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Spinning Apart

The 1959 decision to establish a house of formation in Spain was a turning point, although the Benedictine sisters did not realise it at the time. The immediate aim was to resource the Australian mission more reliably than visits to the villages around Burgos ever had. This hope went unfulfilled, but there were other consequences of the move. Being Spanish, missionary as well as monastic, and women rather than monks at New Norcia had always presented challenges. Gradually these realities reoriented the group away from Western Australia. Paradoxically, as the Second Vatican Council encouraged religious communities to remember their foundational goals, the touchstones of identity that had defined the sisters' presence in the mission town evolved through the 1960s and 1970s to become the reasons for their leaving. Being Spanish gradually superseded the claims of new missionary work and the community's significance in the monastic town. Through these decades there was still energy invested at St Joseph's and at Kalumburu, particularly in the innovative childcare centre at Girrawheen in Perth, but, subtly, the foundations at Samos, then Zaragoza, then Barcelona and Madrid began to define the future.

This chapter traces the commitment to the new initiatives in Spain and Australia and changes at New Norcia as new funding models opened choices for Aboriginal people. No less than other stages in their history, this last chapter of the Benedictine sisters' story in Australia was marked by contrast. An ambitious effort to step away from New Norcia coincided with a corrosive loss of confidence among the Spanish women about the viability of their community in Australia. Just as the new venture seemed to be flourishing, they made the decision to leave.

New foundations in Spain

In Spain at first, the work of formation for new members was itself relegated to the background as the sisters struggled to find a base for their ministry of household work, first in Samos and then in Zaragoza through the 1960s. Benita and Gema were dismayed that the promised convent in Samos was delayed and delayed again. They spent three months with Benedictine nuns in Madrid before they took up residence in a country farmhouse in the Galician village of Villadetres. Nevertheless, they were joined by Hildegard and Francisca in January 1961, and when the convent was finally finished in August the community included two potential new members. Benita returned to Australia in the same year, replaced by Francisca as superior so that by March 1962, when Teresa and Matilda arrived to work with the aspirants, there were five experienced sisters in the new Spanish base. Less than two years into the arrangement, however, there was an opportunity to do similar domestic work in Zaragoza for a more generous stipend in more suitable accommodation with the St John of God Brothers, so the community divided. The work with newcomers was moved to the larger town, a centre of pilgrimage in the northeast.

In Zaragoza, the house of formation became a community of nine at the end of 1963, when Angelina arrived as superior to join Teresa, Matilda, Hildegard and, after a regular turnover of hopefuls, five aspirants. Financial negotiations with the brothers continued until 6 July, when an agreement was reached that would enable the congregation to save enough to build a convent in the future.¹ We can imagine those conversations with the meticulous Angelina, holding the line on remuneration, urged on by Teresa, and both encouraged by the new mother general at New Norcia, Magdalena Ruiz de la Barga, and her councillors, Mary Ciudad and Felicitas Pampliega. A year later Francisca and Gema, who had remained behind in Samos, closed the house there, the *Notebooks* record, as conditions were still not what had been guaranteed. They joined the others in Zaragoza, where the community considered itself happy, both well-provided for and appreciated by their employers.²

1 'Origen de la Congregacion de las Hermanas Benedictinas Misioneras de New Norcia, Western Australia', unpublished typescript from the notebooks of Sister Felicitas Pampliega c.1921–c. 1967, transcribed and edited by Sister Teresa González, Madrid c. 1980 (*Notebooks*, Madrid), 36.

2 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 36.

The good working arrangement with the St John of God Brothers expanded further in 1964 when the Benedictine sisters moved to Carabanchel on the outskirts of Madrid to take up roles within St Joseph's Refuge. This institute to care for epileptic boys had been built in extensive gardens by the Marqués of Vallejo at the turn of the twentieth century as the first of its kind in Spain and had been run by the community of nursing brothers from the outset.³ In March 1961 they expanded to register a school for children and adolescents who needed help with 'social integration'.⁴ Their invitation in July 1964 to the Benedictine sisters to assist them could have included some work in the school, but the vanguard community in Madrid of Francisca, Gema and four of the aspirants was probably focused on domestic work and initially provided a solution to overcrowding in Zaragoza as the number of hopeful candidates increased there. According to the *Notebooks*, it was only a few days before a similar increase in Madrid, with 16 aspirants by September 1964, when Teresa was transferred to Carabanchel to assist with the program.⁵ Lucia also arrived in Zaragoza from New Norcia to help Hildegard run the kitchen there.

It seemed the sisters had been right to expect that there would be vocations for the community in Spain. Just a few months after Josephine Montero made her final profession at New Norcia on 12 March 1964, Ana Maria Lopez was received as a novice in Zaragoza on the feast of St Benedict in July. The *Notebooks* note the moving ceremony as she became the first to take the habit for the community in Spain. Three other aspirants were also received as postulants that day. As the community grew, the mood was buoyant. Even when Hildegard died in 1966, unexpectedly young at 57 years old, a photograph of half a dozen new members clustered around the headstone of the Drysdale River pioneer comforted her niece Visitación in the Kimberley, suggesting the future of the work was secure.

When the promising new candidates asked Teresa how they would manage in Australia if they did not speak English, however, she could not give them an answer that made sense to them or to her. Language study was expensive and rare in Franco's Spain, and even today only 12 per cent

3 Francisco Javier Faucha Perez and Jesus Fernandez Sanz, 'La Fundacion Instituto San José de Carabanchel Alto', *Madrid Historico* (2011): 73–80.

4 'Asilo de San José', Karabanchel.com: Una Pagina de Nuestro Barrio, karabanchel.com/asilo-de-san-jose-2/; accessed 2 January 2017.

5 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 37.

of Spaniards have a working knowledge of English.⁶ Given the choice between Spain and a context where they could not speak, Teresa knew as well as they did that learning English haphazardly was a shaky foundation for ministry. In the end, out of more than 20 hopefuls, only Ana Maria remained to make a permanent commitment to the community.

In Teresa's mind domestic work for another community had always been a trap and a distraction from more significant work with people. She advocated for new initiatives in childcare that would link the foundations in Spain and Australia. In January 1970, looking to balance the history of the congregation with opportunities for the new members, they scaled back Zaragoza to open a kindergarten and weekly boarding house for children of working parents on the outskirts of Barcelona. Josephine Montero had completed her nursing training in Perth and come to Spain in 1969 to begin this work; financial support flowed from Kalumburu where Florentina was being paid by the Commonwealth Government as the nursing sister at the clinic. It was hard work, as usual. Some children were very young indeed, and the old house in Rasabada Road outside Barcelona's centre needed repairs, but they attracted a full complement of 34 by January 1971. Mary wrote enthusiastically to General Franco as head of state as well as to Propaganda Fide in Rome to seek financial support.⁷ Discussions about a daycare centre were also well-advanced in Perth by the end of 1970, with funding already in place from state and church authorities,⁸ and in April 1973 support from local benefactors made the land available at Parla on the outskirts of Madrid to establish a similar kindergarten, open only during the working day. Barcelona remained a boarding facility and was 'a difficult job for older people, as are the Sisters there', and 'even worse for young people with no training'.⁹ Nevertheless, a promising cohort of eight or more newcomers remained, mostly connected to the community in Madrid.

6 European Union Directorate General for Education and Culture, *Europeans and Their Languages*, Special Eurobarometer 386 (Brussels: European Commission, June 2012), 29, ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf; accessed 3 January 2017.

7 Mary Cidat to His Excellency, General Franco, 12 January 1971, Archives of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tutzing (ABTM).

8 Mary Cidat to Angelina Cerezo, 14 November 1970, ABTM.

9 Fr José Luis Cortega, OSB, to Mary Cidat, 1 June 1972, trans. Kerry Mullan, ABTM.



Figure 10.1: Young members from the Spanish house of formation in the late 1960s at Hildegard's tombstone in Zaragoza.

Source: ABTM.



Figure 10.2: Natividad Montero makes her profession as Sister Josephine, March 1964 at New Norcia. Students from St Gertrude's College and one of their teachers to her left, Felicitas, Veronica and Antonia to her right.

Source: ABTM.

When Mary Ciudad was elected superior in October 1970, the new mother general wrote to the houses in Spain with a clear sense of urgency to clarify organisation and focus. Mary had plans to consolidate the novitiate in either Madrid or Barcelona (or even a proposed new location at the historic town of Castrojerez in Burgos),¹⁰ whichever place that 'most guarantees the best offering of good formation and education for the young ones ... as within a few years they will have to keep our Congregation afloat'.¹¹ She presented Girrawheen to the Spanish houses as an agreed new focus for ministry in Australia and similarly sought a single focus in Spain, instructing that 'everyone, even the Novices, must give me their opinion, which kind of apostolate interests you',¹² and urging Angelina and Matilda as local superiors to keep all the newcomers informed 'to give them courage and confidence'. Time might be short and her term was limited: 'pray often to our Lord to give me health; it is my wish to do all this in these three years'.¹³ Above all, a common purpose was fundamental to her hopes: 'try to be united, otherwise you will ruin everything and I won't be able to do anything'.¹⁴ She was writing not only to the sisters who had been her novices in the 1940s and 1950s at New Norcia but also to the new members born in the years since they had left for Australia.

Life at New Norcia had not prepared the sisters for a cross-generational community in urban Spain. The average age of the community had risen to 52, with most members in their forties. One of the monks from Cuelgamuros outside Madrid wrote to Mary in May 1972 with frank advice: she needed to announce plans for the six young sisters in temporary vows in Carabanchel, or they would leave. He assumed these young women recruited in Spain were the future of the community and urged Mary to give them full responsibility especially in the work among other newcomers. It was clear to him 'that the young people have no confidence in the older Sisters'.¹⁵ Along with the simple fact of an age difference, he named the chief barrier to understanding as the pattern of life learnt at the mission:

10 Mary Ciudad to Angelina Cerezo, 14 November 1970, trans. Kerry Mullan, ABTM.

11 Mary Ciudad to Angelina Cerezo, 14 November 1970.

12 Mary Ciudad to Matilda Arroyo, 14 November 1970, ABTM.

13 Mary Ciudad to Matilda Arroyo, 14 November 1970.

14 Mary Ciudad to Matilda Arroyo, 14 November 1970.

15 Fr José Luis Cortega to Mary Ciudad, 1 June 1972, ABTM.

[M]ost of [the New Norcia sisters] are already quite old, they were trained in a different environment from the one in which they live today. They lived almost like cloistered nuns and the impact from the outside has turned out to be very hard for them. We must give way to youth, give them a sense of responsibility.¹⁶

The ‘good, very hardworking Sisters’ had no aptitude for work with young people, ‘especially in these times’. The exception was Teresa González, who could still ‘kill the most robust person and tire out the most dynamic’. He warned that she had too much to do ‘everyday and at all hours’ so that she was becoming bitter even while she remained ‘a great merit in the house and in the young ones’ training’.¹⁷ He proposed that she should share the role in formation with one of the Spanish recruits whom he felt the group also trusted. He argued strongly against closing the house at Carabanchel in Madrid.

Mary took at least some of this advice and did not close Carabanchel. She asked the community in Barcelona for their thoughts about moving the novitiate (which had been formally transferred from New Norcia to Barcelona the year before) to Madrid.¹⁸ The community there had already welcomed the proposal. She referred them to St Benedict’s understanding of authority: ‘As you will understand, I have to listen to everyone, but listening is one thing and deciding is another’,¹⁹ and updated them on administrative arrangements. Two final matters—questions about their dress and their pattern of prayer—gave an indication of the context of change this community shared with other communities of vowed women after the Second Vatican Council.

