Missionary Women and Work: Benedictine Women at New Norcia Claiming a Religious Vocation – Katharine Massam

In 1931 the Benedictine Oblate Missionary Sisters of New Norcia stood between phases in their history. The small community of women had been recruited by the Abbot of New Norcia in twos and threes through the 1920s and 1930s from villages in the north of Spain. Often they came from networks with strong historical ties to New Norcia, the mission founded by Spanish Benedictine monk Dom Rosendo Salvado in the Noongar-Yued country near Perth in Western Australia in 1846. In the nineteenth century Salvado had ignored all offers to set up a women’s community alongside his monks, and cautioned that ‘the whole business of nuns needs to be thought about ‘thrice three times’. But his successors actively sought to establish a community of European women who would ‘help our Benedictine missions amongst the Aboriginals …and be an ornament of the holy Roman church.’ The active word, at least from the perspective of the monastic leadership was ‘help’, and the framing concept to ‘ornament’ (‘assist’, or even ‘decorate’) the work of missionary monks remained significant through the twentieth-century history of this neglected group. Taking the Benedictine Missionary Oblate Sisters as a case study, this article explores the tensions within the definition of a missionary vocation. It looks especially at the place of work within the broader monastic tradition, and negotiations about the role of women as authentic ‘missionaries’.

The group of Benedictine women at New Norcia had stumbled into existence from a series of decisions that misfired, but nevertheless claimed a clear missionary identity. The monastery’s first attempt to found a women’s community in an arrangement with the
Companions of St Teresa of Jesus from Barcelona at the turn of the twentieth-century had imploded quickly, but by 1915 three of these Tereisan Sisters had made remarkable decisions to leave their congregation and to associate themselves with New Norcia as laywomen in private vows, committing themselves to the mission as ‘Benedictine oblates’. By 1931 this community had grown to twelve members. They ran ‘St Joseph’s Native School and Orphanage’ at the southern edge of the mission, and, together with the Aboriginal women and girls from St Joesph’s, took responsibility for much of cooking, washing and cleaning in the monastic town. They came from a Spanish Catholic culture that affirmed vowed religious life as an option for women and men, and frequently inherited family stories of missionary sacrifice and service, of religious vocation, and of adventure overseas. But at the Australian mission, although they dressed as religious sisters and were commonly referred to as nuns and Benedictines, their community had no formal status. They were simply an uncanonical group of women who shared a monastic lifestyle in the Benedictine mission town if not quite by accident, then certainly informally.

By the end of 1931 events were in train to regularize their informal status, and to define their missionary vocation as specifically Benedictine mission workers. How this status as missionary worker connected with a vocation as a religious sister, or whether it connected at all, was a significant question for the women involved, and also for the male authorities at New Norcia and in the wider church. Drawing on Foucault’s concept of physical discipline as a ‘technology of the self’, especially as it has been refracted for religious life by Pierre Hadot, This article tests the concept of work as a ‘technology of self’ against the experience of the Benedictine missionary women of New Norcia, using letters from the 1930s as well as oral evidence from contemporary members. I will argue here that the Rule of Benedict upheld the status of manual work, and so supported the women’s claims for the full religious status of their missionary vocation. While a strong hierarchy remained in which priestly roles were reserved for men, the Benedictines were explicitly instructed in Chapter 31 of their Rule to value the cooking pots and other domestic utensils as highly as the ‘sacred vessels of the altar’. The women and men of New Norcia lived in a climate where humble tasks were not ancillary, but valid spiritual
tools in themselves. Potentially, the Benedictine definition of work secured a duel status for this women’s community as both monastic and missionary.

