A Leader without Authority: Mary Consuelo de la Cruz Batiz and Missionary Women at New Norcia

Katharine Massam

Abstract: In 1904 Mary Consuelo de la Cruz Batiz, originally from Mexico, arrived in Western Australia with six other women who were to form a community of missionaries alongside the Spanish Benedictine monks at New Norcia. Consuelo, the sole English speaker in the group, became the director of the new college for Aboriginal girls and exercised significant responsibility within the mission town. Within the fragmentary sources, the glimpses of Consuelo Batiz in the Spanish-language records depict a woman widely appreciated by missionaries and Aborigines for her energy, dedication and capacity to lead. This material sits uncomfortably alongside evidence recorded in English that show Consuelo captive to prevailing racist assumptions, and with her authority constrained by a highly charged field of religious, cultural and gendered assumptions. This chapter considers the handful of sources documenting Consuelo’s time at New Norcia, and argues that the disparity between accounts may reflect tensions between the roles Consuelo exercised and the identities she navigated as a Spanish-speaking missionary woman in a British colonial context.

Keywords: Consuelo Batiz, New Norcia, Benedictine, Teresian, missionary women

The monastic settlement of New Norcia in Western Australia is relatively well known as a former mission to the Yuat-Noongar people of the Victoria Plains, established in 1846 by the Spanish Benedictine monk, Rosendo Salvado. The charismatic founder is still widely admired as a visionary who appreciated the intelligence and capacity of Aboriginal Australians and imagined a better future for them with secure landholdings and skills to trade. Less well known, indeed perhaps hardly heard of except among the few Aboriginal families who remember the grandmother and great grandmother named in her honour, is Mary Consuelo de la Cruz Batiz (hereafter Consuelo), a member of the Catholic missionary congregation the Company of St Teresa of Jesus (Teresians). Her role at New Norcia encompassed some eight years in two separate sojourns, compared to Salvado’s 54 years of continuous involvement, and Consuelo’s commitment is documented by accident rather than with the clear intentionality that ordered the founder’s papers. Although her impact, and the impact of the group of women she helped establish in the town is
clear, the details of Consuelo’s leadership are hard to grasp. Within the fragmentary sources, the glimpses of Consuelo Batiz in the Spanish-language records depict a woman invested with responsibility by the second abbot, and widely appreciated by missionaries and Aborigines for her energy, dedication and capacity to lead. This material sits uncomfortably alongside other strands of evidence recorded in English that show Consuelo captive to prevailing racist assumptions, and with her authority constrained by a highly charged field of religious, cultural and gendered assumptions. The contradiction across the languages itself invites investigation.

The conflicted evidence makes the account of Consuelo’s leadership role at New Norcia messy but intriguing. This chapter considers the handful of sources documenting Consuelo’s time at New Norcia, and argues that the disparity between accounts may reflect tensions between the roles Consuelo exercised and the identities she navigated. Spanish material written from a monastic perspective assessed her as a missionary woman living out a religious vocation, initially to great acclaim; English-language documents from administrative sources sidestepped her in favour of the abbot and underlined her awkward place ‘between’ communities, and her attempt in the one (and perhaps only) example of her direct interaction with the West Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines to simultaneously mediate for and control an Aboriginal family. Written in the margins and gleaned from sources that exclude the voices of the Aboriginal women who knew her best, Consuelo’s leadership is compelling precisely because her status and reputation is not stable.

Like missionary women in many other contexts, Consuelo’s story is written in the ‘white ink’ of Gerda Lerner’s famous phrase; milky, lost between the lines or visible only through accounts of other people, such as the Chronicle or collective diary of the neighbouring community of men, photographs for the Catholic press, and administrative records that trace the interaction of the church and the state. Occasionally, we get a sense of personality in these records, and even more so in the few surviving letters she wrote to the abbot and other officials in time of crisis. More often, though, we only have glimpses and passing remarks to piece together.

