EVANGELISTS OF EMPIRE?
MISSIONARIES IN COLONIAL HISTORY

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"THAT THERE WAS LOVE IN THIS HOME":
THE BENEDICTINE MISSIONARY SISTERS AT NEW NORCIA

Katharine Massam

On 2 June 1958 Natividad Montero arrived at New Norcia, the small monastic township established by Rosendo Salvado and his Spanish monks in 1846, as a mission to the Yutu people on the Moore River north-east of Perth. She was twenty and had travelled from her home near Burgos in the north of Spain to join the Benedictine Missionary Sisters. Her new community was vowed to 'obedience, stability and conversion of life', according to the sixth-century Rule of Benedict, and followed a daily pattern developed in Belgium for women whose primary religious responsibility was domestic work. From 1904 to 1974 this group of Catholic missionary women had their administrative centre at New Norcia. Of the fifty-eight women who were Benedictine Sisters for the West Australian mission in these years, forty-three were Spanish, mostly from the north near Burgos, five were Australians and one a New Zealander of Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, and four were Aboriginal Australians. At New Norcia, they took responsibility for working with Aboriginal women and girls at what the government called 'St Joseph's Native School and Orphanage'.

The photograph that records Natividad's pledge to be a missionary is a typical family snapshot. On this occasion, when Natividad 'took her new name in religion' to become Sister Josefina, she is shown standing in the centre of the community's small chapel with the pledge of her new identity in her hands. Rather than the careful formal portraits that marked the foundation of the St Joseph's community, or the ethnographic documentation of New Norcia's local community that dominated the nineteenth-century photographic archive, this image was almost a random glance. We are looking from the 'St Joseph's side' of the gathering, so we cannot see any of the Aboriginal students; instead, Josefina is framed by the students and teachers of St Gertrude's, the local boarding college, who were guests for the occasion. Sister Veronica Therese, her companion in the novitiate, is in the foreground, kneeling behind what seems to be the chair Josefina has just left, and behind Antonia the other novice. Veronica Therese (formerly Marie) Willaway and Antonia (formerly Norma) Stack had been students at St Joseph's. They were daughters of Aboriginal families of the Yutu people before they entered the convent in 1938 and pledged themselves to new identities. Their superior, Sister Felicitas, is also kneeling in the photo's foreground. It was almost forty years since she had arrived at New Norcia as the nineteen-year-old Maria Isabel Pampliega from Spain, and nearly twenty-five years since she returned from a period of training in Belgium to

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take on the leadership of the group. The photograph shows them lost in their own thoughts, looking neither at the camera nor at Josefa, but following the order of the service in which, decades apart, they had also pledged themselves to the Benedictine Sisters.

The image seems to be an action shot, taken while the ceremony itself was in progress, but it is not focused on the celebrant, the Abbot, or on the men who accompanied him at the altar, but on Josefa herself and the women of the town. Rather than showing her conventionally, from the back facing the sanctuary, as in images of the Sisters that appeared in the Catholic press, or obscured like the more heavily veiled teacher from St Gertrude’s on her left, here we can see the nun’s face. The photo was probably taken as a momento to send to the missionary’s family in Spain, and as a private document it was the capturing of the moment and the faces that gave it meaning. It was preserved in the family albums of some of the Sisters as well as in the archives of the community in New Norcia and Madrid. There were no details, dates or captions, just a colloquial understanding that this was ‘Josie’s profession’, and it needed no other interpretation. It was not a staged photo, just a glimpse into an occasion that brought the faces of these women together in the context of the mission town.

