

DAUGHTERS OF OUR LADY, QUEEN OF THE APOSTLES—THE FIRST AND ONLY ORDER OF ABORIGINAL SISTERS IN AUSTRALIA, 1938—1951: HISTORY, CONTEXT AND OUTCOMES

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Abstract

The story of the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, the first and only order of Aboriginal¹ sisters in Australia, is deeply enmeshed with the story of the evangelisation of the Aborigines in the West Kimberley by Roman Catholics. Beagle Bay Mission was established by the Trappists in 1890, then in 1901 it was taken over by the Pallottine order whose mission was to evangelise the Aboriginal people of the area. In response to Papal directives, one of the Pallottines' most important aspirations was to establish an Aboriginal ministry to their own people. The Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles was created in 1938 by Bishop Otto Raible SAC, Catholic Bishop of the Kimberley (1927–1959), with an enthusiastic group of young Aboriginal women in Beagle Bay Mission. It lasted for eleven years.

Acknowledgement of Country

This paper was first presented on country of the *Whadjuk* people of the *Noongar* nation and I wish to pay my respects to their past, present and emerging Elders.

I also wish to pay my respects to the *NjulNjul*, the *Nigena* (*Nyinina*) and other Aboriginal peoples of the Kimberley as the topic of this paper refers to them and their ancestors.

I sincerely appreciate living on *Whadjuk boodja*, having come here from Malaysia in 1967 and been welcomed by the Aboriginal people of this land.

Introduction

It was the *NjulNjul* people of Beagle Bay who encountered the Catholic missionaries to the West Kimberley region in the last decade of the 19th century, and it was at Beagle Bay that the first permanent Christian mission was established in the Kimberley. For the missionaries, the 'frontier' was

¹ I use 'Aboriginal' to refer to Indigenous people of Australia, and the Kimberley. The term 'Indigenous' is used only when it is specifically mentioned in the references or discussions to which I refer in the paper.

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more than the physical environment, it included the ‘frontier’ of spiritual endeavour, where they set out to evangelise the Aboriginal peoples. The early history of the Catholic Church in Western Australia is deeply enmeshed with the Church’s mission to the Aboriginal peoples, and the story of the order of Aboriginal (native) sisters, Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, established in Beagle Bay by Bishop Otto Raible in the 1930s, lies at the heart of the evangelisation method.

In this paper I document a brief history of the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, which survived for eleven years between 1939 and 1951, and place the order in the ecclesial and social contexts in which it emerged. The Catholic Church and the wider community of Australia are largely unaware of the existence this order of Aboriginal women and its contribution to the Church. Not only was it established in the north-west of Australia, far from the focus of the Church in the south and east, but it was an order exclusively for Aboriginal women established at a time when Aboriginal people had no legal rights on their own land colonised by Europeans.

There is no mention of the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles in *The History of the Catholic Church in Western Australia* by D. F. Bourke, published by the Archdiocese of Perth in 1979.² Maria Rosa MacGinley, whose history of women religious in Australia was published in 1996, devoted five paragraphs to the ‘Daughters of Mary Queen of Apostles’. MacGinley drew on the work of Mary Durack, J C Dunphy, Margaret Zucker and research notes provided by Sister Brigida Nailon CSB who wrote the history of the Pallottines in Western Australia.³ In Nailon’s history, *Nothing is wasted in the household of God*, the opening of ‘a convent for native sisters’ was limited to four short paragraphs; the native sisters were referred to again

2 D F Bourke, *The History of the Catholic Church in Western Australia* (Perth: Archdiocese of Perth, 1979).

3 Maria Rosa MacGinley, *A Dynamic of Hope: Institutes of Women Religious in Australia*, (Sydney: Crossing Press/Institute of Religious Studies: 1996), 311–313; Mary Durack, *The Rock and the Sand*, (London: Constable: [1969] 1985); J C Dunphy [nd] ‘The Pomegranate: A History of the Sisters of St John of God’, unpublished manuscript (in possession of author M R MacGinley); Margaret Zucker, *From Patrons to Partners: A History of the Catholic Church in the Kimberley, 1884–1984*, (Fremantle: University of Notre Dame Press: 1994), 114–115; Brigida Nailon CSB, *Nothing is wasted in the Household of God: Vincent Pallotti’s Vision in Australia 1901–2001*, (Richmond: Spectrum Publications: 2001).

briefly in the context of their presence in Balgo Mission, and their eventual formal closure in 1953.⁴

In Chapter 6 of *Mission Girls*, based on my own research in the 1990s on Aboriginal women on Catholic missions in the Kimberley, I drew on a range of sources to tell the story of Bishop Otto Raible's dream of establishing an order of Aboriginal sisters to minister to their own people.⁵ I interviewed a number of women who had joined but were then reluctant to speak of their experiences in the order. However, in more recent times former members have shared some of their experiences for the St John of God Heritage Centre in Broome.⁶ The biography of Katie Fraser, one of the first young women to join the order, offers further insight into the life of one member of the order, though Katie herself was reluctant to speak of her time as a nun. Katie's story is told as a joint biography and family history in her daughter Cindy Solonec's PhD thesis.⁷

On 20 April 1939, *The Advocate* newspaper in Melbourne published an article about the forthcoming establishment of the order in Beagle Bay with the acceptance of the first postulants⁸.

First Australian Native Nuns. Foundation at Beagle Bay

WHAT promises to be the first congregation of Australian aboriginal nuns is soon to be established at the Beagle Bay Mission of the Pallottine Fathers in the Kimberleys, Western Australia. In June, six or seven native young women, educated by the Sisters of St. John of God, will become postulants in a new religious congregation, to be known as the Sisters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles. His Lordship Bishop Raible, P.S.M., Vicar-Apostolic of the Kimberleys, has taken the step after careful consideration, following constant requests over a long period by the native girls themselves to enter the religious life. At present they are undergoing special study and training, before

4 Nailon: (2001), 139 and 199.

5 Christine Choo, *Mission Girls: Aboriginal Women on Catholic Missions in the Kimberley, Western Australia, 1900–1950*, (Crawley: UWA Press: [2001] 2004).

