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Winding Together: 'The Grace of God Is Not Tied to Any Colour, Race or Nationality'

Across Australia, religion boomed in the 1950s. The phenomenon of flourishing youth groups and public demonstration of commitment touched the expanding suburbs of Australian cities as postwar prosperity created leisure and space for Sunday observance on a scale not seen here before.¹ The Billy Graham Crusade among Protestants, the Family Rosary Crusade among Catholics, and the Cold War hope that a third world war would be averted by prayer and action against 'atheistic materialism' gave this decade a feverish anxiety for something better.² Around the globe, Catholic convents and seminaries were bursting with new recruits drawn by hope for a new reality. Christian Europe's confidence in progress had been shattered by war and shamed by Auschwitz; in the quest for a new world of peace and justice, churches were anxious for spiritual rearmament at home, in former colonies and mission countries.

1 David Hilliard, 'God in the Suburbs: The Religious Culture of Australian Cities in the 1950s', *Australian Historical Studies* 24 (1991): 399–419; David Hilliard, 'Church, Family and Sexuality in Australia in the 1950s', *Australian Historical Studies* 27 (1997): 133–46; Anne O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005).

2 Katharine Massam, 'The Blue Army and the Cold War: Anti-Communist Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Australia', *Australian Historical Studies* 24 (1991): 420–28; Judith Smart, 'The Evangelist as Star: The Billy Graham Crusade in Australia, 1959', *Journal of Popular Culture* 33 (1999): 165–75.

Secular powers shared similar hopes for change. The newly formed United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 1948 with Australia among the initial signatories. The document signalled a growing awareness of the realities of discrimination, as it also provided a potential lever for change in the treatment of First Nations people and increased interest in missionary work.³ By the middle of the decade, the Western Australian Parliament heard a ringing endorsement of missions like New Norcia as 'the organisations most likely to achieve the greatest good in uplifting the native population and particularly in training native children to become good citizens'.⁴ Within the hope for 'citizenship' lay the old assumption that individuals should, in the words of the now retired Commissioner for Native Affairs, A. O. Neville, 'be advanced to white status'.⁵

Cultural assimilation of First Nations people had been championed by humanitarian advocates opposed to the biological regimes since the late 1930s.⁶ Principles of assimilation would dominate official thinking not only on Aboriginal Australians but also on immigration until the 1970s. In both instances, it upheld the language and lifestyle of 'British Australians' as the goal to be reached by new arrivals and the original inhabitants, both racially by intermarriage and culturally by eliminating difference.

The irony of 'Mediterranean' women being agents of this policy was not lost on some of the Spanish Benedictine women: 'we were more brown than many of the children', Teresa observed.⁷ In practice, however, the sisters' status as Catholic missionaries merged them with the mainstream effectively enough. Assimilationist policies sounded less patronising and more inclusive of Aboriginal Australians than the policies of protection

3 Stefano Girola, 'Rhetoric and Action: The Policies and Attitudes of the Catholic Church with Regard to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, 1885–1967' (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2006), 191.

4 The Treasurer, A. R. G. Hawke, member for Northam, Western Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard*, 23 September 1954, 1826–27, [www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/0/353772eedff490ac48257a41000fbb3/\\$FILE/19540923_Asembly.pdf](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/0/353772eedff490ac48257a41000fbb3/$FILE/19540923_Asembly.pdf); accessed 22 January 2016.

5 A. Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* (Sydney: Currawong, 1947), 56, cited in John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1990), 577.

6 Charlie Fox, 'The Fourteen Powers Referendum of 1944 and the Federalisation of Aboriginal Affairs', *Aboriginal History* 32 (2008): 27–48.

7 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 26 October 2013.

and 'breeding out the black' that had dominated the first half of the century, even though they were built on the same blindness to the merits of Aboriginal society. As it had been since the foundation of the mission, Catholicism was the cultural norm at New Norcia; it had long dominated Aboriginal custom and it refracted Spanish tradition into patterns mainstream Australia recognised.

Internationally in the decade after the Second World War, Catholic thought was moving towards greater awareness of racism and the challenges of decolonisation. Local churches were particularly encouraged to move beyond charity into social reform, 'for in the first place there must be justice which should prevail and be put into practice'.⁸ The Vatican promotion of justice through missionary work, however, was linked to the 'supreme crisis' of the Cold War that had divided the world into 'two opposing camps, for Christ or against Christ'.⁹ In Australian Catholicism this concern to protect the church against Communism overshadowed everything. The annual Social Justice Statements issued by the Australian Catholic bishops, from the first in 1940, were silent about Aboriginal Australia or missionary work until 1978.¹⁰ In effect, this meant the mission at New Norcia and the Benedictines at St Joseph's were part of another world. While the sisters at New Norcia shared the overall buoyancy of the period, with new buildings and new members, they were on the far periphery of Catholic imagination in Australia.

Just as the novitiates of other religious communities expanded in the 1950s, drawing keen recruits from their schools, now at New Norcia there were promising former students from St Joseph's who joined the Benedictine Missionary Sisters. That Vera Farrell and Marie Willaway became the first Aboriginal Australians to take perpetual vows as religious was a momentous first. There was rejoicing and hope that Sr Cecilia and Sr Veronica Therese would be followed by others from St Joseph's. But not as Aborigines: 'nobody talked about Aboriginality', Veronica recalled, 'nobody used that word'.¹¹ As the final section of this chapter will

8 Pius XII, *Evangelii Praecones*, 51; see also sections 21, 46–47, 49, w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_02061951_evangelii-praecones.html, accessed 3 April 2018.

9 Pius XII, *Evangelii Praecones*, 70.

10 Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace for the Catholic Bishops of Australia, *Aborigines: A Statement of Concern* (Sydney: E. J. Dwyer, 1978).

11 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 9 July 2012.

show, it was significant and celebrated that two former pupils joined the community, but their decision was not understood as a new step towards an Aboriginal Catholicism. Instead, the new Aboriginal sisters were seen as exercising their overriding citizenship of heaven. As Abbot Catalan declared when Vera became a novice, here was proof if anyone needed it that 'the grace of God is not tied to any colour, race or nationality'.¹² The reality of cultural difference rested alongside a theology of overriding unity. Belief in a common God-given humanity sought to encompass a community that had been defined as Spanish from the outset, that took pride in their work with Aboriginal people, but that nevertheless shared many assumptions of White Australian society.

The Benedictine Missionary Sisters welcomed the commitment of the Aboriginal women but remained convinced that, to be secure, the community needed vocations among non-Aboriginal Australians. Through the decade, there was a concerted effort to raise awareness of the sisters and their work in parishes in Perth. The promotional material has left us the highest quality photographs in the history of the community, but there was no great influx of vocations from Irish-Australian parishes as a result. Anne Moynihan, who became Sr Pius in 1959, had grown up in East Perth. She had always known Aboriginal people and felt especially drawn to be among them.¹³ Three others from Perth also entered through personal connections: Barbara Allen, a trained teacher from Dalkeith who had been employed by the Education Department at Kalumburu, and Carolyn Gould, from the Nedlands parish, both joined in 1964, and Philomena Roche, a New Zealander, transferred from the contemplative Benedictine community at Pennant Hills in 1971. But there was no wave of interest in Perth to compete with the pull towards the mission that Abbot Catalan had found on his recruiting trips in the north of Spain.

12 Abbot Catalan, address at Vera Farrell's reception as a novice, quoted by New Norcia *Sunday Leaf*, 15 October 1953.

13 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.



Figure 9.1: Back left to right: Cecilia Farrell, Ludivina Marcos and Mary Ciudad. Front left to right: Angelina Cerezo, Dolores Vallejo, Magdalena Ruiz and Benita Gozalo, c. 1960.

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



Figure 9.2: Veronica Therese Willaway, Pius Moynihan, c. 1962.

Source: ABTM.

The sisters continued to pray and hope for Australian vocations while also actively seeking members in Spain. After the wave of commitment in 1948 and 1950, the arrivals came only in twos or threes: Spain was changing. Fewer young women from the villages saw the missions as their destiny. The last to make her profession in Australia was Natividad Montero, who arrived with Isolina Ruiz in 1958. In an effort to make Australia more accessible to likely candidates, in July 1959 the sisters established a permanent house of formation in Spain. It created few ripples at New Norcia at the

time. In retrospect, however, it laid the foundation for the transfer of the motherhouse from Australia to Madrid. The decisions that would spin the New Norcia community apart were finally taken in the 1970s, but the seeds were sown in the midst of the renewal and hope of the postwar decades.

The dramatic new start or 'Second Part' announced by the Spanish *Notebooks* from the arrival of the 12 in November 1948 was at one level simply a shift in demographics. As the new recruits set sail, there were 10 sisters in the Benedictine community: their average age was 43. Perhaps more significantly, they had been together in the mission for at least 15 and generally well over 20 years. Suddenly this group of women, middle-aged or no longer young, found themselves in a crowd of 15 teenagers from farming villages, together with two in their mid-twenties (one with some teacher training) and a 31-year-old nurse's aide. By the middle of 1950 the average age was just over 28, and the median age had fallen to 25 years in a group that now had 28 members. There were three communities: St Joseph's was always the largest, while up to six sisters were stationed at Bindoon and three or sometimes four were at the Drysdale River Mission. It was still a tiny congregation by international and Australian standards, but all of a sudden there was energy and critical mass.

The convent at New Norcia was overcrowded. An asbestos and weatherboard dormitory-style extension accommodated the new group of 12 and then 18. There were curtains to separate their iron-frame beds, and only water jugs on stands to wash their faces. Some were shocked: Carmen's family had hot and cold running water at home, but others, like Illuminada, came from farmhouses where there was no bathroom as such, just the animal yard.¹⁴ There was little privacy, 'no room at all to move',¹⁵ and rosters covered everything.

14 Illuminada Perez, Interview, Burgos, September 2010.

15 Carmen Ruiz Besti, Interview, New Norcia, 14 October 2001.

The transition into the community was easiest for those who expected an isolated mission and the domestic work of a farm. Anyone who hoped for a quiet life of prayer, or a place to study, or a pathway into decision making and responsibility had much more to confront and dreams to abandon. Everyone was busy, and even those who prided themselves on stamina were stretched by the demands of St Joseph's. As Teresa González reflects:

My energy was given away at New Norcia. I am very busy now [in retirement in Spain], but busy in my head, thinking. ... At New Norcia I was busy in a different way: doing things, making things. My energy was given away.¹⁶

Twinned with prayer, work remained a pillar of the group. 'We prayed the monastic office; that was something I always appreciated,' Visitación recalls, 'in English with the books they got from Maredsous.'¹⁷ At home in the contemplation of the liturgy, Visitación nevertheless found the intense work of the monastic town dominated life, especially at Bindoon, where there was 'no time even to scratch my ear'.¹⁸ The young sisters mostly learnt on the job. 'I was kicked into the ocean and it was swim or drown in the kitchen', Scholastica observes. 'I swam. I did my best. I worked hard alright.'¹⁹ She developed a routine early on that involved getting up before the first prayers of the day to get the stove going and then perfected a method for cutting the sides of lamb into chops and other portions. She mimes her capable action with the cleaver moving along the kitchen table as she remembers, proud of her efficiency and energy.²⁰ In 1950 the kitchen catered for 37 children across the two institutions, in 1952 there were 70, and in 1959 numbers peaked at 217 children at St Joseph's and St Mary's.²¹

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

17 Visitación Ciudad, Interview, Madrid, 3 August 2010.

18 Visitación Ciudad, Interview, Kalumburu, 3 May 1999.

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

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

21 See Appendix 1.



Figure 9.3: Scholastica Carrillo, making cheese in the 1960s.

Source: ABTM.

The rosters were unrelenting, but the work was linked to God and to a sense of purpose, as Carmen maintains: ‘But God helps. I have God’s help. And [I was] very happy; hurry hurry all the time’.²² The work they were to do was the focus of their arrival in Australia. The *Record* reported they had come ‘to engage in the various works of the diocese, both for whites and the natives, as obedience should ordain’.²³ Hard work in response to spiritual authority was a familiar and trusted formula to achieve holiness. There were no details, simply an expectation that, like earlier sisters, they would undertake practical tasks as the mission required.