To read this image primarily as a view from a family album is to underline an important theme in the self-identity of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters. Growing from an informal community that was a remnant of a grander vision for missionary women who came to the town in 1904, the Sisters were often ‘family’, the blood sisters, cousins and friends of the monks of New Norcia and each other, recruited by the abbot on his visit to the villages in the North. 4 Drawn by circumstances, and an attraction to the style of work more often than an active choice for the Benedictine Rule as such, the oral evidence shows nevertheless that they valued the Rule’s affirmation of relationship and emphasis on community over more austere seclusion. ‘Family’ became a touchstone that defined their sense of call. Benedict is about family, and in the end I am proud of that observed Sister Scholastica, as she reflected on more than fifty years with the group. 5

This chapter traces the particular sense of identity as a ‘family of outsiders’ that shaped the realities of life for the missionary women at New Norcia, no less than for the Aboriginal children in their care. The affective, emotional relationship that affirmed a ‘New Norcia family’ is an awkward theme, problematic and even pathetic in a context where assimilation carried all the racist assumptions of removing children for their own good, as part of a commitment to a ‘superior’ white culture. What gives the theme significance for the groups at New Norcia, both the Aboriginal people and the missionaries, is the recognition that they were oriented together towards a frame of reference that put them all outside the standard assumptions of white ‘success’. The first section of the chapter explores the tense but enduring connection between ‘family’ and ‘assimilation’ at New Norcia, setting the mission in context; the second section considers three case studies each powerfully informed by the family ideal. I will argue that even in a racist context the concept of ‘family’ and particularly a family of outsiders, forged bonds both among and between the town’s communities and stretched across boundaries of ethnicity and culture.
New Norcia's nineteenth-century founder Rosendo Salvado has been celebrated as a compassionate champion of Aboriginal people, building cottages for families rather than dormitories for separated children, and integrating Aboriginal men into the workforce alongside the lay brothers of the monastery. While work is progressing on the translation of sources to enable a deeper understanding of Salvado, New Norcia's reputation as the 'single success' of the West Australian mission effort was affirmed by contemporaries, and credited to the particular dedication of the Benedictines. For example, Alexander Maitland, a missionary with the Church of England in India, visited New Norcia in 1867 and was surprised to find 'not an organization for reclaiming from savagery and training in the elements of civilization the natives of Australia, but the natives living as an integral part of an organised Christian community, humanised, civilised, Christianised'. Furthermore, Maitland told the *Perth Gazette*, the monastery was the secret of the mission's success:

The faith, patience and courage which have been enabled ... to establish the monastery and Christian village of New Norcia, as we see it now, are beyond all praise of man ... The success obtained by the Benedictines of New Norcia shows us clearly the only means by which a happy result may be obtained. But for Protestants it will always be difficult to establish and maintain a similar institution with our habits of comfort; and above all to find a like number of men so full of self-abnegation, patient and persevering and entirely devoted to this work of civilisation.

The vision of an agrarian village of families surrounding a monastery did not survive the expansion of European settlement. By the 1880s there were separate wattle and daub cottages in the town for girls (St Joseph's) and for boys (St Mary's), and Salvado was writing to the Chief Protector impatiently protesting that he did not know or care whether their parents were alive, only that they were children in need.

Salvado maintained 'this Benedictine mission of New Norcia was never intended to be, and is not at all an orphanage', and yet the number of children increased and the monks were appointed to care for them. Salvado's hope did not match the colonial reality: it is likely Aboriginal people shared the sense of ambiguity as they continued to experience it in the twentieth century. In her work on the Catholic missions in far north of Western Australia, including the 1908 Benedictine foundation at Drysdale River (later Kalumburu), and the Trappist foundation at Beagle Bay, Christine Choo argues that 'the State could not have legislated for the removal of children...without the encouragement and compliance of Church agencies'. Choo also shows that for 'many Aborigines there is an ambivalence in their attitude towards the missionaries and the Mission itself because for them it had become home'. Peggy Brock chose the word 'ghetto' to convey the effect of the mission, at the same time both 'home' and 'institution':

Like the ghettos of other lands, outback missions simultaneously oppressed and nurtured the communities they confined. These institutions offered a
haven from the hostile, outside world, and a basis for community solidarity
and consolidation in contrast to that world.13

More recently Tim Rowse has wrestled with the multi-valent impact of 'assimila-
tion', the policy that was supposed to ensure Aboriginal equality, as effectively under-
minder Aboriginal difference and cultural continuity, all in the name of abolishing
paternalistic 'protection'.14 New Norcia was not unique in the cognitive dissonance that
it both was and was not an orphanage, that it both encouraged family life and modelled
monastic separation from it, but the choice to frame the experience of the mission as
'family' is striking in the records.