The Spanish Benedictine sisters at New Norcia were in a tiny minority of Catholic women working almost exclusively among Aboriginal Australians. Paying attention to the changes in their formal status is a close focus but not a narrow one. This micro-history of the assumptions that framed their role, and the levers that allowed them to claim a full religious status for themselves as missionaries and as monastics inform a wider conversation about the place of Aboriginal mission in Australian Catholic life, the relative status of manual labour and other work in this Christian tradition, as well as currents of gender that still clouded their missionary status. This article sets the archival material in context first by exploring the wider historiography of Catholic women in mission history, and then the high value placed on manual labour by the Rule of Benedict that governed this community, before turning to the significance of this Benedictine understanding of work as a spiritual tool for bridging potential divisions and hierarchies of missionary life.

*Catholic women within the historiography of missions*

Within the historiography of women and missionary work, the role and significance of Catholic women around the globe awaits fuller investigation. Both Deirdre Raftery and Suellen Hoy have called attention to the large numbers of Irish Catholic women involved in missionary work internationally, and their relative neglect in the literature. Hoy estimates between 4,000 and 7,000 Irish women emigrated as missionary nuns to the USA in the century before the First World War. Raftery has noted the emphasis on North America in the discussion so far, and estimates that from the early nineteenth century through to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) the number of Catholic women missionaries leaving Ireland alone for various mission fields was close to 20,000. Australia was a primary destination for many of these Irish congregations, but the significance of their missionary impulse has often been eclipsed by an emphasis on their work in the Irish diaspora in schools and hospitals.
Catholic women have been obscured in the statistics of Australian missionary activity because their work in cities, or simply as women, meant they fell outside the institution’s working definition of ‘missionary’. At New Norcia, Salvado himself differentiated between the men who were ‘missionaries’ and seven others he designated simply as ‘female religious’, ‘Sisters of Mercy’, who were in the party of Catholics that arrived in Western Australia in 1846. Half a century later, the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1911 still maintained a distinction between the 392 Catholic ‘missionaries’ (presumably men) who were working in Australian and Oceania, and the 531 ‘Religious Women’ who worked as teachers and nurses in the mission context. Those 531 Catholic women counted separately from missionaries in the mission statistics represented roughly 10% of the total labour-force of vowed religious women who staffed Catholic schools and hospitals throughout Australia in the first decades of the twentieth century. This larger group is not usually included in the statistics of ‘missionaries’ or Catholic women on mission fields in Australia either, but their absence should be challenged. Many of these women had volunteered from Ireland ‘for the Australian missions’. Like the international Catholic church that in 1927 classified the entire continent of Australia as a mission field, they also understood their roles among the immigrant Irish in parish schools and hospitals as missionary work, although not directed explicitly towards ‘native peoples’.

Spanish Benedictine Women at New Norcia: a microhistory of Catholic missionary negotiation

The tension between those, like Salvado at New Norcia, who wanted priority given to work with Aboriginal people and others, who were committed to building an Anglo-Celtic institution, is a thread in Australian Catholic history that deserves more attention; but by the 1930s momentum was clearly with the maintenance of the institution, especially the Catholic education system. As Salvado’s successor Abbot Anselm Catalan explained to the superior of one European convent in 1930, ‘the great majority’ of nuns in Australia worked in schools, hospitals and beneficent asylums, ‘in places where they do not have Missions’.

He defined mission as work with the ‘aborigines [sic] of this
country… away from those who form the principle population of this continent,”¹⁷ and immediately reinforced the definition with ‘some photographs of our Mission at Drysdale River.’¹⁸

The decision to send four of the Spanish sisters from New Norcia to this remote station, at Drysdale River, and near the mouth of the King George River,¹⁹ 3000 km north of the capital by sea, is a pivot in the interconnected moves that defined the nature of the group between 1931 and 1936. The arrival in the Kimberley of Escolastica Martinez, Hildegard Ruiz, Gertrude Banks in August 1931 and then Matilde de la Fuente in 1932, as the ‘Benedictine Oblate Sisters’ highlighted the fragile nature of the community. It was with the intention of making the informal group more robust, that the abbot sent two other Oblate Sisters, Felicitas Pampliegia and Benita Gonzalo, to a Benedictine convent in Belgium. There they completed a canonical novitiate, or a formal period of study and training that made it possible to regularize the commitment the New Norcia women had all made privately as Benedictine oblates, and to convert their status into members of a religious congregation, technically sisters, or ‘nuns’. Their public vows for a new diocesan congregation of religious women made in the community in Belgium would have formal recognition by Rome as part of the diocese of New Norcia. They could then establish a foundation from that group at New Norcia, and so secure public recognition of their status in the church as both ‘missionary women’ and ‘vowed religious’.

