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Presentation Sisters In Queensland - A Centenary Reflection

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Historical studies today are aware of the on-going evolutionary development of human society in all its aspects: religious, social political. In particular, religious historians are conscious of this as they seek to trace and explain the journey through time of humankind led forward by an encompassing Providence whose purposes often remain only dimly perceived by us. Yet God's providence is at work and no more evidently than in the developing story of religious orders and their founders. Each changing period in history has seen the emergence of new and highly relevant responses by these founders within an overall continuity in the elements which have characterized religious commitment - a single-hearted response to an awareness of being called, simplicity of life-style, and a continuing discerning of God's designs, not one's own, in the chosen field of service.

So it was that Honora (or Nano) Nagle, daughter of a wealthy Norman-Irish family, founded her little Sisterhood within changing times for Church and society. She was born in 1718 just as the code of penal legislation against Catholicism in Ireland reached its full measure on the statute books. Like the children of so many of the old Catholic gentry, she found herself following her education on the Continent and later living in exile in Paris, where Irish emigres were largely settled around the historic parish of St Sulpice. Here, while living a life of ease and high social acceptance, she noticed both the religious devotion of the poor and a practical way of alleviating their social disadvantage. By that time in France, the contours of the tridentine reform were firmly established, especially its programme of a broadly-based evangelization of the poor linked with alleviation of their many forms of distress. Women played a central role in this evangelization, with the Daughters of Charity, founded in 1633 by Sts Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, the leading example of the new type of religious institute. But there were many others - a little Sisterhood of Christian Instruction in the parish of St Sulpice was later to provide Nano with her model.

She returned to Ireland about 1746, by this time in her late twenties. Appalled by the poverty and spiritual destitution of the poor, now deprived of their natural leaders, her first response was to return to the Continent and enter a convent there where she could at least pray for their needs. It was a choice made by many other comfortably-off Irish girls of the time. However, an inner conviction and the advice of a confessor led her to leave this community and return to Ireland. There, in Cork, in the pattern of the St Sulpice Sisters, she began to gather poor children and teach them despite the still operative legal prohibition against any form of Catholic education. However, these laws were becoming less rigorously enforced though still on the statute books. In 1771, Nano provided for the establishment in Cork of an Ursuline community from Paris, where they were noted educators. Because these Sisters were highly enclosed, they did not spread beyond the substantial convent Nano had built for them. While continuing to value the education they provided, especially for a re-emerging Catholic middle class in the city, Nano turned herself to the sole care of the poor. With a few other women, in 1775 she founded her Sisters of Charitable Instruction of the Sacred Heart, offering free basic education to poor children together with training in useful handcrafts, a feature also of the French model.

I cannot deal here with the transformation, some twenty years after Nano's death, of her little unenclosed, simple-vow Sisterhood into the enclosed solemn-vow Order of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, based on the Ursuline model. However, by this time the Sisters were spreading in Ireland where, within the precincts of their enclosure, they continued to establish large free day schools for poor girls to which their industrial classes were attached. By the 1840s, some of these Presentation schools had entered upon a new developing trend: the provision of pay day schools for the lower middle class. By this time also, they had begun expansion overseas: to Newfoundland in 1833, to Manchester in 1836, to India in 1841, and later to San Francisco in 1854. In each of these cases, they followed a specific path of Irish migration: fisher people to Newfoundland; povertystricken migrants to England; Irish soldiers and their families to India; gold seekers to California.

In 1866, the first Presentation Sisters came to Australia. They went from Fermoy in Co. Cork to Tasmania where they were asked to introduce a further innovation: the opening of a boarding school. For this, as well as taking fee-paying pupils, they required a papal dispensation. In Europe, boarding schools were the preserve of the upper classes, a field the Presentations in Ireland did not enter. In Australia, such schools were a function of distance, not privilege, hence the request put to Australia's first Presentation community. The Sisters who conducted this college had themselves boarded with the Ursulines in Cork and

closely replicated the Ursuline pattern of education in Hobart. Other Presentation foundations in Australia were to follow this same adaptation. Further communities from Ireland followed, each, in the old monastic pattern, independent of the others and of their founding houses in Ireland. Groups of Sisters went from Limerick to Melbourne in 1873; from Kildare to Wagga Wagga in 1874; from Lucan, near Dublin, to Lismore in 1887; and from Sneem in Co. Kerry to Geraldton in Western Australia in 1891. Secondary independent foundations were made in Australia, chiefly, interestingly, from Wagga.

