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Monastic and Missionary Sisters: 'Their Currency and Savings Were the Work'

In the 1930s and 1940s the Spanish women embraced their status not only as active missionaries in the remote Kimberley but also as 'true and authentic Benedictines'.¹ The intertwined monastic and missionary dimensions of their life had been a fault line since the time of the Teresians. Over these years, when the church recognised their community life, the work done by the 'Benedictine Missionary Oblate Sisters' became the bridge that connected monastic principles to their tasks as missionary women. The Rule of St Benedict in the sixth century had identified manual work as part of monastic spirituality. This chapter begins by exploring the place of work in the long history of Benedictine life, especially as it had been interpreted in the traditions of the mission at New Norcia. Then, by gathering together fragments from the sisters' writing and their recollections, it will trace the intertwined themes of work and prayer as the sisters shaped their new community in three vastly different locations: in Belgium and in the tropical Kimberley, as well as in the original house at New Norcia.

1 Abbot Catalan to Escolastica Martinez, 28 April 1937, New Norcia Archive (NNA) 01438/125.



Figure 6.1: Benedictine Oblate Sisters of New Norcia early 1931.

Left to right: Hildegard Ruiz, Escolastica Martinez, Gertrude Banks, Benita Gozalo, Mary Ciudad, Margaret Perez, Felicitas Pampliega and Teresa Roca.

Source: NNA W6-B3-4-108.

The equivalent status of manual work, formal study and prayer within Benedictine life paradoxically gave hard work dominance over both study and prayer as the preferred currency of religious commitment in the lives of these Benedictine sisters. Their work was part of their commitment to poverty: a giving over of their time and energy to be deployed as directed. Within a strong hierarchy that reserved many decisions to the monks, they gave their labour to the institution without expecting to influence that institution. As the Spanish *Notebooks* commented ruefully after detailing the heavy load of allotted tasks: 'The Sisters did not have anything; absolutely everything was provided to them by the Monastery, even down to the stamps for writing letters. Their currency and savings were the work'.² How poignant that the letters they sent with precious 'provided' stamps now play such a valuable role in piecing together their lives, and how telling that stamps were remembered as essential to life, a staple that they were not quite able to take for granted.

2 'Origen de la Congregacion de las Hermanas Benedictinas Misioneras de New Norcia, Western Australia', unpublished typescript from the notebooks of Sister Felicitas Pampliega, c.1921–c. 1967. Transcribed and edited by Sister Teresa González, Madrid c. 1980 (*Notebooks*, Madrid). Literally, *Sus moneda y aborro er[a] el trabajo*.

Gathered on the bridge

At the start of a decade when ‘work’ was the metaphorical bridge connecting the monastic and missionary aspects of life in the New Norcia convent, eight sisters from the small community had their photo taken on a literal bridge. Sometime early in 1931 as the moves to regularise the community were brewing, they gathered on the high wooden walkway above the Moore River that linked the monastery’s orchard and the apiary, near the waterhole the Yued people call *booradjin*. The bridge has no railings, and the drop of 6 feet (2 m) to the water below them is arresting. We don’t know who chose this quirky place to have a photo taken, but the daring location is symbolic. Standing between earth and sky, the Benedictine Oblate Sisters were also standing between phases in their history.

The other bridge across the Moore, the one where there was often an Aboriginal camp,³ was at the edge of town on the road to Perth. It had brought the women to the mission, and, from the time of this photo through another dozen years until the end of the Second World War, most of the Benedictine sisters crossed it again, leaving town for a time to implement the decisions detailed in the previous chapter. As the informal community expanded and evolved into a diocesan congregation, overseen by Rome through the abbot at New Norcia, six of the eight women pictured here, and three of the four others who joined them in this decade, were away from New Norcia for up to seven years at a stretch in other houses, most often for stints at their own branch house in the Kimberley.

Perhaps it was the foundation of the Kimberley house that prompted the photo. Certainly the three ‘pioneer sisters’, Hildegard, Escolastica and Gertrude, whether by dint of their new assignment or an accident of height, had led the line out onto the bridge. As the Spanish *Notebooks* affirm, the New Norcia sisters were ‘already a community, although they had no constitutions, no statutes or anything at all’.⁴ They were ‘guided only by good will’,⁵ but they appear here as a collective, steady with each other above the water, uniform as daughters of the church in black serge, starched collars and regulation shoes. Elias Devine, the Carmelite, now aged 92, is absent as usual from the community photo, as is 16-year-old Matilde de la Fuente. When Elias had arrived in 1912 she found

3 Veronica Willaway in conversation at New Norcia, September 2015.

4 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 12.

5 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 12.

a class of eight girls under the age of 12.⁶ But increasingly active policies of 'Protection' for Aboriginal people as well as the economic pressure of the Great Depression made for a different picture. Now, instead of the neat rows of a 'whole school' photo with the teachers as in the years before the First World War, numbers in the institution had more than tripled. On this occasion when the photograph was being taken the oldest and the youngest of the sisters remained at home with the 51 girls of St Joseph's, while the rest of the community assembled for the record.

The camera has captured small distinctions in stance and style that help us sense something of their life together. Teresa Roca, aged 64, stands closest to the bank. After 27 years at New Norcia, she meets the camera with a direct gaze and a warm half smile; her feet are planted firmly on uneven planks, and her hands rest outside her scapular. Felicitas Pampliega is beside Teresa and also looks gently at the camera, her face shadowed by her veil, her hands tucked away in the demure stance of the cloister. With a decade of service in town, she is already a senior in these ranks and looks older here than her 28 years, ready to set out for Belgium before she turns 30. On her right, her contemporary in the community, Margaret Perez, is less composed and seems about to shift her feet from the awkward edges of the board. With Teresa Roca, Margaret is one of the two who will remain at New Norcia throughout this decade of travel, but the camera has caught her, here in her early thirties, not quite settled. In contrast 19-year-old Maria Ciudad on Margaret's right appears in perfect symmetry, immediately recognisable to those who knew her 'always with her veil far forward',⁷ the sun just catching the gleam of her polished shoe. Teaching alongside Felicitas under the tutelage of Elias, she is now more often 'Sister Mary' at school, and in 1938 she will become the new superior of the house in the Kimberley, returning to New Norcia dramatically from hospital in Darwin in 1942 ahead of the Japanese bombing in the Second World War. For Benita Gozalo, standing beside Mary, a different war will make the most impact. She was honoured to be the standard bearer of the new congregation with Felicitas in Belgium but was overwhelmed with a lasting grief. The Spanish Civil War that broke out in 1936 meant she could not visit her dying father in Burgos despite

6 Numbers at St Joseph's are recorded in 'Returns of Children at New Norcia Mission', 31 March 1912, State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA) S116 cons652 1916/1592, also 1 August 1930; Abbot Catalan's *Ad Limina* Report to Rome, Catalan Correspondence 1930, NNA 01436. See also Appendix 1.

7 Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Madrid, 7 June 1999.

being 'close enough'.⁸ Here she has tucked not only her hands but also her arms behind the scapular. She seems to stand with her weight on her heels as some soldiers do, her young face almost entirely blinkered by her veil.

The Australian Gertrude Banks is in her early fifties and stands ready, too, her steady regard framed by the same veil, her scapular outlining her hands folded classically beneath. Her journey through this decade moves from the mission in the north, back to New Norcia, and then, independently of the community, to the Aboriginal mission at Lake Menindee near Broken Hill, before joining the Carmelites in Adelaide as Sister Gertrude once again. Thirty years Gertrude's junior, Escolastica Martinez is next: at ease and unselfconscious, one hand free and her sleeve rolled up a little, her belt buckled to the side. Like Benita, she is a veteran of five years at New Norcia, and she will soon lead the new community in the Kimberley. On her right, Hildegard Ruiz, who will travel north with Escolastica and Gertrude, is more sombre here as a 20-year-old than memories of her 'infectious laugh and energy'⁹ suggest. She is turned towards the photographer on the shore, rounding the line of companions into a group, the breeze wrapping her veil back like a villager's scarf. Their habits were simple and less confining than other nuns of the era. Their veils and skirts were long, but above their starched collars there was no enclosing coif to cover the neck or sides of the head. These assembled sisters were workers too; everyone knew that.

When the later Benedictine sisters reflect on the founding generation of their community they affirm hard work and a positive spirit above all. 'She was a good worker ... very cheerful ... a good and holy nun.'¹⁰ The unofficial Benedictine motto, *ora et labora*, drew attention not only to the two poles of the community's life but to the balance between prayer and work that was the ideal: 'She was a good sister, a good worker. Work is good, but to be with the Spirit is much better, you have to join the two'.¹¹ Benedict's Rule explicitly instructs his followers to value the cooking pots and kitchen utensils as highly as the 'sacred vessels of the altar'.¹² The Rule creates a climate where humble tasks are not ancillary but valid spiritual tools in themselves, a response made in faith to God's call.

8 Catalan to Benita and Felicitas, Maison d'Emmaus, Maredsous, 15 November 1935, NNA 01436/345.

9 *Pax*, November 1966.

10 Visitación Ciudad and Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Kalumburu, May 1999.

11 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 17 May 1999.

12 *The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), 31.10 (hereafter *RB*); Terrence Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 271–72.

Abbot Catalan's decision, explored in the previous chapter, to establish the missionary congregation through links with a Belgian house committed to the domestic care of monks gave implicit priority to the monks themselves and underlined a practical rather than intellectual or spiritual calling for the sisters. Again and again in letters to Felicitas and Benita as they trained in Belgium, the abbot reported the sisters at New Norcia were 'going well and full of work as always', 'healthy and working a lot as is the custom',¹³ with a focus on their capacity for physical labour. But for the sisters concerned, all facets were linked by their understanding of work as a central element of Benedictine life, and all tasks were equal. As the wider literature on monasticism is showing, the Rule of Benedict freed the women and men of the monasteries to claim manual and domestic work as central to their religious vocation and, in the case of New Norcia, to the wider purpose of the mission as well. While the priests were the decision makers, the women were essential to the mission's enterprise.¹⁴ Their specific and constant domestic tasks, their particular role with the Aboriginal women and girls and their contradictory status as informally professed but still vowed monastics put them 'between' and at the intersection of categories in the mission town.

Work and the body in monastic history: From Michel Foucault to Pierre Hadot

New Norcia's sisters understood their commitment to hard work as part of living prayerfully. The place of work as an embodied expression of prayer in monastic life has attracted scholarly attention since the 1980s, and that discussion helps us see the reality of the Benedictine sisters. In the first phases of the conversation in the mid-1980s the political philosopher Michel Foucault argued that ancient philosophical schools of thought promoted particular physical disciplines.¹⁵ His work raised awareness of the bodily dimensions of the history of ideas and of monastic history. Essentially, the Rule of Benedict is not a set of beliefs that are assented to but a set of practices that are embodied: monasticism is enacted; it is a way of life that is followed (or not). So, the day-to-day realities of

13 For example, Catalan to Benita, 26 September 1935, NNA 01436/320; Catalan to Felicitas and Benita, 15 November 1935, NNA 01436/345.

14 Katharine Massam, 'Missionary Women and Holy Work: Benedictine Women in Western Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies* 39 (2015), 44–53.

