

Josephite Sister humbled to receive Queen's honour

# Following saint in 'ordinary' life

By Peter Bugden

Sr Margaret Cleary, a Brisbane girl who's wandered far, is the latest in a long list of Catholic religious to be honoured by the Queen, but she's so mindful of being "ordinary".

Sr Margaret was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours recently "for service to the Catholic Church of Australia".

It's not an accolade she savours for herself but points rather to the one who is her role model, Mary MacKillop, Australia's first saint.

"It's firstly humbling to receive, that somebody nominated me ..., but I accept it in acknowledging not only being named for my contribution to the Church in Australia but I acknowledge the contribution of Mary MacKillop and all sisters, all women religious, who have contributed greatly to the life of the Australian people through the Church and beyond because, particularly in rural areas, you're part of the community regardless of being Catholic or whatever religion," she said.

"You're just part of the people, which I think goes back to Mary MacKillop and the early sisters in being the ordinary, everyday people ... who happen to take vows."

The "ordinariness" of St Mary MacKillop's Sisters of St Joseph was one of the main reasons Sr Margaret felt called to follow in their footsteps as a young woman.

Born in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley, young Margaret was educated by Mary's sisters in Nundah, Josephite heartland in Brisbane where St Joseph's School and Mary MacKillop College continue today.

She chose religious life in "the late '50s and early '60s and vocations to the priesthood and religious life were pretty abundant in those times".

"I think (it was about) having learnt and been inspired by the stories of missionaries and the dedication of their lives to God and the service of other people, and making a better world, that kind of thing," she said.

Sr Margaret worked for a year after leaving school and was happy in her job but "there was a more strong and more urgent, compelling voice, or inner voice, leading me to say that 'This is my calling in life ...'"

"And it seemed to be a right fit and a strong call to live my life as a religious and to be in ministry with the people," she said.

A key factor "was very greatly the influence of the Sisters of St Joseph who taught me at Nundah, the influence of their lives and the inspiration that they were".

"Their 'ordinariness'" was what struck her about the Josephites.

It was the way they related to people; it wasn't just about education.

"Most of them were quite vitally interested in our families, supported them, and I felt like it was the values of my home - my parents - and that the values that the sisters held seemed to be one," Sr Margaret said.

"(It was) also the sisters' interest in the growth of each person - I think that encouragement to be your best possible self.

"And they supported people in their joys and sorrows ...

"I think all of that ... and the enthusiasm to be a teacher; I wanted to be a teacher ... and the Josephites were mostly teachers in those days.

"It was more than just academic teaching (that appealed); it was faith as well - to be able to try to enthuse or encourage people to realise God's love for them, that that is personal, and to be in a

position through Catholic education to be able to do that.

"It was the education of the whole person - the spiritual life as well as the academia."

So, inspired by the "ordinariness" of the Sisters of St Joseph, Sr Margaret was called into extra-"ordinary" service, moving on to become a principal at schools around Queensland - Millmerran, Mundingburra, Upper Mount Gravatt, Cloncurry and Caboolture.

She then was invited into leadership roles, firstly as a provincial councillor with the Josephites in Queensland before becoming a congregational financial administrator (bursar) with the order in Sydney from 2008-13 and then as the regional leader for the Centre West region taking in South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory and East Timor.

She finished her six-year term as regional leader in March this year and has returned to Brisbane.

Sr Margaret has also served as a member and director on many boards including college and aged-care boards in Brisbane and Adelaide, Archdiocesan Development Fund in Brisbane, and Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide Charitable Trust.

"I have always wanted to be of service to the wider community and enjoy being able to contribute to the many ministries that the Sisters of Saint Joseph are involved in," she said.

"Mary MacKillop has been and is, such a wonderful inspiration of living life to the full, embracing as blessings, the joys, challenges and sorrows in life with extraordinary faith and trust in her 'good' God, whose love for all was shown in her love, openness, courage, inclusivity and deep respect for every person regardless of creed, culture or background."

It's been a lifetime of learning about and following Mary MacKillop more closely.

"I think as I've got to know Mary MacKillop in a much deeper way over the years that she has been an inspiration of a person of a really expansive heart, who had great trust in God and God's providence, and was attentive to the needs ... She seemed to have time for everybody," Sr Margaret said.

"If there was a need she seemed to find some way to respond to the urgent needs of her time.

"So I suppose I hope that in some small way I've been able to do that through education and the people that I've been engaged with in various roles.

"Her courage and resilience in the face of difficulties and just in responding to almost impossible situations and I think her real conviction of upholding the dignity and rights of each person, they've been the hallmarks of what I've wanted to do but in a very small way compared to what she did, but very much encouraged by her."

Sr Margaret has marvelled at the many and varied ministries that the Josephites have become involved in as they've followed Mary MacKillop in responding to the needs of the people.

As regional leader in South and Western Australia, she saw sisters in the Kimberley region working among Indigenous communities, others welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, and others supporting struggling families in many regions.

What was striking was the way the sisters were involved "at the practical level".

"Some would take migrants in the evening to teach them English and how to fill-in forms, just very practical, down-to-earth things that just amazed me," Sr Margaret said.

"I remember meeting one 90-year-old (Josephite Sister) and thinking, 'She's living here by herself and it must be a bit lonely ...' and so on,



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and then she started telling me, 'Well, I do this on a Monday, and Tuesday I visit these people, and Wednesday I do ...'

"Four days a week she was out and about for most of the day.

"She wasn't the only one but she articulated it so much ..."

Some of the sisters were involved at a community level in dealing with a proposal for a nuclear waste dump in South Australia, and others in the issue of climate change - "advocacy at a lot of levels".

"I often talk about Mary MacKillop's expansive heart but I think there's been an expansiveness in our vision as Josephites too," Sr Margaret said.

"We've moved from the more structured kind of life in education to be more - even though in the past they were certainly with the people - but I think, even more today, we've got the time and the space to be more involved with people wher-

ever we happen to be, whether it's in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Peru, Timor ..."

Sr Margaret said it was about being open to the spirit of St Mary MacKillop - "very much so ... and the Spirit".

"I mean, Mary MacKillop's spirit is the Spirit, isn't it - the Holy Spirit's guidance of us all," she said.

"I think Mary MacKillop's spirit and values ...; it's her take or the lens of the Gospel that she was so strong in."

If St Mary was living today, Sr Margaret said she would be "delighting in contemplative prayer and action, and seeing the interconnectedness of all Creation - God at the heart of our lives and the heart of all Creation ..."

"I think she would be responding or wanting to respond to the critical challenges that are facing us and the crises of today, mainly some of those that I've (already) mentioned," Sr Margaret said.

"I think she would be a very busy lady."

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