She formed part of an evaluation of the Bureau after ten years of its existence. In 1982, as a member of the Australian Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, Patricia Pak Poy visited the Philippines, and later travelled in mainland China. Also in 1982, the showing of the film 'Mercy on the Move' made an impact, displaying as it did the changed stance in ministry being made by the Mercies in Buenos Aires. There the sisters had made a corporate decision to gradually move out of their now well established and relatively safe institutions into work with the more marginalised people within the Argentinian

society. This had drawn upon them the suspicions of the government, but they had persevered despite the very evident danger.

In 1984, the Fringe Play: *Mercy Killing (or the Sisters of Mercy try producing Murder in the Cathedral with many interruptions)* was produced as a novel way of doing things together in preparation for the forthcoming Congregational Chapter. Directed by Janette Gray and Deborah Fulton, over thirty sisters were involved, together with many friends. The play was performed to packed houses (more than eight hundred people) for three nights in cabaret style seating. *Mercy Killing* was a play within a play, depicting a group of Mercies trying to put on *Murder in the Cathedral*, the murder, however, being that of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, assassinated in 1980. Not only was the production a means of bringing the sisters together to reflect on issues of importance for their life and ministry, it was also a way of presenting to others something about themselves and about what they thought were urgent issues in contemporary society.

#### S A I G O N

In the years preceding the fall of Saigon, capital of South Vietnam, in 1975, a number of sisters or former members were connected with Rosemary Taylor's homes for children in that city.

Rosemary had been instrumental in establishing homes for children abandoned or orphaned by war, as clearing houses for them to be adopted outside the country. The operation was called Friends for Children of Vietnam, and was connected with a funding organisation in the United States with various chapters throughout that country. The Vietnamese homes were concerned not just with adoption, but also cared for the children, who were frequently severely handicapped in some way.

Sister Anne Barry administered the house called Allambie, an Aboriginal word meaning 'Put you up for a while before you go walkabout again'. Sister Doreen Beckett, having set up the administration of To Am and Allambie, then became administrator of the nursery named Hy Vong – House of Hope. Margaret Moses, a fellow past-pupil of St Aloysius College and also a member of the congregation for a time, was assistant to Rosemary, as executive director of the operation. Marion Molyneux, who was later to be admitted into the congregation, worked in the programme. Other sisters who went there for varying lengths of time included Monica and Bernadette Marks and Ruth Egar.

A remarkable woman, Rosemary was the continuing inspiration behind it all. Margaret Moses said of Rosemary:

Her life seemed to be a series of quixotic guestures, which may explain why every time I hear the tune of 'The Impossible Dream' from *The Man of La Mancha*. I think of her.

Rosemary had begun her programme in 1967, being officially registered in 1973 as an organisation, 'Friends for the Children of Vietnam'. She chose that name since an organisation of the same name had been helping them for some time, and they were able to obtain a Colorado, USA, adoption licence with minimum delay. Later, the adoption service re-registered as a separate corporation under the name 'Friends for All Children'.

Rosemary's endeavours also fired the imagination of others who did not go to work with her. Sister Janet Mead and the Romero community in Adelaide presented a full-scale musical every year from the early 1980s, the proceeds of which were solely for Rosemary's work. They also acted as an outlet for craftwork and clothes from village weaving projects supported by Rosemary. They saw their offering as 'a response to the love and courage shown by Rosemary in her life'. Children at St Aloysius College made toys for Rosemary's children in Vietnam.

The military fall of Saigon led to the death of Margaret Moses (aged thirty-five) in the crash of an American plane ferrying orphans out of the country. Her death was felt deeply by the Adelaide Mercies. She and a fellow worker from Adelaide, Lee Makk (about twenty-eight years old), had been about to accompany children on an Australian plane, but had changed their plans at the last minute when escorts were needed for the American contingent. Lee also was killed. At the Requiem Mass for the two women in St Francis Xavier's Cathedral in Adelaide, the Mercies arranged the music. Two of the hymns sung had been translated and adapted by Margaret. Margaret had been particularly helpful in her four years in Vietnam, handling much of the international liaison between governments and adopting families. With a droll wit and a special quality of empathy, she had been the trouble-shooter of the team.<sup>24</sup>

Altogether, Rosemary and her team had got at least four thousand children out of Vietnam. Rosemary and Doreen Beckett waited until the very last, in an effort to get as many children out of the country as they could. They left on the final precarious evacuation from a city under heavy shell fire. Evacuees were transported to waiting US warships by helicopters, from which they jumped onto the ships, the helicopters then being ditched into sea, as there was no room for them on the decks. Doreen and Rosemary were landed on the deck of the *Blue Ridge*, a floating arsenal.

Doreen died of cancer in Adelaide in 1986, aged forty-two. Between leaving Saigon and her death, she contributed to the life of the church in Adelaide in a number of ways. She was a member of the committee overseeing a Monastery Refugee Project set up by the archdiocese and the Passionist Fathers. Mercy sister Celeste Galton was manager, and Marion Molyneux later joined the workers there. Some hundreds of refugees were received and aided in settling in South Australia. Doreen's

own life experience also contributed to her efficacy as a spiritual director of many.

Rosemary Taylor's work for abandoned children did not end with the closure of the homes in Vietnam. There was work with Kampuchean refugees in Thailand. This was followed by the opening of a facility for teaching the handicapped and for training teachers and caretakers of the handicapped in Phnom Penh with the resettlement of the refugees in Cambodia. The Adelaide Mercies continued their external involvement, with Sister Monica Marks acting as one of Rosemary's informal agents in Australia. In 1994, in a period of staffing crisis, Monica herself assisted for a few months in the centre.

On 3rd April, 1995, the tenth anniversary of the air crash in which Margaret Moses had died, some of the sisters gathered in the Adelaide Cathedral to pray for her and the children and other volunteer escorts who had also perished.

#### MERCY REFUGEE SERVICE

In 1984, the national Mercy Institute set up a Mercy Refugee Service Australia as one caring response to the flight of numerous people, such as the Vietnamese people, impelled by war and after appalling circumstances to leave their own countries and seek sanctuary elsewhere. Through Mercy Refugee Service, sisters and associates have offered assistance to displaced persons from Asia and Africa. They have worked in holding camps, have helped with repatriation in the home country or with resettlement in Australia, and have been involved in advocacy, seeking to exercise a mercy that follows through to justice.<sup>25</sup>

The service has operated in conjunction with the Jesuit Refugee Service, which was established in 1980, after a long history of Jesuits working with refugees throughout the world. The collaboration, initiated after Patricia Pak Poy's return from a JRS meeting in 1984 at which she had been resourcer and observer, led to Sisters of Mercy being deployed worldwide in JRS projects. Reflecting on the first decade of JRS in Asia and the Pacific, director Andrew Hamilton SJ pointed to a number of ways in which the collaboration had enriched JRS. The development of MRS, he claimed, had challenged the men's group, especially through the women's greater local rootedness and the strength of MRS operations within Australia itself. The Mercies had been able to involve their local communities and their 'publics' in a strong way. The relationship between the two services gradually had become one of greater equality and partnership. According to Hamilton, MRS had managed to retain its own identity and had developed a tradition of hospitality. It had invited all those who wish to use its resources and to attend its

meetings, while insisting on the importance of the Mercy traditions and networks. JRS had much to learn about becoming a network of Jesuits and their publics from MRS. On the other hand, he suggested, the Mercies faced the further challenge of articulating more clearly their own language of refugee spirituality in the face of the renowned articulacy of the Jesuits.<sup>26</sup>

Sister Mary Densley was the first co-ordinator of MRS, a post she held from 1985 to 1991. Mary acted in a networking capacity for those sisters working within Australia with refugee people, but most particularly for those sisters and associates working in the field, liaising with the Jesuit Refugee Service under whose aegis the field workers obtained employment. Mary's office was at one stage a box under her bed in Henley Beach convent, but the task grew gradually to much more significant proportions. She tried to bring her own insight, sensitivity, and support to those sisters and associates working in often appalling and sometimes terrifying conditions. Her experience and practicality was reassuring for sisters helping to unravel the frustrating complications connected with the lives of powerless, stateless people. All in all, Mary learnt the art of international diplomacy. Her wider tasks included providing information about and resources to promote Mercy refugee work around Australia.

Reflecting on the nine years of MRS work in refugee camps in South-East Asia, from 1984 to 1992, Mary stated that the journey from Australia to South-East Asian countries was at first a journey from wealth and security to poverty and uncertainty, and had prepared the way for a journey to an even poorer and more uncertain Africa. It had helped the Mercies to think globally, to understand the dynamic of forced migration, to explicate more clearly the history of mission, to consider the conduct of Australia as it begins to see itself part of Asia. It had taught them that as foreigners and Christians we tread humbly.

On her relinquishment of the co-ordinator's role, Mary spent some time in post-graduate Development Studies in Adelaide, after which she became the Communications Officer of the Jesuit Refugee Service Asia-Pacific's Bangkok office. Her flat became a mecca for Mercies 'out there' when they wished to visit the city or to meet one another. Mary left Bangkok in January, 1995, after almost two years there, to take up her new position as elected leader of the Adelaide congregation.

A past pupil of Mercedes College who spent some time with Mercy Refugee Service was Rosslyn von der Borch. Rosslyn worked as Information Officer in the JRS office in Bangkok for three years. She edited a book of reflections from the Mercy Refugee Service Australia, *The Life We Share*, contributing also a major article. In this, she knit together her deepening understanding of the Mercy charism of Catherine McAuley in relation to the

contemporary work with refugees. Her reflections on the underlying principles that guided Catherine led her 'to look squarely at one of the greatest challenges to our spirit: our fidelity to the common life' – not the 'common life' of a small community, as it is often interpreted, but rather the life that we all – refugee and non-refugee – share in common.

In 1989, some Mercy past-pupils began a tradition of holding a dinner each year on the eve of the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, the money raised to be given to the MRS. They called it Mercy Endeavour Australia. South Australian contact was Lyn von der Borch, mother of Rosslyn. Guest speaker at the seventh annual dinner in Sydney in 1995 was Dr Adrian von der Borch, Rosslyn's father, who had recently attended an International Conference on Landmines in Cambodia.

Between 1976 and 1990, Patricia Pak Poy paid a number of visits to Asia for Australian Catholic Relief. During 1990, Patricia was based at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila and then in the JRS office in Bangkok. Her observations made her more keenly aware of human rights violations in the treatment of refugees. In 1991, she spent six months at the University of Oxford in the Refugee Studies Programme as a Ford Fellow, which meant she was also part of the staff there. She was involved in the preparation of educational programmes. She learnt about international refugee relations and law, the management of refugee assistance, and the psycho-social aspects of forced migration. Some of this she shared at a world meeting of JRS Regional Coordinators in Rome in the spring of 1991.

In her year in Asia, she had also witnessed first hand the horrendous effects of landmines on the lives of people. This led her to work energetically to arouse consciousness about the issue. An International Campaign to Ban Landmines had begun in 1991 as Patricia was raising support in the Adelaide Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission of which she was executive officer. In an era when many nations – and factions within nations – were using landmines to maim the enemy, a large number of civilians were being crippled in some way. It was estimated that one of every two hundred and thirty-six Cambodians were either legless, handless, or blind through contact with a landmine. Patricia became the co-ordinator of the Australian network of the international campaign. She was supported financially in this by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, Mercy Refugee Service Australia and the Justice Desk of ISMA, and then by the Jesuit Refugee Service. By the end of 1995, one hundred and fifty groups were in the campaign network. As co-ordinator, Patricia used her advocacy skills as a non-government member of the Australian delegation to United Nations meetings seeking to bring about a more humane policy and practice among nations. In 1995, a National Day of Action was co-ordinated throughout Australia. The journal *SA Catholic*, issue of January, 1996, wrote that Patricia had

been 'pivotal in creating a growing awareness in Australia of the anti-landmine movement'.

In December, 1988, psychologist Maryanne Loughry began a three months placement with the Community Mental Health and Family Services at Bataan in the Philippines.<sup>27</sup> It was the beginning of a dedicated commitment to working with people whose lives had been disrupted by war. She spent a year working in refugee camps in Hong Kong and in subsequent years helped train para-professional workers. In 1994, she trained government and non-government workers to help in the process of people's repatriation into Vietnam. Later, she gave her services in war-torn areas of Africa and the Middle East. All this was while continuing as lecturer within the department of nurse education at Flinders University of South Australia.

#### VIETNAMESE SISTERS OF MERCY

By 1992, there were about ten thousand people living in South Australia who were born in Vietnam. The two thousand new migrants each year were either refugees or were sponsored by family members already living in the State.<sup>28</sup> The Adelaide Mercies had been involved in a number of sponsorship bids.<sup>29</sup> The increasingly visible presence of these new and frequently disadvantaged people was a challenge to their compassion in their many ministries.

The presence of two members of a Vietnamese women's religious order living in Mercy communities in Adelaide from the mid-1970s was a special and constant reminder of this challenge. Sisters Mary Elizabeth Bui Thi Nghia and Marie Frances Tran Thi Nien were both members of the Lovers of the Holy Cross. They were among the early boat people to arrive in Australia in 1975, following the fall of Saigon in South Vietnam to the North Vietnamese communist regime.

Sister Elizabeth, born in North Vietnam, had fled for her life in June 1975. She had been matron of an orphanage in Saigon. When the new regime announced they would take it over, Elizabeth decided to leave as a refugee to carry on her work elsewhere. With thirty-one other people, she fled her country in a nine-metre long open boat, with enough food and water for just over four days and enough fuel for six days. On the twelfth day, they were picked up by a passing ship, possibly because, at the request of the other passengers, Elizabeth had put on her full nun's garb.

In Adelaide, Elizabeth was able to bring the compassion born of her own terrifying experiences to her work with other Vietnamese in South Australia – through the Centre of the Indochinese Australian Women's Association which she helped establish in 1977-8, as well as the hostel for young women which she also set up. Elizabeth defined a refugee as 'a person whose past was



*Rosemary Taylor  
and Vietnamese  
orphaned children,  
Saigon, before 1975*



*Mercy Refugee Service – Maryanne Loughry and ex-refugee workers returned to Vietnam*



*Open Day, Indo-Chinese Australian Women's Association, 1989. Srs Elizabeth Nghia (first left) and Patricia Sims (fourth left). Elizabeth is the first Vietnamese-born member*



*Tran Thi Thu Trang, at First Profession ceremony, 21st May, 1994. Sr Christine Keain (first left) and Sr Tran Thi Nien (fourth left)*

a time of great hardship and difficult decisions, whose present is clouded by emotional distress and anxiety, and whose future is full of uncertainties ... who can't go home.'<sup>30</sup> She herself had experienced fear, hunger, and illness. In 1984, Elizabeth received an Order of Australia medal for her services to ethnic welfare. In 1989, Sister Claudette Cusack managed the women's centre at Woodville, while Elizabeth took a year off for a period of spiritual renewal in Sydney. Sisters Patricia Sims and Mavis McBride also gave some help at the centre. After living with the Adelaide Mercies for a number of years, Elizabeth finally transferred to them officially in 1989.

Sister Marie Nien also came to Australia in 1975 as a refugee. Nien had done parish and educational work in Vietnam, following her study in French and English Literature in France and French Literature in Saigon. In Adelaide, she taught at a number of secondary schools, teaching French, English, and Vietnamese to Vietnamese students, helped pastorally in the Vietnamese Catholic community, and then, in 1985, became a lecturer in Vietnamese Studies at the South Australian College of Advanced Education and, subsequently, at the University of Adelaide.

Initially, Nien lived in the Brighton (Adelaide) community of the Wilcannia-Forbes Mercy congregation, but in 1982 moved to the Adelaide congregation's community at Parkside. She transferred to the Mercy congregation in 1988. She gave among the reasons for her transfer that

the sisters have shown great understanding and compassion for the poor and those less fortunate than themselves. They have also shown great love for migrants.

The Mercy Order always tries to read the signs of the times in order to play a leading role in the church in various forms of apostolic works – like Jesus in His public life.

At the ceremony of Nien's first incorporation, Congregational leader Patricia Pak Poy commented that this was

not only her journey but ours too.

We ponder, too, what is God asking of us as a Congregation out of the turmoil of the history of Vietnam. People have come to Australia, their suffering demanding a response of us in Australia, their courage and lives enriching us.

Nien's work as educator helping to bridge the two cultures was vital. The repercussions of living in Australia on Vietnamese families have been described as 'a Savage Blow', in that it creates a generation gap which can lead to the breakdown of family unity.<sup>31</sup> This phenomenon had already been witnessed among other ethnic groups which placed much value on internal family discipline as well as on the extended family. Children usually found it

easier to assimilate into the dominant Australian society and might then tend to rebel against traditional family values.

In 1988, Mary Do Thi Thu arrived in Australia under the Community Refugee Settlement Service and with the assistance of Sister Elizabeth Nghia. She was the only one of her family to come to Australia. Thu joined the Mercies in 1992. She studied for an Associate Diploma of Social Science (Child Care) at TAFE and worked with Vietnamese families. She made her first commitment as a Sister of Mercy in 1996.

Her companion in the novitiate was Tran Thi Thu Trang. Trang was born in 1960, and had come to South Australia in 1985. She had been studying dentistry in Vietnam but changed to physiotherapy at the University of South Australia. She was received into the Mercy community in 1989, and made her first commitment in 1994. She began a theology degree at Flinders University and continued it full-time in 1996.

Entrance into the Mercy community was not easy for these two women, facing a new way of life as well as a new culture and an ageing group. Their presence was a challenge to all to work towards a more inclusive definition of community and a wider understanding of religious life and of the charism of Mercy. Trang expressed it as an opportunity also to recognise and to accept the essential aloneness of each individual.

#### CHANGING TRENDS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The 1970s saw greatly changed understandings of what it was to be missionary. The new perception and the developing missiology were expressed, to some extent, in the decrees of Vatican II and more fully in later Roman documents.<sup>32</sup> The whole church was stated to be missionary, and every individual Christian and every local Christian community had a responsibility in the work of evangelization, including self-evangelization. The emphasis now was on the church's mission to all peoples rather than on its 'foreign missions', which had tended to be seen as an extension of the Roman or Western church. Consequent to this fundamental shift was the notion that local Christian communities were all equally local churches within the unity of the universal church. There was a decided movement away from change coming mainly through 'outsiders' to that coming from within the community itself. Moreover, Catholic activity should be in collaboration with that of other Christian communities, and dialogue with other faiths was likewise encouraged.<sup>33</sup>

Theologians found help in the findings of anthropology and related fields of knowledge when considering how the translation of the Gospel could take place from one cultural context to another. Principles of cross-cultural communication began to be spelt out. It was becoming evident that the people

of the receiving culture were the ones who were essential to interpreting the gospel in terms of their own symbols, values, and traditions. Missionaries had often been drawn into the processes of colonization and its disruptive effects. On the other hand, mission schools and other services had also fostered the processes of decolonization. Now they were finding themselves in the role of bridge-builders, between the past and the new present and the future.

The time for a church initiated by overseas missionaries was clearly past. Paternalism, albeit with the best of intentions, was seen as misguided and encouraging dependency. Accommodational approaches, which presupposed the existence of 'naturally good' elements within the 'pagan' way of life, and which used these elements to form a bridge to Christianity, were also being recognized as masking an underlying distrust of the local people. It was all too often the foreign missionaries who determined how the accommodation took place.

In Papua New Guinea, the effects of such developments were transformative in the long term. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, a number of events occurred which expressed the reconstruction that had begun to take place within the church in Papua New Guinea. These included the foundation, in 1967, of the Union of Women Religious of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The new Union established, in 1969, the Xavier Institute of Missiology in Port Moresby, for both national and expatriate sisters. Both organisations fostered a wider vision. Highly significant, also, was the Self-Study of the Church by the Melanesian Institute, during 1972 to 1975, which involved national and expatriate Catholics throughout the country, encouraged local leadership, and gave a new sense of local church.

Then, in 1975, the country was declared a new and independent nation. The constitution was Christian in tone (its 'father' was a Catholic priest) and its most popular politician a product of mission education. The preamble acknowledged the 'noble traditions' of the indigenous culture as well as 'the Christian principles that are ours now'. The active and legal participation of women in economic and social activity was promoted, though its reality was to be achieved but slowly. The Catholic Church opted to be part of the National Education System.

In 1977, a survey of Expatriate Sisters in Papua New Guinea led to a reflection on the changing positions of women religious in the country, and revealed some interesting developments. The expatriate sisters responding to the survey considered that the local church of PNG was now established, and the Melanesians were ready to assume leadership. The government policy of localization in education – already completed in the primary section – had led many sisters into pastoral and catechetical work. This was causing some tensions in that this was work which, in comparison with teaching, was non-structured and for which the sisters had not been trained.

The church's self-study was also leading some of the sisters to ask if their presence was a hindrance to the growth of the local church.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, the Melanesian setting required changes in the way in which the religious life was lived. This had repercussions not just for the expatriate sisters but also for any indigenous women wishing to join either a Western-based or Papua New Guinean community. As well as the desirability of greater sensitivity to Melanesian customs, new apostolates – and the closer contact they often brought with the people – were requiring different structures in community living. Some of the changes identified clustered around the need for more flexibility, simpler living standards, less stress on time and schedules and more on hospitality, and the adaptation of liturgies and other spiritual practices. The expatriate sisters were being called to support rather than to initiate. The primary concern was evangelization, social needs were secondary.

Despite the queries and hesitations expressed by the expatriate sisters, local women in religious orders were clear that the former still had a vital role among them. The local sisters saw pastoral and catechetical works as important and urged the others to continue in or enter into them more strongly, as well as to train national sisters therein. Teaching in high schools and tertiary colleges, the development of catechetics, and the formation of young local religious were tasks that the indigenous sisters still wanted the expatriates to perform at this time. They saw the two groups working together side by side. The emphasis on pastoral and catechetical work was corroborated by the clergy and the bishops, the latter's main thrust being the training of local sisters in these ministries.

The Sisters of Mercy in Papua New Guinea continued their apostolate in the country in ways that mirrored these changes depicted by the survey. As the localisation of primary schools progressed, other avenues of ministry remained within the more traditional services. These included teaching and administration in high schools (including governmental), in teachers' colleges (also including governmental), catechetical work, and nursing in government health centres. Newer areas that opened up were the development of Christian living programmes for women; catechetical training courses for indigenous sisters and for village catechists; and positions within various church institutes. These included the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service, the Liturgical Catechetical Institute, the Xavier Institute of Missiology, the national Seminary for the training of clergy, and the national Conferences of Bishops and of Major Superiors.

A succession of Adelaide Mercies worked in Papua New Guinea during the years after the survey of expatriate sisters. During the 1976/77 school holidays, Bernadette Marks visited Papua New Guinea, and returned to teach at the Senior High School at Aiyura from 1978 to 1981. This was one of the national high schools opened by the new civil administration, in an attempt

not just to give further education to the people but also to help promote a national identity among so many separate tribal groups. Bernadette found herself the only Catholic on the staff of twenty-three, all but one of whom were expatriates. There were a hundred Catholic students out of a total school population of three hundred boys and a hundred girls. Religious instruction was voluntary, occupied one hour per week, and was non-denominational in character. Bernadette gave courses in 'Value Clarification' and 'Science and Religion', and would attract an attendance at times of about a hundred. Her main role was teaching mathematics and being the senior girls' tutor. Reflecting on her work, she valued the experience – living alone, being able to manage her home, working with people of different backgrounds and faiths, with students so willing to learn it was refreshing. She had been impressed by it all and especially made to think by the contact with many dedicated non-Catholic Christians.

In 1980 and 1981, Sister Mavis McBride taught in the provincial Catholic High School at Kondiut. The Mercies had gone there in 1974 to make the existing college of the de la Salle Brothers co-educational. In 1982, Mavis accepted the position of Executive Secretary/Treasurer of the combined Commission of Bishops and Religious Major Superiors. This also involved being Coordinator of the Religious Studies Correspondence Centre. Mavis lived at Goroka during this appointment, which ended in 1984.

The third Adelaide high school teacher was Cynthia Griffin. Cynthia taught at Keravat, New Britain, an island off the mainland, from 1983 to 1985. After a period of study overseas, she returned to take up a position at Passam High School near Madang, where she was from 1987 to 1992. Passam High School comprised five hundred students from all over the country. There were two Marist Brothers on the staff. During her second term in Papua New Guinea, Cynthia held two administrative posts. In 1987, she was elected to the council of the national Mercy superior, Joan MacGinley, and was appointed Joan's Vicar. She was also deputy principal at Passam High School. On leaving the country in 1992, she thought of Papua New Guinea as having been for her 'a well filled with life-giving water', as it was for the Samaritan women at the well in the scriptures. Employing another metaphor, she left with 'a wonderful unfinished bilum<sup>35</sup> which she had been weaving in her mind for six years ... finely woven ... multi-patterned ... many strong colours.' It had changed size and shape in her time there. She would carry its image with her and hoped it would help her carry burdens, bring nourishment to others, and enable her to continue weaving other patterns and colours.

Teresa Flaherty continued with her work at Goroka Teachers' College, first as a Senior Tutor and then as a lecturer in Professional Studies, under contract with the University of Papua New Guinea. At first she lived in a flat at

the bishop's house in the town, and accepted also the role of mission superior of the Mercies in the Highlands.<sup>36</sup> Later, she moved to live on the Goroka college campus, finding that more advantageous pastorally. In 1979, she took study leave granted by the University, and studied for a Master's Degree in Comparative and International Education at Michigan State University. Teresa already had degrees in Arts and Education, but aimed to develop content and processes for pre-service teachers, as well as provide practical assistance to new national staff at the college. She spent some time also working in an educational faculty in an English university. Reflecting on the purpose of her study leave, Teresa claimed that she had grown in happiness in Papua New Guinea, and in some wisdom – she thought – from making mistakes. During her time away, she had wanted, as well, to nourish her inner life through a contemplative prayer retreat (in the Carmelite tradition) and through a workshop in Intensive Journal Writing.

Her world travel helped her see Papua New Guinea as part of the global family, and to be more realistic in her societal goals and expectations, she claimed on her return. That she was competent in her chosen field of cross-cultural educational psychology was confirmed by her appointment as member of the United Nations Inter-agency Mission on the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Bougainville in 1995, after that island had experienced great turmoil. Teresa was asked to prepare the educational section of the report to UNESCO. The leader of the mission expressed himself confident that her proposal would 'prove to be a major step towards return to normalcy on the island'.<sup>37</sup> In 1996, Teresa received a doctorate in Educational Administration from Macquarie University, Sydney. Her thesis gave rise to a book on women's experience in education in Papua New Guinea.

The Melanesian Institute in Goroka was founded in 1968 by the Association of Clerical Religious Superiors. In line with the growing understanding of the need for contextualizing the gospel, the primary aim of the Institute was to give new missionaries greater understanding of the people, their culture and traditions. In 1971, the Anglican, Lutheran, and Uniting Churches joined in the Institute, and, in the following years, it also moved more directly towards serving the local churches and peoples. It came to state its aim as cooperating with the churches and peoples of Melanesia in their search for their own identity, purpose and mission in the post-colonial world. It would do this by research and the presentation of the results in print and by word of mouth. It had two regular publications, *Point* and *Catalyst*, as well as occasional papers.

In 1978, Sister Helen O'Brien joined the staff of the Melanesian Institute in an editorial capacity. She tried to encourage a broader Melanesian contribution to the publications. In the same year, Sister M. Vianney (Romley)

Dirmann took the position of Institute Librarian. Both sisters combined their work with a wider outreach. Vianney helped set up libraries in other parts of the country. She retired in October, 1983.

As one of the four Mission Superiors, Helen was elected delegate to the first national chapter of the new Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia. In 1982, she was appointed first national superior of all the sisters in Papua New Guinea, resigning her job at the Institute in September of that year, as the two tasks proved too much. She remained the national superior until 1987. Appointed then as directress of young indigenous sisters in temporary commitment, she spent a period of spiritual renewal at the Pacific Mission Institute, New South Wales, during 1989. From 1990, she also became secretary of the Conference of Women Religious, operating from Xavier Institute at Port Moresby. In 1991, Helen was delegate to AMOR IX, the Asian meeting of Women Religious, held in Indonesia.

The Papua New Guinea Mercy project continued to attract Adelaide sisters. In 1985, Sister Nance Munro went to Papua New Guinea and became manager of the bookshop at the Liturgical Catechetical Institute in Goroka, a position she held for three years. Subsequently, she spent two years as Secretary/Bursar to the national Mercy superior. As such, she was involved in the negotiations to set up a national Mercy house in Mount Hagan. In 1986, Sister Marie Britza, a nurse, took the role of principal of the Nursing School within the Raihu Health Centre at Aitape, a northern and isolated region. She finished her term there at the end of 1988.

The moves towards unification of the Mercies both within Australia and within Papua New Guinea facilitated the taking of indigenous candidates into the Mercy Institute. Three young women were accepted at the first national assembly in 1980, and were quickly followed by others. Sister Carmel Bourke, having pursued her interest in the beginnings of the Mercy Institute and especially in the spirit of the foundress, was invited to speak on this around Australia and New Zealand, and then in Papua New Guinea and Western Samoa. Her time living at the novitiate with the young indigenous novices was a precious time for Carmel. It was there that she learnt to express the message of Catherine McAuley and her charism of mercy in very basic terms, so that these young women could express it for themselves and their people in their own way. It was one of the first candidates, Sister Terry Gongi, who prompted Carmel to do 'as dear Theresia requested: Write it all down!' The result was the study of Catherine's life and spirit, *A Woman Sings of Mercy*, which has deeply moved many around the world.

The various steps towards forming one group of Mercies in Papua New Guinea eventually led to the desire for a separate congregation there. The 1987 Assembly decided that they wanted to work towards the canonical establishment of 'The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Papua New

Guinea' as an autonomous group. They aimed to develop a new Mercy Congregation which would embody the charism of Mercy expressed in the meeting of cultures in Papua New Guinea. It would express their multi-congregational and multi-cultural characteristics.

In 1990, Sister Deirdre Jordan was asked by a combined ISMA/PNG Task Force to research and report on this issue. She saw the early differences between the expatriate sisters – coming from different Australian Mercy congregations – to have disappeared. They had taken on a new PNG identity. Interaction between nationals and expatriates, with neither group dominating, was a strongly held value. Deirdre found that the national sisters were drawn to the Mercies by their spirit of love, caring, service, and respect for the Papua New Guinean culture.

Deirdre's report on the initial spiritual formation of the national sisters that had taken place was also extremely positive, leading to the 'flowering of exceptional qualities of strength of mind, commitment, understanding of Mercy,[and] an outstanding quality of freedom to be themselves.' Their formation had stressed the importance of insertion into their families and culture, and appeared to have met to an extraordinary degree the needs of a multicultural group.<sup>38</sup>

The establishment, in 1989, of *Mercy Pacific* by the Federation of the Sisters of Mercy of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Institute of Sisters of Mercy Australia, as a network of Sisters of Mercy in the Pacific, led to the Mercy Pacific Forum of 1993, at Samoa and Tonga. It was attended by some forty indigenous sisters and a few Australians and New Zealanders. As preparation for the forum, Helen O'Brien conducted a four days' Social Analysis workshop at the Mercy formation house, Wewak.

The leaders of the congregation in Adelaide, through their sisters working in Papua New Guinea, had had an ongoing administrative involvement. In the first years of the 1980s, this was extended somewhat for Patricia Fox, through being – for the Goroka region – one of four designated Australian sponsoring superiors.

Her successor, Patricia Pak Poy, and one of her councillors, Joan Haren, visited the country in July, 1988, and gave a report which succinctly commented on the questions becoming more urgent for the Mercy expatriate sisters. There was a growing fear of violence. While there, they had not been able to continue along the highway to Mount Hagen, as one of the sisters had been involved in a traffic accident when a pedestrian was killed. The tradition of 'pay back' made it unsafe for any sister and they went back to Goroka under a police escort. At Aitape, at the same time, Marie Britza was dealing with the dismissal of a nurse student and its aftermath, which included the assault of four people. At the Teachers College in Goroka, where Teresa Flaherty was on staff, a post-graduate student had been killed

just off the campus as part of the pay back system. There had been riots in Passam where Cynthia Griffin was teaching. At St Benedict's Teachers' Training College in Kaindi, Wewak, a land dispute and consequent intimidation and threats had led to the sisters living with security guard. The novitiate was transferred from the Kaindi campus to Kairiru Island. As National Superior, Helen O'Brien was part of the Kaindi negotiations. With the growing political and social instability, new questions were arising for all. Patricia and Joan judged that personal relationships between the sisters and those with whom they worked were very good, but they asked was it now the time for the sisters to step back so as not to hinder the indigenous people and the local sisters from taking more control over their own lives.

Tribal fighting was a well established custom in some areas. Elizabeth Miller had written in the 1970s of clan fighting in the Chimbu. Now, there were political secessionist moves. Newly grown criminal elements were terrorising both nationals and expatriates. Deirdre Jordan, in 1990, found the situation 'volatile', with many sources of concern. Yet she also found the Mercies 'a stable, viable, energetic group.' Cynthia Griffin, writing to Patricia Pak Poy after the annual assembly of 1987, spoke of 'the spirit and energy given by the young National sisters.'

The sisters at the assembly, Cynthia continued, had been very conscious of being part of a multicultural, multicongregational group searching for a Melanesian expression of Mercy. 'These young women come to the idea of 'Mercy' so directly and simply whereas we (Aussies) seem to be wading through words and ideas which come from a background of charitable organisations and social welfare structures.' She would have loved both Carmel [Bourke] and Elizabeth [Miller] to have been there. 'Their spirits certainly were.' In 1993, Patricia Pak Poy, as Adelaide formation director, visited Papua New Guinea with the two Adelaide novices, Tran Thi Thu Trang and Mary Do Thi Thu. It was for them a rich cross-cultural experience.

## P A K I S T A N

In the early 1990s, two Adelaide Mercies were among those significantly instrumental in establishing the Notre Dame Institute of Education in Karachi, Pakistan.

Australian Sisters of Mercy had been working in Pakistan in the province of Rawalpindi, at Gujarat and Peshawar, since 1985. They had been involved in a number of different ministries, with a special concern for Pakistani women in a strongly male-dominated society. Pakistan had a large population of some hundred million, a strong military presence, and a state religion – Islam – with over ninety-seven per cent of the people belonging to it, and

just over one percent being Hindus and a similar percentage Christians. As a nation, Pakistan was fascinating, with a highly developed culture going back to at least 2500 BCE. Its landscape was likewise richly varied, though its climate was harsh. As a modern-style nation, it dated only to 1947, and was encountering many problems and much poverty. The Christians were among the lowest socio-economic groups in the country. Mainly descendants of the Untouchable caste, they had continued to occupy a marginalised place in the society, being tolerated rather than fully accepted. Many of the better-off Catholics and the majority of the clergy and religious were of Goan descent, from a group traditionally employed by the British. The Goans were now tending to leave the country on account of discriminatory practices.

Education of the lower classes was almost non-existent throughout Pakistan. The Catholic Church ran a number of schools and provided some inservice training to teachers, but the standards of teacher education still left much to be desired. Bishop Lobo of Karachi, chairman of the Episcopal Education Committee, had long dreamt of an efficient Catholic teacher training institution. By 1991, the bishops and the religious orders of both men and women were giving this top priority. An Australian Christian Brother was approached to establish the proposed institution, but did not consider it feasible.<sup>39</sup> Bishop Lobo called on Sister Deirdre Jordan, currently occupying the position of Chancellor of Flinders University, Adelaide, for advice. He hoped for a teacher training institution which would serve as a model for the rest of the country through its innovative and creative practices.