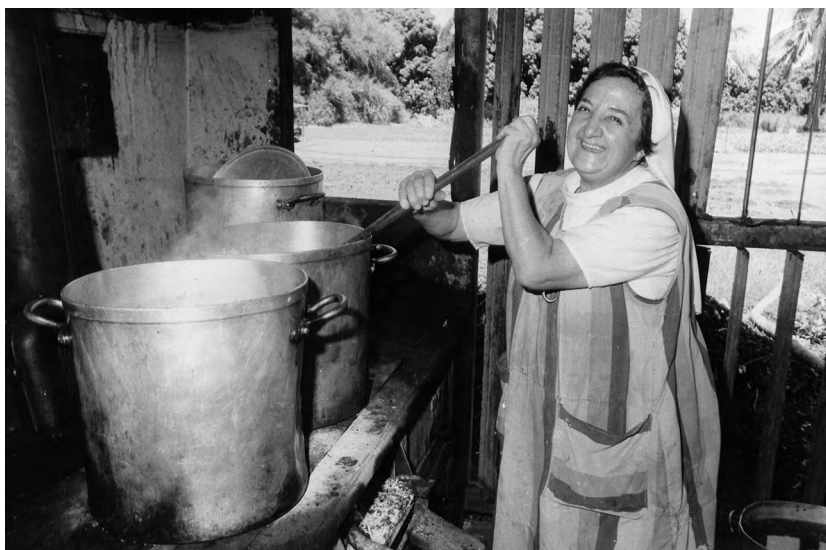


Figure 9.4: Scholastica with cooking pots at Kalumburu, 1970s.

Source: ABTM.

²² Carmen Ruiz Besti, Interview, New Norcia, 14 October 2001.

²³ *Record*, 2 December 1948, 5.

By weight of numbers the new arrivals had a separate collective identity, but the counterweight of monastic tradition began to integrate them into the community. The new names that most chose echoed Benedictine tradition and filled the place of sisters who had gone before. Already hoping fervently she would be sent to the Kimberley, Scholastica Carrillo was clear her choice was to remember Escolastica Martinez as well as to add a Benedictine patron:

They put the names there for each to choose, if you wanted. ... [Interviewer: *Why did you choose Scholastica?*] Well, for the other one that died before us, and as nobody wanted to pick Scholastica. I felt it is a great name and some Benedictine Sister's doing. That was the reason and I am very proud of it. I have one more advocate: Raiminda Juliana Josefina (always called Josefina) and now Scholastica! Four names! Four helping me!²⁴

Angelina Cerezo, Carmen Ruiz Besti and Visitación Ciudad kept their baptismal names. This was a small gesture Visitación was glad to make for the sake of her mother: 'to keep the name she gave me'.²⁵ Her cousin Florencia Arroyo Ruiz chose Matilda, keeping alive the memory of their neighbour in Tapia, Matilde de la Fuente. Her other cousin, Hildegard's niece, 15-year-old Carmen Ruiz Ruiz, took the name of the young martyr and patron of girls, Agnes. Milagros Ruiz, already pale and ill but confiding in no one, chose another martyr: Cecilia. Maria Villaño chose a third: Lucia. Marina Diez became a new Sister Gertrude, though little was said about her Australian predecessor. Josefina Liroz became Sister Gema, and Illuminada Perez was Sister Florentina. Clementina Vallejo became Sister Dolores, and Ines Herce was first Bernarda and later Araceli, before reclaiming Inès in the 1970s when stationed in Spain. Four of the newcomers tried their new identities more briefly: after 18 months Casilda found she did not have a vocation and returned to Spain, 'many are called, but few are chosen', judged the *Notebooks*.²⁶ Isabel and Edita did not renew their temporary vows and also left the mission in 1954. Josefina was warned early that 'exaggerated piety is visious [sic]²⁷ but an early

24 Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Kalumburu, 25 April 1999.

25 Visitación Ciudad, Interview, Kalumburu, 24 April 1999.

26 '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, Archives of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tutzing (ABTM) (hereafter *Notebooks*, Madrid).

27 Catalan to Josefina, 23 November 1949, New Norcia Archives (NNA) 01454/137.

posting to the Kimberley did nothing for her hyper-religiosity. She was recalled after only seven months from Kalumburu, finally to make her way to Spain in 1957.

For those who stayed, the children supplied nicknames. Scholastica firmly discouraged the tempting rhymes ‘plastica’ and ‘elastica’ and embraced ‘Schollie’, as Visitación became Visi. Marie-Therese became ‘Cowboy’ because of the polished heels of her shoes. The children noticed other things too: ‘You’re too pretty to be a nun’, they would comment to their lively teacher. ‘I chose this way’, Marie-Therese would reply.²⁸ The new names, the nicknames and the banter that affirmed decisions were all part of living into a new identity and negotiating the boundary between then and now, Spain and Australia, world and church, prospect and reality.

Schooling

On 10 September 1950, five weeks after they had made their first profession as Benedictines and on the day they saw the six new postulants received as novices, three of the sisters who would soon have responsibility for St Joseph’s School went to Perth to learn English and prepare for teaching. While they were away, plans for new buildings at St Joseph’s were put into effect with the help of funds from the state Lotteries Commission. There was a need for change.

Education had never been an end in itself at New Norcia, but by the mid-twentieth century the attention to individual capacity that had marked some memorable successes in Salvado’s time had gone.²⁹ There was one small classroom with one small window at St Joseph’s, literally relegated to a corner. As Marie-Therese remembers, it became the focus for the new sisters’ most forceful questions.³⁰ They insisted on improvements: the larger dining room was converted into a new schoolroom, and a dormitory became the dining room. Beds were rearranged to make room for more in the dormitories.³¹ Giving more space to the classrooms was not just a practical necessity as numbers increased; it also spoke of a new emphasis on schoolwork and the value of the teachers.

28 Mary Nannup, Fatima Drayton and Gloria Drayton, Interview, Moora, February 1999.

29 Katharine Massam, ‘Work in the Benedictine Monastery of New Norcia 1860–1910’, *Tjurunga: An Australasian Benedictine Review* 87 (2015): 33–47.

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

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



Figure 9.5: Needlework was a sustaining tradition in the convent and at the school.

Source: ABTM.

There had been trouble brewing at the school through the 1940s. Mary and Felicitas presided in turn over a single class, while the youngest children played in the space under the desk: 'we used to be *in* the table, there was an archway underneath, and Sr Mary used to put Glenys, Mae and myself in there with toys while she taught the big ones'.³² An inspector's report in 1940 concluded New Norcia was doing 'very satisfactory work', but the detail revealed a patchy approach.³³ The children were 'well-kept, clean and healthy in appearance ... [with] a very satisfactory training in regard to correct attitudes',³⁴ but Inspector Radbourn could see that they were 'behind what would be expected of white children of the corresponding age'.³⁵ English (especially reading) and arithmetic needed attention, although writing, drawing and 'expressional work' (choral singing, the set recitation of poetry and drama) was strong, 'particularly in the girls'.³⁶ The

32 Georgina Taylor in conversation, Old Convent, New Norcia, 17 October 2001.

33 Inspector Radbourn report on the New Norcia Mission School, 2 October 1940, 'New Norcia Mission – Education of Natives', State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA) S2030 cons993 1940/0904; Commissioner Bray to Catalan, 28 April 1941, 'New Norcia Mission – Education of Natives', SROWA S2030 cons993 1940/0904.

34 Radbourn, report, 2 October 1940.

35 Radbourn, report, 2 October 1940.

36 Radbourn, report, 2 October 1940.

needlework too continued a tradition 'of outstanding merit'.³⁷ The inspector made suggestions to the sisters and left a copy of the syllabus, but 'attitudes', not curriculum, were the main concern for the Department of Native Affairs, as they were for the mission itself.

Despite the government policy of 'absorption' of First Nations people into White Australia, separate education at mission schools remained the norm. The absence of educational focus was one of the reasons, together with finance, that oversight of mission schools passed to the Department of Education early in 1944,³⁸ although schooling did not become compulsory for Aboriginal children in Western Australia until 1948.³⁹ Even after that, a provision in the state's *Elementary Education Act 1893* could be invoked against any child deemed to have infectious diseases or to be 'injurious to the health or welfare of other children' so that Aboriginal children were routinely excluded from state schools.⁴⁰ New Norcia was applauded for the practical training it offered. One local parliamentarian lamented the futility of other institutions where 'they are attending school and receiving instruction in reading and writing'.⁴¹ The member for the Central district apparently saw no contradiction, in 1941, between his advocacy for Aboriginal people and his assumption they would not need to be literate. Ironically, while catechism, needlework and choral singing had more emphasis at St Joseph's than in most schools, the Spanish-speaking sisters knew firsthand that literacy in English should not be a luxury.

Nevertheless, the Benedictines assumed school prepared the girls for motherhood and domestic work and the boys for farm labour. Consequently, some Aboriginal parents 'expressed dissatisfaction with the standard of education at the Native School' when the department compelled them to return their children to the mission in August 1945.⁴² Alerting the abbot,

37 Radbourn, report, 2 October 1940.

38 Minister for Education in the course of the debate on 'Natives (Citizenship Rights)', Western Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard*, 10 October 1944, 1015, [www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/vwMainBackground/19441010_Assembly.pdf/\\$File/19441010_Assembly.pdf](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/vwMainBackground/19441010_Assembly.pdf/$File/19441010_Assembly.pdf); accessed 3 April 2018.

39 Sally Hodson, 'Making a Rural Labour Force: The Intervention of the State in the Working Lives of Nyungars in the Great Southern, 1936/1948', 'Historical Refractions', ed. Charlie Fox, special issue, *Studies in Western Australian History* 14 (1993): 26–41.

40 *The Elementary Education Act 1871, Amendment Act 1893*, section 22(4), www.legislation.wa.gov.au/legislation/statutes.nsf/law_a3146.html; accessed 3 April 2018.

41 E. H. H. Hall, Western Australia, Legislative Council, *Hansard*, 12 August 1941, 117, [www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/83cc4ce93b5d4e0b48257b33001cfef6/FCB617E07C72F0CE48257A4E0010ECA0/\\$File/19410812_Council.pdf](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/83cc4ce93b5d4e0b48257b33001cfef6/FCB617E07C72F0CE48257A4E0010ECA0/$File/19410812_Council.pdf); accessed 3 April 2018.

42 Bray to Catalan, 29 August 1945, 'New Norcia Mission – Education of Natives', SROWA S2030 cons993 1940/0904.

Commissioner Bray made no secret of his view that parents wanted only to claim the Commonwealth Child Endowment allowance, extended to Aboriginal mothers in 1944. New Norcia knew that extra financial support meant parents did indeed have more options. While the abbot complained but could do nothing when families took children home or placed them with relatives in the cottages rather than St Joseph's,⁴³ there are hints that the criticism of the school hit home. The idea of mixed classes at St Gertrude's had been shelved long ago, but Catalan tried to recruit new staff for St Joseph's. Perhaps the Good Samaritan Sisters would help? He put the question to their provincial, Sr Oliveria. In 1947 she wrote to report that they did not have sisters to spare for a community in the west.⁴⁴ (Part of the reluctance, discussed among the sisters in Sydney, was the realisation that their teachers would be expected to answer to the abbot.⁴⁵)

In the meantime, New Norcia's stated priority was for Catholic education. Catholic Aboriginal parents who enquired were generally, though not always, told there were vacancies for their children.⁴⁶ Space was made to accommodate children at government request, especially if they were Catholics. The claims of religion and the mission's view of the best interests of the children always trumped the rights and requests of parents. For example, the abbot had thought one mother was motivated by Catholic faith when she 'left no stone unturned'⁴⁷ for her son to be transferred to New Norcia from Moore River. But when she asked the department to return the 12-year-old to her three years later, Catalan saw it differently: 'she endeavoured to place her son in a private institution to have a better chance to take the boy with her when she would like'.⁴⁸ Rather than claiming any credit for an institution that worked more in tandem with families, the abbot thought the mother had no claim to disrupt the mission's work. If the (clever and promising) boy left, he 'would never look at a book again'.⁴⁹ In a stunning turn of phrase, Catalan acknowledged the mother's feelings but discredited them as primitive:

43 For example, correspondence of Abbot Catalan, 18 September 1941, NNA 01444/306; 24 November 1941 NNA 01444/162; 22 August 1946, NNA 01449/225; 2 July 1946, NNA 01449/221; 24 August 1946, NNA 01449/224; 8 January 1951, NNA 01456/149; 14 July 1951, NNA 01456/162.

44 Sr Oliveria, St Scholastica's Glebe Point, to Abbot Catalan, 4 March 1947, NNA 01341.

45 Margaret Malone, SGS, in conversation at New Norcia, 18 February 2016.

46 For example, Catalan to Mr Peter Jackson of Moora, 9 August 1946, 'as soon as we have a vacancy'; and undated letter from the same year, 'the room for the three girls will be reserved for two weeks', NNA 01449/347; Mrs Eillen Farrell of Summers Hill, 23 July 1946, 'there is at present room', NNA 01449/375.