Applied to work in institutions caught up in assimilationist policies directed at the
stolen generations, the label of 'family' is poignant, perhaps dissonant and unstable; but
it is persistent. Even Veronica Willeway's family who trace their local Yuat heritage
back beyond co-operation with Salvado, tell the story of their eldest sister joining the
Benedictines as a comical and unromantic episode of finding an alternative to the family
home. Her sister Rose remembered, 'Mum chased her with a broom one day, that's why
she joined'.15 They had been 'mopping' the floor with 'hoses in the house ... and Mum
came home from work early, from work, and ... she caught us. Water's everywhere in
the kitchen. After that you [Veronica] joined. That's why she joined'.16

In a joint interview, Veronica concurred, a little reluctantly: 'I ran away quickly'.
Rose insisted, 'She was one lap for the convent. Never seen her. Veronica affirmed,
laughing: 'One lap for the convent?'17 It was a matter of some five hundred metres from
the cottages Salvado had built for the Aboriginal families to the Benedictines' 1930s
convent and the class rooms where the Willaways, Taylors, Draytons and other local
families went to school. In one sense it was all familiar territory, and Veronica's family
traditions had spoken strongly and consistently of co-operation with the Spanish mis-
sionaries so that the 'transfer' seemed part of her destiny.18 If Salvado's hope of Abo-
iginal monks and priests had faded in the twentieth century, it seemed in the 1950s that
the Spanish Sisters, focused on 'women's work' and drawing on traditions of shared
family history, were reviving prospects of an 'integrated' religious community.19

The hope of a 'family' of Benedictine women at St Joseph's skirted close to the as-
similationist hopes of White Australia, even as it subverted them. A little over a month
after Natividad took the name Sister Josefin, the community celebrated the Feast of St
Benedict on 11 July. Coincidentally 11 July 1958 was also National Aborigines Day, and
a committee answerable to the various ministers for 'Native Welfare' at state and federal
level produced a folder of information and photographs under the title Assimilation of
Our Aborigines. The commentators offered a definition of the key policy term as social,
not racial:

In its simplest terms assimilation means that, in order to survive and prosper,
the aborigines must live and work and think as white Australians do so that
they can take their place in social, economic and political equality with the rest
of the Australian community.20
The pamphlet affirmed in conclusion: 'The problem [of difference] is being attacked ergetically and constructively by the Government and the Christian Missions'.

The formulists of White Australia's assimilation policy would probably have claimed a triumph in the Benedictine Sisters. But there are more layers to their story than a simple success in policy terms. Certainly Marie and Norma were Sister Veronica Therese and Sister Antonia, and they may have moved away from the Aboriginality of their families 'for their own good', even including the good of their souls, but the members of the group they belonged to were largely dark-skinned Southern European women for whom English was a poor second language. They all worked as Catholic in a Catholic institution, in a sectarian climate marked for much of the century by mutual distrust. They followed Spanish, not Irish or English norms, so that when Anne Moyihan from Perth joined Veronica in the novitiate, she was amazed to find olive oil on the table for her bread and a notice board of messages exclusively in Spanish, a language she resolutely refused to learn as an Australian in Australia. The young women who had grown up in New Norcia, however, recognized enough Spanish to get by. They all prayed in Latin. Like Natividad, they spoke of being 'called' to become Benedictines, to live holy lives as sisters, to serve God in serving others.

Assimilationist policies carried implicit definitions of success, most often associated with meeting White Australia's criteria for 'doing well in the world'. But what might I have meant to 'assimilate' with a group whose members defined success in counter cultural terms? I am interested to explore questions of assimilation in the context of mission experience by taking Christian patterns of theology and styles of spirituality, or Christian understandings of holiness and 'a good life' as a starting place. While leaders of New Norcia, and most famously Rosendo Salvado himself, sometimes maintained a high public profile as part of their work for the mission, the Benedictines more generally saw their lives as answering a call to be separated from the world, and to live according to different priorities. The Benedictine Missionary Sisters were encouraged to value poverty, hard manual work, separation from family, obedience to a superior, and dedication to a demanding monastic timetable as a means of increasing their own capacity for holiness and growing closer to God.