In response to Lobo's invitation, Deirdre visited Pakistan in late 1989 under the auspices of a private educational foundation, the Hamdard Foundation. She gave a series of public lectures and visited teachers colleges and universities in more than one location. Through this she made contact with most of the educational leaders in Pakistan. Consequently, she supported the Lobo Plan – which also had the support of state as well as church authorities – and approached ISMA to consider if the project could go under the general ISMA umbrella. She thought that the Adelaide Congregation would find this appropriate and fitting. ISMA was not immediately willing to do this, but Deirdre – with characteristic energy – set about finding appropriate staff. Sister Gabrielle Jennings, formerly lecturer at Ascot Vale Teachers' College, congregational leader of the Melbourne Mercies, and staff member of the Sydney Catholic Education Office, was appointed Director. Her deputy was Sister Bernadette Marks from Adelaide.

Mary and Matthew Coffey also from Adelaide responded to the situation. Matthew had to leave on account of ill health but his wife, Mary, finished her nine months term there. Matthew subsequently died in Adelaide, 23rd July, 1993, and Bernadette was present to attend the Requiem. On her return at

the beginning of the school year for 1993-4, she found herself with an extra heavy burden. She was, for an interim period, acting principal of St Michael's High School, with an enrolment of six thousand students, while still attending to her duties at Notre Dame.

On Mary Coffey's departure from Pakistan, Sister Noreen Reynolds OP of Adelaide took her place. When the Institute began to consider a BEd for primary teachers (as well as the existing one for secondary teachers), Mary Coffey's experience proved valuable as a member of a Course Development group formed by a number of lay women in Adelaide. This group was set up by Mary Schinella of Adelaide who had volunteered to coordinate it, and included also Marie O'Callaghan (who was to go the following year to Karachi for some months as a volunteer), and Josie Strangio who had been appointed to the new position at the Institute in Primary Methodologies.

A number of visiting educationists helped enrich the curriculum of the college with workshops and other activities. Among these were Sister Christine Keain and Sister Monica Marks. Christine, with her social work background, gave sessions on guidance and counselling; Monica, with her experience in teaching English as a second language, led some English language workshops. The visit of Deirdre Jordan – the named Patron of the Institute – in 1992 was the occasion for some talks on aspects of education, as well as a number of welcoming events hosted by Karachi University and the Hamdard Foundation. In 1995, Sister Catharine Ahern, having finished a term on the Adelaide leadership team, joined the full-time staff of Notre Dame, a large part of her responsibilities being the management of the hostel for the women teacher students. Clearly Adelaide was proving to be a fruitful locus of resources for the young Institute.

In February, 1995, the sisters from the three areas – Karachi, Gujarat, and Peshawar – celebrated together ten years of Mercy in Pakistan. By then, Notre Dame Institute of Education was a going reality. It had been affiliated with Karachi University, through which students were awarded a degree in education. At their first external examination, Notre Dame students won the top three places named (only three being named) and all others gained First Division passes, except one who gained Second Division. Liaison had also been established with Australian Catholic University, which proved a valuable source of assistance in different ways. Notre Dame had been asked to host and coordinate in Pakistan a research project into culture and drug abuse and prevention in nine Asian countries. The project was being sponsored by the International Federation of Catholic Universities and was funded by the European Economic Commission.

At the celebration of ten years of Mercy in Pakistan, Bernadette Marks was elected the new national Mercy coordinator, and Patricia Pak Poy's report paper about accepting Pakistani women as Sisters of Mercy was discussed. At

the request of ISMA, Patricia had visited Pakistan the previous year to help discern an answer to that question, an answer which would be life-giving both to the women wishing to join and to the Mercy Institute.

Like the other Mercy works in Pakistan, the Notre Dame Institute of Education, in the spirit of Catherine McAuley, was especially directed towards the needs of women. Women were ill-educated, and their status was low. Islam, as interpreted in the ideology of the country, maintained women in that low status. Pakistani women saw the Institute's courses not only a way in which to raise the standards of education but also as a means of liberation.

#### OLD POVERTIES RE-VISITED: NEW FORMS OF HOUSES OF MERCY AND ORPHANAGES

Meanwhile, within the dominant culture at home in Australia, old poverties were still present but were reshaping themselves in new forms. The poverties that the traditional Houses of Mercy and Orphanages had sought to relieve were just as compelling, but the institutional forms of alleviation seemed less and less appropriate. The House of Mercy had long been defunct; the Goodwood Orphanage had changed from large institution to small family-style cottages and then out of the care of the sisters. What happened within the ministry of the Adelaide Mercies was the establishment of a number of houses for people in need, with different foci but with a common underlying dedication to the spirit of Mercy. They were all small in operation, in contradistinction to the larger institutions of yesteryear.

The nineteenth century style of female refuge, which had more or less accepted the social status quo, had disappeared by the mid-twentieth century. The first of a more contemporary form of women's shelters was set up in the 1970s, in New South Wales. These shelters aimed to provide a place of refuge for married and unmarried women and for children who were victims of domestic violence or other problems, including sexual abuse. They aimed also to help women find and exercise their own power as persons. The Adelaide Mercies moved into this field of ministry. They set up one complex of houses for women in need of refuge, another for single mothers with children, and a hostel for younger women on low incomes. Individual sisters were instrumental, also, in setting up an inner city day centre for homeless men, with several houses of accommodation attached; a residential community and outreach for people needing community and healing; and a foster home.

#### **Adelaide Day Centre**

Although the Adelaide Day Centre for Homeless Persons was not established until 1985, its genesis goes back to 1972. In that year, Sister Janet Mead, on the



*Sr Bernadette Marks in Pakistan, 1995*



*L to R: Mrs Cletus Hooper (Board member), Srs Anne Gregory (Administrator) and Christine Keain (Provincial Council) discuss plans of Catherine House, 1988*

staff of St Aloysius College, began the Adelaide Rock Mass in the Cathedral in response to young people's need, in particular, to express their belief in contemporary idiom. The Mass continued every Sunday uninterrupted, although in 1990 it transferred to Goodwood parish church. Its popularity had increased in 1973 when Janet recorded a rock version of 'The Lord's Prayer' and, over night, became famous. From that year, too, she began teaching liturgy and music and leadership skills through community masses in schools and parishes of all denominations around Adelaide. In the 1980s, Janet formed Youth Groups based around Drama and Music activities that aimed to develop community and leadership skills, and to educate the young people for justice and mercy. These and the community network which sprang up around the Rock Masses gradually led to action groups of service on many levels.

Out of that initial step of the Rock Mass also grew the Romero Community, a residential community of lay men and women. Together with Janet, they lived in the inner city and became increasingly involved with marginalised people and their struggles for justice. Their actions on behalf of justice with others who made up a wider network intensified. People in Third World countries benefited from the proceeds of trading their goods sold through Moore Crafts shop in the city<sup>40</sup>. The annual musical for Friends of All Children was a resounding success each year, both musically and financially. *Adelaide Voices*, a bi-monthly paper, was committed to being a forum for the oppressed. Aboriginal welfare and health projects; prisoner support and advocacy; neighbourhood residential support; support for refugees trying to settle into a new life in Adelaide – all became part of the outreach.

In 1985, the Adelaide Day Centre for Homeless Persons in Moore Street was started by Janet together with Sister Anne Gregory and members of the Romero community. It was a place where men could come during the day and take part in activities there as a member of a household. Everyone was expected to contribute in some way to its running. A food parcel service as well as a soup kitchen during the cold winter months operated from the centre. Several houses were renovated, managed, and supported by it, giving the occupants a chance to feel that a home was once again a possibility. A handyman service helped set up and maintain the centre and the homes, providing work experience for those with the skills. The garden and highly successful fowl house in the grounds of the Old Adelaide Gaol helped feed the occupants of the centre as well as contribute to food parcels distributed. In early 1995, Romero Community member, Dr Damian Mead, set up a multi-disciplinary medical centre, the Brian Burdekin Clinic, where health services are provided for those without easy access to health care. It was welcomed and supported by Moore Street Centre.

One of the community's songs summed up the spirit of the Adelaide Day Centre: 'We'll meet at the centre where life can be found'. For the initiator of

this whole chain of caring events, Janet Mead, the spirit is the spirit of Catherine McAuley, whom she saw as her model. It was also the spirit of the Angas Street Community, who taught her at school, with whom she later taught, and who remained her base. Sister Francis Coady for many years cooked a weekly meal at the centre, and other sisters supported in various ways. The Angas Street sisters were Janet's ongoing inspiration as they served the people of South Australia in an utterly committed and honest way. She felt that her own experience of moving beyond the traditional boundaries truly expressed the Mercy spirit now, and pointed to who were also carrying it now – women and men who were not necessarily vowed members of the Mercy Institute.<sup>41</sup>

### **Hesed Community**

Hesed Christian Community came from the participation of Sister Patricia Kenny in the Charismatic Renewal movement, as well as her involvement with Bundeena Christian Fellowship, near Sydney, in New South Wales. In the early 1970s, Patricia was working as a teacher at the Charismatic Renewal day centre in Goodwood, Adelaide, and went to Bundeena to teach and offer spiritual direction for one month each year. The work of Enid Crowther and the Bundeena Community's Training School for people in need through various social causes was an inspiration to Patricia.

So, too, was the work and spirituality of Jean Vanier, French Canadian founder of the world-wide *L'Arche* communities for intellectually disadvantaged persons. Patricia made a retreat with Jean Vanier, who encouraged her in her dream of setting up a residence for people whose homes were very damaging or who, for other reasons, needed to find a supporting loving community. She was heartened, also, by the 1968 Mercy Chapter's approval of 'experimental communities'.

The attempt at an 'experimental community' with a charismatic renewal spirituality had begun at *Rosmore*, Kingswood, in 1979 and then at Erindale convent during 1980-2. It was based on the vision of a Christian living and healing ministry centre.<sup>42</sup> It was at Erindale that the community adopted the name *Hesed*, one of the Hebrew terms for divine mercy, loving compassion, and everlasting faithfulness. In March 1983, the concept took a big step towards fuller realisation when the Hesed community moved to a rented house in Payneham. The idea of rental was a conscious attempt to share as fully as possible in the life of those who would be part of the community. From the beginning, there was – as in the Vanier houses – a desire to eliminate any trace of two levels within the community. All members would share life equally within 'a new life-giving spiritual family.'

A number of other centres were soon added. In September of the same year, a second house, called *Shalom* (peace), was rented nearby, and its doors were

opened to welcome those in need of healing and hospitality. A third house was offered by a family, in September, 1984, in the same area. Named *Discipleship House*, it was used for teaching and counselling and as a residence until January, 1991, when its owners wanted it again. In October, 1986, a rented house at Oaklands Park, *The Haven*, became a residence for handicapped men. This was transferred, in March 1990, to a Lutheran group. In 1988, a house was rented from the SA Housing trust at Magill, as another residence for people in need. It was called *Rahamim*, the scriptural term for mercy as womb-compassion.

In 1993, negotiations were made with the SA Housing Trust, and a number of units within a newly constructed complex were made available at Magill, not far from Rahamim. In this way, all the houses were in closer proximity. The new Hesed<sup>43</sup> and the new Shalom occupied three units within the complex, with the possibility of expansion into other units. In October, two other units were rented, extending the accommodation available. The Hesed Christian Community also supported others living in emergency or in long-term accommodation or in their own units. An outreach of the community – Carrington Cottages in the inner city – began in 1990, and provided low cost housing for fifty-five homeless men, in a boarding-house style situation. Sister Betty Schonfeldt acted as administrator of the cottages, upgrading the accommodation provided.

Those who came for support to the Hesed community came for various reasons – family breakdown, recovery from addictions, mental or physical illness – and stayed as long as they needed. Basically, the community's vision was to work together to build a healing community which would give 'new life and hope to those in need by healing prayer, loving counsel, and practical support and care'. Sister Patricia Kenny, with professional training in education, nursing, and social work, not only offered counselling but also co-ordinated a daily programme of activities, including scripture teaching, prayer, and personal growth towards wholeness. Members of the community committed themselves annually. There was also a circle of supporters who helped in various ways, including volunteers who come in on a daily basis.

Apart from Patricia Kenny, a number of other Sisters of Mercy have been part of the Hesed community story. There were Rose Casey and Lynette Beck and Margaret Tallon (West Perth Mercies) in the earlier days. Later, Sister Betty Schonfeldt (live-in helper at Rahamim) and Melbourne Mercy Sisters Felicia Holland and Mary O'Loughlin (live-in helper at the new Hesed) have been part of the Hesed Christian Community. Sister Monica Marks continued to give support through membership of the Council of Hesed Christian Community Inc., of which Patricia Kenny was president and Betty Schonfeldt secretary. Julia Lloyd and Val Chandler of the community committed themselves to becoming formal Mercy Associates.

When Sister Helen Owens facilitated the community in a two-day planning

session, in January, 1994, a symbol was constructed to summarise the gifts and joys experienced by members of the community. In the central circle of the symbol was written: 'This is a community which has literally enabled me to stay ALIVE.' By the deeds of the members of the community and those of the many other persons who have been part of the venture, the goal of witnessing to the sacred qualities of loving-kindness, faithfulness, and compassion – symbolised in the community's name, Hesed – has been quietly but potently achieved. The record of the Hesed community has been called a 'quiet record of sustained excellence.'<sup>44</sup>

### **Bundeena House**

As well as Patricia Kenny's involvement in Bundeena House in New South Wales, through teaching and spiritual guidance, Sister Maureen O'Grady was a member of the core community there. Beginning with a six months renewal period, Maureen stayed from 1974 to 1983, at which time the onset of ill-health forced her to return to Adelaide. The move to Bundeena arose from her interest in the spiritual Charismatic Movement.

The Bundeena community was a covenant community within the ecumenical charismatic movement. It originated from the rehabilitation work begun in their own home by Enid and Barry Crowther during the early 1960s. The 'family' gradually enlarged to the size of about a hundred members, including a large percentage of young people. The ecumenical Bundeena Training School was set up in 1971, which offered programmes aimed at 'helping people with problems sort themselves out and learn to live a balanced Christian life'. The concept of 'community' became important to the 'family' and this led to an exploration of the experience of 'community' within the Catholic Church. The insights gained by both Patricia Kenny and Maureen O'Grady through their lives in the Mercy community were welcomed. A number of sisters visited Maureen at various times during her stay there and experienced first hand the life of the Bundeena community.

### **Catherine House**

In mid-1977, Sister Anne Gregory had become resident administrator of the newly established Women's Shelter in the Para District within the city of Elizabeth. It had the support of government and voluntary agencies, including the South Australian Housing Trust. Anne herself was sponsored by the Mercy congregation until the shelter obtained secure finance. She remained in this position until 1983. During this period, in 1981, Anne received a Commonwealth Scholarship to research women's shelters overseas.

As early as 1979, the Sisters of Mercy as a group had applied for government funding to set up a women's Shelter. They wished to establish another centre more specifically 'Mercy', a contemporary style House of Mercy for

young single mothers and babies. Volunteers were called from among the sisters to staff the centre, and Anne Gregory would resign from her position in the Para district shelter to manage it. The submission had been rejected. Anne did accept the role of president of the management committee of a somewhat similar programme which was approved at Brighton.

Her interest in setting up a Mercy women's shelter survived her involvement towards establishing the Adelaide Day Centre for homeless men. In 1988, Catherine House was set up in the inner city by the Sisters of Mercy, in conjunction with the Adelaide City Council and the South Australian Housing Trust. It was seen as another expression of the 'traditional' Mercy ministry within the city.

The sisters' congregational involvement was preceded by the study of a steering committee appointed in 1987, the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, to look at the needs of homeless women in Adelaide. Sister Maureen O'Grady's report of the conclusions of a Needs Study, 'Accommodation for Single Adult Women without Children', together with Sister Gloria Lord's research, helped identify the probable clientele.<sup>45</sup> This led to a second application for a grant to set up a shelter. The congregation guaranteed finance until there was sufficient funding for the shelter to survive.

Catherine House, built by the SA Housing Trust, was a two-storeyed home in Princess Street, with beds for thirteen women for short-term stays of about two months. The women came with a history of mental illness or drug abuse, or of domestic violence or sexual abuse as children. They were struggling to move away from a destructive lifestyle, and needed time and an environment that would give them a sense of security and consistent support.

Anne Gregory was administrator. Her initial staff included other Sisters of Mercy, Maureen Healy (from Ballarat East Mercy congregation) and Mavis McBride, who set up the records and accounting system. As well as the money provided by the Adelaide Mercies, funding came from a variety of sources, Federal and State governments, Adelaide City council, private enterprise, and the church. Later Mercy members of staff included Helen Owens, Loyola Crowe, and Rosemary Day. A Sister of St Joseph, Margaret Tully, was a full-time helper.

By February of 1989, one hundred and twenty women, aged seventeen to seventy, had passed through Catherine House which had had to turn away at least another forty. Many of these were the city's 'hidden homeless', most of them isolated in cheap lodgings or – too afraid to sleep on park benches as many men did – forced into undesirable relationships.

The acquisition of a two-bedroomed Housing Trust house where two women could stay for up to six months was not sufficient solution to this problem. Accordingly, again acting in conjunction, the city council

and the housing trust acquired property for two further and considerably larger extensions of Catherine House, Salem Terrace and Miriam Place.

A number of cottages in Carrington Street were renovated to form a ten-bedroom boarding house, where women could stay on a longer basis and could be connected with the various community resources available. The complex was called Salem Terrace, by the original owner, Johan Weil, a native of Hamburg, who had acquired the land in 1880. *Salem* was an appropriate name for the new extension of Catherine House, coming as it did from the Hebrew *Shalom* (peace) and incorporated into the name Jerusalem. At the official opening and blessing, on 19th June, 1990, Sister Christine Keain, congregational leader, commented that the Sisters of Mercy had arrived in Adelaide on 3rd May, 1880. It was one hundred and ten years to the day that the first ten women had taken up residence in Salem Terrace. 'These coincidences', she said, 'give us a sense that this is a very appropriate thing for us to be doing and a very appropriate place to be at this time'.

Then, in 1992, Miriam Place was opened. Miriam Place was a three-storeyed building in Angas Street for long term residents. Each floor incorporated a shared kitchen and lounge. In opening the complex, the Governor, Dame Roma Mitchell, commented on the appropriateness of the name. A Mercy-conscious reading of the Moses story in Exodus, Dame Roma said, revealed a remarkable overcoming of racial and legal barriers. The three women in the story – the daughter of Pharoah, the oppressor, and the mother and sister (Miriam) of the baby Moses, who would eventually lead his people out of Egypt – were united by their expression and experience of mercy in saving the baby in the bulrushes.

Anne Gregory, responding to Dame Roma, commented how Roma had, in her own person, been a sign to all of one woman's achievement in the sphere of society's need to struggle for justice. Miriam was Hebrew for Mary, who was the mother of mercy. Miriam was a leader, a prophetess to her brothers Moses and Aaron. Pharoah's daughter, too, had been moved to compassion, the Hebrew scripture using the same word as it did to describe God's merciful love. When they had first moved into Miriam Place, they had had a little unofficial blessing and anointing. It was a women's liturgy, a very moving experience, in which they were moved to both laughter and tears – tears for the pain of what had been – tears of joy because of hope for a new future.

The Catherine House enterprise and its extensions attracted the support of individuals, schools and parishes as well as other agencies. The support of the South Australian Housing Trust was especially enlightened. At the opening of Salem Terrace, Anne Gregory stated: 'Our Housing Trust is well known – Australia wide – for their work for the disadvantaged and the opportunities they give them for new beginnings.' The general manager of the Housing Trust, Mr Paul Edwards, said that it was partnerships of this kind –

working with the city of Adelaide and the voluntary sector – that were an integral part of the Housing Trust's vision of its role in the world. 'The Sisters', he continued, 'are a striking example of putting customers first – and unlike commercial enterprises the Sisters' customers don't have a great number of resources but do have very great needs. It has been a stimulating challenge for us in the Trust to work with the Sisters'. Dame Roma, when opening Miriam Place, had stated: 'For many years the Sisters of Mercy in South Australia have been known as forward thinking educators of girls and in earlier years were responsible for the care of orphans in the Goodwood Orphanage. In more recent years they have spread their good works more widely.'

It was Anne Gregory's own statement that epitomised what was happening at a deeper level in Catherine House and Salem Terrace and Miriam Place. 'I have developed', she claimed, 'a real love for these women because they have called forth compassion and admiration from me ... I find I am the one who is being transformed, the one who is being taught'.<sup>46</sup>

### **Coolock House Parenting Unit**

The same sentiment could be expressed by Sister Helen Densley, the first and long-term director of Coolock House Parenting Unit, in Morphett Vale, to the south of Adelaide. Coolock House was named for the residence of Catherine McAuley's adoptive parents, the Callaghans, on the outskirts of Dublin. There Catherine McAuley – then virtually a young woman without a home – found acceptance and loving kindness. From it, she herself tried to help young women in need in the village. The Callaghans bequeathed to her Coolock House and the fortune with which she established the House of Mercy for women in Baggot Street, the beginnings of the Mercy Institute.

Coolock House, South Australia, began in May, 1981, with Sister Anne Foale also a member of the staff. It was an action to mark the 1980 centenary year of the Sisters of Mercy in South Australia. Morphett Vale parishioners gave furniture and offers of help. Helen and Anne took occupancy of three units in two courts, Bradley and Godfrey. Approval by the Noarlunga Council for the project was not given until two months later, when the first single parent and child were able to come into residence. It was hoped that Coolock House could provide its young residents with a time

to be settled  
to gather resources together  
to make friends  
to make new choices  
to learn new skills.<sup>47</sup>

Sister Christine Keain assisted as counsellor and staff resource person, and later as facilitator in child-parent relationships. A number of other Sisters of



*Srs Anne Foale (L.) and  
Helen Densley (R) at  
Coolock House, 1983*



*Adventure in the playground at Coolock House*



*Fostering:  
Sr Carmel Christie, 1995*

Mercy added to the richness of Coolock over the ensuing years, either as full- or part-time staff, as resource persons in various areas, or as members of the Coolock House Consultors (later the Coolock House Board when Coolock House became an incorporated body in 1984).<sup>48</sup>

Funding for the project came from a variety of sources, including the Roman Catholic Archdiocesan Charitable Trust, TAFE grants, and the State Government. In 1995, the South Australian Housing Trust provided a new and attractive complex of units on the one site, around a central courtyard. Part of the complex was reserved for the Day Centre.

Programmes were provided for the young mothers and their children. There were play groups for the children. Sessions for the mothers helped them with their own personal development and particularly with child-care and parenting skills. Shared Living Skills, Sewing for Survival, programmes in crafts, health, cooking, child-parent relationships, and counselling were all offered. Families in residence stayed for anything up to six months. The women were young and the children predominantly toddlers.

The staff at Coolock endeavoured to work as part of a team, offering support to resident mothers in a context of respect for each, for her life story, and her individual situation. They aimed to help the women set realistic goals, resolve conflicts arising out of their personal histories, and grow in personal responsibility, self-determination, self-confidence, and stability in their lives. Their approach was to 'do with' rather than 'do for', an attitude also adopted in the day centre programmes, and in the follow-up service offered to mothers and children when they left Coolock; the women themselves were more and more closely involved in planning the day-to-day programmes in the residential unit.

Helen Densley expressed the philosophy thus:

It seems to me that the cycle of homelessness, poverty, deprivation and abuse can begin to be broken when a young woman is trusted enough to hold the pieces of her puzzle independently, to truly find her own voice.

As Sister Catharine Ahern – one-time member of staff and of the board – said, 'A Catherine McAuley could work quite happily and constructively at and from Coolock'.<sup>49</sup>

In 1993, under government pressure to restructure, a coalition was formed between Coolock House and a like agency in the southern area, Malvern House. The coalition was named 'Young Women's and Children's Support Services'. During the process of restructuring, Coolock House received excellent feedback from government and other agencies as well as client families on the empathy, expertise, and professional service delivery of the staff and volunteers of Coolock House. The coalition seemed workable to the sisters in so far as Coolock House continued as a Mercy project.

### **McAuley Lodge**

Towards the end of 1983, the local Mercy community in Elizabeth began to discuss the possibility of making their relatively large house available for other purposes. The numbers of sisters living in the convent had decreased. There was a particular concern about a chronic shortage of housing for young people in the area. The convent was jointly owned by the Sisters of Mercy and the two Elizabeth parishes. By mid-1985, discussions between those implicated had resulted in a formal submission being made for funding by the Para Districts Housing Service, the proposal including the suggestion that the sisters lease the convent to the SA Housing Trust for emergency accommodation. The accommodation would be available to single low-income earners. In return, the Trust would provide alternative accommodation for the sisters.

A lengthy period of negotiations had occurred, with funding bodies, with the Elizabeth City Council, with the Law Courts, and with uncooperative neighbours, before the project became possible. The convent building was renovated considerably to make it more homely for young people. Renamed 'Yorktown House', it was able to house up to eight young people between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, for up to six months for each individual. There were also three emergency beds for overnight stays. However, on account of funding restrictions and the management committee's decision not to use volunteer staff, only four youths, at a time, were actually taken.

The project did not prove viable. The lease of the convent to the Para Districts Housing Service was terminated, and a second project commenced in 1990. This time it was a joint venture of the Sisters of Mercy, the two Catholic parishes in Elizabeth and the archdiocese, and the Knights of the Southern Cross. It was named McAuley Lodge and Sister Claudette Cusack accepted the task of administrator.<sup>50</sup> Claudette travelled around the State to raise funds for the project. Donations from various groups and individuals together with some grants for recreational and educational programmes helped with financial survival. All the furniture was 'scrounged from somewhere'.

McAuley Lodge offered 'accommodation plus practical preparation for living independently' to young women who were in need of accommodation. It was not a 'shelter', but rather geared to long-term residence. It was to be non-denominational in its offerings, but it would incorporate the profound religious ethic of belief in the dignity and worth of each person, and in their right to adequate food and shelter and to growth towards fullness of being.

McAuley Lodge was conceived as a place of learning. Residents were supported and encouraged to improve their education, to seek work and to hone their life-skills. They were also encouraged to become independent. There was opportunity to experience budgeting and the economic buying of food, and to learn how to care for the earth. The facilities and atmosphere

were kept 'home-like', within the framework of the lodge's goals. There were animal friends, sharing of class assignments, and celebration or otherwise of results.

At the same time as Coolock House and Malvern House were more or less forced to amalgamate aspects of their administration, McAuley Lodge was embroiled in the government's rationalization of social services in the northern areas. In this instance, it did not seem likely that the peculiar ethos and purpose of McAuley Lodge would be preserved within the proposed coalition. Accordingly, the service was terminated in 1994. The convent was sold.<sup>51</sup>

Staff member Mrs Jo Salmon summed up the brief history of McAuley Lodge when she stated:

When we think of ... each and everyone of the young women who shared part of their lives with us at McAuley, we can indeed be thankful to those wise ladies who saw the vision and concept of McAuley. It was a unique establishment, and fulfilled its purpose to the utmost'.

### Foster Home

When, in the early 1980s, the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau decided that celibate religious were less appropriate to run cottage homes for children than were married lay people, Sister Carmel Christie decided to continue her ministry of child care through setting up a foster home. She rented a Trust home in Torrensville which would accommodate herself and four children. Partly owing to the set-out of the home, she found herself eventually confining it to boys.

One of these boys was a long term member of the home. In 1995, he had been with her for eight years, from when his father had died and his mother was unable to care for him. He expressed himself as 'very lucky' to have had only one foster mum. 'I live with a nun', he told the reporter from *The Advertiser*<sup>52</sup>. 'She's been just like a mother to me – a normal mother.' He was then a seventeen-year-old student at prestigious Prince Alfred College, having won a college scholarship to attend. He was also part of a group to set up networks for foster kids. It was the Australian Association of Young People in Care, a national self-help group.

## NEW WAYS OF EDUCATING

Meanwhile, educational services continued to be offered with the same traditionally conscientious attention to the religious and moral growth of the students and to the attainment of the basic knowledge and skills. However, with the rapidly changing environment of the times, there were many new developments, both within the schools and also through different ways of being educators.<sup>53</sup> The retraining of many sisters opened up whole new and



*Sr Janet Mead leads Sunday Rock Mass singing in Cathedral, 1970s*



*Sr Patricia Feehan (R) at Brompton pre-school, 1977*



*Sr Denise Coen broadcasting, 1980s*

exciting ways of answering their Mercy call to serve the 'ignorant'. It was for them a period of awakening, of challenge, and of widening horizons.

One of the pivotal changes was the rapid transformation of Australia into an extremely multicultural society in the decades following World War II. This brought both enrichment and difficulties. Curricula became enriched through attention to the cultures of countries from which the young 'New Australians' came. Kathryn Travers found that the most exciting thing about teaching for her was the possibility of awakening children to new experiences, to an awareness of the world around them, helping them to enjoy literature, art, humor and to appreciate themselves and each other.

In a multicultural Australia, this acceptance and appreciation of self and of each other was of prime importance. Central education agencies as well as the schools were challenged to develop programmes which would help the settlement of migrants, especially those from non-English speaking societies, into a new country, while trying also to lessen the impact of cultural shock. The growing consciousness about the uniqueness of the culture of the Australian Aboriginal peoples was also a challenge for curriculum developers.

It was the time, too, in the secondary schools of a heightened call to Catholic Action. The invitation to be 'Christian' was becoming stronger than that to be 'Catholic'. Social change added to the linking of mercy with justice worked towards the enunciation of a lay spirituality of apostolic action. The church's Young Christian Students movement, based on Josef Cardijn's See-Judge-Act principles, offered a critical process of self-education which aimed at helping students evaluate their daily lives against the message of the Gospel.

A number of Adelaide Mercy Education Conferences were held in the 1970s which influenced future directions significantly. The first of these was the Mercy Primary Schools Conference, held at Nunyara Camp, Belair, in 1973. Thirty-five sisters attended. Their task was to look at the present situation, to face the crisis in the shortage of personnel and finance, and to evaluate viable alternatives to the closure of their schools. They would try to reach a consensus on where their thrust should be in the future.

Primary school needs were discussed under the categories of resources, people, and personal needs. With the data so obtained, and with the help of a facilitator, sociologist Peter Dwyer SJ, the group evaluated each of the schools. Establishing several criteria, they accepted two major ones – where a unique contribution could be made, and where the more deprived could be served. The schools were then listed in the absolute order of importance, both from a provincial and a personal point of view, giving the provincial ranking a higher weight.

This evaluation led the Mercy Council to determine certain planning priorities:

- \* concentration of sisters where it was difficult to obtain lay staff and where religious seemed needed
- \* in cooperation with the CEO, the handing over of certain well-established schools to lay administration
- \* a greater percentage of sisters to work in the more disadvantaged areas
- \* encouragement of a smaller group of sisters to experiment more radically in finding ways and means of working for a new type of education for social change
- \* the building into future plans a structure flexibility i.e. to see themselves more in terms of task-forces free to move in and out.<sup>54</sup>

The primary school conferences became annual for a number of years. At the Mercy Education Conference, held at St Francis Xavier Seminary, in 1978, for all sisters involved in education, there were thirty-two participants. They were involved in primary and secondary schools, Aboriginal education, parish work, parent-child centres, formation, adult education, and charismatic renewal. Joan Haren, convenor of the organising committee, remarked on the greater diversity of apostolates since the Nunyara conference in 1973. She felt at this conference there was evident a much greater appreciation and acceptance of this diversity.

Agenda for the 1978 conference, while still practical, was much more concerned with ethos. Under the overall theme of 'The Spirituality of the Religious Teacher in the Light of Current Apostolic Trends', and facilitated by Marist Brother Kevin Treston, it looked at a number of topics: the identity of the Catholic school and of the Mercy school, educating for justice, spirituality of mission, and adult education as well as province planning. It examined the difference in the role of the sister between the 1950s and 1978, the ways in which changes were affecting the sisters, and the support they needed in new situations.

That this latter was a very pertinent topic was emphasised by Patricia Pak Poy in her role as education consultant to the congregation, in 1982. Patricia outlined some of the difficulties now being experienced with appointments of religious. She judged that the Sisters of Mercy seemed to have a good relationship with the Catholic Education Office, but that there was a certain 'malaise' about relationships of religious, in general, with the CEO. On the side of the religious, this was largely to do with 'not being needed any more'.<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, the global consciousness of the teaching sisters was being raised in many ways. Developing the theme of the 1979 National Mercy Conference on Mercy and Justice, which she had organised as executive director of the National Mercy Conference, Patricia had given a paper on 'Justice Education: some Implications for Catholic School Administrators', at the second National Catholic Education Conference, Canberra, 1980. Joan Haren was another sister articulate in her views. She considered that

there were areas within society where those in education, particularly religious, should be in the foreground or, at a minimum, present, and they were glaringly absent. One such area was work with refugees when they first came to South Australia. There was, she added, a place for sensitive educated people to confront the system, through, for example, the Public Service Immigration Department.<sup>56</sup>

Within and without the schools, the teaching of 'new' English – English as a second language (ESL) – became the specific apostolate of some sisters. Gemma Johnson at Tenison College, Mount Gambier, helped Vietnamese, Kampuchean, and Dutch migrant students to cope with school studies in a foreign language. She helped translate into English each morning an adult's poem to his young wife in Vietnam, which he had written the previous evening. Deirdre O'Connor and Monica Marks, in Adelaide, were both involved in ESL through TAFE. Mercedes College began a Learning Assistance Programme during 1984, which assisted any student, not just migrant, in need of extra help, and encouraged the tutors to develop stimulating ways of tackling problems that arose. Similar programmes, often involving experts in ESL teaching or volunteer or employed teacher aides, were conducted in the various schools, both primary and secondary, most of which had children from many non-English speaking groups.

Judith Redden, as principal of St Aloysius College, saw adaptation to changing needs as having always been one of the school's major features. In 1984, there were students from thirty-nine national groups. Half the parents were born in a non-English speaking country. The college policy was to offer a number of places to refugee students from Poland and Vietnam. This had profound implications for the educational programme of the college. An action-based research programme in the Junior Secondary school helped identify and develop strategies and methods for more effective teaching and learning. Some of SAC staff introduced an Inter-cultural Exchange Programme with the Gilles Street Language Centre, where recently arrived students were given an intensive six month course in the English language. In 1995, the building on the site of the former Barr-Smith residence facing Angas Street became a Language Centre, separately incorporated as SA Adelaide Language Centre by the Mercy congregation<sup>57</sup>. That the college was successful in proclaiming its openness to all seems evident from the statement of some Aboriginal parents who wrote that they wished to send their child to SAC because they believed that 'SAC is aware, very sympathetic and understanding of the talents, problems and needs of many disadvantaged groups within the community.'

Sisters Trudy Keur, principal of Kilmara College, and Patricia Feehan, deputy principal in charge of the primary section, also found a challenge in working with the large number of ethnic groups, and, in particular, the high

Indo-Asian population of the area. Kilmara was a diocesan co-educational primary and secondary college in the inner western suburb of Thebarton. Not only were teachers needed to teach English to non-English speaking students but translators were necessary for communication with both students and parents. The two sisters found, too, a challenge in being part of a systemic parish school where the parish and the school communities differed considerably. Trudy had already faced the challenge of administration within a 'non-Mercy' secondary college, when she had been deputy principal and then principal of Siena College at Findon. There had been the added factor of succeeding a much respected Dominican sister in what was originally a Dominican site.