6 St John of God Heritage Centre. 2015. Sisters of Mary Queen of the Apostles. *Kimberley Community Profile*, Sep 2015, 14–15; St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome. 2016. *Native Sisters. The Blue Sisters 1939–1951: Sisters of Mary Queen of the Apostles*. Video Recording. Produced by Julie Bailey for SSJG Heritage Centre, Broome: <https://heritage.ssjg.org.au>; Also exhibits at the SSJG Heritage Centre.

7 Jacinta Solonec, *Shared lives on Nigena country: A joint Biography of Katie and Frank Rodriguez, 1944–1994*. PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia (2015).

8 A 'postulant' is a candidate for entry into a religious order.

beginning their postulancy. Their habit will be blue and white, with the initials of the congregation, and they will wear sandals. But they will not take vows and will be free to leave whenever they desire. The Beagle Bay Mission is one of the oldest established in Australia, being founded by the Holy See in 1887.⁹

Although other newspapers throughout Australia ran similar articles in the following weeks and on a few other occasions, the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, the first and only order of Aboriginal women in Australia, seems to have slipped into oblivion, out of the consciousness of Australia's Catholic community and wider public.

Church in the Kimberley – Beagle Bay Mission

Beagle Bay Mission was established in 1890 by Trappist monks (an order of Cistercian cloistered monks who follow the Rule of St Benedict) from Sept Fons in France, with the encouragement of Bishop Matthew Gibney of Perth who had a particular interest in Aboriginal people and their welfare. As early as 1892 the Trappists recognised the need for the presence of nuns to assist in the education of 'the young female savages and even the incorrigible boys' and were hoping that the a few sisters of the newly established French order, Religieuses de Notre Dame des Missions (Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, established in Lyon in 1861), would join them in Beagle Bay. However, this was not to be. After nearly a decade of hard work in Beagle Bay where the environment was not conducive to the life of the contemplative order, the Trappists left suddenly on orders from France. After a long search for suitable missionaries to replace them, Bishop Gibney arranged for the Pallottines to take responsibility for the mission in April 1901.

The Pallottines belonged to the order of male missionaries, the Pious Society of Missions, PSM (Pious Society of Missions, later named Society of the Catholic Apostolate, SAC), which was founded in Italy by Vincent Pallotti in 1835.¹⁰ One of their aims was 'to carry the faith where it was unknown'. They were an apostolic order whose priests and brothers sent to

⁹ *The Advocate* (Melbourne), Thursday 20 April 1939, 4.

¹⁰ The Society of the Catholic Apostolate, Regina Mundi (Queen of the World) Region, also known as Pallottine Fathers and Brothers, is an integral part of the Union of Catholic Apostolate, a people inspired by St. Vincent Pallotti's (1795–1850) vision of everyone being called by God to be disciples of Jesus, continuing the work of Jesus here on earth 'urged on by the love of Christ' (2Cor 5:14). Website: <https://www.pallottine.org.au/> See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_Pallotti

the Kimberley were practical men who could turn their hand to any form of labour. Their plan was to evangelise the Aborigines through work and prayer. The Pallottine approach to evangelisation, similar to that of the Benedictines in New Norcia, was to settle families close to the mission and to remove the children from their families into dormitories located in the mission compound in order to give them a basic education. Men and boys were trained in trades and young women mainly in domestic work.¹¹ The Pallottines soon recognised that they needed female missionaries to help to run the girls' dormitory and the school.

On 6 June 1906, nine sisters of St John of God, under the leadership of Mother Antonio O'Brien, arrived at Beagle Bay Mission from Ireland via Kalgoorlie and Subiaco. The sisters were responsible for the care of the children in the dormitories; they taught them in school, and worked with the women and older girls on household chores for the priests, brothers, sisters and children in their care. With the arrival of the St John of God sisters the number of children who were brought under the care of the mission increased dramatically as this period coincided with the introduction of state-sanctioned removal of Aboriginal children, particularly 'half-caste' children, under the *Aborigines Act* of 1905 (WA). The number of children cared for at Beagle Bay Mission increased steadily. At the end of 1913 there were 147 children being cared for at the Mission.¹² In 1936 there were at least 124 children in the mission dormitory, most of whom were half-castes removed from their families and placed there under legislation.¹³

In addition to the maintenance of their own religious life, the St John of God sisters were also responsible for the care of the church and preparation for religious services. In 1908 the sisters moved away from the strict control of the male hierarchy in Beagle Bay to Broome where they established a

11 This approach to evangelization was practiced in the Benedictine missions at New Norcia and in Drysdale River Mission in the Kimberley, and later at the Pallottine mission in Balgo. Christine Choo and Brian F McCoy, 'Mission Dormitories: Intergenerational Implications for Kalumburu and Balgo, Kimberley, Western Australia', In Patricia Grimshaw & Andrew May eds., *Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Exchanges*, (Brighton, U.K. & Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press: 2010). See also: Christine Choo, 'Mixed Blessings: Establishment of Christian Missions in the Kimberley', in Cathie Clement, Jeffrey Gresham and Hamish McGlashan eds. *Kimberley History: People, Exploration and Development*, (Perth: Kimberley Society: 2012).

