

7

Gathering New Energy: Abbot Catalan Recruiting in Spain, 1947–48

In July 1947 Anselm Catalan took a one-way ticket to Europe on the first stage of a journey that sought new life and energy for New Norcia. For 12 years safe travel between Australia and Spain had been restricted, limited first by unrest and civil war in Spain and then prevented by the Second World War. But now, as the Australian Government actively sought immigrants to boost agriculture, establish industries and build population for national security, there would be new arrivals again at New Norcia. Unable to find a return berth on any boat, the abbot left his travel plans open; in any case, he did not know for sure how many new members would be making the return journey with him. This time he was looking for at least a dozen young people: six men for the monastery and at least six new members, perhaps more, to join New Norcia's missionary women. It was imperative that the group gathered new energy.

Like a photographic negative, the carbon copies of Anselm Catalan's correspondence, so diligently kept, invite us to imagine the subtle colours of the wider missionary enterprise. This chapter draws on the abbot's letters as the key surviving source for the dynamics of recruiting new members. We can trace his continuing preoccupations with good health and simple holiness as requirements for a life of hard work at the mission. Even without the replies we catch glimpses of what it meant to receive his letters, and, in faint outline, we can follow other characters in the drama. As his replies mirror back the personalities of the young women interested

in his work, we can also sense in this correspondence assumptions that do not quite mesh and the potential for challenges and conflict at the mission. Moving into the postwar period there was a mood for rebuilding at New Norcia. As the abbot gathered his party he brought together young women who would provide the foundation for new work in the school, a branch house at Bindoon, and the continuing work in the Kimberley, as well as for fresh energy in the laundry and kitchen. It was Abbot Catalan's intention that there would be change, but many of the new sisters would be shocked by the conditions they found at New Norcia. Their group was buoyed by the expectation that they would make a difference.

Catholic missions continued to be a matter of national pride. Idealistic young people were regularly invited to consider emigration to serve the church as missionaries. Most travelled to former Spanish colonies in Central and South America, Africa and China. Australia was an unusual destination but clearly recognised as a part of the broader mission enterprise, especially in the network of villages in the north of Spain where New Norcia was well-known.

In the 1940s the local paper in Burgos gave full coverage to events such as an annual 'Mission Week' and regularly featured both the Benedictine tradition and the significance of missionaries for the church. It reported proudly on the Spanish commitment to the church overseas, in keeping with the tenor of General Franco's Nationalist Government in which Spain was identified with Catholicism. Missionary work was affirmed as a heroic and also realistic choice in these reports. The public face of missionary life was always male. But young women read the papers too, heard the admiring stories, and were moved by the hope that they could save souls, work for God, and live a good and meaningful life.¹ It was, as Scholastica Carrillo would recall, 'a missionary time in my place'.²

Scholastica, whose baptismal name was Josefina, remembered telling her mother that she wanted to be a missionary. It was an early memory, firmly dated from before her father died when she was six years old. It was the same kind of childhood ambition that might have seen her older brothers hope to be businessmen or teachers, but it came to have much greater significance for her. The general talk about overseas church work in the parish and in her family's fish shop that had so inspired her as a child

1 For example, *Diario de Burgos*, 29 March 1948, 25 May 1948, 12 August 1948, 19 August 1948.

2 Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Kalumburu, 1 May 1999.

reassured her as an adult that her vocation was real. The memory of how specific she had been in the childhood conversation with her mother kept her confident in later life of her decision to join the Benedictine community at New Norcia and especially nourished her conviction that her home was in the mission in the Kimberley. Six-year-old Josefina Carrillo was probably not the only child to announce one day to her mother that she would be a missionary, but as an adult she remained surprised at what her child-self seemed to have known:

I was not yet seven years of age. ... [M]y father died on 20 February [1924] and I make seven on the 15th March, ... and I told my mother before my father died, so I was not yet seven: 'When I am older, I will go far away from here (I couldn't go further!) and I will be dressed in white and I will be in a very hot place.' All that I told my mother when I was not yet seven.³

Her early hope of being a missionary encouraged the young woman through loss and hardship in her twenties as she nursed in war-torn San Sebastian and wrestled with saving up a dowry to join the Sisters of Charity who ran the city's hospital. When she heard that a friend's visiting uncle was an abbot recruiting for New Norcia's convent and would not ask for a dowry, her childhood dream was all the explanation she needed.⁴

Abbot Catalan's journey of 16 months in 1947 and 1948 stretched across a wide canvas of international Catholicism. It connected him to celebrations marking 14 centuries since the death of St Benedict, to meetings in Rome to elect a new abbot primate, to the inner-city youth networks of Catholic Action, and to small Spanish farms where children heard stories of the missions. As he travelled through the north of Spain in the second half of the trip, drawing on some 30 years of experience to assess potential new workers for the mission, Abbot Catalan had a certain public standing as well as private connections. He was listed among the dignitaries of both church and state whose presence to honour Benedict at the famous monastery of Silos was reported by the *Diario de Burgos* in May.⁵ He was one of a number of Spanish priests from far-flung dioceses in South Africa, Brazil and Mexico at that occasion who exemplified the wide reach of Spanish Catholicism. As the church in Burgos sponsored

3 Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Kalumburu, 1 May 1999.

4 Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Kalumburu, 1 May 1999; Visitación Ciudad in conversation, Madrid, 2 August 2010.

5 *Diario de Burgos*, 25 May 1948, 1.

charlas misionales or ‘missionary chats’ to inspire support during the Mission Week in August, the Australian missionary travelled in the wake of other Spanish priests—Jesuits from India, Oblates of Mary Immaculate from Canada, Dominicans from Japan—as well as presentations on the sixteenth-century ‘missionary giant’ Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico.⁶ In the months that Abbot Catalan was in his home region, the significance of Catholic missionary life for Spain was taken for granted in the press.⁷

In the villages near Burgos, where families already had ties to New Norcia, support for overseas missionary work had long been part of the Catholic culture. Once again, the abbot peppered the parishes with letters to likely candidates and their sponsors, by turns cajoling and cautioning, sifting and assessing the responses, referring them to government officials or his own agents. He was part administrative tour leader and part physician of souls. He also tapped out a steady stream of correspondence to New Norcia on his portable typewriter, ultimately sorting his copies by clerical status and gender. He wrote most often to the prior and other monks at New Norcia, to other abbots and to the superiors of women’s communities in Spain, but he also kept individual Benedictine sisters at New Norcia and in the Kimberley up to date on his progress in recruiting, giving them news of Spain and their families, offering direction and commenting on what they had told him.

One letter gives a particularly compelling insight into how he saw the context at St Joseph’s in which the sisters worked. Close to the mid-point of his journey, in March 1948, he wrote in accented English to the Aboriginal girls themselves at St Joseph’s.⁸ Sent in response to a collective greeting from the girls in February, the letter stands out for intriguing clues about the pattern of relationships in the town. Like the abbot’s letters to the missionary women themselves, this single letter to the Aboriginal girls reflected not only his understanding of the work the Benedictine women were doing, and an alert sense of the interactions that made up the life of the institution, but also a warm regard for the children. He wrote to them sounding like a concerned and pious parent who knew the life of St Joseph’s well enough to joke about it. Perhaps he imagined Felicitas Pampliega or Mary Cidat reading the letter aloud in English to them all,

6 *Diario de Burgos*, 19 August 1948, 12 August 1948.

