

The Grail in Mackay: An International Faith Community of Women Called to Serve in a Queensland City

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The Ladies of the Grail was a movement founded by Dutch Jesuit, Fr Van Ginneken, in 1921 that spread rapidly to a number of countries. Van Ginnekin's vision was of a deep, vigorous, passionate Catholicism which drew inspiration from early Christianity. He believed women could best embody this vision. Young women aspiring to give their lives to God, yet not inclined to the religious life were attracted to this form of the Lay Apostolate. While taking direction from bishops, they were to remain a movement of lay women free from the controlling power structures within the church such as under priest chaplains¹. In this paper I will explain how the Grail Movement came to Mackay in central Queensland in 1955, the first such centre established in our state, at a time that would soon evolve into a period of momentous social and religious change. We will see how the Grail benefitted from these changes and made an important contribution to the life and work of the Catholic Church and especially of Catholic women in the Rockhampton Diocese in the 1970s and 1980s.

At the initial invitation of Bishop Dwyer of Wagga Wagga, five Dutch Ladies of the Grail arrived in Sydney in 1937 and immediately set about making an impact. Their mission to young girls and women was to draw upon the richness of a full Catholic life and so bring about the transformation of the world for Christ. There was an emphasis on developing their talents for the greater glory of God. Their method was to set up a residential centre for young women whereby Catholic life with its liturgical seasons, its fasts and feasts, the scriptures and especially the gospel teachings of Jesus, could be experienced in a prayerful environment. Fortified by daily Mass, the psalms and other devotions, the women were passionate and compelling in their belief of what could be done. Added to that was their appreciation of culture and worldly affairs which could prepare young women to be good citizens and Catholics. There was also a strong element of joy in their folk dancing, singing and drama presentations.

At a concert at All Hallows' School in July 1939, Dr Lydwine van Kersbergen and Frances van der Schott demonstrated their belief in the potential of young Brisbane women to make an enlivened contribution to the church and its mission. This was through drama, action songs, and community singing of the girls they had inspired. They were enthusiastically applauded by the large crowd including Archbishop Duhig, a large number of clergy and also the President of Catholic Action, Mr J P Kelly. Catholic Action was the collective name for most of the activities of lay Catholics in the church at that time². In the following years, Grail ladies visited Brisbane organising and enthusing groups of young women from

school leavers to university students – sometimes in leaders’ training camps with prayerful discussion, liturgy, music and folk dancing. Their mission to Brisbane was hampered by the lack of a centre. Archbishop Duhig announced that he had a house and grounds in mind for the Grail³, but nothing eventuated. It was war time and finance was an insuperable hurdle.

In a paper presented to this society in 2002, Geraldine Crane, speaking about the early days of the National Catholic Girls Movement in Brisbane discussed the dissension that occurred in Melbourne with members of the hierarchy, clergy, and some leaders of the Catholic Action executive. Despite highly favourable support for the Grail in Brisbane, the desires of the National Catholic Action executive prevailed⁴. By 1945 the Grail had ceased its active presence in training of leaders for that movement and the programme for the Vanguard parish groups in Brisbane.

Under the charismatic leadership of Judith Bouwman, one of the five Dutch ladies, the Grail had set up a centre in Melbourne at *Tay Creggan*, a house leased from the Archdiocese. Here young women participated in a Quest programme, live-in courses of three and six months – sometimes working in day jobs and attending talks in the evening. ‘Keynote of the courses was the contribution well-equipped Christians could make in Australian society in a rapidly changing world’⁵. Numbers of young women from Queensland went south to be stimulated in their search and desire to serve the Lord in whatever capacity they could⁶.

How They Came to be in Mackay

In 1955 a Grail House, the first in Queensland, was opened at Mackay. Much of the credit for the establishment of this centre must go to the foresight, perseverance and genuine interest of Bishop Andrew Gerard Tynan. In 1946, at age 38, he was installed as bishop of Rockhampton. Previously he had been on the staff of St Stephen's Cathedral and lived in close proximity with Archbishop Duhig at New Farm. His duties in Brisbane included his appointment as the first diocesan chaplain of the Young Christian Workers⁷. The YCW was the official Catholic Action group for young men and followed the precepts and charism of Cardinal Cardijn. In this role of chaplain, he could not have failed to be aware of the enthusiasm of the response of young women whose hearts were 'set on fire' by the influence of the Grail and of the controversy in the south. From the very outset of his episcopacy in Rockhampton, Bishop Tynan kept up a courteous and respectful relationship with various Grail ladies and desired to have them in his vast central Queensland diocese⁸. Several young women from the diocese had travelled to Melbourne to undertake the Quest programme at *Tay Creggan* with his blessing.