One image provides a metaphor. Sometime after 1912, a photographer recorded renovations at St Joseph’s Native School and Orphanage, the institution administered by Consuelo for the Benedictine community. The image draws the viewer’s eyes across the expanse of bare ground towards a woman dressed in a religious habit who stands with a toddler at her side between the camera and the new whitewashed walls; near her a group of children cluster around a sturdy swing. Similarly sturdy posts support four neat washing lines in the foreground. At first glance in grainy reproduction, the swing looks more like a gallows to some viewers, and the washing lines as
barbed wired fences. Such stark realities would conform with a picture of Aboriginal Australia, and the assumptions pick up the reality that this is an institutional photograph. But magnifying the image reassures that this is also a domestic scene. In the deep verandah the camera has captured taller figures of the older girls and young women in long skirts. Magnifying the image brings a washing basket into focus, some tubs, buckets, fine collars and cuffs, and the copper against the wall; a woman at the far left has a cockatoo on her arm; on the right another figure has turned towards the window. There are two children sitting on the swing. At several points the image blurs with movement: this photograph is only partly posed. There is no Sunday best, the children are in shapeless pinnies, barefoot, and no one is staying still for the occasion. The photographer intended we would see the whole, the sweep of the scene, not scrutinise the parts. But as the magnification climbs faces emerge in the group around the swing. Technology clarifies the woman’s face into Consuelo’s features: not European, not Aboriginal, but reflecting her family origin in the Mexican village of Chalchicomula. The children’s different gazes come into focus – serious, alert, sombre, pained, curious, squinting. And then we can go no closer. The fine-grained image breaks apart, resolves into pixels, not reality. They are not there. It is the same with every photograph, every text: so far and no further.

In New Norcia today the swing and the clotheslines are gone but visitors can still stand where that photographer stood and imagine the scene. At the southern end of the former mission town, the institution known variously as the ‘convent’ and ‘laundry’, as ‘St Joseph’s’, or ‘the Girls’ House’, still stands. The complex currently serves partly as the town’s museum and art gallery, and partly as accommodation for visitors. The yard where Consuelo stood becomes a picnic ground when Aboriginal families gather for an annual reunion. St Joseph’s continues as a hub of memory for the local Aboriginal women who grew up there, making the story of the women missionaries who worked there and their complex relationships with the families in the town central to the ongoing work of reconciliation. Consuelo’s era from 1904 to 1917 is crucial in that story, marking the collapse of high hopes for the Aboriginal girls’ school on the one hand and a tighter institutional culture on the other. The sources exploring Consuelo’s near decade of influence at New Norcia, her absence from 1907 to 1912 and her final departure in 1917, are incomplete, frustrating and contested; they hint at broader stories and many particular instances of interaction that do not necessarily coalesce into a single narrative. They suggest a gifted and resolute woman who was at best under pressure and inconsistent, and at worst over-promoted and out of her depth. In either case, Consuelo was caught between the expectation that she would exercise leadership and the reality that she had no institutional authority.
The Benedictine Mission at New Norcia

Within the wider historiography of Christian missions in Australia, New Norcia’s practice was marked as unique for the stability of the community of Benedictine monks, and the town’s reputation as a remarkable ‘success’ of the West Australian mission effort was credited by commentators to their sense of vocation. The mostly Spanish men, often of peasant stock, who joined the community at New Norcia were committed to a simple, celibate and institutional life of prayer and work that sustained a farm, a town and an extensive network of rural parishes. The structure of religious community and the system of sacraments that ordered their life differentiated Catholic from Protestant missionaries. In Salvado’s case a communal commitment and a symbolic world view were points of connection with Aboriginal people, but more broadly Catholic missions were noted for institutional structures of obedience ‘which not only encouraged the taking of orders from above, but the giving of them to those below’, and assumptions that members worked for God and their keep, not wages. Strong commitments to humility and reserve as aspects of holiness and respectability often meant Catholic missions were least able to empower Aboriginal leadership. While work is continuing on the sources that will enable a fresh assessment of Salvado within this context and test the narrative of New Norcia’s success, the material so far available for the nineteenth century supports the tradition of exceptionality. It shows New Norcia’s administration integrated Aboriginal men into the workforce alongside the lay brothers of the monastery. Salvado also provided training and paid employment for some Aboriginal women, as postal workers and postmistress, and as matrons in the hostel for girls, as well as aiming to prioritise family life for Aboriginal workers over institutional dormitories. It was at New Norcia, and nowhere else in Western Australia for example, that a woman had a public voice during the visit of Cardinal Moran in 1887. Eliza Willaway, who welcomed the cardinal at that time, was one of two Aboriginal matrons working at St Joseph’s; she was also in the photograph taken to mark the arrival of Conseulo and the other Teresian Sisters in 1904.