In this mission context, as within the dominant patterns of Catholic spirituality in twentieth-century Australia, the frame of reference for success (perhaps especially for women) was not so much achievement in 'this world' as holiness in preparation for 'the next life'. The ultimate priority was 'to be good' rather than 'to be successful', or even 'to be respectable', and while all of these were not necessarily mutually exclusive, the orientation towards 'a holy life' had significant implications. The simple commitment to holiness, or being 'good Catholic', governed the choices the Sisters and the Benedictine monks made in running the mission's institutions, and the criteria used to evaluate projects, well into the 1970s. At New Norcia, as in Benedictine life in general, the tasks of daily life in the kitchen and the laundry, in the classroom, on the farm and in the chapel were all equally to be regarded as 'tools of holiness'. Claims of Christian vocation did not override, but did interact with, the powerful categories of race, class, and gender to shape the mission experience of the monks and nuns, Aboriginal and European, men and women. General Australian understandings of assimilation were challenged by as
sumptions that everyone at New Norcia, members of the Indigenous community no less than the monastic missionary community, should be first and foremost shaped as a family of 'citizens of heaven'.

The delicate question of what constituted 'heavenly citizenship' was defined in institutional terms firstly, as shared participation in the devotional life and sacraments of the Catholic church, and then, within the particular experience of New Norcia, as connected to missionary identity. The participation in the church as part of the fabric of life in the family of New Norcia was an important nuance in the dynamics of the mission. Observation may not have been especially strict – in the days of the founder, lay brothers and most monks in fact lived a peasant life as shepherds and labourers away from the routines of monastic prayer – but the Spanish Catholicism of New Norcia definitively set the town apart from the English-speaking Protestantism of decision-makers in Perth. The sectarian realities of Australian life through to the 1960s meant the missionaries, men as well as women, thought of themselves as outside the dominant culture, and distrusted the Protestant Protector and his government. Claims to 'heavenly citizenship' also rested in a particular way on a specifically missionary identity. Individually and collectively through the decades, the Sisters attested they were called to work away from the mainstream, replacing their birth-families with those of the Aboriginal people; some saw themselves called by their circumstances, or the Abbot; others, probably most, felt called by God. In the first half of the century especially, they framed it as a call to lowliness, to heroic self-denial. For the Aboriginal women and children, to be a good member of the New Norcia family and a citizen of heaven was also to affirm the missionary identity of the Sisters and monks of the town, and in important ways to claim a relationship with that identity. Assimilation into an alternative Catholic framework of success thus worked both ways – for missionaries it was an identification with what they termed 'lowliness', and for Aboriginal people a validation of spiritual equality even as they remained outside mainstream society. For both groups it was marked by a sense of powerful relationships formed by a common 'family' bond to New Norcia as a place and particularly as a mission town.

The relational 'family' bonds that made sense of and motivated choices at New Norcia are clear in the writing of each of the two women credited as 'foundress' by the Benedictine Missionary Sisters, and they also underpinned the reunion instigated by former students of St Joseph's to mark the Sisters' work in New Norcia. This chapter moves now to consider in turn written accounts by Maria Harispe and Felictas Pampliega, and then the painting by Sheila Humphries that had pride of place in the central liturgy of the reunion.

On 6 June 1908 Sister Maria Harispe wrote an extraordinary letter to Father Henry Altimira, secretary to New Norcia's Abbot Fulgentius Torres. Maria wrote in her own hand and in Spanish, the language of Paraguay, her home country. After nine months at New Norcia, the 26-year-old lay sister was pleading to be allowed to remain in the work she was doing at St Joseph's, even though her community was imploding around her. She felt compelled to ask to continue to follow what she called 'this way of abnegation and sacrifice for His love', after a month of careful prayer 'with all the sincerity of my heart'. She put her request in terms that reflect a careful and unromantic discernment of
her decision as a response to a call from God; ‘since as far as I can understand, although no angel from heaven came down to reveal it to me, I think it will be God’s will when He gives me these desires’.24 She offered four reasons for her request: her long-held sense of call to the work, her particular promise to ‘sacrifice’ her connections to her own blood family, and her commitment to the Aboriginal people, who, in the Spanish of her day, were matter-of-factly ‘blacks’ and ‘savages’, despised by the majority of people, but loved by Maria who would consequently be happy to live and die with them:

