

SR ROSA MACGINLEY

The historical phenomenon of congregations of religious women is possibly of wider interest today than formerly because of the growth of the women's movement. It is also of vital interest from an ecclesiastical and pastoral point of view because of the rapid change now evident in congregations familiar for so long as an integral part of the Church in Australia, whether in its parochial, educational or welfare aspects. Indeed, there is good reason to claim that the solid structure of the Australian Church resulted from the close collaboration of diocesan clergy, religious and ever-supportive laity. No element can be dropped out of this equation nor any be regarded as incidental. This was as true of the Church in Queensland as elsewhere - indeed, the growth of the Church in Queensland provides a fairly neat case study of the overall growth of the Australian Church.

First of all, on the world's time-scale, and in the now two millenia of Christian growth and experiences in different cultures and different parts of the world, it is a new Church we are speaking of and, as we shall see, one that shared in many new insights and forms of pastoral action which were then emerging. When Queensland was cut off from New South Wales to become a self-governing colony in its own right, it became a new diocese to which was appointed a young and energetic bishop - James Quinn, one of a new group of bishops who had studied in Rome, done theses on topics which were to emerge at the First Vatican Council, and who were determined to give their energies to building the Church in the modern world - the new international Church - to rise on the ravages of the old conflicts of Europe and to spread in a fresh missionary endeavour around the globe. James Quinn could have known little of the daily actualities on his diocese, but he did know that he had to build from scratch and that he would need strong and capable support. On his appointment, while still in Dublin, he turned to the newly founded Sisters of Mercy - in fact they were to arrive in Brisbane just thirty years after their foundation in 1831 - to aid him in setting up the schools and works of charity which he knew would be a first need in the frontier conditions to which he was coming. When he arrived in Queensland, he was accompanied by a group of these sisters ready for whatever works were at hand.

A little needs to be said here of the circumstances in Ireland in which new congregations of religious women were emerging. First of all, Ireland, though living out her own particular history of invasion, revolt and attempted suppression of her own indigenous Christianity, was part of the wider scene in western Europe. A world collapsed with the French Revolution, carrying much of the accepted face of the Church with it, as well as an entrenched political system. From seeming chaos were born myriad forms of new life, evidenced especially in the many congregations which developed from 1800 onwards to meet the new needs of a new type of world, while affirming with fresh vigour the age-old values of the Gospel. For the first time in the long history of the Church, the numbers of apostically engaged women began to equal those of men, to produce, in a few decades, the situation with which we have been familiar in our own century, where religious women considerably outnumber clergy and religious men in the Church. This, too, had something to do with the public emergence of women in the nineteenth century - first wave feminism, as it is now called in broader context.

Ireland, as we noted, had her own peculiar story. The first modern congregation to emerge there - also to appear in Queensland in good time - were Presentation Sisters, founded in 1775 by Nano Nagle, a far-sighted woman who pioneered the way in her country for the later nineteenth century foundresses. Again, as in post-Revolution France, she built on ruins, for from the dissolution of the monasteries in Ireland in the mid-1500s until the introduction of the Ursuline Sisters from France in 1771, there was no possibility publicly of adopting a community way of life - as it was, in fact, still prohibited, though the city

authorities in Cork turned a blind eye to this fact. Small numbers of Dominican Sisters and Poor Clares survived through the penal times as needle women and largely in hiding, until they re-emerged and went through the process of virtually re-founding their communities. New congregations to follow were the Brigidines, founded in 1807, the Charity Sisters, founded in 1815, and the Mercy Sisters already mentioned, as well as the Loretos, established as a new foundation in Ireland by Teresa Ball. Communities from all of these latter groups were in time to appear in Queensland. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, an early census reveals that there were 120 nuns in Ireland at the time - it was only after the 1830s that convents and religious women became a familiar sight. This means that many of the earliest Catholics who came to Australia had never seen religious women nor come in contact with the many-faceted forms of charity - among them elementary education - which their congregations were founded to offer. Hence the earliest religious sisters who came to Queensland came with near memories of a recent and concerted effort towards the rehabilitation of their people following the dislocation and degradation of penal time. They came hence as religious women with a tradition of total giving.