12 Nailon, (2001), 40.

13 Choo, *Let the Children Come to Me* ([2001] 2004), chapter 5.



Members of the Sodality of the Children of Mary – Mia Charles, Margo Joseph, Emelda Taylor, Carmen Haslem, Philomena Wudi, Agnes Wright, Cecilia Rose Jnr, Susan Dolby, Monica Stracke, Teresa Dann, Martha Hughes, Laura Booty, Magdalene Kelly—with Father John Herold. Beagle Bay Mission, circa 1934–1936. Photograph (SSJG-0002521) courtesy of Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome

convent and a school. From the 1930s they worked in the Kimberley with people with Hansen's Disease (leprosy) and other illnesses. The sisters have maintained a deep and ongoing relationship with many Aboriginal women in the Kimberley.¹⁴

Because of their close contact with the children in the dormitories the St John of God nuns became the surrogate mothers and sisters of the young Aboriginal girls in their care, all of whom lived away from their own families. They were closely involved in nurturing the young women's faith development and became significant role models for them. Girls and young women on the mission were baptised and brought up as good Catholics – they attended mass and the sacraments and assisted with the preparation of the altar for daily mass; at mass they sang hymns and responded in Latin; they collaborated closely with the priests, brothers and deacons as supporters

¹⁴ *Sisters, Pearls and Mission Girls* (Rebel Films, 2002). Viewed 13 Mar 2019: <https://slwa.kanopy.com/video/sisters-pearls-and-mission-girls>

in the evangelisation of their own people. Older girls cared for the younger girls, including their own siblings.

From as early as 1911, the missionaries encouraged the young women to join the Sodality of the Children of Mary, an association within the Church founded in the 1830s in France, that encouraged prayer and devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Sodality members met regularly for prayer and on these occasions they wore a distinctive uniform of a white dress with a belt and a blue cape. Mission girls' membership of the Sodality of Mary shaped their spirituality and religious practice.¹⁵

Wider Ecclesial Context

In this discussion of the only religious order of Aboriginal women in Australia, it is important to examine the wider ecclesial context including the place of women's religious orders, and expectations of these orders in the Catholic Church in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

From the mid-1800s a number of directives from the Popes instructed the Church on the necessity to reach out as missionaries beyond the borders of their diocese. On 18 September 1840, Pope Gregory XVI published his Encyclical Letter, *Probe Nostis – On the Propagation of the Faith*, in which he encouraged the rebirth of missionary endeavour in the Church. He encouraged the development of male and female missionary orders, in both the lay and clerical spheres, and urged the bishops to extend their missionary endeavour to the whole world.¹⁶ Nearly eighty years later, on 30 November 1919, Pope Benedict XV issued an Apostolic Letter, *Maximum Illud – On the Propagation of the Faith Throughout the World*, which identified the need for Catholic missions to train local clergy and to reach out to the indigenous populations.¹⁷ Pope Pius XI, on 28 February 1926, published an Encyclical Letter, *Rerum Ecclesiae – On Promoting the Sacred Missions*, which focussed on the foundation, consolidation and independence of the new churches with native clergy and lay leadership, and respect for native values.¹⁸ It envisaged the development of native Catholics who would provide

15 St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome (2016).

16 Gregory XVI. 1840. *Probe Nostis—On the Propagation of the Faith* (18 September 1840).

17 Benedict XV. 1919. *Maximum Illud: Apostolic Letter on the Propagation of the Faith Throughout the World*, Translated by Thomas J M Burke, S J (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Office: 30 November 1919).

18 Pius XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae—On Promoting the Sacred Missions*. © Copyright—Libreria

leadership in the Church and their country. The Encyclical made special mention of the work of women (the Pope was referring to missionary sisters who ventured to lands far beyond their convents in Europe):

30. We must not go further without saying something about the work that is being done by women, for since the very earliest days of the Church they have always been remarkable for their diligence and zeal in assisting the preachers of the gospel. We want to single out here, and single out for Our highest praise, those many women who have vowed their virginity to God and have gone to pursue their vocation on the missions. There they have devoted themselves to the education of children and to a great many other works of charity and devotion. This recognition of their achievements will, We hope, encourage the sisters and inspire them to further efforts on behalf of the Church. We hope too that they will hold fast to the conviction that the usefulness of their work will increase in proportion to the care they give to their own spiritual perfection.¹⁹

These Papal directives created the broad ecclesial context for the extension of missionary work to indigenous peoples, and for the role of women missionaries.

In Australia, one of the significant outcomes of the Third Plenary Council of the ecclesiastical hierarchy who gathered in Sydney between 2 and 10 September 1905 was the call for the evangelisation of the Aboriginal people of Australia, particularly the north west. The 'Acts' of the Third Plenary Council record that on Saturday 9 September 1905 'a brief report by the Right Reverend Bishop of Perth dealing with the missions to the Aborigines in Western Australia, was read by the Secretary of the Council'. The report, which indicated that the Western Australian government was prepared to support the work of the missions, was unanimously endorsed by all present at the Council who recommended to the Holy Father that a new mission to the north of Western Australia be approved. The Pope's formal approval was given on 17 June 1907.²⁰ The Benedictine monks of New Norcia established a mission at Pago in the far north of Western Australia in 1908.²¹

Editrice Vaticana (28 February 1926).

19 Pius XI, *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926).

20 E Perez, OSB, [nd] *Fifty Years of the Drysdale River–Kalumburu–Benedictine Mission*. Handwritten draft. Benedictine Archives, New Norcia, Western Australia, BA 01039.

21 Perez, E OSB, *Kalumburu, 'Formerly Drysdale River' Benedictine Mission North-Western Australia: A Golden Jubilee Publication (1908–1958)* (New Norcia: New

The popes' encyclicals of 1840, 1919 and 1926 provided a new challenge to women in religious life in the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, where missionary activity coincided with the westernising influence. Wherever the sisters went they welcomed women from local communities who wanted to join their orders. They also helped to establish orders of indigenous sisters, with the hope that they would contribute to the development of leadership of the young, non-Western churches.²²

Globally, in most locations where they were established, native sisters reached out to those in greatest need in their communities. Some Western missionaries believed that the conversion of the women would lead to the conversion of the nation and they worked hard to bring young women into their schools; women and girls were taught European domestic skills and needlework. Some missions established orphanages where they educated young girls and prepared them for marriage to male converts. By joining a religious order, the native sisters challenged the marriage systems and customs of their communities.²³

The feminine culture of the nuns conflicted with a masculine culture of clericalism, authority and obedience in the Church. The western nuns and native sisters remained under the control of the male hierarchy in almost all aspects of their religious practice and work. While missionary clergy welcomed the practical assistance the sisters gave them in mission work, and valued sisters as co-workers, there was a tradition of clergy using sisters as sacristans and housekeepers who washed, ironed, mended and sewed for priests and brothers, often in addition to their work as teachers and nurses. As McNamara states:

By implication, nuns were being realigned as subalterns at the lower ranks of the clergy rather than being placed at the elite peak of the laity. By the twentieth century, Rome was taking women religious

Norcia Abbey Press, 1958); 1.

