

# FRANCIS MCGARRY AND THE ‘LITTLE FLOWER BLACK MISSION’: ENCOUNTERS OF A CATHOLIC LAY MISSIONARY WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA 1935–1944

Charmaine Robson\*

## Introduction

The Little Flower Black Mission was the first Catholic mission in Central Australia. It was established in 1935 among the Eastern Arrernte people who were living in and around the township of Alice Springs. The Mission relocated twice – first to Arltunga in 1942 and then, in 1957, to a site 85 km south-east of Alice Springs, when its name changed to Santa Teresa. Officially, the Mission was founded by Catholic priest Father Patrick J. Moloney of the order, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC). But it is Moloney’s assistant, layman Francis McGarry who is the focus of this paper. McGarry’s pivotal role in the establishment and day-to-day management of the Mission during its first nine years was unusual, if not unique, for a lay worker on a Catholic mission in pre-World War 2 Australia. This article begins by considering the factors that led Frank on this path – his background, faith and the Church’s position on the evangelisation of Indigenous Australians – and then traces the foundation and development of the Little Flower Mission, including McGarry’s interactions with the Aboriginal mission people, and concludes with his departure from mission life.

The archival research for this article is based mainly on correspondence written by McGarry from the Mission to his adult siblings and mother living in the Sydney.<sup>1</sup> The letters were in the form of a diary in which he entered his daily activities, plans and thoughts. They perhaps served as an outlet for McGarry to share his new and often confronting experiences as he exchanged his relatively comfortable life in seaside suburbia for a missionary vocation in the Australian desert. They also give valuable insights into the factors that impelled and sustained his mission work, and

\* Charmaine Robson is an Adjunct Lecturer at the University of New South Wales. Her PhD in Australian history from UNSW examined the care of Indigenous Hansen’s disease patients by women missionary nurses. She also holds a Bachelor degree in Pharmacy from Monash University. Her research interests include histories of religion, health and disability, and their intersections with Australian race relations. The research for this article was generously funded through the 2017 Australian Religious History Fellowship of the State Library of New South Wales.

for tracing mission developments. To bring some balance to the perspective on the history presented in the letters and to provide context, the article will draw on relevant scholarly histories.

The mission project undertaken by McGarry was based on his assumption that Aboriginal people would be better off with his assistance, be it material or spiritual. To contend fully with this question is beyond the scope of this article. But it is possible to provide some historical context to McGarry's continual representation of the Eastern Arrernte people he encountered in the 1930s as "in such a deplorable condition" and with "practically no food."<sup>2</sup> Studies by researchers including Diane Austin-Broos show that incursions by white settlers into the Alice Springs region in the late nineteenth-century led to the alienation of Eastern Arrernte people from their traditional land and food sources and their increased susceptibility to infectious diseases. The arrival of cattle in 1872 led to the depletion of essential water sources and the denuding of native vegetation which had made up more than half of the Aboriginal diet. Marsupials and rodents, which were important protein sources, also decreased. By the 1930s, many had adopted a sedentary existence and relied either on government rations, consisting of flour, tea and sugar, or the food affordable on low wages.<sup>3</sup> Neither system allowed them sufficient nutrition. The scarcity of food is confirmed in the memories of the late Wenten Rubuntja, who attended first the Lutheran and then the Little Flower Mission school as a child in the 1930s. He remembered running away from the former to scrounge in the rubbish tip for food or to find birds to eat. At other times, he and his friends went around to the Lutherans, Anglicans, Catholics and Muslims – as "all of the priests used to feed people" and "all those churches were all right – they were all holy."<sup>4</sup> So hunger was a reality for the Arrernte but also a crucial factor in their attraction to the churches.

### **Francis McGarry: his background**

Francis (Frank) McGarry was one of twins born in 1897 to Catherine and John, in the New South Wales town of Wagga. In 1903, John, a butcher, died after a long illness, leaving a family of eight children: Jack, Molly, Minnie, Kathleen, the twins (Dot and Frank), Thelma and Fred, a baby. Two years later, fourteen-year-old Minnie died, and it was around this time that Catherine sold the butcher's shop and took her family to live in the suburb of Manly in Sydney. The reason for their relocation is not clear, however

Michael McGarry, the children's uncle, lived in Manly with his family, while continuing his business interests in Wagga. Catherine may have looked to them for familial support while seeking the greater employment opportunities in the city for her growing brood. After they had left school, the three McGarry brothers took jobs in Sydney department stores, an easy commute on the Manly ferry, while two of their sisters became typists.