An early concern, then crisis, which was to face the Australian bishops was education - subsidies came to be accorded to denominational schools in New South Wales following the Stanley system of public education introduced in Ireland in 1831; when Victoria and Queensland separated from the parent colony in the 1850s, this was still the pattern, though coming under increasing attack from the proponents of one uniform secular system of education as entitled to public support. The earlier schools, especially parochial elementary schools were lay-staffed, though the bishops saw the writing on the wall as the public education controversy gained momentum. Bishop James Quinn came prepared to establish his own system of schools - in collaboration with the government and, if that eventually broke down under pressure from secularists, he had a flexible body of religious teachers ready, not only to take over the lay-staffed schools, but to expand into new areas themselves. In due course, in 1875, the secularising Education Act was passed, withdrawing government aid from denominational schools.

With a diocese as large and scattered as Queensland, Bishop Quinn needed increasing numbers of religious teachers - at a synod in Melbourne in 1869, he heard of the recently founded Sisters of St Joseph and lost no time in arranging for a community to come to Brisbane. This new and innovative group of sisters was founded in Penola in South Australia in 1866 - the joint inspiration and actualisation of the dreams and hopes of Fr Julian Tenison Woods and Mary MacKillop who desired to give her life to a new type of sisterhood where simplicity and practical service, in the light of needs she saw, would be central in a new living out of an age-old religious ideal. Mary's experience was Australian and, when Woods outlined the needs of the far-flung bush apostolate, she saw what she could do. The invitation to Brisbane was the first summons to move beyond the diocese of Adelaide and Mary herself readily undertook the long sea trip to Brisbane. However, in the light of the official canonical understanding of the time, for a group of religious women to move from one diocese to another meant transfer to the immediate jurisdiction of another bishop. Even earlier, in accordance with a decree of the Council of Trent, every convent was to be quite autonomous, subject only to the superioress elected by the community and the local bishop, its canonical ecclesiastical superior. This was the pattern both Mercy and Presentation Sisters brought to Australia, though both made a big adaptation here where, at the instigation of the Australian bishops, in the various dioceses where they were located, they began forming networks of branch houses under a central mother house. As the Sisters of Mercy expanded in Queensland from their original mother house of All Hallows, they exhibited great flexibility in grafting a new mode of organisation into the ancient monastic pattern. Where, for example, a convent in the established centre of Ipswich would normally have become autonomous, it remained a branch house. However, the convents in both Rockhampton and Townsville, founded respectively in 1873 and 1878 from All Hallows, became the centres of independent congregations, although at the time of foundation Queensland was all one diocese. Townsville remained part of the Rockhampton

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It was Mary MacKillop's wish to keep all her sisters united under the one mother house which was the chief issue in a growing conflict between Bishop James Quinn and the Josephite Sisters and which led to their eventual withdrawal altogether from his diocese. By the time this occurred, the sisters were staffing thirteen schools as far north as Mackay, where they also ran an orphanage. With the withdrawal of the sisters, this orphanage was later transferred to Neerkol outside Rockhampton under the care of the Sisters of Mercy who found themselves again the only religious women in Queensland engaged in the educational apostolate. There was, however, by this time another religious community of women - the Perpetual Adoration Sisters founded in Brisbane in 1874 by Fr Tenison Woods, founder of the Josephites. His active, resourceful spirituality operated on many fronts - his own basic call to prayer and contemplation led him to found a contemplative group whose hidden lives would be a powerhouse of prayer for the developing Australian Church, where the practical needs were so great. From supporting themselves by needlework, these sisters opened, in a long tradition of religious hospitality, a home for elderly ladies, the well known Villa Maria situated in the heart of Brisbane. They were later to open a Villa Maria in Ipswich and, in more recent times, in Wollongong.

Until the end of the century, these were the only groups of religious women in Queensland - the primarily contemplative community of Perpetual Adoration Sisters on St Paul's Terrace and the rapidly spreading Sisters of Mercy, the three independent congregations in Brisbane, Rockhampton and Townsville being joined by a fourth independent Mercy congregation, that founded, directly from Ireland, in 1888 in Cooktown, then the headquarters of the Augustinian Vicariate in North Queensland.