First, because since I heard that a house was going to be founded in Australia for the natives I always had the desire that they might send me. Secondly, so to live separated from the world and above all from my relatives which sacrifice I offered the Lord in a special way on the day of my religious profession. Thirdly, out of the compassionate love which I have towards the blacks for being so despised by the majority of people. Fourth, because I would desire to sacrifice my life for the savages and I would consider myself very happy if I could finish my life amongst them.25

She hesitated to tell the Abbot’s secretary of these requirements she saw as essential to her offer, but then set aside her fear of being laughed at, and detailed what she wanted. She hoped she could continue to be identified as a religious sister, even as she sought to align herself with the Aboriginal people, so that the mission authorities ‘may regard me as a native’ in material terms. She made clear that this request was to be for the rest of her life in her attention to the provisions for her burial at New Norcia:

Concerning the conditions I will speak to you when I see you since ... I have no doubt that you will laugh. Shall I put them to you? Yes. Firstly, that I may always be able to use the religious habit even though it be of sackcloth. Secondly, that they may regard me as a native as far as my clothing and other necessities. Thirdly, a plot of land when I die and a requiescat in pace.26

Maria was given the permission she sought, and remained at St Joseph’s. Her conditions were also met and by her final illness in 1925 a small community of three, then four, and then six had arrived to share the missionary life she modelled as a religious sister, in the same austere conditions as the local people.

Those conditions shocked the future superior Felicitas when she arrived in 1921. She was already formed in some of the Benedictine patterns by months as a lay sister in the large and historic Monastery of Haulages Reales in northern Spain. Felicitas overcame her shock and disappointment at her situation in New Norcia by the same two reference points that had informed Maria – love of God and the people – and to these Felicitas added a third, the example of the earlier missionaries.

The more precarious state of the community is reflected in the fate of material Felicitas left: her original Spanish notebooks were burnt in the 1980s because any one might read them, and the account of her initial struggle was seen as shameful.27 What remains are versions transcribed and edited into a form of English by later members of
her community. The earliest and roughest of these transcriptions slips between first and third person narration as Felicitas's own voice weaves in and out of the account, and gives details of her shocked arrival that are missing from later versions. If we cannot be sure what Felicitas wrote, it is still clear what her community felt able to affirm. The record of her encounter begins with an affirmation of a wider horizon beyond the trauma of arrival.

When they arrived at New Norcia and saw the small group they were discouraged as they thought to find a community. But coming from far, their decision was to abandon the things of this world for God's love and the aborigines. They found many obstacles on their way. But with God's grace they triumphed. The example of the other Sr[s] before them like the star that shines in the darkness would be for them the guides [sic] and persevering on [sic] their footsteps one day will come when reaching to the submit [sic] God will reward according to their merits.

Initially Felicitas and the other new arrival, Margaret, found themselves a minority migrant group, outside the dominant language and mocked for their lack of awareness. The early record, crafted by later Sisters who also acutely felt their lack of English, allowed Felicitas to complain and express her sense of alienation:

Here the two young Sisters in charge of a group of aborigine girls, without knowing how to speak English [sic], and how little they like on those days to be under supervision, and discipline; these girls then were waiting to hear some commands of the young Sr[s]; some broken English, to have some fun of them perhaps. In the sewing room most of the time they would do nothing of their work, but with eyes fix on them just waiting now and then for our broken English [sic].

Then the Notebook leaps forward without explanation to a calmer scene three years later, and set, significantly for the later self-understanding of the community at St Joseph's, in the bush. By this stage the young Sisters are relaxed in the company of the Aboriginal children, and take their day away with them 'joyfully in stride:

One of those days of spring in New Norcia's bush, we two were sent for a picnic with the children, and as usual this [sic] children spent their time picking wildflowers, cutting a tree with honey. On those days no one would have bee boxes. We pass the day joyfully in the bush with the children and came home that day about 8.30 in the evening, this our first picnic day, quite satisfied of the day.