As New Norcia’s founder Salvado had firmly resisted any effort to bring a community of European women to join the work in the mission. He was clear that ‘the whole business of nuns needs to be thought about “thrice three times”’. For forty years, Salvado had entrusted the running of the residential house for girls to Br Froilán Mirò, a Benedictine brother, assisted by the Aboriginal matrons. This arrangement struck Salvado’s successor as in need of urgent reform, and the young second abbot Fulgentius Torres enlisted the help of the Company of Teresa of Jesus, newly founded in Barcelona in 1876 specifically to work as teachers in mission contexts, and pledged to missionary outreach drawing inspiration from the sixteenth-century reformer, Teresa of Avila.
The Company of St Teresa of Jesus at New Norcia

The international leaders of the Teresian community agreed to send a community of seven women to Western Australia, retaining responsibility for their missionary life on the other side of the world, while the abbot provided resources and facilities for the work, and had the ‘usual’ jurisdiction of a bishop directing the work of his diocese. In late August 1904 Consuelo arrived at New Norcia as one of this founding group of women missionaries. The sole English-speaker in the group, Consuelo, aged 26, became the director of the ‘new college’ for Aboriginal girls and watched as tall towers of an extraordinary building grew to replace the small whitewashed cottage that had functioned as school rooms, dormitories and living space since 1867.20 The new abbot had high hopes for this missionary party, and Consuelo was key to the enterprise.21

In details that are lost to us, Consuelo probably met the Teresian Sisters near her home in Sedan, Pueblo de Los Angeles, Mexico where they had opened a community in 1888.22 This was the first foundation outside Spain for the vibrant new group, but the company was expanding rapidly from Barcelona to the former Spanish colonies, in particular to Mexico, Uruguay and Paraguay. Young women from those countries joined them, including, some time after 1896, Maria Consuelo ‘de la Cruz’ Batiz whose new name in the community literally honoured the ‘comfort of Christ’s Cross’.23 Maria Harispe Quilliri, a French citizen from Paraguay, who joined a few years later and Teresa Roca Lluch from Barcelona, a decade senior to them both, would also become important for the New Norcia story.

Consuelo’s formation in Spain would have included time at the group’s teacher-training institute in Barcelona. The community inherited an emphasis on the training of women from their founder Fr Enrique Osso who had been fond of remarking: ‘The world has always been what women made it.’24 Education was a key to securing their capacity for influence. By 1904 Consuelo had made a lifetime commitment to this group, taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as a ‘choir sister’. She was destined for a teaching role prized by the group and perhaps also leadership, rather than the manual work undertaken by less educated *ayudante*, like Maria Harispe and Teresa Roca, who were in English terms ‘lay sisters’, manual workers or literally ‘helpers’ in the work of the community.25

Teresians at New Norcia

When the Teresian party arrived at New Norcia on 25 August 1904, it was after close to two years’ negotiation.26 The Aboriginal community had known that sisters were being sought since at least Christmas 1901. At that time Eliza Willaway made it clear to a ‘Lady Visitor’ (likely to have been Daisy Bates)
that ‘a convent is now talked about [to] take charge of the girls and women’. Torres, apparently blind to the role of the Aboriginal matrons, had secured a religious community of women to do this women’s work. On 11 December 1904, responsibility for St Joseph’s passed into the hands of the Teresians. The photograph marking the transfer included women and children only, as the abbot had hoped, with the missionary women in tight veils clearly distinguished from the Aboriginal women in wide-brimmed, heavily decorated hats, and the girls in straw boaters. Consuelo sat to the left of the group’s leader Montserrat Fito, her hands in her lap holding a small book.

Practical demands came first and it is the matter-of-fact announcement in the monastery’s Chronicle, two days after the sisters took over that reveals most about the expectations of their work. The Chronicle is essentially a collective diary kept by a designated monk on behalf of the community, intended to give an overview of events. New Norcia’s diarists write tersely, but the day-by-day account is often an invaluable guide to the mood of the monastery and the town, from one close observer’s perspective. Following the arrival of the missionary women the diarist noted: ‘The Teresian Sisters have made a habit for Fr Alcalde. They are also mending the old habits of the community.’ Three months later the diarist celebrated the expansion of the domestic work at St Joseph’s when ‘for the first time the girls of the College have washed the clothes of the community’. This emphasis on domestic and menial work as part of the school system would persist at New Norcia.

Education in Salvado’s day had also been specifically focused on skills for employment, and yet rising behind the humble cottage of St Joseph’s was the new school building dedicated to the fourteenth-century Benedictine scholar Gertrude the Great of Helfta and pledged to the memory of the founder Salvado for ‘the education of indigenous girls [puellis indigenis] to the Christian religion’. The quality of the building and the generous spaces for classes surpassed anything in Western Australia at the time, and the twin fairy tale turrets each carried a marble coat of arms, one of Torres, and the other of the Teresian Sisters. Celebrated on completion as a ‘wonderland of the West’, it spoke of refinement and academic endeavour, of education to rival Europe, not skills training for Australian farms. Torres had expected a staff of seven English-speaking teachers, but now the work of the school would fall entirely to Sister Consuelo. By Torres’s own account he was disappointed and alarmed; he invested in improving her English, probably through private lessons ‘so as to have her made ready’ to head the new school.