47 Catalan to Commissioner, 13 April 1947, NNA 01450/101.

48 Catalan to Commissioner, 13 April 1947.

49 Catalan to Commissioner, 13 April 1947.

Mrs [L.] shows what she really is: a mother with plenty of love for her children, but a love of natural instinct rather than a love guided by reason. Her love may be compared to the love of a lioness for her cubs.⁵⁰

The Commissioner was persuaded: the boy remained until he turned 14.⁵¹

Similarly, when Mrs Starr from Carnarvon arrived to collect her son and two daughters in April 1949, Catalan wrote warmly to her husband at home, to congratulate him on the older children and to put a case for the youngest daughter, aged 13, to remain. Schooling was one reason: 'I would advise you to allow her to stay with the Sisters here a little longer in order to give her the chance to be well educated and instructed'.⁵² A second concern were the potential distractions, perhaps the moral threat, of life outside St Joseph's, even with a stable home:

Once she leaves here she will have no chance to continue her formation as a good and practical catholic girl, and not because you will not look after her properly, but because she will always be occupied in so many things that she will have no time for her own personal affairs.⁵³

He closed with the punchline of the girl's best interest: 'So please let the girl remain where she is at present for her own benefit'. We do not know what the parents thought and said, but their daughter did not leave.⁵⁴

The government had the power to direct the movements of all Aboriginal people, but New Norcia could put an alternative view. When one 14-year-old was directed to the East Perth Girls' Home for further training, the sisters reported she 'objects to leave the Orphanage and naturally we are not going to force her to leave'.⁵⁵ Moreover, she was 'too simple [a] girl yet to clear her from the watchfulness of the Sisters'.⁵⁶ Some negotiations were on behalf of the children themselves: one 'full-blood' 16-year-old girl who had been 'restless' at St Joseph's was 'allowed to go with her family'. When the abbot heard she had found things 'not so bright',⁵⁷ he wrote to

50 Catalan to Commissioner, 13 April 1947.

51 Peter Hocking, personal communication, 21 January 2016.

52 Catalan to Mr J. Starr, 28 April 1949, NNA 01453/159.

53 Catalan to Mr J. Starr, 28 April 1949.

54 Peter Hocking, personal communication, 21 January 2016.

55 Catalan to Commissioner, 24 March 1949, NNA 01453/115.

56 Catalan to Commissioner, 24 March 1949.

57 Catalan to Commissioner, 17 March 1947, NNA 01453/99.

advise the Commissioner, hoping he might help to find domestic work for this girl, who was 'clever and in good health'.⁵⁸ New Norcia itself had been placing girls in domestic service at surrounding farms for decades, but the abbot was not above stretching the truth to dismiss requests from outside the mission's network:

I am sorry to have to tell you that all girls here are of schooling age, and they return to their own relatives as soon as they are ever [sic] 16 years of age. This explanation will show you that we are unable to oblige you.⁵⁹

The abbot made choices, but the children and their parents had few options. Harrowing stories of welfare officers and the police delivering children to St Joseph's or removing them to foster homes continue into the late 1960s.⁶⁰

Families sometimes took action nevertheless. In one instance in April 1950, two sisters aged eight and 10 were removed from New Norcia by their father because, the abbot told the department, the sister teaching one of the daughters 'had punished' her three weeks earlier. The girls' removal coincided with the sudden departure of an Australian novice who had been helping at the school since July 1949. As the *Notebooks* record it, she had endeared herself to the girls,⁶¹ but soon after her profession in March 1950 the mood changed. When the new sister was left in charge of a class while Felicitas went to Perth, her erratic anger shocked the girls. Holding books or bricks at arm's length as punishment took on a vindictive edge. When the two girls were removed by their father, the classroom events became public. The new recruit left, or was sent away, a bare month after profession because, in the stock phrase of the *Notebooks*, 'her vocation was not solid'.⁶² The department issued a warrant for the girls, and they were returned from Moora by the police eight weeks later, in June 1950. The incident still resonates in the memories of those on the sidelines as well as those involved. The young Australian had come 'after many prayers and years of hoping for Australian vocations' but had proved a disaster. Instead, it was the new sisters from Spain who promised the way forward.

58 Catalan to Commissioner, 17 March 1947.

59 Catalan to Mrs Crothwaite, 6 April 1949, NNA 01453/178.

60 For example, Celine Kickett in *Many Voices: Reflections on Experience of Indigenous Child Separation*, ed. Doreen Mellor and Anna Haebich (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2002), 44; Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

61 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 28. Literally, *se hizo querer por ellas*.

62 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 28.

Teachers for the school

The process of accrediting new teachers for New Norcia would take several years. It was made possible through the practical support of the Sisters of Mercy at Victoria Square in Perth. Matilde de la Fuente's 1944 initiative in linking with the St John of God Sisters to secure some training in nursing had paved a way for others. The arrangements for Marie-Therese and Agnes to join the community close to the cathedral and the mission's house at 1 Murray Street, for Angelina to go to St Brigid's in Lesmurdie on Perth's rural fringe, and for Scholastica to briefly 'collect ideas'⁶³ at St Anne's, the maternity hospital close to the city in Mount Lawley, also run by the Sisters of Mercy, would have been made by Abbot Catalan. All the memories of the later Benedictines underline the significance of his newfound commitment to the school. In the crucible of New Norcia's anxiety about the practical workload, it was an investment by everyone to send three of the sisters for longer-term study. It was another sign that the school was in focus and a priority.

While they were away, new red-brick buildings replaced the original cottage where Brother Miro and the Aboriginal matrons had presided, extending the facilities built in 1910. In 1952 a spacious school hall (60ft x 22ft, or 18 m x 6 m) and a wider dormitory (50ft x 28ft, or 15 m x 8.5 m) ran down the north of the site, and in 1956 a two-storey wing to the south of the convent added dormitories with 110 beds, a dining room, an upgraded kitchen and new bathrooms for the children and the sisters. The renovations came at a cost of £28,000, supported by the Lotteries Commission and the mission itself.⁶⁴

Smaller contributions also made an impact. In January 1957 the sisters thanked 19 donors for a total of £32 towards the cost of a statue of St Joseph that had been blessed and installed above the doorway facing the road. Past pupils played a prominent part in meeting the 'overdue' need.⁶⁵ The names and amounts were a roll-call of New Norcia families. All the supporters except perhaps one were Aboriginal, and all but two of them were women.

63 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 28.

64 'Land, Melbourne Loc1, historical notes', NNA 01159; 'Lands, surveys and leases', NNA 01144.

65 *Pax*, 17 January 1956, 3. The donors were Mrs Louisa Starr £5, Miss Rosie Finucaine £5, Mrs Phil. Williway £3, Miss Doris Moody £3, Mrs Eileen Farrell £2, Mrs Lena Narrier £2, Mrs Mary Lawson £2, Mrs Agnes Taylor £1, Miss A. Moody £1, Miss Pauline Taylor £1, Miss Norma Stack £1, Mrs Lena Jose £1, Miss Lucy Paterson £1, Miss Frances Indich £1, Mrs Julia Maher 10s, Miss A. Cameron 10s, Mr Paddy Taylor 10s, Mr Thomas Taylor 10s and Mrs Laws (Vic) 10s.



Figure 9.6: New dining room at St Joseph's, 1956.

Source: NAA W6-B5-338.

Between these projects, in 1953, a concrete water tank with capacity for 50,000 gallons (190,000 litres) was installed on the western boundary to improve the water supply.⁶⁶ At the same time, the 'mission cottages' that had been a hallmark of the town were demolished. The bigger houses on the hill to the north of the monastery that accommodated eight employees of the mission and their families were renovated, and six new, two-bedroom 'monocrete houses' were also built to the north.

⁶⁶ NNA 01159; NNA 01144.

David Brand, the member for Geraldton and future state premier, called attention to the additions as parliament debated the *Native Welfare Act* in 1954, calling them a hopeful experiment 'being watched with interest'.⁶⁷ The Act itself aimed to undo many of the restrictions imposed on Aboriginal people in 1905 and 1936. In keeping with prevailing policies for cultural assimilation, provisions for education, health, housing and welfare of Aboriginal Australians would be administered by the relevant departments within those budgets, rather than being overseen by the Department of Native Affairs. Oversight of the mission schools was part of that integration. In April 1952 Stanley Middleton, who had succeeded Auber Neville as Commissioner for Native Affairs, wrote to Thomas Robertson, Director of Education, to alert him to a request from New Norcia.

Middleton advised that the Benedictines had sought help 'to establish an educational standard comparable at least to the State Primary Schools'.⁶⁸ The Education Department arranged for G. F. Thornbury, soon to become the new Superintendent of Native Education, to visit New Norcia.⁶⁹ The department had also recently undertaken to staff mission schools, although none of the Catholic missions had taken up this offer. The prospect of alternative teachers surely added impetus to New Norcia's plan to train the sisters for this work. As it turned out, Marie-Therese would be called to assist earlier than planned.

When the younger sisters were sent out to study in 1950 the dispersal of the group helped to relieve pressure on the accommodation at New Norcia and gave those sent to the other communities a chance to see Australian convent life in action. Scholastica spent less than a month at the maternity hospital in Perth, before she and Matilda Arroyo went north in October to join the community at Drysdale River.⁷⁰ Early in 1953 Florentina and Bernada Araceli were 'already making progress'⁷¹ in a full course of two years studying nursing with the Sisters of St John of God in

67 David Brand, Western Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard*, 5 October 1954, 1968, [www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/vwMainBackground/19541005_Assembly.pdf/\\$File/19541005_Assembly.pdf](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/hansard/hansard1870to1995.nsf/vwMainBackground/19541005_Assembly.pdf/$File/19541005_Assembly.pdf). The new buildings were also announced in the *West Australian*, 7 February 1953, 26.

68 Middleton to Robertson, 7 April 1952, 'Native Education – Reports from Officers of Native Welfare Department', SROWA S24 cons1497 1951/0953.

69 Robertson to Middleton, 18 April 1952, SROWA S24 cons1497 1951/0953.

70 They left on 8 October 1950. *Notebooks*, Madrid, 29.

71 Catalan to Francesca, 2 February 1953, NNA 01457; Catalan to Florentina, 3 April 1955, NNA 01457.

Perth, also with an eye on the mission in the north. At Victoria Square, Marie-Therese found a warm and welcoming group. She was soon part of the community with friends she could rely on.⁷² 'She was very loyal to Agnes', one of the Mercy cohort remembered,⁷³ hinting the younger sister was less easy in the group. At Lesmurdie, Angelina was challenged by the unfamiliar food and routines. '[I]n a little time', she realised 'she could not adapt to the Australian community's customs'.⁷⁴ She returned to New Norcia and studied at St Gertrude's instead,⁷⁵ with strong results.

All three had set out on a path to teacher training, taking advantage of the measure introduced by the state Department of Education in 1951 to address a chronic teacher shortage by opening Claremont Teachers' College to mature-age students with a junior certificate (awarded after three years of high school).⁷⁶ To qualify, or to take the steadier route with a leaving certificate, they needed five junior subjects from various categories, including English.⁷⁷ Angelina passed eight subjects. There was a blitz of five languages (English, Latin, French, Italian and Spanish) as well as arithmetic and algebra, geometry, and art.⁷⁸ In the leaving certificate two years later she secured a distinction in Spanish besides three other languages (Latin, Italian and French, not English) and art.⁷⁹ Agnes also had strong results with six subjects in the junior: two languages (English and Spanish), two social studies subjects (geography and history), with physiology and art.⁸⁰ She sat and passed the same six leaving subjects three years later in 1956 from a country centre, probably St Gertrude's at New Norcia, with a distinction in Spanish,⁸¹ and followed Angelina to Claremont Teachers' College. Marie-Therese passed a modest four subjects in the junior with Spanish, geography, physiology and art.⁸²

72 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 31 May 1999; Sr Theophane, RSM, Interview, Perth, April 1999.

73 Sr Theophane, RSM, Interview, Perth, April 1999.

74 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 29.

75 Catalan to Sr Francisca at Kalumburu, reporting on the junior results, 2 February 1953, NNA 01457.

76 Kaye Tully, 'State Secondary Education in Western Australia, 1912–1972', *Education Research and Perspectives* 29 (2002): 81.

77 Tully, 'State Secondary Education', 46.

78 *West Australian*, 21 January 1953, 8.

79 *West Australian*, 11 January 1955, 8.

80 *West Australian*, 21 January 1953, 7.

81 *West Australian*, 9 January 1957, 13.

82 *West Australian*, 21 January 1953, 6.

It must have been a bitter disappointment to everyone that Marie-Therese missed English, and so did not qualify for the certificate. That had been so much the point of the exercise, and she was so at home in the classroom. But 'she had other gifts', as Visitación observed, including vast reserves of creative flair, the capacity to communicate with the children and to organise. Marie-Therese began a new year as a student at Victoria Square. The intention, the abbot confided to Francesca in the north, was to try again for the junior certificate,⁸³ but then plans changed.