7 For example, the 1948 Mission Week featured in *Diario de Burgos*, 12 August 1948.

8 Catalan to St Joseph’s Orphanage, 27 March 1948, New Norcia Archives (NNA) 01451/112.

perhaps after breakfast before the work of the day, perhaps before prayers in the dormitories at night. It was a rare example of his interaction with the children and gave a picture of the community of sisters he imagined around them. The letter outlined Abbot Catalan's sense of their shared world at St Joseph's:

My dear children,

I do appreciate your nice letter of 23rd February. I was indeed anxious to know about you all, and your letter gave me indeed a great relief, for I know that you are keeping in good health and contented. It is true that some of the big girls have already left the Orphanage, but other girls younger came to take the place of those who left, and you are there, I understand more than ever. You are 57, and as you are all so young, you will be alright and no mischief among you. I suppose there will be plenty of noice [sic] there being so many and so young, I am afraid that some times [sic] you will cause headache to the Sisters. Am I mistaken?⁹

Abbot Catalan saw the children as a group, cared for in turn by the group of sisters; both groups kept busy with shared tasks and taking a collective place in the work of the mission town. Writing himself into their midst, he was concerned to reassure the children they were part of a secure ongoing institution. He asked them to 'insist in [their] prayers' that he would find transport for the new missionaries who would secure the future, and gave them a sense of his connection with Spain in the process. Unless they found a boat soon, it would 'be too hard to pull me out of this beautiful Country, which suits my health so well'. In 1948 Catalan's capital C for his homeland 'country' was almost certainly not connected with any awareness of the significance of land for Aboriginal Australians. Perhaps he wrote that sentence expecting that the sisters would understand; being uprooted and transplanted was a metaphor used by Thérèse of Lisieux the patron of missionaries and one of Catalan's favourite saints.¹⁰ Perhaps some of the children also caught an echo of their own experience of disruption and loss in his phrase.

The abbot did not elaborate. He moved on to discuss the practicalities of the laundry, reading 'the tune of your letter' to reflect back to the children (and no doubt to the sisters who had helped them in the drafting), collective

9 Catalan to St Joseph's, 27 March 1948.

10 [Thérèse Martin,] *Soeur Thérèse of Lisieux* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1908), Chapters 1 and 7.

gratitude for the labour-saving washing machines bought secondhand in the neighbouring town of Northam.¹¹ The abbot echoed popular piety (or had his tongue in his cheek) suggesting that ‘now that you will finish your work quicker, you will have more time to pray’.¹² Achieving holiness through ordinary domestic work was a hallmark of the Benedictine sisters, as the previous chapter shows. It also sat well with the spirituality of St Thérèse as patron of missions. Her spirit of selflessness seemed strong in the passages of the abbot’s letter in which he commended the girls for what they had written to him about doing all things well for the glory of God.¹³ He also warned about the need to be careful and wary of the machines that were indeed industrial units that ‘don’t care whether they wash the clothes or smash the arm of a girl’.¹⁴ Catalan told the children, reinforcing what he had told the sisters already,¹⁵ that it was dangerous to try to manage the washing machines without training: ‘So, you should not interfere with them unless you are appointed for that’.¹⁶ The arrival of the new machines and a concern about the workload in the laundry were recurring themes in the letters he sent to the missionaries too, women and men.

After the domestic work, the abbot dealt with farm work. In decades when winemaking was a cottage industry in Western Australia, the routines of the vintage were one of the strands of cultural life that marked off New Norcia from mainstream Australia and potentially formed part of the distinct collective identity that the Aboriginal children shared with the sisters and the monks. Catalan presented it as a happy time that he was sorry to have missed. The sisters recall the harvest as hard work, especially in years that were ‘a taste of purgatory’,¹⁷ some of the children do not remember having any fruit for themselves,¹⁸ and Felicitas was pleased the newcomers would not arrive until those tiring days were over.¹⁹ The abbot’s

11 Catalan to Chick, The Laundry Service, Northam, 29 April 1947, NNA 01450/143.

12 Catalan to St Joseph’s, 27 March 1948.

13 On devotion to Thérèse in Australia, see Katharine Massam, *Sacred Threads: Catholic Spirituality in Australia, 1922–1962* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1996), 127–54.

14 Catalan to St Joseph’s, 27 March 1948.

15 Catalan to Felicitas, 18 March 1948, NNA 01451/94.

16 Catalan to St Joseph’s, 27 March 1948.

17 On the hard work: Francisca Pardo, Interview, Madrid, 31 May 1999; Pilar Catalan, Interview, Madrid, 1999. On heat: Catalan to Matilde, 5 February 1947, NNA 01450/154.

18 Abbot John Herbert, in conversation, 27 April 2010.

19 Catalan to Felicitas, 27 March 1948, NNA 01451/93.

assumptions about the work meant he teased the girls about eating the grapes, while he also passed on some praise from the winemaker, Felix, and affirmed their ‘behaviour’ with a more formal tone:

Have you finish [sic] to pick [sic] the grapes? What a pity that I missed the vintage this year! ... Did you eat many grapes? I presume you did eat as many as you could, as usual. Is Fr Felix satisfied with the quantity of wine he made this year? Perhaps he expected some gallons more wine, but he forgot that you like the grapes too much, and that many of the grapes instead of going into the bucket go somewhere else, and you know it better. One thing I know, and it is that Fr Felix is always delighted to see you at the vineyard, whether it be to pick the grapes or to put together the cuttings after the pruning. The reason is because he thinks that you do your work quickly and well. This speaks highly of your behaviour, at least in this respect.²⁰

This discussion of work and behaviour led the abbot immediately to name and praise three young women who continued to live at ‘the Orphanage’ and share in the work of the sisters, although they were over 17.²¹ The abbot affirmed this ‘safer’ and (by implication) holier choice in contrast to those who were anxious to leave. His picture of St Joseph’s as a safe haven against the dangers of the world drew on traditional understandings of the cloistered monastic life. Staying on at St Joseph’s was an option for otherworldly success that would be good for the soul. For Abbot Catalan this was the only success worth validating:

I am glad to hear that Rosie and Grace and Angelina are still with you at the Orphanage. They care not for the things outside the Orphanage, as they know that in the Orphanage their souls will be safer than in the world where God is so often offended. You will not hear of any miracle of the girls who are too anxious to leave the Orphanage even when they are less than 17 years of age.

The moralising tone of this section gave way to more gentle teasing about a recent picnic, before the abbot concluded his letter. He repeated his thanks for their prayers, reminded them to be good, and assured them of his blessing:

You say that you had a lovely picnic. Of course, provided you go in the lorry all picnics are good. I know that you enjoy it much better when Fr Peter takes you far away, like this time when he took you

20 Catalan to St Joseph’s, 27 March 1948.

21 Rosie Finucaine, Grace Williams and Angelina Moody.

to the lakes of Wannamal. Did you catch many gilgies? Did you offer them to the Sisters? Or were you too greedy and kept them all for yourselves?