The details of daily life were in flux. Mary sent instructions about the habit: postulants were to wear their own clothes; for novices, she was sending a new pattern with Florentina, who was transferring from Kalumburu to Barcelona, asking that Josephine might bring a spare white veil in the new design with her when she, in turn, travelled back to take up the duties in the clinic in the Kimberley ‘in case someone enters here’.²⁰ It was still a possibility. Then, concerned about the format of prayers the community should follow, she reported that the Benedictine abbots would meet in 1973 to make a decision on the best of three new breviaries:

16 Fr José Luis Cortega to Mary Cidat, 1 June 1972.

17 Fr José Luis Cortega to Mary Cidat, 1 June 1972.

18 Mary Cidat to Matilda Arroyo and Community, 24 June 1972, trans. Kerry Mullan, ABTM.

19 Mary Cidat to Matilda Arroyo and Community, 24 June 1972.

20 Mary Cidat to Matilda Arroyo and Community, 24 June 1972.

I asked if this will affect us and I have been told it will ... For the moment it is more practical to wait, there is no point wasting money now, only to have to change it [the prayer book] again in 2 years time; it won't take that long to translate it.²¹

It would be the same format for the whole community, in Spanish and in English, she observed, 'and that's ideal', but in the meantime they should make do. While bold about change in local matters, Mary consistently advocated caution in relation to the Council:

I understand that many Nuns went further than the Council wanted and one also hears the nuns making many critical remarks; they say that [ordinary] people instead of admiring them [are] doing the opposite, and they do not get the respect they used to. Therefore let us learn this for ourselves, and let us be among the more careful ones.²²

An unruly ferment of renewal held no attraction for Mary.

There had been few precursors to Vatican II at New Norcia.²³ The rigid collar introduced to the habit in the early 1950s was a symbol of their interaction with the modern world. Ungainly and hot but made of up-to-the-minute plastic, the great advantage of the innovation was supposed to be that it was easy to clean. Most sisters actually found it unhygienic and impractical.²⁴ At Kalumburu they wore it for photos and special occasions.

It was replaced with a rolled collar of normal fabric in 1962 in a secret ballot on modifying the habit, to the great rejoicing of the *Notebooks*.²⁵ That the community persisted with 'the bib' for close to a decade says something, perhaps about a lack of capacity to evaluate change.

The need to adapt sensibly was part of the advice given to the fourth Congress of Religious Sisters that gathered 200 representatives from Australia and New Zealand at the Loreto Convent in Claremont in January 1965.²⁶ The Benedictine Missionary Sisters were among the 50 groups

21 Mary Ciudad to Matilda Arroyo and Community, 24 June 1972.

22 Mary Ciudad to Matilda Arroyo, 25 June 1971, trans. Kerry Mullan, ABTM.

23 David Barry, 'New Norcia', in *Historical Encyclopedia of Western Australia*, ed. Jenny Gregory and Jan Gothard (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2009), 629–30; John H. Smith, ed., *The Story of New Norcia. The Western Australian Benedictine Mission* (New Norcia, WA: Benedictine Community of New Norcia, 2015), 32.

24 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 13 February 1962.

25 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 13 February 1962.

26 *Record*, 28 January 1965, 10.

represented, and it would have been Magdalena with Felicitas and Mary who heard the Apostolic Delegate, Fr Domenico Enrici, remind the women of the power of unity. Sharing ‘the same love for Christ and His Church, and the same resolve to work for the salvation of the world’, they were to be ‘an army, compact and invincible fighting the good battle’ and ‘a family, united together by the sweet bonds of charity’.²⁷ Both metaphors suited the sensibilities of the Spanish Benedictines.

While the conference was underway, the Benedictine delegates returned to New Norcia to celebrate the final profession of Pius Moynihan with liturgical reforms made possible by the Council. On 21 January 1965 Sr Pius vowed a permanent commitment to the Benedictine life, and then, with Abbot Gregory presiding, she became the first woman in Catholic Australia to receive not only bread but also wine at the Eucharist. The Council’s decree on the liturgy had been promulgated on 4 December 1963, but according to the *Record*, this was the first occasion ‘that we know of in Australia’²⁸ to draw on its provisions to make the cup available to others, not only the priest.²⁹ The following March, when Veronica Therese had turned 21 and was also able to make a life commitment, she also received both bread and wine, and the *Record* remarked on it again: ‘The returning to the spirit and practice of the Last Supper by the use of this rite is highly recommended by the Council Fathers’.³⁰ Innovation in the interests of tradition was a thoroughly Benedictine trait.

In keeping with the Roman directive to all religious communities following the Council, the Benedictine sisters had held a general chapter to consider their constitutions in July 1969. These were provisionally approved in 1970, but in July 1971 Mary took advantage of the formal visit to New Norcia of the abbot president and former abbot of Montserrat, Gabriel Brasó, to ask him to bring them further into line with the Council. Abbot Brasó’s visit coincided with the resignation of Gregory Gomez as abbot of New Norcia and his replacement by the first Australian to hold the post: Fr Bernard Rooney. The change in leadership increased Mary Ciudad’s reliance on the Spanish-speaking Abbot Brasó for administrative advice. Although he occasionally referred her back to the more than

27 *Record*, 21 January 1965, 1.

28 *Record*, 11 February 1965, 5.

29 Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963, para. 55, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacro_sanctum-concilium_en.html; accessed 9 January 2017.

30 *Record*, 24 March 1966, 12.

competent canon lawyers at New Norcia, Brasó became an important link to the Spanish church. Mary confided that ‘as I don’t know who else to turn to, naturally I am turning to Your reverence as our protector’.³¹ It was a significant shift in the relationships between the Benedictine communities in the mission town.

Considering the constitution, the abbot president made a number of suggestions in person and in the correspondence that followed through 1972 to make the document ‘more rounded and richer in doctrine’.³² Then in some confusion about the drafts, apparently triggered by a letter from Mary, the Congregation for Religious suspended work on the new statements from New Norcia until January 1973,³³ and a process of revision continued until after July 1977.³⁴ If they stopped to think about it, New Norcia’s sisters had been waiting carefully for similar determinations about their constitutions for most of their history.

Defining the New Norcia charism—again?

When Felicitas had adapted the constitutions from Maredsous to her own community in the 1930s, she had added local references while keeping the European model intact. Like the skilled seamstress she was, she made thoughtful adjustments to a trusted pattern rather than design from scratch. Both the Belgian and Australian groups aimed for ‘the sanctification of their members’, and their main work was with children in need. Felicitas broadened the scope (and reflected the reality at New Norcia), noting that commitment did not exclude ‘other benevolent work such as working in the Missions, serving in hospitals or providing domestic service to another religious Community’.³⁵ She added Joseph to the patrons they shared with Belgium—Benedict and Scholastica—and retained the claim to ‘protection’ under ‘the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary’, although that more typically French and Irish devotion did

31 Mary Ciudad to Gabriel Brasó, 6 January 1973, ABTM.

32 For example, Gabriel Brasó to Mary Ciudad, 15 December 1973, ABTM.

33 Gabriel Brasó to Mary Ciudad, 23 January 1973, ABTM.

34 Teresa González, ‘Summary of the Meeting and Notice to the Communities in Madrid and Barcelona’, 7 July 1977, ABTM.

35 *Constituciones de la Congregación de Religiosas Oblatas Regulares Benedictinas de Nueva Nursia*, handwritten copy, n.d.. Madrid, I (2), ABTM; *Constitutions de las Congrégation des Soeurs de la Misericorde des Sacrés Coeurs de Jésus et de Marie d’Héverlé Oblates Régulières de Saint Benoît*, printed copy, n.d., Madrid, I (2), ABTM.

not feature strongly in the Spanish heritage of New Norcia.³⁶ Similarly, the maternal image of the convent itself remained: the 'mother-house' at New Norcia was a spiritual 'cradle' and a gathering place that nurtured a 'faithful image' of the 'religious family' in its other houses.³⁷ Both groups were 'not strictly cloistered because of their mission',³⁸ and it was also specified that there was no distinction into classes of sisters as 'Choir' or 'Lay'; instead, all members had 'equal rights'.³⁹

There was one remarkable difference from the European model as finally approved by Abbot Gomez in 1954: these Benedictines made five vows. This provision was in neither the Belgian original nor Felicitas's handwritten translation, but appeared in the later typescript. At their first profession the New Norcia sisters committed themselves to poverty, chastity and obedience. These were the vows made at first temporarily and then for life by the Belgian sisters and by other 'active' religious congregations. In the handwritten version of the New Norcia constitutions, these three vows were sufficient to frame the life commitment of the Benedictine community.⁴⁰ The later, typed copy specified 'additionally' that when the Benedictine Missionary Sisters at New Norcia made their perpetual profession they added the two Benedictine promises of 'Stability in the Congregation' and 'Conversion of Customs and Habits'.⁴¹ Felicitas had written originally for the 1936 community who were already oblates and had probably taken these Benedictine attributes for granted in the first draft. The tangle points to the community's hybrid identity, but if the addition came later maybe Abbot Catalan had been waiting for some particular Benedictine statement of identity, never dreaming it could be added to the 'simple vows' of the active sisters. In summary, this was a group in the Benedictine tradition dedicated to the missionary work supported by New Norcia and other wider apostolates that seemed appropriate. Significantly, the constitutions did not specify their connection with Aboriginal children and families.

36 *Constituciones ... Nueva Nursia*, I (4); *Constitutions ... Héverlé*, I (4).

37 *Constituciones ... Nueva Nursia*, I (6); *Constitutions ... Héverlé*, I (6).

38 *Constituciones ... Nueva Nursia*, I (4); *Constitutions ... Héverlé*, I (4).

39 *Constituciones ... Nueva Nursia*, I (7); *Constitutions ... Héverlé*, I (7).

40 *Constituciones de la Congregación de Religiosas Oblatas Regulares Benedictinas de Nueva Nursia*, handwritten copy, n.d., ABTM.

41 *Constituciones de la Congregación de Religiosas Benedictinas Misioneras de Nueva Nursia*, typewritten copy, 1962, of the version approved in 1954, ABTM.

The status of the community had haunted Felicitas through her long tenure in authority: first, as the novice mistress training the community for public vows from 1936; then, as the prioress appointed by Abbot Catalan in 1942 and 1945; and, finally, as the elected superior for 12 years from 1949. She had been succeeded in 1961 by her trusted adviser, Magdalena Ruiz. Wise and astute, ‘with the milk of human kindness’,⁴² Magdalena had always shied away from formal roles because she felt her lack of English, but she was trusted and respected by both monks and sisters at New Norcia and at Kalumburu,⁴³ and now she successfully managed the new foundations in Spain. Then, in a push to see the next generation of leaders, Angelina Cerezo was elected in 1967. The transition to the younger sisters proved too sudden, however, and to resolve tensions Felicitas became local superior at New Norcia again in 1968. Following the general chapter for the renewal of the constitutions in 1969 (resulting in the draft that would be referred to Gabriel Brasó), Mary Cid was elected superior in October 1970 for three years. Mary’s ambition for clarity and order was linked to the long history of awkwardness about the status of the community. As events played out, independence from the monks and payment for the work of the sisters came to be crucial in her eyes. In Australia that quest for financial autonomy emerged alongside increased access to funds for Aboriginal people.