*Work in the Rule of Benedict*

The account of how to live a Christian life given by the *Rule of Benedict* in the sixth century has been noted for its practical and realistic approach.²⁰ Benedictine monasteries balanced work, prayer, rest and leisure to sustain the members of a self-sufficient community focussed on God, not worldly achievement for its own sake.²¹ Manual work was especially valued in the tradition as a cure for depression and distraction, and for the foundation it offered to prayerful contemplation. There was no hierarchy of labour, except a reminder that monks who took in the harvest with their own hands were then most truly monastics.²² The *Rule* firmly directed attention away from external outcomes
of labour and towards the inner purpose of the work. Idleness was an enemy, and while activity was not a weapon in itself, work was a spiritual discipline in an ordered pattern of life.\textsuperscript{23}

Benedict’s support for moderation and the essentially spiritual character of manual work was part of an earlier Christian tradition. The ‘noon-day demon’ of acedia who might manifest as both listlessness or as dissipating hyperactivity to undermine the capacity to focus on important matters was well-known in monastic literature.\textsuperscript{24} The cure for this temptation underlined the place of work in a healthy spirituality. Against the vice of distraction, the monastic tradition recommended the virtue of persistence, in both prayer of the psalms and in work. In particular manual work was a central strategy, not for its own sake, and not to produce wealth or status, but for the dangers it warded off and the foundation for quiet it provided.\textsuperscript{25}

Overall, the work that supported the community, and the process of working itself was to be a dimension of contemplation for the members of the community. While the vision of the Rule was always in tension with the real politik of putting it into practice, the Benedictine principle nevertheless offers a framework for understanding women’s work within the Aboriginal mission at New Norcia.

This claim for a spirituality of work that acknowledges the equal status of manual labour in religious life comes into focus more clearly in the light of recent scholarship on the embodiment of values. In the mid-1980s Michel Foucault directed attention to the ways in which particular philosophical schools of thought promoted disciplines of the body. His work on philosophical ‘techniques of the self’ raised awareness of the bodily dimensions of monastic history. Essentially the Rule of Benedict is not a set of beliefs that are assented to, but a set of practices that are embodied; monasticism is enacted (or not). So, the day to day realities of baking and sewing, cooking and cleaning, are validly what Foucault might call ‘technologies of the self’, at the core of the creation of a monastic person. For New Norcia too, that monastic settlement, the work of the township was at the core of the mission’s project to ‘Christianise and civilise’, to create Godly citizens.
But in response to Foucault, Pierre Hadot subsequently argued that the end point of these technologies of belief is not in fact the self, but beyond the self. The hard work in response to monastic obedience was not an end in itself but a means of going beyond the self. This was an important corrective in relation to understanding work in religious communities. It highlighted the role of work, not as an end in itself, and not as a tool of self-creation, but as a technology of going-beyond-the-self. For the Christian monastics, the goal is holiness, salvation, God. So physical practices of the Rule are not so much technologies of self, as technologies of holiness. There is a theoretical key here to the simple equation the Benedictine women made between their missionary and monastic vocations. In the context of Benedictine life, the variety of work undertaken was not the point, the achievement or particular contribution of the person was not the point; the purpose was always the refinement of the soul, an obedient response to God’s call to sanctity. All work was equal in the vocational arena, enabling all, equally, to ‘be’ holy.