22 Jo Ann Kay McNamara, 'Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia', (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 586.

23 McNamara (1996), 594.

more seriously and spending more effort to define their position. ... In 1906, Pius X established the Sacred Congregation for Religious with supervisory powers over congregations that had escaped diocesan control by direct ties to Rome. All religious communities were commanded to revise their constitutions to conform to the details of convent life prescribed in the new canon law code of 1917.²⁴

Paradoxically these requirements imposed further burdens on religious congregations of women, even as the congregations were working to champion the rights and change conditions under which local women were living.²⁵

In the early 20th century, congregations of native sisters were formed in Papua and New Guinea. On 27 October 1912, at the Cathedral of Vunapope in New Guinea, His Lordship Dr Coupe, MSC, inducted five young native girls as postulants in the newly created Society of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate or 'Little Sisters', which came under the guidance of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH). The Sisters went regularly to bush stations close to Vunapope; they taught in village schools, visited and attended to the sick. They made altar-breads and assisted the 'Blue Sisters' (OLSH) in washing, ironing, and repairing altar and house linen, and they cared for the Mission cemetery. In 1920 a branch of this order was established in Tapo or Tanui, another mission station not far from Vunapope where the native sisters taught in the school.²⁶

On 1 December 1918, the Congregation of the Handmaids of Our Lord (Ancilla Domini – A.D. Sisters) was founded in Papua by the Vicar Apostolic of Papua, Archbishop Alain Marie Guynot de Boismenu, MSC. Six young women (five from Papua and one from Thursday Island) formed the original group who came under the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH) for their formation who made their first profession on 30 November 1920. Their role was to support the priests, especially those working in remote and isolated areas. They opened schools, provided some medical services, took care of the church, gave religious instruction, visited villagers, created vegetable gardens, cooked and did house-keeping for the priests. They also cared for orphaned babies.

²⁴ McNamara. 1996, 613–614.

²⁵ McNamara. 1996, 615.

²⁶ Joseph Madigan MSC. Why Not Become Nuns? The Native Sisters in Our Island Missions. *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney, NSW: 1850–1932): Thursday 22 July 1926, 11.

Although women's religious orders have worked in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia, including in some of the most remote areas, very few Aboriginal women have joined the religious orders as nuns. In Western Australia, only four Aboriginal young women are known to have joined an existing religious order, the Benedictine Missionary Sisters based in the Benedictine monastery town of New Norcia. Their situation was different from that of the young women of Beagle Bay as the girls from New Norcia joined an established order of nuns who had come from Europe to work with the Benedictine monks in New Norcia and Kalumburu (formerly Drysdale River Mission) in the Kimberley. Sister Veronica Willaway OSB, daughter of Harold and Philomena Willaway who had both been brought up in New Norcia, was the only one of the four who remained in the order. She joined the Benedictine Sisters in 1958 and made her final vows in 1966 at the age of 21. When the Benedictine Sisters withdrew from Australia, she was transferred to Spain and eventually to the USA in 1991.²⁷

It is within this broad ecclesial context that the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, was established in Beagle Bay by Bishop Otto Raible in 1939.

Establishment of Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles

Father Otto Raible arrived in Beagle Bay in 1928 and was ordained Bishop in May 1935. One of Bishop Raible's priorities, in line with the directives from the Vatican, was to establish a ministry with Aboriginal priests and nuns who could serve their own people.²⁸ By then there were three generations of Catholics at Beagle Bay who were well schooled in religious practices including attendance at daily mass and benediction, the daily recitation of the rosary and participation in spiritual retreats. They held a special devotion to the Sacred Heart, and young women and teenage girls were encouraged in Marian devotion through the Sodality of the Children of Mary.

In 1938 Bishop Raible led an enclosed retreat for 27 members of the

27 Willaway, Sr Veronica OSB, 'My memories as a Benedictine Sister at New Norcia', *New Norcia Studies*, 6 (September 1998): 42–44; Katharine Massam, 'To name and remember: The Benedictine Sisters of New Norcia Reunion with past pupils, October 2001', *New Norcia Studies* 10 (September 2002): 26–32.

28 Bill Worth, 'Bishop Otto Raible SAC, part 1, 'Church of the Kimberley—Heroes in Faith', *Kimberley Community Profile* (St John of God Heritage Centre Broome: May 2015): 11: <https://heritage.ssjg.org.au/Assets/historical-articles/KCP-May-2015-Raible-part-1.pdf>

Children of Mary at which he had encouraged the participants to consider becoming nuns. Four of the girls responded by requesting to become nuns to work with their own people. This was the Bishop's dream. He immediately sought permission from the Holy See at the Vatican to establish a new congregation of sisters at Beagle Bay, and wrote to the mother general of the St John of God sisters in Wexford in Ireland to inform her of these plans. Bishop Raible was inspired by the establishment of the Native Sisters in the Vicariate of Rabaul in 1912 and sought the advice of the Bishop of Rabaul on the establishment of the order in Beagle Bay.²⁹