15 Especially Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 3: *Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), in English as *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3: *The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

cooking, washing, sewing, teaching and meeting for prayer are validly what Foucault might call ‘technologies of the self’, at the core of the creation of a monastic and missionary person. Later, in response to Foucault, Pierre Hadot offered important and insightful clarifications. He argued that the endpoint of these technologies of belief is not in the fashioning of the person but in taking the person involved beyond the self and, by extension, taking communities beyond themselves.¹⁶ The goal of the disciplined physical life is not discipline for its own sake. Spiritual disciplines, such as work, fasting and practices of prayer, are tools to reach beyond and engage the mystery of the universal. For Christian monastics, like the women committed to the mission at New Norcia, the goal was holiness, salvation, God. So the physical practices of the Rule should not be seen so much as technologies of the self but as strategies for going beyond the self. Work, like prayer, is a tool for living faithfully. The purpose of work was not production but rather to enable people to take their place in a community of commitment. To be a Benedictine was not to hold a set of precepts but to live a way of life.

The monastery was a community, not a factory or a work camp. Here is a vital nuance in the Benedictine understanding of labour as it was inherited at New Norcia. Alongside the affirmation of work without any hierarchy of tasks, Benedict also insisted the members of the community needed to be seen clearly as individuals, not as cogs in a machine. Pithily, he insists that talent has a role to play in determining tasks, that ‘brothers should read and sing, not according to rank, but according to their ability to benefit their hearers’.¹⁷ Artisans with particular skills were to ‘practice their craft with all humility’ for its own sake and the sake of their souls, not with the conceited sense of ‘conferring something on the monastery’.¹⁸ Members were given particular roles, as prior, as cellarer, in counselling the wayward, in answering the door to visitors and as abbot with responsibility over all, according to the qualities they possessed.¹⁹

16 Pierre Hadot, ‘Reflections on the Idea of the “Cultivation of Self”’, in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1995), 206–13. For the connections between Foucault and Hadot and their distinct views, see Cory Wimberly, ‘The Joy of Difference: Foucault and Hadot on the Aesthetic and the Universal in Philosophy’, *Philosophy Today* 53 (2009): 191–202; Orazio Irrera, ‘Pleasure and Transcendence of the Self: Notes on “a Dialogue Too Soon Interrupted” between Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36 (2010): 995–1017.

17 *RB* 38.12.

18 *RB* 57.2.

19 On the cellarer, *RB* 65; prior, *RB* 31; counsellors for the wayward, *RB* 27; doorkeeper, *RB* 66; abbot, *RB* 2, 64.

All through the Rule, Benedict insists the monastic leaders should pay attention to specific needs of individuals in making sure they have clothes that fit, sufficient food, appropriate tools, and also the opportunity to negotiate ‘impossible tasks’.²⁰ The watchword of the entire document is ‘listen’ so that authority is exercised in light of the experience of the whole.²¹ A Benedictine eye would see the people involved in the work and their particular talents and needs, as well as the tasks that require attention. The Rule was a manifesto for clear-eyed discernment of ability and guidelines aimed not at the production of goods but solely at bringing the community closer to God.

In the context of Benedictine life, the point of work is not the task itself or the achievement of the person but rather the refinement of the soul. The overarching focus in the Benedictine framework was ‘elsewhere’, and the stock in trade of the lifestyle of the monks and for the sisters, as well as the girls in their care, was a commitment to technologies of godly living.

Spiritual disciplines cannot be imposed. There is a vast difference between hard work, poverty and obedience chosen within a commitment to ultimate values and that same regime being lived through force of circumstances. For the Benedictines, the Rule was to ensure prospective members understood the life on offer and to provide ample opportunity for the community and the applicant to assess each other. For the Aboriginal people at New Norcia, the choice about how closely they associated with the mission enterprise was much more constrained. Adults were not compelled to stay in town, but if they stayed they were expected to work for modest wages and goods in kind. The mission cottages were reserved for employees, almost always men with families. Unsatisfactory workers were dismissed and expected to leave town.²² The collaborative manual work between the hardy Spaniards and the local people was an enduring hallmark of New Norcia’s culture and at its best underpinned relationships of trust and respect. Even so, the most devout Aboriginal Catholics were not monks and were not bound to the monastery except as employees. On one occasion in the 1930s Abbot Catalan also spoke out against the government’s increasing surveillance of Aboriginal people.

20 On individuals having what they ‘need’, *RB* 33, 34; provision of adequate food and drink, *RB* 39, 40; clothes and shoes, *RB* 55; impossible tasks, *RB* 68.

21 The entry for ‘listening’ in the thematic index to *RB 1980* makes the network of mutual listening clear, with the primary need for the whole community to listen for the divine voice.

22 Paul Willaway and Veronica Willaway in conversation, Perth, November 2014. Veronica’s parents, Harold and Philomena, were sent away when Veronica was a sickly child because Harold missed days at work to care for her and her mother.

In a rare protest against government policy Abbot Catalan objected to 1936 amendments to the 1905 *Aborigines Act* that in his view made the people 'slaves'. The proposed legislation extended the powers of the state's Commissioner for Native Affairs, making him the legal guardian of all Aboriginal people under 21. Anyone who had more than one Aboriginal grandparent came under the Act and could be moved by the government not just to or from a 'reserve' as in the earlier laws of 1905 but also from any 'district, institution, or hospital'.²³ New provisions tightened requirements for a permit to work and required all marriages to be approved by the commissioner.²⁴ There were exceptions for men and boys under 21 with one or two Aboriginal grandparents 'where such person does not live after the manner of original full-blood inhabitants',²⁵ but no exceptions were made for girls and young women. In keeping with the recognised disproportionate impact on Aboriginal women and girls,²⁶ the numbers at St Joseph's grew steadily and more quickly than St Mary's, with more girls being placed by parents from outside the mission itself. The government was overruling the mission in Abbot Catalan's view. Freedom of decision making, mostly for the mission but also for the Aborigines, was at the heart of his complaint.

Some Aboriginal parents saw New Norcia's institutions as a lesser evil when the state threatened to remove their children. For example, one mother sent an urgent letter from Toodyay after a visit from the Chief Protector early in 1937. Writing as she spoke and with emphatic capitals for the official and the child, she asked permission to bring her daughter to New Norcia, explaining the threat of removal:

I suppose you have heard by Mr Nevell the Proctor. He is taking every girl that is fair from their mothers. He Has taken several now and He came to my place to see my Daughter. ... He doesn't want them to reconize their mother any more and I don't recond that's fair for Him to do that to my Daughter.²⁷

23 *Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936* (WA), sections 9 and 12, [www.slp.wa.gov.au/pc/o/prod/FileStore.nsf/Documents/MRDDocument:12388P/\\$FILE/AborgnActAmAct1936_00-00](http://www.slp.wa.gov.au/pc/o/prod/FileStore.nsf/Documents/MRDDocument:12388P/$FILE/AborgnActAmAct1936_00-00); accessed 19 January 2016 (site discontinued).

24 *Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936* (WA), sections 13 and 25.

25 The phrase recurs through the Act; for example, *Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936* (WA), sections 8, 13, 17.

26 Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919–1939* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2000); Marilyn Lake, 'Feminism and the Gendered Politics of Antiracism, Australia 1927–1957', *Australian Historical Studies* 29 (1998): 91; Alison Holland, "'Wives and Mothers Like Ourselves'? Exploring White Women's Intervention in the Politics of Race, 1920s–1940s', *Australian Historical Studies* 32 (2001): 292–310; Alison Holland, 'Mary Bennett and the Feminists: A Response', *Australian Historical Studies* 33 (2002): 398–400.

27 Mrs J. Gillespie to Catalan, 16 March 1937, NNA 05120/5.

She made the case that her daughter was a Catholic and would be able to go to church at New Norcia. The Sisters of Mercy at the Toodyay school thought New Norcia was a good solution. 'Please send me a wire at once because I want to take her over on Sunday', the mother pleaded, 'Hoping the Lord will Help me.'²⁸ The girl and also her sister were admitted to St Joseph's within five days.²⁹ They were removed six weeks later, following a flurry of letters from the Commissioner Francis Bray: 'taken by the Protector', the record noted grimly.³⁰

By July 1938, when the regulations to implement the full force of the Act were to be debated in parliament, Abbot Catalan was sufficiently alarmed to slip a complaint into the final paragraph of a letter to Aubrey Coverley, the long-serving member for Kimberley. Writing to thank the Catholic parliamentarian for sensible advice on a funding request that was turning controversial, the abbot took the opportunity to ask him to speak against the regulations.³¹ They were 'ignoring entirely the descretion [sic] of the Missionaries and their Superiors'³² and effectively binding Aboriginal people so firmly to the department 'that they become ... slaves'.³³ He had long held the view that the power of the commissioner as a single authority, 'absolute Monarch and Pope of the Natives',³⁴ was a menace.

Mr Coverley did speak out but the overall thrust of the Act for more control remained in place.³⁵ Enforced obedience and governance by fear was at odds with Benedictine principles. New Norcia hoped to be admired by the government but on this occasion, at least, the abbot took issue with official policy.

28 Gillespie to Catalan, 16 March 1937.

29 Aboriginal Families Index (NNA), 203, 204 (with thanks to Peter Hocking for these details).

30 Bray to Catalan, 20 April 1937, 23 April 1937, 24 April 1937, NNA 05120.

31 Catalan to Coverley, 1 July 1938, NNA 01437/187. See also Catalan to Coverley, 1 November 1927, NNA 10425/137.

32 Catalan to Coverley, 1 July 1938.

33 Catalan to Coverley, 1 July 1938.

34 Catalan to Coverley, 1 July 1938.

35 Western Australia, Parliament, Legislative Assembly, Hansard Archive, 27 October 1938 (p. 1701), 16 November 1938 (p. 2152), 15 December 1938 (p. 3202), www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/screen1930s; accessed 19 January 2016.

Binding prayer and work together at New Norcia

Through the development of the community in the 1930s, prayer and work melded together. The Spanish *Notebooks* preserved the memory of back-breaking work in the late 1920s that almost eclipsed everything else. Alongside the St Joseph's girls, whose story as workers deserves separate attention, and picking up English from the girls as best they could, the missionary sisters worked as farmhands, until 'finally', at the end of crowded days, they gathered exhausted for prayer in the church. The produce of the 5,000 acres (2,023 hectares) then under cultivation was itself directed not only to the immediate practical needs of St Joseph's, St Mary's and Drysdale River but also to underwriting fees at the boarding colleges and to longer term investment in the Benedictine life of the town so as 'to form and educate our Missionaries'.³⁶ The work served all purposes and, as the *Notebooks* show, governed their lives:

The Sisters and the girls went to the field and gathered grain, cleared small stones, collected gum from the trees, pulled weeds where they got above the wheat, picked fruit from a big orchard, harvested grapes and olives. The days were very busy and there was little time left for spiritual or cultural formation. Nevertheless the Sisters learnt English on the strength of parroting the girls. In spite of so much hard work they finally said their prayers with the fathers from one side of the Church.³⁷

The spatial distinction from the monks in the church gave the sisters a clear place and a separate role in the prayer. The monks were on one side of the choir screen, and the sisters were on the other. Both gathered as religious communities, but it was the men, not the women, who occupied the monastic zone while the sisters shared the public space with any of the lay workers who came along. As numbers at St Joseph's grew, the sisters led separate devotions with the girls at home in the evening focused on the recitation of the rosary. Felicitas and her editors have left the challenge of the work and the sisters' ambivalence in these years intact: 'As the years ran on these young sisters were sometimes lively and other times longing to return to Spain'.³⁸

36 Catalan to Chief Protector, 28 September 1928, NNA 01429/86.

37 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 12.

38 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 12.