Thanks for your prayers that I and my big party may arrive there soon. I expect that on arriving there the Sisters will give me a good news [sic] of every one of you. I am sending you my blessings from the famous shrine of Our Blessed Lady of Montserrat where I am spending the Holy Week, and where I am listening to beautiful music every day in the church.

Wishing you all heavenly blessings and asking you to pray for me, I remain, my dear children, sincerely in Jesus Christ, Abbot of New Norcia.²²

The ending recalled them to the hierarchy of the town. His carbon copy left a space between 'sincerely' and his title where he would have signed 'Anselmo', but the children never called him that, nor did the sisters. He was 'the Abbot Catalan', and 'Father Abbot', and 'My Lord'. He knew their names but probably not so well. The abbot's letter shows his view of their life was shaped by the mission's concern for the laundry and the farm but not limited only to work. It extended to a sense of the good times on the picnics and even in the harvesting, and it was governed by an ambition for their holiness. He was genuinely interested in life at St Joseph's, but in the end he was in Catalonia, or remote within the monastery; he was not part of the everyday. As always too, the silences are telling: for instance, the abbot did not think to ask the children about school.

At the same time, in his exchange of letters with the young women who were weighing their decision to join the New Norcia enterprise, the abbot found himself drawn into discussions of education and training. Practical domestic training had been the focus of education at St Joseph's from the outset, and academic aspirations were nowhere on the horizon for either the sisters or the students. In December 1947, however, both Angelina Cerezo of Tordómar, in the small town of Lerma near Burgos, and Amalia González of Villaquirán, also near Burgos, enquired about New Norcia's missionary Benedictines. Neither of them was connected to the families already represented at the mission, but the qualities and capacities of these two gradually brought the needs of the mission school into focus for the abbot. For these young women, the school at St Joseph's shaped the hope of their vocation.

22 Catalan to St Joseph's, 27 March 1948.

Angelina Cerezo wrote first, apparently asking for information before offering herself as a candidate. Abbot Catalan responded respectfully and at greater length than to the daughters of the village families he knew well. Angelina impressed him not only for good qualities that she shared with others who had already signed on but also because she had finished the high school *bachillerato* and wrote 'elegant' prose, 'very much to the point'.²³ She was 18, and the abbot's response suggests a careful, focused, perhaps rather serious young woman. He encouraged her to treasure her missionary vocation if she had one and indicated that teaching could well be part of her future:

I received your letter and was filled with joy to see your outstanding humility and sincerity, two virtues that honour everyone who possesses them. Your letter, notwithstanding the low opinion it has of itself, is very good and very much to the point in what you want to know.

There are nine girls who have offered to come with me. They are apparently very good but they have no more instruction than they have received in their villages. There are certainly none among them who have completed the studies you said you have done, and that show in your letter which though short, is elegant, simple and well-written. I am very happy you have written and I would say something about your good hopes.

If God gives [you] the vocation of missionary religious life, do not despise the favour that God does. It could be a mark of predestination.

You are young, and perhaps you have not realised how difficult it is to lead a devout life in the world, even though you have noticed the frivolity that dominates the youth of today. Courage then. If you feel moved by God, co-operate with all your strength for what God wants of you. And even if you cannot come to Australia do not be discouraged as perhaps God wants you for another religious congregation dedicated to teaching.²⁴

The abbot could not have claimed that New Norcia's sisters were themselves dedicated to teaching, and certainly not as their main work.

23 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947, NNA 01451/65; on her *bachillerato*, Catalan to Felicitas, 30 July 1948, NNA 01451/98.

24 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947.

Rather than focus on the school, the picture of the sisters' life that the abbot sketched for Angelina was of a farm run by a flourishing, hard-working, closely networked Spanish community. First, he warned Angelina that 'several of these girls who are going to Australia soon have relatives already in the mission, some have brothers, others aunts or family friends'.²⁵ Then he clarified that the missionaries were not cloistered but prayed together 'more briefly than ... enclosed Benedictines who cannot be a missionary by spending hours in choir'.²⁶ New Norcia's sisters were dedicated to God but were specifically called 'oblates' to mark their offering to the work of New Norcia itself. He offered a picture of their focused obedience: 'they do what they are told to do as is necessary or useful to the Mission'.²⁷ Then, within this frame of devotion and utility, the abbot explained the school. He set the lessons of an undifferentiated curriculum as additional to a long list of practical tasks, and implied a moral training in the example of the sisters:

Our Benedictine Oblates are in charge of a school for Aboriginal girls. They teach these girls primary school curriculum and also domestic work, washing, ironing, sewing, darning, mending, cooking and all classes of work compatible with their sex and strength. Our Benedictine Sisters always are an example to their former students and advance the Mission.²⁸

He told Angelina about the town, pointing out that 24 Spanish priests provided for the spiritual needs of the community and that the farm furnished everything else. Perhaps Angelina had asked for details of this, as the abbot specified 'huge quantities of wheat', 'great herds of cows, pigs, chickens and bees', 'all kinds of fruit—grapes, olives and oil', and noted the mission had its own flour mill, bakery and electricity generators.²⁹ He concluded with a promise to help if she believed God had called her and a subtle invitation to heroism, 'entrusting your case to God and asking him to strengthen your vocation if not for Australia then for another community that does not ask the sacrifices that are needed for overseas missions'.³⁰

25 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947.

26 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947.

27 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947.

28 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947.

29 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947.

30 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947.

Events were moving quickly: Angelina would have received his letter on 7 December; she replied with a clear request to be admitted as a postulant no more than five days later, so that the abbot certainly had her letter by 18 December. But in the intervening time the abbot had reached and exceeded his upper limit of 12 postulants for the sisters. He replied to Angelina promptly, acknowledging that she was a more suitable candidate on account of her age and her studies, as well as her sincerity, than some of the younger women whom he had accepted. He assured her that she would have first preference if any of the others pulled out. While he could not say this was likely, it was not impossible.³¹

There had been no hint of urgency in the abbot's first letter to Angelina and much encouragement. In the second letter he did not seem to think she would be shocked by his decisions. Perhaps he simply assumed she shared his view that God guided the speed of letters and that this was as good a tool of discernment as any, or perhaps he consciously made room for doubt about this clever, cautious girl in New Norcia's bush and left her 'knocking at the gate' for a while, as the Rule required.³² He did remind her that God was in charge, as he gave her his own address to write to over Christmas: 'Do not be sad if this reply is not what you wanted, if God wants you to come to Australia He will arrange everything in the way that will fulfil his divine will'.³³ Ten days later he wrote again in response to new letters from her. He welcomed her willingness to conform to God's will, her growing appreciation of the privilege of being the 'bride of Christ', and assured her she would be just that in time, if she continued to model such openness to God. Hoping that there would be a place for her, while promising nothing, he asked her to collect the documentation she would need to be ready to leave if a place came up.³⁴

Anselm Catalan did not tell the aspiring missionary Angelina that she was being put through this edifying trial of waiting because he had replied immediately to a straightforward offer hand-delivered on 16 December 1947. Amalia González sent her application through the Benedictine convent in Barcelona; she was as unknown to the abbot as Angelina Cerezo, but in this case he did not hesitate. Slightly older, at 24, she had also completed her schooling and had written to the abbot after she read

31 Catalan to Angelina, 6 December 1947.

32 *RB* 58.