Money and authority to choose

Through the middle years of the twentieth century, Aboriginal Australians were gradually able to access social welfare payments available to other Australians, beginning with child endowment allowances in 1944 through to the old-age pension and other substantial benefits in 1959, including for people on reserves or at missions, and finally also including those classified as ‘primitive and nomadic’ in 1966.⁴⁴ Frequently, however, and especially in remote areas, payments were made to a third party—such as a mission or an employer—that was legally entitled to control the funds on behalf of individuals and to pass on only what was deemed appropriate and necessary. This was very much the arrangement in place at Kalumburu

42 Veronica Willaway, Interview, Nebraska, 13 June 2013.

43 Fr Seraphim Sanz, personal communication, October 2002.

44 J. C. Altman and W. Sanders, ‘From Exclusion to Dependence: Aborigines and the Welfare State in Australia’, in *Social Welfare with Indigenous Peoples*, ed. John Dixon and Robert P. Sheurell (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 209.

and, to a lesser extent, at New Norcia. Total Commonwealth expenditure on Aboriginal welfare almost tripled between 1969 and 1971, more than doubled again in 1972 and 1973, and continued to rise under both Labor and Liberal federal ministers. In 1974 and 1975 the Commonwealth allocated \$186.1 million, more than 10 times the amount in real terms that had been allocated in 1969.⁴⁵

In 1962 the Benedictine Missionary Sisters became an incorporated body under that more streamlined name and in their own right, rather than as a dimension of the monastery. They opened their first bank account and, through Br Anthony McAlinden, a young Australian monk in charge at St Mary's, they were able to charge purchases independently at Ahern's, the Catholic department store in Perth.⁴⁶ Previously, all provisions had come via the monks, with the exception of what could be purchased with proceeds of the annual embroidery sale and the income from eggs and poultry sold to the New Norcia hotel. ('This is because you cannot ask monks to buy the underwear', Scholastica Carrillo observed.⁴⁷) Salaries began to flow to the mission at Kalumburu for the work of Araceli, Florentina and Josephine, all trained nurses who were responsible in turn for the health clinic in the 1960s and 1970s, and also for the work of Visitación teaching sewing.

After strenuous negotiation in exclamatory Spanish, the superintendent at Kalumburu, Fr Seraphim Sanz, agreed to a portion of this income being transferred to the Benedictine sisters, with other funds held against the in-kind support of the community. By 1974 this annual payment was \$1,000 for each of the sisters at Kalumburu.⁴⁸ (At the time, the average annual wage for a woman working full time in Western Australia was around \$3,700, and the minimum award was \$3,010.80,⁴⁹ but as Seraphim put it to Mary: 'How many lay men or women save \$1000 [net per annum]? There are many lay missionaries who work for much less

45 'Table 1, Identifiable Commonwealth Expenditure on Indigenous Affairs, 1968–1969 to 2009–2010', in John Gardiner-Gaden and Joanne Simon-Davies, *Commonwealth Indigenous-Specific Expenditure 1968–2012* (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, 2012), www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/IndigenousExpend#Table1; accessed 9 January 2017.

46 Anthony McAlinden, Interview, New Norcia, 2002.

47 Scholastica Carrillo, Interview, Kalumburu, April 1999.

48 Seraphim Sanz to Mary Ciudad, 10 January 1974, trans. Kerry Mullan, ABTM.

49 *Western Australian Year Book 1975* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics), 501, 503, www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/1300.51975?OpenDocument; accessed 10 January 2017.

that this!!!'⁵⁰ He drew no comparison with the Aboriginal workers who, like the Benedictine women, were still paid mostly in kind.) Additionally, when the Marist Brothers withdrew from the boys' college at New Norcia at the end of 1964 and the Benedictine monks took on responsibility for that school, renaming it St Benedict's, they turned to the Benedictine sisters to take over the kitchen. If Abbot Catalan had occasionally expected the Marists to manage with school fees paid in bags of wheat, there was now a more generous cash economy. The school fees supported payment for the cooks within the community. Later, there was also state sponsorship of adult education classes at New Norcia. Together, these funds made it possible for the Benedictine Missionary Sisters to buy a modest house at 55 View Street, North Perth, for £4,750 in 1965 (or roughly \$9,500 in the decimal currency introduced the following year).⁵¹ It was an important step to have a base that was separate from the monastery's own house in Perth and, financially, View Street was a foundation for other ventures.



Figure 10.3: Scholastica, Florentina and Visitación, and Kalumburu's cat, with chorizo made from the local wild boar that fed on the monastery's figs.

Source: ABTM.

50 Seraphim Sanz to Mary Ciudad, 10 January 1974, ABTM.

51 *Notebooks*, Madrid, 27 April 1965.

As predictable cash flow increased, both the mission and Aboriginal families could make different decisions. Families were able to support and educate their children in Perth and elsewhere, and numbers fell at St Joseph's from 120 in 1959 to 24 in 1973.⁵² The relative proportion of children placed by state authorities rather than by families also increased at St Joseph's as a result, reaching 58 per cent in the final year.⁵³ As funding became available for direct payment of fees and uniforms, other schools also increasingly enrolled Aboriginal students. For example, in an arrangement Pius Moynihan forged with St Gertrude's, it became the norm for older girls at St Joseph's to go on to high school as full-time boarders there. The connection with the college closed the gap that had opened up after the departure of the Teresians, but it did not escape the attention of the Benedictine sisters that the St Joseph's girls fared much better when there were teachers in charge who had enough history in the town to relate to them well:

Sister Gregory [Leonie Maine] and Sister Georgina [West] were both very good to our girls when they eventually went to St Gertrude's. They made them feel welcome ... keeping an eye on them and telling them off when they needed to be pulled into line with certain things. It was interesting when those two sisters left the next year, [two others] had no idea how to handle the girls so they were all expelled. I was wild about it.⁵⁴

Later years were calmer, and when the Girrawheen community opened, at least one of the girls boarding at St Gertrude's caught the bus to Perth to stay with Pius and the community 'as the colleges are having a long-week-end'.⁵⁵ Such a visit fitted with the shift the Australian sisters hoped to see: away from the large institution of St Joseph's and towards group homes, to be run by Aboriginal families but with the sisters and monks involved. The question of how such a change in structure could be made to fit with the Benedictine pattern of religious life remained unresolved and troubled the older Spanish sisters.

52 See Appendix 1.

53 Report of Trevor Ewers, District Officer Moora, to the Director, 31 May 1973, 'Native Education – Reports from Officers of Native Welfare Department', State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA) S24 cons1497 1951/0953.

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

55 'Chronicle of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters, Girrawheen' (*Girrawheen Chronicle*), 4 July 1974, NNA 05505. Photographs of the Girrawheen community and a visiting child, and others from this period at New Norcia showing small groups of Benedictine sisters with the girls at a birthday party are with the Storylines project at the State Library of Western Australia.

There was no divide about initiatives in 'Adult Native Education'. The Benedictine sisters across the board strongly supported classes, from direct involvement as teachers to encouraging men and women from the town to participate, providing refreshments and offering other behind-the-scenes support. These classes were sponsored by the state government, first to provide information about voting rights and the repeal of discriminatory restrictions under the *Native Welfare Act 1963*,⁵⁶ and then expanded to include courses in personal development.⁵⁷ New Norcia's involvement began when Sister Michael saw an invitation in the paper; it grew in conversation with Brother Anthony McAlinden and the two took their interest to the Education Department. By 1970 there were nine classes running at New Norcia, including Community Obligations, Personal Grooming, Mothercraft, Home Renovation and Maintenance, and Dressmaking.

The program became a landmark success based on collaboration between the sisters, the monastery, the Aboriginal people and the government. Initially, the idea had been to base the work at the convent, but 'then it became quite evident that really the nuns couldn't carry it because they didn't have the connections ... [T]hey never went out'.⁵⁸ Instead St Joseph's became the nucleus for sewing and dressmaking classes, and Brother Anthony coordinated a wider overall program resourced by schoolteachers and other skilled locals.

One of those involved as a teacher was Philomena Drayton, one of the St Joseph's girls. Early in 1965 she had joined the sisters as a postulant but returned to her family after two months and was still living in town. Well trained by Felicitas, she was an excellent seamstress and ideal to have involved: 'we set her up because she could do some teaching up there too'.⁵⁹ Communication with the department ensured funding flowed smoothly for the coordinator and the teachers and the equipment, and New Norcia's people were keen participants:

56 *My Voice for My Country: Changing Images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voter Participation* [online exhibition], AIATSIS, 'A Growing Demographic', aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/my-voice-my-country; accessed 11 January 2017.

57 *My Voice for My Country*.

58 Anthony McAlinden, Interview, New Norcia, 2002.

59 Anthony McAlinden, Interview, New Norcia, 2002.

I used to get the government department man [Peter Cuffley] to come up here; he was thrilled to come. [H]e told us at one stage that we were the biggest operation in the State. And we had all these classes going. The same people going to different classes, and then we'd bring people in from round about ... [I]t was great.⁶⁰

A dinner dance in August 1970, initially suggested by the Community Obligations group to mark Abbot Gregory's fiftieth jubilee, became a celebration of the program itself.

The Minister for Native Welfare in the Brand Liberal Government, Edgar Lewis, was also the local member for Moore and a regular at sports days and other events. He sent 'warm thanks for the interest taken over so many years by the Benedictine Community and the Sisters of New Norcia' and particularly the 'encouragement towards social assimilation'.⁶¹ He forwarded the glowing reports of the event sent by Peter Cuffley and Mrs Michael Beaton of Native Welfare at Moora. Funded by sales of refurbished washing machines and toffee apples, between 50 and 60 Aboriginal guests gathered at New Norcia's hotel.⁶² For Aboriginal people to join the abbot for sherry in the hotel that had excluded them was in keeping with the repeal of legal restrictions on drinking⁶³ and a significant shift. The formal dinner with matching wines, coffee and speeches was followed by a dance that included all age groups in the St Joseph's hall.⁶⁴ The Megatonnes, a local group led by Meg and Tony Phelan, provided the music: from 'old-time ballroom to modern popular dances'.⁶⁵ Overall, it was 'the conduct and appearance of the people present, the children's behaviour, and the evidence of organisation displayed'⁶⁶ that Cuffley underlined. The positive atmosphere of 'fellowship plus good organisation' among the 'well-dressed and socially mature community' also impressed Beaton.⁶⁷

60 Anthony McAlinden, Interview, New Norcia, 2002.

61 Minister Lewis to Gomez, 8 October 1970, NNA 05100.

62 Adult Native Education, Visit to New Norcia by P. J. Cuffley on 22 August 1970, forwarded to Abbot Gregory by Edgar Lewis, Minister for Native Welfare, 8 October 1970, NNA 05100.

63 Lyn Furnell, *Report of the Royal Commission upon All Matters Affecting the Wellbeing of Persons of Aboriginal Descent in Western Australia*, 26, cited in Kayla Calladine, 'Liquor Restrictions in Western Australia', *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 15 (2009), www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/IndigLawB/2009/15.html; accessed 13 January 2017.

64 Adult Native Education, Visit to New Norcia by P. J. Cuffley on 22 August 1970, forwarded to Abbot Gregory by Edgar Lewis, Minister for Native Welfare, 8 October 1970, NNA 05100.

65 Cuffley, 22 August 1970; Anthony McAlinden, Interview, New Norcia, 2002.

66 Cuffley, 22 August 1970. Photographs of young women and girls at a 1970s dance and of action on the dance floor are with the Storylines project at the State Library of Western Australia.