Bishop Tynan's dream of establishing a Grail centre in the diocese took shape when the home of the late Charles Bagley became available for sale. Some years before, Therese (Catherine), the only daughter of the family had joined the Grail Nucleus and a son Kevin was a priest in the Rockhampton diocese. In 1953, the Bishop wrote to the Grail inviting them to consider establishing a home for the many Catholic working girls scattered about the city

of Mackay whose families lived in remote districts outside of the city. It was evident that he was concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of these young school leavers and young working women and looked to the Grail for assistance. In 1955 Mackay was a big provincial city, with a population of about 43,000⁹. The chief industry was sugar growing, milling and export through a large natural harbour. It was the northern most city of the central Queensland Catholic diocese of Rockhampton, with at that time four city and five country parishes. Bishop Tynan wrote to the Grail leaders via Joanna Waite whom he knew: ‘There would be scope for your Apostolate among these and other girls there and in other parts of the diocese.’ And conscious of the practical side of things, he added, ‘The people of Mackay are generous and would give you every help in financing of such a centre’¹⁰.

Across the next thirty years, the Grail was to experience at first hand, the kindness of the Mackay people and their generous support in the *Ballybrac* venture. Although very tempted by the proposal, Adelaide Crookall, the new Australian-born president, wrote to Bishop Tynan explaining that she needed to confer with the head of the International Grail in the Netherlands, Ms Rachel Donders who, coincidentally, was on her way to visit Australia. Eventually Adelaide wrote that most regrettably the Grail had decided they could not come¹¹. Not to be thwarted in the acquisition of such a fine property as the Bagley home for the church, the bishop wrote to the superior of a Franciscan order of nuns in Gozo, Malta, inviting them to consider an establishment in Mackay¹². There were notable numbers of Maltese

families settled in the districts who would welcome the sisters and so the matter rested for a time.

The fact that Bishop Tynan with his firmness of purpose and his respectful encouragement desired to have the Grail active in the diocese in spite of its inability to take up his offer for *Ballybrac*, was revealed by the report of a memorable visit by Ladies of the Grail in late August 1955¹³. At the invitation of his Lordship, Joanna Waite and Elizabeth Reid had visited three large centres in the diocese and given several lectures. Elizabeth Reid had spent a number of years as an accredited war correspondent in Hong Kong and had firsthand experience of the dismantling of Christianity in the now Communist China, with harrowing stories of persecuted missionaries limping across borders. Fortuitously, it seemed, Reid recognized *Ballybrac* as a potential centre for the training of lay people as missionaries and urged Grail headquarters to take up the opportunity offered to them. Soon after this, Adelaide Crookall informed the Bishop that the Grail had decided to accept his offer and that she would send Miss Joanna Waite and Miss Pat Sheeran to set up the centre as soon as it could be arranged¹⁴. Almost by the same post as Adelaide's letter, the Bishop received advice from the sisters from Malta that they too had decided to accept his offer¹⁵.

Letters held in the Rockhampton archives reveal the bishop's eagerness to accept the offer of the Bagley property by his personal involvement in obtaining finance. Because the house was located within St Patrick's, the town parish of Mackay, there was to be some dependence on parish funds as well as a bank loan

and some assistance from his own diocesan funds¹⁶. Suspecting that there might be some opposition to the setting up of a youth hostel when he did not clearly have an organisation to manage it, he had sought positive support from the younger associate pastors and the Catholic Daughters of Australia.

The Acquisition of *Ballybrac*

Ballybrac, situated at No 7 Nebo Road, Mackay, was the gracious and stately home of the Bagley family. Only one mile from the centre of the city, it would become the centre of the Grail presence in the city of Mackay for thirty years from 1955 to 1984. Its major function would be to provide accommodation for hundreds of young working girls in Mackay and neighbouring districts in an 'environment supportive of their personal growth and development'¹⁷.

Built in around 1902 by Welshman Evan Davies, *Ballybrac* or 'the home of the speckled trout' was named in honour of a village in Ireland in which a cottage was given to the activist Michael Davitt by his supporters. Michael Davitt had spent about six months in Mackay around 1896 investigating the exploitative labour conditions of South Sea Islanders, who had been brought in to work in the tropical north cane fields. Situated on five acres of land, the house was purchased by the Bagley family about 1914. Charles Bagley was an outstanding Catholic layman in Mackay for many years. At the time of his death in 1949, he was chairman of the Mackay Harbour Board, managing director and founder of the large merchant firm of Michelmore and Co. Pty Ltd and patron of many Catholic church, civic, business and

sporting bodies. His son, Father Kevin Bagley, a golden jubilarian of the Rockhampton diocese, described the house as he remembered it:

It was a high blocked house with a latticed front verandah and two side verandahs, one of which was used as a sleepout. It had narrow sash windows and at one end there was a dressing room. Later a little projecting study was built on to it. The hallway from the front verandah led to a living/dining room which stretched across the width of the house. From it a couple of steps led down to another open verandah, a bathroom and large pantry and kitchen. In the 1920s renovations and additions were made. The former kitchen area was demolished and a new living room and dining room, both with silky oak panelled walls were added. There were wide verandahs around the dining room and one of them was used as an informal every day dining space. It led to the backstairs which were the usual means of entry for the family and their many friends who gathered there. The mango trees lining the gravel drive from Nebo Road (there were once 21 of them) go back to the time of Mr Davies¹⁸.