Under the Rules of the Society of Native Sisters, Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, the first aim of the Daughters was to try to make themselves more holy every day 'by imitating what Our Lord Jesus Christ had done, especially by being poor, chaste and obedient'.³⁰ As their special work, the Daughters would 'help our poor pagan brothers and sisters, the natives of Australia, so that they also may know God, love Him and so save their souls'. They would do this 'by assisting the priests in their work, wherever it [would] be required, in schools and orphanages, homes for the aged and poor, and by nursing the sick'. They would 'take special care of the native women and girls, so that they become good Christian women and mothers.' And their work would be confined to 'the Australian full blood and half caste natives' and any Catholic girl of 'at least one half of aboriginal blood' could be admitted if she had 'the right intention, [was] bodily and mentally fitted for missionary work and [was] of a sociable disposition'. Girls of twelve years and over could be admitted as aspirants³¹, and the age of admission to the novitiate was eighteen years. The candidate entered her postulancy, a time of special probation, six months before admission to the novitiate. The right of admission and dismissal rested with the Bishop, and prior to her admission, inquiries would be made about 'her character and piety, and also about her people'. During the years prior to their reception, candidates received thorough instruction in their Faith and were also taught general knowledge and given training in 'certain useful trades'. The girls wore a

29 St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome. 2016; St John of God Heritage Centre, 2015. Sisters of Mary Queen of the Apostles, 14–15; Nailon (2001), 433.

30 Brigida Nailon CSB. [?1987] 'Land of Wait and Wonder. Resource Notes on the Establishment of Roman Catholic Missions in the Kimberley'. Archives of the Diocese of Broome. [unpublished]. Included as Appendix F in Choo, *Mission Girls*.

31 An 'aspirants' was a girl who showed interest in and hoped to join the Sisters.

habit comprising a long garment of unbleached calico with blue trimming and other features that distinguished them from other girls at the mission. (Refer to Appendix 1 for the text of the Rules).

The postulants' religious instruction commenced in January 1939 with Bishop Riable urging them to follow a strict routine to enhance their spiritual life:

Then His Lordship gave us some advice what we should do in order to prepare ourselves for our new Vocation. He told us to go to Holy Mass every day and receive Holy Communion if possible, make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament each day and to make some little sacrifices every day. Then he gave us a little book in which we should mark every day, if we had done these things faithfully during the day. He also gave us a Catechism and New Testament each and told us that Father Francis would give us some lessons regularly.³²

In 1939 the aspirants to the sisterhood were placed under the care of Sister Mary Augustine McCarthy SSJG. She was assisted Sister Gerard SSJG who was appointed mistress of novices³³ in October 1940, and Sister Catherine



Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles in their blue-trimmed habit - Vera Dann, Katie Rodriguez, Biddy Kelly and Mary Albert Snr.

The first four to join (included Lucy Dolby/ Sr Ursula who left just prior to May 1942) completed six months of Postulancy and on 22 June 1942 received from His Grace Archbishop Prendiville the holy habit and received their religious name. Mary Magdalene Albert was accepted as a postulant the same day Beagle Bay Mission, 24 May 1942. Photograph (SSJG-0002085) courtesy of Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome

³² 'Chronicle of the Regina Apostolorum Convent (Native Sisters) Beagle Bay Mission, November 1938–23 December 1951, referred to in Nailon CSB. [?1987], 'Land of Wait and Wonder'.

³³ A 'novice' is a person who has been received into a religious order for a period of



Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, Veronica aka Vera Dann (Sr Elizabeth Dann), Brigid aka Biddy Kelly (Sr Frances Kelly), Catherine aka Katie Fraser (Sr Agnes Fraser/Rodriguez) and Lucy Dolby (Sr Ursula Dolby), with Bishop Otto Raible. Beagle Bay Mission, circa 1942–1946. Photograph (SSJG-0003108) courtesy of Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome

Hayes. Their newly renovated convent ('Blue Convent', and former hospital) was blessed and opened by Bishop Raible on 6 January 1940, the Feast of the Epiphany. The first four postulants in 1940 were Katie Fraser, Lucy Dolby, Veronica (Vera) Dann and Brigid (Biddy) Kelly.³⁴ On 22 June 1940, as part of the Jubilee celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the Catholic mission at Beagle Bay, four of the original six girls who had expressed interest in joining became novices and received the holy habit of the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles. The same day four other girls entered the

probation prior to taking vows.

34 St John of God Heritage Centre. 2015. Sisters of Mary Queen of the Apostles, identifies the first four postulants as Lucy Dolby (Sr. Ursula), Brigid Kelly (Sr. Francis), Veronica Dann (Sr. Elizabeth) and Magdalen Albert (Sr. Anne).



Aspirants, Postulants and Novices of Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, Biddy James, Margaret Albert Snr, Olive Dann, Alice Henry, Flora Baird, Anastasia Peters, Biddy Kelly, Mary Leonie Sibosado, Mildred Baird. Four who wear capes and medals have taken formal promises. The other seven girls are aspirants who have not progressed to making promises. Beagle Bay Mission, circa 1947/1948. Photograph (SSJG-0071666) courtesy of Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome

society—postulant Magdalene Albert, and three aspirants—Mary Leonie Sibosado, Martha John Baptist and Benedicta Dann.

The presence of high-ranking members of the Church hierarchy at the ceremony, including the Apostolic Delegate from Rome and Archbishop Prendiville of Perth, gave the Daughters the official sanction of the Church and recognition as an important achievement in the life of the Church in the Kimberley.³⁵ Therefore, the girls who joined the Daughters bore the heavy burden of the expectations of so many people who had a vested interest in the success of the order.

³⁵ *The Record*, 27 June 1940.