On arrival in Manly, the younger children, including Frank, attended St Mary Immaculate primary school, a ten-minute stroll from their house. Frank went on to Marist Brothers in Darlinghurst for his secondary education, after which he became a warehouseman at Paterson Laing and Bruce in Sydney. When he turned eighteen, he joined the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Militia and, three years later in 1917, as a member of the AIF's 45<sup>th</sup> Battalion, he left for Europe to serve in the Great War. In northern France, his main role was truck driver for the troops.<sup>5</sup> At war's end, he returned home, uninjured, and resumed his previous occupation and interests. He remained living at home with his mother, as did most of his siblings. The only ones to leave were Jack, Kathleen and Thelma, who all married in the 1920s.

St Mary's parish figured prominently in the daily life of the McGarrys. As well as regular attendance at Mass, they were involved in church activities and associated organisations, and were part of the local Catholic community. Frank and Fred joined the Manly conference of the St Vincent de Paul (SVDP), which met at St Mary's, and they gave much of their spare time to charitable work. Long serving parish priest Father John McDonald was a close family friend, and mentor to Frank. The McGarrys extended the practice of their faith into their home, where they regularly prayed and read inspirational texts together. When Frank moved to Alice Springs, he reminisced about those times. One evening during prayers, he felt his mother's presence and wondered if "you were all saying the rosary at home and your thoughts and mine were united with the one glorious object of thanking God for being so good..."<sup>6</sup> The spiritual intimacy and collective devoutness of the close-knit McGarry family aligns with what historian Katharine Massam has called "devotional Catholicism", the form of worship encouraged by the Australian Church in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Massam further states, "The model of God presented to Catholics through the devotional strand of spirituality was a delicate mix of sentiment and encouragement to action, to which Catholic people could legitimately respond

in a variety of ways.”<sup>8</sup> Frank’s devotion to God can be therefore understood as an impetus for his diligent SVDP work in the 1920s and 1930s, and his later mission venture. With the onset of the Great Depression, the Brothers’ assistance with accommodation, funds, food and clothing to the poor of Sydney was critical. The SVDP emphasised the value of these services for the salvation of the Brothers’ own souls. To further earn the grace of God for both themselves and those they assisted, they were encouraged also to proselytise.<sup>9</sup> Much of Frank’s SVDP work was performed on Sundays when he visited the lazaret at Little Bay to give pastoral care and to deliver the inmates requested items such as books and newspapers. This work came under the SVDP category of ‘special works’.

Relevant to Frank’s trajectory as a religious worker was the promotion of Catholic Action by the Church in the decades prior to the Second World War. Michael Hogan argues that this was an ambiguous term, its interpretation in the Sydney Archdiocese varying to that promulgated in Melbourne. In its simplest definition, Catholic Action entailed the participation of lay Catholics in work traditionally performed by the clergy. Catholics, especially young men, were urged to become active proponents of their faith rather than passive adherents of the Church.<sup>10</sup> If, as a hard-working SVDP member, Frank exemplified this ideal, towards the middle of the 1930s, he reevaluated his commitment and considered how he might give more of himself to this task, possibly as a result of the increasing stridency of the Church’s call for Catholic Action at this time.

At the National Eucharistic Congress in Melbourne in December 1934, speaker Father Martindale, explained Catholic Action as “The Christianising of each man and woman...Every Catholic, then, is called to regard it as his duty to work in coordination with the Hierarchy and under their guidance at something that is meant to change the world.”<sup>11</sup> The SVDP took part in the congresses therefore it is reasonable to assume Frank was familiar with this speech or its gist. To ‘change the world’ under his present circumstances, as a full-time storeman, hardly seemed possible.