The agreed price was fourteen thousand pounds and was covered by a bank loan of five thousand, the trustees of the estate lent four thousand and the parish and the diocese the remainder, to be repaid under generous terms.

One final point in the story of the Grail's coming was Adelaide Crookall's request to Bishop Tynan that he write to Archbishop Duhig to advise him of the impending establishment, since the Archbishop had been so keen to have the Grail set up a centre in Queensland. She believed that it would be more tactful for the news to reach Duhig

from Tynan than any other source¹⁹. Accordingly, with his usual promptness, Bishop Tynan wrote:

Your Grace, you will be interested to know that the Grail has accepted an invitation from me to establish a centre in Mackay. Two of their members Miss Joanna Waite and Miss Pat Sheeran... are to conduct a hostel for working girls and make their foundation a Centre for their activities in the diocese. The property they are taking is the home of the late Charles Bagley. The building can take thirty girls without many structural changes or additions.

In view of your Grace's wish to have the Grail in Brisbane, Miss Crookall is a little apprehensive of your reaction to her decision to accept my offer. But I think her main reasons for coming here are that I was able to offer her easy terms of repayment owing to the generosity of the Bagley family. Then the size and property are most suitable. It is a good building situation, five acres of land near the centre of the town. I shall be grateful if you will give the Grail Ladies your blessing in their work.²⁰

The Bishop, however, was much too tactful to tell the Grail of the Maltese sisters' arrival but he was able to see them happily settled in several projects including the management of an old people's home in West Mackay.

It took approximately six months from the time Pat Sheeran and Joanna Waite arrived in Mackay on 15 October 1955, until the official opening on Low Sunday, April 1956, to complete the building renovations. Pat Sheeran described how:

During the working week, a building contractor was employed and in the evenings and weekends bands of voluntary workers - carpenters, painters, cleaners,

gardeners and anyone willing to work, young and old prepared *Ballybrac* and the grounds for opening day. Sometimes there were twenty or thirty volunteers. These were all fed on the job by others who had done the baking in their own homes. They came with baskets full of piping hot scones, cakes, sandwiches and hot tea to fortify the labourers. Many firm long-standing friendships were formed through the working-bees.²¹

The opening attracted five hundred people to witness the blessing by the Bishop and handing over of the property to the Grail. Among the guests were members of State and Federal Parliament, chairmen of the five shires, the Mayor of Mackay, Police Inspector and Stipendary Magistrate for Mackay²². Bishop Tynan's great pleasure in this successful outcome was attested to in his speech which showed his unusual empathy with and understanding of the Grail mission:

The Grail is an organisation of dedicated lay women who have as their objective the conversion of the world to Christ ... As lay people, by a completely modern and attractive approach to the problems of youth, they act as a leaven to bring youth to the maturity of integral Christian life.²³

He made a special point of thanking the priests who, despite their own financial responsibilities, had supported the project knowing that the centre would prove a blessing for the Mackay church as a whole.

Finally, he explained his own long standing relationship with the Grail:

I have been privileged to see their work in Australia for more than twenty-three years and from my experience of

them, I believe they cannot fail to win the esteem of all as they become known to you. Their immediate aim is to provide a home for girls living away from their families. But, side by side with this they will, as opportunity offers, expand their activities throughout the Diocese.²³

As Dinny Culican Ward comments, the Grail Leaders present on that day, including Catherine Bagley and Adelaide Crookall, must have been overwhelmed by such a warm and sensitive welcome to the Diocese of Rockhampton²⁴. In Sydney the Grail had been offhandedly treated by Cardinal Gilroy in relation to the Sydney Catholic Central Library which they had staffed and as a consequence much of their activity in the Sydney Archdiocese had been curtailed²⁵.

As the young boarders took up residence they would have enjoyed the Grail tradition of the linking together of liturgy, prayer and singing with the daily lives of all who lived there. There would be a shared evening meal where refinements at the table were expected and nightly prayers in the small room that served as a chapel. In the mornings they were awakened with the greeting *Benedicamus Domino* in time to join the Grail members going to morning Mass at St Patrick's if they so chose. There was always a range of enjoyable activities at the weekend. It did not take long for the tennis court to be fully operational so that young people as well as the residents were attracted to the friendliness of the tournaments. Management funds were very slim and Pat and Joanna had to be diplomatic and resourceful and live frugally themselves. Pat said:

We took pride in our simple lifestyle. We celebrated the feasts of the Church year and other occasions in memorable and happy ways. For recreation we enjoyed the natural resources of the nearby beaches or mountains and we used these occasions to strengthen friendships.²⁶

The Grail's propensity for drama revealed itself quickly. They set up a puppet theatre group that met weekly in preparation for the August carnival which was to be the only major fund raiser they dared to establish – wary, as they were, of the burden parishioners carried for their own parishes. Before Christmas much effort was expended in the preparation of a nativity play to which the Bishop was invited. Some of the actors spoke later of the confidence brought out in them by performing in such events and their understanding of the Grail's characteristic use of talents.