In all the Mercy schools, parents were encouraged to have more participation in the educational aspects of the school, not just in fund-raising or maintenance – essential as these services often continued to be. Teacher-parent nights became customary, in an effort to explain school philosophy and practice. At St Thomas More's school, Elizabeth, principal Joan Haren and religious education coordinator Pauline Preiss, saw the meetings with parents of newly enrolled children as a way to bridge any gap between the parents' reasons for choosing a Catholic school and their knowledge and understanding of new developments in religious education.

Other creative initiatives were made on occasion. In 1984, Margaret Abbott, as principal of St Mary Magdalene's school at Elizabeth, encouraged parents and teachers to attend a three-day conference run by the non-government sector of the SA Disadvantaged Schools programme. Then, as a follow-up, the parents from St Mary Magdalene's who had attended the conference, ran a workshop for the staff, which helped bridge the gap between parents and teachers. Perhaps more significantly, the workshop helped all to question their attitudes and the gap between their own more privileged experience and that of those in their school community who lived in daily oppression. In 1986, at St Thomas More, Elizabeth, where Joan Haren was principal and Mary-Anne Duigan was parish worker, a Drop-in Centre was a total school/community effort. Parents, school staff, and parishioners all co-operated to make the centre one that parents could call their own, and also one that would be a welcoming place for all, including children, the sick, lonely, and aged. The Drop-in noticeably improved relationships between parents and teachers and parents and children.

The incredible advances in technology within society were reflected in school curricula and resources. The introduction of TV, videos, and then computers into schools made radical differences in the way subjects were being taught. Rosemary Day, principal of Parkside and later Henley Beach primary schools, saw the introduction of computers into schools as having potentially one of the most radical influences on education.



*Sr Ilsa Neicinieks (first right) in Catholic Adult Education Service, 1990*



*Sr Deirdre Jordan and Monty Hale –  
Marrngu linguist, c.1984*



*Sr Trudy Keur, Darwin Cathedral, 1995, after  
inauguration of the NT Council of Churches*



*Sr Gloria Lord on the city beat*



*Chaplains at Julia Farr Centre for chronically sick and disabled persons – Sr Marie Britza (standing), 1984*



*Sr Benigna Davis (centre) sorts clothes for St Vincent de Paul Society*

When changing demographic patterns threatened the continuation of the secondary section of Kilmara College after the end of 1991, Trudy Keur and Patricia Feehan were part of a study group set up by the South Australian Catholic Commission for Schools (SACCS) to review Kilmara's future. Trudy's own strong interest in the relationship between science and religion led to her valuable input into the study group's proposal to transform Kilmara College into a school with a focus on technology within the Catholic Education system. The group saw that 'an awakening of consciousness to the impact of technology in society ... involves an extension of Christian morality to govern new dimensions of human activity and our relationship to nature and to all persons'. In a school with such a focus, the insights of scripture and tradition could be brought to bear on the complex world of technology and the future, providing a means by which our technological society could be assessed and judged. Although this new vision for Kilmara College was not accepted by the system, Trudy herself saw the concept as still relevant, and followed through some of its themes in her continuing study of theology both in Adelaide and at Berkeley, USA.

Adult education – both as school staff development and as parish based programmes – assumed a much greater importance. Several sisters took up the new role of religious education coordinator within the schools, and as such found themselves involved not only as resource persons but also involved in the development of curricula and in the formation of teachers. Kathryn Travers found her role as religious education coordinator at the large St Augustine's Parish School at Salisbury to cover many such areas. Music and singing, liturgical celebrations, input at staff meetings, were among some of the evolving parts of her work. In 1994 Kathryn was presented with an award by the interdenominational South Australian Religion Teachers' Association. It was for her 'inspirational use of music, mime, and drama in primary school.' Her long-time membership of the Therry Dramatic Society had been a helpful and enriching experience.

Full-time catechetical work with students in government schools, through what was for a while called 'motor missions', found a few sisters working in religious education, and extending their services also to youth groups and adult catechists. The concept of 'motor mission' came from Archbishop Beovich in 1956, when he invited the Sisters of St Joseph to form two teams of two sisters each to travel from public school to public school offering religious instruction to Catholic children. The invitation heralded a new era of ministry, and a network of 'motor missionaries' grew, formed by sisters from differing orders.<sup>58</sup> This ministry was forced to change its *modus operandi* when entry into the state schools was no longer permitted, in 1973, and it was subsumed more directly into the activities of the parish.

Janette Gray was another Adelaide Mercy who moved from secondary

teaching to adult education in faith. As one of the staff of the Theology Institute and Catholic Adult Education Service (CAES), Janette found her engagement with adult students, including teachers, to be a situation of mutual learning and enrichment. In the early 1990s, she moved to Perth, West Australia, where she joined the academic staff of the Catholic Institute and Perth College of Divinity. In this capacity, she developed a programme for a theological and scriptural background to the main areas taught in religious education, and also tutored at Murdoch University in scripture. In 1992, under cooperative arrangements, Janette became a part-time faculty member in the College of Education of the new Catholic University of Notre Dame, situated in Fremantle. She assumed responsibility for the foundational and scriptural studies within the pre-service Graduate Diploma in Education for secondary teachers, while also researching in ecclesiology and authority<sup>59</sup>. In 1994, Janette was granted study leave to pursue a doctorate in theology through Cambridge University, England. In 1995, a launch of a book based on her master's thesis on religious celibacy was held in the Mercy International Centre, Dublin.<sup>60</sup>

There was movement of sisters also to other diocesan resource, administrative, and consultancy roles. A number of sisters went into adult faith education, resourcing teachers and catechists in religious education, and administrative roles with the diocesan central agencies. Patricia Pak Poy, Catherine Seward, and then Ruth Egar were part of the Diocesan Pastoral Renewal programme, helping in the coordination of education for leadership. Other sisters were involved as trainers, leaders, and advisers.<sup>61</sup> Ruth Egar later became the director of the diocesan Community for the World programme, which operated to encourage the formation of basic ecclesial communities within the parish system. This movement built on the Cardijn tradition of 'see, judge, act' in the diocese and on its commitment to small groups. BECs provided a structural renewal within the parish context and a kind of validation of popular initiatives. Adelaide was, it seems, the first Anglophone diocese in the developed world to adopt BECs as its official pastoral strategy.

Mary Densley worked part-time at the Centre for Catholic Studies, tutoring in the graduate diploma in religious education. Ilsa Neicinieks, after a year as student and then the year 1982 as staff member at the spiritual renewal centre, *Kairos*, in Sydney, went to the USA for further religious studies. On return, she joined the Catholic Adult Education Service through which she offered courses in scripture, liturgy, and religious education. She also conducted parent nights, prayer days, and the catechesis of groups of Cambodians interested in becoming Christians. Ilsa later followed her specific interest in liturgy through specialized studies in North America. This led her to appointments in faith education within two dioceses in New South

Wales, the second of which – in Parramatta – allowed her to use her expertise in liturgy more explicitly.

Ruth Mullins was part of a programme for school development, introduced to the Catholic schools in South Australia in 1982 by a team from Jesuit schools. Called the Curriculum Improvement Process, the programme engaged the school staff in an evaluation of the school against principles of faith and justice. One stage of this was the Colloquium, an area in which Ruth became particularly immersed. The colloquium offered teachers an opportunity to reflect together on the things in their teaching lives that mattered most to them. Hopefully, the colloquium would set in train a lasting process of collaboration for educational reform. In the early 1990s, Ruth went to North America to pursue doctoral studies in group processes. She later accepted a post at a spirituality centre in America's mid-west, where she helped run the centre and contributed to its retreat programmes, while continuing her doctoral studies part-time.

Sisters in central diocesan education agencies saw it as part of their role to help keep alive the vision of a unique Catholic education. In July, 1979, after having spent six months working in the Catholic Education Office, Joan Haren was convinced that religious orders in general, and the Sisters of Mercy in particular, should see it as a priority to put some of their best people into the CEO. It was a time of radical transition from religious to lay staffing and administration in the Catholic school system, and this was one area where she felt that religious orders should be in the foreground to help retain the Catholic educational vision. Joan wrote that the role of Judith Redden at the CEO was making a great contribution. She saw Judith as the one within the administration who had the vision of Catholic education. Judith needed support, Joan reminded the rest of the congregation. Religious should be at the lead in working for change and ensuring that the system was not elitist, but rather was a unique way of serving and being a voice for those in greatest need in our society at home and abroad.<sup>62</sup>

Patricia Feehan as a young sister on the staff of Mercedes College was supported in her developing interest in appropriate methodologies for children with differing backgrounds, such as from a non-English speaking family, or with various types of handicaps. It was an interest that was to lead later to work with the State Education Department (and the Catholic Education Office, under secondment for a period) as well as to a continuing involvement with the World Educational Fellowship. Her course under John Morley at Adelaide Teachers' College was a turning point, strengthening her commitment to education and to religious life. Morley's concept of 'a giant asleep in every person' that could be brought to life by drama, arts and other creative ways became the basis of her educational philosophy.

Mary Harvey's participation in a 'Focus on Leadership Programme'.

Spokane, USA, led to an invitation, in September, 1984, to work in the West Australian Catholic Education Office. She remained there until the end of 1986. Her focus was professional development of teachers, through induction programmes for teachers entering the Catholic system and for newly appointed principals. A variety of new experiences also came her way, including retreats for lay people, spiritual direction, and chapter facilitation.

Trudy Keur spent the second half of 1993 conducting a review process for principals in the Catholic schools of the Northern Territory. In 1994, she accepted the position of assistant to the director of the Catholic Education Office, Darwin, for the Territory. Her area of responsibility as assistant director was broadly concerned with curriculum and professional development of teachers. The number of Catholic schools in Aboriginal communities in the Territory, devolved from the period of Catholic missions, widened her understanding of the culture of the first people to inhabit Australia.

As principal of St Mary Magdalene's, in 1984, Margaret Abbott had to cope with the consequences of a deliberately lit fire that destroyed two-thirds of the school. During the ensuing period of rebuilding not just the material school structures but also its relationships, Margaret exercised the creativity and energy that were her hallmark. Those children who did not lose their classrooms were encouraged to support those who had, through friendship, parties, hikes and reading their home-made books to one another. The relationships so formed set the scene for a beautiful moment in a 'Rising of the Phoenix' celebration when the 'littlies' said thanks and unbegrudgingly gave away their specially made leis. Margaret later pursued her talents in this direction through studies in theology and pastoral ministry, and through becoming a staff member of the Faith Education team at the Catholic Education Office. Her special attraction to ritual and her skill in presenting workshops in creation spirituality and in sacred psychology – and her later studies in these areas – gradually expanded the range of her inspiration to include not only teachers but also wider groups of participants from a variety of spiritual backgrounds.

A few sisters worked outside of church agencies on a full-time basis. Maryanne Loughry had worked in chaplaincy to tertiary students and in youth ministry within both diocesan and Mercy structures. Her postgraduate studies in cross-cultural psychology led her to focus her attention on the adjustment issues facing Vietnamese adolescents in Australia. During this period she was also employed by the South Australian College of Advanced Education in teaching student nurses in interpersonal skills, social psychology and sociology. In 1991 Maryanne obtained a full-time position as lecturer at Flinders University in the department of nurse education. Much of her subsequent work with refugees was conducted under the auspices of Flinders University.



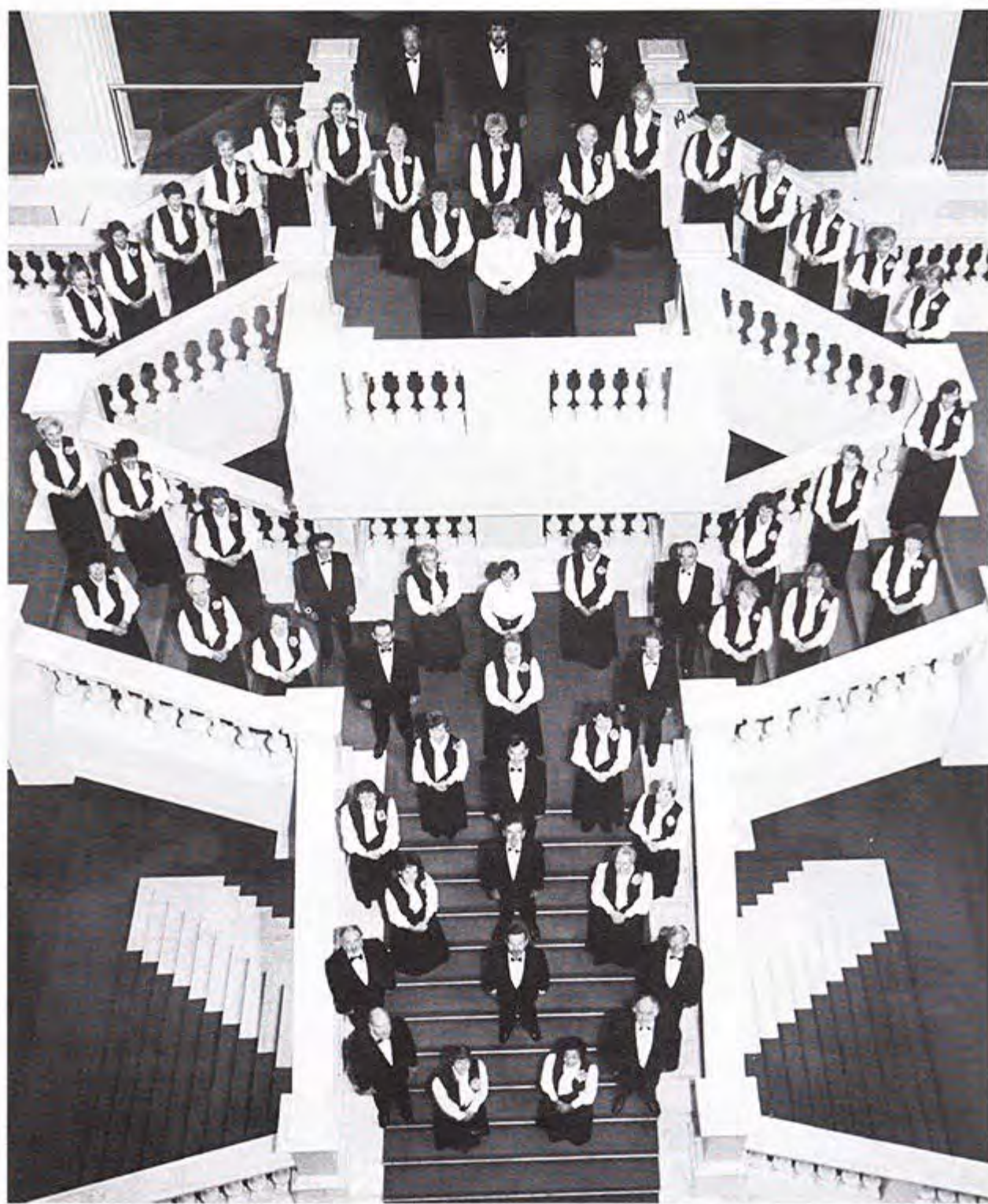
*Sr Patricia Kenny, at 'Rosmore' in 1979, beginnings of the Hesed community*



*Sr Betty Schonfeldt, member of Hesed community*



*Sr Mary Symonds (R) and parishioner at Henley Beach, late 1970s*



*Murray Park Singers, 1990. Sr Anne Cashen is in second back row, fifth from right*

Lyn Beck's participation in a PRH Personal Formation programme, Seattle, USA, beginning September, 1984, resulted, on her return in August of the next year, in a new ministry. Personality and Human Relations (*Personnalité et Relations Humaines*) originated in France, in 1970, under Andre Rochais, and had been introduced into Australia eleven years later. Lyn's six years previously working in adult ministry, group and individual, had led her to explore what PRH had to offer in ongoing adult formation. She found that the comprehensive process used by PRH and its practical application for adult growth was what she had been seeking. Eventually, with the learnings from her studies and her experiences, she worked out her own programme, remaining in private practice until 1995. In that year, she joined the staff of Coolock Parenting Unit, seeing her work there as a continuation of her previous ministry in a different setting.

Media Studies assumed greater significance in the formation of both teachers and students as the various forms of public media assumed greater and greater significance in society. A number of sisters had had some occasional involvement with radio or television religion programmes.<sup>63</sup> Deirdre O'Connor, for example, was on the Christian Television Association Program for two years, called 'Over a Cuppa'. Denise Coen was the first to work in the media full-time. Denise and Theresa Rolfe acquired some radio procedural knowledge and production skills through participating in the weekly presentation of a Catholic radio programme broadcast through Northern Community Access Radio. Denise became one of two persons responsible for resourcing the programme in Media Education being undertaken by many Catholic schools. One way of doing this was through coordinating material for religious education radio on university radio 5UV. As liaison with the Australian Broadcasting Commission, she also kept contact with Catholic schools in the area of schools' broadcasting in radio and television. After some years in this role, and having done graduate studies in communication, Denise went overseas to research the theology of communication through the medium of radio and television, and to develop this in respect to adult learning. While in England, she accepted an ongoing position with the Catholic Truth Society in London.

Education for entertainment or leisure continued through the offering of music, art, and drama. The number of sisters who made class singing and the individual teaching of musical instruments their main work had diminished severely, but school curricula had relatively broadened to encompass the possibility of incorporating the arts at all levels. Sisters such as Janet Mead and Margaret Burke were two among the younger generation who contributed much to the school through music or drama or both. In the late 1970s, Anne Cashen was part of the introduction of small group music teaching into primary schools through the Kodaly method of bringing music

literacy within the reach of all pupils. Anne incorporated her love of music into her personal lifestyle by engaging in choral and other presentations.

#### PASTORAL WORK

The term 'pastoral work' is a vague term, and is applicable to any ministry within any structure, whenever there is a dedication to the service of others through that ministry. The work of Christian education may be defined as a pastoral work. Sisters, through visiting people in their homes and in hospitals as one of their nominated works, had always done a type of parish visitation. However, in the period under consideration, some sisters assumed the more formal role of 'parish workers' or 'parish assistants', and offered a variety of services within the framework of the parish structure. Other sisters opted to work with social agencies to share specific skills within the wider community.

In the early 1970s, Ruth Egar was the first to explore the role of parish assistant. Ruth felt that working within a parish would be a Mercy ministry differing in form but possessing the same ideal of service as Catherine McAuley's. She had been a member for three years of the Christian Life Movement, and, while working at Goodwood, had also completed a course on child care and development which had looked at the breakdown of families. She consulted a number of people and explored possibilities. She considered that the Mercy order must now face experimentation in their attempt to 'read the signs of the times', and that such an attitude might be reassuring to women considering joining the community.

In late 1978, Ruth obtained employment with the City of Salisbury in their Family Support Programme. She worked in an area largely developed by the Housing Trust and gained experience in strategies of community development and education for leadership. She remained in Salisbury until 1983, when she returned to work with the Christian Life Movement. Both experiences helped her in her later involvement in the diocesan team for building basic ecclesial communities.

Ruth was followed in parish assistance work by a substantial number of sisters.<sup>64</sup> They worked in a relatively large number of parishes, for varying lengths of time.<sup>65</sup> Their duties were many and diverse. Visiting parishioners at home or in hospital, coordinating religious education, especially for adult parishioners, readying adults and families for the reception of the sacraments, preparing for the liturgical celebrations, guiding youth groups, and developing responses to other social and individual needs of parishioners were some of these duties. Other sisters, usually semi-retired, also contributed in some of these ways on a part-time basis. The Mercy Pastoral Group, set up to provide support for sisters working in these new areas, saw



*Diocesan Pastoral Team: Sr Patricia Fox (third left), Archbishop Leonard Faulkner (fourth left), 1987*



*Sr Mary Symonds on the Marriage Tribunal, 1984*



*Sr M. Vianney  
(Romley) Dirrmann  
and first Papua  
New Guinea Mercy  
postulants, 1980*



*Sr Bernadette Marks at  
Kassam Pass, 1978*



*Sr Mavis McBride and secretarial assistant, 1983*

all these kinds of ministries as coming under three categories: faith sharing, relationships, and formation/education.

A few sisters, especially those with professional training in social work, evolved the role more in the direction of community development. Pauline Button spent three days a week in the parish at Mount Gambier and three days as a social worker for the Department for Community Welfare. In her role as parish worker, she found herself committed to a cottage facility for respite care for disabled children, to the local women's shelter, as well as to the parish Charismatic and the art/craft groups. Celeste Galton saw her primary thrust as development of the various groups within the parish at Morphett Vale. She worked with Health Services and Combined Churches and shared some work with the Department of Community Welfare.

In the Parks Area<sup>66</sup> a different kind of evolution occurred in 1983. Sisters had been living in Athol Park for several years and working there in the local neighbourhood and community. They had reflected on their experience of living in the area among the people, rather than in a traditional convent, and from this came the creation of a pastoral team whose priority was to work with the people involved with the church at Mansfield Park. The original team consisted of Father Denis Edwards, Meredith Evans and Gloria Lord. Sisters of Mercy continued to be part of this team over the ensuing years. Catherine Seward broke new ground at Mansfield Park in 1988 when she became the parish administrator – in fact if not in name<sup>67</sup>. It was a new experience, the validity of which was not always fully accepted – or recognized – by others in the parish or diocese.

Catherine Seward had moved from secondary school teaching to parish work. Her sabbatical year had been spent in studying pastoral theology where she pursued her most persistent question: How do adults grow in their faith? She was able, in her ongoing work in parishes, to offer programmes which explored some of the main conclusions of her studies. Through them, she not only tested current faith development theories, but she also grew in her conviction that adult education in faith was a vital contemporary service. Catherine had an especially open opportunity to develop this conviction at Mansfield Park, with a small church community composed of people from several ethnic groups. Her belief in basic ecclesial communities and the diocesan programme envisioning the church as a community for the world, helped her stimulate the growth of an already warmly accepting community.

Gabrielle Travers, one of those who had been living at Athol Park, saw herself as committed specifically to a 'neighbourhood apostolate', through her presence in the area and the support she could give to her neighbours. She was not part of any formal structure in doing this, and so worked at a variety of jobs in order to keep herself financially. Gabrielle was a member of a support group of sisters from various orders who joined together to reflect

on and explore this particular style of ministry. She continued to pursue her ideal of a neighbourhood apostolate when she moved to Bowden, although her major focus then was on the work of spiritual retreats and spiritual direction of individuals and the coordination of this for the archdiocese.

Meredith Evans, working at Hackham West in the Noarlunga area, was described as 'a community worker from the Sisters of Mercy'.<sup>68</sup> She was one of a team of two – with Cardijn College teacher Anne Rhodes – who initiated the Cardijn Community Project. Meredith and Anne visited families connected with the college, so as to get to know them and to promote the importance of family life. Funded by the College and the Catholic Education Office, the project led to a number of practical programmes such as advertising people's marketable skills within the school and wider community. It built on the Archdiocesan vision of the church as 'community for the world'.

Meredith and Anne Foale also exercised a kind of neighbourhood apostolate while living in two adjacent units of a Housing Trust enclave at Hackham West. There they had formed a community which aimed to provide an opportunity for younger people to be involved in a local neighbourhood, with a sense of mission, for a temporary period. The living arrangements allowed for a flexible combination of privacy and togetherness. The other members of their community changed over the years they spent in the area. It was described in the Diocesan Newsletter of December, 1989, as 'a unique project' by two sisters and a group of young people to help the local community.

In 1988, Meredith and Anne had visited a number of lay Christian communities in England, Europe, and Canada, which had been formed since Vatican II. In 1989, the first community at Hackham West began with four lay women, between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine. The concept was one of a temporary commitment for about one year, to live and work with the two Mercies to help improve the living environment of the local community. Each person in the community, later to be known as the Kairos community, endeavoured to become involved in work in the local area. With paid part-time employment they could use their free time for activities that would help break down the isolation and loneliness experienced by many in urban areas. They saw themselves as trying to work as a community with a common sense of what was important in their lives as a group of women and as Christians, and how they could develop a common sense of mission from that. After the initial year it became apparent that longer-term relationships were more appropriate for the needs of the local community and members committed themselves for periods of two or three years. Among the subsequent members were lay men and a priest.

Work with young people had been taking place in a variety of other ways. At the National Sisters of Mercy Youth Conference of 1984, the sisters placed themselves 'alongside young people in a mutual search for a just society'. In

1981, Maryanne Loughry had been appointed congregational youth/vocation worker. The creation of this role had been recommended by the Mercy team concerned with initial and ongoing formation of the sisters. They had recognised the need to be supportive of youth in their immediate post-school stage, and were aware that it was then that important vocational choices were made. Maryanne's duties in this role covered the promotion of religious vocations, together with additional youth work aimed at a wider group. She performed both roles while filling a variety of work positions. Among these were chaplaincy at Adelaide University, volunteer youth work with the Department of Community Welfare Street Kids Programme, and membership of the diocesan Catholic Youth Team.

In 1984, Debbie Fulton was a youth worker in the Mansfield Park area as well as a worker for Christ Encounter Renewal, a young adult movement in the Archdiocese. Helen Owens and Shelly Sabey concentrated much of their involvement within the Cardijn-style movements of the Young Christian Students, Tertiary Young Christian Students, and Young Christian Workers.<sup>69</sup> They helped young people review their lives according to Christian principles, develop leadership skills, and participate in action for social justice. Helen became the national YCS chaplain in 1986, with special focus on leadership training. She attended the YCS World Council meeting of that year, its theme 'New Focus of Evangelisation in School and University'.

Late in the 1980s, a Young Women's group was formed. Patricia Pak Poy, Meredith Evans, and Maryanne Loughry brought together between twenty and thirty young women for a programme of faith formation. They were introduced to areas of the spiritual life, such as different forms of prayer and methods of contemplation, principles of spiritual discernment involved in decision-making, and commitment to the making of community wherever you are.

The 1987 Mercy Youth Ministry Workshops demonstrated the then commitment of the Adelaide Mercies. Maryanne Loughry, Debbie Fulton, and Helen Owens had each been member of one or more organising committees. Patricia Pak Poy had been facilitator, her place being taken by Maryanne when Patricia was elected congregational leader. Janette Gray had addressed the 1986 workshop on the theme of evangelisation, especially the evangelisation of Australian youth.

In 1990, Helen Owens and Maryanne Loughry acted as non-residential co-ordinators for a Companions Volunteer Community in Adelaide. CVC, a joint national Mercy and Jesuit youth project, offered young men and women the opportunity to work full-time in serving the poor directly and in supporting programmes that allow people to help themselves. The members committed themselves to live in community for one year, had the opportunity to share experiences and deepen their spiritual lives, followed a simple

lifestyle, and worked with people in poor circumstances. The Adelaide CVC was comprised of one man and three women.

An annual five-day *Kiteflying* workshop was another national Mercy and Jesuit joint project in which Adelaide Mercies were heavily involved between 1977 and 1992.<sup>70</sup> Called Kiteflying, it gave participants 'a chance to test out ideas by throwing them up in the air and watching how they fly'. The idea was the first corporate initiative of the Sisters of Mercy when they were moving towards unification in late 1976. Patricia Pak Poy had introduced the notion and, with the help of Margaret McGovern, a North Sydney Mercy, and Mark Raper, SJ, had designed a basic process 'to invite young people into a deeper personal confrontation with their faith and life as Christians in contemporary Australian society'. Participants were between nineteen and twenty-five years, and by 1990, some four hundred young people had taken part. For most of these, the workshop presented an opportunity to relate their lives of faith in the context of acting justly in Australia, and was an important step in their spiritual formation. Maryanne Loughry also acted as a resource person for several years, and was co-author of a handbook *Kiteflying - a workshop exploring social justice and the Christian faith*.<sup>71</sup> The dynamics of the process had changed little over the years. It was based on the principles of adult education and Paulo Freire's model of praxis, whereby participants were recognised and valued as resources, and were invited to engage actively in the process, reflect on their learnings, and take active steps towards integrating these into their own lives. Kiteflying also led to a second workshop, 'The Easter Uprising', for those making choices re directions in life. There was a heavy emphasis in it on Ignatian processes of discernment.

Single parents were another group of people with whom the sisters empathised. Many of the women in their shelters or parenting units were single mothers. Kate Conley was involved in a small but constant way with the Catholic Single Parents group for a number of years following its formation in 1978. The convent at Henley Beach, where Kate was then living, was open for brief break-aways, retreats, and social gatherings. The sisters in formation, of whom Kate was director, were also involved from time to time. In a less direct way, Patricia Pak Poy's 1984 appointment to the Children's Interest Bureau by the Minister of Community Welfare helped single parents. While a member, Patricia initiated a survey on children's play areas in residential districts. The Bureau was historically interesting in that it was the first time in Australia that a government had established an independent body to advise on child welfare policy.

Pastoral aid in another form was proffered through Mary Symonds' work with the church's Marriage Tribunal in Adelaide. Proceeding from part- to full-time in 1982, Mary interviewed persons seeking annulment of their marriages, contacted witnesses, and prepared the cases to be presented to

the tribunal for judgment. She also gave talks on occasion to various groups about the legal process. On returning from graduate study in canon law in Canada, Mary accepted a position in the Sydney tribunal, as judge. Her expertise in canon law proved useful at various times when the Adelaide Mercy book of statutes was being examined or revised.

Membership of the archdiocesan pastoral team assisting Archbishop Leonard Faulkner in his administration of the diocese became another channel of pastoral care. The team was first established in 1986, as the form of governance which would best suit the Adelaide diocese at that time. Patricia Fox, having completed her term as Mercy congregational leader at the end of the previous year, was appointed to the team. Patricia saw herself as privileged to be part of a new and prophetic moment in the evolution of local Church governance. She felt that the archbishop, in committing himself to work in a participative and inclusive way, was modelling a vision of Church that was 'both very attuned to the values of Jesus and also a symbol of hope for the Church of the future'. Patricia also saw it as an invitation to use every ounce of skill, experience and humour afforded her in living and working in Mercy works and communities during the preceding twenty years. In 1995, Meredith Evans became the second religious sister to succeed Patricia on the team. Meredith, too, saw it as a challenge to use her pastoral skills and sensitivities within a new ecclesial organisational framework. Both Patricia and Meredith sought to bring a woman's perspective and a sign value for women to their task.

Long term school educator, Mary Harvey, was another sister who re-trained and transferred to 'pastoral work'. In 1995, Mary became part of the Port Adelaide Central Mission of the Uniting Church. Her specific task was the coordination of the Port Family Project. The new Port Mission Family Centre was opened as a one-stop help centre for local families in need. It incorporated four local welfare groups, including the financial assistance services of the State Government's Family and Community Services for that district.

The more specifically spiritual orientated work of 'retreats' became the predominant apostolate of a number of sisters. Doreen Beckett played a leading part in establishing the Adelaide structure that arose in the late 1970s and that offered both directed and preached spiritual retreats. Structured traditionally or innovatively, these were open to anyone in the diocese. After leaving Vietnam and doing follow-up work in North America, Doreen had studied at the Institute for Religious Formation in Denver, USA. Although she underwent major surgery sometime after her return to Australia and was to die of cancer in 1986, Doreen continued to develop retreat work and spiritual guidance. In mid-1984 she was appointed Director of Formation within the Adelaide Mercies.<sup>72</sup>

Patricia Sims, formerly in child care at Goodwood orphanage, ventured further afield in the early 1980s, and spent some time helping run the guest house of the Benedictine monastery at New Norcia in Western Australia. While there she gained insights into Benedictine life and spirituality, especially through participating in a symposium for the fifteen hundredth centenary of Saint Benedict. Dame Maria Boulding of Stanbrook Abbey, England, was a key contributor. While at New Norcia, Patricia also experienced the visit of Brother David Steindl-Rast, also one of the best known of contemporary contemplatives.

A different kind of retreat was the 'Home Retreat', led by Kath Pierce and Francis Coady for a number of years, beginning in 1982. Based on the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, according to the model developed by the Cenacle Sisters, a home retreat was spread over a period of eight weeks, with one session weekly. Kath and Francis conducted such home retreats in private homes within parishes, in the Angas Street convent, and in Southern Cross aged hostels. As a follow-up, days of reflection were held at Angas Street. Kath also became active in leading a weekly group meeting at Angas Street of people committed to meditation on the style taught by Benedictine John Main, and forming part of a world-wide network of meditators promoted by fellow Benedictine, Laurence Freeman, after Main's death.

In the 1990s, other home retreats were offered by other sisters. Kathryn Conley and Patricia Fox offered a second kind of Home Retreat through the Sophia Women's Spirituality Centre in Adelaide. Lyn Beck, in addition to her work in PHR, also led groups of women in spiritual reflection days, one group of women meeting monthly with Lyn for a great number of years. Gabrielle Travers coordinated the diocesan retreat team and was, herself, deeply engaged in leading retreats in parishes and elsewhere and in individual spiritual direction.

Chaplaincy – in industry, hospital, and prison – was another form of pastoral care into which a few sisters ventured. Hospital chaplaincy was an extension of the traditional visitation of sick people in hospitals, but became more professional in the modern sense of that term. Pauline Costello, when she retired from teaching in 1979 and spent three days a week visiting Glenside Psychiatric Hospital, was the first. Patricia Sims also worked as chaplain at Modbury hospital at this time. Marie Britza, a nurse, became a fully accredited hospital chaplain in the Elizabeth area at Lyell McEwin public hospital. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Marie, as one of an ecumenical team of chaplains, also worked at Julia Farr Centre, a very large nursing home for the chronically sick and disabled. She was a member of a group of multi-disciplinary professionals who met regularly to assess each person's need. As part-time assisting chaplain she was not funded for this and so was financially supported by the Mercy congregation. After some time as nurse



*Sr Cynthia Griffin's house on Keravat school campus, 1983*



*Mercy Assembly in Goroka, 1981, at which Helen O'Brien was elected National Superior. Helen is at extreme left. Also present: Mavis McBride, Vianney Dirrmann, Patricia Fox (as a sponsoring superior), Elizabeth Miller, Bernadette Marks, Teresa Flaherty*



*Papua New Guinean-born sisters at Mercy Assembly, 1990*



*Sr Nance Munro is seen off to Papua New Guinea by Srs Martha Keane (in wheelchair) and Barbara McQuillan, 1985*

educator in Papua New Guinea, Marie returned to hospital chaplaincy at both Lyell McEwin and Julia Farr, a work she found profoundly enriching, as also its ecumenical cooperative aspects.

From 1978, the Inter-Church Trade and Industry Mission (SA) had been inviting the Sisters of Mercy to join the mission as industrial chaplains. With the economic atmosphere of the period and the impact of new technology, people in the work force were under severe strains. There was escalating pressure to perform. There was increasing fear of retrenchment or of company failure as well as personal life problems. Many employees were seriously exploring the spiritual questions of life. Migrant women were in a particularly vulnerable position. At various times, three sisters responded to the challenge of ministering to employees, management, and unions: Kathryn Conley, Ruth Egar, and Josephine Weatherald.<sup>73</sup>

In the mid-1980s, Kathryn Conley also moved into chaplaincy at the women's prison. One source of joy for her lay in the ecumenical prayer rituals she conducted regularly at the prison in a way which tapped into the events within the women's lives, their joys and their sorrows. She felt she received strength and inspiration from her growing relationship with the women and the deeper knowledge of their whole story, which often included great courage. Her prison and her industrial ministries sometimes merged. At Christmas, 1992, for example, Central Linen allowed a worker time off to be Father Christmas at a prison party. Women employees donated some of the gifts. It was a significant outreach, she felt, to people who often find no bridge back into the community.

