

Sisters of Charity: Caring for Convict women and their children

Dianne Snowden

In 1815, Mary Aikenhead founded the Sisters of Charity, a Catholic organisation, in Ireland. Their ministry was to serve the poor in their homes and especially those who were sick.

Twenty-three years later, in 1838, five Sisters of Charity came to Australia. Their first ministry was to the convict women in the Female Factory at Parramatta. The Sisters were the first religious women in Australia.¹

Since their arrival in Australia, the Sisters of Charity have undertaken welfare work in schools, hospitals, prisons, and social welfare activities in the wider community.

About 1847, Vicar-General Hall, on behalf of Bishop Willson, the first Catholic Bishop of Hobart, wrote to Sister Mary de Sales O'Brien in Sydney saying that the Sisters would be welcomed, to 'attend the prisoners', and 'give some supervision to our poor free women' and 'supervise our dear little girls'.²

On 20 June 1847, three Sisters of Charity, Sister Mary John Cahill, Mary de Sales O'Brien and Mary Xavier Williams, arrived in Hobart on the *Louisa* and, on 2 July, they took possession of their convent at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Harrington Street, Hobart.³ They were known as the 'pioneer sisters'.

The Sisters of Charity pioneered welfare work in Tasmania, beginning by working with the women in the female factory.⁴

¹ <http://www.sistersofcharity.org.au/yesterday/ourhistory> accessed 1 April 2016

² W.T. Southerwood, *Planting a Faith* in Hobart, p.100.

³ W.T. Southerwood, *The Convicts' Friend* (Bishop R.W. Willson), George Town, 1989, p.74 citing J.H. Cullen, *The Australian Daughters of Mary Aikenhead*, Sydney, 1938, p.7; *Examiner* 28 June 1947 p.9 (article by Basil Rait)

⁴ Southerwood, *Planting a Faith* in Hobart, p.99.

Bishop Willson was known as ‘the convicts’ friend’.⁵ His social reforms and welfare work, particularly in the penal area, dovetailed with the work of the Sisters of Charity. By 1845, he had requested the appointment of a female catechist to work on the *Anson*; lay readers of prayers at the main prison institutions in Hobart; and a schoolmistress for the education of the Catholic children at the Orphan School in New Town.⁶ In 1845, Bishop Willson called for contributions for accommodation for the expected arrival of the Sisters of Charity, who would work among ‘the female sex who are in bondage’ and among orphans ‘desperately in need of sound social instruction and moral training’.⁷

According to historian Terry Southerwood, the three Sisters of Charity ‘visited 600 women at the Cascades Female Factory for two hours every day and ventured into the Men’s Gaol with its “condemned cells”, the Colonial Hospital, the Queen’s Asylum and the homes of the poor’.⁸ They experienced very little opposition to their ministry of social reform, although, again according to Southerwood, they were harassed by an occasional anti-Catholic bigot or overzealous government official like J.M May. The Comptroller of Convicts, for example, tried, unsuccessfully, to curtail the scope of their work at the Cascades shortly after their arrival.⁹

Glimpses of the work of the Sisters of Charity can be found in the Bishop Willson papers held in the Diocesan Archives in Hobart.

⁵ Southerwood, *The Convicts’ Friend (Bishop R.W. Willson)*, George Town, 1989.

⁶ Southerwood, *The Convicts’ Friend*, p.55: citing Convict Correspondence in the Catholic Church Archives 44/63, 25 February 1845.

⁷ Southerwood, *The Convicts’ Friend*, p.55. In 1842, Hobart Town was created a diocese separate from New South Wales, headed by Bishop Willson, who arrived in 1844: John H. Cullen, ‘Willson, Robert William (1794–1866)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/willson-robert-william-2800/text3995>, published first in hardcopy 1967, accessed online 3 April 2016.

⁸ Southerwood, *The Convicts’ Friend*, p.110.

⁹ Southerwood, *The Convicts’ Friend*, p.110.

In August 1847, Vicar-General Hall wrote to the Lieutenant Governor of Tasmania formally requesting permission for the three Sisters of Charity

to visit the different convict establishment at convenient times to afford religious and moral instruction to the unfortunate inmates belonging to my Church. I need not add that they will effect much good particularly among the unfortunate females for having been trained up to the duty of Charity and having had the experience of 8 years in NSW.¹⁰

The Comptroller General's Office replied that

the necessary authority has been given for the admission of these ladies to the several Convict Establishments as requested. With regard to the Cascade Female Factory and the 'Anson', I am to state that it will be desirable that the Ladies should confer with the Superintendent or Matron of the Establishments as to the times at which they can most conveniently have access to the different classes of women, so as not to interfere with the discipline and work of the Establishment.¹¹

The Vicar-General gave an undertaking to the Comptroller General that the Sisters of Charity would not communicate directly with the Protestant women at the Convict Establishments.¹²

Bishop Willson reported to the Head Superior in Sydney in 1849,

Not less than five hundred prisoners in Hobart Town derive benefit from their visits and instructions. Full one hundred female orphans are also visited by them. Then they have their own school with an average of

¹⁰ Diocesan Archives, Hobart: Bishop Willson Papers, Diocesan Archives Ref. 95.185, p.95.