It was looking back on this situation in August 1928 when Mary, Hildegard and Matilde joined the community that the Spanish *Notebooks* introduced the powerful economic metaphor of work as vocational ‘currency’ that gives this chapter its title. The arrival of three teenagers lowered the average age of the community to 28 years, with half not yet 21. All 10 sisters were responsible for the 42 girls at St Joseph’s as well as cooking, cleaning, laundry and farm work together with the small school. The *Notebooks* affirm the community was forged in work, leading into the sentences we have already seen above that affirm their dependence on the monks:

The work made them happy and already they were making a life as a community. The Sisters had taken private vows before the Abbot who was Superior, Administrator and teacher. The Sisters did not have anything nor had they means to provide anything; absolutely everything was provided to them by the Monastery, even down to the stamps for writing letters. Their currency and savings were the work.³⁹

That there was pleasure in purposeful work was one thing; that it was their sole asset, the only ‘currency and savings’ they had to trade,⁴⁰ is another.

What stock were they building, using this currency of work? It depends on how they understood the transaction. Spiritually, with God as the focus, their lives were defined as offerings, literally ‘oblations’, and they had vowed ‘not to count the cost’ of their commitment. The economic metaphor made their material dependence clear and, in the reciprocal arrangement with the monks, their work bought them livelihood and institutional identity. But as the letters of the foundational sisters sent from Belgium and the Kimberley make clear, they had high aspirations for the new congregation and saw the daily work of the mission kitchen and laundry, in the garden in the north and on the farm at New Norcia, as part of a quest for sanctity. The connection with Belgium would underpin a formal status as ‘brides of Christ’.

39 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 12–13.

40 Literally, *Sus moneda y ahorro er[a] el trabajo*.

Emmaus House, Maredsous, Belgium

Felicitas and Benita left Australia on 6 November 1933 on the *Otranto*, dressed as postulants for the Benedictine Oblate Sisters in Maredsous. Accompanied by Fr Paul Arza, who was setting out to begin a doctorate in canon law at the Benedictine Academy of Sant'Anselmo in Rome, they travelled under their legal names as Isobel Pampliega and Ernestine Gozalo, although the passenger list acknowledged their years in community with the courtesy title 'Reverend Sister'.⁴¹

Much had changed in the month before they left: Magdalena, Francisca and Placida arrived from Spain, young and able to pull their weight in the community that was about to be reduced by two; and Mother Elias had died. Honoured by the *Notebooks* as 'unique among women',⁴² Elias was buried with quiet ceremony after her death on 20 October.⁴³ She had come from running a Belgian missionary training college but there had been no opportunity for them to learn from her fluent French. They would therefore meet their new community in that mute state familiar to New Norcia's sisters, 'able only to smile since they did not speak a word'.⁴⁴



Figure 6.2: Benita and Felicitas en route to Belgium with Fr Paul Arza.

Source: NNA W6-B4-1-023.

⁴¹ *West Australian*, 7 November 1933, 15.

⁴² *Notebooks*, Madrid, 17.

⁴³ 'Mother M. Elias', *St Ildephonsus College Magazine*, 1933, 47.

⁴⁴ *Notebooks*, Madrid, 16.

The departure of the two founding sisters added to the flux of endings and beginnings. They sailed for Naples and spent a fortnight in Rome. An audience with Pope Pius XI was eclipsed by being part of the canonisation of Bernadette of Lourdes on 8 December. Then on 12 December 1933 they made the journey from Rome to Belgium, accompanied by the abbot of Montserrat, Benito Lopez. There was confusion about the need for meals. The *Notebooks* enshrine the memory of one small cup of coffee that saw them through a night and a day. At the town centre of Namur, near the monastery, communication failed again and they waited at the station in the dark. The young women in quaint clothes felt they attracted too much attention on the platform. Finally, well over 24 hours after they left Rome, one of the monks arrived to collect them, 'bringing blankets but nothing to eat'.⁴⁵ Once introduced to the community, language difficulties notwithstanding, there was at last a warm meal. The following day they were admitted formally as postulants, and on 15 July 1934 they took the habit and white veil of novices.⁴⁶

They fell into the order of a 'proper' religious house with gusto, keen to learn all they could of work and prayer from this community of women 'oblate sisters' so they could translate it to New Norcia in the future. Of course, they had both been domestics at Las Huelgas in Burgos, but now they wrote with excitement and pride about their growing confidence in the Benedictine life. They mixed the learning of the Latin Office with the making of lace and the routine of the laundry with the pattern of prayer. The Abbey of Maredsous was a large, busy community with a residential school. The small group of sisters at Emmaus had responsibility for the washing and the cooking for both establishments. In so far as that arrangement matched New Norcia's exactly, Abbot Catalan had chosen well. If they regretted the narrow focus, Felicitas and Benita did not complain to him, although later Felicitas confided to the sisters that if they had to train in Belgium she would have chosen the motherhouse at Heverlé or the monastery of Benedictine women in Maredret ahead of Emmaus. At the time she gave the abbot no sign of any misgiving. Writing of their progress, both Felicitas and Benita assumed a link between learning the technicalities of monastic prayer and acquiring new domestic skills.

The interconnections between mundane work and the ultimate horizons of prayer are nowhere clearer than in the letters that the two novices sent to Abbot Catalan late in 1935 when they were waiting to hear the date of their profession as the first members of the new congregation. Felicitas and Benita

45 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 16.

46 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 17.

had hoped they would take formal vows on 1 November, the feast of All Saints, with two members of the Belgian community. The Mother Superior at Emmaus had offered to cut through the legal complexity by incorporating the New Norcia house into that congregation, but Abbot Catalan preferred to delay until Rome approved the 'new' foundation.⁴⁷ He had already firmly shut down proposals that they would adopt the habit of the sisters who had hosted them: because of the climate and 'other differences between there and here' they would stay in the simpler habit 'of New Norcia'.⁴⁸ A new and distinct congregation in the abbey nullius was the best hope to maintain the existing clear lines of authority.

Recibido: Emmaus
 25 de Junio 1936
 Al. P. M. Abbot Catalan
 Muy amado Pater en el Señor
 Al fin
 tengo hoy la satisfacción de tomar la
 pluma para dirigir estas líneas a V. P.
 lo cual es lo que yo esperaba o más bien desear
 impaciente esperando día por día la
 carta del P. Abbot para así poder yo en
 saber, como cosa por cierto de gran
 felicidad que aya llegado a V. P. y que
 han llegado como la recibimos. Bien
 pues, el 25 de este mes a nosotros mismos
 incluyendo en ella el obediencia del P. Abbot
 y a V. P. no impasione a nadie
 a los P. P. que, pensando que por muchos
 años en la vida de V. P. más que en la
 de V. P. me obediencia siempre ignore que
 a V. P. a obediencia de V. P. me por el P. P. y
 a V. P. si no por el P. P. y a V. P.

Figure 6.3: Benita Gozalo to Abbot Catalan, June 1936.

Source: NNA 01047.

Plans were in place for the profession at Maredsous, but still the paperwork to officially establish the congregation of the Benedictine Oblate Sisters of New Norcia was running behind. As Benita reported: 'The day finally arrived and the telegram did not, so the two Sisters made their profession and we were left with our desires'.⁴⁹ She consoled herself with a motto of Teresa of Avila, 'Patience wins all', and the conviction that God sees beyond the immediate to 'what most benefits souls'.⁵⁰ As urgent letters went from the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome to New Norcia and back, Felicitas saw a comparison with the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids: 'four of us had heard the invitation, but only two were admitted to the wedding feast, those who were well-prepared'.⁵¹ The legal preparation was not theirs to make, but she assured Abbot Catalan she would 'remain knocking at the door without ceasing to call

47 Catalan to Schyrgens, 16 July 1935, NNA 01436/229. See also Catalan to Bastien, Sant'Anselmo Rome, 18 July 1935, NNA 01436/231.

48 Catalan to Felicitas, 26 September 1935, NNA 01436/224.

49 Benita to Catalan, n.d. but clearly November 1935, trans. David Barry, OSB, NNA 01061.

50 Benita to Catalan, November 1935.

51 Felicitas to Catalan, 4 November 1935, trans. David Barry, OSB, NNA 01061.

out, showing ever greater fidelity until the beloved has compassion'.⁵² She pressed the traditional allusions to the 'divine espousal' of her religious vocation in one paragraph, and in another gave details of the whirlwind of practical work the delay made possible:

For some days now we have had almost all the Sisters busy working for us, I have never seen such charity. We hardly finish saying that we would like to know how to do something or other when they are already trying to satisfy our wishes. So one is copying kitchen recipes for us, others recipes for pastries, conserves of every kind of fruit etc. One day I happened to say that I would like to know how to make men's clothing, and the next day they sent me to the tailor who comes here. ... [H]e will give us patterns for trousers and jackets in different sizes. We have also had some lessons in the cut of women's clothing and as many patterns as we want.⁵³

The letter that began with assurances of her constancy as an aspiring bride of Christ ended by asking permission to buy kitchen thermometers and for the abbot's prayers.

With a new possible profession date approaching on 8 December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the two women took confidence and 'placed ourselves under the direction of the Most Holy Virgin'.⁵⁴ For Felicitas the preparation for her vows drew sewing and biblical allusion figuratively together: 'with great care we began to put in place the rich ornaments that were still lacking to the beautiful wedding dress which was already made long before. ... We were convinced that no one could be as capable as she [the Blessed Virgin Mary] of perfecting this work'.⁵⁵ Around them members of the Belgian community all had various views about whether the permissions for canonical profession would arrive in time, but the New Norcia sisters apparently shared a serene conviction that Mary would see their prayers answered. With time running out on 3 December, Fr Schyrgens, whose correspondence with Abbot Catalan had been so crucial to this formal novitiate,⁵⁶ came to find them 'when we were both busy ironing ... asking us again how long it took for letters from Rome'.⁵⁷ They told him 10 days by ordinary mail and that they would not lose hope, but 'his only answer to this was a gesture of diffidence'.⁵⁸

52 Felicitas to Catalan, 4 November 1935.

53 Felicitas to Catalan, 4 November 1935.

54 Felicitas to Catalan, 8 December 1935, trans. David Barry, OSB, NNA 01061.

55 Felicitas to Catalan, 8 December 1935.

56 See Chapter 5.

57 Felicitas to Catalan, 8 December 1935.

58 Felicitas to Catalan, 8 December 1935.

Two days passed with no news. Then on 5 December when the community gathered for the regular Wednesday conference the director announced a letter from Australia. Felicitas remembered: 'All the Sisters then bowed in our direction and gave us a big smile, and just as impatient as we were, wanted to know the contents'.⁵⁹ Benita reminded herself: 'Patience! Let us first say the Hail Mary because everything will come in due time'.⁶⁰ The letter was the one required from Abbot Catalan thanking the host community and completing the paperwork with his 'consent to our consecrating ourselves to God by means of canonical profession, and directly for the Mission of New Norcia'.⁶¹ Although 8 December was a Sunday, a major festival, and not an easy day for extra events at the monastery, Abbot Lopez had already agreed to hold the profession for them at four o'clock in the morning if need be. But, 'it wasn't necessary', Felicitas wrote, 'and he presided for us at 6am'.⁶² In a simple ceremony after the Offertory at morning Mass they made their public vows. They were the first women to take that formal canonical step with the community at New Norcia.

The rush and then the occasion itself had a touch of transnational eccentricity. The Spanish sisters destined for Australia prayed with incomprehensible accents, as Benita relayed home, 'The formula we read in French, or rather it was written in French, because the Fr R[ector] told us later than none of those present had understood anything, only he himself, so that was enough'.⁶³ Felicitas told Abbot Catalan she did not need to give him details as he would see the documents. If she had blamed him for the administrative delay that made her the 'foolish virgin locked out of the wedding', she took the opportunity to thank him for work on behalf of the new congregation. They had heard by accident through a visitor about efforts he had made to move things forward before the profession. She did not gild her hurt but acknowledged she did not know the whole story: 'although you had shown us an external indifference to our prayers and urgent requests, secretly you had been quite preoccupied, and with just as ardent desires as ours, or greater, to find what we were looking for'.⁶⁴ On the day when she had 'the peerless

59 Felicitas to Catalan, 8 December 1935.

60 Benita to Catalan, 9 December 1935, trans. David Barry, OSB, NNA 01061.

61 Benita to Catalan, 9 December 1935. Also Catalan to Schyrgens, 14 November 1935, sent after he received a cablegram from Fr Bastien in Rome, NNA 01436/344.

