



The Life and Work of St Mary of the Cross: A View from Sandhurst

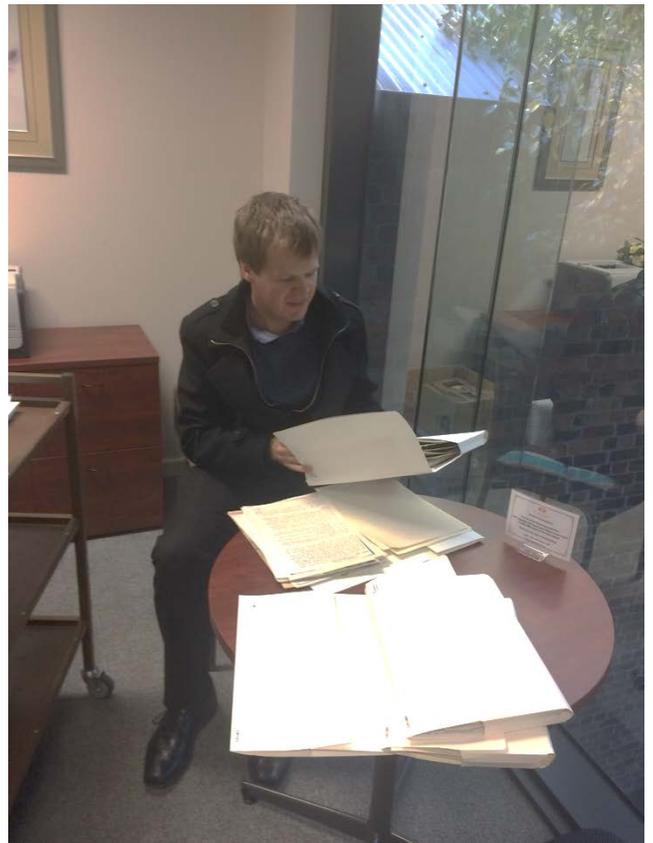
Part 3 of 3: Mary and the Sisters head to Numurkah

By Jackson Saunders

Sandhurst seminarian, Jackson Saunders, offers this final article in his three-part series on the life of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. We reflect on Mary's travels in the Sandhurst Diocese and the work of the Sisters in Numurkah, Eaglehawk, Nagambie, Rushworth, Pyramid Hill, Tallangatta and Corryong.

Mary MacKillop accepted an invitation from Numurkah Parish Priest, Father Michael O'Connor, who she had known when they were both in Penola, to help set up a school in the parish in the Sandhurst Diocese in Victoria in 1890.³⁷ Four Sisters arrived in Numurkah led by Sister Gertrude, at a time when there was an inadequate water supply, no drainage, and no rubbish collection. Mary was there for the opening.³⁸ St Joseph's School for rural poor was opened in January 1890, in a one-roomed building, which had been the original weatherboard Church. Classes began in the current school on February 4, 1920.³⁹ In their centenary celebrations in 1990, it was estimated that 16,000 children had received a Catholic education there.⁴⁰ Josephites also acted as the school principal until 2000.⁴¹ Today the connection with the Sisters at St Joseph's continues with Sister Janet Nolan, who lives in Numurkah and maintains a pastoral presence with the school and parish communities.

The work of the Institute extended in the Sandhurst Diocese to Eaglehawk in 1920 when they assumed teaching responsibilities from the Mercy Sisters at St Liborius' Primary School, who left sixteen years after opening the school in 1904.⁴²



Jackson studies the archives at the Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre in East Melbourne on the Sisters' work in the Sandhurst Diocese. PICTURE: Lloyd Fisk.

³⁷ Joan Ryan, *A Seed is Sown* (East Burwood: Advent Business Forms, 1992), 17.

³⁸ Philomena McGuigan, "Numurkah," in *Sisters of St Joseph. Sandhurst Diocese*. Circa 1984. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

³⁹ Frances Ardern, *Celebrating the Story: A history of Catholic Education in Sandhurst* (Bendigo: Catholic Education Office Sandhurst, 2015), 92.

⁴⁰ Unknown author, *First Josephite Foundation in Victoria: Numurkah 1890-1990*, 2. Information thanks to Lloyd Fisk at the Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre Archives.

⁴¹ Ardern, *Celebrating the Story*, 92.

⁴² Ardern, *Celebrating the Story*, 75.

When the Josephite Sisters arrived, many of the students were children of gold miners and “times were hard.”⁴³ The Sisters shared the lives of the local people, walking the same dusty roads where there was no electricity, telephone and transport.⁴⁴ The Sisters left St Liborius in 1979 and were estimated to have taught 3,500 children during this time. At their farewell, local parishioner, Dolly Carroll highlighted that the Sisters responded to any need, comforted the sick and the poor, as well as shared the little they had themselves.⁴⁵ Other significant achievements included seven past pupils studying for the priesthood or religious life.⁴⁶