33 Catalan to Angelina, 18 December 1947, NNA 01451/201.

34 Catalan to Angelina, 28 December 1947, NNA 01451/202.

an announcement in her local paper, the *Diario di Burgos*, that New Norcia needed young women to work as missionaries. The notice was so small that it seems that it will be lost to researchers until *Diario de Burgos* is digitised, but it caught Amalia's eye and prompted her letter.³⁵ She was also a keen member of the Falangist youth movement, with its emphasis on social action and Spanish national destiny. Pushing the boundaries of their expectations for women, she had begun to think of a career. Law attracted her, but teaching seemed her greater gift. She had trained formally and informally as a primary school teacher; she had been to workshops with Maria Montessori when the Italian pioneer of child-centred learning visited Spain.³⁶ She had taught with the followers of Andrés Manjón in Zaragoza, learning firsthand from the innovative educational theoretician and practitioner as he worked with Romany children. Whether or not Amalia made all this clear to the abbot we do not know. We do know that he found her 'vehement and holy desire to be a Benedictine missionary and before too long'³⁷ compelling. He wrote to her on 17 December to let her know she had made him change his plans:

Your letter has my admiration, and it has made me think, as I see in it a decision that can only be attributed to a strong divine vocation. I had intended not to accept any more candidates as missionary Benedictines for our Missions in Australia but if God wants you how can I leave this vocation to rot? What a pity that we did not meet in Burgos and I could have given you some idea of the sacrifices required in a missionary life.³⁸

It was a robust reply to what was probably a similarly forthright offer. He went on to give in half a paragraph what he had told Angelina in two pages, reserving in this case most of the space to information about the school. He explained the focus on domestic work specifically as preparation for motherhood and made no mention of a formal primary curriculum at all. Perhaps, in writing to Amalia, it was the older girls who came to mind:

35 Teresa [Amalia] González, Interview, Madrid, 22 May 1999.

36 Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Church: Essays on the Religious Education of Children and the Training of Character*, ed. Mortimer Standing (London: Sands and Co., 1930); Barbara de Serio, 'The Profile of the Montessori Assistant: Historical Paths and New Education Projects', *Studi sulla Formazione* 19 (2006): 171–85.

37 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 17 December 1947, NNA 01451/68.

38 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 17 December 1947.

Our Benedictines in Australia are not enclosed and much of their work is outside the convent. They are in charge of an orphanage of Aboriginal girls and to these they must teach theoretically and practically all the work that a household needs so that when they leave the Orphanage they will know all for the house and be good mothers of families.³⁹

Four days after Christmas he received from Amalia the photographs and documentation he needed to begin her passport application. He had also sought and received assurances from her parish priest and the Benedictine community of San José, Burgos, that she was healthy, physically normal and 'likely to succeed' as a missionary.⁴⁰ He told the referees he was confident he had 'with this last girl twelve who are willing to come to Australia',⁴¹ and he told Amalia it seemed as if at Christmas 'the Child Jesus ... has given you the present of an easy path towards your ardent desire to be a missionary'.⁴² He prayed that the Divine Child would give her 'perseverance'.⁴³

Something like pride as well as perseverance kept Amalia on track as weeks and months went by, waiting for a firm departure date. Over the months of negotiations through the immigration process the small photographs attached to her travel documents show an increasingly wan, strained face as the reality of her decision sank in. Her family found the decision of this youngest daughter incredible. Envelopes bearing New Norcia's insignia arrived. Handing them over, her father announced with questioning pride, 'an Abbot is writing to you!'⁴⁴ Her brothers told her she should not go, as they did not believe she would stay. They told her particularly that going so far was a mistake because it would be a long journey home when, inevitably, she 'failed'. She had not settled to anything so far, and therefore she would not settle in Australia, her father maintained. In any case, her mother asked, why could she not find a religious community at home if she had to be a nun? She needed permission from her father, at least, in order to leave the country, and it did not take long. Abbot Catalan did not write directly to her father, but he did put Amalia in

39 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 17 December 1947.

40 Catalan to Rev. Mother, Benedictinas de S. José, 17 December 1947, NNA 01451/89; Catalan to Rev. Pedro Martínez García, Villaquirán, 17 December 1947, NNA 01451/58, 25 December 1947, NNA 01451/59.

41 Catalan to Rev. Mother, Benedictinas de S. José, 17 December 1947.

42 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 30 December 1947, NNA 01451/69.

43 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 30 December 1947.

44 Interviews with Teresa González, her sister and nephews, Villaquirán, Burgos, 30 May 1999.

contact with the network of New Norcia families nearby, in particular the uncle of Matilde de la Fuente. Although in late 1947 Matilde was losing the battle to recover her health and also praying she would die young,⁴⁵ she was a practical model of missionary heroism. Above all, her family was proud she had been among the first Benedictine women in the Kimberley.⁴⁶ In mid-January 1948 Abbot Catalan thanked Amalia for sending him greetings from Matilde's mother, younger sisters and brother. In the same letter he rejoiced with her that both her parents, 'wanting her happiness', had given permission for her 'to follow the vocation God had given'.⁴⁷ In each of his letters to Amalia after that date, whether administrative or pastoral in tone, the abbot unfailingly signed off with greetings to her parents, sometimes to the whole family, and praying 'all the blessings of heaven' or a similar benediction on them all.⁴⁸ A missionary vocation had social implications.

In March, after the Holy Week he described to the St Joseph's girls, Abbot Catalan travelled to Burgos and Corella again, and then, if not before, he met the new members of the party in person.⁴⁹ Amalia recalled she travelled backwards and forwards to Burgos from her village of Villaquirán alone by train, as she often did, for interviews with the abbot and to make arrangements over a few days.⁵⁰ She met the abbot at the hotel he nominated: Hotel España, on the tree-lined Paseo Espalón by the river, close to the cathedral and the town administration. In person she found him serious and a little severe, but she knew that she should not be daunted if she wanted to be a missionary. Approaching 70, and perhaps a little shocked to meet a fashionable daughter of postwar Spain, or now remembering the Rule's precepts to warn and discourage newcomers, Catalan told her bluntly that if she wanted to be a missionary she would 'have to clean the make-up off [her] face'.⁵¹ He appreciated that she was 'valiant' and not afraid to travel alone, but mostly, she recalled, he wanted her to understand that the life required sacrifices and that she would not

45 'The Late Sister Matilde OSB', *Record*, 31 May 1948, n.p., Archive of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tützing, Madrid (ABTM).

46 Catalan to Paula Amo de la Fuente, NNA 01451/162–5, Emiliano de la Fuente, NNA 01451/132–3, Teófil Rojo, NNA 01451/113–120.

47 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 16 January 1948, NNA 01451/204.

48 For example, Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 7 June 1948, 22 June 1948, 5 August 1948, NNA 01451/204–210.

49 Catalan to Felicitas, 18 March 1948.

50 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 22 May 1999; New Norcia, 30 August 2000, 17 October 2001.