62 Felicitas to Catalan, 8 December 1935.

63 Benita to Catalan, 9 December 1935, NNA 01061.

64 Felicitas to Catalan, 8 December 1935.

grace ... the happiness of being counted in the number of the spouses of Jesus', she wrote 'renewing in complete truth my gratitude, [to] thank you most sincerely for all your paternal solicitude directed to our spiritual good'. The same letter, so full of emotion, ends with an apology that she will not have time to write to the sisters but sending them regards. At the last the practical concerns of work flood back in. She assures him she has 'the machine that Sr Theresa asked us for' as a generous unlooked-for gift from Emmaus House, and records that the open-handedness of Maredsous in general means that 'they do nothing but give us things'. Their gifts included not only the preparation for monastic profession but also the tools of trade for a missionary life.

The history of the Benedictine women at New Norcia is full of false starts and amendments. The feast of the Immaculate Conception was a deeply appropriate date, for, as Felicitas with her awareness of records would have surely known, 20 years earlier the missionary women at New Norcia had first appeared in Benedictine habits on that day. Given her sense of history perhaps Felicitas was also not surprised when it turned out that there had been an administrative glitch despite the frantic flow of letters: they had made promises to an entity five days before it had been formally created.⁶⁵ Abbot Catalan wrote to them through January stubbornly insisting their title 'Reverend Sisters' was already formal, even though he was busy at the same time repairing gaps in the official record in Rome.⁶⁶ Once the Benedictine Oblate Sisters of New Norcia actually existed as a formal congregation, the two public members had to make their vows again on 28 February 1936.⁶⁷ Similarly, Felicitas has been remembered as the founding superior of the new congregation (although 'she never wanted to be a foundress, rather to be somewhere established'),⁶⁸ but Abbot Catalan's initial appointments made Benita superior while Felicitas (on advice from Emmaus) was given 'the most delicate responsibility'⁶⁹ as mistress of novices. They served in those roles for six years until August 1942, when the abbot announced a swap.⁷⁰

65 Catalan to Schyrgens, 3 January 1936, reporting his Decree of Erection of the Congregation cabled to Rome on 13 December 1935, NNA 01437/4.

66 Catalan to Felicitas, 8 January 1936, NNA 01437/10.

67 Catalan to Schyrgens, 1 January 1936, NNA 01437/4.

68 Teresa González, Visitación Ciudad and Pilar Catalan, Interview, Madrid, 4 October 2010.

69 Catalan to Felicitas and Benita, 20 July 1936, NNA 01437/96. Catalan acknowledges the advice in his letter to Schyrgens and the Mother Prioress of Emmaus, both 22 August 1936, NNA 01437/160-161.

70 *Notebooks*, Madrid.

Their shared task was to introduce the community into the monastic pattern of life they had learnt in Belgium. The practical skills of missionary life were taken for granted but Abbot Catalan exulted that they were 'returning clothed as true brides of Christ'.⁷¹ Formal status as religious would bring a new phase for the missionary community:

[Canonical profession] is a great consolation, consolation to yourselves, to your Sisters, and also to me. What can I say? This time your profession has been accepted by the church, your vows are public and you are truly Religious 'Oblatas Regulares de San Benito'. You will be the beginning of a new congregation, whose mother-house will be New Norcia.⁷²

The abbot also warned them in a joint letter that there could be trouble because 'the Sisters [are] already veterans in the house and more or less accustomed to their ways, since naturally it was not possible in the past to demand the regularity that will be possible now'.⁷³ As it turned out, the transition was smooth.

Implementing the new congregation

On 22 July 1936 Abbot Catalan gave an informal talk to the sisters at New Norcia, announcing their new status, and on 23 August, four days after Felicitas and Benita returned to Australia on the *Viminale*, the seven in the New Norcia house were received as postulants of their new congregation. Did it make Sr Teresa Roca smile to do this again, 34 years after she had first arrived at New Norcia already fully professed as a Teresian? She was being replaced as superior of the oblate group. Perhaps the abbot had her in mind when he told Fr Tomás in the Kimberley that 'some of the changes in office have dented some individuals, but this is a natural aberration not supernatural. ... [T]hough they have felt it perhaps, they have been able to overcome it'.⁷⁴ The formal status of the community gathered momentum and shifted the structures of the group. Catalan told a potential recruit, an Australian from Brunswick in Melbourne, there

71 Catalan to Felicitas and Benita, 20 July 1936.

72 Catalan to Felicitas and Benita, 20 July 1936.

73 Catalan to Felicitas and Benita, 20 July 1936.

74 Catalan to Gil, 18 September 1936, NNA 01437.

would be no new members for some time, 'not until the new convent is built and other circumstances are conveniently settled'.⁷⁵ He signed himself 'For Sister Teresa'.

The older sisters, Margaret and Gertrude, had known the group before talk of regularisation had begun, but in April 1937 Felicitas told them that Abbot Catalan intended they should remain oblates rather than become members of the new foundation.⁷⁶ Although we can speculate, the reasons are lost to us. Both accepted the decision, but their reactions diverged. Gertrude acknowledged that her path was elsewhere and made an energetic exit. While her first letters from Perth were signed 'the faithless one',⁷⁷ she also sent love to the sisters and asked them as well as the girls and the abbot for prayers as she tested a hope that the archbishop would support her to work with 'thousands of children' near Wagin in the southwest.⁷⁸ When that came to nothing, she gravitated east, seeking the support of Bishop Fox of the diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes for work near Broken Hill. Four years later, when the Carmelites in South Australia approached Abbot Catalan about her wish to join them, he responded promptly with the necessary reference, wishing her well as an extern sister.⁷⁹

Margaret, on the other hand, remained at New Norcia even though classified as a novice in the new community.⁸⁰ With limited English, she had far fewer options in Australia than Gertrude, and perhaps after 20 years at the mission her connections in Spain were limited too, but there is nothing to indicate she wanted to leave or even took the slight to heart. Established as a favourite among the girls, and respected for that by the sisters even as they tolerated what sounds like mild kleptomania,⁸¹ her strange status as permanent novice was no more odd than her previous situation as a private oblate. It continued for 17 years before she made her first profession under a new abbot in January 1953, 'assisted by only some of the Sisters'.⁸² Whether that was a protest or an attempt to limit speculation on the long novitiate we can only guess.

75 Catalan to Miss Florence Jones, 24 June 1935, NNA 01436/207.

76 Gertrude Banks, 262 Fitzgerald St, Perth, to Catalan, 14 April 1937, NNA 01365.

77 Gertrude Banks to Catalan, 14 April 1937.

78 Banks to Catalan, 14 April 1937.

79 Catalan to the Prioress of the Carmelite Community, Glen Osmond, 20 May 1941, NNA 01444/233; Catalan to Gertrude Banks, 21 May 1941, NNA 01444/246.

80 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 26.

81 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, May 1999.

82 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 26.

The new routines were welcomed by the other younger sisters at New Norcia. Francisca was impressed by the faithful observance, 'very prayerful, very reverent' even in the mission,⁸³ and recalled that with Mary, Magdalena, Ludivina and Placida she embraced the new, authentically monastic routines. But Editra, who had arrived as a 16-year-old with Ludivina in 1931 and been with the community when Felicitas and Benita set out for Belgium in November 1933, had already left on her own journey back to Spain in September 1934.⁸⁴ Listed without a surname or given the wrong one in various versions of the Spanish *Notebooks*, the shipping records tell us she was Trinidad López, and the correspondence shows that she, too, came from Tapia.

There is just the faintest outline in the records of this young woman's decision to return to her home town. Apparently she made the choice, supported by her family, with her father giving the abbot assurances he would accept responsibility for putting the 19-year-old on a boat alone.⁸⁵ Evidently with a clear conviction that she had made a mistake, and with resources at home, this sister was able to leave the mission. There had been unspecified failings, 'four times she repented, but without amendment',⁸⁶ so that in the end the sisters noted simply: 'This was not her call'.⁸⁷ The abbot seemed to think she might still have made a nun but, as he put it to her parish priest, she was just not sufficiently grateful to God for her vocation.⁸⁸ Catalan wrote careful instructions to Trinidad herself, explaining the month-long journey from Fremantle to Gibraltar and the boat trip of half an hour that would take her from Gibraltar to the Spanish town of Algeciras to catch a train to Madrid and Burgos. He said nothing of her vocation or the hopes that had brought her to Australia, just assured her that if she did as he said 'you will arrive happily at your destination, which is what you wish'.⁸⁹ She made it home safely and spoke well of the mission to the parish priest. We have no record of her own sense of the events. The abbot assured his colleague in Tapia he should not be 'ashamed' that one of the parishioners had 'failed' as those who remained were 'worth a dozen each'.⁹⁰

83 Francisca Pardo, Interview, Madrid, May 1999.

84 Catalan to Victoriano López, Tapia, 25 September 1934, NNA 01434/296.

85 Catalan thanks Victoriano López for the assurances, 15 September 1934, NNA 01434/282.

86 Visitación Ciudad, Interview, Madrid, 23 October 2013; Catalan to Pio Palacios, 15 September 1934, NNA 01434/283.

87 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 13.

88 Catalan to Pio Palacios, 15 September 1934.

89 Catalan, 'Instrucciones para Trinidad Lopez que va en Fremantle Australia Occ a Burgos en España', filed with correspondence 1934, NNA 01434/284.

90 Catalan to Pio Palacios, 28 December 1934, NNA 01435/358.

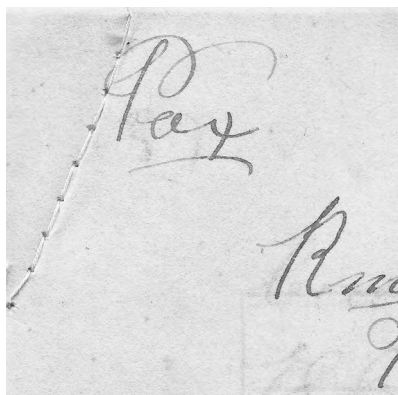


Figure 6.4: Escolastica's sewing machine put to another good use, 1937.

Source: NNA 01061.

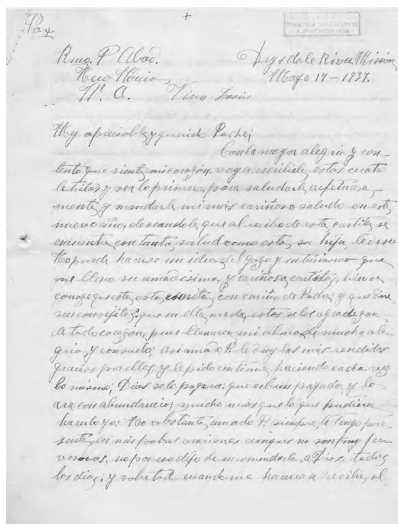


Figure 6.5: Escolastica Martinez to Abbot Catalan, 1937.

Source: NNA 01061.