The sources we have did not comment on Consuelo’s preparation at the time, but fragments give us a sense of a household of some twenty Aboriginal girls and young women and seven Teresians, sharing the manual labour of the laundry and farm-work collectively. However, as Consuelo’s leadership of
the school drew her into the wider circle of the monastery and the neighbouring families, a rift grew in the Teresian community. There was also tension between the superior Montserrat and Consuelo over some of the practices of the house. Montserrat wrote to the superiors in Barcelona accusing Consuelo of being a ‘cronie’ of the monks and ‘betraying the spirit of the Company’. In response the Teresians in Spain acted swiftly and devastatingly. Both Consuelo and Montserrat were recalled immediately to Spain.

Consuelo ‘to whom this mission owes so much’

It was the sudden decision to recall the two Teresians and the reactions reverberating across the township that prompted a series of entries in the Chronicle praising Consuelo as a missionary leader. In the sixteen days between 5 and 21 July 1907, the diarist made seven separate entries focused on the decision to withdraw Consuelo and Montserrat, running to over eight hundred words, far exceeding the emphasis on any other single topic discussed between 1904 and 1920. According to the Chronicle, the sudden order from Barcelona recalling both sisters had fallen ‘like a bomb’ on the whole town. The Teresians were ‘not able to get out of the amazement that the decision of the superiors … has caused them’. The fifteen Aboriginal girls from St Joseph’s withdrew their participation from public prayer, and ‘spent two days in which, in the Church, they could not respond to the Priest leading the Rosary’, perhaps through sorrow, or in protest. In any case their silence was read as a reaction to the loss of Consuelo. Montserrat’s recall was, the monks noted, ‘what the Aborigines and Europeans of these environs want’. But the loss of Consuelo was a great blow. She had earned the respect of the Aborigines in the village and in particular the girls in the college (of which she had been in charge since the sisters started to run it); the European people also admired her and venerated her very much. The Chronicle was clear that the mission owed her ‘so much gratitude, more than to all the other Sisters combined, and that the Aboriginal people ‘admired her and venerated her very much’. The abbot was in Europe, boarding a ship with a party of four new Teresians, but could do nothing. There had been a rift between the two local leaders, and Barcelona attempted to resolve it by recalling them both and nominating one of the newcomers as superior.

The full cooperation with the monastery that Consuelo had claimed at New Norcia is especially interesting in the context of the wider literature on women’s missionary work. As Fiona Bowie and others have shown, ‘missionary’ was often an implicitly male term. The monks or the priests or the male ministers were the ‘missionaries’ and the women – whether accompanying nuns, or ministers’ wives, or single women teachers, nurses or
occasionally doctors – were framed as assistants, associates and helpmates. At New Norcia the Chronicle revealed a similar assumption even as it paid tribute to Consuelo as an extraordinary missionary. Documenting the emotional impact of her sudden recall to Spain in a week when she was ‘feeling it’ and ‘quite upset … through her sorrow’ the diary-keeper praised her for transcending her gender:

[Sr Consuelo] was perhaps never more distinguished than in what has been seen in these days, seeing that she had to overcome [the limitations of] her sex and condition, with her untiring perseverance in working without reserve for the good of the Aborigines, using her great talent in this. She has gained such great respect and love that the sorrow and tears at her departure were common to both the Aborigines and the European women.

As Torres eventually explained to the Teresian Superior General in Barcelona, Sister Consuelo had been at the core of his hopes for the new school, simply ‘the sister who in the judgement of those close to her and of strangers could have been put in charge of the college both of white girls and of native girls without delay’. Clearly appreciated by the monks as well as the Aborigines and the European women in town, Consuelo subsequently made choices that show how deeply she valued her missionary work. Claiming her own missionary vocation and disrupting the expectations of her own religious community to make it a priority left her without the support of her own congregation and in a situation where the support of the monks did not make an impact.

For the next two years the Teresian community continued to struggle at New Norcia and tension grew between the abbot and the leadership in Barcelona as well as locally, until in February 1910 the house was closed amidst accusation and counter-accusation. Several of the sisters had sought permission to remain in Australia, hoping to work in the new mission planned for the far north Kimberley or at New Norcia; and one, Sister Maria Harispe, who had not made a permanent commitment to the Teresians, successfully negotiated a private arrangement with the monastery to continue to work at New Norcia. Maria remained at St Joseph’s, cooperating with Mary Mackillop’s Sisters who had taken up the abbot’s invitation to open a boarding school in the buildings of St Gertrude’s College. The Chronicle hardly mentions the work of St Joseph’s in these years.