By the time of the Congress, Frank was already aware of another appeal by the Church which offered him the possibility of real self-abnegation in the service of God. The previous April, St Mary Immaculate had hosted the SVDP’s annual festival meeting with guest speaker, Father Francis Xavier Gsell of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), founder and

head of the Bathurst Island Catholic mission in the Northern Territory. Gsell informed the meeting of instructions he'd received from the Vatican to open two new mission stations, at distances of 500 and 1000 miles from Port Darwin. "The Aborigines of Australia have a first right to our attention and sympathetic help, since by coming into contact with our civilisation they have generally lost their tribal laws and superstitious fears, which were their guides and their control. These laws and guides must be replaced by the laws and the love of God, not only for their eternal, but also for their temporal salvation...a mission station...is the best and perhaps the only way of saving the native race."<sup>12</sup>

Gsell's speech was part of a vigorous campaign in the 1930s by sections of the Australian Church to shake Catholics out of their apparent indifference and to step up missionary outreach to Indigenous people.<sup>13</sup> After a twenty-year hiatus, this campaign achieved six new Catholic mission stations within the decade and a significant influx of Catholic missionary personnel to the remote parts of the country.<sup>14</sup> In 1935, in accordance with Gsell's request, the MSC Sydney province sent Father Patrick Moloney to Alice Springs to open a mission station in Central Australia. Frank joined him shortly afterwards as a lay assistant. His exact steps in pursuit of this new vocation are unknown, but Gsell's speech was no doubt influential. Frank's letters repudiate any suggestion of his volunteering for the work; the decision, he implied, was God's: "I did not come up here of my own will as when Father Perkins [MSC Provincial Superior] asked me if I would go to Alice Springs, I asked for three days to think it over. On revisiting him I remarked that I had not made up my mind but if he thought it God's will, then I would willingly go".<sup>15</sup>

### **Looking for Mission**

In March 1935, Frank arrived in Alice Springs to take up residence with parish priest, Father Moloney, at the Catholic presbytery. In his history of the Australian province of the MSC, Father Antony Caruana explains that Moloney was a major force in shifting the Order's priorities from overseas mission work towards the Aboriginal apostolate from the late 1920s. Moloney's enthusiasm ultimately outweighed his superiors' reluctance to expose their men to the harsh living conditions and isolation of remote Australia.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, like Gsell, Moloney believed Catholics had a responsibility to redress the wrongs inflicted on Aboriginal people through

colonisation.<sup>17</sup> For him, evangelisation was part of the solution.

Prior to Alice Springs, Moloney established missions at Palm Island (1931) and Menindee (1933). He was fifty-eight and walked with a cane, and, by his own admission, was neither strong nor in good health. Nonetheless, he was resolute and excited about starting this third mission. Frank, twenty years his junior and physically fit, could do the manual jobs, domestic chores and drive the car. Both men also clearly expected that Frank would also play a part in the main work of the mission: Christianising and giving material aid to the Aboriginal people.

Moloney's original plan for the mission was to seek Aboriginal people who'd had little contact with Europeans.<sup>18</sup> In his view, they had the best chance of becoming successful Catholic converts, having avoided the vices and immorality he associated with the undesirable Australian way of life. He and Frank made two long, hazardous expeditions by car into the desert to this end, but returned each time, their hopes dashed. On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1935, Moloney proposed that they "go out and look for blacks" in closer proximity to the town.<sup>19</sup> In a camp on the edge of town they met a group of Eastern Arrernte people, including Brandy McMillan and his family. Frank's letters state they were amenable to the prospect of a mission for their children, and that some asked Moloney to baptise them immediately, to which he agreed.<sup>20</sup>

Moloney and Frank ascribed particular significance to the founding date of the mission, since it was the Feast Day of St Therese of Lisieux, known also as 'Little Flower'. St Therese had been canonised only a decade earlier and enjoyed immense popularity in this period, notably among the Catholics of Adelaide, Moloney's home city. As a pious woman whose short life consisted simply of prayer and work, she became a symbol of enduring faith in an increasingly secular society, and was known for her generous bestowal of miracles.<sup>21</sup> Moloney and Frank believed her intercession had brought about their mission, and they named it Little Flower, accordingly. Furthermore, Moloney believed that St Therese had meant the Mission to be Frank's, not his, as officially it had to be. In early 1936, he informed Frank, "She got me to baptise then only because it was not your office to baptise. But the mission is yours and will remain yours for many a long day I hope."<sup>22</sup>