In 1992-3, she obtained a grant under the programme National Agenda for Women, to set up a more formal system of support for women prisoners. In her submission, she wrote that the project came out of friendship and was about strengthening the bonds of friendship among some groups and individuals as they worked with and on behalf of women who were in prison or were trying to make it back in the community.<sup>74</sup>

In 1992, the Catholic Prison Ministry Committee was established, largely – according to *SA Catholic*<sup>75</sup> – through Kate's driving force. She had made an extensive tour of women's prisons around Australia during the previous year. Her trip was funded by a grant from the International Church Women's Fellowship of the Lost Coin, which furthered the development of women, especially women on margins. The tour also led her to plead for a wider introduction of alternative forms of sentencing.<sup>76</sup>

As always, the internal pastoral work that was largely administrative had continued unabated, at local or congregational levels, and increasingly with the assistance of competent lay women and men. Members of the successive leadership teams, bursars, secretaries, managers of larger convents or the aged hostel, librarians and archivist – all these contributed to the smoother

running of the group as a whole and were an essential support system operating often silently but vitally in the background. Sister Romley Dirrmann set up a compact but increasingly rich congregational library, later managed by Gabrielle Travers and then Joan Gaskell. Sister Deirdre O'Connor showed remarkable expertise in her establishment and maintenance of the congregational archives. Until advancing years brought about their retirement, those sisters who had engaged in house duties continued to offer this service to their companions who presented a more public face in ministry.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All in all, the second half of the twentieth century had witnessed a new story of moving on within the Adelaide Mercies. They had responded in different and differing ways to what they saw as the more urgent needs of *their* times, but had always tried to situate that response within the original McAuley charism of Mercy. They had viewed a film of their Argentine Mercy sisters who were likewise moving on, out of the services of their well-established institutions and into ministries with people in the burgeoning squatter areas on the outskirts of Buenos Aires and provincial towns. Once again, in the 1970s, their activities had aroused the suspicion of the Argentinian Government; but this new 'dangerous memory' had only served to fire their zeal still more strongly.

The Adelaide Mercies, in the land which Evangelista Fitzpatrick had called a land of peace and liberty, did not incur any real hostility from the governments of the 1970s and 1980s. However, for some within their own ranks and for many among the wider church community, their response seemed too daring, too new, too individualist – a betrayal of the proven values of the past. For others, it was a contemporary and necessary response to the current situation, a re-appropriation of their charism in ways that were relevant and were re-defining the traditional phrase 'corporate works of Mercy'.

Overall, and looked back upon from this point in time of just one or two decades later, the variety and creativity of their responses – whether wise or unwise, whether effective or not – may seem overwhelming, even confusing. There can be no doubt, however, for the historian observer, that they were in this period women on the move. The wealth of detail in this chapter amply demonstrates that.

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1. Jean Houston.

2. Ruth Stormey, 'Australian Culture: A Review of the Culture of the Majority of Australians', Canberra: Zadoc Institute for Christianity and Society, Series 1 Paper.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Lora Ann Quinozez & Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, xi.
6. Joan Gaskell's letter re working on Reserves with Aborigines for Province Day, 3rd August, 1974.
7. Eileen Casey, RSM, 'A Brief Summary of the History of the Sisters of Mercy in the Goulburn Diocese', Mercy Archives, Goulburn.
8. Perhaps three or four times more, *The Flinders... Social History*, 173.
9. *The Native Tribes of South Australia*, Adelaide, quoted *The Flinders... Social History*, 308.
10. MASA, 601/7.
11. Margaret Adams told me, in 1993, that most of the Aborigines working around Port Augusta had been trained by Pat and Joan.
12. Training and Further Education.
13. Letter to Mary Densley, 14.11.1983, MASA, 328/4.
14. Article by Margaret Adams, MASA, 328/4.
15. Article by Karen in Action for World Development newsletter, October, 1986, MASA, 328/5.
16. *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press, 1983.
17. Robert Segall, 18.4.1988, MASA, 603/3.
18. The other was Michelle Farrugia of Bathurst.
19. Her work embraced, among other things, the Adelaide University Aboriginal Research Centre Project which looked at the causes of delinquency, research into support systems for Aborigines in Higher Education, chairing the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music at the University of Adelaide, and membership of the National Aboriginal Committee in Canberra.
20. For a number of years Sister Pauline Preiss conducted a course in Aboriginal Studies at the college.
21. Probably the second Australian Mercy, Rita Hassett being the first.
22. Marion left the congregation 2.12.1981, before taking permanent vows.
23. *Heart of Our Service, Sisters of Mercy Adelaide*, 1984.
24. *Sunday Mail*, 13.4.1975.
25. R. von der Borch (ed.), *The Life We Share. Reflections from the Mercy Refugee Service Australia*, 1992, 48.
26. 'A History of JRS Asia Pacific 1979-1989', 45.
27. Arranged through MRS/JRS.
28. *The Advertiser*, 14th October, 1992.
29. For example, sponsorship of a Kampuchean widow and family; of a Sister of Providence from Palau Bidong refugee camp in Malaysia.
30. *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, June, 1984.
31. Bruce Stannard, *The Bulletin*, 19.4.1985.
32. *Ad Gentes*. This decree continued the theme of the basic decree, *Lumen Gentis*, both enshrining the biblically based image of the church as a light to all nations. An important further document was Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975.
33. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, SJ, 1966.
34. MASA, 620/21.
35. Carrying bag woven from dyed grasses in intricate patterns and bright colours.
36. In the later 1970s, the Mercies were coordinated in two groups, Highlands and Coastal, each with a 'Mission Superior'.
37. Peter Witham, 'Tracking Mercy', June/July, 1995, ISMA newsletter.
38. MASA, 620/30.
39. Barry Coldrey, MASA, 644/5. He did not think there were enough resources for an institute to receive accreditation.
40. From Village Weaving Project in Thailand and from Peru and Chile, for example.
41. Interview with Carmel Leavey, OP, 1995, at which I was present.
42. See Chapter Four, section on Erindale.
43. The former State primary school in Magill, an attractive building in early red brick, consisting of two large units with a large kitchen, dining and lounge rooms open to both sides.
44. Andrew, *Hesed* newsletter, Christmas 1993.
45. Student Project, Adelaide Department for Community Welfare.
46. *Adelaide Voices*, Oct/Nov, 1991.

47. *Heart of Our Service*, Sisters of Mercy Adelaide, 1984.
48. These included Doreen Beckett, Theresa Rolfe, Pauline Button, Catharine Aherm, Loyola Crowe, Lynette Beck, Margaret Abbott, Ruth Egar, Anne Gregory, Betty Schonfeldt, Kath Preece, Maryanne Loughry, Nance Munro, Claudette Cusack.
49. *Source of Life and Freedom*, Sisters of Mercy Adelaide, 1987.
50. Celeste Galton was also involved.
51. The sisters still working in Elizabeth had already purchased one of three trust houses that had been provided originally, the one in Hanson Road. The three houses were 15 Thornton Rd., Elizabeth East, 7 Hanson Rd., Elizabeth Downs, and 16 Reo Rd., Croydon Park. Rent was paid at Elizabeth East and Croydon Park.
52. Jaydne Harvey, 23.5.1995.
53. Much of this material has been taken from two booklets produced by the Sisters of Mercy, Adelaide: *Heart of Our Service*, 1984, and *Source of Life and Freedom*, 1987.
54. MASA, 610/8.
55. MASA, 610/5.
56. Ibid.
57. The Delanere Fund (from sale of Springfield land) had financed the building of offices on the Barr-Smith site. It was now rented to SAC for three years, with option of renewal, for the Language Centre.
58. Among the Mercies were Judith Redden and Claudette Cusack.
59. 'Catholic Ethos', National Catholic Education Commission Newsletter, August, 1992.
60. *Neither Escaping nor Exploiting Sex: Women's Celibacy*.
61. Ruth Mullins, Maryanne Loughry, Josephine Weatherald, Meredith Evans, and Patricia Fox as president of the SA Major Superiors' Conference.
62. MASA, 610/5.
63. Carmel Bourke, Francis Coady, Deirdre O'Connor, Patricia Pak Poy, Monica Marks, and Deirdre Jordan.
64. At least 27 sisters were designated, at some stage, as 'parish workers'. The scope of their work would have varied widely in type and time, however.
65. At least in the Cathedral parish, Elizabeth South and North, Victor Harbor, Henley Beach, Morphett Vale, Ingle Farm, Norwood, Para Hills, Ottoway (Parks Area), Parkside, Willunga, Kilburn and Mansfield Park.
66. Mansfield Park, Angle Park, Athol Park, Wingfield.
67. Official title was Parish Pastoral Coordinator. The Mass Presider was Michael Trainor, who was employed full-time as coordinator of Adult Education Services. Catherine was not joined in such a role by another sister-administrator until 1996, although some assistants had administered parishes during temporary absences of the pastor.
68. *SA Catholic*, December, 1991.
69. The Belgian priest had promoted globally the theological reflection process of See-Judge-Act through a number of youth movements. The Australian hierarchy adopted his approach officially.
70. Rosslyn Von der Borch was also part of the 1985 resource team.
71. Written by Maryanne Loughry and Annette Flanagan, published by UNIYA, Sydney, 1991.
72. She was also elected to the Mercy Council at the end of 1984, a year and a half before her death.
73. At ACTIL (textile factory), Telecom, and Central Linen (laundry).
74. The Sisters of Mercy renovated a garage/workshop in the grounds of the house at Woodville Gardens where Kate resided. It allowed for emergency accommodation, a meeting place, and an office.
75. April, 1992.
76. During Kate's sabbatical year in 1995, Sr Mary-Anne Duigan took her place as prison chaplain.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Ladders and Circles: Changing Understandings of Sisterhood

### WOMEN EMPOWERING THEMSELVES THROUGH SISTERHOOD

**I**N the 1970s, one began to see a major shift in the way in which the sisters lived and worked together and in the patterns and structures of relationships among them. The shift seems to have begun somewhere in the 1950s, and to have been crystallised by the impact of the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960s. These were years in which the Adelaide Mercies showed themselves, relative to other Australian Mercies and to other Australian religious men and women, to be on the cutting edge of change.

To understand the profundity of the changes that occurred, it is helpful to examine the earlier history of relationships within the Mercy Institute. It is a history of women empowering themselves through sisterhood – through engaging in corporate works and through living a shared way of life. It is also a history which includes much disempowerment of themselves, in reaction to various influences and in various ways, especially through the growth of structures of inequality. Finally, it is a history of women exhibiting features of a more contemporary understanding of sisterhood, a history of women in solidarity, working together for social change, while giving each other support in a style of living somewhat different from the cultural norm.

Through all these phases or facets runs the warm thread of friendship. In the Mercy Institute, ideally all can experience what has been called a companionship of rule<sup>1</sup>, with closer intimacy attained within pairs or smaller groups of companions in house or work. What we tend to term friendship may be less inclusive, more elusive, running deeper than companionship or sisterhood. Even then, as theologian Mary Hunt suggests, we may need to re-define our definition of friendship extending it to embrace categories of relationships not always included.<sup>2</sup> Whether we expand our definition or not, what seems indisputable is that all can work towards a friendly atmosphere, in which more

women are enabled to be friends as well as companions and sisters. Such a friendly environment was evident in the beginnings of the Mercy Institute, and has persisted – with peaks and lows. There is evidence, it is true, of the frictions and small rivalries and misunderstandings inevitable among persons living and working together in such a contained environment. There were hurts that needed reconciliation. Yet the overall impression gained by the historical researcher is of a positive and life-enhancing milieu.

#### CATHERINE MCAULEY'S 'CORDIALITY'

The founder, Catherine McAuley, was a warm and loving person, spontaneous and flexible, initially free of existing pre-conceptions about how her group should live together. What she had envisaged was nothing like a traditional religious order with all its hierarchical trappings of formality. Forced she may have been to adopt some of these trappings, but underneath it all she remained herself. She had a great gift of affection coming from within herself towards others, and coming to her from her companionship with others. She trusted those who joined her in her work, and she frequently expressed much pleasure in being with her family, friends, and sisters. Her vocabulary revealed how compassionate and warm-hearted she was. She used terms such as 'affectionate', 'attached', 'dear', 'tenderness'. She loved the quality of 'cordiality' – something that revives, invigorates, and warms. She talked repeatedly about the need for comfort and consolation, both human and divine, for herself and others.<sup>3</sup> On her deathbed, she wanted the sisters to have the comfort of a 'good cup of tea', as well as the comfort that they could offer one another and that God could give them as they sorrowed over her death.<sup>4</sup>

Being with Catherine was stimulating, not just because of her passionate concern to help people in need and her ability to envision and to en flesh her dream. These qualities she had in abundance. But she also treated everyone as individuals. She rejected all artificial restraint, stiffness and rigidity, not only among the sisters but in other relationships as well. Although she had great devotion to the cross, which helped her to understand the presence of much suffering in her life, she also displayed lightheartedness and was not at all happy about conventual practices of spirituality which denied the worth of the human body. She eschewed excessive fasting and praying, the unwise use of penitential artefacts such as haircloths, and the monastic practice of keeping custody of the eyes, which could make one look rather disagreeable, she thought.<sup>5</sup> Spending time in recreation with Catherine could mean laughter, poetry, dance, and music.

In her notions of authority, Catherine was essentially of her time. But a study of her changes in adapting the Presentation Rule to a Mercy Rule (not

all of the changes being accepted by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Murray) shows that she omitted anything which might seem to unnecessarily subdue the human spirit. In particular, she deleted phrases which emphasized the authority of the superior or which might tend to make her authority arbitrary or dominating. She was suspicious of stiffness and rigidity. She wanted her sisters to be at ease with themselves and others, to act with simple dignity but as human beings with genuine feelings and a sense of passion.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the early sisters responded readily to this warmth and freedom, limited at times, of course, by their own quirks of personality. Among the younger sisters of Catherine's last years were two who helped nurse her when dying, and who each led foundations to Australia. Both were remarkably human and humane. Mother Vincent Whitty has come down in both Dublin and Brisbane history as a very loving woman. For Mother Vincent's biographer she emerged from an initial obscurity 'as a happy nun, interest and intelligence in her eyes; sympathetic in manner, a good listener ...', a woman of 'enduring love, forgiving love.' She had a place among those women of vision and strong initiative who did much to advance the spiritual, education, and social resurgence of nineteenth century Ireland. In her years in office in Dublin, especially as novice mistress or as reverend mother, she had preserved close contact with Mercy communities throughout the world, and this continued when she departed for Australia. There her reputation in Ireland and England provided her with an ongoing source of new members, despite the very disturbing rumours that were spread about the church in Queensland. In a diocese where the unity of the Catholic faithful and of the Mercy community were continually threatened under the autocratic leadership of the first bishop, Mother Vincent's sense of balance, her breadth and her humanity, her ability to live with ambiguity and to create harmony was the 'diamond cement'<sup>7</sup> which kept her community together.

Mother Ursula Frayne, her companion at Baggot Street, also emerges from history with warmth and freedom. She was a courageous and strong woman, made more lovable by some touches of human weakness. Her letters and other writings in Perth and Melbourne show her to have been clear headed and articulate, genuinely simple in manner and intent, keenly interested in people and places, a lover of the abundant natural beauty around her, very affectionate and loving. She derived much comfort in the loneliness of pioneering days from keeping in contact with her friends in Baggot Street. Writing was obviously a form of renewal of spirit for her, and a source of solace in troublesome times. Her sense of the slightly ridiculous, her eye for detail, and her interest in her new country with its strange beauty made her letters a delight to their readers. She possessed in abundance that passion for life and for the works of Mercy that Catherine so desired among the members.

Sisters who went from Irish communities to found new ones in the United

States also displayed that very Catherine-like gift of playfulness in the midst of real hardship. They chose often to reflect humorously and in verse on the difficulties they met, their grace and good humour carrying them through. Flexibility and adaptability, in the early Mercy tradition, were characteristics of the many groups of sisters departing for America. Catherine's own beloved Frances (Fanny) Warde and Fanny's sister-companions wore secular clothes on the ocean voyage to protect their habits from the sea. While the other sisters wore white net caps trimmed with white ribbons with their simple black dresses, Frances chose to wear a cap of black lace trimmed in lavender. A triviality, but it was characteristic of her individuality and liberty of spirit, and of the flexibility in a new environment displayed by so many of the early foundresses in both America and Australia.<sup>8</sup>

#### FRIENDLY FOUNDATIONS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick laid down the same foundation of warmth and affection among her sisters, which she expressed more than once in her letters. Reading through the Mercy archives in Buenos Aires in 1960, newly elected Mother Superior Bernadette O'Leary was given confidence to write to Dublin for advice and help in a situation of need.

Looking through our files I have been consoled and encouraged to see that, through letters exchanged with Baggot St and Carysfort, an affectionate and sympathetic correspondence has been maintained between us and the fountain-head of our holy Institute, ever since the first group of Sisters of Mercy arrived in Argentina over 104 years ago.<sup>9</sup>

Evangelista herself had written, nearly eighty years previously, of 'being overwhelmed with kindness' in Ireland and England when she had returned from Buenos Aires.<sup>10</sup>

Both Evangelista Fitzpatrick and Baptist MacDonnell were women regarded with love by their companions. The firm bonds of friendship and affection that existed within the first Argentinian Mercy community had contrived to keep them so closely united that all twenty-four had opted to come to Australia in 1880, and had remained together despite an invitation en route for some to settle in South Africa. Angela Windle described how 'doleful' they were when they were obliged to divide in South Australia, though that was not to have been the separation it later became when the Mount Gambier community became independent. There was great sadness when six of the Mount Gambier group returned to Buenos Aires. Correspondence – and limited visits – between the two countries continued over the ensuing century and into the next.



*Enduring links:  
Srs Moira Flynn (Argentina)  
and Deirdre O'Connor (front)  
at Mercy International Celebrations,  
Dublin, 1994*



*Sr M. John (Mary) Malone at Baggot Street, Dublin, 1966, holding Catherine McAuley's crucifix*

Such friendship was not confined to members of their own Institute. There has always been a strong women's network of support through convents which has existed more or less worldwide, if only invoked periodically. Individual visitors to another region, country, or continent can almost invariably find hospitality within a convent, the contact being established through another sister, or a cleric or even a lay friend, or through dint of looking up addresses. On other occasions, there is hospitality and wider cooperation given to newcomers trying to establish themselves within a diocese.

The Mercies had experienced this kind of support from Mary MacKillop and the Sisters of St Joseph in their first days in Adelaide. Mary had already experienced hospitality from the Convent of Mercy, Blandford Square, London, where she had found great kindness.

... truly the Sisters were indeed Sisters to me. They were so kind, so holy, and so ready to give me the benefit of their great experience in many things, besides ... it was such a comfort to feel myself amongst Sisters once more.<sup>11</sup>

Mary was writing from another Convent of Mercy, St Mary's Retreat, Lower Gloucester Street, Dublin.<sup>12</sup> 'I need scarcely tell you', she added, 'that all these here too are Sisters in very truth to me, they playfully say I shall be a Sister of Mercy before I leave them.'

In their turn, the Adelaide Mercies befriended Mother Gonzaga Barry and her community of Loreto Sisters when they arrived in 1904 and were given hospitality for a fortnight. Mother Gonzaga wrote about 'the extreme kindness of our good friends here in Angas Street. They are an example of "See how these Christians love one another" in their generosity and charity towards us.' When the Loreto Sisters moved to their new home, which was totally empty and in much need of cleaning, the Mercy 'kindness provided personnel and wherewithal to scrub the floors.'<sup>13</sup> The memory of friendship offered and gratefully received was recalled in 1985, when a group of Loreto pilgrims were again welcomed at Angas Street, the old stories of beginnings in Adelaide were re-told by both communities, and they prayed together in the room which the founding Loreto sisters had occupied.

This bonding with one another was brought about through the holding of a common vision. Within the Mercy communities, there was a sharing of common goals and of corporate works. There was a collective sense of mission and of purpose for one's own life within the Institute of Mercy, which was re-inforced by participating in their institutional works, and by the following of a common rule and the living together in community according to the way of life delineated by that rule. Many strong and lifelong friendships arose among individuals and within groups and helped to give a human flavour to the sacred enterprise.

## RE-WRITING WOMEN'S FRIENDSHIPS INTO HISTORY

This pattern of friendship among women had always existed, but had not always been seen for the life-giving reality it was. Not many examples of deep friendship between women have been written into our cultural tradition. Friendships between saints held up for our edification have usually been heterosexual or between men. Vera Brittain in her *Testament of Friendship* states:

The friendships of men have enjoyed glory and acclamation, but the friendships of women ... have usually been not merely unsung, but mocked, belittled, and falsely interpreted.<sup>14</sup>

Yet feminist history has been able to reclaim a strong and vibrant tradition of female friendship within groups of women. There were the ascetic circle of highborn women in fourth century Rome, the nuns and the beguines<sup>15</sup> of later Europe, and the nineteenth century marriage resisters of southern China. There have been many stories of 'women of strength and fortitude who encouraged their selves and each other', women who identified with other women 'out of a shared strength rather than a shared pain'.<sup>16</sup>

## COMPANIONSHIP IN LIFE AND WORK, AND PATTERNS OF FRIENDSHIP

The experience of companionship has been strong among the South Australian Mercies. In the decades around the middle of the twentieth century, a period when relatively large communities of sisters lived together, the sense of companionship was especially strong when there was a group of younger women and when there was much work to be done. A sharing of responsibility and a great caring for each other could develop. Friendships were often triggered by striving for a common project. If there were members of the community who could bring fun and laughter into recreational gatherings, the exhaustion generated by too much work could be relieved and sanity could prevail. That kind of living worked then.

In an era when not much visiting one another was permissible or even feasible and the telephone was not yet a ready tool, celebration days – for jubilees or feastsdays or other special occasions – became a meeting point for the sustenance and revival of old ties. Sister Kevin Kennedy's jottings detail lots of such gatherings in the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> Very many sisters came to Goodwood to congratulate Sister Bernard Ryder on her Diamond Jubilee. When Mother Elizabeth Miller was down from Papua New Guinea, many sisters called to see

her on the feast of her patronal saint. When Mother Carmel Bourke was living at Springfield, the rest of the provincial council were driven there by a woman friend to wish her a happy feast. When Mother Provincial (Dolores Barry) and Mother Michael Kain left to visit Goroka in Papua New Guinea, many sisters went to the airport to see them off. This gathering at the airport became a tradition that has lasted. The travellers sent wires and letters from each capital city they visited en route. They were met at Port Moresby airport by some Old Scholars. On the occasion of Mother Dolores' feast in 1961, not only were there many visits from sisters during the day but there were presents displayed on the community room table – another long standing Mercy tradition. The presents were particularly welcomed in view of the imminent opening of a new convent at Elizabeth. On Easter Sunday of 1962, all day, visitors rang or called exchanging Easter Greetings. In 1965, when the Brighton Sisters of Mercy<sup>18</sup> celebrated a Golden Jubilee, many Angas Street and branch house sisters paid congratulatory visits. Not long after, Sister M. Gerard Green observed the Golden Jubilee of her profession at Mount Gambier by visiting that town, where many of her friends met to congratulate her. When Sister M. Liguori Renehan died at the beginning of 1966, her Requiem was attended not only by the sisters but by very many past pupils, members of the Mothers' Club, and other friends – showing deep gratitude to one who for so long taught in school and at music. When Sister Margaret McMahon held her Diamond Jubilee in Mount Gambier, Mother Provincial (Claire Lynch) and her council, as well as many Angas Street Sisters, relatives, Old Scholars, and friends joined her. The Centenary of the foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph, in 1966, led Sister Kevin to write that the Sisters of Mercy joined in their great joy by being present at their celebration.

It had always been possible to find companionship at Angas Street Convent and in the branch houses. But there was a particular kind of experience, where one younger sister found 'a real quality of life and tremendous bonding' within her peer group. It was in the years of Vatican II and just before the radical changes in religious living. There were supper sessions in the kitchen when the discussion was lively and life-giving. There was openness and trust and belief in one another, enabling people to go on their journey, even when that meant changing ministries or leaving the community altogether. The experience showed that, although sharing between companions and friends involved risks, it could be part of personal and communal transformation.<sup>19</sup>

The earlier years at Mercedes, Springfield, seem to have been especially potent in the feelings of community and partnership generated. Here the sense of all working together for a common enterprise was extraordinarily strong. There was much sharing of responsibility, much caring for each



*Srs Marta Barry (Argentina) (L) and Judith Redden at gravestone in Buenos Aires, commemorating the six sisters who returned to Argentina from Australia. Taken in 1981*



*Srs Janette Gray (R) and Nerida Tinkler (L) Vice-President of ISMA, with Sr Helen-Marie Burns (USA), Sydney, 1992*

other. Again late night supper sessions, after the day's work was finally ended, in 'The Golden Room' or 'The Lodge', played a significant role.

Laughter and friendly interaction were not the prerogatives of the larger communities, or of just the younger peer groups, however. Middle aged and older sisters could display a youthfulness of spirit. Many befriended and encouraged less experienced members. At Springfield, Sister Mary Marra would not only cook special meals on free weekends, but would also encourage and console younger sisters when in distress, or would join them on camping trips in the Flinders Ranges. Mary and Monica McKee formed a long friendship through working together in house duties but also through their weekly outing, during the football season, to barrack for Glenelg. They paid their membership fees in order to obtain a seat, dressed in black and gold, and at home watched the replay.

Observant boarders at Angas Street or Springfield could pinpoint friendships. They could tell you that Sister Paul and Mother Michael, for example, were great friends, as were Sisters Gertrude and Francis, whose love and humour and laughter were visible. Sisters Peter Byrne, Philomena Moroney and Monica Gallivan gave one new student at Henley Beach a warm-hearted glimpse into their community lives with their laughter, informality, and ease at relating. She received a sense of their really being friends, despite the wide range in age between them. Students could also attribute, perhaps unfairly at times, less than goodwill to others, such as on the basis of competition for the most talented music pupils.

Life in smaller country communities could also be enriching through the working together, praying and playing together, holidaying together. The quality of life in the smaller convents was, however, much more a factor of compatibility of personalities than it was in larger communities, where numbers gave a greater choice of more intimate association.

Some friendships began in the novitiate and survived until death – and beyond. A classic example of this was between Rose Hill and Margaret McMahon, both Mount Gambierites. Each of these sisters ended up in the infirmary in Angas Street, when well in their eighties. Ever energetic, though ill from cancer, Margaret decided they would not vegetate, and so drew up a daily timetable for them to follow. Rose was delighted. At 10 a.m. they took their exercise by walking the full length of the upstairs balcony and back. Then came morning tea, followed by a sing-a-long of all the songs they could remember. Midday prayers, lunch, siesta, a game of scrabble, afternoon tea, and spiritual reading (out loud to each other), and another walk along the balcony took them up to about 4 p.m. Then came a pre-dinner stout before the evening meal.

Rose died in 1969 and Margaret in 1975. Although 'different as chalk from cheese', they had been great friends all their religious lives, and had enjoyed

a wide variety of simple activities together. Two other stalwarts who remained friends until their death were Sisters Bernard Ryder and Berchmans Lennox. The dying Berchmans, then nearly blind, said to Bernard she would meet her soon for 'Heaven wouldn't be Heaven without you.'

Some of the friendships exhibited among the sisters had, in fact, already begun in pre-convent days. Adelaide is a comparatively small city still. Many of the entrants into the community already knew each other before entry as well as many sisters who had been their teachers and, not infrequently, their friends. A high percentage of entrants had been boarders. The situation was even more intense in the smaller and rural community of Mount Gambier. Not only did the members know one another almost all their lives, and know their families as well, but the wider civic and church community knew the sisters. Sisters accompanying well-known identities like Immaculata Coffey – 'Sister Mac' – on a walk down town soon found that you got nowhere very fast.

Stability of community was a factor in promoting friendship within the traditional model of living and working together. Reminiscing about days together in the novitiate or in such and such a community has a powerful effect in keeping a group friendship alive when the group no longer lives together. As members age, the bonds seem to get stronger, and telling stories plays an important and enjoyable role. On the other hand, when a sister was changed frequently, as one was eight times within nine years, such permanency of bonding was more difficult to attain. The amalgamation of the Mount Gambier congregation with the Adelaide congregation in 1941 made an exceptionally severe rent in the fabric of companionship within the former, much smaller group, which had a feeling of being swamped by the larger unit. For those who had lived a great part of their religious life in a small and fairly isolated group, this was the equivalent of a death, and grieving rather than happy reminiscing could become the order of the day. It took some time for this grieving to be understood and empathised with generally.

Within a friendly communal environment, solidarity could be built, skills of survival and of hospitality learnt, and vision retained by the less stalwart, through alliances formed. This could be even more so when, sometimes, there was bonding together in adversity. Unconscious – and sometimes conscious – coalitions could be formed against over-dominating superiors or restricting regulations. Mount Gambier was always a place of companionship for the sisters who had entered there, 'home' to those living in the branch houses of Millicent and Naracoorte. However, after the amalgamation and much interchange of personnel, the country town could seem isolated to women who had entered in Adelaide and who could now normally return there only once every two years. Because of the size of the community at the

Mount, and the amount of work to be done in both day and boarding school, there were always a number of younger sisters on the staff. Creative ways of surviving overwork or rigid structures were found, and personal links became firmer in the process.

#### CARE OF AGED SISTERS

The sisters' care for one another as they aged shows the strength of community relationships. Elderly sisters had always remained within the convent households, often becoming something of an icon around the school and parish. When they became very frail, they would retire to the mother house infirmary. In 1962, a twenty-bed hospital was licensed at Angas Street Convent. Sister M. Carmel was 'loaned' by the Melbourne Mercies to set it up and run it while Sisters Ruth Egar and Patricia Kenny trained as nurses at the Mercy hospital in Melbourne.

This arrangement lasted until the early 1970s, when the congregation bought into the Knights of the Southern Cross retirement village in North Plympton, Adelaide, acquiring the use of ten hostel and/or nursing beds in perpetuity. Four older sisters volunteered to move to the hostel. They were Margaret Holmes, Teresita Juncken, and Rita McIntyre, together with Brigid Walsh who lived in the independent unit section. They moved from hostel to nursing home as they aged.<sup>20</sup>

The care of the aged remained an ongoing issue on account of the developing imbalance of ages throughout the congregation. The needs of individual sisters varied and the congregation therefore tried to allow great flexibility in individual retirement plans. Many of those sisters who lived at the hostel found they were able to continue their ministry of Mercy among the other residents there. On the other hand, several who moved into the nursing home found the adjustment much more difficult. Finally, in the mid-1980s, it was decided to register the convent at Angas Street as a hostel, and to admit those who required greater nursing care to the nursing section of the Sisters of St Joseph's establishment at Tappeiner Court. The sisters at Plympton and later at Tappeiner Court were attached to a Mercy community in Adelaide, which had particular care for them, provided for their special needs, and brought them home for visits and celebrations.<sup>21</sup>

#### PARTNERSHIP IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH <sup>22</sup>

Throughout their history, there was strength and sustenance coming, also, from the sense of being a vital part of the church's enterprise. This was

especially so in Australia, where the bishops had made the Catholic school – particularly the parish primary school – the central focus of their missionary thrust. The experience of the South Australian Mercies was essentially one of such partnership. As with other communities of religious women, they played a seemingly indispensable role in the establishment and growth of the Australian Catholic Church. They were very active agents in both the spiritual and more material undertakings of the church in which they willingly and enthusiastically invested their energy, their talents, and their money.

The rest of the church – cleric and lay – was very happy to let them do so. Apart from the ongoing contribution of their schools and other works, the Adelaide Mercies were extremely generous in distributing what were really their own finances among their apostolic works. When, on Sunday, 10th September, 1961, at the laying of the foundation stone for new school rooms at Parkside, Monsignor Bayard thanked the Sisters of Mercy, he also revealed that during the last seventy years they had not asked the parish for money.<sup>23</sup> The same was said on other occasions and in other parishes.<sup>24</sup>

The sisters themselves were also happy to be so generous. They tended to accept the unconscious sexism within church structures, partly because of the unconsciousness of the pre-feminist age, but also because of the values they espoused. They were viewed as – and could see themselves as – ‘spiritual mothers’ within the local churches, or as midwives of an age-old church in a new land. This carried with it all the self-sacrificing connotations of motherhood of the era.

Partnership in church was not without its inequalities. In the early years, the sisters were expected to build and maintain their own institutions, even the parish school. Yet the bishop and the parish priest, to a lesser degree, held final jurisdiction over what went on in the institution. This could lead to difficulties, and did in South Australia, as in the reluctance to accept and help the sisters shown by the first parish priests in Mount Gambier, in the 1880s; the hasty handing over of the orphanage at Goodwood in 1890; or the displeasure of Archbishop Spence towards Mothers Clare and Cecilia in the 1910s. And there are stories of other less public complications at more local levels.

Nevertheless, the women were usually able to negotiate their way successfully out of uncomfortable situations. Although they were dependent for much on the male clerical system, they also had real independence as a system of their own, with papal approbation.<sup>25</sup> They possessed some public status conferred by the nature of their religious profession, by their title, and by their distinctive dress and way of living. They could vote with their feet, as they had done in Argentina, where one very significant factor in the decision to depart had been the lack of support – and the actual opposition – from some of the clergy, together with a benevolent but powerless archbishop.



*Partnership in church – Angas Street, Cloisters. Archbishop James Gleeson with Srs Patricia Fox and Anne Gregory*



*Para Hills West community, celebrating Easter at Elizabeth convent, 1985. Sr Margaret Holmes (second from left) resident at Plympton Hostel was linked with Para Hills community*

As the years of change led to questioning of much in their own way of life and to a greater awareness of sexism in church as well as society, new questions arose about the ecclesial partnership. The more immediate post-Vatican II years constituted an era when it initially seemed appropriate to hand as many of their institutions over to the central church authorities, in an effort to be more truly 'church' themselves, more deeply immersed in the reality of the communities of church and of the world. This did not always prove appropriate, given their own responsibility towards the works they had established and maintained for so long. The governance of Mercedes College proved a case in point. In other instances, declining numbers and individual sisters' moves into new ministries during the 1970s and 1980s led to a more permanent relinquishment.

Fresh questions continued to surface about their relationship to church and what it meant to be partners in mission. A study on religious in the United States in the early 1990s showed a lowered respect for the magisterial authority of the church, yet a continued desire to be ecclesial.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, there was urgent questioning among the South Australian Mercies. There was a growing awareness of the patriarchal nature of church ideologies and structures per se, rather than attributing, as formerly, difficulties to the vagaries of individual clerics. The 1970s and beyond saw the continuing confusion necessarily accompanying the efforts to create a new paradigm.

Among the questions being asked were how to be courageous enough to find new ways of relating to church, of 'being church'; how to maintain openness in the face of a still patriarchal church and, in fact, an increasing conservatism among co-parishioners and Roman authorities; and how to change these limiting structures and situations. And how might they cope with the fears accompanying the working in new roles within their own institutions, or outside of those institutions, or even outside of church agencies?<sup>27</sup> There was the issue of how to be less private about a way of life which was counter-cultural but really for all Christians. Were they, in truth, part of the new lay involvement in the church?