Sad news awaited them, however, and the Notebook juxtaposed the happy 'first picnic' day when they seemed to have found their feet with the onset of Maria Harispe's last illness. Met on their return from the bush with news that the foundress was grievously
sick, the community faced the trial of her treatment for cancer in Perth, and eventual loss of hope in her recovery. The Notebook presents the ordeal in familial terms in which God remains the steadying point, observing 'we were left like orphans, and we have to say now “My God and my all”'.

When Maria died the following spring, the account was unusually precise, giving the time, and the order in which the groups in the town came to mourn, before reiterating Maria’s status as ‘Mother’:

During this weeks [sic], Sr got very sick and 10 [minutes] after receiving Holy Communion at 7.20 am died on the 16th of November 1925. As soon as possible three Benedictine Fathers came to say prayers for the death. They rang the church bells for the death, Masses were offered for her eternal rest. As soon as the natives knew Sr. pass away they all came around her remains praying to see her, that which [sic] had been a Mother to them for 15 years. The Josephine [sic] Sisters from St Gertrude’s also came to pray around her remains. Her remains and her grave was [sic] covered with beautiful flowers. She was loved by everyone, as she was a Mother to everyone. So we were without a Mother.  

Of course, there were other mothers in town, Aboriginal women in the cottages and the surrounding bush, and also white women on the surrounding farms. But the young Sisters had lost the figure who had represented their particular brand of a shared public maternity lived in the name of the church, and significantly their account elided their own loss with that of the Aboriginal community. The relationship, framed by assumptions of a shared Catholic culture, was used in the Notebook to identify the missionaries with the people, and the people with the missionaries.

The identification with a common Catholic and mission-town identity was also a theme that emerged strongly at a reunion organised in 2001 by a group of women who had grown up at St Joseph’s. Acting against the stereotype of their childhood as disaster, even as they acknowledged the reality of the stolen generation, they framed their experience in terms of relationship. Mae Taylor brought the organising group together. A student in the 1950s when Natividad arrived, when Veronica joined the Sisters, when Felicita was the Reverend Mother who had let Mae the toddler hide in her skirt, Mae said her aim ‘was to be a mother to the one in this home’.  

It is all there in Sheila Humphrey’s painting Life at St Joseph’s, now hanging in the museum at New Norcia, and featured in the concluding liturgy of the reunion fortnight when a ritual procession gradually surrounded it with other symbols of the life and work of the women – both Aboriginal and white – at St Joseph’s. Sheila’s description of her work begins at the centre of her image:

If you look at the picture, in the centre you will see the girls [with the] Aboriginal sitting symbol portraying the girls in the different colour uniforms we had throughout the years that we were in here. Around us you will see in black and white the Aboriginal figure again, showing the nuns ... how we were always protected by them, their love surrounded us, everyday life was around us.
There are two separate circles, one of the children, one of the nuns, and they are coded in separate roles in the colours of institutional dress. But a common symbol represents them both, and one circle embraces the other. Imprisoning? Restricting? No, Sheila said: Protecting. Surrounding. The Sisters’ love and the detail of the day to day surround the girls. Her commentary connected the girls’ everyday experience directly with the Sisters’ own situation and the disruption of their ordinary circumstances.

Everyday life was around us, they left their homes, their parents, their families, came our to Australia. Most of them were only teenagers like ourselves, they came out to look after us, knowing very little English.

A strong critic of the monastery in other contexts, Sheila went on to remark on everyday life in the orphanage:

I’m not denying there were times it was bad, there were times when I wished that Mum and Dad were near, but, the Sisters were always there for us. It wasn’t just an institution, it was a home where people loved us and looked after us.

The love that the painting records was expressed in simple gestures of companionship. There is another frame in the image beyond the central circles, ‘Everyday life was around us’, Sheila said. Everyday life involved shared traditions and a shared place:

In the painting you will see different colour dots in the background, representing the earth, grass, and different colours of flowers. The circles on the picture represent the different area that we went to for walks with the nuns, as you can see the walk sign and the travel sign is all over the picture ... We travelled all over New Norcia as children with the nuns ... with picnic spots, and areas that we went to swimming picking wildflowers, chasing rabbits and ducks, and in the rivers catching eels for the nuns and the priests ... when we’d go on picnics we used to chuck’em on the fire and the Sisters used to have a feed with us, so we had our bush tucker.