At first Frank visited the camp to instruct the children, always bringing treats and helping with any ailments when possible. But after a few weeks, he stopped his visits, as the children began making the six-kilometre walk

to the presbytery every day. Frank gave them breakfast, made sure they washed and changed their clothes, and checked and attended to their sores and ailments. He then taught them school and catechism in the church. Gradually, he became known to the families, not only as someone who would teach their children, but who would provide them with food, warm clothes and medical attention. The adults from the camp began visiting the church, some requesting this kind of assistance, while some women were anxious to see how their children passed their time up at the Catholic church. Frank explains in his letters that some older people asked if they could be instructed in the catechism, and so he began adult classes. They became regular churchgoers and, when Frank decided they were sufficiently instructed, Moloney baptised them. Thus, while the children remained the focus of the Mission, members of their families and wider social groupings also became part of the Mission community. Frank announced to his family in early 1936, "now our home is a school and hospital and we are anxious to help all."<sup>23</sup>

### **The Mission Station**

Frank's plan to make the Little Flower Mission more inclusive of families was facilitated when it was granted a site in December 1936. The Chief Protector of Aboriginals (Northern Territory), Dr Cecil Cook, approved Moloney's application to build a school and staff quarters at Charles Creek, on part of an Aboriginal reserve a little under one kilometre north of the Alice Springs township.<sup>24</sup> By this time, Brother Ed Bennett MSC had joined the Mission and, along with some of the Aboriginal men, erected the infrastructure. In addition to the buildings, Frank established a nearby camp to accommodate the children and their families. He favoured keeping them together, perhaps reflecting his own high regard for close family life. Frank formed an advisory council of eight senior Aboriginal men and together they pegged out plots on the mission site for each family. The men built new wurlies made of wooden framework and covered with old iron, bags and grass. Frank required the new homes to be arranged in 'streets', and for residents to plant a small tree outside each of their homes. He also expected the residents of 'Camp IV', as it became officially known, to keep their wurlies clean, streets swept, and to utilise the new sanitary system. Archival records show no evidence of government permission for Camp IV. It was only when white

townspeople started to complain about the proximity of the camp to their homes and businesses that departmental officers wondered how it had come to be there, particularly since it was located within the two-mile radius of the town subject to a nightly curfew for Aboriginal people (and during the day except for those with jobs in town).<sup>25</sup> Moloney was probably stretching the truth when he insisted that Dr Cook had given permission for “a school and camp.”<sup>26</sup>

Several men and women in the Mission camp worked for townspeople or had seasonal work on pastoral properties, but Frank referred often to others who did not have adequate means of subsistence, including some of the children and the aged, sick and immobile, to whom he provided food and care. The government rations to which the elderly and infirm were entitled were not nutritious or plentiful, consisting of flour, tobacco, sugar and tea. Furthermore, the walk to the ration depot in the heat or wet was not easy. As Frank received no financial support for this purpose, he relied on whatever resources he could find locally. He procured meat offcuts from the local butcher; stale bread from the baker; fresh vegetables and fruit from the market gardener; and old clothes from his sister Molly’s friends. Frank was particular about helping only the ‘deserving cases’; he would only assist the fit unemployed if they worked for him in exchange.

Hospital visitation was another aspect of Frank’s missionary endeavour, echoing his former SVDP work. He described conditions in the Alice Springs ‘Black Hospital’ as “appalling and an absolute disgrace to all concerned”.<sup>27</sup> Aboriginal people, Frank claimed, avoided the hospital or absconded if forcibly admitted, as they associated it with death. The only other hospital, run by the Australian Inland Mission, refused to treat Aboriginal people. So Frank encouraged the sick or injured to stay in the Mission camp where he tended them personally with his rudimentary nursing care, deferring to the local doctor for serious cases. Often, those with diseases such as tuberculosis and pneumonia, could not be saved. In these instances, Frank’s last task was to ask the dying if they agreed to be baptised and then hastily summon Moloney from the presbytery for the purpose.