While Angelina and Agnes pursued formal qualifications, Marie-Therese returned to New Norcia at the end of the first term of 1953 to play a key role in the school. The need for a teacher had become urgent, not so much at St Joseph's as for the 10 boys then resident at St Mary's.⁸⁴ Marie-Therese's availability cut through the conversations that had begun with the government in 1952 when New Norcia sought advice about the school.⁸⁵

When the newly elected Abbot Gregory Gomez picked up discussion with the Department of Education in late March 1953, the Director-General Robertson pledged to help 'in any way'. Gomez took up the offer in mid-May: 'I will be obliged if you have one teacher ready for me'.⁸⁶ Non-Aboriginal lay staff, whether men or women, always stretched New Norcia, and a government employee in the boys' school would have been a significant innovation. A week later, on 25 May 1953, Gomez had reconsidered and wrote again advising that a teacher was not required. 'I am pleased to inform you that our Benedictine Sisters from the girls' Orphanage have today taken charge of the school.'⁸⁷ The department would register the new coeducational arrangement.

The new role for the sisters was announced to the Sunday congregation at New Norcia, and soon classes were combined with both boys and girls at St Joseph's.⁸⁸ Sister Marie-Therese had plenty of ideas, and Sister Felicitas was ready to listen if action promised improvement. It is unlikely that anyone at New Norcia studied the Education Department's 1953 curriculum for 'Coloured Pupils', but its tone and recommendations

83 Catalan to Francesca, 2 February 1953.

84 See Appendix 1.

85 B. A. McLarty, District Officer Central District, report 7 April 1952, SROWA S24 cons1497 1951/0953.

86 Gomez to Robertson, 18 May 1954, SROWA S24 cons1497 1951/0953.

87 Gomez to Robertson, 25 May 1954, SROWA S24 cons1497 1951/0953.

88 New Norcia *Sunday Leaf*, 31 May 1953.

matched the approach Marie-Therese advocated. The 'educational potentialities, interests and desires' of the children were 'inadequately known'.⁸⁹ Teachers should experiment, 'adapt any suggestions to fit the needs, interests and special conditions of their pupils', and expect their own observation and reflection to lead to 'continuous revision'.⁹⁰

Marie-Therese took the need for change for granted and was deeply engaged by the challenges in the school. New Norcia was frustratingly isolated. It was hard even to get cardboard and ink to make a chart, let alone more elaborate teaching aids, but she agreed 'methods will need to make the fullest use of the concrete and the visual rather than the verbal "chalk and talk" technique'.⁹¹ The department reminded teachers to watch for those 'who could profit from a more advanced education, technical, clerical, nursing or otherwise'.⁹² Marie-Therese was alive to the possibilities that education offered:

We know most of the sisters who came here ... the only thing they taught the girls was to do washing and work. Well, alright. I agree with that [summary]. But I have to say that when I came to Australia I had done something in Spain. I had my studies. So I tried to teach the girls not *only that*. Not only to dress 'as a native', [but] to dress as really going outside and doing something else.⁹³

She brought the expectation that St Joseph's girls could and should match the outside world.

Her hopes were about more than simple appearances, but in a sense Marie-Therese's revolution in the school was led from the sewing room. The new uniforms for weekdays and for sport, with other clothes for after school and Sunday-best, broke away from the heavy mission dresses that had been deemed appropriate at some stage by the Josephites at St Gertrude's. No one remembers when or how:

When I came to Australia and I saw the girls with those dresses there? *Oh!* Fire was inside of me. How could I bear to have the girls like that? I told the sisters: 'You have to take all this away, and do this a different way!' And the sisters answered me: 'No, we are not

89 *Provisional Curriculum for Coloured Pupils in Caste Schools* (Perth: Education Department of Western Australia, 1953).

90 *Provisional Curriculum*.

91 *Provisional Curriculum*.

92 *Provisional Curriculum*.

93 Teresa González, Interview, New Norcia, October 2001, original emphasis.

allowed to change their dresses and things because we have to ask permission to [sic] the sisters there in St Gertrude's.' So! Nobody was going to tell me what I had to do with the girls! They are not the teachers!⁹⁴

Marie-Therese had confidence in her own trained judgement. Change was also more possible as war-time restrictions were lifted and Australian manufacturing began to supply cloth to the local market again.

Veronica Willaway remembers pestering her mother that she wanted to start school at St Joseph's as the 'new look' at the school unfolded. Her mother, Philomena Nettles, who had grown up with the sisters and was still close to the community, would not let her go alone. 'If you're going in, your sister's going too'. So the two Willaway girls left the family cottage for the 'orphanage': Veronica, quiet, sensitive and just turned five, with Rose her younger but much feistier sister, aged four. They were together as their mother insisted—two among a group of 33 girls at that time.⁹⁵ 'Rosie's never forgiven me', but Veronica was not to be deterred. Living-in with the sisters appealed. 'I thought orphanage kids were spoilt: 2 weeks holiday at Dongarra every year, and nice things at Christmas, and all these clothes. You know, the grass is always greener.'⁹⁶ The new Alfa sewing machines (brought from Spain without their cases to save freight) were treadled into action for new clothes.

Marie-Therese was clear her role as a teacher was the main expression of her vocation, and she gave priority to the demands of the school over the convent. 'Everything was upside down', she chuckled to remember.⁹⁷ 'I was very much with the children. If I went to Moora with the children for sport or sports practice, I couldn't go to prayer. Sr Mary said I had to be on time for prayer. I told her this was impossible.'⁹⁸ As a novice, Marie-Therese had been befriended and encouraged by Teresa Roca, who, 'not knowing what it was to be idle' herself,⁹⁹ respected the younger woman's verve and capacity to relate to the children. When in 1950 the St Joseph's girls gave Teresa Roca a crucifix to mark 40 years at New Norcia, she earmarked the deeply symbolic gift, anointing Marie-Therese

94 Teresa González, Interview, New Norcia, 17 October 2001, original emphasis.

95 See Appendix 1.

96 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

97 Teresa González, Interview, New Norcia, October 2001.

98 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 25 May 1999. A photograph of the post-war sewing room is NNA 74205P.

99 *Pax*, 3 February 1953, newspaper clipping, n.p., 'Las Necrologías', ABTM.

as a worthy successor at the mission and announcing to the community: 'When I die this is for you, for you Sister Marie-Therese'.¹⁰⁰ It seemed to Marie-Therese, 'they were very few sisters and they were frightened to do anything by their own decision', but she felt confident.¹⁰¹ The rest of the community gave her freedom from the other rosters, never expecting her to clean or cook or wash as they did, while she challenged the assumptions of several decades and saw herself as one against the crowd:

Yes, well. My way of thinking was so different to the sisters. So different. But what was I to do? What the other person tells me to do? It is better to put my ideas into practice. Really.¹⁰²

A public identity for St Joseph's began to emerge in coverage of sport, concerts and annual reports that was a step removed from the traditional 'training' offered by the mission.

At last the classrooms were a hub equal to the church and the laundry and the sewing room in the life of St Joseph's, not an afterthought. Even so, the Benedictine affirmation of menial work, of all work as equal for all disciples, as well as the expectation that most boys would take up farm work and most girls would become homemakers for their own or other families, made the assumptions of what was appropriate hard to shift. The older girls, sometimes including everyone over eight, still washed and ironed for the monastery and the boys' schools with the sisters rostered in the laundry. There were updated (or at least Army disposal) washing machines just as there was updated equipment for the farm, but there was no question that the women might train for other work. Veronica Willaway took it for granted:

You mean Mondays? Mondays you washed the whole thing for the boys, everybody had to go to do that.

[Interviewer: *No school at all?*]

No, Monday you did all the washing. At least the bigger kids, maybe the younger kids went to school.¹⁰³

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

101 Teresa González, Interview, New Norcia, 17 October 2001.

102 Teresa González, Interview, New Norcia, October 2001. A photograph of Marie-Therese in the co-ed classroom is NNA 74236P.

103 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

The goal for the school defined by the Education Department was 'bridging the gap between coloured and white'.¹⁰⁴ Training in domestic work provided useful skills, but enshrining laundry in the curriculum met practical needs in the town first and foremost and obviously reinforced rather than questioned the expectation of menial work.

For the government's policy makers, the emphasis of Aboriginal education was on gearing up for 'the greatest fight ... against the tendency to drift so quickly into the camp atmosphere of illiteracy and apathy'.¹⁰⁵ At New Norcia the camp at the edge of town cast the mission into relief. It was distinct from the cottages and even more separate from the 'native school'. Some children, like Rose Willaway, would conclude later that 'we thought we were white',¹⁰⁶ but the division was not simple. Veronica remembers realising around the age of 10 that she and Rose had connections to the camp:

One day with [my half-brother] Peter, I saw one of the old ladies from over near the river, and I was laughing at her and I said to Peter, 'Look at Old [Lady] down there, drunk.' Peter told me: 'That's my aunty.' So I said to him, 'Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't know.' That's when I thought. I hadn't thought before about the people there being his relatives.¹⁰⁷

The camp was a threat. They had been taught that St Joseph's would ward it off. At 10, Veronica could barely comprehend that if Peter had family there then she was connected too.

The same instinct to protect St Joseph's girls from 'uncivilised', or 'bushie', influences extended to judging their families. If parents called to visit but had been drinking (perhaps, Sr Teresa speculates, finding some Dutch courage to face the stern expectations of 'the nuns'), they were sent away. The children would wait on the bench around the water tank on Sunday afternoons, calling out family names to summon others as visitors arrived.¹⁰⁸ If they were allowed to meet their children (and the sisters insist that family visits were usually welcomed), it is memories of mothers being made ashamed by the nuns and of daughters not recognising their families and not knowing how to interact that are among the deepest wounds.

¹⁰⁴ *Provisional Curriculum*, 1953.

¹⁰⁵ *Provisional Curriculum*, 1953.

¹⁰⁶ Rose Narkle, Interview, Langford, 2001.

¹⁰⁷ Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Mae Taylor and Georgina Taylor in conversation, New Norcia, May 2017.

The danger of 'outside' was also reinforced in language where 'blackfella' was an insult. 'Blackfellas until die! Never changing!' Ludivina would hurl her angry accusation if she thought the garden was being raided. 'She didn't normally say it, not all the time,' Veronica explains, 'just in that instance ... to tell them that they should not steal, that they were kind of like black people who never change. You know, she was trying to lift their standards up in her own way, which was broken English'.¹⁰⁹ The defence is on shaky ground. Even if they laughed at Ludivina, the children heard the accusation that wrongdoing was somehow 'black' and innate. Only in the very last years at St Joseph's had Cecilia found a way to bring in visitors to talk about traditional culture and introduce some songs with clapping sticks.¹¹⁰ Until the 1970s the school shared the assimilationist hope for honorary whites who could take their place (a subordinate one) in 'respectable' society. That hope was in tension with the appreciation that Marie-Therese and others had for the heritage of talent across the group for music, dance, drawing and handcraft as well as the recognition of widespread ability to go beyond basic education if only the school could encourage it.

The school defined Marie-Therese. Teaching also came to define Angelina, who returned with her teacher's certificate from Claremont Teachers' College in 1958 and a prize for her history essay on New Norcia.¹¹¹ The classrooms were the focus for their talents and their sense of call. They hoped their pupils would become 'good people' within white Australia but, better yet, that they would be good Catholics and therefore equal citizens of heaven.

In practice, in the junior grades, where Marie-Therese excelled, this meant a curriculum strongly focused on religious instruction and a program that reflected the teachers' strengths as well as students' perceived natural abilities. School days began with prayers and singing, catechism, maths and spelling, reading using the standard issue *Happy Venture* books with stories of Dick and Dora, Nip the dog and Fluff the cat, and then afternoons of nature study, verse speaking, drawing in the service of social studies or other subjects, drama and sport. There were long walks on Thursday afternoons, inherited from the monastic pattern of Salvado's day. It was 'in a way', as Veronica Willaway recalls, 'like big families, the

109 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

110 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

111 *Pax*, 22 December 1957, 7. Angelina tied for first place in the Lee Steere awards for historical essays with her thesis 'An Historical Outline of New Norcia Mission'.

little girls always had a big girl to take care of you'.¹¹² There was sewing and other housework after school, the rosary to conclude the day in the dormitories, and certainly Mass every Sunday, where choral singing by the children, both boys and girls, featured strongly. As numbers increased from the late 1950s, however, the daily Mass in the chapel was no longer compulsory for the children.¹¹³ The culture of saints and sacramental life was woven through it all, underpinned by daily devotion and the presence of the Benedictines themselves.

Celebrations for feast days, First Communion and confirmation were occasions for the school as well as the convent. They depended fundamentally on the work of the sisters in the kitchen and the sewing room who saw to special meals, a feast-day cake, while the children wore their best clothes. For First Communion and confirmation the sewing room excelled again with new outfits for the children involved: suits for the boys and white dresses for the girls, well-fitted, 'not dowdy';¹¹⁴ short lace veils, good shoes, sometimes woven handbags and even bought underwear to replace the homemade pants and singlets that served on normal occasions. Preparation for the sacraments happened at school, but the occasion involved the whole community far beyond the teachers: 'Sister Felicitas, Sister Lucy, Sister Carmen, and others really did their best for their First Communion and their Confirmation. ... [T]hey really put their heart and soul into it'.¹¹⁵

The school also held to standard educational outcomes. 'No-one left that room unless they knew how to read and write',¹¹⁶ recalled Pius Moynihan who inherited the junior class in the 1960s with the system that Marie-Therese had established. Older girls would come in to hear reading or to coach phonics and printing for a range of abilities. Glenys Benjamin often helped out in this way. Clear goals and flexibility made the system work:

[Sometimes] they would spend three years between grades one and two. ... [IF] they were malnourished, let's be blunt, by the time you had got them built up again half the year was gone and then no-one left that room unless they knew how to read and write.