Late in 1956, Adelaide Crookall accompanied by Margot Harrison, arrived at the invitation of his Lordship to give a lecture tour in various parts of the diocese. A weekend retreat for young women from school leavers to thirty years of age attracted over one hundred girls who lived locally or at the neighbouring parishes and districts. This was a creative and stimulating experience for many girls brought together for the first time. The success of this weekend and others like it, fostered a sense of solidarity among the young women. It certainly helped to spread the Grail's influence and mission throughout Mackay and the surrounding districts.²⁷

Initiatives and diversity of Grail activities

Towards the end of 1958 it was evident that the diversity of Grail activities had grown significantly. In the previous

year (July 1957) Joanna Waite reported to Bishop Tynan that she had acted on his suggestion to arrange a meeting of priests in support of extending the Grail apostolate. This might be in the area of Preparation for Marriage talks and other wider subjects such as The Catholic Church. She wrote to him as follows:

Fr McAlister asked me to include the parish priests from the country. It was a most successful afternoon's discussion. All the priests present agreed that it was time we branched out but there was strong feeling that our programme should not affect girls already engaged in parish activity.²⁸

The talks on the Catholic Church had a strong ecumenical flavour inviting the wider community to attend. Challenging subjects such as "What is religion? Is it reasonable? Is it necessary?" were meant to stimulate and activate an intellectual aspect of lived Christianity. Nevertheless they were advertised with the full support of the clergy.

It probably came as a shock to Bishop Tynan when Joanna advised that she would not be returning after their Christmas sojourn to the south for the Nucleus meetings, as she was to prepare for a missionary outpost in South Africa. Anna Moynihan who had just finished training would arrive soon to assist Pat Sheeran²⁹. Bishop Tynan's farewell letter to Joanna was steeped in his great respect and the affectionate working relationship that existed in their frequent correspondence:

During the years the Grail has been in the Diocese I have had abundant reason to thank God for the blessings you have brought to us through your apostolic labours

amongst the young women and others here. That this has succeeded is entirely due to your own zeal, sacrifice and ability...

I know of no better approach to Catholic girls than that which the Grail has developed. Believing this and also having confidence in the ever increasing influence in Australia, I pray that your numbers will be increased by the addition of many more dedicated members.³⁰

1959 was a busy year, filled with a variety of activities: the annual Carnival, the weekend retreat and another Christmas play which the Bishop was cordially invited to attend. Not long after that, on an *ad limina* visit to Europe, Bishop Tynan died suddenly in London. It was a tragic loss of so active and spiritual leader at the relatively young age of 52³¹.

Bishop Tynan was succeeded by Bishop Francis Rush, an energetic Townsville diocesan priest, who had not experienced the apostolate of the Ladies of the Grail. Certainly, the same rapport they had with Bishop Tynan was not there. Early in 1962, Pat Sheeran was to write informing him that the Grail would soon be opening a residential college for young women at the newly designated Townsville University College. In his reply, he mentioned that he had heard from the Rosary Sisters in Tasmania that two of the sisters working in his diocese had reported to their Mother General that the hostel run by the Grail in Mackay was to their mind the best thing of its kind that they had seen³². Pat Sheeran stayed on for fourteen years assisted by a number of talented young Grail women. It was her capacity for organisation and management in those early years that made the foundation in Mackay so successful.

Ballybrac: Centre for lay Catholic life in Mackay

One of the Grail's principal tenets was to set up what might be called 'centres of Catholic life'. Living at such a centre while continuing work with their normal employment or study, the young boarders were able to take part in various activities and courses and above all experience Catholicism as a way of life rather than a doctrine to be learnt or studied. This differed markedly from a parallel stream movement in Australia viz. the National Catholic Girls Movement which followed the Cardijn paradigm for workers in shops, factories and offices. This movement had an emphasis on contact, friendship and influence – on seeing a problem, making a judgment and following with action with guidance to each group from a priest chaplain³³.

Ruth Crowe described the experience of Christian residential ministry when she, Sue Treagle and Sonia Laverty managed the house in 1974. Looking back on the opening days when it was expected that the Grail would provide a home for girls away from their families, eighteen years later there was still a great demand for accommodation for girls who worked in the town. So, there were still over twenty girls in residence. As she explained:

Anyone who has lived in a group, or community, situation for any length of time knows that this style of life has many advantages while at the same time it makes demands on people. The most obvious demand made on everyone is to care for one another. You cannot live on top of each other, as we do, and develop – or even exist – if the same attitude is not shared by the group. Although different people have different

interests, we try to make the most of opportunities when we can do things together. Picnics and 21st birthdays, special teas for those leaving to be married, and other celebrations help us to enjoy doing things together. At certain times and liturgical seasons, for example, during Lent, we make special efforts as a group to pray more together. There were also occurring for some the daily practice of Catholics attending the weekday masses or other devotions, the grace before and after meals, and the prayerful concerns of residents' loved ones ... For the Ballybrac community as a Christian household, there was quite a definite agreement on how we *should* treat one another, talk about one another, help one another.³⁴