In the north, the highly valued duo from Tapia, Hildegard and Matilde, along with Escolastica welcomed news of the monastic changes they would find when they came to undertake their own novitiate. 'I think we were all sighing waiting for them', Escolastica wrote.⁹¹ Essentially there would be a new timetable with more emphasis on monastic practices. The changes were made possible because the new convent at New Norcia, built with some urgency and dedicated on 5 January 1936,⁹² created spaces for the sisters as a community that were separate from the work areas they shared with the girls. There was a chapter room for meetings and a chapel upstairs with fine pieces of devotional art shipped from Valencia⁹³ and where the Blessed Sacrament was now permanently reserved. This, the abbot told Escolastica, 'supports the devotion a lot and helps them continue in their fervour'.⁹⁴ Escolastica shared that fervour. At Drysdale River the convent was much closer to the mission church than at New Norcia, and she found it easy 'to go and visit Jesus my sweet love'⁹⁵ in the tabernacle, 'the nest of our

91 Escolastica Martinez to Catalan, 17 May 1937, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

92 Catalan to Gil, 10 January 1936, NNA 01437/12.

93 Catalan to Benita, on the Stations of the Cross in particular, 26 September 1935, NNA 0136E/305.

94 Catalan to Escolastica Martinez, 28 April 1937, NNA 01438/125.

95 Escolastica to Catalan, n.d. but by internal evidence c. June 1932, NNA 01061.

love'.⁹⁶ Such prayer was already at the centre of her commitment, 'Oh! I can tell you truly that the time spent in front of the Holy One, life of our love, is so beautiful'.⁹⁷



Figure 6.6: Interior of the church at Drysdale River c. 1947, Sister Magdalena Ruiz with a First Communicant.

Source: NNA 65851P.

⁹⁶ Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934, NNA 01061.

⁹⁷ Escolastica to Catalan, n.d. but by internal evidence c. June 1932.



Figure 6.7: Interior of the church at Drysdale River c. 1947, sanctuary and two side altars, St Joseph and St Thérèse, patron of missions.

Source: Archives of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tutzing (ABTM).

What she had been doing informally was now more prescribed at New Norcia, along with other practices from traditional convents. The abbot told the Kimberley sisters that Benita, who ‘carries herself as a real superior’,⁹⁸ had introduced reading in the refectory while they took two of the meals each day in silence, so that ‘in this they are equal to the monks’.⁹⁹ They prayed the psalms in common, not only in the early morning, at sunrise, and in the evening, but also at three other points in the working day, as ‘authentic Benedictine women [who] have the Rule as their foundation’.¹⁰⁰ Their place in the church remained in the public pews, but on Sundays they stayed after Mass to pray the offices of the middle of the day, while the monks prayed too, behind the choir screen. They also came to the church on Sunday evenings, sitting in the public pews while the monks sang Vespers.¹⁰¹

98 Catalan to Escolastica, 28 April 1937, NNA 01438/125.

99 Catalan to Escolastica, Hildegard and Matilde, 19 September 1936, NNA 01437/193.

100 Catalan to Escolastica, Hildegard and Matilde, 19 September 1936, NNA 01437/193.

101 Catalan to Escolastica, 28 April 1937, NNA 01438/125.

There was so little change to the work itself that the abbot saw no need to mention it. We catch glimpses of the tasks continuing unabated in other letters of the time. During the grape harvest, the abbot heard one of the monks stationed nearby at Goomalling was planning to bring visitors to the vineyard at Wyening. Catalan sent a telegram to forbid the visit. He explained later by letter that the work made decent appearances impossible: 'our Sisters who are working with the girls in the vineyard have their own pride and they do not like to appear before the people dirty or in an inconvenient way. This cannot be avoided while they are picking up the grapes'.¹⁰² He underlined the primitive conditions to insist that ordinary hospitality would be impossible: 'our Sisters would be terribly disgusted if they were unable to prepare a decent meal to [sic] the visitors and at Wyening there is not abundance of means to satisfy even the most humble ambitions'.¹⁰³ Essentially they camped in the simple house on site, sleeping and eating in common, and taking in the harvest by hand.¹⁰⁴ Whether or not the sisters and the girls shared the sense of social decency the abbot claimed for them, it is clear their role was demanding, not decorative. Around the same time, another letter pointed to the financial significance of work at St Joseph's. Continuing the long tradition of controversy over laundry, Abbot Catalan wrote to the Provincial of the Marist Brothers who staffed St Ildephonsus' School, restating a claim for £331 for the school's washing. He asserted the monopoly of the laundry at St Joseph's, emphasising that the washing should be done in town, not sent elsewhere, and certainly not in the monastery's truck.¹⁰⁵ And just as the monastery, not the Marists, oversaw the school finances, so the monastery and not St Joseph's collected the laundry fees, set by the monks at an annual £4 per student.¹⁰⁶

In the frontier environment of the Kimberley, the demand of the work continued while the significance of the sisters' presence as women was even more marked. Women working with women conformed closely with Aboriginal as well as Benedictine traditions.¹⁰⁷ The appointment of one of the sisters as 'practical infirmarian' and midwife was therefore an obvious move if the work of Fr Tomás Gil as doctor and pharmacist was going to continue. The sisters were certainly visiting the sick before

102 Catalan to Gregory, 22 February 1936, NNA 01437/52.

103 Catalan to Gregory, 22 February 1936, NNA 01437/52.

104 Francisca Pardo, Interview, Madrid, 31 May 1999.

105 Catalan to the Provincial, Marist Brothers, 28 February 1936, NNA 01437.

106 Catalan to Suñol, 13 May 1935, giving the fees for college students, NNA 01436.

107 See the description of four generations of childbearing in the East Kimberley in Catherine Bridge, 'Midwifery Care for Australian Aboriginal Women', *Australian College of Midwives Incorporated Journal* 12 (1999): 7–11.

Abbot Catalan wrote in September 1936 to insist Fr Tomás nominate an assistant 'when it comes to attending women and more particularly in illnesses and necessities appropriate to their sex ... to wash and do the other things the case requires'.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps aware that midwifery was still controversial work for women religious, or perhaps acknowledging the sisters' lack of training, he commented that while they were 'not entitled to carry out the office alone ... under your direction they will do well, and it is more fitting'.¹⁰⁹ Encouraging marriage and families had been a particular goal since the first missionaries in 1908 had been alarmed to find so few children among the local people. The presence of the sisters as nurses made contact with the women more normal and extended the mission's influence.

Roman authorities were against the involvement of vowed women in childbirth.¹¹⁰ Although there was an exemption made for missionary congregations in the very month of these letters (following steady lobbying by nursing congregations in particular), Catalan was cautious not to compromise the hard-won canonical status of the new congregation. In commentary that betrays the abbot's own assumptions, he observed that 'some will find it more disgusting than others, even morally disgusting',¹¹¹ and then advised, following Benedict's precepts that the superior should assign work according to capacity, that the appointment could either rotate or be given permanently to the one most suited: 'perhaps not all are called to this. ... [Y]ou must judge this for yourself and decide accordingly for the spiritual and bodily health of the Sisters'.¹¹²

In the sisters' own letters there are hints of both more contact and a closer relationship with the local women. Tasks such as dressmaking were shared equally and the sisters' skills were apparently appreciated and copied quickly by the Aboriginal women. There were regular occasions picking peanuts and joking with the women in the garden.¹¹³ Escolastica assured the abbot, 'We communicate a lot with the natives, the children of course'.¹¹⁴ But the strangeness of local customs and the role of the mission played on her mind too. Describing a visit of a group of Aborigines in 1934,

108 Catalan to Gil, 19 September 1936, NNA 01437/191.

109 Catalan to Gil, 19 September 1936.

110 Carmen Mangion, "'To Console, to Nurse, to Prepare for Eternity': The Catholic Sickroom in Late Nineteenth-Century England', *Women's History Review* 21 (2012): 657–78.

111 Catalan to Gil, 19 September 1936.

112 Catalan to Gil, 19 September 1936.

113 Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

114 Escolastica to Catalan, 8 February 1932 [1933], trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

she was struck by both the impact of the mission and the resilience of Aboriginal customs. On the one hand, small children were left behind by the families; on the other, young sisters already committed in polygamous marriage left, and happily:

The women also came [to the mission], with their beautiful children, but to me they seem too small for them to want to leave them here, and what's more, they are from very far away. They say yes, but I don't believe it, because they always say yes, and later they escape. There were also another two—one of ten and one of fifteen, the poor things—we were upset to see them placed between these such brutal customs that they have, but these ones didn't leave them, because they are already with a husband who could almost be their grandfather, and they are so happy, and the two are sisters and with the same man.¹¹⁵

Exuberant about her own faith, Escolastica did not dispute the girls' happiness. She saw it as clearly as she saw 'brutal customs' and felt the dissonance as children were left behind.

Escolastica remained realistic about the degree of change the abbot should expect from the mission. Although her 'greatest wishes are none other than speaking to them of the great love that we should have for Our Lord',¹¹⁶ she was taken aback when the abbot suggested she keep a lookout for Benedictine vocations in the small school. She put more modest missionary goals in God's hands:

I would be satisfied if God gives them the grace to be good Christians; I think this would already be a lot, but as for becoming nuns, I doubt it. But in the end God and Our Mother know what's best for them.¹¹⁷

If there were vocations among the girls she would be delighted, but did not think it very likely, 'because they are very difficult to crack'.¹¹⁸

As the sisters took on monastic practices there was some acknowledgment that the intensity of their work, almost literally burning candles at both ends, would sometimes create friction in the community. The abbot was especially pleased that shared recreation was compulsory in the official

115 Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934.

116 Escolastica to Catalan, 8 February 1932 [1933].

117 Escolastica to Catalan, 14 September 1934, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

118 Escolastica to Catalan, 14 September 1934.

timetable as 'an opportunity for peace' if the working day threw up 'stress due to personality or faults in humility'.¹¹⁹ He held up common leisure time and careful attention to the Rule in general as an 'impenetrable wall'. It would protect the community against quarrels and the murmuring of complaints so it could 'grow in virtue and merit'. Murmuring about the circumstances or the other members was a classic monastic ailment, expressly forbidden in the sixth-century document as corrosive of community.¹²⁰ Unity between the sisters was a key sign of good formation, and the abbot urged the Kimberley group to 'be full of the good spirit that should exist between religious sisters and those of the same habit [at New Norcia]'.¹²¹ In the same week as this admonition the abbot purchased a Singer sewing machine for Drysdale River and told the sisters, playfully or not, it was a concession to 'the wishes of you three' so that 'murmuring' against their work should stop.¹²² Escolastica used the Singer to treadle stitch across the corners of her longer letters. Her immediate reply was brief and written to catch the mail boat by stealing time from sleep.¹²³ Touched, Catalan acknowledged the grind of the life: 'I know how much appeal there is in sleeping after many hours of continuous and heavy work'.¹²⁴ When Escolastica did comment on the machine directly, it was to link the work with God in the Benedictine spirit: she was 'enormously grateful' for it, and for the irons he'd also sent 'because now at least we can iron with pleasure and without anybody grumbling. So our work will be more pleasing to God; don't you think it is better like that?'¹²⁵

In public statements Abbot Catalan maintained that experience at New Norcia had prepared the Kimberley sisters for their work in the north. He told the Melbourne Eucharistic Congress in 1934 that 'their life is a life of work and prayer' so that they 'found themselves quite at home'.¹²⁶ Certainly there were continuities between what they had done at New Norcia and work in the new environment. Some were predictable and

119 Catalan to Escolastica, Hildegard and Matilde, 19 September 1936, NNA 01437/193.

120 RB 40. See John H. Smith, 'Grace and Grumbling: With Reference to the Rule of St Benedict', in *Immense, Unfathomed, Unconfined: Essays in Honour of Norman Young*, ed. Sean Winter (Melbourne: Uniting Academic Press, 2013), 309–21.