67 Mrs Michael Beaton, District Officer Moora to Superintendent of Native Welfare, 27 August 1970, forwarded to Abbot Gregory by Edgar Lewis, Minister for Native Welfare, 8 October 1970, NNA 05100.



Figure 10.4: Speeches during an annual dinner at the New Norcia hotel to celebrate the adult education classes, 1970s. Mr Peter Cuffley standing, Abbot Gregory Gomez and Br Anthony McAlinden to his right.

Source: Courtesy of Tony McAlinden. Author's collection.

The sisters were not especially surprised at any of this. The relationships across the groups were strong; they knew the women could sew and dress well and that, as Br Anthony recalls, 'they always come up to the mark, never miss'.⁶⁸ The ball became an annual event. The sisters were always there, in the thick of the preparation for supper, served with panache by the St Joseph's girls: 'it was a great night for the nuns'.⁶⁹ Pius continued to promote social confidence at St Joseph's, arranging for senior girls to have dinner together in the hotel dining room once or twice a year.⁷⁰ Similarly, before a school trip to the southwest over Easter in 1973, she saw the significance of contemporary casual clothes and secured a small government grant so that each girl, as well as the boys, had a pair of jeans.⁷¹

The question of how St Joseph's primary school itself would move forward was becoming sharper for the community. In June 1970 the Department of Native Welfare had gone out of its way to affirm the work. As minister, Edgar Lewis wrote to 'reassure' the sisters that all were 'totally satisfied' with arrangements for the children, following a full inspection by Mr Wallace, Director of Primary Education.⁷² In the timeline of their history that the sisters created in Carabanchel in the 1980s they preserved the letter in full. Immediately after noting the government's warm support for the

68 Anthony McAlinden, Interview, New Norcia, 2002.

69 Anthony McAlinden, Interview, New Norcia, 2002.

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

71 J. M. Bailey, Liaison Officer Midland, 'Issue of Clothing to New Norcia', n.d. but c. February 1973, SROWA S24 cons1497, 1951/0953.

72 Katharine Massam, 'Notes on the Timeline', 1999, ABTM.

school, however, they also record that 'owing to this matter the Sisters attended a course of 8 Meetings arranged by the Department on Child Care'.⁷³ In Barcelona, Casa del Niño had been open two months. Talk of a new kindergarten in Perth seemed timely.

At New Norcia, St Joseph's was short-staffed. Teresa had been transferred to Kalumburu in 1959 and implemented changes in the school there, including connecting the mission to the radio transmissions of the School of the Air from the state Education Department, before being transferred again to Spain. Dolores, who replaced her at New Norcia, was her equal in strength of character ('the only one who could make me change me mind',⁷⁴ Teresa would recall), but she had only natural talent, no training as a teacher, and was often overwhelmed in the classroom. With Angelina moving between Spain and leadership responsibility in Australia, Michael in the kitchen, Agnes in unpredictable crisis, Damien, the promising young Australian, still studying at the Holy Spirit Institute for Religious Formation in Perth, and talented young women in Spain baulking at the journey to Australia,⁷⁵ the schools at St Joseph's and Kalumburu were depending on sisters without formal qualifications. In the Kimberley the mission moved towards lay teaching staff, while at New Norcia, as numbers fell, there was a reconsideration of the need for a primary school at all.

In late October 1970 Mary received a letter from Minister Lewis responding to her interest in the government's budget announcement about financial support for new 'child-minding centres' in partnership with local authorities. She had asked specifically about plans for the Balga area north of Perth, and Lewis forwarded the premier's three-page summary offering to arrange for Mary to meet with the right people in Treasury and the Department of Child Welfare to take the discussion further.⁷⁶ Two weeks later, Mary was writing to Angelina in Madrid and Matilda in Barcelona about the plans for the future that had been agreed in Western Australia.⁷⁷

73 'Notes on the Timeline', 1999, ABTM.

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

75 On 6 December 1971 Mary announced new assignments for 1972 (to be implemented by Christmas if possible), including posting one of the Spanish recruits, Sr Pilar Iñiguez, to Australia. Pilar made the journey but returned to Spain to leave the congregation. Teresa González in conversation, Madrid, 7 July 2017.

76 Edgar Lewis to Mary Ciudad, 28 October 1970, NNA 01646.

77 Mary Ciudad to Angelina Cerezo, 14 November 1970; Mary Ciudad to Matilda Arroyo, 14 November 1970, ABTM.

The decision to open a childcare centre in Perth was not initially a decision to close New Norcia's convent or even necessarily St Joseph's school. On the contrary, as planning for Girrawheen continued over the next two years there were also discussions about what would be viable at New Norcia.

Brother Anthony McAlinden represented New Norcia in a series of meetings with government officials through 1972. The Benedictine Missionary Sisters were not involved directly in the negotiations about what would emerge in the mission town; neither did the conversations include the Aboriginal families, although commitment to continuing to work with Aboriginal people was fundamental to the hopes that Br Anthony brought to the table. His main partner in the plan to find a new role was the Department of Child Welfare (or Community Welfare from 1972). A meeting in June 1972 set out some principles on 'New Norcia's continuing contribution to Aboriginal Welfare'⁷⁸ that had been agreed to at that point. Noting first the reversal of government assumptions from earlier decades that 'contemporary child care practice on a long term basis requires that children be placed in as normal a home life setting as possible and then only after every attempt has been made to support the natural family itself',⁷⁹ the judgement was that New Norcia was now 'basically unsuited to long-term child-care work'.⁸⁰ Both the communal life of the Benedictines and the physical layout of the existing buildings were barriers to their hope for small family-group homes 'where children can relate to permanent parent figures'.⁸¹

The department was willing to explore an ongoing role in education, probably for children who were 'retarded scholastically but not intellectually',⁸² but it also pointed out that other programs of the same kind had not worked well. The notes of the meetings suggest Brother Anthony was struggling to establish New Norcia's credibility in relating to Aboriginal people and that the long history of local involvement was seen to amount to paternalism and no more. He persisted. Eventually the department conceded that 'positive thinking on your part certainly

78 J. Goerke, Acting Chief Supervisor Metropolitan, 'A New Role for New Norcia Mission', 27 June – 5 July 1972, Department of Child Welfare, 'Missions – Private – New Norcia – General Correspondence', SROWA S1099 cons2532 A0403 v1.

79 Goerke, 'A New Role for New Norcia Mission'.

80 Goerke, 'A New Role for New Norcia Mission'.

81 Goerke, 'A New Role for New Norcia Mission'.

82 Goerke, 'A New Role for New Norcia Mission'.

inspires confidence that, no matter how unpredictable the future is, you will attempt to provide a service based on the real but changing needs in the area of aboriginal welfare'.⁸³

As the discussion continued, a plan emerged to establish two group homes, despite misgivings. They would be run by two local Aboriginal women, one married, one single. A meeting between the monastery and the Department of Community Welfare in July 1973 heard that land for the homes had been gazetted by the state Housing Department, but the plans had not yet been discussed formally with the five Aboriginal families resident at New Norcia.⁸⁴ Although Pius and others were firm advocates for the proposal and imagined a role for the elderly Spanish sisters as 'grandmothers and aunts' that would not cut across their community life,⁸⁵ they were not around the table. This may have been because Pius was close to collapse.

Sister Pius Moynihan was, in the opinion of the Department of Community Welfare but as her own community would never dream of telling her, 'an outstanding person in child care'.⁸⁶ In May 1973 Mr T. C. Ewers, the District Officer at Moora, judged she alone at New Norcia had 'the resources to provide for the needs of these developing children', and she was consequently seriously overworked and ill, 'from her exacting role as mother to all'.⁸⁷ In June that year he heard that Pius was off-duty and triggered a meeting at New Norcia with Mary and Mrs Rosemary Cant—crucially, a woman as well as a psychologist with the department.⁸⁸ The sisters were 'coping', but Mary apparently reported there was no one else 'capable of providing a permanent back up for Sister Pius'.⁸⁹ They hoped Pius would be able to take up normal duties again in a fortnight. The crisis put the future of St Joseph's in doubt, and Mary advised they 'would probably not be re-opening after the Christmas holidays'.⁹⁰ Mrs Cant,

83 Goerke to Prior Bernard Rooney, following a meeting with him and Br Anthony, 18 October 1972, SROWA S1099 cons2532 A0403 v1/188.

84 Minutes of a Meeting Held on 20 July 1973, NNA S12-A5-4.

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

86 Report of Trevor Ewers, District Officer Moora, to the Director, 31 May 1973, 'Liaison – New Norcia Mission', SROWA S1099 cons2532 A0403 v2.

87 Ewers to the Director, 31 May 1973.

88 Mr T. C. Ewers to Social Work Supervisor, Mr K. Monsen, 7 June 1973, SROWA S1099 cons2532 A0403 v2.

89 Mrs R. L. Cant to Mr F. Bell, Chief of Institutional Services, Riverbank, 7 June 1973, SROWA S1099 cons2532 A0403 v2.

90 Cant to Bell, 7 June 1973.

involved in negotiations for the group homes, saw the closure as no bad thing. The department began to make plans to relocate the state wards at the end of the year.

Before the month was out, however, a handwritten letter from Sister Michael, still secretary to the superior, hit the director's desk. Four crisp, polite sentences brought the last day of the school forward to the following week, 29 June 1973. The children would be bussed to the state primary school at Gillangarra, 25 kilometres east. St Joseph's would close completely after the school holidays in August.⁹¹ She announced a change of direction:

As far as we are concerned, the chapter in the History of our Order which deals with Aborigines is finished and all our energies are now directed towards our new Apostolate.⁹²

The stark assumption that Girrawheen had nothing to do with the previous work would have shaken most of the Benedictines involved.

The department received the letter on the very day the school closed and stamped it urgent. District officers prepared a letter of thanks from the director to the Benedictine sisters for their long-standing and full-time involvement with Aboriginal people from 'long before official bodies such as ours were expected to take an interest'.⁹³ The letter was addressed to Sister Michael but by the time it was sent she had left the convent. Internally then, the sisters knew the decision to close was linked directly to an acute staffing crisis: Pius overworked, Michael gone, and also, by early July, Damien granted a dispensation from her vows.⁹⁴ The monks, on the other hand, were shocked to have had no more warning than the government.⁹⁵ Their diarist allowed himself a comment on 10 July when he marked the departure of the last Aboriginal girls to leave St Joseph's: 'In many ways it is a sad day'.⁹⁶ The implications were biggest for the Aboriginal families affected. The official record is silent on that impact. Like much that had gone before, the abrupt closure left evaluation until later.

91 Michael to Maine, Director of Community Welfare, 26 June 1973, SROWA S1099 cons2532 A0403 v2.

92 Michael to Maine, 26 June 1973.

93 Director, Community Welfare Department, to Michael, 3 August 1973, SROWA S1099 cons2532 A0403 v2.

94 Sr Damien Gould, granted exlaustation on 18 May 1973 and dispensation from vows on 6 July 1973; request for dispensation from Sr Michael Allen to Abbot Bernard Rooney, 28 July 1973, NNA S12-A5-4.

95 Anthony McAlinden, Interview, New Norcia, 2002.

96 'Chronicle of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia' (hereafter *Chronicle*), 10 July 1973.