The year 1900 was to bring a change - the previous year, the diocese of Rockhampton, formed in 1882, received a new bishop, Joseph Higgins who, for the previous ten years, had been an auxiliary bishop to Cardinal Moran in Sydney; there he had a special interest in education and came to know the Good Samaritan and Josephite Sisters well. Founded in Sydney in 1857 by Archbishop Polding, the Good Samaritan Sisters, from initial apostolate of charitable works, became after the implementation of the secularising education acts, heavily involved in education at both primary and more advanced levels. Bishop Higgins was determined to introduce both groups of sisters into his new diocese - early in 1900 the Good Samaritans replaced the now overtaxed Sisters of Mercy in Charters Towers, while the Sisters of St Joseph went to Clermont, very close to the scene of their labours in the 1870s, the old copper mining centre of Copperfield. In February 1900, the Presentation Sisters went from Wagga in New South Wales to Longreach to found, in accordance with their pattern of spread, a new mother house on what was then a remote frontier indeed.

Queensland had now four teaching congregations - two founded in Ireland and two in Australia, the two older Irish congregations having a decentralised structure and the two Australian ones the new centralised pattern with their mother houses in Sydney. Among them these four groups of sisters were to spread through the parochial educational systems of the Queensland dioceses. The Sisters of St Joseph, until post-World War II, were to keep to their chosen apostolate of primary education, for preference in remote areas where they were prepared to go in twos and threes. The Mercies, Good Samaritans and Presentations also went to small schools in remote areas, adapting readily to this Australian pattern. At the same time, in the larger centres, they introduced the by-then centuries-old European tradition of convent high schools - private, fee-paying schools, usually boarding,

where better-to-do Catholic women traditionally received their education. This style of education stemmed, not from a university or a government education department curriculum, so familiar to later generations of Australians, but from older sources which the founding mothers of convent school education, especially in France, distilled as best suited to the education of cultured women. And there were cultured women of this tradition in each of the congregations which came to Queensland - well-equipped to found the convent high schools which were soon to appear in the more significant provincial centres of Queensland. As well, in all the primary schools, music was taught, and in many of these smaller towns, the commercial subjects which enabled local boys and girls to secure better employment than otherwise possible.

Public secondary education as we know it today is a twentieth century development - around 1910, the Australian state governments began a tentative entry into this newly developing field. In Queensland, this move was given impetus by the foundation of the University of Queensland in 1910. The idea was to provide opportunity for bright children whose parents could not afford the private colleges. This was in no way a general move - the concept of generally available secondary education at the public expense had to wait till the aftermath of World War II brought a more democratic societal conscienceness, as well as the awareness that to cope with modern society a more broadly educated population was needed.

With the formal introduction of public secondary education in Queensland in 1912, the convent high schools, which beginning with All Hallows in the 1870s, had been putting some of their pupils for the Sydney University Junior and Senior, began the transition to registered secondary schools. Their long-standing curriculum of literature, foreign languages, some further mathematics and the forms of science then known as natural history, enabled them to undertake the newly devised secondary syllabuses. The education offered was no longer, as in Europe, for a relatively small group of privileged women, but, because boarding and tuition fees were kept as reasonable as possible for an expanding Catholic middle class, which in turn these schools, together with the Christian Brothers in Queensland, helped to form. A unique feature here was the availability, from 1914 on, of the Queensland scholarship system where every child who passed the examination at the end of primary school was entitled to tuition fees at the government expense. Most convent schools in Queensland for several decades charged only this allowance, making secondary education free for local girls who passed the examination. There were, as well, book allowances and living-away-from-home allowances available according to a means test. With inflation in the post war years and the government's intention of phasing out the scholarship, the value of these allowances by the 1950s became considerably less, in real terms, than when first introduced. A double effect, however, of the scholarship system and the availability of Catholic secondary schools was that in the inter-war years relatively more young Catholics were receiving post-primary education in Queensland than their peers in the general population.