The Sisters and the girls shared life in a Catholic mission, and life in the Australian country town; they found symbols of a shared Catholic identity in the bush. The painting itself and Sheila’s commentary on it, merged the memory of the bush and the traditions of Catholic practice. The prayer of the rosary, a meditation on the life of Jesus and Mary, his mother, who is traditionally dressed in blue, winds through the painting in blue beads that combine with the blue of the local river:

The large blue dots in the painting represent the rosary which was part of our daily life. We said the rosary everyday, and that was very, very dear to us. The river, the dark blue dots that run through the centre of the picture, is the river
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that runs through New Norcia, the Moore. ... We spent many, many happy hours in that river, with the nuns, we grew up with the nuns.

Local flowers identified in the painting with picnic sites and regular walks, also defined sacred spaces for annual processions and adorned the chapel:

The flowers, we used to pick a lot of everlasting when they were in bloom ...
The wattle meant a lot to us because, each year, at Corpus Christi, we used to sprinkle the path where we walked in procession from the church through the two colleges, and then back to the church. The road used to be sprinkled with wattle blossom right through, and we walked over that. Kangaroo paws we used to pick and bring back. A lot of flowers we picked, the Sisters would put them in the church in our little chapel.

The girls, the Sisters, everyday life of traditional devotion, connection with place, and the relationship between them all accumulated to endorse the institution as a home. Sheila stressed above all that it was a home. It was a home in the institutional sense, 'we were in here', but it was not just an institution, 'it was a home where people loved us and looked after us'. Sheila points to relationships with the other girls, with the absent Mum and Dad, with the Sisters who were near, as the first step in explaining St Joseph's.

When talk of inviting the Sisters 'home' began, it was fuelled by awareness of the significance of relationships, and by a recognition of the significance of being together in the right place to talk and reconnect. It was not about a single agreed narrative. The reunion was a conscious statement about reconciliation; and it was political as every meeting of Aboriginal Australians and mission authorities was and is political. But it was driven by concerns for relationship that placed it outside any neat line of argument about the past. The reunion was about bonds between people, not structures. It brought together people who had publicly and vehemently criticised the Sisters and the institutions at New Norcia with others who had spent their savings to finance a return. Most often the women and men who gathered could speak in more than one voice, from more than one standpoint about their childhood. Women who had fought all their lives against the threat that their own children might end up in care brought grandchildren to town, proud and keen that the next generation might meet 'the ladies who looked after Nanna'. Again and again, the reunion was about relationships that had persisted through dreadful, and sometimes wonderful, experiences and held firm over many years. They were to be acknowledged and honoured, 'so that', as the organisers said, summarising for many, 'people will know there was love in this home'.

When the compelling claims in different stories come into conflict, then it is relationship, especially the bonds of shared experience, which demand attention and make ongoing conversation possible. Conversation, the storytelling that is an incremental and slow process of forging common memories from different histories, is at the heart of reconciliation in Australia for an increasing number of commentators. Elizabeth Pike, a Nyungah woman now writing in Melbourne, argues that the relationships forged by storytelling are crucial:
Before we can learn to get along, we have to get to know each other, in order to build firm relationships. Because we [Indigenous Australians] are such a minority group in the community, it is often very difficult for non-Indigenous people to meet us. It has often been my experience that when contact is made with genuine people, barriers are often broken down quickly. However, when this is not possible, the power of story can awaken the awareness and begin to stir the compassion needed in the depths of one’s being. It requires very little intelligence to know that ‘love’ cannot be bought, sold or legislated in a document and love is what relationships are founded on.33

Here Pike is in tune with the international theological literature that argues for reconciliation as a dimension of spirituality, and as something that emerges most surely from ongoing relationships, rather than simply from well-managed strategies or well-intentioned therapies. But merely layering in another account, watching the contradictions, is not the point. Instead what will make the difference is the search for points of connection that keep their shape in more than one narrative, for common resonances; connections and resonances that might well include the rosary, the Corpus Christi processions, the shared river, and will not end there. Reconciliation is forged slowly in friendship and conversation.36