*Work, Prayer and Religious Women at New Norcia*

The central tension for these women of holding together a monastic and missionary vocation is summed up in the key decision to set up a house in the Kimberley, a foundation that many of the Sisters would come to call ‘the real mission’, and then to resource the group by training them in European monastic traditions of domestic work (not teaching, not nursing, not language study even in English). There were several communities already known to the Sisters and the abbot that might have been chosen as the model for the community of missionaries. Ties with impressive Spanish communities were strong: most of the 1930s Sisters had become missionaries through contact either with the Royal Monastery of Las Huelgas in Burgos, or the even more ancient community of San Salvador in the nearby village of Palacios de Beneber. There were also teaching communities of Dominicans in Burgos and Barcelona who regularly accommodated the missionary parties for Australia. Similarly the Australian Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart (founded by Mary MacKillop) had arrived at New Norcia as teachers in 1908, and ties with the Sisters of Mercy, who ran schools and hospitals in Perth dated back to Salvado himself. The Australian Sisters of the Good Samaritan had
been founded by the Sydney Benedictine Bishop Polding, as ‘active Benedictines’ originally involved in social work, and by this time focused on educations. But of all the groups of vowed religious women in Australia and the wider Benedictine world who could have hosted Felicitas and Benita and supported the move to establish the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of New Norcia as a formal diocesan congregation, the abbot chose to a group in Belgium dedicated especially to domestic work in support of the monks of the famous abbey of Maredsous.27

The choice relates to the debate among historians about whether or not ‘missionary’ was a word that could be applied to women. Scholars including Gayatri Spivak and Fiona Bowie have argued the term was reserved for men, as decision-makers. But as Claire Midgley’s work on Protestant women in British colonies in the early nineteenth century suggests, and as the history of Catholic women religious also shows clearly, it is important to remember the capacity women had to ‘carve out a far greater space for female missionary agency than this picture suggests’.28 As Frank Pochaska argues in his major discussion of Women and Philanthropy, ‘we are perhaps too prone to see limitations where the women of the past saw possibilities’.29 This was the case for the Benedictine women at New Norcia who claimed a full sense of religious vocation while also engaging in work that kept them, in the phrase of one Sister ‘too busy to scratch my ear’.30

Writing a Vocation – missionary and religious

A letter from Scholastica Martinez in the Kimberley to the Abbot at New Norcia when the Felicitas and Benita returned from Belgium to implement the life they had learnt there, makes clear this choice for both dimensions of identity. Scholastica told the abbot she had longed for a fuller religious observance: ‘I like a lot of the changes …I think we were all sighing for them’.31 She feared that the missionary life might have made her wilder than a usual recruit, and faced a reality that monastic discipline was in contrast to the free-er forms of community in the north.
[Perhaps] the mistress of the novices will find it a bit hard to get us professed, …I say this for myself because after spending so many years in this wild bush, there’s no doubt it will be more difficult for us.\textsuperscript{32}

Scholastica drew a distinction between herself and the returning Sisters ‘who had the true spirit of true Benedictines’\textsuperscript{33} and was concerned ‘in case I offend my beloved Sisters when I am in their company’\textsuperscript{34}; but she also counted herself in, as a genuine missionary and authentically vowed religious already.

From the beginning, well before the regularization, Scholastica had been writing of her spiritual ambition to be a saint.\textsuperscript{35} In letters timed to coincide with the mail run from the remote convent where she baked bread in the tropical heat and washed clothes with the women in the river, she discussed her private vows in terms that indicate she saw them as a full commitment to religious life as a nun. If we can only take her word for it that this is what she believed, we can be sure that this exactly what she thought it proper to tell the abbot about her vocation.

Specifically, Scholastica celebrated ‘the great grace’ [by which God] conceded to consecrate me to Him with the three precious nails: Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.’\textsuperscript{36} She spoke of the mission as a cloistered world, and asked the abbot to pray she would, ‘be grateful to my sweet Jesus for having taken me out of the world and brought me to the holy ark of religion, where, away from so many dangers, I can save my soul more easily’.\textsuperscript{37} In a high-spirited flourish that calls on motifs of religious women as ‘brides of Christ’, Scholastica offered the abbot a manifesto of her dedication.