Until 1917, the congregations mentioned were still the only religious women represented in Queensland, and until 1915 there were only the Mercy Sisters and the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in the Brisbane Archdiocese which, at the time included the Toowoomba diocese. A change was to be effected by the transfer of Bishop James Duhig of Rockhampton to Brisbane as Co-adjutor in 1912. He sought particularly to bring to the archdiocese the sisters whose work he knew and admired in his former diocese - hence the coming of the Josephite Sisters to Nundah in 1915 and the Good Samaritans to Coorparoo in 1916. As early as 1914, he was expressing to the Presentation Sisters, still confined to Longreach and Emerald, his wish for them to come to Brisbane - a step delayed, in their case, for another ten years.

With his succession to the archbishopric in 1917, he moved quickly with the introduction of further congregations, the Religious of the Sacred Heart and the Sisters of

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart both coming that year, to be followed by the Ursuline Sisters in 1919. The inter-war years saw the coming to Brisbane of the Presentation Sisters, the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Nazareth, the Brigidines, the Good Shepherd Sisters, the Carmelites, the Franciscans and the Loreto Sisters. On the occasion of the Loreto foundation in 1928, Archbishop Duhig expressed his belief in the value of various educational and cultural religious families in Brisbane. With the arrival of these new congregations, not only was the educational scene diversified, but a wider range of works of charity was able to be undertaken. From the first refuges for women and the orphanages of the Sisters of Mercy, there followed the Mercy hospitals in Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville, Mackay and Bundaberg, the hospital of the Sisters of Charity in Toowoomba and the care of the homeless poor and for orphans on the part of the Nazareth Sisters and the care of girls in need by the Good Shepherds. The Carmelites augmented with their ancient contemplative tradition the primary role of adoration already long established in Brisbane by the congregation of Perpetual Adoration.

In many ways the inter-war years saw the consolidation of the plan of campaign undertaken with such courage and hope in the 1860s - over these years, too, there was operative, as for the rest of the population, a process of Australianisation, both in personnel and in adaptation to developing Australian structures, here especially requirements in education and health care. Between the wars, too, because of a growing body of canonical legislation for religious congregations, a process of what had been called uniformisation spread - the 1920s and 1930s saw consolidation the typical image of convent, convent school, religious hospital and religious woman for Australian Catholics. And there is no doubt that they were sustaining a splendid tradition.

World War II brought, as we know, many changes - as seen now, it brought to a head many processes of change already in operation. The call for updating in women's congregations, sounded as early as 1944 by Pope Pius XII, met a measure of response in the 1950s, to be followed by an avalanche of change after the Second Vatican Council. From the war years until very recently, a new wave of religious women began to come to Queensland: Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Canossian Sisters, Sisters of the Holy Spirit, the Brown Sisters (founded in Sydney in 1913), Sisters of the Holy Family, the Little Company of Mary, the Dominicans, the Daughters of Charity, the Marist Sisters, the Missionary Sisters of Service (founded in Tasmania in 1935), the Benedictines, the Cenacle Sisters and the Schoenstatt Sisters. Not only did these new groups of religious women represent a gamut of new apostolates, as well as the traditional roles of teaching, nursing and contemplative prayer, but, by the 1970s, the earlier founded groups were undergoing radical changes. That an era of transition had been reached is to state what is now a commonplace - we find ourselves now in the ongoing tide of that transition with few firm guidelines, except those of prayer, trust, fidelity and useful service which guided the innovators and re-founders of the nineteenth century. Reference to the nineteenth century reminds us of some pertinent statistics. Of the twenty-seven different religious congregations to which we have referred, seventeen were founded in that century, seven before (of which several were virtually re-founded in the nineteenth century), and three in the twentieth. What is both remarkable and providential in the Australian situation is that this host of new congregations founded to meet specific needs in their countries of origin was available when the Australian bishops were looking for religious personnel to staff their school systems and to establish needed works of mercy.

A final observation notes the total collaborative effort - as new dioceses, from the 1860s on, were established across Australia, it rested most often with the local bishop to take the initiative - in many cases, prior to this, a local committee of lay people, headed by their parish priest, had urged the need of a school, for example. The sisters came to contribute their share to what was already a close-knit community effort, at least on the part of those families which assumed leadership among their fellow Catholic settlers.

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