The relationships that establish the common ground for deep listening necessarily acknowledge what Michael Pritsch calls a ‘shared authority’ about the past.37 They imply, as Robert Orsi argues, that fieldwork and research are not a matter of taking notes, but of comparing them.38 They recognise that the process by which we discover meaning is one of dialogue. This is storytelling from what might be called a meditative and fundamentally relational stance, not just a political or administrative one. This style of engagement is not about gathering information, or seeking ‘raw facts’ but much more about the potential for change at the level of being. The invitation to access ‘the larger whole’ through stories told and heard is an invitation to a way of approaching various kinds of documentation that is potentially transformative. The steady listening to the competing stories does not resolve questions easily, or offer solutions quickly, but it might bring the slow change that comes with being open to living out new relationships.

Endnotes

1 Felicitas Pamplagne, ‘Origin of the Congregation of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of New Norcia, Western Australia’ unpublished typescript, c.1967, 11-12; and Constitutions de la Congrégation des Soeurs de la Miséricorde des Sacres Coeurs de Jesus et de Marie Héroïde Oblates Regularité de Saint Benoit, both held at the Archives of the Benedictine Missionary Sisters of Tutzing, Madrid, Spain.
2 Statistics for the Congregation are compiled from the Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia (BCNN). That the Industrial Schools Act 1874 included Western Australian mission
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...schools is sometimes credited to lobbying by Salvador. David Hutchinson, A Town Like No Other: The Living Tradition of New Norcia (Perth: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995), 63.
4 Katharine Massam, 'To know how to be all for all': The Company of St Teresa of Jesus at New Norcia 1904-1920', New Norcia Studies 12 (2007).
8 Ibid., 487.
9 Salvador to Aboriginal Protection Board, 4 August 1896. Quoted in Russo, Lord Abbot, 233 and Harris, One Blood, 300.
10 Ibid.
11 Christine Choo, 'The role of the Catholic missionaries at Beagle Bay in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families in the Kimberley region from the 1890s', Aboriginal History 21 (1997).
12 Ibid., 28. See also Christine Choo, Mission Girls: Aboriginal Women on Catholic Missions in the Kimberley, Western Australia, 1900-1950 ( Nedlands, University of Western Australia Press, 2001).
17 Ibid.
18 Interview with Veronica Willaway, New Norcia, August 2001.
19 That Salvador sought to foster an Indigenous clergy is misrepresented in Aneuk Ride's factual account of the nineteenth century mission The Grand Experiment: Two Boys, Two Cultures (Sydney, Hachette, 2007). Seeking not just monastic and missionary vocations but men who would be ordained, or in Salvador's theology, 'ontologically transformed', just as effectively as European men were as members of the Catholic priesthood put Salvador outside existing assumptions that he was dealing with inferior or 'lost souls'. See also John Harris, One Blood.
20 Assimilation of our Aborigines: prepared under the authority of the Minister for Territories with the cooperation of the Ministers responsible for aboriginal welfare in Australian States (Canberra: A.J. Arthur Government Printer, 1959). np. For discussion of assimilationism and the related policies see Tim Rowse, 'Indigenous Citizenship and Self-determination'.
21 Assimilation of our Aborigines, np.
22 Anna Haebich's significant work explored the famous phrase. See Haebich, For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900-1940 ( Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1988) and Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000 ( Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000).

23 Interview with Sister Anne Moynihan, North Perth, March 1999.

24 Maria Harispe to Henry Altmira, 6 June 1908, in the Canonical Visitations to the Community of Terrasins of St Gertrude's New Norcia, October 1907, Archives of the Benedictine Community of New Norcia, File 01717, Trans. Fr David Barry CSB. (hereafter Visitations), 82.

25 Ibid., 83.

26 Ibid.


29 Ibid., 67.

30 Ibid., 7.

31 Ibid., 7-8.

32 Ibid., 8.

33 Ibid.


35 Elizabeth Pike, 'Reconciliation, or Conciliation through Restoration?' in Developing an Australian Theology ed. Peter Malone (Strathfield NSW, St Paul's Publications, 1999), 38-9.