112 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

113 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

114 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

115 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999. Photographs of post-war First Communion groups at New Norcia have not been released for publication but see for example, NNA W7 A3-4-472.

116 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

They used to be able to just pass through the system after that. Then you'd get the ones who were as bright as tuppence and just went straight through ... just whizzed through school.¹¹⁷

The reports from government inspectors who called annually (and also unannounced) on their way through to Geraldton affirmed the approach.¹¹⁸

By 1959 results were up and *Pax* proudly detailed a glowing report from the visiting superintendent that 'testifies to the conscientious and capable work of the Benedictine Sisters'.¹¹⁹ There was a wider horizon of both policy and practice being implied. St Joseph's had been judged to compare 'very favourably with any normal school in the district',¹²⁰ and there was confidence among the Benedictines that this was work of 'national importance'.¹²¹

In that year St Joseph's had three classes. In the junior room there were 60 students in Grades 1 and 2, then 33 'intermediate' pupils in a combined Grade 3 and 4 class, and a senior room of 44 in Grades 5, 6 and 7, for a total of 137 pupils, expected to increase to 180 the following year. St Joseph's was working to its traditional strengths: excelling in art and craft, doing 'fine work' in singing and choral speaking as well as outstanding 'voice modulation' in public reading in Grades 3 and 4, and the 'choral accompaniment to folk-dancing in the senior room showed precision and skill'. The superintendent had noted it was 'policy ... at all levels to develop such cultural fields'. Other subjects were strong as well: 'reading is in a very healthy condition. ... [M]any rate as very good indeed'. Results in written expression were across a 'wider range', with limitations in grammar and vocabulary, but the children were 'developing confidence and a willingness to express themselves'. Handwriting, spelling and dictation were all very good, with few exceptions. Arithmetic was 'well to standard'. There were 14 of the 60 students in Grade 1 who were 'still immature' and would repeat but the majority had reached 'good to very good' standard, while in the senior class 'care has been taken to ensure that all have the opportunity to succeed'. Overall, the inspector congratulated the sisters 'on the success they are achieving'.¹²²

117 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

118 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

119 *Pax*, December 1959, 2.

120 *Pax*, December 1959, 2.

121 *Pax*, December 1959, 2.

122 All quotations in this paragraph from *Pax*, December 1959, 2.

Marie-Therese threw herself into the extracurricular dimensions of music and sport and the building of social skills. The tiny music room, one of the original sisters' cells from 1910 between the dormitories, was her particular domain at first. Building on the singing and dancing that had forged a sense of purpose for her as a postulant and some lessons at Victoria Square in Perth,¹²³ she was delighted that some of the children were interested and clearly talented. The retired abbot was also persuaded. Writing a warm letter to Dolores, who had gone north to run the school at Kalumburu in May 1955, aged 20,¹²⁴ he encouraged her to keep practising herself. He told her of the two little girls, aged six and eight, still being taught by Marie-Therese, who was 'very proud of her two disciples'.¹²⁵ Yvonne Anderson and Glenys Benjamin impressed an inspector from Native Affairs with their ability 'to manage a keyboard'.¹²⁶ The abbot's assumptions had been confounded too when he happened to see one of the students practising intently. 'It truly caught my attention that these little girls, so diminutive and native as well, can focus themselves on both lines on the page.'¹²⁷ Marie-Therese had never questioned their 'native' capacity but had simply followed the lead of the girls' own interest. She had been vindicated. As Glenys recalled, her encouragement continued to make the difference through several years that followed. Glenys passed formal exams of the Australian Music Examinations Board with flying colours, through to Grade 7, and shone at school concerts.

For others the music room had a primary role as the lolly shop. Minties, Fantales and Jaffas were made up into packets that Marie-Therese sold from a cupboard near the piano, first for 11 pence each and then for a shilling and threepence. The former teacher has forgotten, but in the banter of the reunion some details emerge clearly: 'They went up, and we used to all pitch in our money and save up and go buy a packet'.¹²⁸ Pocket money was not a great feature of life at St Joseph's. But 'different ones that had family come and visit them and what change they had left over, we'd all pitch in'.¹²⁹ Now the former teacher picks up the memory. Her younger self had encouraged an experience of shopping that she hoped was worthwhile:

123 See Chapter 7.

124 Dolores was sent to Kalumburu in May 1955 to replace Florentina, who had developed a kidney infection by October 1954 and was being treated in hospital in Perth.

125 Catalan to Dolores, Kimberley, 5 December 1955, NNA 01457.

126 Catalan to Dolores, Kimberley, 5 December 1955.

127 Catalan to Dolores, Kimberley, 5 December 1955.

128 Georgina Taylor, Interview in the Old Convent, New Norcia, October 2001.

129 Georgina Taylor, Interview in the Old Convent, New Norcia, October 2001.

‘The important thing was how to handle money, how to spend the money, how to save the money. That’s the important thing.’

‘We thought it was the lollies.’

‘Yes, yes, I know! Still the most important thing is not the lollies. After all, you had lollies.’

‘Yes, they always had a pocket full of lollies for us.’¹³⁰

The poignant undertow to the childhood significance of sugar is palpable. Later, for Teresa, the memory serves ‘at least to show that we taught different things that were not picking olives and working’.¹³¹ Talented teachers in Perth’s schools had a simpler task.

Sport at New Norcia had meant cricket and football, both played with distinction for generations. From the 1950s there was formal team sport for the girls, too, with the introduction of hockey and basketball to St Joseph’s. In 1954 a group from the Young Christian Students at St Gertrude’s ‘kindly undertook ... to teach the native girls of St Joseph’s Orphanage to play basketball, with very good results’.¹³² Sport provided a link between the separate schools, perhaps easing the way for some older girls from St Joseph’s to move to full-time boarding in the high school when federal funding came through to support that in the late 1960s.¹³³

Along with team sport at school came marching. With fond memories of her own experience of military drills in Falangist youth groups in Spain, Marie-Therese was an enthusiastic coach, assisted in time by Angelina and the monks from St Mary’s. As the annual interschool Central Midland Sports Day approached, marching consumed the out-of-school hours: ‘you would see the little ones walking around the school practising: “left, left, left, left”’,¹³⁴ Pius recalled. There were in-house competitions at New Norcia with a well-drilled march past, and then in 1957 the combined team of boys and girls from St Joseph’s began a run of success with the ‘most coveted of trophies’ at the Central Midland Interschool Sports meeting. The precision of their teamwork and their ‘dignified’¹³⁵ easy style won admiration.

130 Reunion Group, Interview in the Old Convent, New Norcia, October 2001, original emphasis.

131 Reunion Group, Interview in the Old Convent, New Norcia, October 2001.

132 *Pax*, 24 October 1954, 3. A photograph of basketball practice c.1954 is with the Storylines project at the State Library of Western Australia.

133 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

134 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

135 *Pax*, December 1959, 2.

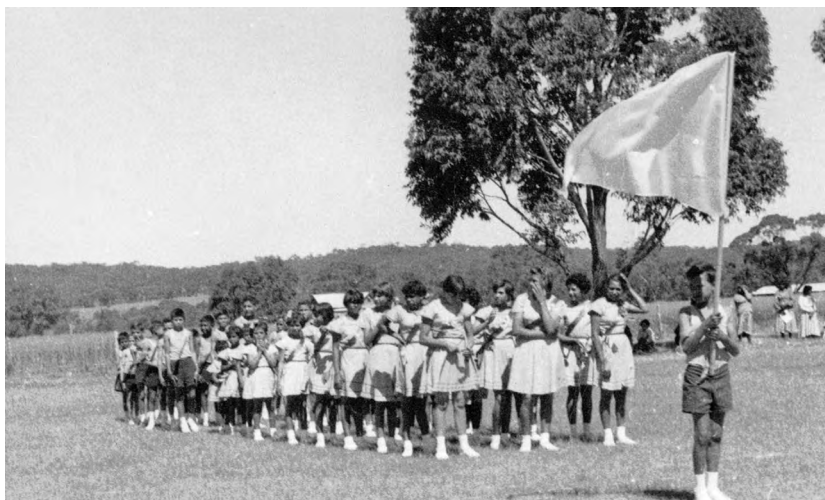


Figure 9.7: St Joseph's marching team at rest, New Norcia sports day, 1960s.

Source: ABTM.

Pax praised a 'truly remarkable performance', drawing attention to the children's elegance. Here the stereotyping was positive. Dignity seemed innate:

[A] graceful walk and carriage are natural to the native children. It is this natural ability that gives a graceful poise to marching. Marching is so often marked by military stiffness, St Joseph's pupils retained the military precision but expelled the military stiffness and thus were worthy winners of the marching shield.¹³⁶

St Joseph's won the 'march past' for six years in a row, from 1957 to 1962, and in four of those years (1958, 1959, 1960, 1962) they won the Moora Road Board trophy for overall sports as well. As Veronica Willaway recalls, preparation was purposeful and exhilarating:

Come that time you're out there practising, every day practising. ... It was an exciting time because you got to go out, down to that football oval down there, and so you were out there, running and doing all sorts of things. Then you got dressed up, getting ready ... and then you came back with little ribbons, shields, all that kind of stuff. It was an exciting time.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ *Pax*, December 1959, 2.

¹³⁷ Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

Even a change in the rules to require everyone in the school to be in the march did not daunt St Joseph's, although it might have been intended to loosen their hold on the trophy. Efforts simply intensified: 'we had the devil's time trying to teach little six-year-olds that this was your left leg and that had to go down'.¹³⁸ In the end the team captains trained the little ones to keep in step and maintain the standard. At the mission's own sports day when the school divided into factions, the team from the 'Girls' House' beat the 'Boys' House' to win the Willaway Shield in three of the four years it was awarded.¹³⁹

Music was also a feature of the public profile of St Joseph's and was highlighted in regular concerts. The large new hall also gave added impetus to activities Marie-Therese had sponsored from the start: folk dancing, drama and group recitations took their place in regular lessons and for special occasions. The concerts were reported first in the *Sunday Leaf*, a news-sheet for New Norcia only, and then picked up by the diocesan paper *Pax* with increasing enthusiasm as the years passed. In August 1953 the occasion was Abbot Catalan's jubilee. Glenys Benjamin, still 'a tiny little tot who had to be mounted and cushioned on the stool of the piano to enable her to reach the keyboard',¹⁴⁰ delighted the audience. 'How much Bishop Salvado would have enjoyed that number',¹⁴¹ the *Sunday Leaf* applauded. Musical skill carried a heritage of respect at the mission.

The concert programs would not have been out of place in any Catholic school in the country. The 1957 event followed a trusted formula. From the opening 'God Bless Australia' through rhythmic drills, country dances both whirling and graceful with 'amazing lightness of step and agility of movement',¹⁴² there was energy and talent but no specific attention to First Nations heritage at all.

The seniors recited 'The Old Bush School' and danced the 'Briar Rose Waltz' accompanied by Arthur Slater on accordion. Perhaps there was a faint hint of Aboriginal culture in the easy teamwork that meant Yvonne Anderson could substitute at short notice on the piano for Glenys Benjamin, who had broken her arm that year, and Shirley Egan could step up for Frances Yappo in a duet with Bella Cooper (harmonised so closely

138 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

139 I am grateful to Dom Christopher Power, OSB, for this information on the trophies.

140 New Norcia *Sunday Leaf*, 23 August 1953.

141 *Sunday Leaf*, 23 August 1953.

142 *Pax*, 22 December 1957, 8. A photograph of girls dressed for folk dancing at a school concert has not been released for publication but see NNA W7-A3-4-489.

that *Pax* thought it had ‘silken-spun quality’¹⁴³). Otherwise, there was no sign of the mission context until the very end when Fr Prior spoke to encourage ‘the parents of the children [to] be grateful to the Benedictine Sisters for all that they did’.¹⁴⁴

The remark was surely jarring, if not for the local parents in the room who had no other educational options, then certainly for the children whose parents were not there and who had no choice at all. The teachers might have been grateful, but it was likely they also wondered who would be weeping after lights out. ‘There now, there now. What is wrong with you?’ Marie-Therese or Angelina would come to inquire quietly.¹⁴⁵ The end of the concert was not the end of the day and tears often followed family visits and big occasions.