51 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 25 May 1999.

be able to change her clothes so often.⁵² Specifically, she remembered she would not be able to bring any of the many fashionable outfits she wore to her interviews. This did not surprise her. It was heroism that drew her. Amalia told him simply, '*Claro*'.⁵³ She felt she was rising to a challenge.

If the strained dynamics of the interviews contributed to her tense-looking photographs, Amalia continued to imagine her work as a teacher in Australia and felt free to make plans that she put to the abbot in regular letters. In response to her suggestion that she might be placed with some nuns to learn 'something useful', Abbot Catalan sympathised that it was indeed 'too hard to wait in the village'.⁵⁴ He told her he was gathering the postulants together in the Dominican convent in Montserrat so they could get used to community life and 'learn the household skills that are used so much on the missions'.⁵⁵ Two letters in June 1948 made the same point, that she should join the other New Norcia postulants in learning domestic work. At Montserrat, the haphazard interim arrangement took a toll: at least two candidates thought better of their choice and returned to the villages. Illuminada Perez remained but did not see the relevance of days spent sewing, especially when she did so much of it that the cotton wore a path through the needle of her sewing machine and she could no longer thread it.⁵⁶

Amalia remained in Burgos. Whether the post did not arrive in time or whether she just did not turn up to join the group of five other postulants who left Burgos for Montserrat on 11 June in the care of Señor Don Teofilo Rojo is not quite clear. But evidently doubting, if not ignoring, the abbot's advice, she proposed an alternative plan to him. Catalan responded patiently to this 'much appreciated daughter in the Lord', pleased rather than perturbed as she pursued her own sense of what a teacher in New Norcia would need. Her focus was music.

Amalia followed her interest and, supported financially by her father, shaped a different view of what would serve her well at the school. Impressed by Amalia's 'strong vocation', the abbot encouraged her 'to go ahead in music as much as possible' while she had free time.⁵⁷ At New Norcia, Felicitas

52 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 21 August 1948, NNA 01451/208.

53 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 25 May 1999.

54 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 7 June 1948, NNA 01451/206.

55 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 7 June 1948.

56 Illuminada Perez [Sr Florentina], Interview, Burgos, September 2010.

57 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 21 August 1948.

was hoping for a musician among the newcomers.⁵⁸ Music was part of New Norcia's heritage: in Salvado's day the Aboriginal boys had formed a brass band and the girls sang to the accompaniment of violin and double bass. Catalan was abbot to the composer Fr Stephen Moreno, and the children sang his impressive harmonies on Sundays. The abbot wrote to Amalia that lessons in *solfa* musical theory were indeed part of 'preparing ... to be in the Mission as God has destined for you'.⁵⁹ He could see no point in starting piano, although if she had the opportunity in her village or in Burgos 'to catch the handling of the keyboard' she should not ignore the chance.⁶⁰ But when she pressed him, and apparently suggested that, as she was not afraid of travelling alone, she might well meet up with the group now at the Dominican convent in Barcelona and learn piano there, he drew the line, reminding her the schools were closed and teachers deserved their holiday. Besides, the Dominicans did not have a piano and he expected by mid-October they would have 'one foot in the stirrup for our trip'.⁶¹

As the abbot drew Amalia into the shared vision of the group that would journey together to 'our beloved Mission',⁶² he had no doubt about where she was headed, or how much the destination might mean to her. Living by faith, his nerves honed by previous recruiting trips, he knew to watch for 'God's will above all'⁶³ as names and travel documents fell into line. He could assure Amalia that 'we have to take it all as Providential'⁶⁴ that two 14-year-olds had withdrawn and their places had been filled by others. He knew, as Amalia did not, that one of those newcomers was Angelina Cerezo and the other was Josefina Carrillo, now in her early thirties and able to fulfil the missionary dream she had shared with her mother as a child. What the abbot did not know, even in the first week of September 1948, was how he was going to get the party home.

58 Catalan to Felicitas, 27 March 1948, NNA 01451/93.

59 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 21 August 1948.

60 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 21 August 1948.

61 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 21 August 1948.

62 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 21 August 1948.

63 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 26 September 1948, NNA 01451/210.

64 Catalan to Teresa (Amalia), 6 September 1948, NNA 01451/209.

Travel funds from America, paid off in prayer

With shipping and international currency both disrupted by the Second World War, transport between Europe and Australia was hard to find and harder to finance. Abbot Catalan was rallying help on all sides when, in a process running from February through to November 1948, the international Benedictine network found him a solution. In the end, his missionary party of 1948 was able to travel to New Norcia because Benedictines in the United States provided a loan in American dollars that was secured by the monks at Montserrat and paid off at New Norcia in Mass stipends. This currency conversion combined Catholic tradition with American practicality, both mediated by Benedictine community. The correspondence travelled from Catalonia to Collegeville in Minnesota, through New York and back, with reference to precedents in Manila and with New Norcia informed at last. First, Catalan wrote from his base at the monastery of Montserrat to Abbot Celestine Gusi in Manila, and then a week later he sent much the same letter, this time in English, to Abbot Alcuin Deutsch of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. He outlined his problem and made his request.

Already absent too long from New Norcia, he could not get home with his new recruits because the English ships were full of government-sponsored migrants, and non-British companies would not accept payment in English pounds, stretched to the limit by the war. He knew of berths on a French steamer but he needed to pay for the entire party in American dollars. Suggesting that Abbot Deutsch might appeal to other American communities to help as well, Abbot Catalan named the sum, and proposed a solution:

What I ask you for is to deposit at the Cook's agency in New York the amount of 12000 (twelve thousand) dillars [sic] to pay our 19 passages from Marseilles to Fremantle in Australia. To repay you this money I will open an account in the name of your abbey in Australia for the equivalent money in pounds. ... Please consider my proposition. ... [W]e shall be very obliged to you and your community for ever.⁶⁵

65 Catalan to Alcuin Deutsch, Collegeville, 15 February 1948, NAA 01451/7.

The community at Montserrat, and Catalan himself, would have known that Collegetteville had already helped missionary houses in the Philippines and elsewhere. Perhaps they all knew how other groups of missionary priests used stipends more conveniently than local currency for international transactions. But even Abbot Alcuin Deutsch, known in his Collegetteville community for ‘no request refused’,⁶⁶ was facing a rejection from his council until Abbot Aurelius Escarré of Montserrat swung in behind Catalan with added security. The Spanish underwriting enabled Deutsch to bypass the dubious British currency and to counter with a different scheme. Deutsch wrote to Escarré in April to explain the deal:

My chapter refused to accept Abbot Catalan’s proposition. ... The reason for our refusal is the present condition of the British Empire and the uncertainty of its monetary values. My Chapter would have refused the loan if you had not assured us, by your cablegram, that you will accept Mass intentions to guarantee the loan to Abbot Catalan. We are not so well situated financially that we can afford to lose the money; in fact we need money badly as we ought to build, for we are badly overcrowded.⁶⁷

What Collegetteville proposed, and what Montserrat accepted as go-between for New Norcia, was that \$12,000 (USD) would be loaned to the Spanish community. The Spanish monks would work off the debt by celebrating Mass for the intentions that the Collegetteville community had been asked to remember in their prayers. The stipend of a dollar a Mass that American Catholics sent to Collegetteville with their prayer requests would stay in Collegetteville and gradually liquidate the debt. The Americans noted that Montserrat could also contract New Norcia’s priests to help with this prayerful labour, but the loan was essentially to the Spanish house.⁶⁸