The Institute’s mission in Sandhurst grew when Bishop John McCarthy invited the Sisters to Nagambie. They opened St Joseph’s Primary School in 1923 with Sisters Dympna, Borromeo and Ursula. The Sisters started the school soon after a school run by lay staff had closed at Wahrung, so had responding to a need to provide education in the rural district.⁴⁷ Sister Dympna noted in a letter to Bishop McCarthy dated June 24, 1923, that new Catholic families were coming to the district and that thirty-three children had received first Holy Communion on June 3.⁴⁸

On May 23, 1935, the Nagambie Superior, Sister Giuseppi, noted that the school had 50 children when it opened and that since then there had “been a steady increase in the numbers.”⁴⁹ Father Francis Marriott, Parish Priest of Nagambie in 1982, noted on their sixtieth anniversary in Nagambie that the Sisters had seen many changes, including the introduction of radio, electricity, television, washing machines and air-conditioners. He added that there had been a reduction of Irish clergy and hierarchy,

with “scarcely an Australian Bishop in 1922 (and) only two active Irish Bishops in Australia in 1982.”⁵⁰

The Sisters withdrew from Nagambie in 1983; however, their legacy lives on with one of Mary’s best-known quotes on the school’s front gates: “Never see a need without doing something about it.”⁵¹

The 1950s was a significant decade for the Institute in the Sandhurst Diocese with Josephite schools opening in Rushworth, Pyramid Hill and Tallangatta in 1954, 1956 and 1958, respectively. Bishop Bernard Stewart opened St Mary’s school in 1954, with Sisters Cuthbert, Paschal and Cecily part of the convent. The school opened with 84 pupils but grew to have 209 pupils by 1967. Secondary school classes were also provided until the end of 1979.⁵² Sister Geraldine Larkins, who now serves as the Deputy Director of Catholic Education for the Sandhurst Diocese based in Bendigo, was the last Josephite Principal at Rushworth in 1997.⁵³ Today, the Institute continues to have a pastoral presence in the town with Sister Cornelia Versluys, who is involved in parish ministry to the sick and elderly.

The Josephite spirit of living among the people and trusting in God’s providence was evident in Pyramid Hill when Sisters Genevieve and Anne arrived in 1956. The Sisters showed their poverty of spirit while having nowhere to live when they arrived. They exemplified the courage of Mary, “who dreamed of providing education to small, isolated communities.”⁵⁴ The parish had, however, purchased two beds for the Sisters, which were put in the home of parishioner, Mary Erwin. Subsequently, a local man, Bert Wood, offered his

⁴³ Philomena McGuigan, “Eaglehawk,” in *Sisters of St Joseph. Sandhurst Diocese*, 1. Circa 1984. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

⁴⁴ Aylene Kirkwood, *St Liborius Primary School No. 262 100 Years 1904-2004* (Eaglehawk: St Liborius Primary School, 2004), 32.

⁴⁵ McGuigan, “Eaglehawk,” 1.

⁴⁶ McGuigan, “Eaglehawk,” 2.

⁴⁷ Unknown author, *A Potted History of the Sisters in Nagambie*. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

⁴⁸ Sister Dympna, *Letter to Bishop John McCarthy*, 24 June 1923. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

⁴⁹ Sister Guiseppi, *Letter to Bishop John McCarthy*, 23 May 1934. Circa 1984. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

⁵⁰ Francis Marriott, *I have come that they may have life: Letter to Nagambie parishioners*, 1982. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

⁵¹ Ardern, *Celebrating the Story*, 89.

⁵² Philomena McGuigan, “Rushworth,” in *Sisters of St Joseph. Sandhurst Diocese*. Circa 1984. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

⁵³ Ardern, *Celebrating the Story*, 96.

⁵⁴ Ardern, *Celebrating the Story*, 93.

cottage to the Sisters and moved out to live in a shed on his farm.⁵⁵

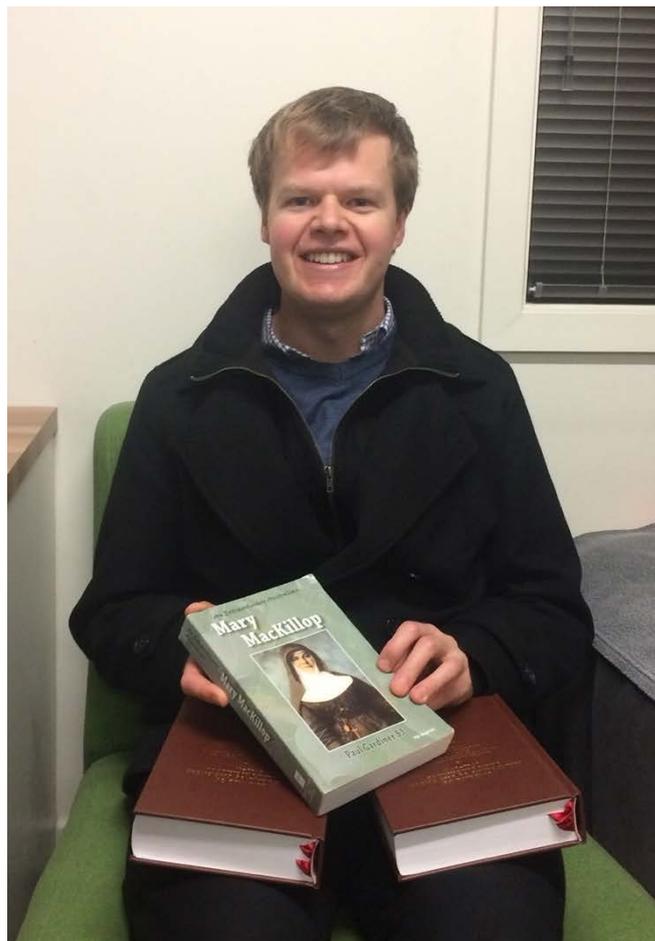


The bust of Mary at Corpus Christi College in Carlton. PICTURE: Jackson Saunders.