Ruth made the observation gleaned from talking to people who ran similar institutions that there needed to be some leadership in the group so that at least a framework is set up within which the group would agree to operate. It was in this role that the Grail nucleus women did provide that leadership as distinct from say a manager of a boarding establishment or backpackers' hostel. The positive things the girls had to say about the situations were that they enjoyed the companionship, the opportunity to stand on their own feet, make their own decisions (and take the consequences). One former resident was later to reminisce:

The Grail stretched us...I think they set a standard.. I felt as if there was a sort of higher standard up there and one automatically lifted oneself to meet it. The Grail developed our spiritual lives and that's how they did it ... sort of by discussion and soft methods of witness – not by lecturing us.³⁵

A resident of over five years observed:

I met a wide range of people from around the world who shared the high moral ground on issues such as social justice, world development, racism, inequality of opportunity. For some of these people, their stance was a total commitment and that was inspiring.³⁶

Little could they anticipate the magnitude of change coming to the Catholic world that would bring the church into the modern world. But, Father van Ginneken had exhorted the Grail to remain modern in their methods and means, to move with the times and to adapt to changing conditions and needs³⁷.

Vatican II (1962-1965) and the Grail

Not only did the Rockhampton Diocese receive a new bishop whose administration was somewhat different from that of Bishop Tynan, the Catholic church had a new Pope, John XXIII, who surprised the world by calling an ecumenical council to which all the bishops of the world were summoned to attend. The watershed council known as Vatican II heralded huge changes for the practising Catholic. One significant document, *The Church in the Modern World*, proclaimed the church itself as the pilgrim 'People of God' and the call to holiness was universal. So during the late sixties and early seventies, ordinary lay Catholics as well as clergy were adjusting to many changes in how they worshipped and saw their call to discipleship in a different light. The laity was to be regarded as much a part of the Church as the clergy and members of religious congregations. Most significant in the liturgy was the change from the centuries old Latin to the vernacular (ie English in Australia). Altars were turned around so that the priest celebrated Mass facing the

people, and the call for full and active participation introduced the singing of English hymns for all. There were responses for the congregation to make in answer to the celebrating priest's prayers. The Grail had been in the forefront of such responses with the Dialogue Mass which was sometimes a feature of their gatherings. Mass at *Ballybrac* regularly celebrated on a Sunday became noted for its singing with guitar and Sonia's banjo accompaniment. Gone were the mantillas, hats and veils, and women were permitted to read from the scriptures and act as cantors for the responsorial psalm. The Council widened the mission of the Church to serve the modern world and to communicate God's saving grace through entering into a great range of activities on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, the disadvantaged, the underprivileged and refugees and so on. Catholics were urged to consider social justice and human rights just as integral to the Church's mission as its liturgy and its religious education³⁸.

In the Rockhampton diocese, Bishop Rush moved quickly to implement the changes that had been promulgated. With the Grail staff already moving in this direction it seemed inevitable that *Ballybrac* would become a centre of adult faith, learning and renewal. Parishes were encouraged to set up parish councils and the Grail leaders at *Ballybrac* played a significant part in the training and organising of councils in the whole region of Mackay³⁹.

During the decade 1970 to 1980 in Mackay, specifically at *Ballybrac*, there was a distinct programme of adult education, catechetics and spirituality, a missionary focus

on women in the Pacific, a determined outreach on social justice issues and ecumenism.

Preparation for marriage

From the very outset the Grail staff - Pat, Joanna and others who followed Joanna - were not content enough with providing accommodation for country girls whose homes were too far away from work in Mackay. Christian living meant preparing for the life ahead.

At the time of the establishment of the Grail centre, girls had a limited window of employment. On becoming engaged to marry, they were usually advised by their employers that their work would terminate on their marriage. In these years the residents at *Ballybrac* numbered over twenty so the excitement and joy for any girl about to be married was shared by all. A programme of marriage preparation was offered for the girls and their fiancés which covered a variety of topics and was aimed at the transition from working girl to married life and domesticity. It opened up the vision of how a Christian couple would live out their vocation.

Over time, there was economic and cultural change. There was no restriction on working after marriage and many girls who had gained extra qualifications did not have to discard their experience immediately. In 1968 Pope Paul VI promulgated his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* which touched married couples at their deepest point.

From the time of the centre's earliest establishment, and with the blessing of the clergy in the deanery, courses to prepare couples for marriage were offered across the whole Catholic community of Mackay. From time to

time, the subject matter was assessed and offered perhaps by a different team. This might consist of a doctor, a social worker, an accountant, and generally other married couples, with a priest offering his spiritual vision of how a Christian married couple ought to live⁴⁰. One of the presenters, a member on the Council of the National Catholic Marriage Education Council, put some of the success of the programmes to the atmosphere of friendliness and happiness at *Ballybrac*⁴¹.