Nevertheless, the investment of energy by the new teachers and new resources were making a difference in the school. Through the decade *Pax* reported on other success: the music examinations where Glenys Benjamin was consistently awarded marks in the 90s,¹⁴⁶ the one-off, now lost, edition of a school magazine,¹⁴⁷ and the state-wide essay competition of 1,000 entrants in which two St Joseph’s students, Imelda Clinch and Elizabeth Papertalk, were highly commended.¹⁴⁸

Alongside achievement, problems remained. Particular teachers took out their troubles on children, kicking chairs from under them, lashing out with physical and verbal abuse. Agnes is the focus for some of the worst memories. She had been sent to Teachers’ College as the clever young niece of Hildegard, and it seems that her place in the Tapia family and her qualifications shielded her in circumstances where another sister would have been dismissed. The report awarding her teacher’s certificate commented on a ‘pleasant confident manner’, but there was silence where other assessments commended trainees for ‘natural aptitude’ or ‘good personal contact with children’. Agnes had simply ‘shown good progress, control strengthening and preparation thorough’.¹⁴⁹ Back at New Norcia the emphasis in the classroom was on her authority, and students feared her temper.

143 *Pax*, 22 December 1957, 8.

144 *Pax*, 22 December 1957, 8.

145 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, July 2002.

146 *Pax*, 9 September 1956, 2; 24 November 1957, 2.

147 *Pax*, 15 September 1957, 2.

148 *Pax*, 8 December 1957, 1.

149 Report on private student Sr Mary [Agnes] Ruiz, 13 December 1962, ‘Training of Teachers for Non-departmental Schools’, SROWA S24 cons1497 1958/1141.

Tension mounted in the community too. In 1963 and 1964, Agnes became infatuated with one favourite sister, Scholastica Carrillo, and routinely insulted the rest, disrupting recreation and meals. Rather than sending Agnes away, or helping her make good her own frequent threat to ‘get a hat and leave’,¹⁵⁰ there were ‘various warnings and corrections’ that ‘proved fruitless’.¹⁵¹ It was Scholastica who, with no inclination towards the relationship, as everyone knew, was given a canonical warning in the presence of the abbot and sent again to the north in 1964.¹⁵² (It was, in fact, a ‘banishment’ she had been praying for since 1952 when she had been replaced after a brief stint at Drysdale River by the fervent but ill-suited Josefina. ‘At every opportunity, every day, walking and working, I was praying: “St Joseph, send me back to Kalumburu”’.¹⁵³)

The pattern repeated when in 1969 the children began to comment on the affection between Agnes and her teaching companion Sr Michael. Again it was the other sister who was moved. In 1970 Michael was switched out of the classroom to take up a role as cook for the Marist Brothers. Two years later the ‘inordinate friendship’ was part of the reason for her long stay with the Benedictine nuns at Pennant Hills near Sydney and ultimately an exit from the congregation. Agnes, far from ‘regaining her senses’ as Mary as superior had advised her, began to shadow a third sister who was also promptly sent away to Spain. Michael wrote in distress from Pennant Hills convinced that Agnes was risking her vocation, asking Mary to consider the need for love and trust and to remember what Agnes could bring to the community.¹⁵⁴ At this point, Mary wrote an account for the abbot concluding that Agnes should be dismissed. The decision came after 25 years at the mission, a decade after problems became obvious, and too late both for the sister whose unhappiness had wrought havoc and for those damaged in the wake. She found a temporary home with Michael’s mother in Perth and ultimately moved to Darwin. The loss of the two trained teachers then stationed at New Norcia helped precipitate the sudden closure of St Joseph’s between school terms in July 1973.¹⁵⁵

150 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

151 Mary Ciudad, ‘Razones para despedir a Sr. Agnes’, c. 1972, ABTM.

152 Mary Ciudad, ‘Razones’; Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Kalumburu, 1 May 1999.

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

154 Michael to Mary, Michael to Bernard Rooney, both 22 November 1972, NNA S12-A5-4.

155 Michael to Mr Maine, Department of Community Welfare, 26 June 1973, ‘Missions – Private – New Norcia – General Correspondence’, SROWA S1099 cons2532 A403 v1.

Before this scandal unfolded, St Joseph's and an unnamed teaching sister who is most likely Michael featured positively in an account of the school published by the American educationalist Marianne Wolman about her visit in 1969.¹⁵⁶ Wolman worked with the Head Start program for disadvantaged children in the United States and sought out New Norcia because of its school. Writing in the well-established *Elementary School Journal*, she painted a bleak picture of New Norcia's dusty isolation but was inspired by the expectation of success at St Joseph's.

The visitor was surprised by the focus on formal learning and the levels of achievement. She remarked on the school uniform of blue cotton dresses, or blue shorts for the boys, with bare feet. The kindergarten room was lively and relaxed: 'There was no evidence of undue pressure on them; they were permitted to talk to one another which they did wholeheartedly; there was a good deal of laughter and shuffling of feet'.¹⁵⁷ With short lessons of 15 minutes broken up by play outside, the five- and six-year-olds impressed her with their level of reading and simple maths.

In the Grade 1 room, set up like 'any first grade room in the USA',¹⁵⁸ with work by the children on display around the room, Wolman was spellbound: all the children could read and '[t]here was not one child in that classroom who was not totally involved in learning'.¹⁵⁹ The young teaching sister explained her methods—a big stack of comics for the first few months, then flash cards, charts, simple stories, 'plenty of practice and a fair amount of drill'.¹⁶⁰ Wolman remarked that it was unusual for all the first grade to be able to read at the end of the year, but the teacher explained simply: 'I was very privileged to have received a fine education. I know how to teach. I expect all children to learn, and because I love them, they all do'.¹⁶¹ It was a declaration that Wolman told readers she would always remember, though she wondered aloud if it really was that simple. There is no reason to doubt the gifts of the teacher, the sincerity of her comment, or the success among the early students; nevertheless, the wider history shows us that the story of the school is more complex.

156 Marianne Wolman, 'Visit to a Mission for Aboriginal Children', *Elementary School Journal* 70, no. 5 (February 1970): 261–66. I am grateful to Sharne Rolfe for this reference and for the photographs from the Wolman family. Copies of photographs of the visit showing 1970s classrooms and groups in the playground with triangular cartons of 'school milk' are with the Storylines project at the State Library of Western Australia.

157 Wolman, 'Visit to a Mission', 263.

158 Wolman, 'Visit to a Mission', 263.

159 Wolman, 'Visit to a Mission', 263.

160 Wolman, 'Visit to a Mission', 263.

161 Wolman, 'Visit to a Mission', 264.

In the same article, one of the monks underlined the early success, coupled with disappointment, that the children did not ‘aspire’ to more than farm work and homemaking. The American wondered instead ‘whether it was ... not rather a realistic evaluation of what Australian society would permit aboriginals [sic] to do in their country’.¹⁶² Among the highly motivated first graders there were both girls and boys who would complete high school, undertake tertiary study, and pioneer work in nursing, in teaching and in many areas of the public service. From the standpoint of the convent, though, the most significant role models from the 1950s onwards were the former students who chose the Benedictine life.

Aboriginal Benedictines but ‘the word was “native” and we were not that’

Cecilia Farrell was the first Aboriginal woman to enter a religious community in Australia and the only Aboriginal Benedictine woman or man since July 1849 when the two Yued boys, Francis Xavier Conaci and John Baptist Maria Dirimera, famously received the Benedictine habit from Pope Pius IX in Naples.¹⁶³ In the earliest days of New Norcia there had been hope among the missionaries that there would be many Aboriginal Benedictines. Against assumptions that Aboriginal people were ‘incapable’ of grasping religious training,¹⁶⁴ Salvado recognised the local sense of the sacred and was convinced of the possibility of an Indigenous priesthood. His hope came to nothing, but, occasionally, accounts of New Norcia recalled the four boys who travelled from New Norcia to European monasteries with Salvado and Serra.¹⁶⁵ More by accident or misunderstanding than any considered planning, Francis Xavier Conaci,

¹⁶² Wolman, ‘Visit to a Mission’, 264.

¹⁶³ Rosendo Salvado, *Report of Rosendo Salvado to Propaganda Fide in 1883*, trans. Stefano Girola (Northcote, Vic.: Abbey Press, 2015), 36, 39–40; Anouk Ride, *The Grand Experiment: Two Boys, Two Cultures* (Sydney: Hachette, 2007) is a fictionalised account. Sr Beatrice Thardim of the Yerpela people joined the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH) in the 1960s; see Robyn Reynolds, OLSH, ‘A Far Cry: Resounding Call to All Australians: “Missionary Turned Around: Bound to be Free”’, Charles Strong Trust Lecture (Part 2), Adelaide, 2013, users.esc.net.au/~nhabel/lectures/2013Part2RobynReynoldsMissionaryTurnedAround.pdf; accessed 17 March 2016.

¹⁶⁴ For example, *Freeman’s Journal*, 19 August 1899, 21; *Mirror*, 21 March 1936, 15.

¹⁶⁵ Most notably when Veronica Willaway was professed: ‘Native Nun Takes Final Vows’, *Record*, 24 March 1966, 12.

John Baptist Maria Dirimera, Benedict Upumera and Placid Cantagoro became members of Benedictine communities, but all died before they completed their studies. More than a century later, Vera took another step.

There is no story to tell about Vera Farrell or Sister Cecilia in her own words. With integrity and gentleness this elderly lady, now with some dementia, decided, 'I do not want to talk about that'.¹⁶⁶ We have memories of others, and the public record, but so close to the possibility of a richer account there is a choice for silence. Marie Willaway, who became Sister Veronica Therese, made a different choice, but like all the Benedictine Missionary Sisters whose conversation informs this work, the choice to speak involved revisiting realities that words do not capture well. The relationship between the mission culture and Aboriginal heritage is one of those realities.

When Veronica joined the community, she found what she knew Cecilia had found before her: that the choice for a Benedictine life was seen as a choice to silence all other claims of identity. In Veronica's experience, 'nobody talked about Aboriginality'.¹⁶⁷ The 'Aborigines' were tribal people in the north: 'it meant you were black, we didn't want to be black'.¹⁶⁸ Even the legal term for the peoples in the south who were assimilated or familiar with white ways was equivocal at St Joseph's: 'the word was *native* and we were not that'.¹⁶⁹ Being a St Joseph's girl was 'not that', at least not within the mission. Even more profoundly, being Benedictine was different again from being a St Joseph's girl, and both were somehow outside the negative categories on offer.

Nevertheless, when the Catholic press reported the milestones for Cecilia and later Veronica, it was to put 'native' in the headlines and to claim a bold success for assimilation. The distinctive, exceptional status of the sisters attracted comment. If St Joseph's quibbled about 'native', then *Pax* certainly did not, and even less the other newspapers in Western Australia. In a typical example, when Veronica made her final profession in the mid-1960s the *Record* claimed twin principles for New Norcia overall: the 'missionary vocation and assimilation programme for the

166 The polite refusal has been made many times through various channels, both Aboriginal and Benedictine, and definitively in a telephone conversation in August 2010.

167 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 8 July 2012.

168 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 8 July 2012.

169 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 8 July 2012, original emphasis.

natives'.¹⁷⁰ It claimed that Veronica's decision, like her brother Gabriel's election as team captain at St Ildephonsus, was 'a great demonstration of successful assimilation when a balanced atmosphere free from narrow prejudices can be found'.¹⁷¹ There was an affirmation, of sorts, of both the ancient culture the women represented and the ancient Rule they were committing to follow in the recognition that 'the ever-fresh Rule of St Benedict seems well-adapted to the needs and exigencies of one of the oldest races on earth'.¹⁷² The new phase was a success for the Benedictine women too, who were judged to be 'reaping the fruits of a field long and laboriously prepared by zeal for God and self-sacrifice'.¹⁷³ Their way of life now attracted 'unselfish generosity in young people to the extent of them asking for the Benedictine habit'.¹⁷⁴

In Veronica's assessment, the sisters' focus was simply on vocation, not race. The culture of the convent was assumed to be universal. 'Well, you know, they didn't stress "Aboriginal" back then. They just stressed that you went in as a postulant, that was "entering"'.¹⁷⁵ Her choice depended on everyone's conviction that human beings were equal before God. Paradoxically, it seemed to Veronica that it was a particularly Spanish trait not to discriminate between cultures:

Now, you have to say one thing about the Spanish: they were never prejudiced. That was one of their best qualities. So, when I entered they didn't take me in because I was an Aboriginal person, Aboriginal girl, or because I was anything to do with Aboriginal, they just took me in as a young girl wanting to enter.¹⁷⁶

While she and Cecilia were celebrated publicly as past pupils and 'first of their people', privately there was the traditional corporate emphasis on not being distinctive. By the time Veronica entered, Cecilia's presence in habit and veil in the classroom and the playground was no longer novel; she had made a transition into the Benedictine world. For the girls at St Joseph's, Cecilia and Veronica were sisters who 'understood'.¹⁷⁷ They were

170 *Record*, 24 March 1966, 12.

171 *Record*, 24 March 1966, 12.

172 *Record*, 24 March 1966, 12.