121 Catalan to Escolastica, Hildegard and Matilde, 19 September 1936, NNA 01437/193.

122 Catalan to Escolastica, Hildegard and Matilde, 25 September 1936, NNA 01437/203.

123 Escolastica to Catalan, 9 October 1936, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

124 Catalan to Escolastica, 28 April 1937, NNA 01444.

125 Escolastica to Catalan, 15 May 1937, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

126 Catalan, 'Drysdale River Mission', in *The National Eucharistic Congress, Melbourne, Australia, December 2nd–9th, 1934*, ed. J. M. Murphy and R. F. Moynihan (Melbourne: Advocate Press, 1936), 188.

already published widely: 'teaching and instructing [the children] in the truths of religion', as well as 'cooking and sewing and other occupations so indispensable to the Mission'.¹²⁷ Others were more surprising and tucked into the detail of letters: nougat at Christmas made with the almond grinder they brought from the kitchen at St Joseph's, regular production of 80 bottles of tomato conserve, devotional reading for an hour before lunch (Escolastica asked the abbot to send a biography of St Francis, a collection of his letters, and the letters of St Teresa), walks in the New Norcia tradition on Sunday and Thursday.¹²⁸

There were the perpetual language difficulties. 'Don't worry,' the abbot tried to reassure Matilde as she took her turn at the school of 10 pupils at Drysdale River, 'soon you will know how to tell them the most important things and they will understand the catechism'.¹²⁹ From afar, Escolastica encouraged the idea that the new novices, Magdalena, Francisca and Placida, should have lessons in English at St Gertrude's when they arrived at New Norcia in 1934, 'because that's what we need [to speak] in this country, and then they will be able to teach those who don't go out, like myself'.¹³⁰ But 'bored in a bad way and growing sad because it seemed they were not teaching them as they hoped',¹³¹ the newcomers left the college and began lessons with Mary, by then in charge of the school at St Joseph's, on the strength of the English she had learnt from Mother Elias. In the abbot's eyes this 'concession to human weakness' put Matilde in the north at the forefront of studies: 'How are you going with English?' he asked her. 'I understand you like it a lot, and have regular lessons [from the monks] and read a lot in this language. Good, so it will be more useful every day.'¹³² She was also learning to sing the psalms: 'Well done', the abbot affirmed. 'When you come back to New Norcia you will be ahead of everything.'¹³³ Escolastica reminded the abbot that with English they could be 'more useful' to the mission.¹³⁴ It was obvious to everyone that without a proper grounding in the language the sisters were reliant

127 Catalan, 'Drysdale River Mission', 188.

128 Catalan to Benedictine Missionary Sisters, 9 January 1933, NNA 01434/17; Escolastica to Catalan, 30 September 1934, NNA 01061; Catalan to Escolastica, 24–26 July 1933; Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934, NNA 01061.

129 Catalan to Matilde, 5 March 1934, NNA 01435/100; numbers in the school from Escolastica to Catalan, 8 February 1933[3], NNA 01061.

130 Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

131 Catalan to Matilde, 2 May 1935, NNA 01436/143.

132 Catalan to Matilde, 2 May 1935.

133 Catalan to Matilde, 2 May 1935.

134 Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934, NNA 01061.

on others in all their contacts with the Australian community. In the Benedictine scheme of prayer and work, however, language skills were not a priority. Or to put it another way, the impracticality of not speaking the language did not impact on their capacity to pray or to work.

The rhythm of prayer and work framed the Benedictine life wherever the sisters were, but there was also plenty that was unfamiliar at the isolated tropical mission. Their correspondence picks up newsworthy differences against a background of unquestioned monastic observance: Easter marked with all-day singing and interrupted by the mission bell only 'because when they start to dance they don't know when to stop', the 'Purgatory' of ground so hot they could not stand on it despite shoes wrapped in four other layers of covering, the itch of *zarpullido* or prickly heat under regulation black serge clothing, the relief of the river where (against the abbot's concern for propriety) they could swim in their expansive pinafores, 'nice' photographs where they wore their collars so the abbot could 'show them to anyone', and other photographs so 'mixed with natives' that the abbot could not tell who was who.¹³⁵

There was the walk of over five hours through head-high grasses, between the Drysdale River Mission station and the new convent and mission settlement with a reliable water supply at Kalumburu; a real danger that without flour they would become a 'house without bread'; and crocodile, mangoes, dugong and other unfamiliar food so that the intrepid Escolastica could declare: 'What doesn't poison you makes you fatter'.¹³⁶ The *Notebooks*, compiled at a distance and later, stress the community's hardship especially in relation to cooking. Supplies came in by barge every six months, but most familiar food could not be stored; 'therefore', Felicitas or her editors recorded crisply, 'it was not sent'.¹³⁷ Flour was a mainstay, lasting three months before what remained was 'fermented' with moths and other insects. The sisters made bread notwithstanding and added it to great pots of soup as both breakfast and supper for all at the mission 'unless', the *Notebooks* concede without telling us how often, 'one of the Aboriginal women brought some fish or kangaroo tail'. The heat of the oven and the kneading of the bread was 'unimaginable'.¹³⁸

135 Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934, 8 February 1935, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061; Catalan to Matilde, 7 August 1934, NNA 01434/238.

136 Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934, 17 May 1937, 30 September 1934, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

137 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 15.

138 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 15.



Figure 6.8: Washing in the river, but wearing collars.

Source: NNA W7-A5-180-1.



Figure 6.9: Washing as it was more usually done, without collars and with helpers.

Source: ABTM.

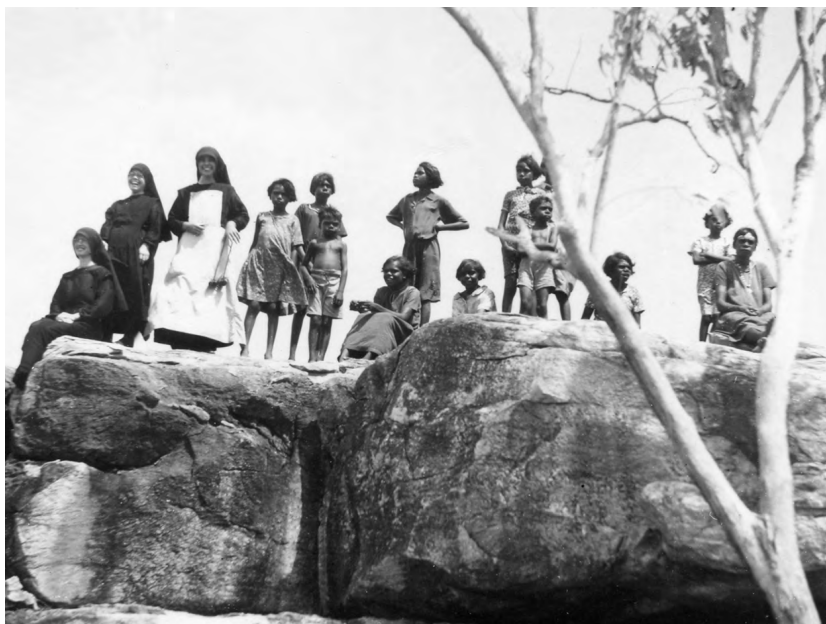


Figure 6.10: Magdalena (seated), Ludivina and Maria (in apron) on a picnic at Drysdale River, c. 1939.

Source: NNA 65318P.



Figure 6.11: Escolastica with her class at Drysdale River, 1932.

Source: NNA 65312P.



Figure 6.12: Fr Boniface Cubero with a camp oven on a picnic, 1930s.

Source: NNA 80499P.

In the tropical wet season, and also in the dry, the sisters kept the conventions of the convent as the norm: routines of prayer and work and even standard habits designed for Europe's climate remained. The small community of between four and six monks also continued to work hard in practical as well as pastoral tasks, but with the arrival of the sisters they were freed from routines of domestic work. Asked to comment on a photograph of Fr Boniface Cubero baking bread in a camp oven around this time, Scholastica Carrillo, the later namesake of Escolastica Martinez smiled mischievously. '*This ...*', she announced with all her dramatic flair, '*This ... was for a picnic*'.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Kalumburu, May 1999.



Figure 6.13: Posing for a photo on an excursion, 1930s: Hildegard (left), Escolastica (right), Matilde in front, local 'bush' men, woman in mission dress, and Benedictine monk with rifle.

Source: NNA 90509P.

Through the decades, the photographs tell a story of a more relaxed community than at New Norcia. The sisters socialised with the monks and shared recreation with the people, especially on Sundays at the beach.



Figure 6.14: Josephine and Visitación with fishing nets at the beach, 1970s.

Source: ABTM.

The dual identity of the sisters as hard-working missionaries and faithful monastics was a matter of pride in Spain among their family and friends, as well as at New Norcia. Abbot Catalan's letter to the parish priest of Tapia, the village that was home to Hildegard and Matilde, was typical. He included a photograph to add to the reality of their reputation as heroines of the community:

I show you this interesting photograph of the little nuns so you can see those you've heard talk of so many times and always with great praise, bursting with joy since they have gone to the mission at Drysdale: your former parishioners, today daughters of St Benedict and most fervent missionaries.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Catalan to Pio Palacios, 28 December 1934.

The two from Tapia and Escolastica from Cavia returned to New Norcia in June 1938, six years and nine months after the foundation of their house in the north.¹⁴¹ A second trio of sisters had joined them in May and stayed on to continue the work.¹⁴² Magdalena replaced Matilde as the teacher, while Mary took over as superior and Ludivina as the cook.

Escolastica feared that the missionary life might have made the Drysdale sisters wilder than the rest of the community. As she returned to the motherhouse to begin the novitiate, she drew a distinction between herself and the sisters who had trained at Maredsous, 'who had the true spirit of true Benedictines', and was concerned 'in case I offend my beloved Sisters when I am in their company'.¹⁴³ Although she regarded her vows as an oblate as already fully binding, Escolastica also faced a reality that monastic discipline was in contrast to the freer forms of life in the Kimberley:

[Perhaps] the mistress of the novices will find it a bit hard to get us professed ... I say this for myself because after spending so many years in this wild bush, there's no doubt it will be more difficult for us.¹⁴⁴

But in the event it was a physical challenge rather than a spiritual one that she faced.

On their return Hildegard, Matilde and Escolastica took their places in the normal rosters at New Norcia, but Escolastica could not shake a persistent cough. It did not seem serious until 'one day working outdoors she was caught by a sudden heavy rain ... [and] her breathing became so difficult that she had to be rushed to Perth'.¹⁴⁵ Dr Lucraft at St John of God Hospital in Subiaco recognised tuberculosis. Treatment for TB promised little in the years before the mass production of penicillin or the development of the antibiotic streptomycin. Escolastica was in hospital for over a year as Lucraft operated twice without success. Friends in Perth, supporters of the mission in the north, wrote to enquire. The abbot thanked them for their concern but reported 'she does not improve

141 *West Australian*, 18 June 1938, 15; *Northern Times* (Carnarvon), 24 June 1938, 1; 'Pioneer Nuns of Drysdale River Mission', *West Australian Catholic Record*, 23 July 1938, 14.

142 'Chronicle of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia' (hereafter *Chronicle*), 10 May 1934, NNA.

143 Escolastica to Catalan, 17 May 1937, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

144 Escolastica to Catalan, 17 May 1937.

145 'Sister Mary Scholastica OSB', New Norcia *Sunday Leaf*, 29 November 1953, 2.

much'.¹⁴⁶ To Sr Gertrude, now in the Carmelite convent in Adelaide, he confided: 'it seems there is no human remedy for her. She can do nothing except praying, and that she does'.¹⁴⁷ Over the next two years of illness some weeks were better than others, but hope of recovery had faded. It seemed she had been ill almost since she left Perth and had probably caught tuberculosis from one of the friends of New Norcia who had come to see the pioneer group off on their way to the Kimberley. 'Among the Natives of the North this sickness is not to be found', the New Norcia news-sheet, *Sunday Leaf*, claimed.¹⁴⁸ Escolastica prepared for the end with Fr Boniface, also a veteran of Drysdale River and a friend of her family in Cavia, with 'exemplary resignation and patience'.¹⁴⁹ Defying pious platitudes she told her young nurse Francisca Pardo often enough that, 'When I am dead, I will come to pull your nose'.¹⁵⁰ Ardent and clear-sighted, Escolastica resisted stereotypes but she had long had a holy death in mind.