The issue concerning their status as, or involvement with, lay people in the church was not entirely new. The sisters had always been cognisant of their essentially lay status within the church. This had been no problem.

In their history of ecclesial partnership, there has been the recurrent theme of sisters forming networks of support with parents of children and with other lay people. It was a lively feature of Catherine McAuley's founding strategies. For the sisters in South Australia, as elsewhere, the mothers and other laywomen were especially significant in their fundraising efforts; the fathers and other laymen proffered expertise in business, legal, medical and other matters, and helped with the maintenance of buildings and grounds. Later, the networks extended to willing staff, as lay men and women in their

institutions and in their central administration were employed more and more.

On the whole, the patterns of relationship within their ministries and their partnerships within church were a source of a real and mutual enrichment, even if a genuine role in the decision-making power of the church's structures continued to be denied them, even if the church was not yet that 'discipleship of equals'<sup>28</sup> which they might have wished it to be.

### S U S P I C I O N   O F   F R I E N D S H I P

Until the 1970s or even later, the existential reality of companionship and friendship patterns, both within and without the community, had been largely accompanied by a lack of reflection on their nature, a 'vast unconsciousness'<sup>29</sup>. Some of the strength of novitiate ties, for instance, came from learning to live creatively together despite the restrictions and hardships of initial formation procedures. On the other hand, the mood of suspicion – in some periods, at least, if not all – about what were termed 'particular friendships' or 'private parties' could make some novices and younger women wary of investing themselves in too much intimacy. This may have embodied a genuine realization that exclusive rather than inclusive friendships – as also friendships of much dependency – could perpetuate immaturity. Yet there seems to have been less cognisance that growth is a process. What might seem as a ban on friendship in general could make for great loneliness. Nevertheless, when the impositions of novitiate years were finally lifted and sisters moved out into the wider community life, many relationships found they had survived and could then blossom.

Not all Novice Mistresses were as concerned with particular friendships as were others. Some made no attempt to destroy friendships but actually encouraged them. One former university student was allowed visits from young men who had been her co-students. One other young sister was told by Mother Dolores (as Provincial) to talk to one of her friends during silence time, if she felt she needed it. Even when the rhetoric was especially strong, some novices were able to dismiss it more easily than others. They could see that everyone had friends, even their Novice Mistress or their Mother Superior. Everyone knew that Mother Cecilia and Mother Columba were friends, that Sister Margaret Mary Kenny or Mother Dolores had special friends. They could see that women whom they respected had warm relationships with men, especially priests, reminiscent of the sensitive and supportive companionship that the records indicate was very much part of the spiritual flowering of women in an earlier age.

The state of 'vast unconsciousness' persisted until very recent years. There had been little help to resolve these ambiguities in practice and theory, and

the fear of sexuality or the fascination with power which could underlie them. The words of Jesus in the New Testament about friends and about the nature of service and power did not seem to be followed through to a more positive and realistic kind of reflection on the human nature of friendships within religious life. Talk of 'spiritual friendship' could be seen as a compromise.

One factor operating against this kind of reflection was the family metaphor on which traditional community living was based. The sister in charge (the Superior) was called Mother, and there was a strict order of seniority within the members. Close bonds often did develop between the superior and members, but sometimes it was not a friendship between equals, but rather a mother – daughter relationship. The relationship did not always progress beyond this. Mutuality and maturity were not fostered by such role stereotypes and the resultant inequality. The maternal symbolism was strong and ingrained. The removal of differentiating titles and a less rigid adherence to order in the early 1970s did not make for immediate equality within relations but gradually helped towards a more genuine reciprocation. The role of superior had not been an easy one, and placed on the encumbent the onerous task of seeing that the rule was being obeyed. The appointment, in the 1970s, of some younger women in charge of local communities with a different perception of their role was a freeing step.

#### CONTROL A MAJOR FEATURE OF PRE-VATICAN II RELIGIOUS LIFE

In traditional religious life, there had developed a complex and hierarchical structure seemingly aimed at maintaining order and efficiency as much as at developing the uniquely personal inner life of the individual and the pastoral energy of the group. There was what has been termed 'The Great Repression of the Twentieth Century',<sup>30</sup> wherein the influence of church law, especially after the codification of 1917, made for a somewhat rigid uniformity of structures and procedures. Uniform criteria were established for the approval of constitutions; a five-yearly and extremely detailed report was required from the highest superior of an order or congregation; the superior possessed personal authority through her status or role. For religious women of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of common law, observance of church law – couched in the style of Roman law – meant, perhaps, stricter adherence to the letter of the law than the authors might have intended. Convents provided an all-woman context, but the major rules of the game were largely externally and male defined.

Details governing behaviour had multiplied over time within the orders themselves. There seems to have been a real loss of simplicity and flexibility

in the era around the mid-twentieth century. Different orders were affected to greater or lesser extent, but all were touched to some degree. Despite the flexibility of their origins, the Australian Mercies did not escape the current dysfunction of the institutions of professional religious life. Again, the impact on Mercy communities in different parts of the continent varied. Though following a common rule and fundamentally possessing the same spirit, local groups had their own local histories and their own local personalities. The impression is that the Adelaide Mercies had escaped some of the worst features of this rigid institutionalism, but there is enough evidence to show that an ethic of control operated within them as elsewhere.

According to ethicist Sharon Welch's analysis of the situation when control is the dominant ethos of operation, effective and immediate action to resolve problems or to achieve desired ends becomes the deciding factor. Those in power control the rest, for the sake of the common good and often with the best of intentions. The powerful are dominant over the weak, they know what is good for the weak even if the weak are not in favour of the action. The ends may be worthy but so important is apparent success that the use of violence can be seen as unavoidable, if deplorable.<sup>31</sup>

While communities of religious women never succumbed totally to this ethic, which pervaded – and pervades – our culture, there seems little doubt that they were negatively influenced in that direction. Efficiency and external achievement did, at times, assume undue proportions in a group dedicated to following the way of Jesus, the supreme failure who taught another meaning of success. There is no evidence of physical violence within the convent walls, but psychological violence can be very subtle and less readily recognized. There was, in practice, many of the characteristics of a hierarchy of domination rather than a partnership of equality: pope over all; bishops and priests over sisters; sisters over laity, especially children; choir sisters over lay sisters; superiors over other members. When an institution becomes a total institution, as pre-Vatican II religious life was, an institution through which the individual was almost totally immersed into a system of beliefs and practices, it becomes extremely difficult for an individual to make personal choices in freedom. What was needed were prophetic people and prophetic movements to bring into question what have been called 'the royal arrangements'.<sup>32</sup>

There was, in fact, little overt questioning, among the Adelaide Mercies as elsewhere, of the rule and customs of the religious community. The new initiate discovered early that one did not question either doctrine or procedure. There was control through small things as much as through the larger framework of religious life. Members fairly meticulously adhered to the rule and constitutions. The Adelaide Visitation Books, in which the examining Reverend Mother wrote her recommendations to the local



*Two life-long friends, Sr Margaret Coffey (L) and Martha Moloney*

community, show how much emphasis was put on keeping the rule in minor details. The sisters in one community were cautioned, for instance, to wear their aprons when serving at meals in the refectory.

The rule of silence was very controlling, as was also the lack of free time. Those hours not filled with ministerial duties, meals, and sleep were largely taken up with prayer and other spiritual activity. Even the nightly hour of recreation was regulated as to time and place and, often, manner of attendance.

Levels of membership also made for segregation. The daily programme and other differentiating marks of lay sisters promoted separation. The white apron of the lay sisters made some of the sisters in house duties feel second class citizens. It was only in 1927 that Mother Clare Murphy petitioned Rome for its abolition, on the grounds that it caused 'some unpleasantness'. She wrote that 'our country was very democratic' and against class distinctions.<sup>33</sup> It was several decades later before novices and temporarily professed sisters were permitted to talk freely to fully professed sisters. Any woman who left the community did so in a cloak of secrecy, and no mention was made of her departure. Subsequent contact was actively discouraged.

Superiors had a great amount of control over the daily personal life of the member. Letters to and from family and friends were – or could be – read by the sister with the appropriate authority. Some structures were, to a contemporary mentality, quite punishing. Permissions for anything outside of what was laid down in the rule as common had to be requested from the superior. When approaching the higher superior – or the novice mistress for novices – to discuss a matter or make a request, the sisters were expected to kneel while doing so.

The wearing of religious dress, commonly called 'the habit', was a powerful formula for gaining conformity.<sup>34</sup> For most orders, the dress itself was similar to the black dress of widows, but the headgear had more mediaeval origins. The traditionally clothed nun wore a covering over her forehead, and the veil was worn over this. While it was distinctive of the nun, it was not greatly unusual in a society where all women wore long dresses and all women with some status wore a headdress of some kind. Medieval nuns wore long trains, wide sleeves and ceremonial cloaks, as did other upper class women. Like most nineteenth century foundations who had received papal approval, the Mercies adopted this kind of habit. However, by early in the next century, when women's dress in general was simplifying, the religious habit was becoming more and more an anachronism. Yet the symbolism remained extremely strong and embedded in the group psyche. The religious habit and the central values of religious life were wellnigh equated.

The desirable overhaul of dress came through small incremental changes.

Pope Pius XII had given the impetus in the 1950s by telling religious women they should modify their garb so as to be more practically attired for the works and life of their times. Modifications were made only very slowly by the women themselves, and in very gradual steps, as the following Adelaide Mercy items show. The long train on the back hem of the dress was eliminated in 1952. The habit was made of lighter material and was two and a half inches off the ground. Visitation veils (worn when travelling outside the convent complex) were dispensed with. On 21st November of the following year, at the inaugural Mass at Springfield, the sisters wore soft black guimps instead of their traditional starched white ones.<sup>35</sup> On the feast of Our Lady of Mercy of the year after that, 1954, the outer sleeves (detachable wide sleeves worn over more closely fitting inner ones) were dispensed with. In 1963, white habits to supplement the customary black were introduced. In 1968, short sleeves were permissible in the black habit.<sup>36</sup> Small steps taken in almost two decades!

These and later more drastic alterations were accompanied by relief for some, pain for others, and for most, if not all, some degree of unease at least. When Sister Patricia Kenny was studying for a social work degree at Adelaide University in 1969 – the first sister to do so – and she was asked by her department not to wear her religious habit, she found that quite a few of the older sisters at Angas Street could not look at or talk to her while in civilian dress. All these emotions were also experienced by Catholics watching what was happening. Religious garb was tied up with the very definition of the nun's identity together with that of the cleric or lay person. The religious dress was a sign that this woman was, in a presumably total manner, dedicated to God, and so, was also unavailable, primarily sexually, but also with respect to many facets of normal human interaction, including familial contacts.

The rules concerning enclosure had a special effect on ease of relationships. Enclosure had a very long history in religious institutions, especially female. It was instigated by male ecclesiastics, without consultation with the nuns, and had several more or less valid origins – political, economic, and social as much as spiritual. These included regulations to ensure stability and to reduce wanderlust. There were precautions also to abolish every possibility of lasciviousness and so to safeguard the chastity of the nuns and of the men who had dealings with them. Stricter legislation and detailed rules evolved over the centuries.<sup>37</sup>

Catherine McAuley had successfully rejected the essence of enclosure but the situation in her time was ambiguous, and certain canonical restrictions had to be retained even for active orders such as hers. There developed a rhetoric about the spirit of enclosure in an attempt to accommodate the legislation even when it hindered works. How seriously the Adelaide Mercies took the rhetoric about the spirit of enclosure, at least at one period, can be

gauged from their decision to adopt the then custom of the Mother House, Baggot Street, concerning visits of secular friends to the Infirmary. 'When danger of death is manifest, the members of the sick Sister's immediate family may be admitted to see her, but seldom as possible'.<sup>38</sup>

Younger members were a special focus of control. Some superiors of branch houses saw their role as one of training younger sisters in the right way to live religious life. 'Novices' or 'younger sisters' were expected to be respectful of 'senior sisters' and rarely to question their judgment. When one 'senior novice' of the 1920s<sup>39</sup> told her novice mistress, Mother Cecilia Cunningham, of a decision she and her companion novices had reached, Cecilia's response was typical of the time. 'Novices do not decide'. One young sister<sup>40</sup> of a later period was given charge of the first grade in the school 'to teach her humility'. There were varying reactions, of course, to all this emphasis on training in how to be a 'good religious'. Some entered without too many things to psychologically project onto the institution as they grew towards a maturer acceptance of the necessary and strengthening aspects of authority and order. Some, more easily than others, could adapt and take much of it with a healthy grain of salt. For others it was more crippling. For those that survived, within and without the community, most grew through, if not wholly because of, it.

#### **'DANGEROUS MEMORIES' AND AN ETHOS OF RISK**

There always survived within the Adelaide Mercies, as we have seen, enough 'dangerous memories' to encourage an alternative ethos to that of control. In comparison with some of the other Australian Mercy groups, they were always much less regimented. Some younger sisters of the 1960s, studying in other States, found it difficult to conform to what they saw as structures of a previous era. Without articulating it very clearly, the Adelaide Mercies did, in truth, begin to operate more and more fearlessly within an 'ethic of risk'.<sup>41</sup> There were always some surviving group memories of risks taken by their predecessors; these encouraged the sisters of the 1960s and later decades to create their own 'dangerous memories' for the generations that might follow.

The element of risk lay very deeply imbedded in their Argentinian – Australian founding story. It was one of the first stories which they heard on entry and was often repeated. It was kept alive till relatively recently by the living presence of elderly Argentinian sisters like Cecilia Cunningham and Margaret Mary Kenny.<sup>42</sup> It was a story where the participants were willing to be vulnerable as well as strong. It was a story where the definition of responsible action did not rest on the exercise of power or control over others, and

did not necessarily have to result in great material success. It was a story where it seemed that the women involved had to claim their own power, make their own decision, and move on despite the pain involved.

There was risk, too, in spending all the money they had on buying their first convent in Angas Street, and in buying one in Mount Gambier without any money at all. As also in spending, over the earlier years, the several legacies received from families of the sisters – including the very large inheritance of Cecilia Cunningham – to expand the works of the Institute. For the community at Mount Gambier, especially, there was also the story of the return of the six to Buenos Aires. That entailed great courage and risk, to go back to somewhere from which they had fled only ten years previously, to set about the healing of the rupture caused by their previous departure, and to build again the Mercy Institute. Yet, in all these risks, there was courage but not foolhardiness. There was grief, possibly some anger, in the case of departure from Argentina, and the later return by some, but there was also an ability to move from the grief into the act of reconstruction. There was a willingness to take risks that would provide foundations for the future.

The collective telling of stories is potent in keeping alive such dangerous memories, and nowhere more so in the memories of certain women in the community. Many of the sisters of the foundation and consolidation years were clearly possessed of much freedom and integrity, able to live happily and creatively within a rule and structure which they had to be seen publicly to honour. Honour it they did, in essence, but with a flexibility which set them apart. On the whole, most of the women were themselves. They never came out, as one observer expressed it, like peas in a pod – even after a very strict novitiate. Or to change the metaphor, they did not all toe the party line.

There were images of strong women in scripture that assuredly appealed through their freedom to go against the tide of the time. There were the stories of women saints, also, who gave their lives, literally or figuratively, for what they believed and the God they loved. They were all subjects of meditation and food for the spirit.

On the more immediate level of existence, several names keep recurring in the Mercy history during the first half of the twentieth century, as women who possessed a certain freedom and showed it in their behaviour. Sisters Peter Byrne, Vincent Teisseire, Carmel Bourke, Ignatius Kelly, Teresa Dunlevie, and Brigid Walsh are among them. All of them kept the rules when they had to, but were able to live enterprisingly within them. Some of them may have had to retain their individuality by becoming unique characters. Sister Margaret McMahon of Mount Gambier was a striking instance of this type. She was eccentric to the point of being an 'original'. When things got too much for her, she would go rowing on the lake. Vincent Teisseire loved ocean cruises and took two of them for her sabbatical – the first around the

Pacific, the second to the USA – an unusual choice for a nun, Ignatius Kelly always wore her Port Adelaide football badge under her guimp. Three other Kelly sisters, Rose, Claude, and Angela (no relation to Ignatius Kelly) were 'real personalities', as well as friends. They had been milliners before entry, after which they taught.

Sister Colette O'Loughlin was a rough diamond, abrasive, with high energy but a heart of gold. If she believed deeply in a person or a vision, she worked at it and saw it through. In a few words, she was faithful and courageous. She had a humanness and a friendliness that drew people to her. Sometimes, though, she could be quite authoritarian. On the other hand, Sister Catherine Shevlin, it was claimed, preserved her sanity by living 'with the faeries' a bit. There is a delightful vignette illustrating these two very dissimilar personalities. When Catherine was in charge of the dining room at Mount Gambier, one of Colette's *bêtes noires* was Catherine's failure to put the butter back in the fridge. Catherine claimed that it had never been done in Mount Gambier 'in Mother Liguori's day'. Colette, as convent superior, was dressing her down one morning, when Catherine, container of Crispies in one hand and of Rice Bubbles in the other, flung each away to the tune of 'Whoops-à-la and away she goes' – one of Margaret McMahon's favourite concert items. Vincent Teisseire had peculiar dreams, no doubt as a way of release. There was a certain sadness in Vincent's personality; life seemed somewhat complex for her. Her unconscious must have helped her live with that complexity. She often dreamt of persons walking along with their head under their arm. Or she had amusing dreams such as the one where Sister X – a staid and 'proper' nun – lost her corsets in the classroom, and fell off the rostrum to hide them.<sup>43</sup>

Some sisters seemed especially to have such a great freedom within themselves that they could adapt comfortably, without feeling either restrained or overwhelmed. Elizabeth Miller was especially companionable and non-controlling, a friend to younger sisters in teacher training. Elizabeth and Carmel Bourke had been friends since their teacher training days. In 1938, they took part in an Ecumenical Sunday of the Air religious programme on radio 5CL, a 'very daring venture' for the era.<sup>44</sup> Michael Kain was a big-hearted, human, real woman, who gave some younger sisters sanity, others hope. Boarders may not have enjoyed her long tirades against misbehaviour, but they found they were kept in touch with world events through her long petitions before each decade of the Rosary daily. Carmel Bourke, on the provincial council in the 1960s, could say that she and her peers had run things the way they had wanted; now, it was time to let the younger ones have their say. Both Carmel and Brigid, as teachers at Angas Street, would make sure that younger sisters accompanied their classes on outings to the theatre, for example, or on geography excursions. They used the existing structures



*Gathering after breakfast at Goodwood for Sr M. Bernard Ryder's Jubilee, 1960. Sr Bernard is sixth from left, front row.*



*Two Silver Jubilarians – Srs Veronica Courtney and Stephanie Cashel and two Golden Jubilarians – Srs Martha Keane and Benedict Howard, 1975*



*Golden Jubilarian Sr Elsie Radford (R) with Sr Anastasia Fricker, 1986*

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to widen the experience of these women, while, at the same time, they kept the letter of the law which prohibited such things as eating in public places. As the visionary largely behind the progressiveness of Mother Dolores Barry in her early moves during the 1960s to give sisters higher education, Carmel had a significant impact. Dolores herself had shown great strength and courage in her efforts to educate the sisters.

The willingness to go along with a movement towards transformation became more and more evident, beginning with the 1960s. Outside events were prompting changes. A number of minor but significant alterations occurred in the devotional lives of the sisters. Grace was said in English, not the traditional Latin, for the first time on Sunday, 7th February, 1960. The Angelus prayer was recited in English on Sunday 28th of the same month. Since both these prayers were recited three times daily, they were accompanied by a definite if as yet intangible change in consciousness. On 26th July of that year, there was the newly introduced rite of the Dialogue Mass, together with the singing of the Gelineau Psalms. On 14th August, Mass was televised for the first time in Adelaide from the Cathedral. On 16th July of the following year, 1961, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the customary church cloaks – long white or cream cloaks worn over the habit at Mass or other special eucharistic occasions – were discarded.

Mother Cecily (Claire) Lynch, as Novice Mistress (1954-1962) and then as Mother Provincial (1962-1972) was particularly noted for her ability to let things happen. She may not always have personally chosen what was taking place, but her faith and her trust in others overcame her innate impulse for continuity. At a time when the extremely conservative theologian Rodriguez was still an indispensable part of the novitiate programme of spiritual study, Cecily allowed the novices to study layman Frank Sheed's *Theology and Sanity*, an influential and liberating text for that era.

A growing understanding of the renewal movement taking place also made change easier, and its effects a little less confusing. The 1960s were years of wider contacts with other communities of religious women, when experiences and insights could be shared. In August, 1960, for example, Mothers Dolores, Carmel, and Cecily motored to Canberra to attend a general chapter of the Australian Union of Sisters of Mercy<sup>45</sup> and, on the way, stayed for two nights each at Mercy convents in Bendigo and Albury. In 1965, Cecily, now Mother Provincial, and Dolores went to Perth for a Congress of Religious Sisters.

In 1968-9, there took place a special general chapter, in two sessions a year apart, as mandated by Vatican authorities in response to the Council's call to the renewal of religious life. Together with the provincial chapter of 1968, the special chapter and its reflections formed a watershed in the growth towards a more contemporary understanding of their own Mercy way of life

and of its relationship to their society and culture. The months of preparation, the debate during the lengthy sessions, and the decisions reached all heralded profound changes.

A period of deconstruction followed, the urgency of which stemmed from the abuses of the past as also from changes in the social environment. There was much excitement and great pain. There were internal tensions and confusion, as there were far-reaching decisions about structures and praxis. Cecily (Claire) Lynch was provincial during the beginning of this period, and her freedom to allow things to happen proved a valuable quality. The years ahead were to be exhilarating and painful.

#### CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP OF THE 1970s AND 1980s

##### **'Adelaide always one step ahead . . .'**

It was during the next two decades, the 1970s and 1980s, that the Adelaide Mercies most clearly revealed to the rest of the Mercy world their capacity for leadership in adaptation and renewal. It was largely their record during these two decades that gave validity to the remark of a Parramatta Mercy: 'You know how Adelaide was always one step ahead of the rest of us'.<sup>46</sup>

The leadership during the 1970s passed to a new and charismatic breed of younger women. In late 1972, Monica Marks was elected provincial, a position she held for the rest of the decade. The 1980s saw the successive election of Patricia Fox and Patricia Pak Poy. All three were assisted by able councils which included other visionary women<sup>47</sup>. Councils were becoming more significant than hitherto in the central governance of the group, as the concept of team leadership evolved. This concept was accepted more and more in theory and in practice and in expectations of the members.

A 1992 study on religious in the United States, *Future of Religious Orders in the United States*, indicated that outstanding women leaders were extremely active in securing the commitment of the group to appropriate actions or decisions. They used their positional and personal power to influence outcomes but not at the cost of diminished sharing of power in the group. They encouraged participation, they shared power and information, they enhanced others' self-worth, and energized them. They showed signs of spiritual sensitivity. They spent time persuading people and thought of power as resources to be shared and used to attain group goals. They had spiritual dynamism and consensual authority, and focused on strategy over maintenance.<sup>48</sup>

This appears to be a fairly accurate profile of the type of leadership that now came into positions of authority within the Adelaide Mercies. In general, there was a vigorous and illuminative leadership. With a great love

of the Mercy heritage and charism, and the advantage of a more profound theological and spiritual formation obtained at a relatively early age, the successive leaders were women who could move the group through the pitfalls of deconstruction into a new way of exercising authority.

Overall, the notion of 'blind obedience' no longer held. There were attempts to allow and to encourage individual members to participate in decision-making that affected their lives. The old notion of God speaking through the superior, no matter how inept she might be and unwise her decision, was superseded by a wider vision of how the divine will is made manifest. As the revised Australian Mercy constitutions finally put it, God spoke through many agencies: through sources available to every Christian, such as the Scriptures, our faith tradition, the teachings of the church, the events of our lives, and the signs of our times. For those who belonged to a community, the sources also included their rules and constitutions, the words and actions of other members, the guidance of their leaders, the ministerial and other choices made by the community. The ultimate task of leadership was to set the context for both individual and community to prayerfully discern from all these human mediations, what would be most conducive to growth. Authority was thus being transferred to the membership, and followership was being interpreted in an active rather than passive sense.

This demanded skills for engaging in participative and consensual processes. A number of consultants in group dynamics were engaged at various times to help the sisters develop such skills. Courses undertaken through sabbaticals also were formative. The 1971-2 Adelaide chapter recommended that every sister be enabled to have a sabbatical; both administrators and members took this seriously as a means of personal and professional self-development. Theological and spiritual courses helped the women to move to new understandings and to ground their visions of a new way of living and working together.

This era of the 1970s and 1980s was also an era of great change in society. It was becoming clear that Western culture was undergoing a mighty paradigm shift. The re-introduction of ancient techniques, including those from eastern cultures, and the development of modern technologies were leading to a new threshold in consciousness, a tremendous leap of understanding in so many areas. For the sisters there was an exciting, if somewhat bewildering, choice of opportunities for personal and spiritual growth, and for social action. The notion of structural or systemic injustice was being explored with passion, and was having a profound influence in the ongoing interpretation of the charism of Mercy.

The breakdown of corporate ministries that occurred at this time necessitated attempts to develop a sense of corporate mission and a sacramentalization of relatedness. The theme of 'unity in diversity' emerged



*Srs Monica McKee and Mary Marra with Glenelg Football Club member, 1984*



*Birthday celebration: L to R, standing: Srs Elizabeth Miller, Martina King, Gerard Barrett, Joan Gillen. Sitting: Srs Pauline Costello, Marie Nien and her mother, 1987*

strongly. There were changes in definitions of community and of how to belong. While there was hostility expressed on several public occasions – and, no doubt, on many private ones – there was overall a move to a more friendly atmosphere, a return to the earlier founding ethos though this time in a more democratic style.

The ability to name problems publicly was evident at the Assembly at Goodwood in 1975, for example. Composures might have been shaken, but honesty and sincerity of purpose – and Catherine McAuley's legacy of union among members – seems to have prevailed in the long run. Patricia Fox's first talk as congregational superior<sup>49</sup> spoke of trust in one another. In September, 1983, at a plenary gathering to share the fruits of regional meetings, a reconciliation celebration took place in the chapel at Angas Street, an attempt to heal past and present hurts. Networks of members with common ministerial interests or of friendship circles began to emerge as new structures of association, a move that intensified in the 1990s.

In many ways, utopian qualities were demanded of those in authority during the 1970s and 1980s, though ultimately more realism succeeded. Gradually, too, there grew the perception that leadership belongs to all. The new emphasis on assemblies of various kinds gave scope for sisters to contribute old and new skills. Previously, most could have exercised leadership only within their ministry, if there. Now, it was becoming apparent, especially in the 1990s, that all could take up the challenge of leadership within the group, in various ways.<sup>50</sup>

These ways included skills for the negotiation of arguments and arrival at communal decisions; for the development of strategies of mutual exchange and networking and the building of communities of shared power; for the acquisition of techniques of consciousness raising, especially concerning social issues and how their own organisational culture was dysfunctional with the changing environment. There was, also, the exploration of the gospel concept of authority as reflected in notions of partnership, empowerment, and engagement. There was a search for the presence of the feminine in its many aspects. This slowly led to the envisaging of the divine with a new face, and the expression of this in liturgical celebration together. The potency of symbols in giving a logic to the Mercy shared life became highlighted. Feminine and holistic symbols and values were more and more appreciated, and sisters with talents in this respect were able to give a special kind of leadership.

Gradually, the Adelaide Mercies were forming a more autonomous and self-determining, more mature community, while remaining mindful of the need for dependence and interdependence within the whole human community. This led to the need for re-definition of the role of central authority, a re-definition that was ongoing. A vital concern bequeathed to the administrations of the 1990s<sup>51</sup> was how to involve,

appropriately, as many members as possible in the communal life of the group.

The Chapter at the end of 1994 was seen as a particularly participative and holistic gathering. These qualities were the culmination of a consistent effort over the preceding decades. Principles to shape chapter processes had been indirectly formed. A chapter was seen as a sacred moment in the group quest for the sacred, hence it allowed for processes that could be spirit-filled: processes of contemplation, discernment, reconciliation, prophecy, and celebration. It allowed for the symbolic aspects of group life – ritualising, story-telling, the feeling and aesthetic dimensions of life – to be expressed in varied ways, including dance, song, art, photography, and movement. It allowed, too, for the expression of the feminine in both thought patterns and structures. Embodiment was recognised as a fundamental source of self-empowerment.

The model of association was the friendship model, based on mutuality and non-hierarchical leadership, with interconnectedness being acknowledged as both a value and a strategy. The guiding theology was one of liberation. Each member could equally claim and exercise her own power and authority. While the reality certainly fell short of these ideals, it was much more obvious that the level of interest and trust in decision-taking had become stronger, that individuals could offer contrary views with respect, and that friendship was a genuine value within the group. As the 1994 Chapter Statement put it, the sisters were able to acknowledge that there was 'tension between individualism and communitarian values', but also that they rejoiced in 'friendship in sisterhood' and longed for it to be 'stronger and more sustaining'.

## CHANGES IN LOCAL COMMUNITY STRUCTURES

New questions were also surfacing about the more intimate patterns of association within the group.<sup>52</sup> One of the major shifts that occurred was in community living, as new forms of residential community were born. This shift was accompanied by much transitional confusion. But it was a necessary transition in a movement from dependence through independence to interdependence.

Questions were asked. 'Who is my community? What process is appropriate for determining its composition? What does the Vow of Obedience now mean for me? What values do I need to hold in common with the other members? What are the patterns of living that support my Mercy ministry, that bring me closer to life struggles of those with whom I work?' These considerations were surfacing within the group, which struggled to find answers.



*Playing tennis during Spiritual  
Renewal period, 1971.  
Srs Kathrine Conley (L)  
and Rosemary Day*



*Group Dynamics with Brian Gurner as part of formation programme for novices Meredith Evans  
(back left) and Maria Britza (front right), 1971*



*Chapter delegates, 1968*



*Preparatory Chapter weekend, 1990.  
Srs Clare Flynn (L) and  
Marita Mullins (in disguise)*

When, in the mid-1970s, Carmel Christie, Patricia Costello, Josephine Weatherald, and Lucy McConachie worked in three separate residential cottages connected with the development of Goodwood Orphanage, they actually – if unconsciously – modelled a new form of community. They frequently rang one another, they lunched together regularly, they celebrated each other's birthdays, they discussed their common work, and totally supported one another. Underlying this was a solid base of companionship and friendship. This situation lasted for some eight years, and cemented enduring relationships.

The changes had begun some years previously, however. After the Juniorate closed at Erindale, several student sisters lived there over the ensuing years. It operated more or less traditionally, but when, in 1968, Patricia Pak Poy went with student sisters to set up a House of Studies at Erindale, a different structure seemed appropriate. Everyone was absent from the house during the day, and were not all together in one centre such as a teachers' college, university, or school. Breakfast was traditionally a silent meal. Now talk was necessary, if only to organise transport to the different locations. During the subsequent years, Erindale developed a more flexible style of living, with its community in some years including laywomen. Patterns were altering, but not without resistance. There was criticism from some uncomprehending members that the younger generation were 'doing what they liked'.

When Meredith Evans made temporary vows of profession at the end of 1972, she was consulted as to where she would live and work – a radically new procedure in the formation of communities. In 1973, Meredith formed a small community of two with Sister Ruth Egar, who had begun the previous year to serve as pastoral worker in the parish at Morphett Vale, while living in the community at Goodwood. This new work by Ruth, in itself, was seen as 'experimental'<sup>53</sup>. Ruth and Meredith were invited by the provincial authorities to work out how to live together. It was a new shift, to a non-constitutionally erected convent. In the same year, a community of three sisters had been set up in Lower North Adelaide, with part of the house offered to two students who were interested in exploring community connections.<sup>54</sup> That this was also seen as a new thing was clear in that the Adelaide province was requested to report to the General Council of the Mercy Union on this in Canberra. In a letter to another sister at this time, Patricia Pak Poy asked and answered this question, somewhat facetiously: 'What is the difference between a convent and a house? ... Obviously, for us, the mermaids on the front door! What convent ever had such topless and bottomless ladies to welcome visitors!'<sup>55</sup> Quite obviously, the distinguishing marks of a traditional convent were becoming less visible. On a more serious note, Patricia spoke in an interview with the local paper, *The News*, about the more open life style that would be possible in North Adelaide.

The traditionally composed communities were also beginning to feel the winds of change. A new structure – small group sharing – was modelled at a weekend at Victor Harbor, when nine sisters met to reflect on themselves and on their aspirations to ministry.<sup>56</sup> Small group sharing was to become an ever more significant feature of the patterns of relatedness: within a community, between sisters from different communities, and at general assemblies. Initially, it was extremely difficult and often painful for women unaccustomed to revealing what they had been conditioned to keep private, except in the confessional or with a spiritual director or reverend mother. However, the value of such sharing was gradually appreciated by most. The concept of theological reflection on one's daily life became more widely accepted. Some experts on group dynamics were employed to facilitate the procedure. When, in 1970, Brother Ronald Fogarty, FMS, worked with the community, and returned in 1971, he opened up new vistas. He talked about the legitimacy of feelings, including sexual feelings, as also the legitimacy of sharing difficulties. The initiation of new members into the Mercy way of life began to change in nature. A completely new context for novices Meredith Evans and Marie Britza was set during the summer holidays of 1970-1 when some professionals<sup>57</sup> in group dynamics were employed to facilitate the interaction within a group of fifteen professed sisters and the two novices.

At least one group of about six sisters started meeting together regularly and encountered real sharing. Group reflection on and searching together for answers to contemporary questions in the lives of individuals and in the joint life of the community became a permanent structure of some communities. Some local houses experimented with co-responsibility. The Elizabeth community, in the 1970s, was allowed to elect a coordinator of the group activity. The transition towards more collaborative decision-making was uneasy. The Elizabeth experiment was soon limited to the nomination of a coordinator by the local members, the final choice being made by the provincial council.