¹¹ Diocesan Archives, Hobart: Bishop Willson Papers, Diocesan Archives Ref. 95.186, pp.95-96.

¹² Diocesan Archives, Hobart: Bishop Willson Papers, Diocesan Archives Ref. 99.191, p.99.

about eighty daily; and besides the common Gaol where poor men are executed, also the Hospital and Infirmary for aged females to visit.¹³

The school referred to was St Joseph's School in Harrington Street. In July 1848, Mother Mary John Cahill in Hobart reported to the Head Superior, Mother Mary Ignatius Gibbons, in Sydney

We have an abundance of occupation according to our Vocation, the routine of the week is as follows. After the usual hour of prayer, Mass and breakfast, one Sister goes to the school till 12 o'clock, when she is relieved by another (who has been till then employed in instructing the women of the Factory – number generally about 300) who give religious instruction to the children and dismisses them – Dinner at one o'clock and at 2½ the children return till 4 o'clock. The evenings are devoted to the sick etc.¹⁴

Education was an important part of the ministry of the Sisters of Charity. They pioneered Catholic education in Hobart. From 1847, the Sisters were involved in the education of Catholic girls. Their school, known as St Joseph's, operated in the top floor of the convent building behind St Joseph's Church. The boys were taught on the ground floor.¹⁵ Later, the boys' school was moved to a new site and the Sisters took over the whole building. The old building was demolished to make room for extensions to St. Joseph's Orphanage.¹⁶

In 1923, the new St Joseph's School was completed on a site at the corner of Molle and Macquarie Street.¹⁷

¹³ Diocesan Archives, Hobart: Letter from Bishop Willson to the Head Superior in Sydney, Mother Mary Ignatius Gibbons, 1849.

¹⁴ Diocesan Archives, Hobart: Letter from Mother Mary John Cahill, Hobart, to Head Superior, Mother Mary Ignatius Gibbons, July 1848.

¹⁵ *Examiner* 28 June 1947 p.9 (article by Basil Rait).

¹⁶ *Examiner* 28 June 1947 p.9 (article by Basil Rait).

¹⁷ *Examiner* 28 June 1947 p.9 (article by Basil Rait).

In 1863, Bishop Willson established St Luke's Ragged School in South Hobart, on a site close to St Francis Xavier's Church today. From 1873, it was run by the Sisters of Charity.¹⁸ A plaque on the site acknowledges their contribution.

The Sisters of Charity established St Brigid's Convent School at New Norfolk in 1925 and later, in 1942, Mount Carmel in Sandy Bay. They also established St Vincent's Hospital in Launceston.¹⁹

Care of vulnerable children was also an important part of the ministry of the Sisters of Charity. The Sisters were regular visitors to the Queen's Orphan School.

When the Queen's Orphan School closed in 1879, the Sisters, realising the need to for an institution to care for the orphan children, established St. Joseph's Orphanage opposite the church in Harrington Street. Formerly known as Aikenhead House, the orphanage was opened in May 1879. When it opened, there were 29 girls there, including 20 Catholic girls transferred from the Queen's Orphan School at New Town.²⁰ It was enlarged in 1923.²¹

Aikenhead House later moved to Tarooma and the Harrington Street building was sold to the Commonwealth government.²²

In 1888, when the Tasmanian Sisters of Charity rejoined their sisters in Sydney after a split in the 1840s, fifteen of the sixteen nuns in Hobart were Tasmanian born. One of the most well-known was Sister Agnes Hall, daughter of Dr Edward Swarbreck Hall. She died in 1934 just before her centenary.²³

¹⁸ W.T. Southerwood, *Planting a Faith* in Hobart, p.99.

¹⁹ *Examiner* 28 June 1947 p.9 (article by Basil Rait).

²⁰ W.T. Southerwood, *Planting a Faith* in Hobart, p.99.

²¹ W.T. Southerwood, *Planting a Faith* in Hobart, p.99.

²² W.T. Southerwood, *Planting a Faith* in Hobart, p.99.

²³ W.T. Southerwood, *Planting a Faith* in Hobart, p.99.

Of the three pioneer Sisters, Mother Mary John Cahill lived to 1864. Mother Mary de Sales O'Brien died in 1871 and Mother Mary Xavier Williams died in 1892.

ENDS