It was a practical offer, promptly accepted by Escarré. Abbot Catalan was also enthusiastic and wrote to the Americans saying New Norcia would take care of 6,000 Masses and could accommodate between 400 and 800 additional Mass intentions each month. Up to this point the abbots might have been trading contract work in baking or shoemaking. When Abbot Catalan proposed they would begin ‘three weeks from now’,⁶⁹ however, Abbot Deutsch wrote quickly to remind him of the requirements of canon law. He emphasised the need for order, literally and metaphorically:

66 Fr Columba Stewart, OSB, in conversation, New Norcia, July 2009.

67 Deutsch to Aurelius Escarré, 3 April 1948, copy at NNA 01451/10.

68 Deutsch to Aurelius Escarré, 3 April 1948.

69 Catalan to Deutsch, 27 April 1948, NNA 01451/13.

Since the Code of Canon Law prescribes that he who sends Mass intentions to others is still bound by the obligation *until he has received an acknowledgement that they have been received* may I beg you to be very careful in sending to me each time a letter of acknowledgement of receipt of Masses, giving me the date when I sent the Masses, and the number of intentions sent—then I will be able to keep exact account in our Mass records.⁷⁰

Deutsch also sent firm instructions via the abbot of Montserrat, reminding Escarré that the system could not be allowed to fall apart as it had done once before, that time in relation to Manila during the war.⁷¹ Nevertheless, for all their practical and even monetary purpose, these transactions were shifted around the globe as part of a divine economy, and the abbots shared the role of accountant as part of a sacred trust.

With the fares secured, Abbot Catalan still needed to find space on a passenger ship. In February 1948 he sought help in London, appealing to John Beasley, the former Commonwealth Minister for Supply and Shipping who was now the Australian High Commissioner in London, as well as to the Western Australian Agent-General William Kitson. The abbot stressed the good service the missionaries would offer the state and his own need to return promptly to the diocese.⁷² London offered a plane to fly the party to Australia, if New Norcia would foot the bill. The flight would have cost three times as much as a steamer and also meant paying for the plane to return to Europe.⁷³ Catalan frankly did not trust air travel and thought ‘it would not be too poetic to see us falling out of the sky’.⁷⁴ He dismissed the idea as way beyond his budget; it was suited only, he joked, to the pocket of Melbourne’s Archbishop Mannix.⁷⁵

The abbot prayed for something more practical and routinely enlisted others to petition God and St Joseph to send a boat while he continued his earthly lobbying.⁷⁶ He urged English-speaking friends in London to

70 Deutsch to Catalan, 3 May 1948, NNA 01451/11.

71 Deutsch to Escarré, 2 May 1948, NNA 01451/10.

72 Catalan to Kitson, 8 February 1948, NNA 01451/34; Catalan to Beasley, 10 February 1948, NNA 01451/38.

73 Catalan to Ubach, 16 April 1948, NNA 01451/33.

74 Catalan to New Norcia, 23 March 1948, NNA 01451/49.

75 Catalan to New Norcia, 23 March 1948.

76 Catalan to Ubach, 21 May 1948, NNA 01451/34; also to Isodore, 17 February 1948, NNA 01451/39; to the monks of the juniorate, 17 February 1948, NNA 01451/51; to Sr Benita, 3 February 1948, NNA 01451/99; to Sr Felicitas, 18 March 1948, 28 April 1948, 3 June 1948, NNA 01451/91–3; to the girls of St Joseph’s, 27 March 1948, NNA 01451/112; to Boniface, 29 April 1948, NNA 01451/40; to Gabayo, 22 May 1948, NNA 01451/41; to Sr Hildegard, 12 September 1948, NNA 01451/105.

go to the steamer companies and explain in person.⁷⁷ He imagined the community at New Norcia would 'form a chorus' to enlist the help of Arthur Calwell, Commonwealth Minister for Immigration, if his rumoured visit to New Norcia took place in March.⁷⁸ In July, while the Australian Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, was visiting London, Catalan wrote to him twice requesting help.⁷⁹ The abbot argued that, although his group did not qualify for Commonwealth assistance, they deserved some help as 'future missionaries in WA constitute the best sort of immigrants and cost nothing to the government'.⁸⁰ A possible solution fell through in August when the Abbot of Genoa recommended they cancel arrangements with a French steamer that seemed unlikely to last the distance to Australia.⁸¹ It was the second week in September before Abbot Catalan advised the Department of Immigration that they had found berths on the familiar Italian steamer the *Toscana*, now resuming regular voyages after the war.⁸²

Until the last, the abbot was sorting immigration documents with Mrs Clark at the Australian consulate in Barcelona, begging billets for the large group of 18 young people, including six young men for the monastery, dealing with Spanish authorities, and complaining to Fr Wilfred that 'these offices are models of delay'.⁸³ But finally the young men and women gathered with the abbot in Barcelona and began the long train journey through France and Italy to Genoa. On 19 October 1948 they were on board the *Toscana* and ready to sail. Remembering a promise to Felicitas in New Norcia to send a photo for the sisters,⁸⁴ Abbot Catalan assembled the 12 new postulants on deck.

77 Catalan to Anderson, 11 February 1948, NNA 01458/x.

78 Catalan to Gabriel, 24 March 1948, NNA 01451/52; also to Gozalo, 14 April 1948, NNA 01451/80.

79 Catalan to Chifley, n.d. but in context 14 July 1948, and 28 July 1948, NNA 01451/28–9.

80 Catalan to Chifley, n.d. but in context 14 July 1948, and 28 July 1948.

81 Catalan to Escarré, 3 August 1948.

82 Catalan to Secretary, Office of the Minister for Immigration, Canberra, 9 September 1948, NNA 01451.

83 Catalan to Wilfred Sanz, 4 October 1948. In Barcelona the young women stayed with the Oblates of the Holy Redeemer, founded by Joseph Serra in 1862 after his return to Spain. Catalan to Mrs Clark, British Consulate General, October 1948, NNA 01451/161. Five of the group had been boarding with the Dominican sisters in the same city for some months, Catalan to Reverend Mother, Dominican Convent, Montserrat, 10 August 1948, NNA 01452/88.