#### DECLINE IN MEMBERSHIP

This was also the era of departures and decline in membership, with the congregation witnessing the withdrawal of some very able and committed women. During the years 1941 to 1970, thirty-five members left. The highest number in any one year was six. This was a large number for a relatively small group. The loss was particularly disturbing when it occurred during the years of renewal and creative visioning. On the other hand, from 1981 to 1984, only two women joined the group, while three departed. These were two novices and a member in temporary profession.<sup>58</sup> Loss of membership meant also an increasingly ageing group. In 1972, the median age was approxi-



*Formation conference, St Anne's, Canberra, 1967. Sr M. Gemma Johnson (first left) as Formation Directress, Sr M. de Sales (Nance) Munro (left centre) as General Councillor resident in Canberra and Sr M. Virginia (Patricia) Pak Poy (first right) as temporarily professed member*



*Chapter Coordinating Committee, 1994. L to R: Srs Meredith Evans, Bernadette Marks, Patricia Fox, Maryanne Loughry, Anne McLay (co-facilitator), Mary Symonds, Sandra Lupi (co-facilitator)*

mately forty-one years; in 1986, it had risen to between fifty-five and fifty-six years. In 1988, there was one woman in temporary vows and no one in the novitiate. Between then and 1996, there were three transfers and three entrants but as they were mostly relatively older women, their membership did not lower the median age appreciably.<sup>59</sup>

The phenomenon was not unique to the Adelaide Mercies, but followed a pattern already being set in the United States and elsewhere among most groups of religious, both men and women. For some it seems to have been a way of resolving unease (long-standing perhaps) with or loss of passion about the option for religious life; for others, it was more specifically a question of commitment to this particular community; or a question of the choice between commitment to a community or to one person in marriage. Some seem to have been uneasy with the changes introduced after Vatican II; others troubled that the changes were band-aids rather than genuine means to a life-giving renewal of the group. The reasons for particular departures from the Adelaide Mercies were probably as many and as varied as the members involved, and both personal and private to the individual. There is little empirical research on the lack of entries into such groups as the Sisters of Mercy, but it would seem that the number of alternative ways of living a religious life option now available is part of the answer. What historians are agreed on is that the missionary and apostolic models of religious life characteristic of the last two hundred years are becoming obsolete.<sup>60</sup>

#### FRIENDSHIPS AND STRUCTURES ACROSS THE CONTINENT

To offset the decline in local membership, ties and associations within the wider Mercy Institute began to grow in significance and meaning. There had always been a Mercy network of friendships and friendly contacts across the continent and beyond. The archives contain an untitled notebook begun in 1880 which lists, among other things, letters sent and received during the next decade. Those received included several from Baggot Street together with books, others from Hull, New Orleans, Brisbane, Geelong, and Mother Ursula Frayne. Letters going out from Adelaide were to Mother Vincent Whitty, Buenos Aires, North America, Rome, England and Ireland, New Zealand, and 'the colonies'. The correspondence between Buenos Aires and South Australia was, in particular, a continuing one until the present day. It was taken up, in turn, by women who mostly had never met each other in person but who became friends through a common heritage, common foremothers and foresisters.<sup>61</sup>

In Australia, as earlier founding sisters died, the connections had become more tenuous and distinct Mercy groups, even within the same town or State,

did not really know each other. However, as need arose, the networking usually became operative. When the movements for change led to its more formal revival in the second half of the twentieth century, it proved to have been very durable, indeed. One of the minor miracles of Mercy history has been the world-wide preservation of a recognisable Mercy spirit throughout the vicissitudes of separation and isolation.

As Catherine McAuley had organised it, the original institute was a network of convents, each separately governed, but motivated by a shared charism and united in spirit through a common rule and Catherine's own fostering of friendly contacts. This was continued by her immediate successors in Dublin; was taken over, in time, by other mother houses with their own foundations; and later, operated more within specific geographical areas when distances became great. Its promotion was based very much on personal relationships, so there was a certain tenuousness about it all. Yet when opportunity arose for meeting face-to-face, it immediately became real.

Attempts by church authorities to force Mercy networks into a more centralized structure – as in the amalgamations, of which Mount Gambier and Adelaide is the South Australian example – were of an ambiguous fruitfulness. All proved to have their advantages but all met with opposition from the participants and carried a legacy of hurt and resentment. The instinct for local autonomy and for a looseness of association between groups was very strong in the Mercy legacy and experience.

When, during the second half of the twentieth century and as a response to democratic and other forces, the church began espousing the principle of subsidiarity, with authority placed at appropriate levels, Catherine McAuley's decentralized structure and networking practices were to look very apt. Nevertheless, in the 1950s, the church was still strongly wedded to centralization as the preferred structure, and worked to bring the disparate Australian Mercy groups into some kind of central organization. As a result of this, the Australian Union was formed by eight congregations, in 1954. The other nine congregations that then existed did not join it, but in 1957 formed a Federation.

The Adelaide Mercies joined the Union. Sister M. de Sales (Nance) Munro (1966-72) and Sister M. Carmel Bourke (1972-1978) each served a term as a member of the General Council, stationed at St Anne's Convent, Canberra. Sisters M. Martina King and Gerard Barrett<sup>62</sup> helped with the running of the house for some years. Nance, with the Mother General, Marie Therese Moore, and Mother Eymard Smith, attended the San Francisco Conference of the United States Mercy Union, and also visited Mercy convents in Chicago, New York, Washington, and Denver. It, and a subsequent tour, expanded her horizons.

In practical operation, the Union was not much more centralized than was the Federation. It was 'more a formalized version of the network model'.<sup>63</sup>

It had some advantages. Centralized planning was more easily achievable, and this proved valuable in terms of educating the members and professionalizing the works. There was an easier exchange of views and personnel, though the latter occurred only occasionally. Provinces did assist one another, and a greater sense of unity and a greater friendliness developed. Central leadership also had some role in conserving and in clarifying the tradition and interpreting it for the now.

Sister Carmel Bourke played an invaluable part in this aspect during her term of office. It was the visits as general councillor to the Mercy provinces throughout Australia, and work towards a revised and Australian version of the Mercy rule of life and constitutions, that led Carmel into a deepened study of the spirituality of Catherine McAuley. From this resulted, the year after she came out of office in Canberra, a research trip to Mercies in the United States, England, and Ireland, especially at those convents founded by Catherine herself. This was followed by reflecting on Catherine's life and sacred gifts with sisters and novices in cultures far removed from Ireland – indigenous women of the Pacific – enabling Carmel to broaden her understanding of what the charism of mercy might mean. The fruit of all this was a book on Catherine, *A Woman Sings of Mercy*<sup>64</sup>, which has become popular among Mercies everywhere, a valuable and heartwarming contribution to spirituality and history. Its public launch brought forth a story which was typical of its author's down-to-earth qualities and sense of humour. Publisher Anthony Dwyer had been somewhat dilatory in bringing the printing to its conclusion – until Carmel told him, by telephone, that she was eighty years old and might be dead before it was published, at the rate he was going. In 1995, a translation into Spanish was completed by the Argentinian Sisters of Mercy.

Carmel fortuitously found a satisfying role for herself as general councillor, but there was no clearly defined formal role for the Union Council, especially the four councillors as distinct from the Mother General. There was little real work of governance. There was a continuing resistance at local levels to allowing much power into the hands of the central authority. Rather the history of the Union is one that shows powers being given back to – not taken from – the local groups, now called 'provinces'. In the latter part of its existence, a major shift took place towards consultative government, with an increase in executive power at provincial level.<sup>65</sup> Notwithstanding all this, it was evident that a central body could have a real animating and inspirational role, with some real power to authorize change.

Thus, the desire for some kind of national Mercy leadership persisted, even though local autonomy was fiercely guarded. In 1967, a National

Conference was set up, which brought together the Union and the Federation into a loose affiliation. It had the special task of preparing the way for some ultimate structure which would foster unity of heart and mind, localisation of initiative and decision making, and regional and national collaborative action in response to the call of a leader.<sup>66</sup> Common constitutions for the two bodies were initiated, and went – with participative processes – through three versions – Interim (1969) by committees incorporating both organisations; Draft (1972) by two writers, one from each body; and the final version, written by a single author chosen by the Conference. This latter was used provisionally at first and then officially authorized by Rome in 1987.<sup>67</sup> Assemblies and other meetings, including conferences for formation personnel, contributed to a growing awareness of the strength that could be gained from combining.

Adelaide contributed greatly to the work of the Conference. Specifically, Sister Patricia Pak Poy was appointed its first full-time executive director in 1976. As such, Patricia organised the initial Australian Mercy Assembly in 1977. Its theme, *Mercy and Justice*, was also a watershed in the development of a Mercy spirituality, linking as it did the age-old thrust to serve others in a spirit of mercy with a more contemporary understanding of the need to seek for justice for all peoples and all individuals. As executive director, Patricia also had a unique responsibility in the preparation of the two special National Meetings of 1979. At these meetings a model for the new national body was presented. It was adapted and finally accepted by an inaugural chapter of the new Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia. The constitutions of the new Institute owed much to Carmel Bourke's series of workshops over two years, leading as they did to the appointment of the author of the final text.

Reflecting on her experience as Conference Director, Patricia Pak Poy commented on the 'quite extraordinary phenomenon' of finding commonality and unity among all the members, of feeling at home all over the country. There were differences brought about by separate development; there were groups that did not communicate despite being close geographically; but the 'striking characteristic' of them all was how the common roots, the common sense of family overrode all other differences. Even the stories of novitiate and other days were so much the same, Patricia remarked.

It was December, 1981, when the work of the Conference led to the dissolution of both Union and Federation and the establishment of the Australian Institute of the Sisters of Mercy Australia (ISMA). Its structure was then seen, by both participants and canonists, as a new model, a unique blend of centralized authority or national cooperation and local autonomy. At the time, it was recognized that it would be a challenge to make this structure suitably functional, and the experience of the ensuing years bore out that prediction. Nevertheless, despite some frustration on account of its structural pecu-



*First national meeting of Mercy Archivists in Angas Street convent cloisters, 1995. Sr Deirdre O'Connor is in the front row, third from left*



*Together in Cambridge on Magdalene Bridge, 1995. Srs Janette Gray (student at Cambridge University), Patricia Fox and Denise Coen (working in London)*



*Paul Eddington, star of TV's Yes Minister series, sent a Christmas card to Sr Carmel Bourke thanking her for a copy of her book and remembering the tea party at Angas Street Convent*

liarities, ISMA proved it could work. Adelaide Mercies continued to contribute to its effectiveness through membership of its governing plenary council and its committees, and through participating in many of its projects.

A number of aspects of the workings of ISMA contributed to a deeper understanding of the Mercy charism, a closer sense of unity among groups, and an openness to friendship among individuals. National chapters and other assemblies, meetings of the various organisational units of ISMA, and – above all – projects initiated or sponsored by ISMA, have all led to mutual exchange and have served to blur the boundaries between congregations. Programmes for novices were helpful in the formation of friendship networks across the country, a development of especial significance in a period of drastic decline in membership at local level. ISMA was increasingly being seen as the gathering point for newer ministry initiatives which were beyond the scope of any one congregation.

Not all planning and initiative has been situated within the national plenary council or the national executive. The first national Mercy Archivists' Meeting, in February 1995, held at Angas Street Convent, is a case in point, and was very significant for the participants, working hitherto in virtual isolation. Organised by some of the archivists themselves, Sister Deirdre O'Connor, Adelaide archivist, played a major role.

The second national President, Kath Burke, judged in her final report (1993) that the Institute model – neither Union nor Federation – was creative and life-giving, though not without ambivalence. It was their own hybrid. Her question was whether any model of the seventies was adequate for the nineties and beyond in view of the massive social and ecclesial changes of this era. Consequently, during the third phase of the Institute's history, a review of structures was begun. Trudy Keur was a member of the task force appointed. A video consultation in 1994, to which some eight hundred members Australia-wide responded, revealed much energy for exploring creative options for the future of the national Institute. A Think-Tank to explore these options took place in August, 1995. Among all this activity, there remained a conviction of the ultimate value of ISMA as a facilitator of a national circle of Mercy friendship and collaborative action.

## INTERNATIONAL CIRCLES OF MERCY

The symbolism of circles of Mercy became potent internationally in the 1990s. Mercy Pacific had become a reality after the idea was mooted at the 1987 national chapter. A movement towards greater association between Mercies worldwide had been the dream of many sisters especially in the United States. This led ultimately to the acquisition of the original Mercy convent in Baggot Street, and its reincarnation as an international Mercy

centre. The holistic, feminine symbol of a circle of Mercy was incorporated into the theme song at its opening and was inscribed on the plaque at its front door. In mid-1996, Sister Marita Mullins finished as parish worker at Elizabeth South and joined the core staff at Baggot Street for a two-year term.

The growth of international Mercy links was paralleled by the strengthening of links with other religious orders of both women and men through a variety of channels. This also led to friendships within and beyond Australia.

#### OPENING THE CIRCLES OF MERCY TO 'LESS FAMILIAR FRIENDS'

In the national Mercy newsletter of May, 1995, *Tracking Mercy*, ISMA President Jan Geason wrote:

The call and the grace is to move deeper into mystery and to cross boundaries for the sake of mission, to leave the safety of home for new lands and to open our circles of friendship to include those whose ways are less familiar to us.

The crossing of social and ethnic boundaries can lead to the breakdown of what has been termed 'structural enemyhood', with tremendous implications for social change. Crossing boundaries had been inherent in the Mercy tradition from the foundation, when the limitations of social, religious, economic and generational boundaries were considered irrelevant to the works of Mercy. It had been bred into the Adelaide Mercies with their unusual founding story. From the opening of their works in Argentina in the 1850s, Evangelista Fitzpatrick had made it clear that they would serve any person without distinction of race. While their boarding and select day schools largely attracted the daughters of Irish settlers, their poor schools were also for the 'native' children, the sons and daughters of Spanish and other ethnic groups.

When, in Australia, the call was heard, in the 1950s, to work with the people of Papua New Guinea or, in the 1970s, with the Australian Aboriginal peoples of South and West Australia, there was a generous and ready response, as there was later in the various missions to South-East Asia, to the Pacific Islands, to South America, and to Pakistan. In the years following World War II, Australia itself became an intensely multi-cultural society. The Adelaide sisters displayed an eager and an ongoing response to the plight of various groups of migrants and of refugees. They continued to respond also to other people in impoverished social and economic situations.

There were a number of entrants from among migrant women into the Mercy community. In a group whose origin was heavily Irish, perhaps the election of Patricia Pak Poy – third generation Australian of Chinese descent



*Provincial Council of 1962, taken in 1968. L to R: Mothers Augustine (Joan) Gaskell, Cecily (Claire) Lynch, Michael Kain (Bursar), Thomas (Rose) Casey, Bernadette Dwyer (Secretary), Dolores Barry, Carmel Bourke*



*Provincial Council of 1968. L to R: Mothers Bernadette Dwyer (Secretary), Cecilia (Monica) Marks, Carmel Bourke, Campion (Deirdre) Jordan, Cecily (Claire) Lynch, Augustine (Joan) Gaskell*



*A Council meeting with a difference, 1972 council, taken in 1976. L to R: Srs Kathrine Conley, Patricia Fox, Kathleen Preece, Monica Marks. Front: Sr Deirdre O'Connor (Secretary). Sr Patricia Pak Poy missing*



*Council of 1976. L to R, back: Monica Marks, Mary Densley, Deirdre O'Connor (Secretary), Nance Munro (Bursar). Front: Patricia Fox, Joan Gaskell, Kathrine Conley*



*Council of 1980. L to R: Patricia Fox, Mary Densley, Bernadette Marks, Christine Keain, Patricia Pak Poy*



*Council of 1985. L to R: Doreen Beckett, Ruth Eggar, Christine Keain, Patricia Pak Poy, Joan Haren*



*Council of 1990. L to R: Christine Keain, Catherine Ahern, Meredith Evans, Judith Redden, Claudette Cusack*



*Council of 1995. L to R: Joan Gaskell, Helen Densley, Mary Densley, Anne Foale, Mary-Anne Duigan*

– to the position of Congregational Councillor twice and then Leader was symbolic of the relative ease of the group to accept ethnic differences. Patricia's personal life history was Australian. It may be more indicative that Adelaide was able to accept Vietnamese-born women into their membership – not without some awkwardness but with a basic calm.<sup>68</sup> The experience of these women, and of Patricia Pak Poy in directing the two younger ones, proved a valuable source of data for the national consideration of Mercy involvement in Vietnam itself. It proved valuable also when Patricia was asked to facilitate the Mercies working in Pakistan during a process to decide whether to invite Pakistani women as members.

The greatest test may, however, be found in the more recent urge to form closer forms of association with lay colleagues and friends. Again, there was a precedent in the Dublin founding story, for Catherine's original plan for the House of Mercy had been to engage a wider group of young women who would volunteer their services in the years between leaving school and marriage. Voluntary lay help had always been an informal but significant adjunct of Mercy ministries. With the increase in the number of paid lay workers in Mercy schools, hospitals, and other institutions, the cooperation of these lay colleagues reached a vital point of influence. In addition, as sisters began to move into other ministries outside of the institutions, they entered more and more into collaboration with lay men and women.

From this increased partnership in mission, there grew – within the worldwide Mercy Institute – an awareness that 'Mercy' spoke also to the hearts of other men and women apart from the vowed members. There were many men and women who also saw 'Mercy' as an authentic way of bringing about the reign of God in our world.<sup>69</sup> Hence there developed, worldwide, a movement to formalize the association through some form of 'Lay Associates'. The manner of association varied from place to place, and, even within the one place, with differing degrees of closeness. However, in some more or less significant way, Associates shared in aspects of Mercy life and ministry. They, too, had a love for, and understanding of the Mercy charism.<sup>70</sup> The quality of the relationship was such that the term 'associates' was sometimes queried as not implying the mutuality of the relationship that existed, and the term 'partner' proposed, instead.

The Adelaide group accepted their first formal associate, Petrina Morris, in 1985. Petrina herself queried the term 'associate', suggesting the alternative of 'companion'. Until her departure for England a few years later, Petrina was loosely attached to the Henley Beach community, with whom she lived for some time and then nearby, in a flat which was available at times to sisters seeking a short respite by the sea. During the early 1990s, six other women were admitted<sup>71</sup>. The commitment stated was very general, and the congregation's response also: 'We welcome you, accepting your friendship

and offering ours to you'. In 1987, Rosslyn von der Borch had been connected under the Lay Mission programme.

As the concept developed, differing ways of becoming more formally associated became clearer. A brochure outlined the four ways of becoming associates –

1. Prayer partners
2. Christian Growth Programme
3. Lay Mission Programme
4. Community Associates<sup>72</sup>

Co-ordinator of the Associates was Sister Maureen O'Grady, until her sudden death in 1996.

Some sisters queried the need for formal association, as many of their colleagues were strongly imbued with the ethos of compassion and mercy without feeling the need for any structural ties. However, the 1994 Adelaide Chapter accepted the goal of continuing to explore issues of membership and other forms of association with the Congregation. In particular, it decided to explore the possibility of a training programme for young people who might wish to commit themselves for several years to work with our sisters in different areas of mission.

Such an exploration was also in the context of a national search, set in motion by the 1993 National Chapter. It initiated a conversation around the concept of a New Foundation for Mercy. Around the centralising focus of the charism of mercy, the current Institute of vowed members might be one specific unit, with other units of differing types of membership developing. Mary Symonds of Adelaide, working in Sydney, became a member of the national task force established to continue the conversation. Meredith Evans attended a preliminary national consultation. The Task Force moved on to planning 'a National Gathering of people already involved in the search for a mercy and justice focus in their lives, and who were in some way defining their lives by mercy ministry and spirituality in partnership with Sisters of Mercy.'<sup>73</sup> The local and national gatherings were planned to culminate in a Mercy Charism conference, in 1996, 'Mercy Alive', a year in which the Institute was to celebrate one hundred and fifty years of Mercy presence in Australia.<sup>74</sup> At this conference, Patricia Fox was one of the key presenters. Patricia presented a theological paper entitled 'Mother of Mercy: a title reclaimed for God'.

#### C I R C L E S ,   N O T   L A D D E R S

Such gatherings, whether they were small or large, local, national, or international, were proving to be important avenues by which Mercy women

could empower themselves through a deepening understanding of sisterhood. Beginning with the friendly foundations of their first days, suffering somewhat under the more restrictive and controlled environment after the re-codification of church law in 1917, and returning in the post-Vatican II years to a more flexible and less formal mode of association, the South Australian Mercies had moved through varying patterns of companionship and friendship.

The image of a ladder, which seemed so appropriate for hierarchical forms of association, had begun to be replaced, with enthusiasm, by the notion of circles. Alterations in structures only embodied the profound change in consciousness occurring. Despite a legacy of some suspicion of friendship, despite internal tensions brought about by the ever-present vicissitudes of daily living and by the overwhelming impact of change in the second half of the twentieth century, the Adelaide Mercies strove to appropriate the McAuley virtue of 'cordiality'; strove to develop a companionship which would enrich their life and their ministry; strove to re-write their friendships into history.

1. Source of phrase uncertain, but I think I first read it in Janet Ruffing, RSM.
2. She gives six different types in *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*, New York: Crossroad, 1991, Chapter Two.
3. Mary C. Sullivan, RSM: 'Comforting and Animating: The Generative Work of Catherine McAuley', MAST meeting, Pittsburg, April, 1992; *Catherine McAuley and the Tradition of Mercy*, South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
4. This is the phrase used in Mother Vincent Whitty's account of Catherine's death; tradition seems to have translated it into a 'comfortable cup of tea'.
5. As we know, however, from Sr Vincent Whitty's account, Catherine herself did use instruments of penance, but under the guidance of her spiritual director.
6. Mary Daly, RSM: 'See I am Doing a New Thing: The significance of the changes made by Catherine McAuley in Adapting the Presentation rule', MAST meeting, Pittsburgh, April, 1992.
7. Phrase used by second bishop of Brisbane, who had been present during all the previous potentially disruptive years.
8. Helen M. Burns and Sheila Carney: 'Mercy's Coverlet of Compassion across the Americas', 1994, draft manuscript for American panel, Heritage Room, International Mercy Centre, Dublin. Kathleen Healy, Frances' biographer, gives a more mundane explanation – the bishop wished them to wear secular clothes; the lilac trimmings were to distinguish Frances as superior.
9. 1.9.1960 to Mother General Clarysfort Park, Dublin, Mercy Archives, Booterstown.
10. Austin Carroll, article, 'Twenty-four Years in Buenos Aires', copy in MASA, 150/2.
11. Underlining hers. Letter 10.8.1874 to Mgr Kirby, Irish College, Rome, MASA, 150/17, copy from Archives Sisters of St Joseph.
12. St Mary's Retreat was a reformatory which the sisters managed between 1873 and 1886.
13. Loreto Archives, copy in MASA, 150/35.
14. Quoted Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection*, Boston: Beacon, 1986, 26.
15. Women who gathered in communal settlements in Europe during the late Middle Ages, especially the 13th century. They were a religious group but not a religious order in the canonical sense. They often became the centre for larger groups of other women. They were frowned upon by the church eventually but beguinages survived until the end of the 18th century.
16. Rosemary Ruether & Eleanor McLaughlin, *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, New York: Simon & Schuster, Chapter Two; Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends*.

17. MASA, 150/26.
18. Founded from Broken Hill in New South Wales, so not part of the Adelaide Congregation; now belonging to Wilcannia-Forbes amalgamated congregation.
19. Josephine Weatherald.
20. Other sisters who lived at Plympton included Ignatius Kelly, Benedict Howard, Benigna Davis, Bernadette Hogan, Martha Keane, and Xavier Webb.
21. For example, Margaret Holmes at Plympton was attached to the Para Hills community.
22. Janet Ruffing, RSM, 'Recovering a History of Partnership: American Sisters in the nineteenth century', in Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt, *Where can we find her? Searching for women's identity in the new church*, New York: Paulist Press, 1991.
23. Sister Kevin Kennedy's Jottings, MASA, 150/26.
24. For example, Sister Monica Marks, dinner launch of SAC Building Fund Appeal, 1967; opening of extensions to school, Henley Beach, 1965.
25. Approved July 5th, 1841 Rule.
26. Janet Ruffing, RSM, 'Leadership a New Way: Women, Power, and Authority', *Review for Religious*, May-June, 1994; David Nygren CM and Miriam D. Ukeritis CSJ, 'Religious - Leadership Competencies', *Review for Religious*, May-June, 1993.
27. These questions arose from my reflection process, with the sisters, on their founding story, 1993.
28. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press, 1983.
29. Phrase from Kate Conley, RSM.
30. Mary Ewens, OP in Rosemary Ruether & Eleanor McLaughlin (ed.) *Women of Spirit, Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979.
31. This discussion is based on the analysis by Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.
32. E. & J. Whitehead, cited by Meredith Evans. Cf W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978.
33. To Cardinal Laurent, Rome, 15.8.1927. (copy in Buenos Aires Mercy archives). Some groups, e.g. in Ireland, were still requiring lay sisters to wear the distinguishing white apron in public until the mid-1940s, at least.
34. For a study of the origins of the habit, see A.G. Martimort: *Deaconesses: An Historical Study*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986; briefly summarised by Rosa MacGinley in *History Newsletter*, Institute of Religious Studies, Strathfield, April, 1995.
35. A kind of overblouse or cape worn back to front.
36. Mavis McBride, History Notes, MASA 300/9.
37. Religious Life Review, March, 1994; James R. Cain, *The Influence of the Cloister on the Apostolate of Congregations of Religious Women*, Rome, 1965, and his series of articles in *Review for Religious*, July 1968, September 1968, June 1969.
38. Entry in chapter book, August 25th, 1891, see 'History of St Mary's Convent of Mercy, Angus Street', compiled by Sr Mavis McBride, 1980.
39. Carmel Bourke.
40. St M. Vianney (Romley) Dirmann, who entered in Mount Gambier not long before amalgamation.
41. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. In Part III, she explores J.B. Metz's concept of 'dangerous memories'.
42. Died 1945 and 1966.
43. Recollections of S.M. Brigid Walsh, MASA.
44. History notes, Mavis McBride, MASA, 300/9.
45. See later in chapter for establishment of this Union. Sisters Augustine (Joan Gaskell) and Campion (Deirdre Jordan) were the drivers.
46. Sophie McGrath, RSM, historian, to the author, 1993.
47. At various times, Kathrine Conley, Kath Preece, Bernadette Marks, Mary Densley, Christine Keain, Joan Gaskell, Ruth Egar, Joan Haren, Doreen Beckett.
48. D.J.Nygren & M.D.Ukeritis, 'Religious - Leadership Competencies', *Review for Religious*, May-June, 1993.
49. Elected December, 1980.

50. Marie Augusta Neal, SND has written about the democratic process in the experience of American sisters, *Catholic Sisters in Transition: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, Delaware: Glazier, 1984, and *From Nuns to Sisters: An Expanding Vocation*, Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990. See also Mary Linscott, 'Leadership, Authority, and Religious Government' in *Review for Religious*, March/April, 1993. Neal conducted surveys of American religious women over a period; Linscott was on the Vatican commission that approved revised constitutions, and read the English language ones.
51. Christine Keain and Mary Densley were the congregational superiors. Their councils included Judith Redden, Meredith Evans, Catherine Ahern, Claudette Cusack; Helen Densley, Joan Gaskell, Anne Foale, Mary-Anne Duigan.
52. Documents, September and November, 1993.
53. *The Southern Cross*, March 3, 1972. Ruth was allowed 'to experiment for the Sisters of Mercy as a pastoral worker'.
54. The sisters were Mary Densley, Helen O'Brien, and Patricia Pak Poy initially. The two students were Pauline McDonnell and Pauline Button. The latter later joined the community for a while.
55. MASA, 150/20.
56. 1972 or 1973. The sisters were Patricia Pak Poy, Margaret Adams, Kate Conley, Claire Lynch, Bernadette Marks, Monica Marks, Joan Haren, Deirdre O'Connor, and Pat Walsh.
57. Marist Brothers Brian Gray and Ron Perry, Brian Gurner, and - Hancock from Flinders University.
58. MASA, 902/1.
59. MASA, 231/2, 801/15. The Junior Professed of 1988, Michelle (Shelley) Sabey, later left. After her entry are recorded three transfers (Elizabeth Bui Thi Nghia 1986 and Tran Thi Nien 1988 from a Vietnam order and Helen Owens 1985 from the Wilcannia-Forbes Mercies) and two entrants, Tran Thi Thu Trang (1989) and Mary Do Thi Thu (1992). In 1996 Elaine Treagus joined the community as a candidate.
60. Carmel Leavey OP and Rosalie O'Neill RSJ: *Gathered in God's Name: New Horizons in Australian Religious Life*, Sydney: Institute of Religious Studies, 1996, x.
61. In the 1990s, the links in this affectionate chain are currently kept intact by Deirdre O'Connor in Adelaide and Isabel MacDermott in Buenos Aires.
62. Sr Gerard was in Canberra for nine years.
63. G. Jennings RSM and J. O'Toole RSM, *For the Sake of the Mission*, Melbourne, 1979.
64. Sydney: E.J. Dwyer, 1987.
65. Jennings and O'Toole, *For the Sake of the Mission*.
66. Ibid.
67. The session of the First National Chapter of ISMA in December, 1981, accepted the constitutions for printing; the Adelaide Mercies accepted them personally in their local houses on 24th September, 1982; and communally, on Mercy foundation day, 12th December, 1982.
68. As of writing, there are four Vietnamese members, two of whom were members of religious orders before coming to Australia. Brisbane is the only other group with Vietnamese members, two in number.
69. Jan Geason, *Tracking Mercy*, March, 1995, ISMA Newsletter.
70. Doris Gottemoeller, RSM, 'Becoming Partners in the New Institute', talk, Madison, CT, USA, 2nd May, 1992, reprinted MAST journal, 1994, and reprinted *Lookout* (Adelaide newsletter), May 1995.
71. Rosemary Hennig, Jenny O'Brien (a former member), Rosemary Powell (also a former member), Susan Anderson, Julia Lloyd and Val Chandler who were connected with the Hesed community.
72. That is, by being a member of a community associated with a Sister of Mercy. Not all members would necessarily see themselves so associated, however.
73. Letter, Patricia Powell, for the Task Force, 20.6.1995.
74. The first foundation was in Perth, 1846.

## CHAPTER NINE

# A Triple Spiral of Mercy: Outward, Inward, and Onward

**A**S the journey continued for the Adelaide Mercies, we can discern the movement of a triple spiral – a movement in three directions, outward, inward, and onward. There has been, by the very reason for their existence, a continual outward action of the ongoing commitment to works of mercy, justice, and compassion. This multi-faceted activity was what most people saw in the day-to-day living of the group. The initial period of establishment, the long decades of consolidation, followed by years of amazingly fertile creativity: these formed the outward persona and historical story of the Mercy Institute in South Australia.

There has been, however, a parallel movement inwards, also changing, yet also constantly coming back to the same centre – God – divine mercy – the true source from which all their actions sprang.<sup>1</sup> And, just as the outward movement seemed to be of a spiral, so, too, did the inward one. Both movements spiralled onwards. It was not just an eternal retreading of the same paths, but a movement, sometimes scarcely detectable, sometimes vigorous, that spiralled onwards, onwards into an unknown and often unsure future, but propelled always by the underlying quest for the sacred that was at the heart of their communal being.

This mystical quest is an essential element in their group history. It has led them – as individuals and as community – to express their spirituality in changing and sometimes conflicting ways, seeming perhaps, at times, to discard the riches of the past. Such an intense search inevitably included uncertain steps and meanderings in direction. But what is apparent historically is that at the heart of their service, at the centre of their existence as a group, lay a commitment to and a deepening understanding of both human and divine compassion.

**A P R O G R E S S I V E   H E R M E N E U T I C   O F   M E R C Y <sup>2</sup>**  
In the image of their foundress, they were as the compass that always moves

around the one centre, God. Or, to adapt a more contemporary image, their story was one of a dynamic and changing experience of God. And, to take that image still further, their story was one of a continuing hermeneutic or interpretation of the nature of God. The explanation of the nature of God was often made through an ongoing and deepening understanding of the nature of Mercy as a divine attribute. Beginning with the nineteenth century Irish brand of Catholic devotion and theology, and with their spiritual development often constrained by church legislation designed to regularise cloistered monastic groups, the Adelaide Mercies, nevertheless, felt always impelled to take risks and to respond, in their own flexible ways, to the call of the divine being who is Mercy. In that responding, their understanding of the nature of God, whose primary biblical image was that of mercy, both deepened and widened.

When Sister Carmel Bourke published the results of her years of studying and lecturing on the foundress Catherine McAuley, she called her book *A Woman Sings of Mercy*. It was the fruit not just of her study but – more vitally – the fruit of her own long song of Mercy which she sang along with her companions and students. ‘There is always room’, she wrote in her introduction, ‘for further reflection on [Catherine’s] life and spirit ... There is always need for each new generation to look with fresh eyes at her life and teachings, and to ponder anew their implications in living out the Mercy charism, reincarnating it for a new era and a new society.’ Carmel’s study looked ‘more closely into the permanent elements of the Mercy charism ... relevant for all times and places, now and in the years to come.’ It was within the inspiration and light of that charism which ‘Sisters of Mercy today strive to witness to God’s loving-kindness and to be instruments of his mercy to all in need’. Mercy was Catherine’s song. ‘Truly’, Carmel concluded, ‘We could say of her, in some words attributed to St Ephrem: ‘I am a song God is singing’.

The words of that song, sung by Sisters of Mercy, changed as ensuing years brought new forms of expression. The understanding of the nature of divine mercy itself expanded in new and surprising ways. Sister Monica Marks, when in leadership in the mid-1970s, said that the sisters were then discovering a depth of meaning in the biblical concept of mercy (such as in the Hebrew term *Hesed* or unconditional love) that the early sisters at best only glimpsed. Yet these had had an intuitive sense of the deeper meaning of Mercy, a sense of the love and mercy of that God who had called them by name and that was the source of their life. That was why prayer and meditation were so important in their lives, Monica stated, to deepen their awareness of that life, to know that love and to see it mirrored in the love of others.<sup>3</sup>

This deep sure intuition of divine mercy expressed in compassion was evident in the founding stories of the Institute, she claimed. There was the story of the servant girl in a difficult moral situation who sought Catherine’s help.

Catherine requested a place in a refuge for the young woman, but it could not be granted except by the managing committee which met only on the third Monday of each month. By the next third Monday, the woman had vanished. This made a profound impact on Catherine's compassionate heart, expressed in her choice, when she later had the finance, to build her House of Mercy.

There were, too, the exhortations of Catherine – and of Evangelista Fitzpatrick during the Argentinian dilemma – for the sisters to cultivate their sense of dependence on divine 'Providence'. Such a spirit led to an enormous inner freedom. The Mercies were 'a new thing' externally, 'walking nuns', going to places and answering needs in ways that most other nineteenth century women could not (or would not) go. They were, in truth, a new thing because of their interior trust and confidence in a divine and steadfast loving kindness. It was, in the long run, this inner freedom which had allowed them to pull up their roots – in Dublin – in Buenos Aires – in Adelaide, whence some had journeyed to the turbulent goldfields of the West, and in Mount Gambier, whence some had gone again to Argentina.

A century later, it was the same freedom to love, towards which a sister such as Patricia Kenny was struggling when she embarked on the long journey that led to the establishment of the Hesed community. Sister Pat believed that freedom came from within. Speaking, in 1976, at a Women and Politics State Conference in Adelaide, she stated that she and her sisters were women dedicated to being in love – in the light – in the truth – free. The many works in which they were involved constituted a striving to such freedom. It was a search for their true selves, a dropping of pretence, so that they could love themselves and the others in a new way. Freedom was to be at peace – to know in one's spirit that 'God is – Life is – I am – You are ...' This freedom meant strength, courage, the ability to believe, to hope, to endure ...<sup>4</sup>

#### PROPHETIC WITNESS – SPIRALLING OUTWARDS

This kind of freedom, fed by the inner experience of an ever loving divinity, was essential to the prophetic witness that has been named as one of the central roles of religious communities over the centuries<sup>5</sup>. As the prophets of the Old Testament critiqued the social and ecclesial values and practices of their times, so did many religious, individuals and groups, critique the social and ecclesial structures of their successive days. Unlike the ancient prophets, the Sisters of Mercy, constrained until recent decades by their status as women and as religious women, rarely proclaimed their critique in public words. But they did proclaim it, daily, in public deeds – deeds of Mercy which not only aimed to alleviate current distress but also to help people develop a better life and society.