Yes I am loyal to what I promised Him on the day of my betrothal with the Heavenly spouse. Oh, how he obliges me to be a generous soul and at the same time, with a heart that never says enough and which links itself with all manner of hardship and sacrifice with a smile, for the good of such a good God who has done so much for this unworthy daughter of His.\textsuperscript{38}
Perhaps most simply and significantly of all, she signed herself using her full religious name: Hermana Maria Escolatica and included the initials of her Benedictine identity: OSB.

Scholastica’s writing is more exuberant than some, but typical. The news this missionary woman gave was all about an active life of hard work in demanding conditions: the coming and going at the mission, church services and difficulties with the heat, and the crops, and the bread making, illness and recovery or death among the people; but her sense of purpose was fuelled by classically monastic tropes. The Benedictine missionary sisters negotiated a definition of missionary life that included a strong emphasis on the traditional monastic virtues of obedience, and a ‘separate sphere’ of domestic work in support of the priests and monks. The letters show that their sense of vocation as missionary women ‘combined self-sacrifice with self-fulfillment’. That fulfillment pivoted on their sense of privilege as women religious, on having the sacramental and liturgical resources of the church ‘at their finger tips’, on Christian formation, and opportunity or capacity for prayer. Their fulfillment in discipleship, as missionaries, was in contrast to what they saw as the degraded situation of women in traditional Aboriginal society. That Christianity offered something for women in this life as well as in the next was a clear conviction. The shared and collaborative work of the women from both communities in the kitchen, laundry, in the house and on the farm, also forged an extended community. In the pattern of the Rule of Benedict this had been the model at New Norcia since Salvado’s time. It reflected his conviction that meaningful work, much more than education for its own sake was to be the lever of social change that secured the future for the Yuad people. Significantly, and in keeping with Hadot’s insights, the work was not to ensure prosperity or prestige for its own sake, but to enable Godly living. As for Scholastica in the next century, work was a strategy, a technology of holiness.

*Shared work as a missionary touchstone*

Work shared by Aboriginal people and monastics was at the centre of Salvado’s vision for New Norcia in ways we are only beginning to appreciate. The Benedictine Sisters
followed Salvado’s pattern of shared work, and reflect Salvado’s merged sense of missionary and monastic vocation. Charged with heavy domestic responsibilities they also needed the support of the young women at St Joseph’s who were rostered to help. The partnership is controversial: modeled on nineteenth-century village life, it persisted through the twentieth-century. None of the women were paid for their labour outside the in-kind provision of food, shelter and clothing. Whether and how much the work interrupted education and what other forms of training might have been provided as options for women in the surrounding context changed is emerging as a focus for the ongoing work of reconciliation in the town. But for the Sisters, the hard work is an irrefutable touchstone of their distinctive community.

When the members of this Benedictine Missionary Sisters of New Norcia discuss their heritage now, being a good sister and being a good worker are distinct, but both very close to the core of their life. Twinned with prayer, work was fundamental to their monastic life and their missionary vocation. ‘We prayed the monastic office; that was something I always appreciated,’ Sister Visitacion recalls, ‘in English with the books they got from Maredsous.’ But even Visitacion, drawn to the liturgy as she was, found the intense work of the town dominated life. In some phases the domestic work kept her and others separated from the Aboriginal people, as they were sent to support a neighbouring institution: ‘great ones for visitors… Tables ready, cups of tea, and then more tables, more tea’. Her contemporary Sister Teresa had seen this work as futile, and had dared to question the superior: ‘I once asked Sister Mary, “What is the point of this work there? It is useless what you are doing there”. The reply from the superior had stayed with her for fifty years, and simply reframed the work on the wider horizon of holiness. Mary had replied, ‘It is the will of God!’