The appreciation for their presence was evident among the parishioners, as the school provided for Preparatory to Proficiency standard, which previously had only been available in Kerang, 52 kilometres away. This was shown when about 20 men volunteered three weeks' work to the school's contractor, Mr. J. A. Stone, to have the building ready for its opening in February 1956.⁵⁶ St Patrick's Primary School opened with 60 students in 1956.⁵⁷ Three years later, the parish purchased an old home and made repairs to it for the Sisters to live in. The Sisters' ministry also included home visitations and caring for the sick. The Sisters continued to teach and minister in the town until they withdrew in 1976.⁵⁸

The construction of the Hume Weir in the 1950s shaped the context of the Sisters' arrival in the new town of Tallangatta in 1958. The Sisters had been available to arrive there in 1949. However, the "snowy mountains scheme required the flooding of

the old town of Tallangatta so the decision to go to the parish was delayed until a parish centre was set up on the new site."⁵⁹ They arrived two years after the new town had been established.⁶⁰ The initial group included Sisters Malachi O'Dowd, Veronica Gerdes and Baptista McCarthy.⁶¹ Parish Priest, Father George Sait, had invited the Sisters to his parish and the school was opened on February 24, with 71 students in Years Prep to Eight. There were also boarders from Corryong for a short time. The school continued to be run by Sisters until 1980 when the first lay Principal was appointed.⁶²



Jackson with some of the many books he has studied on Mary's life.

PICTURE: Nicolas Calandra.

⁵⁵ Jill Barnard, *From Humble Beginnings: The story of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in Victoria, 1890-2009* (Richmond: Utber and Patullo Publishing, 2009), 99.

⁵⁶ Philomena McGuigan, "Pyramid Hill," in *Sisters of St Joseph. Sandhurst Diocese*, 1. Circa 1984. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

⁵⁷ Ardern, *Celebrating the Story*, 93.

⁵⁸ Barnard, *From Humble Beginnings*, 102.

⁵⁹ Philomena McGuigan, "Tallangatta," in *Sisters of St Joseph. Sandhurst Diocese*, 1. Circa 1984. Information thanks to Donna Bailey at the Sandhurst Diocesan Archives.

⁶⁰ Barnard, *From Humble Beginnings*, 116.

⁶¹ McGuigan, "Tallangatta," 1.

⁶² Ardern, *Celebrating the Story*, 104.

The final parish the Sisters extended their work to was Corryong on February 4, 1964, when Sacred Heart Primary School opened with 55 students. The first Principal of the school was Sister Eugene Gallagher.⁶³ The Sisters had arrived in Corryong through the initiative of Father Leo Lacey, who was the first Parish Priest of the newly formed parish established by Bishop Bernard Stewart on March 15, 1959. Father Lacey had been bequeathed a plot of land for the Sisters by parishioner, Dan Cronin, to establish a convent. At the same time, he worked to build a school on the Church grounds.⁶⁴

The Josephites continued to have an active presence in Corryong until 2016 when Sister Patricia George finished as Pastoral Associate of the parish. In her second stint at Corryong, Sister Patricia had been active since the mid-1990s. Firstly, she was with Sister Margaret Wise and in later years on her own. The Sisters took on increasing responsibility when the Parish Priest took leave due to ill health in 1995. Their ministry included ecumenical dialogue, palliative care, meals on wheels, aged-care work, family visitation and occasionally driving priests to celebrate Mass at the nearby Walwa.⁶⁵ Sister Patricia also recalls being called to the hospital to sit with dying patients when they had no one with them.⁶⁶ Sister Helen Smith, who was a principal and teacher at Corryong between 1976 and 1979, remembers her ministry there with fondness. Highlights include working with Sisters Mary McArdle and Ellen Lane, as well as hosting dinners for Parish Priest Father Frank Jones and Michael O'Connell, who was a teacher there. She also enjoyed singing at Mass, supporting parish activities and home and hospital visitations.⁶⁷



Jackson with Sr Helen Smith, who worked in Corryong in the 1970s and is Museum Co-ordinator at the Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre in East Melbourne.

PICTURE: Lloyd Fisk.

⁶³ Ardern, *Celebrating the Story*, 74.

⁶⁴ Unknown author, "Corryong's 100-Years Dream Comes True," in *The Advocate* (15 August, 1963), 19. Information thanks to Lloyd Fisk at the Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre Archives.

⁶⁵ Barnard, *From Humble Beginnings*, 182.

⁶⁶ Barnard, *From Humble Beginnings*, 183.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Interview*.