*Changing symbols: models in archives showing stages in religious dress*



*Brides and novices proceed down Cathedral aisle, 1956*

The prophetic witness of the more immediate post-Vatican II decades may seem to have been more striking than that of an earlier era. But nowhere more clearly, as we have seen, was this prophetic element of critique exercised than in their educational philosophy. In a world where inequitable class structures still prevailed and where women of all classes were still second class citizens, from their foundation – in Dublin, in Buenos Aires, in Adelaide and Mount Gambier – their educational ethos was explicitly inclusive. Mother Magdalene Carroll, as head of St Aloysius' School, their supposedly 'select school', could write to a parent:

Our school attracts students of all classes, including the labouring class. It has not changed in nature since its establishment. We see that as the task that God has entrusted to us.

Given much of the prevailing attitudes, including Catholic attitudes, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was even more prophetic that researchers could find scant evidence of Catholic ghetto-ism or of downgrading of women's status among Mercy school documents of the time.<sup>6</sup>

Catherine McAuley had asked her companions: 'How can we teach the love of God if our own hearts are cold?' One of the frequent remarks made by past pupils and teachers of Mercy schools such as St Aloysius, Parkside, or Mount Gambier, to take just a few examples where testimony is available, concerned the paradoxical situation wherein a rather rigid uniformity and fairly strict discipline 'somehow allowed individuality to exist as well'. Comments on the personal care, the family atmosphere, are common and provide the key. There was 'love' between students and teachers, 'a bond of love and sympathy pleasing to witness'. Students were 'special individuals' to the sisters.<sup>7</sup> They were also encouraged towards community service, with senior girls at St Aloysius, for instance, visiting dying patients at Royal Adelaide Hospital. The call to love – the call to *hesed*, the sacred loving kindness at the heart of the world – was externally apparent in the relationship between teachers and students. The latter were also shown ways to extend their own love to those in particular need of compassion. Teaching the love of God through the medium of love of other human beings, the sisters warmed their own hearts with the passion for mercy.

It was a passion that endured. Writing as headmistress in the 1980 St Aloysius College Centenary Journal, Mary Densley stated:

I think what happens at SAC is best summed up as friendship. I am sure that for so many of us who have been part of the school's history this is not new or surprising.

So many of us are privileged in knowing the meaning of friendship, that the love that is set free in our hearts and that draws us to each other is the Spirit of Jesus alive and at work in the world. And for this we give thanks.

The decades of external consolidation, ending somewhat abruptly and unexpectedly during the 1960s, had been plateau years, years of gestation which bore fruit in the extraordinary proliferation of prophetic witness of the 1970s and 1980s, especially. There was a corresponding growth in the understanding of Mercy.

Traditionally, Mercy had been a giving to those in need, a beneficent act of a beneficent God through human benefaction, claimed Carmel Bourke in the SAC Centenary Journal. Sisters of Mercy were 'the bearers and instruments of God's mercy to his people in need.'<sup>8</sup> This understanding of Mercy, according to the national organisational culture study of 1987, tended to lead to the syndrome of the 'worthy helper' bestowing mercy somewhat from on high. However, Carmel did go on to say also that the recipients were people whom God used to bring his mercy and love. After relating the story of Mary MacKillop's kindness to the Mercies, she wrote:

Our Sisters who came here to ... offer Mercy to others, were themselves BEING MERCIED and in receiving Mercy, they knew the faithful love of God ... and they experienced His Mercy anew, because it flowed out to them through all these new friends He sent to aid them.

There was always a keen sense of their own need, as finite human beings, of their own need for divine Mercy.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a deeper understanding of Mercy began to surface, finding expression in the new national constitutions and in local documents. These articulated a 'mutuality of mercy' within the act of ministry itself. And, even more basic, God's mercy to them was the very heart of their service to others.<sup>9</sup> Mercy was not so much a giving to as a receiving from. Conscious of the radicality of their own need for mercy, ministry to others became a question of mutuality, wherein the minister received as much – if not more – than she gave. In the Centenary Journal, Monica Marks wrote that as SAC moved into its second century, it was no longer only 'the Sisters' school', but one in which the original spirit had grown and developed, and where the relationship of Mercy, in giving and receiving, from God and from one another, was taking on a new face.

This new face of Mercy was becoming, in the words of a song adopted by the 1994 congregational chapter, 'a timeless circle of Mercy'.

In Mercy, we touch the hearts of those  
who are in misery,  
In Mercy, we're touched by them  
and feel their strength and courage ...<sup>10</sup>

There was more to it than just this mutuality in ministry. In some strange and mysterious way, the more needy and vulnerable was the one who was the

recipient of the sister's ministry of mercy, the more did *hesed* flow out to both the sister-minister and the one to whom she ministered.

In Mercy we welcome those  
the world has left rejected,  
In Mercy, we're drawn within  
the loving heart of God.

Their 1980 Statement of Mission had expressed it thus:

Our experience of the mystery of God and growth into the vision of Jesus is  
to be found in our service among the less privileged.

### MERCY, JUSTICE, AND COMPASSION

Part of that journey within the circle of mercy was the explicit linking of the qualities of mercy and justice. In 1977, with the first national conference of Australian Mercies, coordinated by Patricia Pak Poy as executive director, the concepts of Mercy and Justice were placed side by side in public Mercy documents in a striking manner, and probably for the first time. Acting justly, on behalf of and in solidarity with, those suffering oppression of any kind was a necessary concomitant of mercy in the contemporary world.

An analysis of congregational documents made in 1990 by an outside observer suggested that broader social issues were of increasing importance to the lives of the Adelaide sisters.<sup>11</sup> The note of human liberation from oppression had, indeed, become evident in all their ministries. Witness to gospel values meant fighting for justice and peace throughout the world. In particular, the dehumanisation of the Australian Aboriginal peoples called for redress, as did the oppression within themselves caused by their own prejudices and by their inability to gain power over their own lives. Christian values were central to becoming human, and all people were created in the image of God. This sounded the note of a burgeoning ecumenism in the post-Vatican II church.

Mercy, coupled with justice, became more and more the notion of 'compassion', suffering with and, therefore, acting with, standing in solidarity with. A recurring and cosmic note in the Mercy story had become that of the compassionate heart, the heart that listened to the cries of the world. Mercy, compassion, was that 'basic mysterious energy or hidden connection' that pervaded and enlivened the whole cosmos, quoted Monica Marks in a talk at Newfoundland in 1992.<sup>12</sup> Given the connotations of paternalism or benevolence connected with the term 'mercy' for past generations, 'compassion' became the preferred term for some.

This recurring cosmic note in the Mercy story had also structural implications for the Institute of Mercy. The notion that 'God's mercy embraces all

humanity' and that 'the charism of Mercy belongs to the whole Church' became more clearly articulated. It was a significant factor in the move towards fostering a diversity of forms of association within the existing Institute. It was stated that 'the mutual giving and receiving of Mercy is facilitated and enriched by a broadening of the concept of 'membership''.<sup>13</sup> While their steps towards formally including non-vowed members were very tentative, the Adelaide Mercies stated that they sought a way to break open the charism of Mercy to include others and so find 'a corporate way of releasing the power in us within the church for the world'.<sup>14</sup>

Helen Owens described a new and yet old way of breaking open the charism of Mercy to include others when she stated that she experienced her base community in a very real way through her work at Catherine House. There she and others on the staff shared reflections on life with the women residing in the attached houses. She found shades of their vulnerabilities in herself, and the growth of a very real mutuality among them.

#### CONTEMPLATION – SPIRALLING INWARDS

Their deepening insight into the nature of mercy was the growth of years of individual and group reflection on life as a Sister of Mercy, the contemplative movement of heart and mind. Catherine McAuley, in the words of the spirituality of her time, had written that the very best apostolate we could engage in was the witness of holiness of life. Our whole life, she instructed her sisters, should be a continual act of praise and prayer.<sup>15</sup> Yet, in the spirituality of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemplation – or, to use the more typical term, mysticism – seemed to be the domain of the privileged few.

Contemplation had been, for earlier Christians, more a matter of individuals reflecting on their own lives and engaging in personal prayer about that. The ordered, silent life of the nun or the monk – punctuated by regular sessions of the divine office as well as the daily celebration of Mass and daily meditations – was also fed by periods of spiritual reading and time spent in chapel alone before the Blessed Sacrament. What happened within the meditations and the other periods of prayer was private to the individual, except for discussion with one's confessor or spiritual director. Only a saintly few apparently attained to the heights of mysticism. Divine visitations through visions or other extraordinary means were not the lot of the normal Christian, religious or lay.

In fact, for religious women, engaged in long and often stressful hours of service, such heavenly marks of approval – and severe practices of penance designed to gain such approval – were somewhat suspect. The Sister of Mercy was expected to find God and converse with Him through the faithful adherence to her religious life structure of prayer and good works. The practice of

*Srs M. Cecilia (Monica) Marks  
and Rosalie (Helen) O'Grady  
return from overseas study, 1962*



*Sr Deirdre O'Connor (first left) and her study companions at St George's College, Jerusalem, 1979*

'Silence' was encouraged by all spiritual guides, a silence that was to be interior as much as exterior.<sup>16</sup> Times and places of silence were prescribed and an atmosphere of quiet pervaded the convent for most of the day, except for speech necessary to work. In addition, there was an annual retreat of eight to ten days, another of three days at the end of the year, and a retreat Sunday per month. There were frequent private visits to the chapel and periods of quiet adoration before the Blessed Sacrament on Sundays and certain feast days. Thus the Rule made time alone available and legitimated it.

A faithful adherence to the Mercy Rule, the sister was assured, could and would lead to union with God. When some of the early sisters in England wished to adopt a more supposedly contemplative form of life, Catherine McAuley reiterated strongly the ordinariness of the form of life within the Institute, with the rider that the faithful performance of ordinary duties should be done extraordinarily well. So effective was this type of life that, despite the restrictions deemed by later generations to be inappropriate, it seems certain that many sisters did reach a high degree of contemplation, interpreted as intimate union with God, whether they named it contemplative or not.

The atmosphere of contemplation within the old structures was experienced again – somewhat out of time – by Sister Kate Conley, in Canada for a 1995 Prison Chaplains International Conference. There she stayed in the convent of another order in Ottawa, and felt she had re-entered her religious life of the 1960s. 'Habits, veils, bells, horariums, customs, convent rules, timetables, polished corridors, correct titles, no table cloths, ordered salt and pepper shakers on ordered rows of rectangular tables.' Pope John Paul smiled benevolently from various walls and people went about as if they had a particularly important job to do without dilly dallying and there was a chapel to hold five hundred. There were one hundred and fifty women living there, including their sick and elderly.

Kate could recognize an essential commonality between her calling and theirs – the works of Mercy. But these conventual rituals, which her own community had largely discarded over the past three decades, now appeared an anachronism to her. The earlier understanding of the contemplative life – into which apostolic religious had been pressured to immerse themselves, despite their active involvements – had been undermined by the church renewal kindled by the Second Vatican Council. From then on, one can trace within the Adelaide history another progressive hermeneutic, that of the nature of 'contemplation'. The understanding of 'mysticism' – or 'contemplation', which gradually became the more customary term – began to change. Ordinary Catholics, and non-monastic religious, were assured by the Council decrees that they, too, could become contemplative.<sup>17</sup> The sermon preached at the ceremony of First Commitment of a Sister of Mercy in

January, 1977, Maryanne Loughry, made a strong impact on Sister Pauline Preiss, which she wrote about in her religious education thesis of that year.<sup>18</sup> Religious were called to be contemplators of the divine Word. Religious, on reflecting, knew this Word was ever fresh and let it spill out wherever the Word was broken in human situations. For Pauline, this involved a commitment to a service of love and to a life organized for and around the option of faith. Contemplation was the nourishing soil of the apostolic life and the role on which all other roles needed to be built.

Just how this 'new' form of contemplation worked in practice needed to be tested. The image of the listening, compassionate heart permeated Sister Gabrielle Travers' religious education thesis of 1974, in which she reflected on some women's experience.<sup>19</sup> Gabrielle reported on a conversation with Sister Ruth Egar, then working in the parish of Morphet Vale. She described how they had considered together the connectedness between reflection on an act and its religious nature – and, conversely, on so-called religious acts performed thoughtlessly – and the quality of listening needed to search for a deep level of meaning in everyday life, in answer to the contemporary longing for transcendence. In other words, the ordinariness of the way in which God was revealed. Somewhat paradoxically, being with, listening to, suffering with, was an essential ingredient in any ministry.

Phrases such as 'theological reflection', 'shared praxis', and 'hermeneutical spiral' began to become familiar. Influenced by a developing contemporary theology which took its starting point from the life experience of people rather than from divine revelation or church doctrine, they began to reflect together on their own life and to critique it in the light of the gospel, the teaching of the church, and their own Mercy constitutions. From this shared reflection came the planning and action whereby they attempted to live out the full implications of their call to Mercy in the service of others.<sup>20</sup>

Writing in the preamble to the 1984 booklet, *Heart of Our Service*, Sister Patricia Fox spoke of the year of preparation for a congregational chapter as a year of taking stock – seeking to do so, contemplatively, in the light of the Gospel and against the reality of our world. Patricia declared herself amazed at how their own deep need for mercy had been harnessed creatively for the sake of God's Kingdom. Researcher Anne Ross-Smith's analysis of Adelaide documents of the late 1980s found that all – even those primarily informative – evidenced a reflective dimension. Stories in the congregational monthly newsletter, *Lookout*, constantly evoked a reflective element. In them, the sisters pondered their lives and ministries and what it was to be Mercy.

Such shared dialogue demanded an ability to listen. The quality of listening had been named, in national and congregational documents, as an essential element in the life of a sister. It was the imperative of listening to one another in community, of listening to the 'signs of the times' in their

world, of listening to the voice of the Spirit within their own inner selves. Spirituality had become a journey into one's inner depths as also a journey to the boundaries of the universe. Within those boundaries, everything was sacred, God was to be found. The life of the Sister of Mercy – as also the life of all Christians – was meant to be a life of prophetic witness to this deep mystery, this truth of divinity at the heart of the cosmos. It was meant to be lived with a stance that was contemplative.

The 1980 Adelaide Chapter Acts emphasised this new expression of the contemplative stance. The Acts proclaimed that as Sisters of Mercy, members were called to listen. Each sister was, accordingly, to receive some education in communal discernment processes and methods of review, planning, and evaluation by the next chapter. Local community coordinators were likewise to be given some help, to facilitate faith-sharing as the basis of community life. Some external practitioners of group dynamics and authentic communication were subsequently engaged.

In the following decade, another congregational chapter document included some principles/values to provide the context for the communal discernment process to be used. These principles included the reaching of consensus by the laborious process of listening to the stories of those involved. That demanded an openness and a capacity to recognize and to accept the movements of the spirit within the group. A Uniting Church document was used to clarify steps in making decisions by consensus. Another set forth Quaker principles of decision-making, which begins and ends in 'centering silence' – the silence which honours the presence within each of the mystery in which all lived and moved and had their being. For Sisters of Mercy, the Quaker document was a heart-warming touch, reminding them of the Quaker benefactress of Catherine McAuley, and the origins of the Institute of Mercy.<sup>21</sup>

A contemplative attitude, an inner silence in the midst of outer noise, a melding of prophetic witness and contemplation, was not all ease. It could be, probably had to be at times, a kind of martyrdom. Religious life, from its beginnings, had been closely identified with the heroism of the martyrs, stated the introduction to *Mercy Killing*, a play presented by the Adelaide Mercies in 1984. *Mercy Killing* pointed away from the ways of this world to the fuller life promised as the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, modern religious life had deeply committed thousands of people to the real, active service of the people of this world. Sisters of Mercy daily contended with all the pressures and restrictions caused by this tension. They continued to hope that the symbolic purpose of their lives could point others and themselves to the Kingdom of God, claimed the introduction to the play. But they were still human. And that was what *Mercy Killing* was about – being human, and how that meant standing in the middle of the intersection of many busy streets.<sup>22</sup>

Changed attitudes to union with God and to holiness were also bringing about a new response of life-style to the pressures of standing in the busy streets. In former times, there had been safeguards to the silence conducive to leading a prayerful way of life. The monastic-style practices of silence produced at least an external atmosphere of quiet. Whether they did so internally or not, depended on the individual. As the structures began to fall, practices of silence were largely discarded.

This had unexpected side effects. The burden of daily living and relating within large convents became heavy for many. Church legislation designed to protect the primary goal of monastic groups – total commitment to contemplation – had not only hampered the apostolic groups, such as the Sisters of Mercy, in their works of service. It had also paradoxically stunted the development of an appropriate contemplative path, from which their spiritual energy had to be derived.

Attempts to follow the path of contemplation, within action for justice in our society, was probably one of the factors which gradually began to lead to a very different kind of communal organization among the Adelaide Mercies. There was not only the abolition of daily structured times and places, but also the breaking down of the large convent living unit itself, with the trend towards very small communities of living, and with some sisters living alone. This trend became discernible and gathered momentum in the 1990s. Clusters of single and double living units began to be constructed in the mid-decade. They were fascinatingly reminiscent of the cenobitic bee hive huts of early monasticism or the apartments of the Beguines of late mediaeval Europe.<sup>23</sup>

While there were several reasons for this trend, the effect at least was to reduce drastically the daily commitment to being with others in the order. 'Oasis times' became more feasible<sup>24</sup>. Those who experienced the new situation frequently expressed appreciation for the space it provided, not just for a relaxed flexibility of living, but also for the opportunity to be alone. Energy could be recouped, improving the quality of one's ministry and the richness of interaction when one did meet with one's sisters, and also the quality of one's inner spiritual path-walking. If one wanted it, a contemplative attitude could be fostered within the more solitary household.

For some, nevertheless, such a lifestyle seemed a repudiation not only of 'community' – one of the basic foundations of their way of life – but also of the martyrdom of daily living, of 'offering your sufferings to Jesus', which was a keystone of traditional Christian spirituality. In particular, for those sisters who could no longer stand physically at the intersection of many busy streets, the 'offering up' of the limitation of age and illness had been a painful but fruitful way to union with God. There still remained a need to affirm the value of common life as shared under the same roof – the daily struggles, the differences, the prayer together – if not for everyone or for always.<sup>25</sup>

*Sr Mary Marra at her  
Golden Jubilee, 1980*



*Sr Martina King at her  
Golden Jubilee, 1989*



*Sr M. Barbara McQuillan feeds the ducks*



*Srs Claudette Cusack and Marie Gaudrey (Parramatta) plant a tree at Mamre, West Sydney*

With the growth of a sense of the need to accept one's own responsibility for wellbeing, and a move towards a more holistic type of spirituality, this age-old practice of offering up one's sufferings was seeming to lose some of its validity. Greater attention was being paid to the things that made for a healthy organism, both personal and communal. The more positive, holistic attitude which resulted did not encourage self-infliction of any kind. Yet, in the end, human limitations prevail. As the profile of the Congregation aged, above all in the 1980s and 1990s, more and more sisters experienced the limitations of age and illness and the diminishing membership of the group.<sup>26</sup> It was a situation germane for fruitful and realistic reflection on the eternal spiral of birth, death, and rebirth.

For those individuals who could make this reflection, it was enlightening to recall that descent into darkness has been considered necessary for initiation into light within all spiritual traditions, that the cross has always been the Christian way to the resurrection. Sister Maureen O'Grady, in the midst of her own long and debilitating illness, was one who was led to reflect on this contradiction and on the 'politics of vulnerability'.<sup>27</sup> In her early 1990s 'Reflections from a Hospital Bed', Maureen wrote of her negative reaction to the chaplain who reminded her about offering all her sufferings to Jesus. For her, God was a healing God, who had brought her ease through the healing skills of hospital staff and the healing action of those who visited her. Discipleship of Jesus, the one who preached justice and peace, meant suffering and death, but also belief in the resurrection.

Sometime before her death in 1996, Maureen had begun a study of the Liberation Theology of Dorothee Soelle, German theologian. Soelle's idea of liberation was that of 'a full and happy life here and now, for everyone', wrote Maureen. The 'poor' meant not just the materially poor, but also the vulnerable people of the so-called First World: the alienated workers of an industrial nation, the women of a patriarchal society, the unprotected citizens of a government dedicated to extending weapons and controls in the name of national security. To all these Soelle, as Maureen read her, delivered a message of hope amidst a changing world.<sup>28</sup>

In a poetic idiom, Sister Anne Waugh summed up the continuing ambiguities of cross, resurrection, suffering and joy, that are characteristic of all human journey.<sup>29</sup>

When God's grace gushes and floods  
When small cracks and crevices brim  
When heart once riveted to Christ-cross only  
Feels smile-split with sometime joy  
Feels clasped and coveted for seconds  
Spun singing into forever now  
Why cry?

Because I and people-pain are one  
Because for this time am I cradled  
Because God gifts gratuitously  
Are fleeting until grasped from time  
I die.

‘ A P R O G R E S S I V E H E R M E N E U T I C O F T H E  
N A T U R E O F G O D ’ 3 0

Underlying this exploration of the way of contemplation was an even deeper, more radical search for who was God. The history of religious life in all religions shows men and women coming together to pursue a common way of life, which varied – often quite drastically – from group to group, from community to community. Yet under all the differences was a common quest for the sacred, a striving for union with the divine, for intimacy with God, and, for Christians, with the person of Jesus Christ. The particular way of life devised by each group was seen as but a means to help in this fundamental search for the experience of God.

This experience of God differed from group to group and, perhaps more typically, from era to era. The very concept of the nature of the divine could – and did – change from generation to generation. Whatever symbol of the ultimate divinity that the community, or the individual, adopted, therein was the primary indicator of their vision of the mystery which is at the heart of all being. What was enriching for earlier generations of Sisters of Mercy may seem less so to later generations, and vice versa. The naming of the divine mystery necessarily depends on metaphors, is always by way of analogies which fall far short of the reality they try to identify.

The foundation Sisters of Mercy were formed in what might be called the classical idea of God, seen through the Christian symbolic lenses, and influenced by the Irishness of the Australian Catholic church and popular devotion, as well as by the universality of the church centred on the papacy. It was a model of God which had persisted, in its basic elements, for a long time. It was to be threatened radically by the rise of a postmodern consciousness in society and the effects of the Second Vatican Council – and all that led up to it – in the church.

This model of God was based on the model of absolute monarchy. God was the Supreme Being, the creator of all things, who governed all things according to a providential plan which was only revealed to human beings in stages. This God was perfect, omniscient, omnipotent, unchangeable, self-existent, transcendent. This God was masculine, a hierarchical ruler, King and Lord of all. On some occasions, He was a wrathful ruler, dominating everything; on others, He was benevolent, but still dominant. It was a

hierarchical model and it was a patriarchal model. It could also be a very comforting model, giving a sure basis for trust and for courage.

For the Sisters of Mercy this God was a loving Father, upon whose providential care and guidance they could rely, even if they could not always understand it. God their Father had laid out, in His infinite wisdom and love, a design for each of them and for the community. When Carmel Bourke gave a speech at the centenary dinner for Old Scholars in 1980, she spoke of God's love and guidance over the past one hundred years, and His special design for them. God had shaped their foundress, Evangelista Fitzpatrick, for her great role through the events of her life. She had been able to fulfil that role through her sure trust in God, their loving Father. Carmel painted a moving picture of Mother Mary MacKillop and Evangelista riding about Adelaide – probably in a hooded buggy – looking at the schools in order to decide which one the Sisters of St Joseph would hand over to the Sisters of Mercy. They were 'two holy women with but one thought, united in their love of God and their longing to serve Him in His people.'

The note of trust in God's loving providence had begun in the founding years of the Sisters of Mercy and continued on through the generations. It had been a favourite virtue of Catherine McAuley's, so much so that one cleric had called her The Sister of Divine Providence. A search through the annuals of both St Aloysius and Mater Christi Colleges from their early decades reveals it to be a constant theme. In the centenary year journal, Anne Rivers, a former principal of SAC – and one of a much later generation than Carmel Bourke – wrote of God as a loving, providing Father who loved us and looked after us. He knew what we needed and He provided it.

Despite this loving fatherhood, the transcendence of God remained an important element in the classical model. The two aspects of immanence and transcendence were frequently juxtaposed. The 1909 writer who wrote of Jesus as our Divine Model, also described God as 'moon and sun' above the 'toppling crags of Duty'.<sup>31</sup> God was 'in the heart within, and also o'er-head', to student Kathleen Kitson in 1917. God sat on His Heavenly Throne, but also, through Jesus, came into our hearts in Holy Communion. Maureen Kennett won first prize in a Monstrance Competition in 1957 with her essay on The Mass in Our Life. Through the Mass she climbed to the throne of God. She adored Him and praised His Holy Name, thanked Him for His gifts, offered reparation for sin, and asked for all that was needed for soul and body. She offered to God herself, her family and friends on the paten in union with Jesus Christ. In Communion, God gave her His only Son to assist her live her Mass in her daily life. It was a familiar theme for that period.

The notion of God's transcendence was tied up with that of solitude. A 1912 article on 'True Education' gave a somewhat enigmatic account of the education of Joan of Arc. She was uneducated according to the world's

standards, but in fact, her upbringing within an isolated place of nature had given her spiritual advantages and an 'ineffably grand' education according to 'a purer philosophical standard'. The fountain of Domremy was on the brink of a boundless forest, where abode mysterious powers and ancient secrets. The abbeys within the region did not disturb the deep solitude but spread over it a network or awning of Christian sanctity.

The 1930 annual printed a poem *Coram Sanctissimo* under a photo of the convent chapel. It displayed the familiar blend of intimacy and transcendent mystery.

Remote – withdrawn from noisy street,  
A shrine of beauty rare,  
Deaf to the traffic of passing feet,  
Silence, breathing of prayer!

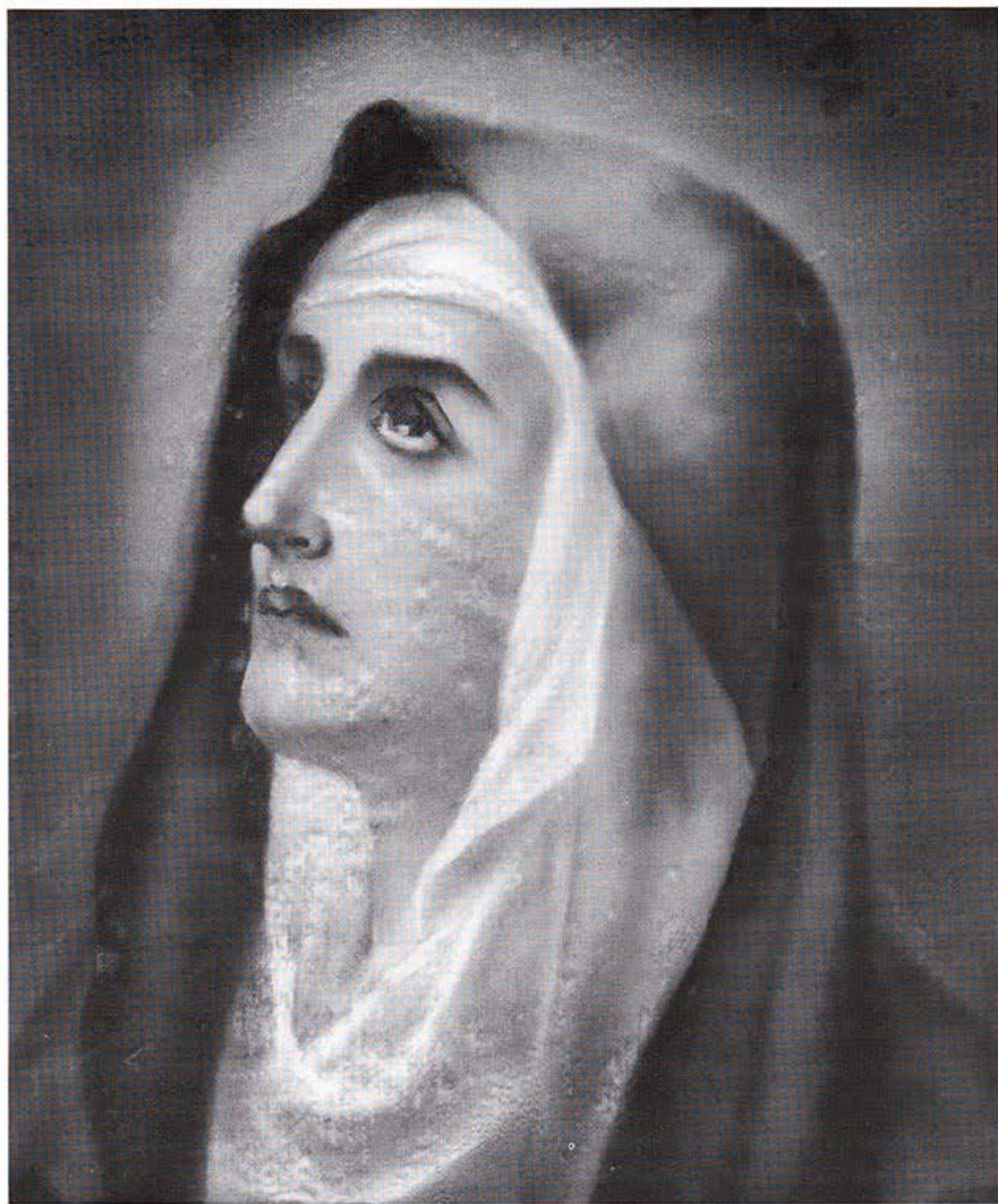
.....

On the incense-laden air  
As gifts from Heaven angels bear,  
Beauty of earth that all is Thine  
From Italy, Africa, Argentine,  
Speak to our hearts of worship meet  
Here at the Master's feet.

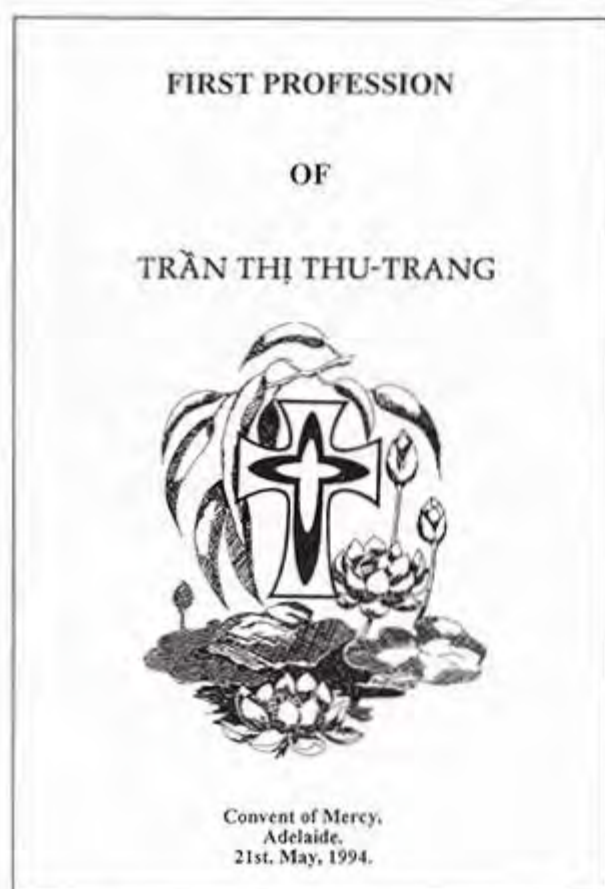
God may be ultimately transcendent, but that there were other beings who could mediate with Him for suppliant humans was also the message of the 1930 writers. God was the Beginning and End of all Experience, but the Kingdom of God, the New Creation, was to be found in the fullness of Christ, who was also the Good Shepherd.<sup>32</sup> The Kingdom of God, achieved through the redemptive sufferings of Jesus, was another frequent theme. God reigned in glory, honour and majesty, strength and beauty. God was a just judge, but one who was loyal to his subjects to the end. For God, though he was Lord, was also, in Jesus, a loving shepherd who cared for His flocks with infinite patience and infinite mercy.

Jesus, who was both God and man, was the epitome of the divine quality of loving care. The 1909 SAC annual, for example, quoted Catherine McAuley's comparison of the five letters of the word Mercy to the five wounds of Our Lord and the five letters of His Holy Name, Jesus. The imitation of Jesus, our Divine Model and Master, was the way along which the sisters walked and along which they tried to encourage their pupils likewise to walk. When Judge Roma Mitchell looked out of her courtroom, she could see the golden cross on the top of the convent chapel, and found therein a special reminder of her school days.<sup>33</sup>

The person of Jesus Christ, Christ of the Gospels and of the Eucharist, was held up to students constantly.<sup>34</sup> Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was



*Painting of Our Lady of Sorrows by Sr M. Camillus Murphy*



*Cover designs for rituals at Sr Tran Thi Thu Trang's profession, 1994; Sr Mary Do Thi Thu's entry ceremony, 1992*



*Sr Maureen O'Grady goes to 1994 Chapter session*

very strong, and provided not just a source of succour but also one of often intense devotedness. The nun was 'bowed in prayer before God's Altar Throne', but it was very often the Sacred Heart of Jesus with whom she was communing.<sup>35</sup> June Devotions, at St Aloysius, involved a daily school assembly and the 'Rosary of the Sacred Heart', climaxing on the feast of the Sacred Heart, when the whole school was consecrated to the Sacred Heart.<sup>36</sup> Even more familiarly, above all for young pupils, Jesus was sometimes the Infant King or the Divine Infant. He was 'dear Jesus', 'Mary's only little Son', and so more approachable when we had done wrong.<sup>37</sup>

The transcendence of God was greatly softened by devotion to Mary and the many and varying saints of the Christian calendar. The annuals of St Joseph's, later Mater Christi College, showed a particularly strong devotion to Mary. Mary was close to us, because she was a human being. She was the Mother of God, our Heavenly Mother and Queen, but she was also our mother and our model for womanhood. The practice of altars to Mary and of processions or other celebrations on her feasts fed the imagination but also stirred emotions. Convent chapels, filled with flowers, candles, white frocks and veils and blue cloaks of the Children of Mary Sodality, made a strong impact on young – and not so young – hearts and minds.

The model of Mary as the perfect woman was rather ambiguous, and certainly unattainable in its entirety. Mary was the Immaculate Mother, Virgin of Virgins, who spread her queenly mantle over the earth. She was all-fair, the great masterpiece of the One who made the mountains and the seas. But she gave protection and powerful aid. Though she was the Mother of God, the perfect Woman, she also shone forth 'as a sign of sure hope and solace to the pilgrim people of God'.<sup>38</sup> She had also come back to earth several times to speak with some of her children. There are many traces of devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes and St Bernadette, to Our Lady of Fatima, or to the Queen of the Rosary who had intervened often to help her children. Our Lady Help of Christians was the special patroness of Australia, and articles on her reminded their readers that it was 'no accident' that the World War II ended in the Pacific on the feast of Mary's Assumption into Heaven.