The Girrawheen story

The Benedictine Missionary Sisters' Child Care Centre in Girrawheen was an initiative made possible by a network of support the Benedictine women enlisted beyond New Norcia itself. It put them 'beyond' rather than 'between' competing spheres of influence because the enterprise was recognised as their own. The opening on 15 September 1973 was a grand diocesan occasion organised by the Catholic network of businessmen, the Knights of the Southern Cross, and covered extensively by the *Record*.⁹⁷ About 180 people gathered on a fine spring Saturday to see Perth's auxiliary Bishop Peter Quinn bless the rooms, and Joe Berinson, the Labor member for Perth representing Kim Beazley Snr, the federal Minister for Education, declare the complex open.⁹⁸ The site of three acres adjoined land reserved for a future parish church and Catholic school and a steady flow of Catholic visitors keen to help kept the foundation community busy.⁹⁹

The Benedictine sisters' enquiries about establishing a childcare centre had coincided with land being opened up 15 kilometres north of Perth's business district to offer affordable housing. The new area of Girrawheen, meaning 'place of flowers' in one of the Aboriginal languages of Queensland, adjoined Balga, the suburb Mary had originally nominated, named with the Noongar word for 'grass tree', where there was a high proportion of social housing and a number of Aboriginal families, including some from New Norcia.¹⁰⁰ The *Record* reported that the sisters had taken advice from both the state Housing Commission and the Department of Community Welfare on the location for the new ministry and were committed to helping single-parent families, migrants, and 'those in special need'. At the end of 1970, Mary had detailed the promised funding of \$15,000 from the state government, a matching amount from the local Wanneroo Shire Council along with a gardener to help out as needed and cash flow to cover repairs on the property, together with a grant from the state Lotteries Commission to equip the classrooms.¹⁰¹ The sisters sold their house in North Perth to contribute close to another \$15,000 to the new project.

97 *Record*, 20 September 1973, 6.

98 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 15 September 1973.

99 Anne Moynihan, Interview, North Perth, 19 March 1999; Philomena Roche, Interview, Nebraska, 2010.

100 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 14 December 1974.

101 Mary Cíad to Angelina Cerezo and Sisters, 14 November 1970, ABTM.

A recurrent grant from the Commonwealth Department of Education added a further \$20,000 annually, enabling the community to take on the project with a total cost of over \$150,000. When Archbishop Goody proposed to Mary that in time the Benedictine women might take on the primary school and 'look after' the church too, she agreed, 'very probably, yes'.¹⁰² Her vision and ambition were expansive.

The facilities were planned carefully with an eye on the future too. The 3-acre site included a large adventure playground for 50 children from two to five years old, with separate areas for each age cohort in the airy building, and a convent to accommodate 10 sisters with provision for visitors, all on a domestic rather than institutional scale to integrate with the surrounding suburb as it expanded. The purpose-built centre and convent had been designed by prominent Catholic architect Iris Rossen.¹⁰³ It featured white rendered brickwork and red terracotta tiles echoing Spain, with exposed jarrah timber inside and out. The chapel in particular was a showpiece of sensitive liturgical decisions informed by the Second Vatican Council: 'contemporary in character but containing a warmth of history'.¹⁰⁴ Rossen gathered friends to the project. A wall cross and the door of the tabernacle were designed and donated by the artist Robert Juniper, altar vessels and candleholders were ceramics by Janet Kovesi, and windows were by the Perth stained-glass firm of Gowers, Brown and Wildy.

Iris Rossen herself spent many hours designing and painting a large banner of Benedict and Scholastica that the community particularly liked, with the motto 'Ora et Labora' above them and 'Pax' below. Photographs of the chapel reflect her appreciation of monastic simplicity and a strong arts and crafts influence with everything fit for purpose. 'Description is not enough,' commented Sr Philomena Roche, the enthusiastic if frequently unspecific diarist, 'one needs to see it'.¹⁰⁵

102 Mary Cidrad to Angelina Cerezo and Sisters, 14 November 1970.

103 Western Australian Museum, 'Welcome Walls: ROSSEN, Ernest & Iris', museum.wa.gov.au/welcomewalls/names/rossen-ernest-iris; Rossen designed a number of Catholic churches in the area and would also design the neighbouring parish church and school: 'Our Lady of Mercy Church', inHerit Our Heritage Places, 1 January 2017, inherit.stateheritage.wa.gov.au/Public/Inventory/PrintSingleRecord/7f1e9d39-bdf7-4a4d-80b3-7cbaca3bfc76. See also www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/archframes.php?archid=3284&countadd=0; all accessed 7 March 2017.

104 *Record*, 20 September 1973.

105 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 19 August 1973.



Figure 10.5: Chapel at the Girrawheen convent, showing tabernacle and wall cross by Robert Juniper.

Source: Photo courtesy of Paul Rossen. Author's collection.

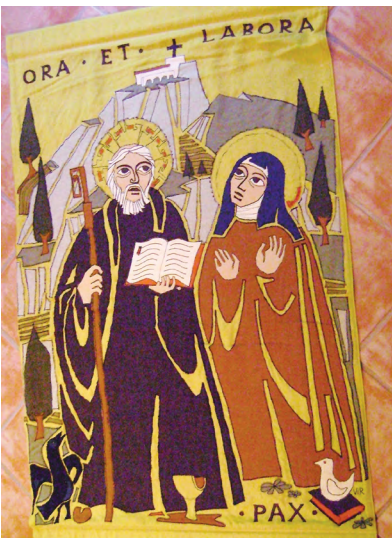


Figure 10.6: *Ora et Labora* banner by Iris Rossen, now in the chapel of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tutzing in Madrid.

Source: Author's collection.

Philomena Roche was the newest member of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters. She had transferred to the New Norcia community from the enclosed Benedictine convent at Pennant Hills in August 1971 after a nine-month trial and just before her fortieth birthday. A New Zealander, she joined Pius Moynihan, Cecilia Farrell, Dolores Vallejo and Carmen Ruiz as the foundation community in Girrawheen: another community where, as Pius had felt so strongly during her novitiate, Spanish, Aboriginal and Anglo-Celts worked together. Preparing for the new community and with the same hospitality from

the Sisters of Mercy in Perth as when the primary teachers were studying in the 1950s, Cecilia and Philomena had completed qualifications in 'mothercraft nursing' at Ngala, the training centre in South Perth, under the guidance of long-time director Beryl Grant. It had been significant for Ngala to have an Aboriginal graduate. Cecilia had excelled. As Matron Grant saw it, she was well-suited to the work she was to do with the children and likely to continue in it.¹⁰⁶

With Cecilia, Philomena, Dolores and two lay teachers, Mrs Kinsella and Mrs Park (and later Miss Anne Doig),¹⁰⁷ Pius as the (still overworked) administrator, and Carmen running the kitchen, the centre celebrated the end of its first week with a picnic. In the New Norcia tradition they took the 27 children across the road to the uncleared bushland for a picnic lunch of sandwiches, cold chicken and salad. Enrolments were close to 50 for 1974, and the community expanded to six with the arrival of Veronica from New Norcia; a management committee of four unnamed 'gentlemen' from the shire council met monthly with Pius and Dolores, and there was a flow of visits from both state and federal governments, including Mrs Walter whose advice on the Commonwealth grants scheme had been crucial. It had been a flourishing start.

The Girrawheen convent was a hub for both sisters and monks travelling from New Norcia and Kalumburu to Perth, as well as former students at St Joseph's who visited or occasionally came to stay.¹⁰⁸ Fr Joseph Carr, OSB, was in residence as chaplain, and they also maintained links with the parishes of Mirrabooka, Joondanna and the Redemptorist Monastery in North Perth. Pius and Philomena both held driver's licences, the community had a car as well as a small van, and with two connecting buses the centre of the city was about half an hour away. In-service days, evening lectures, medical appointments, grocery and other shopping, parish functions and visits with friends were becoming routine. Excursions with

106 Beryl Grant, Interview, Floreat, WA, 2000. For Cecilia's ongoing work, see her publications under her married name Vera Budby: *A Resource Catalogue for Aboriginal and Islander Early Childhood Education Centres*, ed. Vera Budby ([Brisbane]: Creche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland, 1983); *Establishment, Membership, Role and Function of the National Aboriginal Education Committee and the State Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups*, ed. Vera Budby (Canberra: Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1982); *Draft National Workshop Report: Aboriginal Independent Schools*, ed. John Budby with sketches by Vera Budby (Woden, ACT: National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1982).

107 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 5 October 1973, 5 May 1974. A photograph of children and staff at Girrawheen in 1974 is with the Storylines project at the State Library of Western Australia.

108 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, Glenys Benjamin Miles and her family, 30 June 1974, the Willaway family, Margaret Jacobs and her baby.

the children to the beach and the zoo could be managed easily in small groups, and, at Fr Joseph's instigation, the sisters themselves saw the hit musical *Godspell* on stage and ventured to the cinema to see both *Brother Sun*, *Sister Moon* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.¹⁰⁹ New Norcia had always had a network of visitors, but Girrawheen made interaction easier. Ironically, even tragically, just as publicity increased and the sisters' circle widened, communication within the community broke apart.

'Let us approve the three points put forward by the Mother General'

In January 1974 New Norcia remained the motherhouse for the diocesan congregation of Benedictine Missionary Sisters, administering five communities: Girrawheen and Kalumburu in Western Australia, and Carabanchel, Parla and Barcelona in Spain. There were 27 members in total. In Girrawheen there were six, and in Kalumburu, four (Scholastica, Visitación, Francisca and Josephine). The communities in Spain included a number of novices and six temporarily professed sisters, together with the seven who had returned to Spain from Australia. At New Norcia the death of Ludivina in April 1973, after 42 years at the mission, and Agnes's final departure following the closure of the school¹¹⁰ made the motherhouse a small community of six. It was also the most elderly house, with an average age just over 65 years. Despite the flourishing centre in Perth, Mary Ciudad feared for the future of the congregation.

When planning for Girrawheen had begun, Mary had put great faith in the Australian sisters, especially Michael. If Felicitas had a blind spot and could insist on 'whatever the girls wanted', the Spanish sisters thought Mary lacked judgement about the younger Australians.¹¹¹ She deferred to their capacity in English, their good education and work experience, their networks of family and friends, and their understanding of life in the Perth community, and she relied on them. Girrawheen was an initiative the five of them had been meant to carry, with Michael as administrator. All through the tumult of letters from Pennant Hills, Mary had expected to find a way for Michael to continue in the congregation. The crisis had

109 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 1 December 1973, 19 January 1974, 6 July 1974.

110 Remarkably, the *Girrawheen Chronicle* initially expects Agnes will be joining the community in 1973.

111 Teresa González, Interview, Madrid, 27 May 1999.

'broken her heart',¹¹² and when Damien, younger and so much more outwardly compliant, also sought to leave, Mary was shocked to the core. Her own lack of discernment had betrayed her.

Mary flipped from admiration for the Australians to distrust. With Girrawheen barely open, she began actively seeking a separation between the Spanish and Australian members. In November 1973 Sister Mary De Lourdes, the Superior General of the Good Samaritan Sisters, was visiting Rome. She was surprised to receive a letter from Mary Ciudad, forwarded on from Sydney. In it Mary advised that the Spanish sisters were hoping to return to Spain and raised the prospect that three of the New Norcia sisters might transfer to an Australian group, specifically the Good Samaritans who shared the Benedictine tradition.¹¹³ There was more than a little subterfuge in this: the three Australian sisters had no idea such enquiries were being made on their behalf, and among the Spanish at New Norcia the prospect of a permanent move to Spain was hardly even gossip.