The aspirants, postulants and novices were separated from the other young mission girls. They lived like the Sisters of St John of God who worked on the mission, with the same food, routine of work and prayer, and the same work caring for the Beagle Bay Church and the male missionaries, cooking, cleaning and preparing the church for services and working with the St John of God Sisters caring for children in the dormitories and teaching them in school. The girls were taught religious studies, music and singing in Latin. Katie Fraser (Sister Agnes) taught at the school. Bidy Kelly (Sister Frances) played the organ and the violin and could speak German, the mother tongue of the Pallottine missionaries. Other girls on the mission looked up to the Daughters and wanted to be like their friends who had joined.³⁶ Two of Katie Fraser's sisters, Edna and Gertie, also stayed at the Convent with their older sister while they attended school because their parents had left Beagle Bay.³⁷

While the structures and routines of religious life gave the girls status within the mission, they were still lower in the hierarchy in relation to the European priests, brothers and nuns who worked there.³⁸ The postulants and novices continued to live sheltered lives at Beagle Bay with little or no contact beyond the confines of the mission. As children they had left their families in 'the Colony' around the mission compound to live in the mission dormitory from where they moved straight to the convent when they joined the Daughters. Their lives were dominated by religious concerns. Under the Rules of the order the first allegiance of an aspirant, postulant or novice was to God and that allegiance would inform her relationship with her parents and family: 'She must behave in a way that is pleasing to God because God said in the fourth commandment to honour Father and Mother. She can show her love to her parents and relations by praying for them.'³⁹ The change in the way the young women had to relate to parents, family and friends placed an enormous emotional burden on them.

The reflections of Sister Veronica Willaway OSB, who at the age of

36 St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome, 2016.

37 Solonec (2015), 93.

38 This was noted in a letter from the Commissioner of Native Affairs to the Honourable Minister for the North West, in relation to Katie Fraser when, in 1943 at the age of 23, she applied for an exemption from the *Native Administration Act* of 1936 (WA). The Commissioner stated that '... [her vows were] in no way comparable to those taken by the members of the Order of St. John of God', thus suggesting that Katie's status was inferior to that of the European sisters. Solonec (2015): 94.

39 See Appendix 1, Section B: Training.

fourteen joined the Benedictine Missionary Sisters at New Norcia Mission where she grew up, articulate some of the challenges faced by a young Aboriginal woman who entered a religious order. The young women who joined the Daughters in Beagle Bay would also have encountered these challenges.

After I entered, the thing that was the hardest was having to see the Benedictine Sisters and the Monks on a different level of life. All my young life I was taught to respect them as my elders, teachers, care givers, religion teachers, nurses and providers; now I was being called to be their sister through St. Benedict. In my new life I was also being asked to be changed – I was no longer one of the crowd, but starting to be a religious and because of this I needed to be respected by friends and peers in this new status. This overnight change was difficult for most of us, as I was so young and I was among them in school and during recreation periods. Years later, all my friends and peers were very proud of me because I was the second Aboriginal Sister in the Congregation ...⁴⁰

During World War II when the German missionaries were interned as enemy aliens, and when the Aboriginal community from Broome was evacuated to Beagle Bay, the novices and postulants worked even harder on the mission as numbers of residents grew.⁴¹ Soon after the war ended, in 1946, Katie Fraser left the Daughters.

Although no equivalent order or group of Aboriginal men was created at Beagle Bay, baptised Aboriginal men and women were encouraged to participate fully as active laity, engaged in the life of the mission community as workers and family members. Bishop Raible was committed to extending the missionary work of the Pallottines beyond Beagle Bay to the nomadic Aboriginal people of the semi-desert region south of Halls Creek and along the Canning Stock Route. After a failed attempt to set up a centre at Rockhole in the late 1930s, a small group of mission men and women working with one of the Pallottine brothers was sent by Bishop Raible to find a suitable location for the new mission. They established Balgo Mission on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert in 1942.⁴² After the war, on 22 September 1947,

40 Willaway (1998), 42

41 Choo, ([2001] 2004), chapter 6.

42 Choo and McCoy (2010), 171–72.



Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, Mary Leonie Sibosado and Emily Charles, with Sister Gerard Gath and Indigenous families. Beagle Bay Mission, 1946. Photograph (SSJG-0071665) courtesy of Sisters of St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome

three of the Daughters set off for Balgo Mission.⁴³ They were Barbara Cox, Vera Dann and Josephine Sibosado, who joined the team of mission workers from Beagle Bay who were already there. Their departure for Balgo was reported on the radio by the Australian Broadcasting Commission and in the Perth secular press.⁴⁴ The Daughters were sent to Balgo in place of the St John of God sisters because it was considered too isolated and the conditions too harsh for the non-Aboriginal sisters. The Daughters worked alongside members of the Pallottine community and with other Aboriginal lay people from Beagle Bay who were sent to work there.

⁴³ D Breslin, 'Aboriginal Nuns'. *West Australian*, 11 Oct 1947, 4. Versions of this article from Beagle Bay were published in other Catholic newspapers in Australia in October 1947; Brian McCoy, *Holding Men: Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal men* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2008), 53.

⁴⁴ 'Aboriginal Nuns to Evangelise Fellow Natives', *Southern Cross*, 10 October 1947, 5.

This new venture was to be the test of the evangelisation method of sending Aboriginal missionaries to reach out to other Aboriginal people. However, Bishop Raible failed to take into account the cultural, language and social differences between the coastal people of Beagle Bay and desert people of Balgo, and the inexperience of the young Daughters due to their isolation in Beagle Bay. Although the Daughters' work at Balgo was similar to that at Beagle Bay, they experienced severe culture shock as they were not prepared for the harsh conditions and isolation among the nomadic desert people, so different from their own. They were also not prepared for their relative independence in Balgo. In this alien environment they were faced with enormous challenges without the support of the St John of God sisters and their own community and families.

One of the challenges that the young women faced was the possibility of sexual encounters, even exploitation by other workers, lay and religious, in the isolation of Balgo and other distant communities. This situation was referred to by Mary Durack in her book about the Church in the Kimberley, *The Rock and the Sand*, published in 1969, when she suggested that the young women who were sent to Balgo were driven 'to seek reassurance in the company of the few lay helpers, white or coloured, who came their way'.