It is one of these whose centenary we are now celebrating. On 1 February 1900 a group of five Sisters left Wagga for the faraway township of Longreach to make the first Presentation foundation in Queensland. However, before we follow their journey, we must note that a Presentation nun had preceded them here and was buried among the Mercy Sisters in Nudgee cemetery. This was in 1881, over forty years before a Presentation community was established in the Brisbane archdiocese. This Sister, Jeanne Marie Antoinette Besson, in religion Sister Mary Genevieve, was born in Paris in 1860. Her mother, widowed in Australia, remarried, her second husband, Denis O'Donovan, becoming later a noted figure in Brisbane, in both Church and public affairs. He had travelled on the same ship from Cork to Australia with Hobart's Presentation Sisters and may have had relatives among them. In any case, his step-daughter was sent from Melbourne to board in Hobart and later entered the community there, where her musical giftedness was especially noted. She developed tuberculosis as a novice, was advised to go to a warmer climate and came to her family, by then in Brisbane, in March 1881. She lived only five weeks, was professed by Bishop Quinn on her deathbed and buried from St Stephen's Cathedral. An unspoken drama is concealed in this simple account: it is well known that at this time Denis O'Donovan was a public critic of James Quinn, especially in his dispute with the Josephite Sisterhood. Was there an unlikely reconciliation or were other factors involved?

Nearly twenty years after Sister Genevieve's death, the Presentation foundation was made in Longreach. This simple statement also conceals much history. In 1899, Bishop Joseph Higgins, who for ten years had been Cardinal Moran's auxiliary in Sydney, became Rockhampton's second bishop. He was immediately concerned to introduce further teaching religious into the huge diocese. In 1900, Good Samaritan Sisters replaced the over-extended Rockhampton Mercy congregation in Charters Towers and, in the same year, a Josephite community was established in Clermont, close to Copperfield from which their Sisters had been withdrawn almost twenty-five years before. The bishop had known both these congregations well in Sydney where their mother houses were situated. Both were strongly centralized in the newer pattern for women's congregations

and were responsible for replacement Sisters and needed support for these Queensland branch houses. Bishop Higgins may have known the Presentations in Ireland; what is certain is that he knew of their excellent reputation as teachers in Wagga.

He knew also their independent mode of spread. Why was this community, henceforth to rely on its own resources and create its own dynamic of life, asked to go to Longreach, the most remote of the three centres chosen to receive new religious communities in early 1900? Longreach, some 700 kilometres inland, had been gazetted as a town only in 1887; its population in the 1891 Census was a mere 157. It became the terminus of the railway, snaking westward from Rockhampton and bringing further population, only in 1892. It was still unmarked on any map available to the Wagga Sisters in 1900. The reason for its choice lay without doubt in the socioeconomic profile of Australia at the time. Longreach soon became the centre and supply depot for a huge grazing area. The Sisters were to note later that there were in the Longreach hinterland pastoral properties the size of Belgium. These possessed the type of prestige which a generation earlier had consolidated Wagga as the capital of the Riverina. In an age when Australia still rode on the sheep's back, Longreach was expected to develop similarly as a local inland capital.

Five Sisters were selected from the volunteers for the new foundation. Three were Irish-born, including the superior, Mother Mary Agatha Collins from Kildare, who had travelled to Australia in 1885 under the care of the newly named Cardinal Moran and was quite likely a family connection of his. The name given to her in religion, 'Agatha', was that of the Cardinal's aunt, the venerable Mother Agatha Cullen who was superior in Kildare when the first Sisters left for Australia. Of the two Australian-born, one, 24 year old Sister Mary Ursula Kennedy, was the youngest in the group but was soon to emerge as its natural leader.

The five Sisters went by rail to Sydney and then by coastal steamer to Keppel Bay. A smaller boat took them up the Fitzroy River to Rockhampton where they were welcomed by the Mercy Sisters. On the next stage of the journey, the long train trip to Longreach, they were accompanied by Bishop Higgins. An oral recollection relates that when the bishop saw the seemingly endless dry plains, devastated at the time by one of Queensland's worst droughts, he asked the Sisters would they still remain. They replied 'Yes', that having come that distance they would not return. Their arrival at the Longreach railway station on 13 February marked the beginning of a large-scale and carefully planned welcome in which all the townspeople of whatever religious faith participated. Long speeches were given while the temperature hovered at over 44 degrees Centigrade. Though the

Freeman's Journal account of the new foundation noted that these temperatures were also experienced in Wagga, the Sisters' black serge and stiffly starched bandeaux and guimpes must have proved particularly trying.

However, they soon entered on their task of teaching, staffing not only the parish school opened in St Brigid's Church, but also offering the further education and the tuition in music and various art skills which characterized the convent high school of the time. Though living in cramped quarters until their convent was completed in February 1902, the Sisters took some boarders and before the end of 1900 welcomed their first postulant who came to join them from Wagga. Others followed, both Queensland women and some further entrants from the south.

At Mother Agatha's insistence, the new convent duplicated in design the 'Mt Erin' Convent in Wagga she had left - though built in wood compared with 'Mt Erin's' brick. This gifted and artistic woman, who was to return to Wagga after six years, used her skills also to embellish the little bare St Brigid's Church; she saw to the firm establishment of the Presentation way of religious life and educational standards in Longreach where initially women religious were a total novelty. Strong bonds were soon established with the townspeople, both Catholic and non-Catholic - there was a close sense in which all were involved in the pioneering venture together and had only their own resources on which to depend.