De Lourdes, insightful and steady, sought advice first from a canon lawyer at Sant'Anselmo in Rome, Fr Damien Kraus. Ironically, his suggestion was to establish a diocesan congregation responsible to the local bishop—the structure that was already in place although neither he nor De Lourdes seemed to realise that. Back in Sydney, and following Kraus's recommendation, she tried without success to contact Abbot Bernard Rooney, as the local bishop, by telephone. When a second letter from Mary arrived on 3 January 1974 asking if the Good Samaritans would also be responsible for the centre at Girrawheen and renewing an invitation to visit New Norcia to discuss the issues, De Lourdes wrote to Bernard to ask if they could meet when he visited Sydney for the bishops' conference in January.¹¹⁴ They did have a conversation but, as Rooney's files note, 'with little hope of the amalgamation'.¹¹⁵ As De Lourdes wrote to Mary in the end, the Good Samaritans needed to consolidate, not expand into Western Australia. Accepting the Benedictine Missionary Sisters into the congregation would mean 'for them to move east out of their own environment'.¹¹⁶ All the practicalities were against it.

112 Michael to Mary, 22 November 1972, referring to Mary's previous letter (not extant), NNA S12-A5-4.

113 De Lourdes Ronayne to Bernard Rooney, 4 January 1974, NNA S12-A5-4.

114 De Lourdes Ronayne to Bernard Rooney, 4 January 1974.

115 Marginal comment in the index to this correspondence, 21 January 1974, NNA S12-A5-4.

116 De Lourdes Ronayne to Bernard Rooney, 4 January 1974.

Also as 1974 began, Mary Cidád resumed her correspondence with Abbot President Gabriel Brasó. He was expected to visit New Norcia in February, and she hoped to speak confidentially with him then. She confided her view that the Australian phase of the community was over: 'of the few Australians that there were, two have left, and there is no hope that any more will enter'.¹¹⁷ She sought his help to transfer the motherhouse to Spain. She told him, presumably truthfully, that the sisters there had petitioned her to do so although there is no formal record of any such request. Nevertheless: 'I see [their request] as quite natural, and given the circumstances, not only natural but also advisable, and we all believe that it will be better'.¹¹⁸ It is not clear who in the community knew what Mary intended at this stage. Word spread gradually, informally as well as in ordered channels, and eluded some sisters altogether until the very end.

Moving the motherhouse would not have meant necessarily also closing New Norcia, but that was the proposal it seems Mary put to the sisters in Spain by letter, although only their consolidated response survives.¹¹⁹ Their reply was not immediate acceptance; rather, Mary told the abbot president, 'things have been a bit delayed because of our Sisters in Spain who could not understand our situation'.¹²⁰ The Kalumburu sisters also resisted. Scholastica wrote a blistering letter that argued for the ongoing need of a community there and the validity of her own vocation. Strategically, and she believed decisively, she also urged that if they allowed her to remain in Australia she would become eligible for an Australian pension, an ongoing asset.¹²¹ Scholastica was counting on the leadership changing at the next round of elections due in 1976 and had already determined 'to leave her bones in Kalumburu'.¹²² Mary visited Kalumburu for two weeks in May and came round to this view. 'I thought I was in paradise,' she wrote to Abbot Brasó and, distancing herself from the proposals that were by this stage under consideration in Spain and in the north, she added, 'what a shame if they have to close this Mission, but I have a feeling it [the proposal] won't go far'.¹²³

117 Mary Cidád to Gabriel Brasó, 6 January 1974, ABTM.

118 Mary Cidád to Gabriel Brasó, 6 January 1974.

119 Teresa González, 'Summary of the Meeting and Notice to the Communities in Madrid and Barcelona', 7 July 1977, ABTM.

120 Mary Cidád to Gabriel Brasó, 15 May [in fact June] 1974, ABTM.

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

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

123 Mary Cidád to Gabriel Brasó, 15 May [June] 1974.

On her return she stayed at Girrawheen for the week leading up to 24 May but said nothing to the community there of what was in train.¹²⁴ She did, however, meet with the bishop (presumably Bishop Quinn, responsible for religious) who passed on the welcome news of the solution he had found: that the Sisters of Mercy 'will gladly take Girrawheen Centre'.¹²⁵ To meet the conditions of the Commonwealth grant in particular, the childcare service needed to continue and Mary could not leave the country until responsibility for it had been formally transferred to someone else.¹²⁶

Mary called an extraordinary meeting of the General Chapter for Sunday 16 June 1974 at New Norcia. The *Girrawheen Chronicle* notes blandly:

We all went to N.Norcia today for a Community Meeting, as there were some matters concerning which Mother Mary wished us all to vote. We left mid-morning and arrived back about 6 pm.¹²⁷

What Philomena could not bring herself to say was that the searing meeting had stretched the community to the limit. Putting three proposals, Mary spoke vehemently against the Australian sisters as a group, accusing them of 'lack of obedience' more and more stridently until at last Felicitas intervened, rising from her seat in the tiny chapter room and raising her voice in turn to tell Mary to stop, she had said enough, she was being unfair.¹²⁸ There would be a secret ballot to determine the decision on questions that had been put two months before to the two houses in Spain (Carabanchel–Parla in Madrid and Barcelona) and to the sisters in Kalumburu. Votes had been sent to New Norcia to arrive by 14 June.

Carmen could not stand it. She knew what was coming and fled out of the convent and up to the fowl yard. There was more sympathy there. She maintains she did not vote, but the totals counted her in, mistakenly assuming she agreed with the majority. The questions were:

1. If it was judged to be suitable to close the New Norcia House and to transfer the Mother House to Spain;
2. If the Congregation should retain Kalumburu Mission;
3. If they agreed that the Girrawheen Centre should pass to another Congregation.¹²⁹

124 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 24 May 1974.

125 Mary Cídad to Gabriel Brasó, 15 May [June] 1974, NNA 05505.

126 'Child Care Act—Sisters of Mercy, Girrawheen Child Care Centre (formerly Benedictine Child Care Centre)', National Archives of Australia, NAA K317, 53/78/945.

127 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 16 June 1974.

128 Anne Moynihan in conversation, New Norcia, 12 October 2001.

129 'Questions for Decision', ABTM.

All the proposals passed comfortably. Two sisters out of 27 held out against closing New Norcia and three against closing Girrawheen. One voted against keeping Kalumburu open, but perhaps that was Pius, too shattered to think straight, or one of the four recruited in Spain cautious against any Australian link.

It was over by four o'clock in the afternoon, in plenty of time for the monks to hear before Sunday Vespers. Abbot Rooney who might have otherwise presided at the meeting was sick in bed, but the diarist knew the sisters had decided 'to withdraw from the Child Care Centre at Girrawheen, and at the end of the year to close their house at New Norcia, but to keep open Kalumburu Mission as long as possible'.¹³⁰ The next day, Mary wrote to Abbot Brasó bringing him up to date 'with how our affairs are going, certainly better than I had hoped'.¹³¹ There was no disguising the fracture in the community though: of the four non-Spaniards, 'two ... one of them indigenous, have decided to go with us; the other two don't yet know what they are going to do'.¹³² The rift in the Benedictine town was clear too: Abbot Rooney had asked for a few months notice to find replacements for the sisters still cooking and washing for New Norcia. Mary responded, 'they don't deserve it, but we will do it'.¹³³ Then she reported the question that had stung and unrepentantly asked Brasó for help to ensure her bitter reply bore fruit:

He asked me who was going to pay for our travel. I replied [those] who we have worked for for 60 years without charging a cent. See if you can do something for us about this.¹³⁴

Mary hoped to leave in July, the community would stay through until March 1975.

¹³⁰ *Chronicle*, 16 June 1974.

¹³¹ Mary Cidat to Gabriel Brasó, 17 May [actually June] 1974, ABTM.

¹³² Mary Cidat to Gabriel Brasó, 17 May [June] 1974.

¹³³ Mary Cidat to Gabriel Brasó, 17 May [June] 1974.

¹³⁴ Mary Cidat to Gabriel Brasó, 17 May [June] 1974.

Leaving

Veronica would reflect later on the six-week journey by ship to Europe:

The choice was ‘Come with us or leave’. Well, I’d joined them, I was a Benedictine, so I went with them. I didn’t think too much about it. Of course I knew others were upset. For me, it was only when we were sailing into Barcelona, into that harbour and all that ocean behind us, then I realised. ‘What have I done?’¹³⁵

Four decades later, the question is fresh and unresolved. In the large convent in Nebraska where she has worked as liturgical director, in the laundry, and with First Nations people at Winnebago Mission, there is a period of extended home leave in view: Veronica’s eyes fill with tears.

The ritual of Benedictine life had sustained the community through the tension of the decision and the departure. Mary came to Perth three times in July 1974 on business and frequently after that to meet the superior of the West Perth Sisters of Mercy and the officers of the Commonwealth Education Department as they worked through the requirements of the recurrent grant.¹³⁶ Other sisters and monks from New Norcia came with her for appointments, or to see the centre if they had not had a chance before, or to visit after other errands. Prayer in common, the psalms that ran the gamut of human emotion, the daily celebration of the Eucharist in all the houses, and the assumption that they were called to live the Gospel even if the community was splitting apart provided a container for the anger and distress of the Australians and the more simple sense of loss that confronted many of the Spanish.

Cecilia and Pius saw they were out of step with the community. They were both clear that moving to Spain made no sense for them, but what an alternative would look like was anybody’s guess. They would have no community in Perth. They knew nothing of Mary’s attempt to talk about transfer with the Good Samaritans, and the distinctive Benedictine tradition worked against any simple merger with another group in Perth. They felt it was a problem they were being asked to solve alone. Pius spent mid-August to mid-September away from Girrawheen with her brother’s family in Albany, on ‘holiday’ the *Chronicle* suggested, no doubt aiming

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

136 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 9, 16, 30 July 1974.

to come to terms with events.¹³⁷ On the weekend after she returned, the community assembled at New Norcia again to hear more of the future of Girrawheen: 'The West Perth Mercy Sisters will be taking it, but the exact date has not been settled yet'.¹³⁸ Mary travelled back to Perth with them to continue the process of transfer.

In hindsight, it is a puzzle that the choice facing the Australians was so stark. Any number of alternatives seem promising now. Could the sisters who wanted to remain have been attached to the Kalumburu house but working in Perth? Could they have followed the path Maria Harispe had found of pursuing religious life but with informal status as oblates? Could another Perth congregation have offered a lifeline of hospitality, as Mary had clearly been hoping when she approached the Good Samaritans? Could Girrawheen have continued to be a base, even a house of the congregations, supported by more lay staff? Could the monks have refocused their work at St Mary's to share and support the centre in Girrawheen? Religious communities were not yet as open to adaptation or even to news of each other as they would be just a few more years after the Council. It was by chance that Sister Gregory from St Gertrude's ran into Cecilia one Sunday at Midland and learnt of the ultimatum: come with us or leave. It seemed non-negotiable. Later, there might have been more lateral thinking.¹³⁹

As it was, the farewells were beginning. Mary wrote to Bernard to give him the notice she had promised, advising that they would wash and cook until the end of February 1975, and she planned for the final group to leave on 20 March 1975.¹⁴⁰ Josephine came down from Kalumburu for a refresher course at one of the hospitals and also wrote to Bernard after two weekend visits to New Norcia to spend time with those who were leaving. She had been sorry not to see him: 'Please pray for us as we are very upset at the return of the New Norcia Sisters to Spain', she concluded.¹⁴¹ For the Aboriginal families, the sisters leaving went much deeper than the closure of St Joseph's:

'They were Spanish, they had to go back.'

'But after so long? what changed? They came for the people. What changed?'

137 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 14 August 1974, 19 September 1974.

138 *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 22 September 1974.