84 Catalan to Felicitas, 30 July 1948, NNA 01451/98.

The wind was strong, whipping their hair and skirts, and they stood, mostly smiling, beside the deck chairs. Angelina at the far right held a book; in the top row Josefina had not yet found her black dress, and Amalia balanced with the rigging across her shoulder. Amalia stood between Marina Diez, 19, from Villasilos, and Josefa Liroz, 25, whose brother Antonio was also travelling; both were from Corella, the abbot's home town in Navarra. At the other end of the row 15-year-old Josefa Rubio, from Sotopalacios near Burgos, tried to keep the wind from her hair and, in front of her, Francisca Alfarao, aged 19, from Corella, carried a gently bulging briefcase. Alongside in the front were four who all came from hamlets near Tapia Villadiego: Milagros Ruiz Nodal, 24, knelt alone, while Otilia Ciudad, 20, smiled and looked away. Carmen Ruiz Ruiz resolutely met the camera's gaze as a nervous hand checked her belt. She was 15 and had joined the group at the urging of her brother Anastasio, 10 years her senior and also one of the postulants for the monastery. Their aunt was Hildegard, who had left Spain for New Norcia 20 years before. Tapia was also home to the family of Matilde de la Fuente. They were grieving for their daughter who had died of the cancer she had tried to ignore in April. (*Qué lastima!* How much that hurts!' the abbot had confessed to Fr Boniface.⁸⁵) She had inspired her brother Emiliano to join the abbot, and his neighbour Jesus Vallejo was also on board. Yet another Tapia family, the Arroyos, had given permission for their daughter, 18-year-old Florencia, to travel. She stood second from the right at the end. Beside Florencia and directly behind Milagros, 15-year-old Illuminada Perez had volunteered from Villorejo, home town also of the Pardo family, including Francisca, who was already at New Norcia, Vincenta, who until her health failed in August had hoped to join her sister, and their brother Abundio who remained part of the group. The networks of village and family life meant some in this missionary expedition had grown up together, others had spent the months waiting for a passage together in Barcelona, while some had barely met. However well or little they knew each other in October 1948, they were leaving port together on a journey that would change them all and would continue for some for more than 60 years.

85 Catalan to Boniface, 29 April 1948.



Figure 7.1: The 12 who arrived at New Norcia in November 1948 on deck of the *Toscana*.

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

The arrival of the 12

It was a peaceful voyage in the ‘floating palace’⁸⁶ of the *Toscana*, with only one day of rough weather that made a few of the 12 young women seasick. They sailed slowly through the Suez Canal to Ceylon. They saw the sights over two days in Colombo and then steamed on for 11 long days across the Indian Ocean without land in sight.⁸⁷ The group was hopeful about their new life and had found an easy harmony.⁸⁸ On 22 November 1948 they arrived in Fremantle and docked in Gage Roads D Shed by about eight o’clock in the morning.⁸⁹ It was a hot Monday, and an easterly wind from the inland fanned grass fires to the north. Thunderstorms were forecast

86 Catalan to Miguel Catalan, 23 January 1949, NNA 01453/170.

87 Catalan to Miguel Catalan, 23 January 1949.

88 Catalan to Miguel Catalan, 23 January 1949; interviews with Teresa González, Madrid, 21 May 1999, and Scholastica Carrillo, Kalumburu, 1 May 1999.

89 *West Australian*, 22 November 1948, 12.

for the wheatbelt where the harvest was underway, but it did not rain, and Perth 'sweltered' without a sea breeze in 88 degrees Fahrenheit.⁹⁰ From the port, the Benedictine party travelled into the heat of the city. The group divided. The abbot and the six young men probably fitted comfortably enough into the monastery's house in West Perth. The larger group of 12 girls found themselves at the convent of the Sisters of St Joseph in South Perth, on the opposite side of the river. It should have been an easy visit full of shared assumptions, but without the abbot, or any other interpreter, the simplest conversation was impossible.

Australians spoke English, not Spanish. This was not new information, but the Spanish girls were shocked, especially those who had imagined themselves communicating beyond the small group. Knowing in theory that most Australians spoke only English felt very different from being misunderstood in practice. Fifty years later, Amalia recalled her stunned horror that her language was not just different but useless. The sheer wall of kind incomprehension daunted her as they all nodded and smiled in the parlour. Again and again as the hot day wore on she confronted the stark reality: 'I could not speak! How could I teach? How could I teach if I could not speak?'⁹¹ The girls in the parlour were thirsty, and Angelina Cerezo tried to use the English she thought she had learnt to ask for plain water when they were offered cups of tea. Amalia watched with increasing dismay as Angelina's request for 'Watcha?' or '*Agua! Agua!*' yielded nothing. 'Only tea!' remembered Amalia, 'and in Spain tea is only for when you are sick.' They asked again, and were given more tea. As their distress increased they were shown to the bathrooms.⁹²

The misunderstanding humiliated the young women who had travelled without difficulty in first-class, enjoying the Italian meals and the adventure of shipboard life. Suddenly, they were being treated as children. Amalia thought regretfully of the young man, now sailing on to Tasmania, who had hoped she might join him on his farm, her black dress and the warnings from the abbot, and Josefina Carrillo, notwithstanding. At least they had been able to speak to each other. Now, 'I could not speak! How could I have anything left to do?'⁹³ It was when they were on the road again the following afternoon, and their procession of cars stopped at Bindoon, that gentle Sister Francisca Pardo was there to meet them and

90 *West Australian*, 23 November 1948, 6.

91 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 21 May 1999.

92 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 22 May 1999.

93 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 22 May 1999.

give them plain *agua*. Perhaps, even 15 years after she had been sent to English lessons with the schoolgirls at St Gertrude's, Francisca not only remembered the culture that drank plain water but also understood the fatiguing reality of not being able to ask for it.

From Bindoon, the last stage of the journey to New Norcia wound on. The shadows were stretched and the sun sinking when they finally met the traditional guard of honour. As Abbot Catalan invited the assembled community to pray for the new postulants he reminded them all that it was 'an act of heroism to leave home and homeland for such a distant country and Mission, with little prospect of ever returning'.⁹⁴ Perhaps he spoke in Spanish, perhaps also in English, and certainly the *Record* in Perth reported him in English. Whatever the language, for Amalia the celebration of her arrival as an act of heroism merged into accusation: she should not have come; she wanted to return; she had made a mistake; she could not speak. The abbot 'vested immediately for the Liturgical reception',⁹⁵ and the new recruits processed into the mission church. As the young people filed in from the roadway the monks sang the *Te Deum*, the ancient Latin hymn of praise and thanksgiving. Amalia recalled that 'it was very deep and low and as in Spain', and it was too much. She bit her lip and tried to hide the tears. She was weeping for her family, her father, her mother, her older brothers and her sisters; for her studies as a teacher; for what else she might have done; and for Spain: 'Oh my Spain'.⁹⁶ She knew there were traditions for her to uphold: Spanish ideals of courage and daring adventure, Catholic aspirations to self-sacrifice and bravery sufficient even for martyrdom. The familiar hymn swept her up and confronted her with those expectations, but she could not conquer the homesickness and the doubt. Her swallowed sobs startled Josefina Carrillo.

Josefina was in high spirits with none of Amalia's anxious questioning. The two were already firm friends, linked together on the boat as lively personalities who were older than the rest, but their first reactions to New Norcia were completely different. Josefina was not daunted by subtleties of communication. It seemed to Josefina that they had done simply what missionaries did: they had left Spain, and they had arrived elsewhere. She tried to share her pragmatic zest for whatever came next in whispered advice: 'Don't worry. Be brave. Be a missionary!' She squared her shoulders and stared resolutely ahead: 'Be like me!' Defiance against adversity was already

94 *Record*, 2 December 1948, 5.

95 *Record*, 2 December 1948, 5.

96 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 21 May 1999.

her trademark. Through the next days she encouraged her friend: 'Be brave!' But advice did not help. Every morning Amalia put her boiled egg in her pocket because she could not eat and every night she cried herself to sleep.