**Return of Consuelo**

However, on 5 September 1912, the diary broke its silence, interrupting the pattern of rainfall records and barometer readings to devote space to the return of Consuelo. We do not know how contact was re-established. In the first phase of her recall in Spain, when she wrote from Valencia, the Chronicle surmised the Teresians were intercepting letters to her from New Norcia.
But within the small talk of the Spanish congregation news that Maria Harispe had remained in Australia would certainly have reached her. In any event, five years after her departure, the *Chronicle* recorded Consuelo’s return as a stately homecoming:

At two in the afternoon there arrived from Spain, Sr Consuelo Batiz who five years before left the Mission recalled to Spain by her superiors; but today she returned, probably never to leave again as she is freed from her religious vows that bound her to the Congregation of the Company of St Teresa of Jesus. Consuelo’s return spoke eloquently of commitment; it was a powerful vindication of the glowing 1907 assessments of her love for the people and their regard for her. To make the journey from Spain to Australia a second time, and to return as a single woman, formally separated from the missionary congregation that had sponsored her work, gave that work absolute priority.

Maria and Consuelo had never met. When Maria first joined the Teresians, Consuelo was already at New Norcia, and when Maria arrived in August 1907 Consuelo had already been recalled. Perhaps they had corresponded, and undoubtedly Consuelo’s friends at the mission spoke warmly of her. The two Sisters were of the same generation, Consuelo at 34 years to Maria’s 31, they had both come from Latin American countries to Spain to join the Teresians, and they had both stood out against the congregation’s leadership. Evidently, Consuelo slipped back into her role as ‘director’ of the school, and the transition did not disturb the routine enough to cause the *Chronicle* to comment. We have to surmise most of what it meant in the day-to-day. Even the coverage of the funeral of Abbot Torres in 1914 barely acknowledged the Aboriginal presence and did not mention the girls at St Joseph’s or the sisters in charge there at all. The new abbot Anselm Catalan continued the work of the schools begun by Torres, and when Teresa Roca also returned to New Norcia in 1915 Catalan accepted that the three former Teresians were evolving into a new community related more closely to the monastery than the Teresians had been. The ‘Benedictine Oblate Sisters’ formally adopted Benedictine dress on 8 December 1915. Abbot Catalan’s later correspondence shows a clear expectation of the sisters as domestic workers, serving the monastery. Consuelo’s work in the school and with the Aboriginal girls that had attracted so much appreciation might have been remembered, but the hope of an institution that would equip the mission’s women to change the world had apparently evaporated.

As a woman now without official status or authority in the structures of the church, and with precarious acceptance in the officially White Australia, Consuelo confronted narrow assumptions about the work she might do. But the English-language records for this period of her work show none of the buoyant success of her first years at the mission. In the only example that survives of Consuelo’s direct interaction with the government as director at St
Joseph’s, she ends up isolated from the Aboriginal people involved, and out of step with the monastery and the government.

In January 1917 she wrote to the Chief Protector of Aborigines to put the case of an Aboriginal woman, whom I will call ‘J.’. It was rare for any one at New Norcia except the abbot or his deputy to write to the government, but Consuelo initiated this exchange. She chose to write to the government instead of consulting the monks, and she put the case as superintendent of the institution. Heavily pregnant, J. had arrived at the mission some weeks earlier with her common law husband, M., and their five-year old daughter, D.

According to the mission, they asked to place their daughter at the St Joseph’s school, but after a few days, ‘as the youngster was continually crying, the sister [Consuelo] advised the father to take her back’. M. did this, but then left New Norcia almost immediately, leaving D. with her mother. Some weeks passed, and then acting on J.’s request, Consuelo asked the Chief Protector for a train ticket to Guildford so that J. could go to the ‘old women’s shelter’ to give birth. Either informed by J., or drawing her own conclusions because, as she told the Chief Protector, ‘his own wife is still living’, Consuelo assumed that M. had abandoned J. and D. Consuelo arranged accommodation with one of the Aboriginal women in another cottage, the mission provided food and clothes, and D. returned to St Joseph’s ‘quite happy’, but Consuelo put J.’s case starkly to the Chief Protector:

She is in a most destitute state: no one in the cottages around will give her shelter. We await your answer to see what can be done for her.

The Chief Protector’s office checked their files of ‘personal particulars’ but could find no information; they judged a ticket to Perth would be more appropriate and sent one, asking Consuelo to fill in the appropriate names.