139 Leonie Mayne, telephone conversation, Perth, May 1999.

140 Mary Cidat to Bernard Rooney, 5 November 1974, NNA S12-A5-4.

141 Josephine Montero to Bernard Rooney, 11 November 1974, NNA S12-A5-4.

The decision was contested through and beyond the reunion of 2001.

In November 1974 Pius and Cecilia both wrote to Abbot Bernard asking for leave of absence from the congregation to consider their future. Cecilia put it simply: 'Being an Australian Aboriginal I believe my future is here where I wish to serve my own people with help of the Holy Spirit'.¹⁴² Pius put it more bluntly in the negative, 'I do not believe my future is there [Spain]'.¹⁴³ At this point Pius had a clearer plan and knew she was casting in her lot with an experimental foundation, the Institute for Human Development, being established by Sr Patrice Cook from the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. Her letter focused simply on her wish to remain 'in this country, serving my own people' and her hope 'to find out how best this could be achieved—with the help of the Holy Spirit!'¹⁴⁴

At the end of the month, Mrs Philomena Willaway arranged a farewell from the St Joseph's old girls. The *Chronicle* captured her key role in initiating the event, even as it repeated the mission terminology that was by that time outdated:

We all went to New Norcia today as Philomena Willaway had organised a day of reunion for natives with the Sisters before we go to Spain. Many were former children from the Orphanage.¹⁴⁵

It was a forerunner of many 're-unions' the former students would host in coming decades and perhaps even held seeds for the extraordinary occasion of 2001. The details are scant, but it was a poignant day of shared food and stories where the bonds between the women and the long-time missionaries were part of the social fabric. For Veronica's family it was a lead-up to the hard parting on 20 March: 'with Auntie Veronica leaving, we were sure we would never see her again'.¹⁴⁶ And as it would prove in 2001, the occasion also reflected the bonds forged beyond family by the common experience of life at St Joseph's and in the mission town. When the time came, it was Felicitas and Margaret, who had arrived together in 1921, the first two to join from the villages near Burgos, who sailed from Fremantle with Veronica and Dolores.

¹⁴² Cecilia Farrell to Bernard Rooney, 17 November 1974, NNA S12-A5-4.

¹⁴³ Pius Moynihan to Bernard Rooney, 1 November 1974, NNA S12-A5-4.

¹⁴⁴ Pius Moynihan to Bernard Rooney, 1 November 1974.

¹⁴⁵ *Girrawheen Chronicle*, 23 November 1974.

¹⁴⁶ Paul Willaway and Veronica Willaway, in conversation, Perth, November 2014.



Figure 10.7: The last of the community from New Norcia embarks for Barcelona, 20 March 1975; left to right: Margaret, Veronica, Dolores and Felicitas.

Source: NNA W7-a5-5-134.

By Easter 1975 the convent at New Norcia was empty. The Sisters of Mercy had been at Girrawheen since Christmas. Pius was with the new institute. Cecilia had gone to her brother's house in Midland. Carmen had gone to Barcelona inwardly pledged to return and certain 'my vocation was for Australia'.¹⁴⁷ The Kimberley community would reduce to three, Scholastica, Visitación and Josephine, when Francisca joined the sisters in Spain in 1976. She was superior at Kalumburu through 1975, deferring awkward correspondence about remuneration until the abbot

¹⁴⁷ Carmen Ruiz Besti, Interview, New Norcia, 14 October 2001. In 1981, after five years in Barcelona, she initiated a process of transfer to the Benedictine nuns at Jamberoo Abbey in New South Wales.

could visit, gracefully refusing to be drawn into the argument about stipends that was raging around her but asserting her obedience to side with Mary: 'nevertheless I say my Lord I am subject to the Congregation. I have notified Rev Mother Mary ... [S]he will be the one to agreed [sic], or to decide, of what we have to do'.¹⁴⁸ The tension between missionary labour 'for ultimate rewards, sufficient in themselves'¹⁴⁹ and community awareness that 'in this days [sic] of rising costs a certain amount for each Sister is an absolute necessity'¹⁵⁰ was one small instance of the many dimensions in which the Benedictine women still faced competing demands and expectations.

In making the decisions to close New Norcia they had faced hard choices between competing hopes: between the practical reality that the work they were doing at New Norcia was beyond the capacity of the community and the emotional (even cultural) reality that their lives were embedded in the town; between the reality that there were enduring relationships formed by the mission and the need to renegotiate those relationships towards better autonomy both for the sisters in relation to the monastery and for the Aboriginal people in relation to the Benedictine communities and the church itself; between the hope that Spain would furnish new members and the reality that contemporary missionary work in Australia was impractical for non-English speakers. For Francisca the tension resolved in obedience to the decision once made; she trusted the community's choice even though departure came at a cost.

Before she left Australia, Francisca spent some weeks with her brother who had come to Australia as a postulant for New Norcia, too, but who now had a family in Perth. They all visited New Norcia one last time so she could say goodbye. In the parlour at the monastery, everyone encouraged her to take some time to walk across to the convent, perhaps to get a sense of the museum and art gallery already being discussed for the newest sections.¹⁵¹ The kitchen and laundry would be quiet as the new lay cook worked from the college kitchen to cater for the monastery as well ('a lowering of quantity as well as quality'¹⁵²) and the washing came up by bus from the Good Shepherd Sisters in Perth ('They do a good job,

148 Francisca Pardo to Bernard Rooney, 23 March 1975, NNA S12-A5-4.

149 Bernard Rooney to Francisca Pardo, 17 February 1975, NNA S12-A5-4.

150 Mary Cidao to Bernard Rooney, 9 March 1975, NNA S12-A5-4.

151 'Governments Grant \$20,000 for Cultural Centre at New Norcia', *Beverley Times*, 6 December 1973, 3.

152 Bernard Rooney to Felicitas Pampliega, 29 September 1975, ABTM.

but at rather high expense'¹⁵³). She could take the impression of these changes with her and tell the others. Francisca left the parlour with her own thoughts:

I did not say anything to anyone but I could not go. I went to the cemetery to see the sisters. But I could not go to our place. Too much. Too much.¹⁵⁴

She could never farewell New Norcia, not really, though there were no words to say so.

Imagining reconciliation

An ongoing connection to New Norcia remained for the Benedictine women, despite the distance, as they adjusted to Spain again. In Carabanchel the community wore their title as 'the Australian Sisters' with pride. The tag recognised the formative role of Australia in their religious imagination, their long sojourn in that remote country, their ability to manage more than most in English as well as their ongoing work in the Kimberley. Correspondence between Madrid and New Norcia continued on financial matters as the community at Kalumburu continued, and beyond the practical matters some sisters also understood their bond with New Norcia theologically.

In September 1975 Felicitas wrote a reflective letter to Abbot Bernard. She had been back in Madrid six months or so. Writing in English with the whole community gathered at evening recreation, her simple phrases built on the Catholic understanding of being drawn into the heart of God through prayer and especially the Eucharist. She knew others also felt that the distance had not disrupted their involvement with the people:

After all when leaving Australia especially New Norcia, I still remained [sic] with everyone I ever met, lived with and loved in Christ. (I should perhaps speak in the plural taking advantage of my Sisters' feelings.) Yes, our hearts were deposited in that of Jesus together with all of you.

153 Bernard Rooney to Felicitas Pampliega, 29 September 1975.

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

They remained united, Felicitas believed, because Jesus paradoxically transcended time and place:

Therefore since He, remaining there, yet came with us, He also brought you with Him. Thus we are still with you. Realising this fact there is no need of many letters to believe in our close spiritual union and physical remembrance. While looking at Him we see everybody.¹⁵⁵

Felicitas offered a vision of the church as the Mystical Body of Christ connected sacramentally. The image came from the heart of Catholic tradition. It opens out another horizon of reflection and, like the reunion of the Benedictine women with their former students at St Joseph's in 2001 where this account began, it embraces the reality of the material world of travel and events, as it also goes beyond it.

Felicitas's emphasis on the absence of boundaries for the community 'deposited in that [heart] of Jesus' shares a theological conviction that the Eucharist and the story it tells are keys for understanding the church in the world.¹⁵⁶ The celebration of the Eucharist collapses boundaries.¹⁵⁷ As the ritual of the prayer itself constitutes the church, it forms a mutual community of 'solidarity and resistance', beyond barriers of time and space, drawing members together as the Body of Christ. Taking the mystical reality for granted, Felicitas's letter opens up discussion of the ways in which Christian faith offers resources for reconciliation itself.

When the Benedictine women left for Spain, 'reconciliation' was not yet part of the political vocabulary in Australia. In the years following, it came to stand for addressing the schism between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia, especially with the foundation in 1991 of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation under the leadership of Patrick Dodson. In 1975 Dodson had been a member of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic religious order, and the first Aboriginal man ordained as a Catholic priest, remaining active in that role until 1981.¹⁵⁸ In at least one interview he traced a link between the political 'reconciliation ...

155 Felicitas Pampliega to Bernard Rooney, 17 September 1975, NNA S12-A5-4.

156 For example William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovery the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2008); James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2010).

157 Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 4, 5.

158 Kevin Keefe, *Paddy's Road: Life Stories of Patrick Dodson* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), 218–66.

a mitigation of the kinds of injuries that were done to Aborigines' and the Catholic spirituality that taught 'no matter how bad ... or how rejected ... you were still an important being in the eyes of Christ'.¹⁵⁹ Beyond politics or ethics, for Christians reconciliation has a spiritual core.

At the heart of Christian conviction, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ solves the riddle of reconciliation for people of faith. Often in the unashamedly bloody iconography of Spain the cross stands for 'God's punishment' of human sinfulness, borne by Jesus in our place. The language of the liturgy, of 'sacrifice' especially, can seem to confirm this. Through much of the sisters' time in Australia and in many Catholic classrooms, the self-giving love of the cross was lost in popular understanding. As Catholic theologians in the ancient world made clear, the emphasis throughout should have been on radical grace, on the forgiveness that breaks out of reciprocity, returning good for evil, and on hope that blooms out of fear.¹⁶⁰ This is the theological imperative that offers transformation in the Christian world view.

In the prayer of every Eucharist, every time the Benedictine sisters and the St Joseph's girls went to Mass, believers are 'tilted towards' a 'memory of the future' where love already defines reality.¹⁶¹ If Jesus is the Christ, truly as much God as God is, and equally as human as we are, then the cross and resurrection are not God's punishment. Rather, the eyes of faith see that, in Jesus, God as God's self steps freely and willingly into the deepest experience of humiliation. On the cross, God-with-us occupies that place of desolation and powerlessness and chooses to suffer its full brunt without divine magic. This is not so as to model the value of suffering as an end in itself but to break out of the cycle of revenge. Freely suffering the worst that humanity can offer, Jesus broke the cycle of retribution and defined a new reality. As the Aboriginal Catholic writer Elizabeth Pike envisages it, this new reality makes possible the renewal of relationships and the sharing of the deepest stories that are fundamental to genuine community.¹⁶²

159 Rex Scambary, 'Dodson Talks', *Catholic Leader*, 1985, cited in Keefe, *Paddy's Road*, 265.

160 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 104; Miroslav Volf, 'A Religion of Love', *Nova prisutnost* 12 (2014): 458–71, hrcak.srce.hr/file/192078.

161 On 'tilting', Alison, *Raising Abel*, 109–16; and on 'memory', Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 5, quoting John Zizioulas.

162 Elizabeth Pike, 'Reconciliation, or Conciliation through Restoration?', in *Developing an Australian Theology*, ed. Peter Malone (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul's Publications, 1999), 38–42.