The Grail Catechetical Centre

During the decade of the sixties and well into the seventies there existed problems with the provision of Catholic education of almost crisis proportions. This was due to expanding population but also a falling off of vocations to the religious life in the major teaching orders and decisions to appoint lay teachers at considerable cost⁴². While *Ballybrac* had from the beginning been a point of gathering for talks on the faith and aspects of the Church, in 1969, under the direction of Sonia Laverty and assisted by Maria Malone and Denise Sullivan, the Grail took an active role in the training of catechists. There was an announcement that the Grail centre is now making its facilities available for the establishment of a regional Catechetical Centre for the Mackay district, financed by the parishes concerned⁴³.

There had always been generous lay people volunteering to visit the state schools for the purpose of preparing the Catholic children for reception of the sacraments once per week in the short period allowed by the government. It was supplemented in the school holidays by camps, retreats and summer schools⁴⁴. This applied especially

where it was too far for the children to attend Catholic schools or for some other reason. By the late 60s, many parents opted to send their children to state schools. More and more lay people were called upon to be catechists and training for this work was desperately needed.

Writing in the *Grail Newsletter* Ruth Crowe reported:

While new catechists took an introductory course in theology, learnt some classroom techniques and were helped with preparation of lessons, the ‘experienced’ group took a fresh look at some areas of doctrine they had been teaching for a number of years. The theme, Jesus Christ – the Centre of our Faith, was one such focus. As well, this group was brought up to date with the thinking behind the ‘life-centred’ catechesis.⁴⁵

In December of that same year the *Rockhampton Review* reported that seventy-four catechists in Mackay and district had during 1972 continued to accept a major part of the responsibility for the religious formation of the more than twelve hundred Catholic children attending thirty-eight state primary and secondary schools in the area. By 1976, the activities at *Ballybrac* had widened considerably. However, the operation of the Grail House as the centre for the teaching of religious instruction in state schools continued to flourish until its closure in 1984.

Grail mothers’ discussion group

Groups of mothers were encouraged to meet once per month for a discussion and morning tea. An in-house child minding service was set up to enable babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers to be safely occupied and taken care of. Primarily it was a support group providing a venue for

women sharing the same ideals but not the same ideas. There was support for each other in efforts to discover individual potential and fulfilment of both as a woman and as a person. Members of the Grail and visiting and local speakers stimulated discussion on a great variety of subjects. It was an encouragement of mature thinking, especially on current social issues providing an area for growth in and knowledge of the Christian faith itself⁴⁶. At the time, the Commonwealth Government had set up a Royal Commission on Human Relationships which acted as a catalyst for discussion on many different lifestyles. One mother outlined 'by products' of such a group as theirs were: a certain self-confidence, which many lacked, an ability to express oneself, to communicate and share ideas and experiences; a gaining of basic discussion techniques, including the ability to listen to others.

Noteworthy of the achievements of this group was a submission to the State Government Enquiry into the Status of Women. The Grail Mothers Group focused on the 'The Status of the Homemaker', 'The Challenge of Family Life', and 'The Role of Women in Society'⁴⁷. Their submissions received media attention by a comment in *Sunday Mail* March 3, 1974.

Social Justice activities

While the number of hostel residents may have lessened from those early days, the Grail presence in Mackay was all the more prominent among citizens. Sonia Laverty and Ruth Crowe were an enthusiastic team involving themselves in adult faith formation sessions. They were active in the social justice issues of the day and a group had read and discussed Peter Hollingworth's recent book,

*The Powerless Poor*⁴⁸. They were dynamic members of the Mackay Regional Council for Social Development. Established in 1966, it consisted of a number of welfare organisations and churches, a number of people from organisations other than social work as well as interested citizens. Its existence demonstrated to the government the concerns of the community to have social needs met.

The big impetus for change came with the election of a new Federal government in 1972. Ruth and Sonia worked closely with Mrs Carmel Daveson, a social worker, to achieve a number of initiatives. Foremost of these was the invitation to Jacqui Kuiters, a new graduate from Sydney University, to spend twelve months in Mackay. She was asked to establish for the community a need for a full time youth worker. The outcome of this was a successful application by the Mackay Regional Council for Social Development for funds to pay the salary of a full time youth worker. A direct grant under the Australian Assistance Plan made this appointment possible⁴⁹. The social worker was focused on youth unemployment in the Mackay region. It was forecast that over seventy per cent of young school leavers of that year would not be able to find work. The Grail leaders noted the effects on young women who had not been able to find employment or who had been put off when they turned eighteen years of age because employers did not want to pay them the wage increase⁵⁰.

The Whitlam government established a Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, extending some earlier research by a Professor Henderson as to what constituted a poverty line. This commission received widespread publicity and

its reports in 1975 were widely disseminated. Concurrently a nation-wide education campaign was set up by the major Christian denominations under the theme of Action for World Development. It wasn't a fund raising effort, more to raise awareness of the issue of 'development' and what that meant. In Mackay, Ruth Crowe was on the organising committee to have groups of eight to twelve people meeting in houses in an ecumenical atmosphere and following a programme of discussion over four weeks⁵¹.