If the story ended here, we would see Consuelo had intervened on behalf of J., and perhaps to some good effect. But at the same time J. received a letter from M. enclosing money for a fare to Guildford. Consuelo’s advice was for J. to travel on through Guildford to Perth. Perhaps Consuelo was being obedient to the Chief Protector, perhaps she was unpersuaded that a de facto relationship could be stable, perhaps she did not think M. would be there at all. J. disagreed and insisted she would go to join M. in Guildford. As the abbot reported it later, J. ‘became insolent and abusive’ towards Consuelo.

However, we do not know whether this was before or after Consuelo took the decision that five-year old D. would not travel with her mother.

It is not clear what form the confrontation took, or whether it happened at New Norcia or at the Mogumber station, but on the file copy of Consuelo’s telegram advising the Chief Protector to ‘please meet Aboriginal woman [J.] going train to Perth’, there is a departmental note that ‘arrangements have been made to stop the train at Guildford’. Someone, perhaps in the face of J.’s distraught insistence, over-ruled Consuelo on the matter of destination.
This was a Friday. An undated letter from M. to the Chief Protector, probably written the following Monday, protests that his wife is ‘too much upset’ and ‘worrying and fretting night and day for her child’; the following Friday 2 February 1917 the Chief Protector wrote to Abbot Catalan, restating J.’s anxiety and the parents’ hope to have D. sent to Guildford, and asking with bureaucratic flourish to hear ‘the reasons which actuated you in retaining the child’. The abbot replied with the details of the initial involvement of the mission, reiterating the parents were not married, noting that D. and her parents were all Catholics, by which he may have meant that the mission had some authority to judge in this matter. He reported that J. ‘willingly left the child at the Orphanage’ and that D. was ‘still very happy’ there. The Chief Protector sent the police to ask M. to call in again, and wrote to the abbot again on 20 February advising that both parents ‘appear to be emphatic in their desire to have the child returned to them’. The new baby had arrived, a son, and ‘J. appears to be well able to look after the little girl’. On Monday 26 February word was sent to M. that the abbot was sending his daughter, and on Thursday 1 March 1917 her parents met D. from the morning train at Guildford. The Chief Protector wrote to thank the abbot.

There is a lot to explore in this one instance of church and state implementing provisions for the ‘protection’ of Aboriginal Australians, the determined struggle of the Aboriginal parents for their daughter most obviously. But turning the pages of the file it is also striking that Consuelo’s unique intervention is swiftly overtaken by male voices. As Consuelo overruled J. to keep the child at St Joseph’s, so M. appealed to the Chief Protector, and the Chief Protector sought advice from the abbot and then overruled that advice on his own assessment of the situation. Perhaps as the situation played out, Consuelo also began to advocate that D. should go to Guildford, but we do not hear her voice again. Consuelo was in direct contact with J. before any other figure of authority and could marshal resources for her as well as disrupt plans. She did not hesitate to intervene with the authority of the mission, but ultimately she did not determine events. For the Chief Protector and for the abbot her role was entirely ancillary to theirs, and would not determine policy.

This assumption that Consuelo’s work was under the direction of the abbot and at the disposal of the mission seems to have deepened through 1917. The focus of dispute appears to have been the abbot’s expectation and direction that Consuelo would sew for the monks. Consuelo found this ‘unacceptable’. On 10 November 1917 she wrote to advise the abbot that she would be leaving New Norcia and reminded him of a financial contract agreed with Torres that would come into effect if she left New Norcia. On Saturday 14 November the Chronicle recorded that Sr Consuelo had been ‘disobedient’ and was to be sent away. In tense negotiation with the monastery about
financial reparation, Consuelo delayed departure until Wednesday 2 December, and hurriedly made the clothes she needed to replace her own religious habit. Catalan was clear that she could not wear the habit ‘that distinguishes the other Sisters from the rest of the ladies of the world’.

This proviso that she should not leave New Norcia in religious dress was a marker of her change of status in relation to the mission and the wider church.

Consuelo left New Norcia but she did not return to Spain or Mexico. Instead, as Miss Batiz she took a position as a ‘sewing teacher’ at Carolup in the southwest, near Katanning, at a mission run by the United Aborigines Mission. She applied for a certificate of naturalisation declaring it was ‘her intention to remain in Australia’, with references from Richard Lanigan, Jeremiah Clune and Charles Davidson, all neighbours at New Norcia. This move to a Protestant mission station to work as a sewing teacher with Aboriginal people rather than remain at New Norcia and sew at the abbot’s direction for the monks underlines Consuelo’s conviction about the purpose of her return to Australia. Her sense of missionary identity that had outweighed her original commitment to the Teresian Sisters now also enabled her to break her connection to New Norcia and probably to minimise, if not compromise, her commitment to Roman Catholicism. There are no traces of her story at Carolup, but she was still there in 1921, when prompted perhaps by rumours of the closure of that mission she reopened her claim for further funds from New Norcia, through the representative of the Vatican in Australia.