There was the very real communion of the saints – men and women who had led holy lives and were now enjoying their reward in Heaven, and who were willing to intercede for those still on earth. Those saints chosen as patrons for the convent or the school received attention on the festive days given them in the church calendar. The Mercy Rule listed a quite lengthy list of saints, men and women, put forward as ones to whom the sisters were 'exhorted to pay special devotion'. St Joseph was a particular friend, and was often called upon in needy circumstances, including financial. St Aloysius was a model of purity for the students, as was St Maria Goretti in the mid-



*Sr. Teresa Flaherty meets Pope John Paul II, 1979*

twentieth century. Celebration of St Patrick's day was assured by the Irish origin of the Catholic Church. The patronal feasts of sisters, especially of the Reverend Mother, were marked by hand-made gifts, flowers, and sometimes concerts. The boarders celebrated the feast of their boarding mistress by a concert in the evening, followed by a party. There was a special assembly at SAC on the feast of St Aloysius with a 'long play' and an early finish in the afternoon. A talk on the saint's life and virtues constituted the religion class for that day.<sup>39</sup>

The archives contain an interesting amount of 'Memorabilia' depicting devotion to the communion of the saints. There are relics of various holy men and women, some known, others more obscure, some probably authentic, others more doubtful. There is a stone from the Hill of Calvary, and leaves from Fr Damian's grave. There is a piece of Catherine McAuley's habit and also a scrap of Pope Pius IX's cassock. There is a medal of Catherine McAuley and one of Our Lady of Mercy, Dolour beads, and a Lourdes medal.

Communion with the universal church's centre in Rome remained meaningful. The archives hold papal blessings and other papal messages, decoratively printed and illuminated. There is a college article on the visit of Paul VI to Australia in 1970, which ended with the words, 'God bless the Pope'.<sup>40</sup> As a descendant of a settler who came on the first boat to Adelaide, the *Buffalo*, in 1836, Margaret Abbott took part in the penitential rite at the Mass said by Pope John Paul II in 1986. There are letters from two Adelaide Mercies on their response to the presence of John Paul II at the beatification of Mary MacKillop in Sydney. Ilsa Neicinieks and Mary Symonds were representing the Adelaide Congregation at the ceremony in 1995. Both were migrants to Australia, and were now attending the beatification of a first-generation Australian, one who had helped Evangelista Fitzpatrick and her twenty-three companions significantly when they arrived from Argentina. Ilsa expressed her emotions on this occasion:

I realized again what an amazing church I belong to, and that, despite its contradictions and sinfulness, I love it deeply. Then I thought of Mary MacKillop and remembered that she said something similar when describing how she felt in her darkest hour.<sup>41</sup>

#### RE-DEFINING SPIRITUALITY

The late 1960s and the 1970s had begun to display a re-defining of the nature of spirituality and a decided change in the flavour of devotion. Documents of the 1960s onward reveal a growing exploration of scripture, including the Old Testament, and a growing experimentation with liturgy. A number of sisters were now studying theology, including external courses from the



*Sr M. Xavier Webb, joyous in retirement*



*A 'new' look – Sr Gemma Johnson*



*Sisters in play, Mercy Killing, 1984*



*Sr Monia Marks (as provincial) meets noted contemplative monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, OSB, in 1980*



*Sr Monia Marks (as provincial) meets Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche communities, in 1977*

Mater Dei Institute for religious in Sydney. Adelaide Mercies were quite early in devising new kinds of retreats – group retreats, held at convents such as Port MacDonnell, Elizabeth, or Victor Harbor. Directed towards a renewal programme, the retreats demanded considerable involvement from each member. A sabbatical or study leave/spiritual renewal programme gathered momentum during the 1980s especially, and embraced a variety of areas and places, including studies in theology and spirituality, long retreats and pilgrimages, and personal development programmes.

There was a move away from what could have been a preoccupation with suffering and an incipient move towards a more holistic life-style and spirituality. A 1968 conference included a talk on 'Health, Happiness, and Holiness for the Religious Today'. In 1969, the basic ideal or theme of the first of the Mercy Union Renewal programmes conducted in Canberra annually was 'The Glory of God is Man [sic] Fully Alive'. Included in this was the 'acquisition of womanly virtues' – though it must be added that all the directors or lecturers were male. In 1970, the programme for one day was led by a woman, Dominican nun and medical doctor, Sister M. Luke, who spoke on 'Womanhood'.

The traditional value of prayer was still affirmed strongly, with greater emphasis on the immanence of God. Sisters guiding postulants and novices and members not yet in permanent vows were reminded that mental prayer was the source of familiarity with Father, Son, and Spirit. A vocation to religious life involved young people in self-reflection before God. The evangelical counsels demanded a total consecration of self to God, a living-out of the whole gospel way of life. Thus the absolute necessity of prayer, if they were to come close to Christ. In God alone would they find the grace and strength they needed.<sup>42</sup>

Seeing religious life in the context of Christ's presence in the ordinary situations of our lives deepened their understanding of commitment.<sup>43</sup> The essence of Christian spirituality was given in the words of St Paul. It was 'putting on the mind and heart of Christ', 'Christ among you – your hope of glory'. Mrs Glenda Condon, as deputy principal of St Aloysius, described the college curriculum of the 1970s as 'developing a 'just' community and living out the gospel message' of love for one another, and of justice and mercy. Another lay teacher on the staff described Educating for Justice in terms of the quality of relationships and attention to who was suffering, so that God's 'love, peace, healing, and concern' could prevail.<sup>44</sup>

*Godspell*, one of the college musicals of the time, under the direction of Sister Janet Mead, proclaimed that 'Jesus Christ started it – King Arthur was one of those who carried it on. By retelling the attempt and apparent failure of inspiring people to be fully human and make this world a better place, we are all strengthened in our own struggle to do the same ... Whether we

succeed or not does not really matter – what matters is the honesty and willingness with which we have cared for each other in striving to give all we have and more, to others.’

The Holy Spirit was also receiving greater recognition in daily living. Mass of the Holy Ghost/Spirit opened the school year. Now the Spirit’s action was tied up with the notion of listening not only to God but also to one another. As the spotlight became more and more focussed on ‘community’, as well as on changes in ministry according to the needs of the times, the exhortations were for every one to be ready to hear the voice of the Spirit when he [sic] called for us to move on. The Holy Spirit was the finger of God, whose gift of understanding would help our vision to become clearer, so that we would know how God was directing us in this twentieth century.<sup>45</sup> A few sisters were also attracted to the more dramatic Spirit-based piety of the Charismatic Movement or Pentecostalism.

The symbol of the Word, which was evident in documents such as the Editorial of Mater Christi Principal, Sister Monica Gallivan, in 1969, and more decidedly in the 1980 Adelaide Chapter Acts<sup>46</sup>, combined the notion of listening to the action of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, whose Word comes to us ‘in Scripture, in our lives, in the lives of others’, together with the action of the Holy Spirit, who speaks within our hearts and gives us understanding and wisdom.

Sisters and local communities were enjoined to be open to receiving and sharing the Word with each other within their local communities. They were also to be attentive to the Word spoken in our contemporary society, so that they might seek to find ways of being among those who confront injustice as well as examine their own structures. In Old Testament terminology, their task was to ‘choose life’ so that those who came after them might ‘live in the love of Yahweh, your God: obeying His voice, clinging to Him, for in this your life consists’. (Deut. 30:19-20). The faithfulness of Yahweh, and His steadfast love for His chosen people, was a recurring note of this period.

The 1994 Chapter Handbook showed that a re-appropriation of the feminine spirit of the Wisdom figure of the Old Testament had been occurring (Wis. 9,10-). The Spirit breathed over the world, one issue of *Lookout*, the congregational newsletter, claimed.<sup>47</sup>

*Lookout* this month is alive with the action of our sisters stirring to this breath in whatever sphere is given them, from gardens to government.

#### A NEW IMAGE OF THE DIVINE

As the congregation moved into the 1980s and the 1990s, there was, however, no distinctly different image of God from the traditional one. ‘God’ was still

'God'. But there were hints of an emerging new understanding of that sacred ultimate. There was no new God image in the general run of statements or documents as yet, but outlines of one were discernible in talks, workshops, or writings by some of the more articulate sisters, as well as in congregational newsletters, in articles distributed for reading, or in library books purchased.

A number of post-modern symbols were being used. There were new words to describe the sacred and what was happening in their inner journeying. Words such as 'energy', 'presence', 'connectedness', 'relationship', 'conversation', 'fluid process', 'creativity', 'round tables', 'inclusive', 'cyclic' were being used, some widely.<sup>48</sup> The 'divine mystery' could be expressed in 'an abundance of symbols'. There were the images of God as Creator, Designer, Wise One, Rain-giver, Mother of Mercy, Spirit-Sophia, Great Mother, Architect of the World, Friend, Queen of Heaven, Great Spirit, and Gracious Furious Mystery. There were the epithets of indwelling, resisting, challenging, liberating, connecting, blessing, sustaining, recreating, guiding, completing, renewing ...<sup>49</sup> God was being seen as 'divine energy', 'the ground or source of our being', a God of process or of becoming. God was our loving Father, but increasingly God was also our loving Mother. Even more of an iconoclasm, God was She Who Is.

A number of developing spiritualities seem to have fed into this new symbolic consciousness. Many of the symbols or ideas being freshly used were reminiscent of the Celtic spiritual tradition, from the Irish roots of which the Institute of Mercy – and the majority of its members – had grown. The evolving creation-centred spirituality movement helped to feed into the new symbolism, as did a growing rapprochement to Australian Aboriginal culture and religion and a degree of involvement with the women's movement and feminist spirituality and theology.

The sacredness of the intimate relationship with the land inherent in these spiritualities came through strongly in a poem by Sister Anne Waugh published in the national Mercy journal of 1989.

The earth knows  
Dark and silent and deeply stirring  
The earth knows  
Feels tugged and tremors of small lightness  
Seeds shuffling off old cracked coats  
Tentative and trembling  
Searching and seeking out the surfaces  
The earth knows.

Sister Patricia Feehan's visual image, enthusiastically embraced during the 1994 Chapter Year and as logo by the new administration, may not have been an explicit God-image, but its spontaneous adoption was an indication that a

new image of the sacred was emerging, from which might eventually arise a new concept of God.<sup>50</sup> The colour and the form of Patricia's visual pointed to a sacred centre from which emanated an energy that was fluid, circular, spiralling, in process – yet contained within the limits of tradition or of Mercy-time and Mercy-space. The visual image was right for the group at that time. So, too, were the circular or spiralling movements introduced in rituals or used as illustrations on prayer sheets and elsewhere at this period. The idea of movement around a circle with a sacred centre was part of the heritage from Catherine McAuley's own spirituality. The spiral was not only a pervasive Celtic symbol but one which was surfacing again in women's spirituality.

The notion of process, of asking questions rather than of finding answers, became more and more significant for the group. The process of searching, of exploring, of journeying was even more important than the reaching journey's end. The present system was confused and hard to describe, a document for consultation re housing and community needs stated in 1993. But what was significant was 'Are we asking the right questions?' The notions of story, journey, quest, pilgrimage were being re-appropriated. What was important was to 'seek an explicit naming and exploration of the source of our belonging and our interconnectedness within our universe: the God of Mercy'.<sup>51</sup> God was a process and a mode of becoming.

This metaphor of journeying, of 'leaving home', had a long tradition, a tradition ensconced in mythology and in the scriptures of all religions. The sermon at one of the early professions in Angas Street, that of Sisters M. Bernard Clare Ryder and Berchmans Lennox, in 1900,<sup>52</sup> used such a metaphor, typical of the earlier kind of rhetoric connected with entry into religious life. It was a patriarchal tradition in many ways with its sense of severing bonds and moving onto new territory. And yet, it was a universal human tradition with the sense of leaving old securities, of being open to the inherent reality of existence, of learning to trust the unfolding events of one's life.

Mercy associate Rosslyn von der Borch expressed it thus. Reflecting on her work with Mercy Refugee Service and the contact made with many cultures, and on Catherine's charism, especially her concept of the common life, interpreted to embrace the life we all share in common, Rosslyn wrote:

We have the chance to see God bigger than before, encompassing more.  
We can delight in different ways of living faith, knowing more of God's many aspects and facets.<sup>53</sup>

A background to this growth in a new understanding of the divine was the rise of what has been called 'cultural post-modernity'. As our society underwent drastic change, our culture moved into a 'post-modern consciousness', which made the classical notion of God, in sway since the Enlightenment of



*Srs Catherine Seward and Joan McCourt at Sr Janette Gray's talk on celibacy, in SAC staffroom, 1991*



*Central setting by Sr Margaret Abbott for a congregational ritual, 1992*



*Sr Patricia Feehan's visual of the Adelaide Mercy 'energy', adopted for 1994 Chapter*

the seventeenth century, seem obsolete. The old model of God as absolute, powerful Supreme Being was threatened and no longer completely tenable for many. The consequences for contemporary Christians were often devastating and painful. It was a time of shattering of beloved symbols. The Sisters of Mercy were not exempt from such *bouleversement* in their understanding of God. A process of disruption of the very foundations of their spiritual life had been set in train for many within the group.

Their concept of God seems to have widened most conspicuously with the inclusion of the feminine in the understanding of divine nature. Both cause and effect resided in the attempt to reclaim the feminine aspect of divinity, so that God was symbolised in female images as well as male. That the congregation was fairly well advanced towards acceptance of a Christian feminism – whether the new consciousness was so termed or not – was shown in the second Council newsletter of the 1995 administration. There, in what was basically an administrative information document, a picture of the Last Supper including women around the table was reproduced.<sup>54</sup>

Interest in and action for various aspects of the women's movement – apart from the impact of their ministries with women – had helped raise consciousness for some, and had permeated through the group, to a larger or lesser degree with individuals. A number of sisters were involved in Women and the Australian Church (WATAC) and in Sophia, a women's spirituality centre.<sup>55</sup> There were other networks, such as the women's group in Alice Springs of which Joan Gaskell was a part and which studied the writing of feminist scripture scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, or the congregational Mercy Feminist Theology Group which looked at Anne McLay's work on the feminine in church and education and devolved some feminist principles of organisation, or the women's group in Darwin which Trudy Keur initiated. National Mercy communications and gatherings also contributed.

Some of the sisters advanced this growing consciousness through their own writings and talks. Sister Janette Gray had written of the tendency towards the symbolic, intuitive, visual, and relational in women's ways of effective learning, and of evidence of a 'feminine' spirit in post-Vatican II religious education, though not generally recognized as such.<sup>56</sup> In another article and in her later thesis, published in book form, *Neither Escaping nor Exploiting Sex: Women's Celibacy*, she used the feminine metaphor of pregnancy and waiting to explore the following of Christ as an indwelling in the Womb of God. Women's celibacy rejected the biologism that presumed all women exist to be procreative or for sexual use. Celibacy sought transformation of human relationships by relinquishing the satisfaction of 'progress', a future ensured by progeny, and the 'power' of the ownership of others in human bonding.<sup>57</sup>

Sister Patricia Fox, in a thesis on *The Trinity: Symbol for a Cosmic Future*<sup>58</sup>, claimed that the Roman church would not even begin to admit to the very

serious question of structural dysfunction and internal credibility while its leadership continued to be locked into the worship of a God who was imaged as monarchical and as a trinity of persons which can only be expressed in hierarchical form in patriarchal images. Her work explored the writings of two contemporary feminist Catholic theologians, Catherine La Cugna and Elizabeth Johnson, who both present more holistic and inclusive images of the Trinity. The biblical symbol of Holy Wisdom or Sophia – a consistently female image for God in scripture – was examined. Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia was offered as alternative to the traditional Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit.

Both Patricia and Janette also spread their changed understanding through lecturing. Patricia, in a talk at the national Mercy Alive Conference of 1996, achieved a powerful impact on her audience when she made a fundamental suggestion that an important facet of Mercy ministry today might be a more explicit naming of God as the Mother of Mercy. Mary has had to carry this and other divine titles because of the patriarchal nature of our religious sentiment. Patricia proposed a twin process of relieving Mary of the divine attributes, thus retrieving her as a genuine woman of faith and model of discipleship, and simultaneously restoring these attributes to their proper place, the divinity. The restoration would mean moving towards recognizing the full humanity of women as well as the fullness of God.<sup>59</sup>

Implicit in the female imagery being reclaimed was the thought of embodiment. The female body had long been a stumbling block for male theologians and spiritual athletes. Sister Margaret Abbott's thesis on *Re-visioning Confirmation: Towards Confirming Women's Experience* made a bold plea towards reclaiming embodiment, not only as a fundamental source of empowerment but also as revelation of the divine. The neglect in articulating the role of the Spirit in the sacrament of confirmation derived from the Spirit's association with feminine images such as *ruah*, *shekinah*, and *hokmah/sophia*.<sup>60</sup> If bodies were manifestations of God, and if self-transcendence was through the senses, particularly the body, then for women to communicate with God and with themselves, they needed a divine in women's image, an equal share in the divine with men.

Janette Gray began her exploration of celibacy with a chapter entitled *Suspicion of Celibacy's Denial of the Body*. The chapter opened with a quote from theologian Rosemary Haughton. If we mean anything by 'incarnation', the notion involves caring for bodies – feeding, healing and delighting in them.<sup>61</sup> Celibacy, for Janette, allowed religious women to assume control over their own bodies, in a way which is different to denying their sexuality in order to maintain control or be controlled. She discriminated between 'the Kingdom-like freedom in assuming control of their bodies' and 'the bondage of body denial'.

A page of companionship – mutuality in friendship



*Anne Waugh and Helen Owens*



*Deirdre and Marie Therese*



*The two Ruths*



*Hoa, Elizabeth, Monica, Trang, Mary-Anne, Thu*



*Pat, Francis and Joan*



*Elizabeth's cake*



*A new model of community:  
Kairos community, Hackham  
West, celebrates Tom Gleeson's  
birthday, 1995. L to R: Gerry  
Healy (former member),  
Sr Meredith Evans,  
Fr Tom Gleeson, Daniel (Nudge)  
Wickham, Sr Anne Foale*



*Sr Kate Conley's shepherd hut – experiencing solitude*

There were other fundamental differences in the emerging concept of the divine. Patricia Fox described 'a God who is not monolithic but a living mystery of relation vitally involved with the world.' She explored the use of the metaphor of mutuality, experienced in genuine friendship, as a model for the relationships within the trinitarian divine image. 'The Trinity provides a symbolic picture of a totally shared life at the heart of the universe'. This shared life is not only internally within the Trinity itself, as in the classical doctrine, but also resides in the mutual interdependence between God and ourselves, and in the interdependent quality of the entire universe.<sup>62</sup>

A renewed interest in creation meant that the cyclic quality of the sacred was also attracting attention. A feeling of connectedness to the cycles of our own being and those of the earth we inhabit was becoming fundamental to the perception of the sacred. Patricia Fox wrote of the cyclical movement within the Trinity, 'a revolving action, such as the revolution of a wheel',<sup>63</sup> The metaphor of the dance, and the use of circle dancing in ritual, gained some popularity. Sister Ruth Mullins wrote in a letter to the congregation<sup>64</sup> of how she saw 'God imaged for her in the beauty and grace of a flight of snow geese' in America's mid-West, 'a stately dance of joy in being alive'. Margaret Abbott quoted a poem which used the figures of the circle and the dance when she talked about new metaphors for the sacred meeting of divine and human in the sacrament of confirmation.<sup>65</sup>

A sense of place; a sense of connectedness to nature and to other beings; an awareness of a sacred presence in all things; a bonding to one's own inner being in one's aloneness: these were ancient elements, but also elements that began to contribute to post-modern (and Mercy) spirituality in a very potent way. The understanding was emerging of a 'panentheistic'<sup>66</sup> God. Creation-centred spirituality became subtly influential. Margaret Abbott's work in presenting it to teachers and others fed into many channels, and especially into the creativity and leadership she exhibited in ritual and liturgy for the congregation and elsewhere. So, too, did her initiative in adapting and presenting holistic processes based on the great myths, as developed by sacred psychologist Dr. Jean Houston.

The growing ecological movement was also affecting the spirituality and contemplative attitude of many of the sisters, and was altering their understanding of the nature of the divine. In late 1989, several of them joined together into an 'Environment, Ecology and Holistic Living Group', with the aim to put environmental and ecological issues onto the corporate agenda of the Sisters of Mercy. They sought a 'greater awareness of the connectedness of humankind and our earth by becoming aware of creation theology, and appropriate liturgies, holistic lifestyle, and practical steps.' Their efforts resulted in the congregational chapter of that time adopting care for the environment as one of its priorities.

In 1990, Margaret Abbott accepted the role of Adelaide liaison person with ISMA, which had pledged to disseminate information about the Environmental Sabbath, an initiative of the United Nations Environmental Programme. The Sabbath was designed to be a day of prayer and reflection, of reverence for the earth and commitment to action against its destruction. As liaison person, Margaret contacted schools, parishes and other colleagues, to encourage the holding of the Environmental Sabbath. In 1991, she was joined by Sister Trudy Keur, who was a member of the Diocesan Care for the Earth group. By 1992, their promotion had helped towards the adoption of the Sabbath by the SA Council of Churches, whose Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation commission eventually took over the organisation of the Environmental Sabbath. In 1993, the National Mercy Chapter acknowledged that 'an active ministry to the earth is integral to our Mercy Spirituality'. It urged sisters 'to seek ways to collaborate with those movements of our time, set up for the preservation and regeneration of our planetary home'.

Care for the environment had also permeated the consciousness of the sisters through other channels. Janet Lowe, Claudette Cusack, and Gloria Lord were known as vigorous promoters of recycling and the use of natural and organic processes. Claudette and Anne Foale (as a postulant) had set up, in the late 1970s, an organic garden at Millicent convent school, for which Margaret Abbott as principal, had obtained a Commonwealth Schools Commission Innovations grant. Claudette, in 1984, set up a community garden in Cardigan Street, Angle Park.<sup>67</sup> Substantially subsidised by the Mercy congregation, the project was designed to provide horticultural training for unemployed youth and community service for young offenders. Local children would tend the Peace Garden.<sup>68</sup> Claudette had learnt the principles of organic gardening in Ecuador, and she was later to use them again in the Mamre project of the Parramatta Mercies in St Mary's, a western suburb of Sydney.<sup>69</sup>

Janette Gray's writing on celibacy linked exploitation of women's sexuality with wanton destruction of the land. Such wanton destruction of life signalled the 'death' of God – as we knew Him – and heralded a God rendered helpless, a victim of its creature, humanity. The vicarious extinction of future life, as volunteered by celibates, was a prophetic sign. It was prophetic in its ecological indication of the connectedness of creation, by showing that disorder and pollution in personal, religious and social life adversely affected all life. Celibacy – with the unused womb – reminded us of our responsibility for creation, especially when, as now, the land is unable to be fertile. The death of the future of one life signalled the danger to *all life now*.<sup>70</sup> A celibate commitment signalled a mediation between human exploitation and the apparent helplessness of nature and God.

In 1995, Kate Conley chose to spend her sabbatical year in close contact with the earth, living in a former shepherd's hut in the Barossa Valley. There

she learnt from experience the truth that 'solitude' differs vastly from 'merely being alone or simply passing the hours'. Rather, 'the creator and all of creation are one's constant companions ... There is no hint of any escape from reality ... The dissonance between reality of things of the earth and the body, of those of the spirit and nerves, simply are resolved and cease to exist.'<sup>71</sup> Kate's year of living closer to the earth, together with her reflection on her ten years as chaplain in a women's prison, led her to name God in fresh ways.

Among some of the sisters, there was also a revival of the symbol for the divine presence which accompanied the biblical people into exile – the *Shekinah*. The *Shekinah* was a presence during suffering, a weeping feminine presence. As the great sufferings of the twentieth century brought about the collapse of the Enlightenment myth of unending progress, attention was being drawn more strongly to the underside of history. The analyses of liberation theories and theologies were affecting the contemporary concepts of the divine. The absolute, changeless God, untouched in essence by human misery, was giving way to a God whose own compassionate anguish was a supreme expression of divine love. God was emerging as a God of pathos, a God who suffered, felt compassion, wept with us. It was a new metaphor for the divine and one with which the Mercy charism could resonate strongly.

This vulnerability of God was made even more credible for those sisters influenced by the new scientific story of the universe. Contemporary scientists talked about the chaos at the heart of the cosmos, the unpredictability inherent in the very process of creation. There was order and disorder in all aspects of the universe. God was no longer the immutable, unchangeable, all powerful, omniscient Supreme Being as taught to earlier generations of sisters. The biblical image of *Rahamim*, womb-compassion, became a favourite image for the divine, among Mercy feminists. The Wisdom figure of the Old Testament, too, assumed more significance for some. The need for the guiding power of Wisdom, the feminine Sophia, became urgent in the face of a God who suffered, who was mutable and vulnerable. Ecological understanding, wrote Janette Gray, revealed that God was embodied in the world, not only proclaimed through it.

As the absence of the classical God darkened for many, it seemed that God was a God within the void, the darkness. The slow disintegration of the traditional understanding was painful for many sisters. The pain reverberated with the anguish caused by the very obvious decline in membership of the group. It was a 'dark night', however, that appears to have led the group into a new experience of God, a new compassion for and solidarity with other beings, including the earth itself. There appears to have been a new bonding together within the Mercy circle and a new intuition of fullness of life.

The correlative of divine Mercy was a God who was filled with righteous anger and outrage at the injustice rampant in the world.<sup>72</sup> The presence of

injustice, the vulnerability of suffering people and of the suffering earth, the uncertainty at the heart of the creative process: all contributed to the image of a God who was not completely in control, but who was prepared to encourage the taking of risks, with courage and in love and compassion. What has been called 'an ethic of risk'<sup>73</sup> may be discerned as underlying some of the community's contemporary statements about working for justice and mercy and peace. God was a God who supported the making of 'dangerous memories', of risking all even if success seemed unassured, at least in one's own lifetime.

The experience of vulnerability and the consequent need for dissent was expressed in various ways by different members. Sister Cynthia Griffin, in her 1978 thesis, chose to analyze the plays of two dramatists of that era, particularly from the point of view of what it was like for an individual to be vulnerable in middle class, urban Australia. She explored, through their plays, 'the destructive forces of some aspects of the work situation.'<sup>74</sup> The production of *Hypotheticals: Mercy Unto Two Thousand (AD)* in 1987, by Janette Gray, translated Catherine McAuley's 'legacy to the Institute' of charity into 'all this public dissent and law-breaking by Mercies' when religious ethics seemed to demand it – making them 'a pretty unpopular lot'. The church had become, it was hypothesized, 'the place where people come and lock the doors and tell the truth'. Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated because of his defence of the truth in El Salvador, was the patron of the Romero community of which Sister Janet Mead was member. Romero's words about the work for the coming of God's Kingdom were also quoted in a congregational council newsletter: We may never see the end results ... We are prophets of a future not our own.<sup>75</sup>

It is interesting to peruse a list of letters protesting against various forms of social abuse, written during the leadership of Sister Christine Keain (1990 - 1994). These covered widely differing issues such as nursing homes, the Gulf War, the police, and funds for housing, among others. Marita Mullins took a risk when she spoke out strongly in defence of women's equality in the church in an article in *SA Catholic*, as a response to the pope's statement against the ordination of women.<sup>76</sup>

Maryanne Loughry, recently returned in late 1995 from teaching newly appointed Jesuit Refugee Service workers in war-torn Rwanda, told the members of Boards of Mercy Institutions, at a Mass in Angas Street Chapel, about 'dangerous memories' of a different kind. She had 'now visited three holocaust memorials in her lifetime – YAD VASHEM in Israel, TOK SLOR in Phnom Phenn, and the church in Rwanda, outside of the gates of which children gathered and begged – the children of the dead in the daily genocidal massacres'.

Patricia Fox showed the connection between the image of God as all-powerful, monarchical Supreme Being and the unilateral exercise of power,



*Tree planting ceremony to honour women's achievements, Centenary of Women's Suffrage in SA, 1994. Sr Deirdre Jordan, Chancellor of Flinders University, opens the ceremony*



*Sr Christine Keain (as congregational superior) plants a tree at Flinders University in honour of Mother Evangelista Fitzpatrick*

and the evil of oppressive social structures. She urged a new image of the Trinity. The life of Jesus, she wrote, has given us memories of 'the vulnerable and foolish love' which 'identifies with suffering creation in order to bring liberation and healing'. For Patricia, the Spirit's action in the world continues Jesus' work of liberation and healing. Divine power so revealed and symbolized in the image of the Trinity, where each member is genuinely equal and interconnected in mutuality with themselves and the rest of the universe, can thus have 'profound relevance for our society'. It was primarily among the Adelaide Mercies and the wider Mercy Institute that Patricia 'learnt something of the creative possibility of a collaborative and participative community'.

#### P O S T - L O G U E : S P I R A L L I N G O N W A R D S

As the writing of this history ended – in 1996, the one hundred and fiftieth year of Mercy presence in Australia<sup>77</sup> – and as the start of the third millenium of the common era approached, the movement of Mercy in South Australia continued. It spiralled inward to the God of Mercy. In the words of their recent chapter statement, the sisters asked themselves:

Who is God for us, and how do we share our faith in that God? How can we explore ways of developing our relationship with God, life-source for the cosmos and the earth, that leads into a sustainable future?

The movement continued to spiral outward, in their mission as women of Mercy. They questioned:

How do we choose our ministries in the light of empowering the disempowered?<sup>78</sup>

How can we make 'private troubles' 'public issues'?

How can we continue the exploration of inclusive feminism without alienating others?

How do we face the implications of our ageing?

And, finally, they spiralled onward, watching the growth of the shape and texture of their Mercy group. They told themselves:

Believe in ourselves

and live in mercy;

Create in that, a feeling of belonging.

Including others in the process of mercy,

we open the circle.

1. Catherine McAuley, *Retreat Instructions*, ed. Sisters of Mercy, Albany, NY: 1952, 154.

2. Constance Fitzgerald, quoted in Elizabeth Johnson, *Review for Religious*, Jan-Feb, 1994, calls the present experience of religious 'a progressive hermeneutic of the nature of God'. 'Hermeneutics' refers to the attempts to explain or interpret something.

3. Talk to Southern Districts Ecumenical Fellowship, 8.6.1976.
4. MASA, 740/7.
5. See documents on the essential elements of religious life from the Sacred Congregation for Religious and from both the North American and Australian Leadership Conferences of women and men religious.
6. See Chapter Six.
7. Ibid.
8. Carmel Bourke, SAC Centenary Journal, 1980.
9. Theme of the 1984 congregational booklet, *Heart of Our Service*.
10. Jeannette Goglia, RSM, Merion.
11. Anne Ross-Smith, 'Organisational Communication and the Analysis of Organisational Culture, A case study using organisational documents in the analysis of the culture of a religious organisation', 1990. Copy in Angas Street congregational library.
12. Valda Dickinson, *Listen*, Vol.9, No.2, quoted in a talk on Mercy Spirituality, 1992, at the sesquicentenary of the foundation of the order in Newfoundland, MASA, 704-45.
13. Statement re Membership, ISMA national chapter, 1993.
14. Prayersheet.
15. *Retreat Instructions*, 102, 43.
16. 'Meditations of the Sisters of Mercy before Renewal of Vows, 1863', handwritten manuscript.
17. *Lumen Gentium*, 3.
18. National Pastoral Institute, Melbourne.
19. Ibid.
20. *Heart of Our Service*, 77.
21. Mrs Catherine Callaghan was a Quaker.
22. Produced by Sisters Janette Gray and Deborah Fulton.
23. See Chapter Eight.
24. Phrase used at a Congregational Day, 23.3.1996.
25. Kate Conley.
26. See Chapter Eight.
27. Title of book by Dorothee Soelle.
28. Outline notes for her projected thesis.
29. *Heart of Our Service*, p.60.
30. Constance Fitzgerald in Elizabeth Johnson.
31. S.H. Long.
32. Annual, 1968.
33. Centenary Journal, SAC.
34. Mater Christi Annual, 1955.
35. *History in the Making Part II*, mimeographed booklet, Mercy Union, 1970.
36. Carmel Bourke.
37. Gillian Haslam, Grade VI, 1948.
38. *One Out of Many*, Mercy Union newsletter, 1971.
39. Carmel Bourke.
40. *History in the Making*, Part II, 1970.
41. *Lookout*, March, 1995.
42. Seminar, Formation Mistresses, 1970.
43. Adelaide Province Notes, *One Out of Many*, 1971.
44. SAC centenary annual, 66-7.
45. Adelaide Province Notes, *One Out of Many*, 1970.
46. This attitude was re-affirmed, 1989 Congregational Directory.
47. June, 1995.
48. All in 1994 Chapter documents.
49. Prayersheet. Quotes included from Ivanka and Elizabeth Johnson.
50. Theologian and monk Sebastian Moore, influenced by Bernard Lonergan, wrote that once one finds the right image, then follows the right structure of thought, and the concepts flow therefrom.

We know it is true from the movement of our heart, especially at the point of breakthrough. (ABC Radio Programme, *Encounter*, 19.11.1989).

51. Prayersheet.
52. *The Southern Cross*, Oct.19, 1900, MASA, 150/16.
53. *The Life We Share*, 39.
54. Picture by Margaret Ackland for Uniting Church in Australia.
55. Run by the Cabra Dominican Sisters.
56. *Word in Life*, August, 1987.
57. *Bread and Wine*, 1987.
58. MA in Theol. 1993, Catholic Theological Union of Chicago.
59. Talk printed in national Mercy journal, *Listen*, Vol.14, No.1, 1996; Pat used a slide of a statue of the Mother of Mercy (see frontispiece) and asked her listeners to try to shift their perception and look on it as a representation of God as Mother of Mercy.
60. M.Theol.St., Flinders University, 1995, 71, following Elizabeth Johnson.
61. From *The Re-Creation of Eve*, Springfield: Templegate, 1985, 41.
62. 99-110, following Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine La Cugna.
63. 101, from Elizabeth Johnson.
64. Easter, 1995.
65. By Ann O'Hara Graff.
66. Everything is in God and God is in everything while still retaining their individualities; pantheism, on the other hand, identifies God with everything and vice versa.
67. Enfield City Council.
68. MASA, 910/41.
69. This was also a project which offered unemployed people a chance to learn a variety of marketable skills.
70. Underlining hers.
71. John Griffin, quoted in her journal.
72. See Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, Chapter Fourteen.
73. Sharon Welch in book of that name.
74. *Alexander Buzo and David Williamson, Two Playwrights of Urban Australia*, B.Litt., University of New England, 1978.
75. 20.12.1995.
76. Her original draft was stronger than what the editor printed.
77. The first Mercy foundation in Australia was in WA in 1846.
78. At the *Mercy Alive* conference in Canberra, April, 1996, there was a critical reflection on the possibly maternalistic connotations of the term 'empowerment' with respect to the empowerment of others rather than of self.

## Bibliographical Note

Since most of the research has been done in the Mercy archives, 34 Angas Street, Adelaide and through oral history, I leave it mainly to my text and to my references and notes to indicate bibliographical material. The Angas Street archives have a most comprehensive collection of material concerning the Adelaide Mercy history, collected and catalogued assiduously by Sr Deirdre O'Connor. They – together with the Congregational Library there – also provided me with most of the standard texts for the social background of the various eras. Both archives and library also contain most of the references cited for the study of Catherine McAuley and other Mercy history. Such are readily available in printed form. Most of the Argentinian material was collected from the Mercy archives at Mater Misericordiae convent; the library of St. Ethnea's College, Bella Vista; the archives of the de la Salle Brothers, Rio Bamba; and the archives of *The Southern Cross* newspaper; all in Buenos Aires. Fr Kevin O'Neill, through Sr Isabel McDermott, helped sort out the remains of the Mercy convent at Mercedes.

MASA in endnotes refers to the Mercy Archives, South Australia in Angas Street.

Illustrations are from material in MASA unless noted otherwise.



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