Work and prayer and salvation

From the beginning of her time in the Kimberley, Escolastica Martinez had been writing of her spiritual ambition to be 'a real saint, whatever the cost'.¹⁵¹ She saw a direct connection between her work, whatever the tasks, and the merit God would find behind her effort to pave the way to heaven. In Catholic thinking of the 1930s, unchallenged since the Council of Trent, work undertaken graciously would not only find favour with God but warrant eternal life. Her work in the north was her response to a divine command, and she asked the abbot to pray 'strongly' that she would 'carry out [her] missionary duties well', because 'otherwise I will answer to God'.¹⁵² Answering to a loving God still included the possibility of being found wanting. Escolastica relished the life of the mission and the natural beauty of its setting. She gave thanks to God she was 'very happy and content with my little blacks',¹⁵³ but she also wrote of suffering as a gift. She recast hardship as an invitation to trust God more:

146 Catalan to Catherine Herlihy, North Perth, 29 March 1941, NNA 01444/458.

147 Catalan to Gertrude Banks, 21 May 1941, NNA 01444/246.

148 'Sister Mary Scholastica OSB', New Norcia *Sunday Leaf*, 29 November 1953, 2.

149 'Sister Mary Scholastica OSB', New Norcia *Sunday Leaf*, 29 November 1953, 2.

150 Francisca Pardo, Interview, Madrid, 31 May 1999.

151 Escolastica to Catalan, 13 September 1932, 8 February 1933, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

152 Escolastica to Catalan, 13 September 1932.

153 Escolastica to Catalan, 30 September 1934.

It is very difficult (but what is difficult is valuable) but I think that ... a voice inside my soul says to me[:] Onwards daughter, onwards; even when you have to cross a mountain of pain, walk up this Calvary and embrace the cross through my love, then life is short and glory is eternal.¹⁵⁴

Like the famous young Carmelite (and victim of tuberculosis) Thérèse of Lisieux, whose statue the missionary women crowned with roses and whose patronage was invoked in the name of the vital mission motorboat, the *Teresita*,¹⁵⁵ Escolastica was playing out a hidden, but divinely inspired, personal drama.¹⁵⁶

Escolastica aspired to heaven for herself and also for the Aboriginal people she had come north to serve and 'save' if she could. At New Norcia, Aboriginal involvement in the church often stretched four generations and the drama of conversion was rare, but in the Kimberley of the 1930s Christianity had not overtaken Aboriginal tradition.

Conversion from being 'bush-y' was a priority for the Benedictines. 'God wanted us all to have the same right', Escolastica told the abbot: 'Pray for them'.¹⁵⁷ She envied the simple road to eternal life that Aboriginal converts enjoyed if they were baptised close to death. The 'cheap' and 'easy' road to heaven was one of Escolastica's themes. She put it to the abbot: 'This is truly happiness don't you think Father?', that the Aborigines 'enjoy themselves in this world, and then they enjoy the savannah forever in the next'.¹⁵⁸

Escolastica's appreciation of the happiness among the people before conversion was unusual; even Salvado had stressed the misery of Aboriginal Australians before their contact with the mission.¹⁵⁹ The 'savannah' of heaven was also an image that linked eternity with the bush of the north and echoed the Spanish *selva*, the forest or jungle, that most missionary Spanish speakers hoped the Aborigines would leave. The echo continued in Escolastica's use of *salvaje* to refer to the people coming to

154 Escolastica to Catalan, n.d. but June 1932, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

155 Escolastica to Catalan on the gift of the statue (from the governor or from the Benedictines in Sydney), 8 February 1932; on the motorboat, 14 August 1934, NNA 01061.

156 On the significance of Thérèse, see Katharine Massam, *Sacred Threads: Catholic Spirituality in Australia, 1922–1962* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1996), 127–52.

157 Escolastica to Catalan, 14 August 1934.

158 Escolastica to Catalan, 9 October 1936, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

159 Work on Salvado's Spanish writing continues but Frederica Verdina has found no positive adjectives associated with Aborigines in a sample of his Italian discussion. See Frederica Verdina, 'The Depiction of Indigenous Australians in Catholic Missionary Epistolarity', Paper presented at the Eighth Biennial Conference of the Australasian Centre for Italian Studies (ACIS), Sydney, 1–4 July 2015.

and going from the mission or in the camp across the river. Literally, they were 'savage' in English, more evocatively, 'uncivilised', as in outside the settlement, and still in Escolastica's estimation 'fortunate':

This is how to win Heaven easily, and what's more is that after being created in and enjoying this life, they are going to enjoy themselves in the next, so you see Father, how fortunate these semi-savages are. Oh God, that we might have the same pleasure of sending everyone to their heavenly home with such a good ticket!¹⁶⁰

She saw her own path as narrower because she might not live up to the ideals she had taken on. She also knew the abbot's estimation of contemporary Western politics, and probably shared the view he put to her and to Hildegard in late 1932 that, 'today in Europe and also in America there are people incomparably more savage than the Australian Aborigines'.¹⁶¹ He saw a disdain for faith, or at least a stance against the church, in the Spanish Republic of the 1930s and condemned it also as uncivilised: 'among the hordes of savages we have to count a large number of our Spaniards, who don't care about justice and claim also to put God below their feet'.¹⁶² In the abbot's estimation, Europe was in the grip of 'prejudice, anti-religion, in sum hell'.¹⁶³ It stood in contrast to the heaven the missionaries would enable for the people of the north. Making a bleak connection between the natural and supernatural world, Abbot Catalan suggested the frequent thunder and lightning should remind them 'that God is near ... and that he is witness to all the work that you do for Him and through Him'.¹⁶⁴ He urged the missionary women to see this as 'a great consolation for the souls who for the love of God live a life overflowing with humiliation, which is usually the case for Missionary Sisters'.¹⁶⁵

Escolastica was confident each deathbed baptism in the Kimberley secured eternal happiness as 'one more angel in heaven',¹⁶⁶ but she was also close enough to the people to recognise the fear among some who stayed away 'because they think that if they come to the Mission, we will make them Christians straight away and then they will die'.¹⁶⁷ She saw a clear division

¹⁶⁰ Escolastica to Catalan, 14 September 1934.

¹⁶¹ Catalan to Escolastica and Hildegard, 28 August 1932, NNA 01433/185.

¹⁶² Catalan to Escolastica and Hildegard, 28 August 1932.

¹⁶³ Catalan to Escolastica and Hildegard, 28 August 1932.

¹⁶⁴ Catalan to Escolastica and Hildegard, 28 August 1932.

¹⁶⁵ Catalan to Escolastica and Hildegard, 28 August 1932.

¹⁶⁶ Escolastica to Catalan, 8 February 1935, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

¹⁶⁷ Escolastica to Catalan, 9 October 1936, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

between missionaries and people, secure in the superiority of her faith and way of life, but, like Maria Harispe before her, Escolastica was committed to the Aboriginal people. Her faith suggested that the world's dismissal of them was not God's: 'I feel a special happiness in my heart when I visit them because I see that they are so looked down on by everyone, but at the same time it seems to me that Our Lord loves them very much'.¹⁶⁸ Linking herself with the people, she asked the abbot's prayers, 'For me and for these natives I love so tenderly'.¹⁶⁹

Just as heavenly and earthly realms were paradoxically interconnected, Escolastica also saw a reciprocity between her effort on behalf of others and the vitality of her own spirit. She wanted the abbot's prayers to 'win many souls for my spouse Jesus, which is what he asks of me, and at the same time that he can save my soul, which, as you tell me, is the most important thing to us'.¹⁷⁰ The flow of grace between her faithful attention to her missionary tasks, the example she set and the quality of the explanations she offered the women and children of 'what our holy religion is, and at the same time the great love we must have for God Our Lord',¹⁷¹ bore fruit in ways she could not predict. Only God knew what her work might yield: 'sometimes they don't pay much attention to what we say, but in the end God will be glorified in everything'.¹⁷² The work of the Benedictine women in the north covered a spectrum of apparently mundane tasks valued for its practical contribution to the mission, but from Escolastica's point of view there was a divine scheme in motion.

From the outset, Escolastica had given her private commitment as an oblate the same significance as a formal religious profession. She celebrated 'the great grace [by which God] conceded to consecrate me to Him with the three precious nails: Poverty, Chastity and Obedience'.¹⁷³ She spoke of the mission as a cloistered world, and asked the abbot to pray that she would 'be grateful to my sweet Jesus for having taken me out of the world and brought me to the holy ark of religion, where, away from so many dangers, I can save my soul more easily'.¹⁷⁴ In a high-spirited flourish that calls on the motifs of religious women as 'brides of Christ', Escolastica

168 Escolastica to Catalan, 6 July 1934, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

169 Escolastica to Catalan, 14 September 1934.

170 Escolastica to Catalan, 14 September 1934.

171 Escolastica to Catalan, 14 September 1934.

172 Escolastica to Catalan, 14 September 1934.

173 Escolastica to Catalan, 29 October 1935, trans. Kerry Mullan, NNA 01061.

174 Escolastica to Catalan, 29 October 1935.

echoed Thérèse of Lisieux once again, stressing profound commitment and holiness through service in small things and offering the abbot a manifesto of her dedication:

Yes I am loyal to what I promised Him on the day of my betrothal with the Heavenly spouse. Oh, how he obliges me to be a generous soul and at the same time, with a heart that never says enough and which links itself with all manner of hardship and sacrifice with a smile, for the good of such a good God who has done so much for this unworthy daughter of His.¹⁷⁵

Perhaps most simply and significantly of all, she signed herself using her full religious name, Hermana Maria Escolastica, and included the initials of her Benedictine identity: OSB.

Poignantly, although predictably, it was Escolastica's status as a Benedictine that the abbot stressed when he wrote to her mother in early December 1941 after her long illness ended. His letter offered formal condolences on the death of 'your daughter, our most beloved Sr Escolastica OSB who worked with so much zeal in the missions of New Norcia and Drysdale'.¹⁷⁶ The early summer was already hot and in the last week of her life a bushfire had roared through 10,000 acres (4,000 hectares) of paddock nearby.¹⁷⁷ The abbot described only the classic monastic scene of the young nun's death for her family. She had prepared carefully, receiving communion all but daily through her final six months; there had been good days and bad days, but now the sisters gathered in her room, singing and praying, as the final hours lengthened out. They sent for the abbot about six o'clock in the evening, and they waited with Fr Boniface, still chanting quietly, until the end came about eleven o'clock. Escolastica herself was fully conscious until 'almost the last moment', her family heard, and 'completely resigned to the will of God' so that 'her death was most happy and worthy of a daughter of Saint Benedict'.¹⁷⁸ There was a solemn requiem Mass at nine o'clock the next morning, and the abbot penned his letter. Promising that Fr Boniface would write with more detail, Abbot Catalan hoped the family would find some comfort as they grieved in knowing the community had done all they could for her, 'everything, spiritually as temporally'.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Escolastica to Catalan, 29 October 1935.

¹⁷⁶ Catalan to Señora Nieves Rojo Martinez, 5 December 1941, NNA 01444/444.