In any event within fourteen months not even the folds of the religious habit could conceal the fact that earthly romance had, where most were concerned, proved stronger than the spiritual romanticism of the religious life. One or two said they were prepared to persevere but the truth could no longer be denied. The time and conditions had not been ripe or the young people yet strong and secure enough for the grand experiment by which the bishop had set such store.⁴⁵

The pregnancy of an Aboriginal nun is also referred to in the musical, *Bran Nue Dae* by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles of Broome, in which one of the characters, Aunty Theresa, a deeply pious Aboriginal woman, admits that she had a child to a German missionary who took the child away.⁴⁶ However, this issue, that is the pregnancy of members of the Daughters, remains a topic that is too sensitive to be discussed or acknowledged openly by the women themselves or by the Church hierarchy. Other challenges may have included the strict regime of religious practice imposed on the young women

⁴⁵ Durack ([1969] 1985), 272.

⁴⁶ Chi, Jimmy and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae: A Musical Journey* (Paddington & Broome: Currency Press & Magabala Books, 1991).

within the hierarchy of nuns, brothers and priests at the mission, and the emotional distance that was required of them as religious women.

Finally, as one by one the young women left the order, each for her own reason, the Bishop withdrew the Daughters from Balgo. The convent of the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles closed in December 1951 when Sister Mary Clare, the only remaining postulant, was granted a dispensation from her promises. None of the young women was professed as a sister, and the women remained circumspect about the reasons for their decision to leave the Daughters. The closure of the order marked another milestone in the life of the Catholic mission in the Kimberley and a great disappointment to Bishop Raible, as he recorded:

[Sister Mary Clare] took off her habit with a sad heart, for she had a real vocation. The Bishop declared the Society dissolved, burying his most cherished hopes with it.⁴⁷

Outcomes—‘Nothing is wasted in the household of God’⁴⁸

The women who formed the first and only religious order of Aboriginal women in Australia, the Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, were a product of their time and their environment. They had been brought up at Beagle Bay Mission as Catholic girls, deeply involved in religious practices including attending mass and other religious services, reciting the rosary and praying daily. They were actively involved in music and singing in Latin at liturgical services; their training had given them the opportunity to deepen their faith and share their ministry in the wider community. Their training had also given them some prestige and privilege in their community.⁴⁹

After the former Daughters re-entered the wider Catholic community in the Kimberley, most maintained their commitment to the Catholic faith and continued to identify with the Catholic Church. Those who kept their faith married and raised their children as Catholics and were the strength of the Catholic community and their families. They and their families actively participated in the life of the Church in the Kimberley, contributing as catechists and support workers, readers, singers and musicians in liturgical

47 Bishop O Raible in *Chronicle of the Regina Apostolorum Convent*.

48 ‘Nothing is wasted in the Kingdom of God’ is remembered as one of Bishop Raible’s sayings. Nailon (2001), 276.

49 St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome. 2016.

celebrations.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the faith and commitment of others were shaken by their experiences as Daughters.

Katie Fraser (formerly Sister Agnes) is a good illustration. After Katie left the Daughters in 1946, after seven years with them and before they were sent to Balgo, she worked at Liveringa Station where she met Frank Rodriguez, a former Spanish Benedictine novice who had been granted dispensation from the New Norcia monastery some years earlier. Katie and Frank married not long after they met. Katie's daughter, Cindy Solonec notes:

The Rodriguez marriage remained strong throughout their lives and with their Catholic convictions unflinching they continued to be involved in the Church. They had lived by the mantra 'the family that prays together, stays together'. Their faith contributed not only to the stability of their family but also to the close-knit congregation. They attended services and special events and Frank sometimes stood as a sponsor for an adolescent at Confirmation time (for instance). He also attended parish meetings while they both had a reasonably active social life within the parish. ... it was their interaction with their children regardless of where we lived that was most prominent for the remainder of their lives. ... Our Catholic upbringing ensured that Christian values and morals remained a significant influence in our behaviours for many years.⁵¹

The family remained connected to the Catholic community, in spite of the fact that the importance of the Catholic tradition waned for some Frank and Katie's descendants and family members. As Cindy Solonec states, although Frank was disappointed in this situation, '... he understood the change in attitudes among his descendants as secular influences and further education challenged our worldviews'.⁵²

The women who had been Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, each in her unique way, contributed to the evangelisation of Kimberley Aborigines through the establishment of a network of Catholic families within the community. They were women raised on sound Christian principles who expressed these principles practically in the way they lived.

50 'Sisters of Mary Queen of the Apostles', *Kimberley Community Profile* (St John of God Heritage Centre: September 2015): 14–15; 'Native Sisters: The Blue Sisters 1939–1951: Sisters of Mary Queen of the Apostles' (St John of God Heritage Centre, Broome: 2016). Video Recording. Also exhibits at the SSJG Heritage Centre.

51 Solonec (2015), 190.

52 Solonec (2015), 195.

Although not exactly according to the Bishop's dream, the women's lives did fulfil the Church's approach – to encourage Indigenous people to minister to their own.

Appendix 1

Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles – Rules, Outline of their Training, and Form of the Ceremony of Dedication

A. RULES OF THE SOCIETY OF NATIVE SISTERS (DAUGHTERS OF OUR LADY, QUEEN OF THE APOSTLES)

Chapter 1: On the Aim of Our Society

1. Our Patroness is Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles. We call ourselves 'Daughters of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles'.
2. She was so holy, because she followed the example of her Divine Son so perfectly. We, her children, will therefore try first and with all our hearts, to make ourselves more holy every day, by imitating what Our Lord Jesus Christ had done, especially by being poor, chaste and obedient.
3. Secondly, as our special work, we will help our poor pagan brothers and sisters, the natives of Australia, so that they also may know God, love Him and so save their souls.
4. We will do this by assisting the priests in their work, wherever it will be required, in schools and orphanages, homes for the aged and poor, and by nursing the sick. We will take special care of the native women and girls, so that they become good Christian women and mothers.
5. Our work is confined to the Australian full blood and half caste natives.

Chapter 2: Who Can Be Admitted to the Society?