In 1902, at Bishop Higgins' request, the Longreach community opened a branch house in Emerald, around 400 kms east along the Rockhampton-Longreach line. The opening of branch houses dependent on a central mother house was an innovation for the Presentation Order, but one which Australian conditions came to demand, with so many small settlements large distances apart. In Emerald, like Longreach, the Sisters forged strong bonds with the local, people. They offered an especially appreciated service in opening a junior boys' boarding school which catered for a full primary school education. Most of these boys went on to board for secondary schooling at Nudgee or Charters Towers and later at St Brendan's, Yeppoon. Music was taught beyond the school enrolment to adults of the town and district and tuition in commercial subjects made available to local post school young people, enabling them to secure better positions in this era before the post World War II expansion of State secondary education. These services were to be offered by the Sisters in other towns like Emerald where they did not themselves open a secondary school. It goes without saying also that without their earnings from music these small country convents would have found survival difficult.

It was not until 1917 that the small congregation made its foundation in Yeppoon where, in addition to staffing the parish school, the Sisters soon established St Ursula's College for boarding and day pupils. This brings us to another educational reflection: at this time, St Ursula's was the only secondary school in Yeppoon and, like Our Lady's College in Longreach, took both boys and girls, Catholic and non-Catholic. It was followed some years later by St Faith's Anglican College for girls and in 1940 by St Brendan's Christian Brothers' College. It was only in the mid-1950s that the State Government began to open high schools and secondary tops in Queensland's smaller regional towns. Until this development, the Presentation Convent in Longreach was the only provider of secondary education in the Central Queensland hinterland.

Archbishop Duhig, from the time of his transfer from Rockhampton to Brisbane in 1913, began urging the Presentations to come to the archdiocese. This was not achieved until 1924 when a convent and school were established in the suburb of Herston. To have sufficient personnel to make this transition from the Rockhampton diocese, the congregation for the first time sought entrants from Ireland. Their good friend of Longreach days, Father Patrick Healy, leaving for a home visit to Ireland, promised to interest young relatives in the Queensland Presentations and was as good as his word. A number of young Irish women over the years followed the first volunteers of the early 1920s. The Herston foundation was followed by one at Clayfield in 1925 and the subsequent opening of St Rita's College. By this time a pattern had been firmly set. Following these five earlier convents, between 1934 and 1959, a further 17 communities were established, including convents in both Rockhampton and Toowoomba. Others were in regional towns and further suburbs of Brisbane. Among these latter foundations, Murgon for many years offered secondary education.

1960 was to prove a memorable year. In January there occurred the death of Mother Ursula Kennedy, member of the pioneer group of 1900 and from 1912, with her many terms in office as major superior and wise guide, the chief influence in the spread of her Queensland Presentation congregation. She was followed by another wise and gifted leader, Mother Gabriel Hogan, who was called upon to initiate and guide the changes associated with the Second Vatican Council and also the developing educational scene in Queensland. Rationalizations under newly established Catholic Education Offices led to closing of older schools and launching of new ones. Increasingly, with government funding from the early 1960s, more lay staff were able to be employed. Greatly increased educational opportunities were offered to the Sisters themselves, who were now able to enter a wider field of ministries. Increasingly, the need for such services came to be seen as Australia's social climate underwent change.

In 1960, the central government of the congregation was transferred from Longreach to Clayfield in Brisbane. The novitiate, after decades-long discussion of the matter, had been transferred to the suburb of Manly in 1953. This was for better opportunities for both religious and educational formation for the young entrants. The years from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, as for other congregations in Australia, saw the highest level of vocations on record, together with the introduction of what proved accelerating change in the religious life-style. These adaptations, without doubt, reflected a deeply changing environment, which has evolved new issues, new social needs and new insights into age-old spiritual traditions. Global effects were being felt: in 1958, the autonomous Presentation congregations in Australia federated to form the Australian Presentation Society, to which the Queensland congregation has contributed three of its seven presidents to date; 1989 saw the formation of the International Presentation Association with its member communities spread around the world.

We are still in an era of deep change which has seen many opt for other paths than their initial choice of a structured religious life-style. It has also seen a virtual cessation of new entrants. These situations offer a searching challenge. As in previous eras of deep social change, existing religious institutes and those who feel the call to a life-long religious dedication are challenged to find new paths and more relevant responses as new intersections of Gospel Word and envioning World occur. The Presentation Sisters, out of their hundred years experience in Queensland, are called to explore their resources, both spiritual and material, to meet these challenges. As in Longreach in 1900, they do this only as part of and within the wider community.

Note:

Rosa MacGinley in the author of several books on the Presentation Sisters:

A Place of Springs: Queensland Presentation Sisters 1900-1960 (Brisbane, Leader Press, 1977 and *Roads to Sion: Presentation Sisters in Australia 1866-1980* (Brisbane, Boolarong Publications, 1983); she has also written: *A Dynamic of Hope: Institutes of Women Religious in Australia* (Sydney: Crossing Press, 1996)