When Carolup did close, and most of the people were moved to the Moore River Settlement, a mere six miles from New Norcia, Consuelo’s nerve failed. In January 1922, the Apostolic Delegate passed on her new address in Mexico to Abbot Catalan, urging him to consider the case of defraying her travelling expenses. The abbot wrote to Consuelo Batiz the following day to close the matter noting: ‘already we have done more than charity requires’. He wished her a prosperous New Year and ‘goodbye’.

In the end, Consuelo Batiz staked her identity, not once, but twice and then a third time, on the significance of her missionary role. Her first journey to Australia and the arrival as a Teresian missionary were carefully recorded and photographed as a historic occasion. Her work was judged by the Spanish monks who shared her religious assumptions and hopes for a grand institution in the mission to be a success. The loss of faith in her experienced by her distant superiors was widely lamented at New Norcia, constructed as a failure to understand the mission context. Her decision to resume her work in Australia without the support of her original community was welcomed by the monks and her position of leadership restored. But the warm regard for her and her leadership that suffuses the Spanish records of her first sojourn did not translate into the later context. Her potentially powerful collaboration with
the second abbot towards an impressive school for the Aboriginal girls was overtaken by his death. In her second sojourn her authority as a decision-maker for the institution was invisible to the government and in tension with the abbot’s assumption that he would determine her work. Caught in the web of financial dependency on both the monastery and the department, the English archival material that traces her attempt to influence the outcomes for one Aboriginal family also betrays racist or moralising assumptions and misplaced faith in her own judgement. Had the Spanish assessment overstated her original compassion and zest, had these qualities atrophied, or is there something more subtle to say?

In 2012 I used the records relating to Consuelo Batiz at New Norcia to discuss issues in archival research with a class of honours students in theology. Clusters of students separately considering material from 1907, 1912 and 1917 drew entirely different conclusions. The reality that there was one woman at the focus of all the material was hard for some to grasp. ‘Is this her?’ ‘So, now I am confused.’ ‘Where is the rest of the story please?’ No one wanted to back away from acknowledging the significance of her role, especially at the outset. The tributes apparently shared by the Aboriginal families in 1907 were endorsed by her return and her further move to Carolup. But the factors that shaped her decisions are hidden: her values are implied not articulated, her interactions reported but not the focus of reflection, her words limited and lost. The reality that Consuelo’s story is difficult to summarise, and impossible to synthesise, is part of the story of her leadership. It would be a pity to ignore the sketches we have of her because they are incoherent and shadowy. As in Consuelo’s own situation, there is no single clear and neat authority to order the interpretation; there are simply choices, presuppositions and risks that the picture will be distorted. Like the pixels in a photograph, the material breaks apart: we do not see.


2 Conversations with Drayton and Taylor family members, New Norcia Aboriginal Corporation, Reunion September 2010.


3 Photograph 74622P.jpeg, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia, New Norcia, Western Australia (hereafter ABCNN).


7 For an overview of the monastic town today see www.newnorcia.wa.gov.edu.au.


14 Girola; Harris.

15 Russo; Haebich, ‘No Man is an Island’.

Photograph, Company of St Teresa of Jesus 1904, Archives of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tuzting, Carabanchel, Madrid. See Massam, “‘To Know how to be All for All’”: 44.

Salvado to Garrido, 20 March 1866, 2-2234A/21.069, Summaries of Salvado Correspondence, ed. Teresa De Castro with David Barry, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia.

Chronicle, 6 October 1902. See also Chronicles of the Benedictine Abbey of New Norcia WA from January 1 to December 31, 1902, trans. Mary Chamberlain, New Norcia Studies no. 10 (2002): 92.


Katharine Massam, “‘To Know How to be All for All’”.


I calculate 1896 as the earliest possible entry date because Consuelo, born 15 December 1877, would not normally have made final profession until aged 21, probably after temporary vows of two years.

Cited by Pope John Paul II at the canonisation of Enrique Osso in Madrid, June 1993; see also Alejandro Pombro, 135.

Canonical Visitation to the Community of Teresians of St Gertrude’s New Norcia, October 1907, trans. Fr David Barry OSB, File 01717, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia (hereafter Canonical Visitation).