173 *Record*, 24 March 1966, 12.

174 *Record*, 24 March 1966, 12.

175 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

176 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

177 Mary Nannup, Fatima Drayton, Gloria Drayton Interview, Moora, February 1999.

'like us',¹⁷⁸ members of families who had widespread connections through the Aboriginal community and they were embedded in St Joseph's already. According to the novice mistress at the time, there was a distinction to be created between the new members of the community and the girls they knew from school:

[T]hey told me literally I had to change my attitude to the other girls. The girls wanted me to stay the same, but the sisters had a different idea: that I had to stay at a distance and in a certain way to think of myself above them as a Sister. This was one of the big things. ... [A]nd Cecilia yes, she had done the same.¹⁷⁹

For these sisters, 'Aboriginal' and 'native' were both categories St Joseph's aimed to make irrelevant.

The private dimension of Cecilia's vocation is no more available than the inner lives of the earlier sisters who left no writing, but it was particularly celebrated as a new stage in the history of New Norcia. If an aim to be 'not native' was part of the mission experience, it was nevertheless Cecilia's Aboriginal heritage that made her decision for the Benedictines memorable. Her choice would 'go into the records of the Mission',¹⁸⁰ because for the first time one of the mission women was received as a member of the Benedictine community.

When Vera Farrell made her choice to be a nun in 1953 she had been living at St Joseph's for five years and already the sisters appreciated her 'steadiness of mind'.¹⁸¹ Vera's mother, Eileen Farrell, had written in 1944 from Walebing, 30 kilometres north of New Norcia, asking to place her daughter at the mission. There was a vacancy, and Abbot Catalan indicated he would hold the place for a fortnight, if the little girl was over eight and her mother would promise she would remain until she turned 19.¹⁸² Eileen did not pursue the contact until two years later when Vera spent a month at New Norcia over the summer of 1946. Then in July 1948, aged 12, she was readmitted.¹⁸³ In mid-1952 Vera was one

178 Mary Nannup, Fatima Drayton, Interview, Moora, February 1999.

179 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

180 *Pax*, 15 October 1953.

181 *Sunday Leaf*, 5 April 1953.

182 Catalan to Mrs Eileen Farrell, 15 September 1944, NNA 01447/365.

183 Her birthday is listed as two different dates in the New Norcia records, but the date used most often is June 1936.

of three young women working at Bindoon when District Officer B. A. McLarty visited to inspect. His report raised a number of issues about the workload and indicated Vera wanted a new position near her family. Abbot Catalan assumed an inexperienced official had asked leading questions and dismissed follow-up enquiries from the department as an unjustified kerfuffle, but some changes followed at Bindoon. Explaining them to the department, Catalan advised that Vera had decided to stay at Bindoon until Christmas 1952 and then join her father in Geraldton.¹⁸⁴ Her life at Bindoon had struck the inspector as rather like the convent already, with an early start at 5.15 in the morning to join the sisters at Mass and routines until night prayers at 7.30 in the evening with further ironing sometimes until nine o'clock at night. McLarty was not persuaded by the assurance of Hildegard, as the sister-in-charge, that there was sufficient recreation because 'they are allowed to talk'.¹⁸⁵

As Carmen recalled, the nuns also talked over the ironing. Chatting in the tiny laundry room a few months later, Vera stunned Carmen with a simple question, 'Did you know I am going to be a nun?'¹⁸⁶ Carmen liked this 'girl-helper' of 17 going on 18 but was frank about her surprise: 'I can't believe it. An Aborigine!'¹⁸⁷ She remembers Vera insisted, 'Truly yes! I am going from here. After a few days I am going to New Norcia. I want to be a nun'.¹⁸⁸ Carmen felt honoured to be the first of the ordinary sisters to know and acknowledged it was 'a good choice'.¹⁸⁹ Carmen's more immediate reaction of candid surprise underlined a reality. Vera's decision and the sisters' welcome challenged some stereotypes and carried wider and more public implications.

We do not know how the discussion of practical steps proceeded, but in April 1953 the *Sunday Leaf* announced Miss Vera Farrell had made the move to the convent and 'feels very much at home in the change and adapts herself well to the requirements of the new life'.¹⁹⁰ The standard six months of postulancy passed quickly. Visitación, not far from the experience herself, knew Vera was well-suited and was not surprised when

184 Catalan to Commissioner of Native Affairs, 30 June 1952, NNA 05050.

185 B. A. McLarty, 12 May 1952, summary report sent to Abbot Catalan for comment by Commissioner Middleton, 4 June 1952, NNA 05050.

186 Carmen Ruiz Besti, Interview, New Norcia, 28 July 1999.

187 Carmen Ruiz Besti, Interview in the Old Convent, New Norcia, October 2001.

188 Carmen Ruiz Besti, Interview in the Old Convent, New Norcia, October 2001.

189 Carmen Ruiz Besti, Interview, New Norcia, 1999.

190 *Sunday Leaf*, 5 April 1953.

‘she was one of the ones I was closest to’.¹⁹¹ When the time came for the community to affirm the decision and accept Vera as a novice, there was ‘good hope that she will persevere to the end, and that her example might be followed by others’.¹⁹²

At the ceremony where Vera was received formally and changed her name to Cecilia, many Aboriginal families crowded into the chapel to see ‘the first [from] New Norcia to receive the gift of a religious vocation’.¹⁹³ They heard Abbot Catalan put her vocation on the world stage. The step she was taking was, he said, a local example of the dynamic of divine call that had drawn the Spanish sisters to New Norcia. They, too, had left the familiar behind as implicitly Vera was doing. The abbot stressed to the congregation that God’s grace knew no boundaries:

We have seen the example of many young ladies inspired by God and helped by his grace, [who] abandoned continent, native land, and homes and sailed for Australia to cooperate with Christ in the work of redemption and salvation of souls. In the ceremony this evening we find, however, that the grace of God is not tied to any colour, race or nationality.¹⁹⁴

It was, the *Notebooks* recorded, ‘very moving to see the chapel full of Indigenous women (*indigenas*) who had come to honour one of their own’¹⁹⁵ as she swapped her borrowed wedding dress for the Benedictine habit with the white veil of a novice. Vera’s family hosted a generous spread afterwards with a big family gathering of her father’s people from Carnarvon and her mother’s family, the Narriers, who were well-connected over generations at New Norcia.

There were sombre reflections on the impact of her choice: ‘From her the Lord will perhaps exact something above what he exacts from others’, Abbot Catalan told the assembled crowd, ‘[and] her aid may count in the salvation of many native souls’.¹⁹⁶ Below the surface, by implication, Cecilia’s decision to become a nun was a reordering of the relationship between the Indigenous and missionary communities at New Norcia.

191 Visitación Ciudad in conversation, Madrid, 29 July 2010.

192 *Sunday Leaf*, 31 May 1953.

193 *Sunday Leaf*, 15 October 1953.

194 *Sunday Leaf*, 15 October 1953.

195 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 15 October 1953, 28.

196 *Sunday Leaf*, 15 October 1953.

Identity is about relationship.¹⁹⁷ Potentially, by committing her life to the Benedictine Missionary Sisters she was reframing the identity of Aboriginal people in the town.

Abbot Catalan knew Cecilia was 'the first of her class in these parts of W.A., a former pupil of St Joseph's Orphanage',¹⁹⁸ but he downplayed the claim for priority. He was probably familiar with the 'native sisterhood', the Daughters of Our Lady Queen of Apostles, founded in June 1939 by Bishop Raible of Broome and directed by the Pallottine Fathers and the Sisters of St John of God until its collapse in December 1951.¹⁹⁹ That relatively short-lived community, working at Beagle Bay and Balgo in the Kimberley, had been a 'Pious Union of Native Sisters'. Like New Norcia's sisters before 1935, they took private vows and were not a diocesan congregation as such. Membership was also restricted to Aboriginal women, similar to groups in the United States and Canada that were exclusively for Native American and African American women.²⁰⁰ The abbot might not have known, as the Aboriginal families at New Norcia did, of at least one sister in another community in Western Australia whose family kept their Aboriginal descent private.²⁰¹

As a public commitment to a diocesan congregation, Vera's move was different from the segregated congregations or undeclared Aboriginality. She was 'the first Native girl to apply' to the sisters, and the *Sunday Leaf* affirmed her confidently with a standard biblical allusion. Like Mary of Bethany who sat listening to Jesus: 'she has chosen the best part'.²⁰²

197 On identity as relational and its links to the understanding of space, see Doreen Massey, 'Geographies of Responsibility', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86 (2004): 5–18.

198 *Sunday Leaf*, 15 October 1953.

199 'Aboriginal Nuns: First Congregation Establishment at Beagle Bay', *Geraldton Guardian and Express*, 29 April 1939, 1; Christine Choo, *Mission Girls: Aboriginal Women on Catholic Missions in the Kimberley, Western Australia 1900–1950* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2001), 172–85; Hilary M. Carey, 'Subordination, Invisibility and Chosen Work: Missionary Nuns and Australian Aborigines, c.1900–1949', *Australian Feminist Studies* 13 (1998): 251–67.

200 'Aboriginal Nuns', *West Australian*, 11 October 1947; Brigida Nailon, *Nothing Is Wasted in the Household of God: Vincent Pallotti's Vision in Australia* (Richmond, Vic.: Spectrum Publications, 2001), 139.

201 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 9 July 2012.

202 *Sunday Leaf*, 11 October 1953.

Cecilia's new Benedictine identity and commitment emerged in the liturgy as a stern calling as well as a privilege. She was 'renouncing the blandishments and attractions of the world' for 'the total oblation of herself to God'²⁰³ in a vowed commitment. There was talk not of joy but rather of the obedience that would sustain her in a unique vocation:

God has given her the help of his grace; He expects her to co-operate with this grace by the faithful observance of the Rule, the Constitutions and Conventual Customs, not less than by the fulfilment of the vows.²⁰⁴

The focus was otherworldly. Cecilia was taught that her task was holiness above all, and the community were encouraged to pray for her:

With her exemplary conduct, with the fulfilment of her vows and the practice of the virtues of humility and charity and the exercise of good sense, she may be instrumental in bringing many souls to the fold of the Church and ultimately to the mansions of heaven. Let us ask God through the intercession of Mary, the mother of Jesus, St Benedict the founder of monks, and his twin sister St. Scholastica to grant Miss Farrell the grace to persevere and to become some day a faithful spouse of Christ and a fervent Benedictine missionary.²⁰⁵

The community of sisters chanted the Latin hymns they had probably sung at their own clothing ceremonies, invoking the Holy Spirit in 'Veni Creator' and praising Jesus as inspiration and protector of virginity in 'Iesu, Corona Virginum'. The occasion was an emotional and historic first, but tradition and not innovation was to the fore.

Holding the occasion on 15 October, the feast day of Teresa of Avila, made a quiet connection with Sister Teresa Roca. Her death the previous February at the age of 85 had broken the community's direct link with their foundation history. It is significant that the *Notebooks* move directly from their tribute to the pioneer sister who had seen the arrivals and departures since 1904 to announce that Vera, '*alumna de San José*',²⁰⁶ joined them in April to test her vocation.²⁰⁷ Six months later, as she made her commitment as a novice, the community hoped Cecilia's decision

203 *Sunday Leaf*, 18 October 1953.

204 *Sunday Leaf*, 18 October 1953.

205 *Sunday Leaf*, 18 October 1953.

206 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 28.

207 *Sunday Leaf*, 31 May 1953.

might herald a new stage in their story, so that she would be 'a guide and beacon to many others who ... will follow her footsteps'.²⁰⁸ This vocation was more than a personal commitment: Cecilia represented a category for the monastery. When the new Sr Gertrude (Marina Diez from Villasilos, one of the 12) wrote from the north to say one of the young women at Kalumburu was interested in joining, Abbot Catalan responded clinically that this was entirely possible 'now we have professed the native Farrell'.²⁰⁹

There is a gap in the monastic *Chronicle* at New Norcia in the early 1950s, including the date of Cecilia's first profession, but the record had resumed by Saturday 22 November 1958, when she made a permanent commitment to the community. The diarist, Fr Boniface Gómez, was at the celebration, of course, and his entry recording it brought together the complex realities of New Norcia in a few brief sentences. Beginning with the ecclesiastical specifics, he noted: 'Sr Cecilia makes her perpetual profession. Fr Abbot celebrates Mass at St Joseph's Orphanage. Fr Basil gave the sermon'.²¹⁰

The next detail located the new sister in her family of origin and offered an almost inadvertent glimpse of the impact of her choice and the interactions of the mission town: 'Her mother who is a daughter of Alec Narrier was present and Alec himself was seen coming out of the chapel with very red eyes. He told me he could not hold back his tears of emotion'.²¹¹ The diarist's hint at Cecilia's grandfather's feeling is evocative. It could have been mirrored any number of times in Catholic Australia as parents and grandparents left convent chapels moved with pride, thanksgiving and grief at a daughter's choice.