Figure 7.2: Postulants on a picnic, 1949: Josefina Carrillo (standing left) and Amalia González (standing right).

Source: ABTM.

Amalia would recall that 'when we twelve arrived, we asked very often: "Why?"' Perhaps Amalia was most anxious of all. She put a brave face on it. A photograph of the postulants on a picnic in those early days shows her arms akimbo at the edge of the group, a pair for Josefina on the other side, but she continued to worry that her coming to Australia without any knowledge of English was a waste of time. She felt she should leave.

The abbot was clear she should stay. She petitioned him often but he insisted in return that she would find a way to teach and that it was too soon to turn around and sail back to Spain. It was a spiritual contest as she pleaded the need to be useful, but Abbot Catalan held out the holiness of the life she had chosen and more than hinted she would be in moral danger outside the convent. He joked she had too much energy for just one man, or even two, but the task of keeping three men happy would be a terrible choice and not to be compared to the holy life she could lead at New Norcia.⁹⁷ At one level, Amalia knew this was an unjustifiable ploy to get her to stay. Trained

⁹⁷ Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 3 June 1999.

to take the prelate seriously, however, she felt nevertheless that perhaps he spoke truly: she did face a moral choice. Looking at the community so strained by work, with Felicitas and Mary and Benita competing with each other, and with ‘many of the sisters very strange’,⁹⁸ she wondered if she could make the heroic decision she so admired in Teresa Roca and commit herself to this odd group, despite it all.

In the end, it was not the abbot’s persuasion or the example of the earlier sisters that gave Amalia a sense of belonging at New Norcia; it was the children. The St Joseph’s girls themselves built a bridge for her and gave her a forum as a teacher although ‘I had no words’.⁹⁹ In those early days of summer 1948, the postulants had the job of combing the hair of the youngest children in the morning, looking for lice, and tying their ponytails: ‘It was horrible’, Amalia would remember.¹⁰⁰ But they would sit on the verandah, on the steps and on the ground, and gradually the 12 began to sing folksongs as they combed. This was to cure their own homesickness, to cover the absence of conversation, to share some sense of being a group, to keep the children settled and quiet as was the custom in their own villages. No one bothered to justify or explain the new routine; they just began and kept it up.

Folksongs accompany folkdances. In Spain, Pilar Primo de Rivera, leader of the Women’s Section of the Falange party, had encouraged women to teach children Christmas carols to sing around the crib and to show them regional dances from other parts of Spain to enhance national unity.¹⁰¹ Australia would have called the policy ‘assimilation’. Whether consciously or not, the 12 all knew that dances carried meaning and identity. Nuns do not dance; even postulants and novices do not dance.¹⁰² Sharing the Spanish folkdances with small children, however, was different.

Amalia began to teach the girls how to dance the *hortas* she knew from childhood: the 12 would sing the accompaniment and the children would follow the patterns they showed them. Suddenly, Amalia realised, ‘I could not speak, but I could dance!’ She could not speak, and she would not really learn English until she went to study with the Sisters of Mercy in

98 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 3 June 1999.

99 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 10 July 2004.

100 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 22 May 1999.

101 Frances Lannon, ‘Women and Images of Women in the Spanish Civil War’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 1 (1991): 224–25.

102 Isolina Ruiz in conversation at New Norcia, October 2001.

Perth more than a year later. But she could dance, and the children were responding. In the interviews that trace her memories of New Norcia, she repeated the phrase as the key to all the work that followed in the classrooms: ‘I could not speak, but I could dance!’

Amalia began to feel she could stay at the mission. The girls gave her the courage to choose a new name for her new identity as a nun. Her choice went to the heart of the mission enterprise. She would be Sister Marie-Therese after the French patron of missions and after Mary, Our Lady Help of Christians, the patron of Australia. St Thérèse of Lisieux, the ‘Little Flower’ was strong in the missionary culture of the sisters already, a favourite of the abbot, and a patron of children too; she had died at age 24, Amalia’s own age as she made life-changing choices. Amalia was drawn to the Spanish name Teresa as well, but that was not a real option, both in deference to Teresa Roca and to avoid the confusion of two sisters being named for the foundress of Avila. Later, some years after Sister Roca died, Marie-Therese claimed the other Teresa, for the ‘bigger’ patron and honouring Teresa Roca too.

In those first months, as the singing grew and the dancing practice continued, the relationship with the children opened up further possibilities. Marie-Therese started to pay attention to the mission with the eyes of her training as a Montessori teacher. One morning, she noticed one of the smallest girls not just singing with them but pretending she was playing the piano too, miming with an imaginary keyboard on the floorboards of the verandah. Alert to the Montessori principle of following the ‘natural inclination’, Marie-Therese decided she had to work with this little girl and teach her to play. There was a piano in the schoolroom, and Marie-Therese began to get up early and practise with a book before prayers. The lessons in *solfa* had gone only so far. She could not read music, let alone translate it to the keyboard, but she would sit with the little girl and sing to her, and together they would try to find the notes. It was a painstaking process, and some of the other girls who thought they might learn too lost interest quickly. Glenys Benjamin was patient and keen. The tune would emerge slowly. Marie-Therese would say often: ‘No, not that note, another note, try another note’, until eventually they had picked out enough of the tune that seemed right. They could ask Fr Eliado Ros to show Glenys some left-hand accompaniment when he came across to lead choir practice for the sisters.

For that first hot Christmas there was a concert, with the postulants singing in Spanish and the children dancing in Spanish costumes. They were just the kind of thing Felicitas would have delighted to create at short notice out of 'ladies' scraps' donated to the sewing room. The Aboriginal children in 1948 did not have other dances to offer in return, and the postulants would not have been allowed to learn them in any case. The concert was as confused and poignant an example of cultural mismatch as any that New Norcia offered, but it was a lifeline for the young missionary.



Figure 7.3: Fatima Drayton brings a crêpe paper parasol from the school concerts forward at the reunion liturgy, 2001.

Source: NNA W7-A5-3-119-1.

Perhaps it was a lifeline for some of the children too. When the women who had been the children in those Spanish folkdances were rummaging in the museum storeroom with Teresa and Visitación during the reunion of 2001, there was a whoop of recognition as a yellow crêpe paper parasol, long unexplained, emerged from the compactus. All of a sudden Martha and Mae and Fatima and Gloria were singing an old nursery song with Teresa: 'When I was la-dy, a la-dy, a la-dy', and re-creating a stately dance of curtsies and bows from a school concert some 50 years before, when English had succeeded Spanish and the costumes had extended to props. There was no question but the yellow parasol would be included in the liturgical display at the centre of the reunion, summing up the school years for many in the crowd. It stood not so much for the teachers' assimilationist hopes, or for attempts to mould the school days to the interests of the children, or for policies that aimed to 'discipline and refine' their manners, though it could have spoken for all of these. Instead, like so much else, it stood without irony for the relationship that the women found at the core of it all. There had been no triumphalism in those first attempts to share the Spanish dances. In the end, though there were many tears, there was no shame in claiming the connection they represented.

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

doi.org/10.22459/BB.2020.07