Throughout his dealings with Mission people, Frank attempted to learn and understand their culture and law using his own observations and by asking the elders. He admired the Arrernte people’s deep spirituality and strict observance of traditional law, qualities he thought befitting for strong

Christian converts. But he showed little tolerance for many of their beliefs and practices, particularly those that directly violated Christian teachings. For example, men and women found to be in polygamous relationships were expelled from the Mission camp. Frank was particularly perturbed by some aspects of the boys' initiation rites. He judged them to be excessively brutal and, by introducing the boys to tribal law, made it more difficult for them to accept Christianity. On inquiry, he learnt that other Catholic missionaries in Australia were not worried as "corroborees contrary to the Church will die out in time. However...I am trying to make it a quick process."<sup>28</sup> However, although the elders agreed to Frank's plea to desist from such practices, they nevertheless continued them. When Frank found out, he was surprised and deeply disappointed. He had underestimated the importance of the ceremonies to the Arrernte and miscalculated his own influence on their lives.

Frank continued to teach school for about three hours each day at the new purpose-built classroom on the Mission site. Full-descent Aboriginal children in the Alice Springs area had few other opportunities to access education, as they were not accepted by white parents at the local schools, and Hermannsburg Mission school was more than a hundred kilometres away. But Frank had no teaching qualifications and, as he knew, he would eventually have to give up this work. In April 1938, sister teachers of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart took over the school. Frank found the handover difficult, and tried to maintain his influence over the running of the school, causing considerable tension with the Sisters and the other missionaries.

In 1942, after the bombing of Darwin, the Alice Springs township became an army base, and large numbers of soldiers began occupation. As the Aboriginal reserve, including Charles Creek, was to be resumed for their accommodation, the Mission was ordered to relocate north to Arltunga, a former mining town. Frank's job was to escort the Mission people to the new site and remain in charge while looking for water and building a road. In 1944, when all was ready, the other missionaries arrived and Frank was told his services were no longer required. His letters do not reveal the reason, but later correspondence by Bishop Gsell suggests it lay with Frank's fraught relations with the Sisters.

With Frank's vocation as a missionary at an end, he took up an earlier

offer to join the Native Affairs Branch as a patrol officer. In 1946, he was posted to the newly-established Yuendumu settlement as superintendent. His main job was the distribution of rations to up to four hundred Warlpiri people gathered there after their displacement from their homeland and traditional food sources.<sup>29</sup> Frank found the work onerous due to shortages of government supplies, and frequent sickness and injuries among the people. In 1948, the Department informed Frank that he would have to vacate his position but could apply for the role of assistant. This may have been due to the more rigid enforcement of the official policy stipulating that only married men were to be employed as superintendents, or it may have been that with the arrival of Baptist missionaries at Yuendumu, Frank's authority became problematic. Frank's reaction is recorded in his letter home: "They will put no one over me, so ... I soon may be cutting your lawn."<sup>30</sup> Characteristically, he interpreted the news as a sign from God that his work was finished in the Territory. Arriving back in Sydney in July, he returned to the family home and took a job as a night watchman. During the day he worked at the SVDP opportunity shop in Manly. In 1955, Frank became seriously ill and died, aged 58.

## **Conclusion**

Francis McGarry seemed to embody the ideal put forward by the Church when it urged Australian Catholics to divert their energies to the evangelisation of Aboriginal people. His spiritual fervour and the autonomy accorded him by Moloney on the mission field gave him the opportunity for a new and rich vocation as a missionary. Frank conscientiously assisted hungry, frail and ill Aboriginal people, taught the children school, and introduced many Eastern Arrernte to the Catholic faith. Yet, as we have seen, his assertive attempts to eliminate cultural practices were largely unsuccessful. Aboriginal men and women on the mission continued their ceremonial lives while also practising some aspects of Catholicism. Not all of them needed his material support, but they chose some of what he and his mission offered, just as they did with the Lutherans and other missionaries they encountered.

Frank's position as a layman permitted him certain freedoms, such as his continued closeness to his family, but it also rendered him highly vulnerable. While the Mission was in its infancy, his transition from priest's assistant to mission 'boss' was much lauded and supported by his mentors, including

Moloney and Gsell. But, as the Little Flower Mission consolidated, it became a cause of friction with other mission staff. Had Frank formally committed himself to the religious life, the MSCs may have had an obligation to retain him in the work of their order, but their priorities were their own men and the mission itself with its requirements for Sister teachers. This implicit instability of Frank's position as a lay missionary was clear when his vocation was brought abruptly to a stop in 1944.

## Endnotes

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