Grail Missionaries

From its earliest beginnings in Holland, Grail women felt a strong call to be missionaries, and after World War II members of the International Grail were travelling to a number of under developed countries such as Indonesia, Africa and India as lay missionaries. As well, it was Elizabeth Reid, home on holidays from Hong Kong who envisaged *Ballybrac* as a centre for training lay missionaries. From time to time the Rockhampton Diocesan paper *The Review* featured in its pages stories of a remarkable blooming of missionary effort. Various members of women religious, priests and brothers were farewelled in ceremonies and endowed with a missionary cross before they set off for overseas postings especially Papua New Guinea.

At regular intervals during the 1970s Grail women from Mackay were involved in a series of South Pacific Summer Schools. Some of the goals the Grail programme enunciated were:

- To develop awareness in young people in the region of the South Pacific and their common future.
- To break down barriers caused by ignorance of values and qualities of persons of different cultures.
- Grail South Pacific Summer Schools were held in 1973 Fiji, 1975 Sydney, 1977 Papua New Guinea, 1979 Tonga, 1981 Sydney and finally 1987 in Brisbane.

The changeover of Grail staff in the late seventies brought an authentic aspect of missionary activity to the community of *Ballybrac* and its wider environs. Catherine Bagley was back in her hometown and in her childhood home after many years in Northern Ghana. She was part of an educational Grail team some African Catholic bishops had sponsored to teach English in the secondary colleges in their dioceses. She was soon joined by Sheila Hawthorn who had a fine record of generous service in education in the Wewak region of Papua New Guinea. Added to that was a lengthy visit of Frances Scott (her name Anglicised) one of the first five who came to Australia. International Grail president Simone Taghere from Egypt also visited the Mackay centre. Outside of duties at *Ballybrac*, Catherine became involved in teaching at Our Lady of Mercy College Mackay as well as concerning herself with the English language needs of newly arrived refugees from Vietnam. The links to Papua New Guinea were strengthened when Mary Anne Baillie returned home to Mackay where she and her mother lived. She took time to tell of her experiences in Wewak and so extended the horizons of *Ballybrac* residents.

As an attempt to be a little prepared for the project for which Jenny Mitchell, Jill Herbert and Sheila Hawthorn were going to be involved in the following year in Papua New Guinea, a week's programme was organised at *Ballybrac* during August 1981. This included intensive Pidgin lessons for Jenny and Jill⁵². As a consequence of the year Jen and Jill spent in Papua New Guinea together with Sheila who had already spent many years in educational activities there, strong links were forged with a fledgling establishment of a Grail community among Papuan women in Wewak.

The closing years: 1980-1984:

The Grail Nucleus staff, usually two full time members, had various types of expertise but an essential was to be able to run a hospitable house efficiently and happily⁵³. Every new Grail staffer brought her own gifts and style of leadership. In 1980 Denise Sullivan, a Brisbanite, took over the reins at *Ballybrac* as director. Formerly an academic librarian, Sullivan had been working in Melbourne as a chaplain at Monash University, and had won the President's Prize when she gained a degree in theology.

At that time *Ballybrac* had a full household with twelve residents to care for, to share their lives in a more intimate way, as well as the cooking, cleaning, and laundry. It was real life with the coming and going of working people and the economic reality when unemployment confronted them. As if that was not enough, the house was a hive of activity inviting people for talks and meetings - marriage preparation, catechists and some in-service training in religious education for lay teachers in Catholic schools

The Grail and *Ballybrac* had been identified by the deanery in Mackay as a centre for Adult Christian Formation. The task was to take up some of the challenges of the Vatican II Council and distil its teachings. Inherent in the programme of renewal was to assist Catholics identify with this paradigm. Vatican II had offered, for example, a move from a negative attitude about protestantism towards ecumenism. There was a call for a return to God's Word as the source of the Church's life. There was far reaching renewal of sacramental sources, e.g, the change from confession to reconciliation. Overall, there was a call for the whole people of God to search for holiness and to assume responsibility for the church's mission⁵⁴.

Visiting speakers from the South were a rarity but over the time Denise managed to invite a few people of note: Fr John McCristal OFM (brother of Grail lady, Margaret McCristal, Principal of St Raphael's College, James Cook University); Fr Bill O'Shea gave a series of enlivening faith talks; Fr David Tomlins, OCSO, a Cistercian monk from Tarrawarra, Victoria, and a former Queensland University undergraduate colleague of Denise's whose talk, 'Finding God in one's own experience', attracted ninety people. Fr John Thornhill, SM, and Fr Bill Hewitt, an English Jesuit, gave workshops to which a wider ecumenical audience was welcomed. The catechists also enjoyed the liturgical insights of Father Darryl Millard, a Divine Word missionary, home on holidays, in his talks 'Understanding the Mass'. Another visitor was long time member of this Society, Sr Genevieve Carroll, a Josephite Sister and former school friend of Denise Sullivan.