In this reality, reconciliation is a new way of being to be entered into. It follows from the 'vivacity, power and deathlessness of God in a way that seems almost unimaginable to us'.¹⁶³ The 'dangerous memory' of the death and resurrection of Jesus, celebrated at the Eucharist, enables, or perhaps even compels, people to embody mercy and justice.¹⁶⁴ This perspective informed Archbishop Desmond Tutu's campaign against apartheid in South Africa as well as his work there as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–98). He claims a central place for the church's worship in the authentic transformation of culture.

For Tutu, the liturgy speaks of the possibility of God's new creation even in contexts that apparently deny it. By celebrating the Eucharist together, believers form an 'alternative society', throwing into relief the corruption and injustice that surround it and enabling those who participate to see reality clearly and move towards relationships of justice and peace:¹⁶⁵

If our worship is authentic and relevant, it prepares us for combat with the forces of evil, the principalities and powers. It prepares us to be involved where God's children are hurt, where they spend most of their lives: at work, in the market place, in schools, on the factory floor, in Parliament, in the courts of law, everywhere they live and work and play. Jesus refused to remain on the mountain top of the transfiguration. He came down into the valley of human need and misunderstanding.¹⁶⁶

A sacramental imagination trusts there is a new dispensation where love already defines reality. Outside physical time, participation in the cosmic narrative binds believers to an alternative way of being. In that reality, injustice cannot be ignored, precisely because the hope for transformation is secure and guaranteed in the forgiveness of the crucified and risen Christ. Faith spurs remembering, the lament for and confession of, and casting away of all that should not be, as it promises a new reality.¹⁶⁷ Faith does not circumvent the call for justice in the here and now. In the face of political complexity and repeated failure, faith keeps alive the hope that justice is possible.

163 Alison, *Raising Abel*, 40.

164 Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2009), 118.

165 Battle, *Reconciliation*, 118.

166 Desmond Tutu, 'Spirituality. Christian and African', in *Resistance and Hope*, ed. Charles Villavicencio and John de Gruchy (Cape Town and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 162.

167 Peter Sherlock, 'Reflections from the Vice-Chancellor on the Health and Integrity Conference', Melbourne, 27–29 August 2018, VOX, University of Divinity, www.healthandintegrity.org.au/post-conference-communiques; accessed 28 May 2019.

Perhaps it did not seem such a mystical occasion on the Saturday of the reunion in October 2001 when the Benedictine women and their former students gathered with the Aboriginal families and the monks. The community assembled that day in the open air. The liturgy began as the church bells rang and the sixth abbot of New Norcia, Placid Spearritt, greeted the Benedictine women at the monastery gate. Recalling the sisters' arrival at New Norcia when the monks and Aboriginal people would escort the newcomers into the church, he called the crowd of well-wishers to do the same, processing and singing the same Latin hymn of praise that had met so many of the groups from Spain. As the women moved towards honoured seats in the sanctuary with Sheila Humphries's painting in pride of place, the congregation followed—some to the front pews, others just to the porch to come and go, and still others on the grass to wait. The organ flared out in welcome beyond the doors, and tears flowed. When since the closure of the schools had there been so many Aboriginal people gathered with the missionaries? When since the time of Salvado had there ever been so many Aboriginal people in town across three and four generations of their families?

The readings from scripture revolved around reconciliation: Teresa read in Spanish of Isaiah's vision of weapons turned to gardening tools; we sang a psalm of justice revealed to 'all the ends of the earth'; Veronica read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians of grace flowing in Christ to bring together everything in the heavens and everything on earth; and the community stood to hear how Jesus prayed for his followers to be consecrated in the truth, asking God for disciples as united 'as you are in me and I am in you ... that the world will realise it was you who sent me and that I have loved them as much as you loved me'.¹⁶⁸ For believers, that realisation of unity comes from being drawn into the process of being forgiven, of being welcomed into the place of the Other.

The local story followed the scripture. In a narrative of the Benedictine sisters' history, former students brought symbols of the life of the community forward. The telling had its own rhythm, weaving together themes of race and ethnicity, religious community, manual work and the school with traditions of feminine gentility summed up in needlework. A refrain was too simple but still rang true: 'This is a story of hard work,

168 Isaiah 2:1–5; Psalm 97; Ephesians 1:3–10; John 17:11, 17–23. Booklet for the Mass of Thanksgiving, Reunion of the Benedictine Sisters and Past Pupils of St Joseph's and St Mary's, 20 October 2001, NNA 07078.

and suffering, of much courage and of love'. Chant interspersed the action as the central display was assembled. The image of Mary, Our Lady of Good Counsel, lent against Sheila's painting as embroidered cloths, metal wash troughs and a washboard, baskets that held oranges from the orchard, school books and sporting trophies were all laid in place with dignity and quiet tears. The yellow parasol from the 1950s school concert came towards the end, perched jauntily near the vase that mixed European blossoms with local wildflowers and a candle painted with the Aboriginal colours, a gift from the Benedictine nuns at Jamberoo. As well as the parasol, the storeroom had yielded an embroidered chasuble, part of a full set of eucharistic vestments that the novices of 1948 had worked on together, following the custom of many religious communities. Teresa González had designed the riot of pink and rose flowers stitched onto white silk for the priests of the monastery to wear at Mass, and at the end of the narration she presented the garment again, this time to Abbot Placid. The simple gesture brought the years together. He donned it and moved to the lectern to preach.

Abbot Placid's homily traced the Gospel through the local story, thanking God for the life shared at New Norcia and acknowledging the suffering inflicted and received. Using the politically charged phrase 'I am sorry', he apologised not once but twice, 'to everybody who has ever felt hurt at New Norcia'. The recent days had brought memories to the surface, some happy and some 'so sad that we are never going to hear them at all'.¹⁶⁹ It was an important moment of acknowledgment of how deep the hurt had been. Like Felicitas's letter it wore its theology lightly but insistently:

Of course I am sorry, and since we are a Christian community, I am confident that I can say we are sorry, all of us, that anybody should ever have been hurt here ... because we know that all human beings have been chosen in Christ before the world was made, because we know that Jesus loves us as much as his Father loves him, because we know he wants us to be one in him.¹⁷⁰

169 'Nuns Reunion with Aborigines 20 October 2001', NNA 07078. Photographs of the reunion that show the procession of the St Joseph's banner into the church and the building of the liturgical display are NNA W7-A5-3-005, W7-A5-3-054, W7-A5-3-118.

170 'Nuns Reunion with Aborigines 20 October 2001'.



Figure 10.8: Benedictines and community assembled for the reunion liturgy, October 2001.

Source: NNA W7-a5-3-028.



Figure 10.9: The abbot greets the sisters at the monastery gate as the liturgy begins, Abbot Placid Spearritt and Sister Carmen Ruiz Besti.

Source: NNA W7-A5-3-006.

The homily was a plea to make real the hope of scripture for a community of truth and grace. Prayers followed, led by members of the Aboriginal Corporation (Rose Narkle, Norma Stack, Bernie Starr, Margaret Drayton and Georgina Taylor); Sister Carmen and Sister Hilda (representing Carmen's Benedictine community at Jamberoo) prepared the altar, setting linen and vessels in place; Mae Taylor and Sister Anne Moynihan brought the bread and wine forward; and Abbot Placid took up the prayer, recounting the action of God in Jesus, doing as Jesus did, breaking bread and sharing the cup, in memory of the self-giving of the cross and, according to the ancient ritual, in the presence of Jesus, risen and forgiving.

Felicitas would not have doubted that the reunion Eucharist was a cosmic event, bringing together the past, present and future. When the members of the reunion moved towards the sanctuary to join the sisters for Abbot Placid's final blessing, divisions blurred. In the eyes of faith they were surrounded by a 'great cloud of witnesses' (Heb 12:1). They were all there: Maria Harispe, Teresa Roca, Consuelo Batiz, Escolastica Martinez, all the girls who refused to answer their part in the rosary; Katie Yappo who decided it was time to leave, Grace Williams who never could; the parents from nearby cottages and those too far away; the mothers who wrote and those who could not; the children who flourished and those robbed of their childhoods; and, yes, those who committed those crimes as well as those who could not imagine them. Alongside the congregation gathered physically in the church, flowing over the sanctuary steps where Felicitas and Margaret had pledged their commitment in 1921, faith knew them gathered; all tilted in the eucharistic reality towards a future where reconciliation has already been enacted.

In the present, as people came forward in a confusion of recognition and greeting there were layers in the interaction. In the aisle one man paused at the end of a pew inviting a schoolmate with a gesture, waiting quietly until they went forward together. Grandkids went forward. Cameras flashed. The blessing was choked in sobs. Between the verses of the singing, Sr Carmen's delighted voice was resonant through the hubbub, calling out names in recognition. The sanctuary contained them all, and when the time seemed right the organ struck up the recessional hymn, an old favourite of the St Joseph's girls, often used at funerals. The unsophisticated, lilting lyrics called on 'Mary, Mother of Christ, Star of the Sea', to 'pray for the wanderer ... the sinner ... your children ... for me'. In the same way as the extraordinary gathering had celebrated with an ancient and familiar ritual, here was a thread of familiarity in the unique occasion.



Figure 10.10: Benedictine sisters (Veronica, Visitación and Carmen) with the congregation in the church for the reunion liturgy.

Source: NNA W7-A5-3-055.

That reconciliation has a theological core does not give people of faith magical solutions to dissolve injustice or cancel heartbreak. The promise of a future that *already is* calls forth a new imagination, sometimes embraced swiftly and easily but usually learnt and relearnt slowly in community. Nevertheless, reconciliation as a spiritual value opens up a realm of much deeper political engagement because believers are shaped by an imagination that is not captive to the power of the state or the fear of the other. In this dispensation, discipleship does not replace citizenship in the political reality but galvanises it. In this dispensation, faith does not protect the institution but holds it to a standard of self-giving. The congregation at the reunion liturgy dispersed, but the prayerful occasion generated more than private resolutions. It was a key act of public acknowledgment of the complex history of St Joseph's and the Spanish missionary women in Australia.



Figure 10.11: Mae Taylor (left) and Anne Moynihan (Sr Pius) bring bread and wine for the Eucharist to Abbot Placid Spearritt and Dom Chris Power. The abbot is wearing the chasuble made by the novices in 1948.

Source: NNA W7-A5-3-128.



Figure 10.12: Praying the Lord's Prayer during the Eucharist.

Source: NNA W7-A5-3-056.

New Norcia's story of reconciliation did not start or end at the reunion. The event was part of a much larger narrative being enacted through stories heard accurately and received deeply. Within that larger narrative the story of the Benedictine women at New Norcia is about crossing boundaries and about falling between them, about the good intentions of the mission and its blindness to the racism it condoned. The story of the missionary women bridges the domestic and the institutional, public and private. The gap, the space, was a place of paradox, of tragedy and hope, and also of prayer. New Norcia remains a town built on a fault line between cultures. Any shift in culture is by definition communal and built on relationships.

The story of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of New Norcia is one strand in the complex past of the town. It gives a close, but far from narrow, focus to a longer story of missionary encounter in Australia. It also opens out a wider story of the significance of relationships for reconciliation and the place of a community of memory and hope to support and sustain a process of reconciliation. The Benedictine women of New Norcia gave their lives to a vision that moved towards wholeness, but they knew well they had not attained it. Their story is woven through the lives of many others. They did not want a triumphal history. They hope for an account that empowers others to risk their own stories of remembering in sincerity and truth.

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