Chronicle of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia, 25 August 1904, 8 June 1903.


Fulgentius Torres to unnamed cardinal, 5 June 1908, Canonical Visitation, 80.

Chronicle, 13 December 1904.

Chronicle, 13 March 1905.

Some Account of the Spanish Mission to the Aborigines of Western Australia’ by a visitor with Cardinal Moran, 1887, cited in J.T. Reilly, Reminiscences of Fifty Years in Western Australia (Perth: Sands and McDougall, 1903), 111.

The Latin inscription on the foundation stone remains in place at New Norcia; see also Chronicle, 15 September 1906, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia (ABCNN).

Chronicle, 17 July 1910; and for example, Sunday Times, 4 February 1917, 8.

Torres to Teresa Pla, 3 May 1908. Canonical Visitation.

The Aborigines Question: Evidence taken by Dr Roth’, Western Mail, 20 February 1905, 19–20; Chronicle, 12 September 1906, 1 December 1906, 25 May 1907.
36 Torres to Teresa Pla, 3 May 1908, _Canonical Visitation_; Massam, ‘To Know How to be All for All’.
37 Montserrat Fito to Teresa Blanche, 13 May 1907, trans. Fr David Barry, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia.
38 _Chronicle_, 5, 6, 11, 16, 18, 20, 21 July 1907.
39 _Chronicle_, 6 July 1907.
40 _Chronicle_, 11 July 1907. On the numbers at St Joseph’s over time, see Appendix 1.
41 _Chronicle_, 18 July 1907.
42 _Chronicle_, 5 July 1907.
43 _Chronicle_, 5 July 1907.
44 _Chronicle_, 16 July 1907.
45 _Chronicle_, 5 July 1907.
47 _Chronicle_, 6 and 16 July 1907.
48 _Chronicle_, 11 July 1907.
49 Torres to Saturnina Jassa, Superior General of the Company of St Teresa of Jesus, 3 May 1908, _ Canonical Visitation_, 43.
50 Massam, ‘To Know How to be All for All’.
51 Maria Harispe to Henry Altimira, _Canonical Visitation_, 6 June 1908.
52 Massam, ‘Cloistering the Mission’.
53 _Chronicle_, 8 November 1907.
54 _Chronicle_, 5 September 1912. The monks thought her telegram announcing her return was from Torres. _Chronicle_, 27 August 1912.
55 _Chronicle_, 8 December 1915.
56 For example, _Letterbook of Abbot Catalan, during recruiting trips to Spain 1920, 1948_. Unpublished bound carbon copies, ABCNN.
57 Consuelo to Office of the Chief Protector, 14 January 1917, 653/331/1917, State Records Office of Western Australia.
58 Abbot Catalan to Chief Protector, 8 February 1917, _Letterbook_, ABCNN.
59 Catalan to Chief Protector, 8 February 1917, _Letterbook_, 131.
60 Consuelo to Office of the Chief Protector, 14 January 1917.
61 Consuelo to Office of the Chief Protector, 14 January 1917.
62 Catalan to Chief Protector, 8 February 1917.
63 Consuelo to Office of the Chief Protector, 14 January 1917.
64 Catalan to Chief Protector, 8 February 1917.
65 Telegram from Consuelo to Chief Protector, 26 January 1917, 653/331/1917, State Records Office of Western Australia.
66 ‘M.’ to Chief Protector, nd but probably 29 January 1917, 653/331/1917, State Records Office of Western Australia.
67 Chief Protector to Catalan, 2 February 1917, 653/331/1917, State Records Office of Western Australia.
68 Catalan to Chief Protector, 8 February 1917, Letterbook, 132.
69 Chief Protector to Catalan, 20 February 1917, 653/331/1917, State Records Office of Western Australia.
70 Consuelo to Catalan, 6 November 1917, File 00918, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia.
71 Consuelo to Catalan, 10 November 1917, File 00918, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia.
72 Chronicle, 14 November 1917.
73 Catalan to Consuelo, 26 November 1917, Letterbook, 79.
74 M.C. Batiz to Secretary of Home and Territories Department, 24 June 1918, NAA 1919/1216: 37354, National Archives of Australia.
75 Apostolic Delegation to Batiz, 21 July 1921, 607/21, copy at Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia.
76 Apostolic Delegation to Abbot Catalan, 17 January 1922, 1102/21, copy at Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia.
77 Catalan to Consuelo, 22 January 1922, Letterbook.
78 I am grateful to Dr Mark Lindsay, my colleague at the MCD University of Divinity, for the opportunity to work with the students in Research Methods in Theology.