

## *Quinn and the Josephite Philosophy of Education*

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### **Bishop James Quinn and the Josephite Philosophy of Education**

In December 1878 Sister Collette Carolan wrote from Mackay to Sr Josephine MacMullen, the leader of the Sisters of St Joseph in Queensland. In her letter she tells of a recent visit to the parish by Bishop James Quinn. The bishop had spent three days visiting the Orphanage and seemed pleased. He had also visited the two schools run by the sisters and complimented them on the way the children behaved and answered the questions he had asked. Sr Collette then shared that the bishop had told her that the Sisters of St Joseph did not suit him and that he meant to replace them when he could. The letter continues 'All went on well till he came to say goodbye. While speaking to me, Father Bucas [the parish priest] came to say the steamer bell had rung. 'Come here Father Bucas,' the bishop said. 'Now you and Sister Collette are face to face, I want you to distinctly understand that I intend to send other Sisters here as soon as I can. I want a first-class education given in all the leading places and must send those qualified to give it.' The Sisters of St Joseph left Mackay on 20 January 1880. Why was Dr Quinn so dissatisfied with the Josephite method and philosophy of education? To answer this question it is necessary to understand both the Josephite approach to education and the bishop's expectation of the Catholic schools in his diocese.

### **The Josephite innovation -equality of opportunity**

With the Josephites came a model of school organisation that differed from that of the schools run by other religious orders in Australia during the nineteenth century. In the other Catholic schools the usual practice was to divide the school into two sections, the 'select' and the 'general.'<sup>1</sup> In some cases both sections were housed in the same building, but the children attending the 'select' school enjoyed privileges with regard to the subjects taught and the dress worn, which were denied to the children of the less affluent, pupils of the 'general' school.<sup>2</sup> This device which bowed to the class distinction of the time, found no place in the schools of the Sisters of St Joseph. Egalitarianism was described in 1884 by a visitor to Australia, Francis W. L. Adams, as an attitude of 'a people that is neither

servile nor insolent, but only shows its respect for itself by its respect for others.<sup>3</sup> This was an outstanding characteristic of the sisterhood. It underpinned the organisational structure of the institute and that of its schools, and was noticed by the *Brisbane Courier* that drew the readers' attention to the fact that no distinction of creed or social class had been made in the schools run by the sisters.<sup>4</sup>

This attitude of equality flowed into the relationship of the sisters with the parents as well as with the children they taught. The sisters were directed to 'make themselves the companions of children, and not assume the authority of superiors except in the most gentle manner.'<sup>5</sup> In Brisbane as in the more remote settlements where the sisters opened Catholic schools, they struggled side by side with the new inhabitants not only to enable the formation of a Catholic church community, but also to promote a collaborative civic spirit based on the emerging Australian ideals of democracy and egalitarianism. In this style of school organisation the Josephites led the way for Catholic schools. Gradually, other Catholic schools dropped the division of 'select' and 'general' and adopted this especially Australian model.

#### **Suited to the children of the working class in the nineteenth century**

A characteristic of the sisters' schools was their emphasis on practicality, with no pretensions to offer what was termed a 'prestige education,' and in this sense the claim could be made that what was offered was not in Bishop Quinn's terms 'a first class education.'<sup>6</sup> The Woods/MacKillop scheme was designed for the elementary education of the children of the poor who were irregular in their attendance at school. Even though school attendance was made compulsory in Queensland in 1875, the regulation applied to children between the ages of six and twelve and then for only sixty days a year.<sup>7</sup> Coming from homes where often there was little interest in education, the children needed consistent teaching to achieve the aim of the sisters 'to leave nothing untried, as a matter of justice to the parents, [to ensure] that the children might progress in learning.'<sup>8</sup> The curriculum followed was very much the same as that followed by the government 'vested' schools. It was an 'English education', reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar and geography. Besides these subjects the girls were taught sewing, plain and fancy work and the boys book-keeping.

Because the sisters knew that there was a vital need for some Catholic education to be made available to the poor they were prepared to concentrate their energies in the provision of elementary schools. Quinn was not happy with this. He believed that 'a branch of the Institute would have to be founded to teach higher classes.'<sup>9</sup> Holding this view it is understandable that the bishop could say that the Josephites were 'not fit to teach in town schools.'<sup>10</sup> The parents of the children attending the schools run by the sisters did not agree. They were keen to

express their appreciation, and in 1879 petitioned the bishop to allow the sisters to remain.