That work was a matter of faith imbued all tasks with purpose, and set them up as Hadot’s ‘technology of holiness’. Particular skill was a bonus, not a matter of training; the young Sisters mostly learnt on the job. ‘I was kicked into the ocean and it was swim or drown in the kitchen,’ Sister Scholastica Carrillo observes, ‘I swam. I did my best. I worked hard alright.’ The rosters were unrelenting, but the work was linked to God and
to a sense of purpose, as Sister Carmen maintains: ‘But God helps. I have God’s help. And [I was] very happy; hurry, hurry all the time.’ The constant tests and triumphs over the demands of the timetable were a feature of the Sisters’ life, and straightforward material to recount. We know the summary, “Happy, with God’s help and hurry hurry all the time” is selective; it does not capture the fatigue and the disappointment and the weight of a tough institution that destroyed some women, but it does identify the compelling of purpose, that underpinned the serenity, the companionship and the complexity of relationships that sustained others. It suggests that work as a ‘technology of holiness’ might apply here.

The invisibility of women in the history of Aboriginal Australia and in mission history in general is still being redressed, and we are still honing the tools to help us access the sources to see who they were, and what they did. As well as that, there is the reality that no-one could ever see, or that can only be glimpsed. When the Benedictine Sisters sum up for themselves, they move very reluctantly from the tasks to the purpose that sustained them. Hard work in response to spiritual authority was a familiar and trusted formula for holiness; but the words to sum up a life of faithful attention to the round of duties are more elusive. At the end of a long and deep interview, one of the contemporary Sisters chose a simple phrase and telling phrase to sum up 48 years of her life in the Kimberley. Closing down the conversation gently, and pointing implicitly to the horizon of faith as the means of explanation, Sister Visitacion Cidad simply said: ‘The deepest things – these are what God knows.’

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1 Salvado to Garrido, 20 March 1866, Salvado Correspondence summaries De Castro and Barry, Archives
2 Fulgentius Torres to Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Regulars, 5 June 1908, in the Canonical Visitation to the Community of Teresians of St Gertrude’s New Norcia, October 1907, ABCNN 01717, trans. David Barry: 80.


5 Statistics for this community are calculated from various sources held in the archives of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tutzing in Carabanchel, Madrid, and the State Record Office of Western Australia. A consolidated spreadsheet is part of author’s ongoing research on the history of women at New Norcia.


10 Raftery, “Irish women religious in international mission’:515.


15 Anselm Catalan to Reverend Mother Carmen Mascaro, Vich, 24 April 1930, ABCNN.

16 Catalan to Mascaro, 24 April 1930.

17 Catalan to Mascaro, 24 April 1930.

18 Catalan to Mascaro, 24 April 1930.


20 Michael Casey, Strangers in the City, Columba Stewart, Prayer and Hospitality


22 RB 1980, 48: 7-10, 69


25 Cassian, Institutes 10.7.

26 Las Huelgas and Palacios

27 Anselmo Catalan to Wilfred Saenz, 13 July 1933, Correspondence Books, ACBNN.

28 Midgley, Feminism and Empire, 95.

29 Cited Midgley, Feminism and Empire, 108.

30 Interview with Sr Visitacion Cidad OSB, Kalumburu, May 1999.
Scholastica Martinez to Anselmo Catalan, 17 May 1937, trans. Kerry Mullan, ABCNN.

Scholastica to Catalan, 17 May 1937.

Scholastica to Catalan, 17 May 1937.

Scholastica to Catalan, 17 May 1937.

For example, Scholastica Martinez to Abbot Catalan, 13 September 1932, 8 Feb 1933, ABCNN, 01061.


Scholastica to Catalan, 29 October 1935.

Scholastica Catalan, 29 October 1935.

Midgley, *Feminism and Empire*, 121.


Interview Visitacion Cidad with Katharine Massam, Madrid, August 2010.


Interview Visitacion, Teresa, Pilar, October 2010.

Interview Visitacion, Teresa, Pilar, October 2010.

Interview Scholastica Carrillo with Katharine Massam, Madrid, 7 June 1999.


Interview Visitatction August 2010.