Bishop Bernard Wallace of Rockhampton recognized the work that was being done in adult Christian formation at *Ballybrac* and invited Denise Sullivan to facilitate a series of diocesan meetings in Rockhampton. For this work, the bishop offered a stipend which covered some of her travel expenses. A diocesan pastoral council had been established to assist the work of the parish pastoral councils and to lead programmes such as those on the Christian family. She represented the diocese at an inservice workshop and was thereupon asked to speak to groups in Mackay parishes⁵⁵.

Sullivan's co-worker in 1981-82 was Elizabeth Lancaster who had returned to her home town to work as a sugar chemist in one of the local mills when the cane crushing season commenced. Elizabeth was heavily engaged in a community workshop on Housing and Accommodation in Mackay. It was reported that in 1981 there were over five thousand tertiary students attending the Mackay College of Technical and Further Education⁵⁶.

It was part of the procedures of the annual gathering in Sydney of the Grail Nucleus to report on the activities of their various missions. In 1967 a comprehensive review covering the Mackay centre and the social and economic prospects of the region had been undertaken. Even at that early time, it was foreseen that there would be distinct changes occurring in the education and employment of girls. These evolving changes pointed to a time when hostel type accommodation such as the Grail provided would cease to be needed by young Catholic girls⁵⁷.

Since 1982 there had been serious discussion about the establishment of a Christian Life Centre in each of the

major cities of the diocese: Bundaberg, Rockhampton and Mackay. Such centres, under the auspices of the diocese, would house the apparatus to conduct work of what became known as Centacare. Thus, in May 1984 an announcement was made that the Grail members were no longer in a position to provide accommodation services. For over twelve months, it had been mooted by the Rockhampton Diocesan Pastoral Council that the establishment of a Christian Life Centre in Mackay was essential. Now the Grail centre, *Ballybrac*, was to be offered to the parish of Saint Patrick as a suitable venue where a broad scope of services and activities could be offered. To all involved, this decision seemed to be the best outcome for what had become over thirty years a centre where “thoughtful, holy women had striven to live profoundly Christian lives in the midst of worldly distractions and the humdrum circumstances of everyday life⁵⁸.”

In his address at the Mass of thanksgiving marking the end of the Grail’s time in Mackay, Bishop Bernard Wallace, Bishop of Rockhampton, paid tribute to the Grail. He commended them as very valuable lay women, lay members of the church who had recognized long before the Vatican Council the vital role of the laity in the mission of the church:

Above all as women they felt they had a special ability and role to foster in modern society certain vital qualities: a true sense of God; a spirit of love and of deep concern for those in trouble or sorrow; a strong commitment to the cause of peace; and a strong recognition of human dignity and human rights.

As you leave you carry with you our deep gratitude; our real affection and love; and our sincere hopes and prayers that God will continue to bless you and your work where His paths lead you.⁵⁹

In its thirty years at Mackay, the Grail had provided a Christian home to many young women, it taught them life skills and equipped them for lives as wives and mothers, as lay parish leaders, teachers, missionaries, for the church and the professions.

After the Grail withdrew from Mackay, *Ballybrac* was renovated to provide suitable office space and interviewing rooms for what became the Catholic Family Life Centre until its sale in 2000. In November, the *Mackay Mercury* announced: “A century of history will draw to a close tomorrow when one of Mackay’s landmark buildings goes under the auctioneer’s hammer”. *Ballybrac*, the house which had so many memories was sold for removal probably to a resident of the Clermont district for an undisclosed price, the land having previously been sold to Toyota Motors, an adjoining and expanding business.

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⁴ Crane, Geraldine, “Brisbane NCGM/YCW 1945-70” in *Proceedings Brisbane Catholic Historical Society 4, 2002, p104*.

⁵ Bagley, Catherine, *Australia A history of the Australian Grail* submitted to International Headquarters of the Grail, The

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- ⁶ Hegerty, P “National Catholic Girls Movement: a snippet of Brisbane History”. *In House (Grail)2014*, p 6.
- ⁷ *Spanning a century of the Catholic Diocese of Rockhampton 1882-1982*, Rockhampton, 1992, p 49.
- ⁸ Tynan, Andrew G Bishop, Letters to Maria Malone et al (Rockhampton Diocesan Archives 1947-)
- ⁹ *Queensland Yearbook (1954/55)*
- ¹⁰ Tynan, Andrew G. Bishop: *Letter to Joanna Waite 22/10/53* (Rockhampton Diocesan Archives)
- ¹¹ Crookall, Adelaide *Letters to Bishop Tynan 26/11/53 and 19/1/54* (Rockhampton Diocesan Archives)
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- ¹³ “Memorable Lectures by Grail Leaders” (*The Review, Rockhampton*) Sept 1955) p10
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- ¹⁹ Crookall, Adelaide *Letter to Bp Tynan*. (Rockhampton Diocesan Archives) 8/9/55
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