### **Organised - a distinct improvement on current practice**

The Josephite system was centralised to a high degree. By modern standards it would appear to be 'simple and over centralised,' but it was well suited to the times and a 'distinct advance on contemporary practice.'<sup>11</sup> A school directory not only detailed the syllabus to be followed by each class, but also included a weekly and daily timetable that all schools were urged to adopt.<sup>12</sup> Each priest in whose parish a school was established was given a booklet titled, *The Timetable Explained*. This gave an explanation of the Josephite method of teaching and the effect this teaching was intended to have on the children.<sup>13</sup> Great emphasis was put on adhering strictly to the set daily timetable. Several factors influenced this insistence on adherence to the timetable. In most schools all the classes were housed in one room, very often the church. For teaching to be effective, it was imperative that some classes were working quietly, while others were being given oral work. Further, while some of the sisters were experienced teachers many were not, and these needed guidance. Mary MacKillop also understood the need of children for variety. If the timetable was followed no teacher would spend excessive time on her 'pet' subject. The text books to be used were also nominated. A uniform series of text books was introduced into the Josephite schools. In line with a Catholic Church ruling the text books used in the government schools were forbidden.<sup>14</sup> Father Julian Tenison Woods, one of the founders of the sisterhood, had written a geography and history of Australia as well as a grammar, so care was taken that texts had an Australian orientation.<sup>15</sup>

The sisters opened their schools to the inspectors from the Board of Education so that the parents would be satisfied that their children were progressing at a rate equivalent to that of the children in the government schools. Under the searching eye of these school inspectors this system met with approval.<sup>16</sup> The parents were satisfied that their children were learning otherwise they would have withdrawn them from the schools. Such was not the case.<sup>17</sup> In each school a public examination was held, both to enthuse the children and create interest among the parents. Examination papers were displayed along with other work, competitions were held, and concert items given before an audience of parents and invited guests.<sup>18</sup> Overall the education offered to the children was organised, adapted to their need for variety and simplicity. There was a realism in its objectives and a soundness in the means it had adopted to achieve them.

## **Set to equal the standard of the national schools**

The Sisters of St Joseph saw their schools as offering a style of education which would achieve for the Catholic church what the government schools aimed to achieve for the secular liberal government of the day.<sup>19</sup> In order to make this aim a reality, the sisters aimed to give an education equal to or better than that offered in the government schools, but one in which children would imbibe the beliefs of the Catholic faith, its spirituality and develop a Catholic identity.<sup>20</sup> Essential to the Josephite system was the integration of the secular and the religious. In this some would argue lay the real uniqueness of Mary MacKillop's style of education.<sup>21</sup> The aim was to create a religious atmosphere. Prayer and hymns were taught on a daily basis, but the prayers were 'not too long,' Children were instructed in preparation for the reception of the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Confirmation. Because the lives of the children of the poor were often bleak, the sisters were encouraged to take every opportunity to make school life pleasant. The feasts of the church's calendar were highlighted by celebrations and 'treats.'<sup>22</sup> The sisters' letters tell of these as well as of parties after the reception of First Holy Communion: 'We are so tired this evening. We have been so busy preparing for the Feast ... we had 36 girls and 60 boys for breakfast this morning,' wrote Sr Bonaventure from Monkland (Gympie).<sup>23</sup>

## **Bishop Quinn troubled by what was NOT taught**

It was not so much what was taught or the success of the teaching that troubled Quinn, rather it was what was not taught in the schools conducted by the Sisters of St Joseph that concerned him. Such subjects as art, foreign languages and music did not have a place in the curriculum of the Josephite schools. While the bishop does not seem to have made any comment about the neglect of the subjects of art and foreign languages, he felt strongly that instrumental music should have been taught. Quinn was a man of his era. He encouraged the Sisters of Mercy in their development of the musical talents of their pupils, and found it difficult to understand that those who attended a convent-school would not have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument.<sup>24</sup> In their conversation in 1873 he made this clear to Fr Woods who wrote: 'he [the bishop] regretted that music was not a part of our Rule.'<sup>25</sup>