¹⁷⁷ *Daily News*, 27 November 1941, 1; *West Australian*, 28 November 1941, 9.

¹⁷⁸ Catalan to Rojo Martinez, 5 December 1941.

¹⁷⁹ Catalan to Rojo Martinez, 5 December 1941.

Echoing Escolastica's own sense of the interconnection of work and divine reward, the abbot assured her mother: 'It has ended then her happy path, and now she only rests in God who must reward with the glory of Heaven she who worked so for the glory of God and the salvation of souls'.¹⁸⁰ Then as the temperature climbed to 99 degrees Fahrenheit (37 degrees Celsius), they brought forward the funeral planned for the following day. In the early dusk as the heat waned, 'all' in the town gathered in the small cemetery for her burial.¹⁸¹

Grief and pragmatic attention to the mechanics of the afterlife mingled in the other reports of the death of 'a little saint'.¹⁸² The community at Drysdale River got the news by radio-telegraph sometime on Saturday 6 December, and the monks recorded her role as 'foundress' of the sisters' community in their *Chronicle* and sent 'feelingly worded' messages of condolence to the community.¹⁸³

Less than a week later the Kimberley community in turn sent news to New Norcia by telegram that Mary had been evacuated by air to hospital in Darwin with pernicious anaemia. The abbot decided the sisters at St Joseph's would be alarmed and 'feel it'¹⁸⁴ too much if he told them so soon that another of their community needed hospital treatment, but he wrote directing Mary to come home to recover. He also elaborated for her on Escolastica's death with light-hearted banter built on shared assumptions about the process of moving between this world and the next. If Mary had flown to Darwin, Escolastica had 'flown further than you'.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, the timing suited her baptismal name Conception perfectly. The abbot observed she 'went to Heaven a few days before her nameday feast of the Immaculate Conception [8 December] in order to toast herself a little in Purgatory ... so be purified to enter Heaven on this extraordinary feast'.¹⁸⁶ Liturgically, the feast day, as with all the church's prayer, brought the worlds together, and the community was confident their dead were not far away.

180 Catalan to Rojo Martinez, 5 December 1941.

181 *Chronicle*, 5 December 1941.

182 Catalan to Maria Ciudad, 11 December 1941, NNA 01444/231.

183 *Chronicle* of the Benedictine Community of Kalumburu (*Chronicle*, Kalumburu), 6 December 1941, NNA; 'Obituary of the Late Sister Mary Scholastica', *Record*, 18 December 1941, 7.

184 Catalan to Maria, 11 December 1941.

185 Catalan to Maria, 11 December 1941.

186 Catalan to Maria, 11 December 1941.

The realities of physical distance and an increasingly active war zone in the north of Australia remained for the Kimberley sisters. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, there were fears that Darwin and surrounding areas were also likely targets. The monks painted the word 'Mission' on the roof of their main building on 9 December 1941.¹⁸⁷ As part of a government evacuation of women and children from Darwin, Sister Mary was airlifted out and transferred to St John's in Subiaco on 18 December 1941, much to the astonishment of the abbot who really did not like planes.¹⁸⁸ Darwin, 400 kilometres east of the Drysdale River Mission by air, was bombed on 18 and 19 February, and Broome, some 600 kilometres south, on 3 March 1942. Up to 1,100 people died in these attacks.¹⁸⁹ Despite the large sign on the roof, or perhaps because it was assumed to be a deliberate decoy, the Benedictine mission itself was targeted on 27 September 1943. Six people were killed: Fr Tomás Gil; an Aboriginal mother, Veronica Cheinmora; and four boys whose family names were not recorded, Sylvester, Dominic, Benedict and Jeremy.¹⁹⁰ Many mission buildings were also badly damaged, and the convent was levelled completely. By this time, Magdalena and Ludivina had been evacuated and were safely at New Norcia, but not before they had been held at a Catholic hospital in North Adelaide on suspicion of espionage, or at least claiming a false identity.

The misunderstanding underlined the marginal status of the small community. Two women in unconventional faded black habits had arrived late at night and were met by a priest who had never heard of Spanish sisters in the Kimberley or even 'such a place' as New Norcia.¹⁹¹ If they spoke so little English and in such strange accents they were surely German, or worse, as the Spanish *Notebooks* record it: Protestants. It was after midnight on a long day, but they declined food so they could keep the fast and receive communion the next day and so inadvertently established some confidence among the observers that they really were Catholic. Then in daylight Archbishop Beovich, who had visited New Norcia, 'ended all suspicions',¹⁹² though the arrangements for their onward travel still took

187 *Chronicle*, Kalumburu, 9 December 1941.

188 Catalan to Maria, 19 December 1941, NNA 01444/231.

189 'Japanese Bombing of Darwin, Broome and Northern Australia', Australia.gov.au, Australian Government, www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/japanese-bombing-of-darwin; accessed 25 January 2017 (site discontinued).

190 'The Bombing of Kalumburu', Kalumburu Mission, www.kalumburumission.org.au/main/bombing.html; accessed 31 December 2015.

191 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 21.

192 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 21.

several days. Back at New Norcia neither their arrival nor the drama of the journey rated a mention in the monks' *Chronicle*, but they had a story to compete with Sister Teresa Roca's account of being taken into custody and held at a convent in Singapore on similar suspicions in 1915. Apparently little in the sisters' situation had changed in the 30 years that separated the two spying incidents.

It must have felt dangerously familiar too when Matilde de la Fuente fell ill early in 1944. She had gone to help with the vintage at Wyening for a 'change of air' despite not feeling well,¹⁹³ but suddenly she was vomiting blood. By the time she reached the hospital in Subiaco she needed transfusions before first one and then a second and third operation in a period of five weeks.¹⁹⁴ This time, the threatening illness was not tuberculosis but cancer. News from St John's of the potential need for a fourth operation prompted the community to enlist the whole town in a novena invoking the prayers of Rosendo Salvado as the founder of the mission for her recovery. Matilde remained in hospital through the following four months, but there was no further surgery, and the community welcomed her home to New Norcia in May 1944. She was not as well as she appeared, but an apparent cure secured by prayer would surely have buoyed everyone's confidence in the importance of her future at the mission. She had always been trusted and respected, as the abbot would recall, 'So energetic, so good, so missionary!'¹⁹⁵ Now perhaps she had been spared for a reason.

Matilde had taken her turn as infirmarian at Drysdale River with the other sisters in the original community there. She returned from hospital committed to the idea of taking up that post again. Indeed the *Notebooks* record that she hid signs of her ongoing illness because she was focused on completing an accelerated course in midwifery at the St John of God hospital in Geraldton.¹⁹⁶ Before this proposal for intensive training in nursing there had been no thought of providing the Benedictine sisters with education for more than domestic work. Almost certainly Matilde herself came up with the plan as she got to know the St John of God Sisters who nursed her. The records do not help us see how events unfolded, but undoubtedly the training would help her work on the mission. Disregarding her own health, she risked a great deal to undertake

193 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 23.

194 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 23.

195 Catalan to Boniface, 22 April 1948, NNA 01458/40.

196 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 23.

it, actions remembered as typical of 'the humble Spanish nuns who ... find their happiness in spending themselves in the service of others'.¹⁹⁷ Clever, competent and patient, she completed the program with aplomb, and when the community returned to Drysdale in May 1946, Matilde took charge of the small mud hut that was the hospital. It gave her a great deal of satisfaction. Her community praised her 'uncommon intelligence, constant cheerfulness and amazing capacity for work'.¹⁹⁸ A few months of training was nothing in the scheme of things really, but it was an important innovation for the community in preparing the sisters for work that they saw as fundamental to their vocation.

In years when work remained a constant for the Benedictine women, there had been changes in their context. Aboriginal people found their lives increasingly scrutinised and regulated, so that institutional life became more than ever the norm for Aboriginal children.

The coercive *Aborigines Act* of 1905 and the amendments of 1936 were intensified with further laws in 1941 and 1944 that began to focus on cultural assimilation as well as race.¹⁹⁹ Overall, the climate of duress and surveillance meant Aboriginal families increasingly took the option, with varying degrees of freedom and consent, to 'place' their children with the Benedictines, especially when there was a family history at New Norcia. Numbers at St Joseph's grew steadily with more and more girls coming from families outside the mission. Relatively few were sent by the government. The Chief Protector, A. O. Neville, wanted to build the state institutions at Moore River and Carrolup, not foster church missions. The Benedictines argued at least annually that more of the children on their lists deserved government support and their institutions were growing. The ratio of children to adults at St Joseph's increased dramatically from two-to-one before the First World War, to five girls for every sister at New Norcia

197 'The Late Sister Matilda OSB', *Record*, 31 May 1948, n.p., copy in the Archives of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tutzing, Carabanchel, Madrid.

198 'The Late Sister Matilda OSB', *Record*.

199 Peter Biskup, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens: The Aboriginal Problem in Western Australia 1898-1954* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1973); Anna Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000). See also Derrick Tomlinson, 'Too White to Be Regarded as Aborigines: An Historical Analysis of the Policies for the Protection of Aborigines and the Assimilation of Aborigines of Mixed Descent and the Role of Chief Protectors of Aborigines in the Formulation of these Policies in Western Australia from 1898 to 1940' (PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2008).

in the 1940s.²⁰⁰ Only five out of 94 residents at both of New Norcia's institutions in the first half of 1931 were on the government subsidy list, 12 out of 79 in 1941,²⁰¹ and the payment rose only slightly by May 1946, when overall numbers had reached 95, before dropping back to 45 the following year.²⁰² The mission administrators valued government approval rather than Aboriginal opinion and rarely spoke against the policy regimes of segregation and assimilation. Instead, the mission focused on Catholic identity as shared and overriding all other categories.

Most energy at St Joseph's was still directed to the routines of cooking and washing, mending and cleaning that had served the town since the 1860s. There was little time to spare for reflection on immediate problems, let alone to consider wider policy reported in newspapers that the sisters did not see and could not read. There was no incentive to change arrangements that met immediate needs. There was every indication that the institution was sorely required and that the work would continue and increase. But there were also some nagging questions about how the women could sustain the effort.

When the Benedictine sisters reopened the Drysdale River house in 1946, Sr Teresa Roca was 80. Aching with arthritis, she climbed the spiral staircase to the chapel by sitting on the stairs and easing herself slowly from one step to the next. Even the youngest in the community, Placida Catalan at 28, had spent 13 years following the rigorous schedule of days and weeks that depended primarily on the energy of the women. When Matilde's health began to fail again and someone was needed to replace her in the Kimberley, the abbot worried about the numbers needed to carry on the work: 'they are not very numerous even at New Norcia'.²⁰³ There was pressure from the archdiocese of Perth and the Christian Brothers to establish another branch house at Bindoon that would split the numbers again.²⁰⁴ For individual sisters who found their footsteps flagging as they made their way to chapel, fatigue had a deeper purpose and could be redeemed in prayer. But, as a whole, 'their currency and savings' were still the work, and the community needed more and younger members.

200 Fr Maur to the Commissioner of Native Affairs, 23 October 1950, 'New Norcia Mission – Subsidy and General', SROWA S2030 cons993 1926/0350; Catalan to the Commissioner of Native Affairs, 28 May 1947, NNA 01450/104, and 30 September 1941, NNA 01444/306. See also Appendix 1. (The subsidy increased from £15 in 1931 to £16 in 1947, although the abbot proposed the real amount should have been closer to £22; the correspondence trail shows discussion of 12 blankets but no cash amount in 1950.)

201 Placid Spearritt, Submission to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, 17 July 1996, NNA 04583.

202 See Appendix 1.

203 Catalan to Boniface, 22 April 1948.

204 See Chapter 8.

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