The *Chronicle* did not pursue the train of thought but shifted attention to the federal election on the same day: 'We all went to cast our votes in the Commonwealth elections'.²¹² 'All' in this case referred to the naturalised Australians in the Benedictine communities. The need to get to the polling booth did not distract 22-year-old Cecilia or her family or many of the other Aboriginal people at the service who had no voting

208 *Sunday Leaf*, 8 November 1953.

209 Anselm Catalan to Gertrude Diez, 5 December 1955, NNA 01457.

210 'Chronicle of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia' (hereafter *Chronicle*), 22 November 1958.

211 *Chronicle*, 22 November 1958.

212 *Chronicle*, 22 November 1958.

rights in federal elections until 1962.²¹³ Some Aboriginal families at New Norcia had ‘certificates of exemption’ under the state *Native Welfare Act 1954* to guarantee they were not associating with ‘tribal Aborigines’ and therefore had some voting rights, but many regarded the certificates as degrading and did not apply. On the one hand, they offended against family networks; on the other, they were an affront to people who did not categorise themselves as ‘native’ in the sense of the Act in the first place.

New Norcia’s *Chronicle* did not comment on the question of justice or the politics of the day but returned the focus to the sisters with further news from another Aboriginal family, also framed as a formal announcement: ‘On this day also the eldest daughter of Harrold [sic] Willaway, Marie, was admitted as a postulant’.²¹⁴ For Marie, this was not a ‘native’ story but a Catholic one. Named Marie Terese by her parents after the French Carmelite nun who had likewise insisted on joining the convent at a young age, Marie valued the precedent of child saints who had made heroic choices: ‘All along, I claimed all the young saints, St Agnes, all those young ones, like the Little Flower. It was like they were on the same path as I was, centuries before’.²¹⁵ She cast her choices in the narrative of the Catholic quest for holiness.

Marie Willaway became Sister Veronica Therese in a series of decisions that she traces to a defining story of her birth and a ‘path God led me on with the angels’.²¹⁶ More self-revealing than the accounts offered by the Spanish sisters, Veronica’s story traverses mysticism and the psychology of her earliest experiences to explain a conviction that her vocation emerged because ‘God had paved this and the angels had helped’.²¹⁷ The first round of discussion is light; her vocation was ‘out of the blue’.²¹⁸ But then the conversation deepens and goes back to the beginning.

213 The *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1962* extended voting rights to Aboriginal Australians in all federal elections; see also Australian Federal Election Speeches, Herbert Evatt, 1958, Museum of Australian Democracy, electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1958-herbert-evatt; accessed 19 March 2016. (After a citizenship ceremony on 30 May 1956 in which two members of the Calingari Road Board astonished each of the 14 who had arrived after the Second World War with an English New Testament and bouquet of flowers, all the Spanish sisters were now required to vote.)

214 *Chronicle*, 22 November 1958.

215 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

216 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 16 June 2013.

217 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 16 June 2013.

218 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 16 June 2013.

Veronica was her father Harold's first child with his second wife, Philomena Nettles. The labour at the notorious Moore River hospital was slow and long. The baby was in breech position. After 72 hours, Dr Miles, who attended from Moora, asked Harold to make a choice:

And so, the doctor ... said to my father, 'You're going to lose one of them. We can't save them both.' So my father had just lost his first wife, Peter's mother, so he wasn't about to lose his second wife, so he said, 'Well, maybe the baby. At least the baby will go to heaven.' So they left it at that.²¹⁹

Veronica pauses and takes a sip of water. Her own memory of what happened next is sure. It has crystallised over years of her own reflection, though she acknowledges, laughing, that 'somebody said it would be a good case for a psychologist'.²²⁰ The doctor left them. Though not yet born, Veronica remembers a defining experience of being abandoned by her mother. 'I can still see it in my own mind. ... I was just waiting for her to say goodbye to me. And nothing. She never said a word to me. ... [M]aybe she was praying, I don't know.'²²¹ The sequel takes the experience out of the earthly realm. Her mother's account of the dramatic resolution became the more public part of the family story. The baby was delivered with supernatural intervention:

She told me that three women she had never seen came inside the room, gently touched her on the belly, and she said I plopped out bottom first and made a mess of her. She said they came in, they touched me, I plopped down and they walked out and she's never seen them since. We presume they were angels. ... So, that was the birth.²²²

The miraculous survival of both mother and baby did not heal the rift between them.

The clearest consequence for Veronica was an anger she couldn't resolve, especially towards her mother: 'I couldn't get it out of my system. And so, you know she tried her best, but the damage was done, way back then'.²²³

219 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 20 June 2013.

220 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 20 June 2013.

221 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 20 June 2013.

222 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 20 June 2013.

223 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 20 June 2013.

In her own mind, she was convinced 'I was nobody's child'.²²⁴ She had nearly been consigned to heaven already, and God offered a welcome she felt she had been denied:

As I grew older, then I said to my little self, 'Well, if my mother doesn't care, nobody cares, at least God cares.' So that from that time I got detached, and I was kind of like only God's child, because you don't trust anybody else because they're not going to help you. So you trust God.²²⁵

It was that clarity that prompted Veronica to 'leave home' for St Joseph's as a five-year-old, and it sustained her decision to join the sisters.

Most of the sisters had joined the Benedictine community aged about 18, and several had been 15 or 16, so they recognised youthful idealism as an advantage. Veronica, however, was pushing the limits. Most records adjust her entry to 8 December 1958, the day before her fourteenth birthday, but she had been intent on the convent since she finished primary school at 12. Her mother saw the possibility that her bright first-born might go to high school, but Veronica resisted the idea of college:

So, I was ready, I had finished school when I was twelve and then my mother came and she said 'Do you want to go to St Gertrude's College?' But I was so anxious, and maybe because she said that I decided, 'No, I want to go to the convent.'²²⁶

The sisters hesitated but Veronica was 'stubborn enough' by her own account²²⁷ and, as others remember, 'would not leave'.²²⁸ There was always work for older girls to do at St Joseph's. Some correspondence lessons in English, human biology and business eventually overtook the anxiety-inducing prospect of St Gertrude's. Rose's memory of Veronica leaving in 'one-lap for the convent' fades beside the longer story of her persistence.

224 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 20 June 2013.

225 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 20 June 2013.

226 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 7 July 2012.

227 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 16 June 2013.

228 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.



Figure 9.8: The novices and postulants playing hockey at the back of St Joseph's—Imelda and Josephine in white veils, Veronica centre and Pius right, c. 1959. Fowl yard in the background.

Source: ABTM.

The community recognised her as an 'aspirant' on the understanding that she would be received as a postulant when she was older. Veronica's companions were two young women who had arrived from Spain in June 1958. Isolina Ruiz and Natividad Montero had met Sister Felicitas and Abbot Gregory in 1957 when they were in Spain promoting the work of New Norcia to potential recruits. The journey was prompted (at least in the opinion of the *Notebooks*) because 'there were no Australian entrants'.²²⁹ The two who came 'after a lot of waiting'²³⁰ were received as novices Sister Imelda and Sister Josephine on 14 February 1959. Veronica was judged still too young to take that step.

²²⁹ *Notebooks*, Madrid, 39.

²³⁰ *Notebooks*, Madrid, 39.



Figure 9.9: Sr Veronica Therese with her family on the day of her final profession, 12 March 1966; left to right: Rose, Philomena, Veronica, Peter, Harold, Gabriel and Isobel.

Source: Courtesy of Anne Moynihan and the Willaway family. Author's Collection.

Around the same time, Anne Moynihan from Perth began to visit the convent. Spurred on by a conversation with her brother Tom, a novice with the monks at the time, she came in her early twenties to see this group who seemed to fit her hopes so well: 'I always wanted to be a nun, I wanted to stay in Western Australia and I wanted to work with Aborigines. I did not want to be sent anywhere else'.²³¹ She got to know some of the Benedictine women who had better English, especially the lively teacher Marie-Therese, who often entertained the visitor in the parlour. Rather like Marie-Therese herself 10 years earlier, Anne decided to 'go for it'.²³² She took 12 months leave of absence from her job at the Department of

²³¹ Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

²³² Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

Social Services in June 1959 and was admitted as a postulant on 10 July.²³³ This time the community judged Veronica Willaway could also move to more formal status. The two were companions through the process of formation and Josephine Montero, herself only a new novice, took them under her wing in the ‘little Spain’²³⁴ that was the convent. With Imelda they were the new quartet, and then, from August 1960 when Imelda decided the life was not for her and moved to Perth, a firm trio. There was plenty to adjust to for each of them. At one level, Anne confronted more that was unfamiliar than Veronica: notices and timetables in Spanish, a diet rich in olive oil and routines of thrift that seemed absurd. Veronica had known all this from childhood. She had also already internalised the need to conform, even if she recognised hers was the deeper challenge, already familiar from mission life, of ‘turning white in order to blend in’.²³⁵ As they learnt to chant the psalms and set the altar, mend the sheets and starch the linen, to follow the routines in the hope of finding a role for the future, the three in the novitiate—Aboriginal, Australian and Spanish—seemed to Anne a microcosm of the mission itself.

Turning towards Spain

Among the professed sisters at the same time, momentum was growing away from New Norcia and towards Spain. There was anxiety that numbers were not increasing in Australia, and Felicitas began to act on the idea of setting up a permanent house in Spain to encourage vocations in their traditional stronghold. Able and experienced sisters were already spread thinly between the three Australian houses, so the first step was to withdraw from Bindoon. In November 1958 Felicitas wrote to Brother Quilligan hoping he could contact a community of European nuns she had heard about who were coming from China, ‘ready to accept any work offered to them’,²³⁶ as replacements for the Benedictine women. She assured him of her good intention and gratitude and that she needed to close the branch house to ‘solve a problem which no other way could be resolved’.²³⁷ There is no record of a reply. In a further letter on 15 June

233 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 39. See also ‘Profession of Sister Pius’, *Pax*, March 1965, 1.

234 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999.

235 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 16 June 2013.

236 Felicitas to Brother Quilligan, Bindoon, 10 November 1958, ABTM.

237 Felicitas to Brother Quilligan, Bindoon, 10 November 1958, ABTM.

1959 she apologised for 'so much trouble' and assured him of prayers that he would find 'other Sisters who will be as good or better than ours'.²³⁸ By this time the community's decision was imminent.

At an all-day meeting of the New Norcia and Bindoon communities on 26 July 1959 a majority supported a proposal to establish a 'junior house' in Spain for girls who wanted to explore a vocation to the Australian missions.²³⁹ Abbot Gregory was strongly encouraging of the proposal. He presented two possible locations supported by other Benedictine abbots: one near the Spanish capital and the other in Galicia.

The first option would have linked the sisters with the Benedictine monks of Cuelgamuros at the Nationalist war memorial to Franco's fighters at the Valley of the Fallen, 70 kilometres from Madrid. Discussion about entrusting the busy international guesthouse to New Norcia's sisters stalled.²⁴⁰ Felicitas wrote to Abbot Justo Pérez in October 1959 asking six practical questions. Her concerns ranged from what the duties would be and whether there would be time for prayer to how many sisters would be needed and whether compensation of £100 each would be reasonable.²⁴¹ Felicitas raised doubts about how much contact the sisters and the juniors should have with 'secular persons', through accompanying visitors or serving in the refectory, for example. On reflection, the intensity of that work also seemed to the monks in charge an unlikely fit for New Norcia's house of formation. According to Teresa, Abbot Pérez intended to offer the community other work, but 'before he came to a decision they went to Samos'.²⁴²

Samos was a village in the mountainous east of Galicia remote from everything except a community of Benedictine monks who needed help with their laundry. Surely in a failure of imagination, by June 1960 Felicitas was writing to the bishop of Lugo asking his permission to accept an offer of 'work and economic means of subsistence' in his diocese. She said the foundation was intended for 'the great glory of God and to the benefit of young women endowed with a religious vocation who wish to join our Congregation'.²⁴³ Benita and Gema left Australia on 28 June

238 Felicitas to Brother Quilligan, Bindoon, 15 June 1959, ABTM.

239 *Notebooks*, Madrid.

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

241 Felicitas to Abbot Justo Pérez, Madrid, 22 October 1959, ABTM.

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

243 Felicitas to Dr D. Rafael Balzoa, Lugo, Spain, 23 June 1960, ABTM.

1960, five days after the letter to the bishop to establish the community in Galicia. 'I am not sure what I would have done if I had been making the decision,' Teresa González observes, 'but I do not think I would have gone to Samos to live in a farmhouse in the country away from everybody'.²⁴⁴ The choice suggested not so much the hope of meeting aspiring members as a readiness to continue domestic work. It was also a reorientation towards ministry in the Spanish context and financial independence. Significantly, this work and later arrangements with the St John of God Brothers in Zaragoza and Madrid would attract an independent stipend for the Benedictine women.

²⁴⁴ Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 25 May 1999.

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.2020.09