

## Missionaries of Charity 25 years in Sydney

I would like to begin by thanking Sister Hannari for the invitation to preside at this Eucharist to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the Missionaries of Charity in Sydney although we are one year late due to the pandemic. I also express our thanks to Father John Macdonald, parish administrator for his hospitality.

I still have a clear recollection of the occasion when I was asked in my capacity as Archdiocesan Secretary what would need to be done so the Missionaries of Charity could come to Sydney. The question was posed by a benefactor who would prefer to remain anonymous but whom I knew both professionally and socially.

At that time, the Missionaries were well established in Melbourne and in various regional areas but a presence in Sydney would be very significant. We conspired together to draft a letter to Cardinal Clancy. This was late in 1993.

Shortly afterwards, I recall when the Cardinal walked down the corridor from his office to my office with the letter in his hand. He put it on my desk and said, "tell me what you think but I think this is an offer too good to refuse." I did not have the heart to tell him I was part of the conspiracy.

His Eminence formally replied to the benefactor in a letter of 21 December 1993 saying, "*I am sure that the Sisters would bring great blessings to the Archdiocese*".

It was indeed an offer too good to refuse and His Eminence then set about doing what was necessary to invite the sisters to Sydney.

He again formally confirmed by letter to the benefactor of 9 June 1994 that Mother Teresa had accepted his request to send a community of Sisters to Sydney and indicated that the first superior in Sydney would be Sister Vincy. The other 3 Foundation Sisters in Sydney were to be Sister M Antonine (and may she rest in peace), Sr M Antonella and Sister Agnes Joseph.

It then fell to me to accompany the then regional superior Sister Joseph Maria on a walk around various possible locations for the initial community and we finally settled on what had been the former Sisters of Mercy convent here in Surry Hills which had been acquired by the archdiocese.

We set about the renovation work in the upper floors for the Sisters modest accommodation: for a time the Sisters and the aboriginal preschool, shared the

building but the preschool soon after relocated to more suitable premises and the Sisters had use of the whole building.

When I set about doing some research for this homily, I found this very neat summary in the first item in my Google search.

I quote:

Mother Teresa was an inspiration to countless millions for her lifelong devotion to the neediest and most vulnerable of the world. The selflessness and sacrifice with which she lived her own life made her an international symbol of charitable work, and the love and compassion she showed the destitute of all faiths won her a Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, which she donated entirely to the poor.

Mother Teresa found her inspiration in Catholic teachings but won widespread affection and admiration in her adopted home of Calcutta, India by respecting local customs and beliefs, and always placing our common humanity above religious divisions. By 2013, the charitable organization she had set up, the Missionaries of Charity, had spread to 700 missions in 130 countries, providing soup kitchens, centres for family assistance, orphanages, schools, hospitals and homes for people with diseases such as leprosy, AIDS and tuberculosis.

In 2016, Mother Teresa was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church as Saint Teresa.

I had a teeny-weeny part in the canonization process as I was assigned the task of taking evidence from Sister Dorothy one of her original companions who spent time here in Sydney as regional superior.

I mention two other aspects of the impact the Sisters have had on me.

In 2003 when I was in St Vincent's Hospital after my cancer surgery they came and gave me a relic of Mother Teresa. I put it in a safe place, so safe that I forgot where I put it, but fortunately when I packed up and left Canberra in 2015 it came to light, and it is in my pocket now.

When I was secretary of the bishops' conference in Canberra, I was privileged on Fridays to go out to the convent in Queanbeyan. It was one of the delights of my week and a real antidote to what could sometimes be the tedium of the ecclesial bureaucracy.

I am perhaps being unduly indulgent and as friends and co-workers of the sisters of course I am preaching to the converted. You all have your own stories and I invite you to pause for a moment and cherish the impact the Sisters have had in your lives.

In the few minutes I have left as we reflect on the readings of the day we might think about Jesus' walking on the water and his admonition to the disciples – do not be afraid.

Saint John's gospel is rich in its symbolism and the symbolism of Jesus reaching out to comfort the disciples is mirrored in my opinion by the marvellous things that the Missionaries of Charity do all around the world. But let's for a moment just focus on their presence in Sydney. Their missionary activity whether it's teaching catechism or serving at the soup kitchen is grounded in their relationship with Jesus.

What I have come to appreciate is the contemplative dimension to the Sister's vocation. We can sometimes be caught up in activity and planning and strategy and programmes and forget that the spiritual journey always begins with silence. It is significant, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, that the diaconate was established to free the apostles for prayer.

Think of Psalm 46 "Be still and know that I am God" and in the foyer at Catholic Mission where I work, we have this quote from Mother Teresa.

The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; the fruit of love is service; the fruit of service is peace."

In celebrating 25 years in Sydney which spans three archbishops we can never measure in any quantitative sense the good that has been done but we can certainly affirm qualitatively that the spirit of Saint Teresa of Calcutta is being kept alive in this city.

All of you who have come together today to celebrate this occasion can rejoice and give thanks to God. It is only through the grace of God that we can be here and so celebrate all that God has done through those who commit to a life of love.

St Teresa of Calcutta pray for us.