In nineteenth century colonial society the subjects of art, foreign languages and music were marks of social prestige, and the aim of the sisters' schools was 'social uplift not prestige education'.<sup>26</sup> Where music was concerned, the sisters were willing to teach the children choral singing but not instrumental music. Fr Woods and Mary MacKillop held strongly to this point because their experience had taught them that many of the poor had insufficient funds with which to purchase a musical instrument, and in some cases where one had been purchased, some of

the children were deprived of the necessities of life. They also held that because being able to play a musical instrument was perceived to be a sign of social status, then sometimes children who had acquired this skill felt alienated from their families.<sup>27</sup>

The issue was not the learning to play a musical instrument as such. Both Fr Woods and Mary MacKillop were pianists. Rather, it was the practicality of offering what would be an expense, to those who already found it difficult to pay for the necessities of life. Some historians have not understood the Josephite position on the teaching of instrumental music. They have claimed that it was a somewhat narrow-minded decision, and 'not in tune with the tenor of Australian society.'<sup>28</sup> What they have failed to recognise is that Josephites did introduce instrumental music into their schools in Queensland, when it was offered freely in the government schools.<sup>29</sup> Private tutors were engaged to teach music in Josephite schools, even as early as April 1872.<sup>30</sup> Letters from the sisters show that there was a rapport between these tutors and the sisters, some of whom could also play a musical instrument. The tutors made requests for sheet music from the sisters, and they in turn showed their interest in the progress of the children. The General Chapter of the Sisters of St Joseph held in 1889, only nine years after the sisters left Queensland, gave permission for the sisters to teach music.<sup>31</sup> From this date the training of sisters as music teachers became a practice within the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph.

### **One door closes another opens**

The forced withdrawal of the Sisters of St Joseph from Queensland left its scar upon the sisters. During the ten years they had been resident in the diocese they had opened fourteen schools. Many had entered the institute in Queensland and suffered the pain of separation from family and friends. Perhaps the most enduring hurt came from the lack of gratitude of the bishop and some of the priests for their efforts. The sisters left Queensland under a cloud not only of being asked to go, but with an implied criticism of their ability as teachers. On a positive note, a new beginning provided them with an opportunity to gain confidence and experience in the implementation of the Josephite model of education in New South Wales. Their services were welcomed in the dioceses of Sydney and Armidale. Government aid was to be terminated to denominational schools in this colony in 1882, and both Archbishop R. B. Vaughan of Sydney and Bishop E. Torreggiani of Armidale saw the Sisters of St Joseph as the solution to the impending straitened financial situation that faced the continued provision of Catholic schools. Furthermore both clerics assured Mary MacKillop that the Institute was 'admirably adapted' to the dioceses.<sup>32</sup> These assurances of support were balm to Mary MacKillop, who wrote: 'Considering the manner in which we

were treated in Queensland ... I deeply feel the kindness of Archbishop Vaughan in thus so openly supporting us. All the other orders warmly welcomed us, the priests are most kind.<sup>33</sup> Nineteen years later, in 1899, of the eighty schools the Josephites were conducting in Australia and New Zealand, thirty eight of these were in New South Wales, attended by over five thousand children.<sup>34</sup>

### Back in 'dear old Queensland'

The Sisters of St Joseph were to return to Queensland in 1900, not to the diocese of Brisbane but to the diocese of Rockhampton which had been formed in 1882. The first invitation to return had been issued by Bishop J. Cani, the former Vicar General of the diocese of Brisbane, who after the death of James Quinn in August 1881 and the formation of the new diocese in the northern section of the colony, was appointed its first bishop. He requested sisters for the schools of Clermont, Gladstone and North Rockhampton as well as 'other places.'<sup>35</sup> Mary MacKillop in writing to the sisters shared her happiness : 'I am glad to think the sisters will be back in dear old Queensland, once more.'<sup>36</sup> Although letters indicate that the Sisters of St Joseph were willing to send sisters to commence schools at North Rockhampton and Gladstone, it was not until 1900 that the sisters left for Queensland to settle at Clermont.<sup>37</sup>

This township, situated close to Copperfield where the sisters had conducted a school in the 1870's, on the weekend of the 6 August 2000 celebrated a century of the continued residence of the Sisters of St Joseph.

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