

Foreword

Sr Veronica Therese Willaway OSB

I am very honoured to be writing this foreword to welcome you to read this important book by Katharine Massam about the Spanish Benedictine Missionary Sisters of New Norcia.

This book is much more than words to me. It holds a significant part of my youth and history. I was one of the girls who lived with and was educated by the Benedictine Sisters, and at 14 years of age I entered the Congregation. Monastic and missionary life was not easy. It was a shock to my Aboriginal existence to overnight change my life and leave my peers behind to become a religious Sister. After some time, I came to realise how dedicated these Sisters were to their religious life and vocation to be missionaries working with Aboriginal people. Some people will find that hard to believe. I know New Norcia was also a place of suffering, and I know Katharine understands that too.

Walking together and listening has made this book possible. These values run deep for me. I am an Aboriginal person of the Yued and Whadjuk peoples of the Noongar Nation from the southwest of Western Australia. I am also a Benedictine Missionary Sister and have been a nun for over 60 years. The Yued traditional lands include the region where New Norcia is located. New Norcia is my family's cultural and spiritual home. My ancestors have had a close connection with New Norcia since not long after the Aboriginal mission was established there. This includes my great-grandmother Eliza Willaway (née Tainan). She was one of the Aboriginal women replaced in her role as matron of the mission when the first Spanish nuns arrived. She is included in this book too. My family is very proud of our long association with New Norcia and the Benedictine community there. Following the closure of the mission at New Norcia in 1974, my Congregation returned to live in Spain. I went with them and stayed

there for three years before coming back to Australia. In the last 25 years I have been based in a Benedictine Missionary Sisters Congregation in Nebraska, USA.

Katharine is very well placed to write this book about the Spanish Sisters. She has written extensively about the history of women in the Catholic Church. She has had over 25 years' association with New Norcia, including being a member of the Archives, Research and Publications Committee for the Benedictine Community. I know the remaining Spanish Sisters have wholeheartedly supported Katharine writing this book and they have entrusted her with information, some of a sensitive nature, to faithfully tell their story.

This book about the Spanish Sisters and their experience as missionaries in the distant foreign land of Australia tells a story I am pleased to know. It is a careful step along the way to more storytelling and deeper listening. The curious title, *The Bridge Between*, is insightful. It reminds me that we can all build bridges when we share stories and listen well. It reminds me we are always 'between' hearing and understanding more.

This book has become part of my journey too. I remember first meeting Katharine in 1999 in Perth when she started to write the history of the Spanish Sisters. I have shared my story and insights of the Benedictine Sisters with her on many occasions in the intervening years. I accepted an invitation to attend a reunion with the 'mission girls' in 2001. The reunion was a very heartfelt occasion and showed the depth for feeling between the Sisters and past residents. Katharine was there too, and I saw how she listened. In 2015, I accepted another invitation and collaborated with Katharine in a workshop for theological students about monasticism at New Norcia. In 2016 we co-presented a session at the Conference on the History of Women Religious in Santa Clara, California. Through these activities, Katharine has become a dear friend. This book has been written slowly with patience, resilience and dedication. I warmly invite you to read it.

22 June 2020
Whadjuk Boodjar
Perth, Western Australia

This text is taken from *A Bridge Between: Spanish Benedictine Missionary Women in Australia*, by Katharine Massam, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.