1. Any Catholic girl of at least one half of aboriginal blood can be admitted if she has the right intention, is bodily and mentally fitted for missionary work and is of a sociable disposition.
2. The right of admission and dismissal rests with the Bishop.
3. Before admitting any postulant inquiries must be made about the character and piety, and also about her people.
4. Girls that have completed their twelfth year can be admitted as aspirants.
5. The age for admission to the novitiate is 18 years. For grave reasons the Bishop can dispense from this rule. Six months before the reception into the novitiate the candidate enters her postulancy, a time for special probation.

6. During the years preceding the reception the candidates receive a thorough instruction in their holy Faith. They also will have lessons in general knowledge and will be trained in certain useful trades.

Chapter 3: Our Habit

1. Our habit separates us from the world and reminds us that we are consecrating our lives to God. We will therefore have a great reverence for our holy habit.
2. Our habit consists of a long garment of unbleached calico. The sleeves are short, reaching near the elbow. We wear a cape of the same material with a collar, open in front and with blue bindings. The cincture is of blue webbing with two ends hanging down at left side about fifteen inches. The veil is of light blue material with a white forehead band.
3. Long church sleeves are worn at Holy Mass and whenever the Blessed Sacrament is exposed.
4. The professed Sisters wear a scapular of unbleached calico with blue lining on the same occasions.
5. While at work outside the convent, we wear a plain cape and veil. A medal of our Lady on blue cord reminds us of Our Patroness.

Chapter 4: On What We Do While We Are Novices

1. We are made novices on the day when we receive the holy habit. We make retreat for three days beforehand.
2. The time of the Novitiate lasts two years. For just reasons the Bishop can make it longer but not for more than six months.
3. During the time of the Novitiate we learn all about our holy vocation. The rules are explained to us, and we try to keep them faithfully.
4. The Novices will take special care to find out their faults and to correct them.
5. They will particularly try by every possible means to make their love of the Lord grown in their hearts.
6. By acts of humility and self denial, and especially by perfect obedience the Novices will prepare themselves for their life's work.
7. The Novices will not speak to anyone outside the Convent except what their various duties require. They can receive visitors once a month.

Chapter 5: On the Promises

1. We do not make public vows. We feel ourselves bound to our holy vocation by the love of Christ, which we renew every day, when we offer Holy Mass with the priest.
2. Moved by this love of Our Lord, we promise to be poor, chaste and obedient.

3. We make another promise, namely to persevere in the Society for a certain time.
4. We also promise to work in the Missions for the natives of our own country wherever our Superiors may send us.
5. After the Novitiate we make the promises for one year over a period of five years. After this we dedicate ourselves for periods of three years, until we make our dedication for life. This cannot be made before we reach the age of thirty-five.
6. The Promises bind under pain of venial sin only.
7. Form of Dedication:

*O most holy Virgin, my mother and queen,
Comforted by thy motherly love, and guided by thy gentle hand,
I, Sister
approach the altar of God to give my own self, body and soul, to Jesus.
To Him I give over my body and promise to be chaste.
To Him I give over my soul and promise to be obedient.
For the love of Our Lord I promise to do missionary work amongst my
native brothers and sisters, and to stay in the society of the Daughters
of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles for one year (for three years / for
life) and live according to the rules of this Society.
Unholy though I am of this holy vocation, I throw myself at Thy feet, O
Jesus. With thy holy grace I am ready to do what Thou wilt.
Amen*

B. TRAINING

1. What is the most important thing in the life of a young sister?

That she tries very hard to be obedient to her Superior because by doing so she would be obedient to God himself.

And another thing she tries to be cheerful and happy because she is serving God himself.

2. Who must take first place in her heart?

Well, our Lord must take the first place in her heart, and his heavenly Mother, because we are Our Lord's brides and we've given our lives for him.

3. How must she behave towards her parents and relations?

She must behave in a way that is pleasing to God because God said in the

fourth commandment to honour Father and Mother. She can show her love to her parents and relations by praying for them.

4. What should be the first thing a Sister does when her Superior gives her a correction?

When her Superior gives her a correction she must take it in the spirit of love because the Superior is taking the place of God himself.

5. Why should every Sister have a Spiritual Director?

Every Sister should have a Spiritual Director because he can help her in all her difficulties and can always give her advice to overcome them all.

C. CEREMONY FOR DEDICATION (PRAYERS FROM THE RITUAL TRANSLATED FROM LATIN)

Opening Prayers

1. *Prayer to the Holy Ghost*
2. *O God! You have given the Holy Spirit to your Apostles whilst they prayed with Mary, the Mother of Jesus with one mind. Give us, that under the protection of this our Mother and Queen, we may serve your Majesty faithfully and spread, by word and example, the glory of Your Name.*
3. *Lord Jesus Christ! You have set on fire the hearts of your handmaids with such a fervour of love [by] that they are willing to follow your footsteps by saving the souls of the Natives, give to them, we pray, to persevere un such a wholesome resolution and may they deserve a Heavenly Blessing for their labour:*

Blessing of the Scapular

Lord Jesus Christ! You said: My yoke is sweet and my burden is light – bless and make holy this Scapular in honour of the Blessed Virgin, Queen of Apostles, and grant that she who is going to wear it may persevere under your cross joyfully and faithfully and may be ever conscious of her holy vocation.

Prayers after the Litanies

For the spreading of the greater glory of your most Holy Name, and for the eternal salvation of souls may the dedication of your handmaid be acceptable to You. Filled abundantly with your love may they persevere faithfully in your Holy service.

Lord Jesus Christ! You have deigned to make your most holy Mother the Queen of the Apostles, pour out over these Your Handmaids, whom you have enrolled under your Missionaries, your abundant bounty; so that protected and guided by the same Queen they may live up to their vocation with all their heats and finally may receive the crown of an Apostle.

Source:

[Brigida Nailon, CSB. [?1987] 'Land of Wait and Wonder: Resource Notes on the Establishment of Roman Catholic Missions in the Kimberley', Archives of the Diocese of Broome.]

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