

Remembering Bernadette Fox

9th November 1929 ----- 18th December 2018

For many years Bernadette was a guiding light for Good Shepherd life and mission. For Good Shepherd Sisters particularly in our Province she was like a star which rose in our galaxy, abided with us and slowly sank into the west. In her absence now we sense her presence among us.

When I was thinking of Bernadette's long life as a Good Shepherd sister the story of the Visitation came to me. When Mary heard that her older cousin, Elizabeth, was having a child, she set out for the hill country of Judah to assist her. Mary was aware but not fully understanding of the gift of God within her. In the greeting of the two women God was present. Mary in pondering the mystery of these events responded with her prayer of trust and humility known as the Magnificat.

In many ways the shape of this story brings an understanding of Bernadette's Good Shepherd journey. She was alert to the needs of people and set out to respond in whatever way she could.

She had a deep trust in the Mystery of God present within her and in the many situations she encountered. Her response to the unfolding of her life and where it lead her was one of hope, humility, compassion and courage.

As a young woman, aged 22, Bernadette decided to join the Good Shepherd order in 1952. Through her three Good Shepherd Aunts she would have been familiar with the ministries carried out in Australia, New Zealand and to some extent in the world wide reach of Good Shepherd Mission. Along with many others of her generation, she was inspired by the mission of the Church and wanted an opportunity to help make the world a better place. Bernadette had a personal call to trust in the Mystery of God and respond to the needs of those pushed to the margins of society.

Bernadette along with 10 companions was professed in March 1955. She had her first international experience when she and Patricia Tointon were sent to Angers to prepare for final vows. They made their final profession at the Motherhouse in October 1958.

On her return Bernadette was appointed Assistant Novice Directress and continued teaching domestic science to girls from the various classes. It may have seemed at that time that religious life would go on in a continuing style

with very little alteration. However in the 1960s society began to change throughout the world. Within the Church Pope John 23rd convoked the second Vatican Council. In the Province there was a recognition that sisters needed more training and further education to continue Good Shepherd ministry. Bernadette was an active architect of promoting that direction when she was later appointed Formation Directress for Temporary Professed.

By the late 1960s she was a member of the Provincial Council and along with other team members realised that for the enablement of Good Shepherd Mission expert professional assistance was needed. Good Shepherd sisters required advice in legal and financial areas for the protection and development of assets. An Advisory Committee of Professional men was established. This was chaired by John Date who over many years of change has provided wise and astute legal counsel.

There was change happening at the Good Shepherd international level. Mother Thomas Aquinas Lee, who was the Congregational Leader, realised that structural change was needed for the organisation of the order. Bernadette, along with two other sisters, attended a special Congregational Chapter in 1969 to approve new constitutions and customs for the order.

In 1971 at the Provincial Chapter Bernadette was elected Province Leader for Australia. She initiated a process of mammoth change for the Province. Following a resolution of the Chapter to form a commission to assess the ministries and resources of the Province, Bernadette implemented many recommended changes. These led to the closure of residential programs, the handing over of schools to the Catholic Education Department and the sale of large buildings. At the same time sisters were given opportunities to attend theological courses and training programs for new skills related to the changing ministry needs. There were also changes in governance, administration and community living structures.

In 1972 following the direction of Mother Aquinas Lee and in the light of declining numbers of sisters, New Zealand re-joined the Australian Province. Bernadette enabled this process following the death of the much loved Province Leader of New Zealand, Mother John Eudes Bezar. Bernadette is remembered as meeting the New Zealand sisters with kindness and understanding along with a firmness to bring about the re-structure.

Change brings the hope of possibilities and change brings fear and pain. In these difficult years Bernadette was guided by Vatican Council 2 Directives and what was needed for the Good Shepherd charism to grow and thrive in new times. The path of her vision and decision making took enormous courage.

In July 1973 along with delegates, Joan Raper and Naomi McClements, Bernadette attended the Congregational Chapter. At the age of 43 Bernadette was elected as the eighth leader of the Good Shepherd Congregation. In her own words years later she reflected:

“I was really in shock. I wondered how Sisters, from countries all around the world, could elect someone from Australia. I am a shy person and I thought it was really strange.”

In the midst of her shock and surprise, Bernadette, in her practical approach to life accepted that she had been elected for leadership and she would get on with the task. Naomi remembers at that Chapter she interviewed about forty Provincials, managing the many different languages. Joan Raper was appointed her secretary. She remembers Bernadette’s relational skill and attention to detail as she built her leadership team around the practices of consultation, dialogue and decision making.

In her first six years she travelled to many provinces, listening, being listened to, encouraging leaders and responding to issues. She was guided by the two primary lights, the teaching of Vatican Council 2 and the need for Good Shepherd ministries to modernise. While she was encouraging, Bernadette was also insistent about the closure of programs that were no longer suitable.

In 1979 at the Congregational Chapter Bernadette was elected as leader for a further six years. This Chapter endorsed a document with the title, Towards a New Springtime. With its forward approach encouraging change and the deepening of Good Shepherd spirituality, this document is remembered fondly for the hope and optimism it generated.

In 1985 at the completion of her term of office, Bernadette and her secretary and companion, Joan Raper returned to Australia. It cannot have been easy for them to settle into a changed province after being involved on the world scene. Bernadette in her unassuming way joined the Rosebud community and later on moved to Hawthorn. She was involved with parish ministry and at the same time was supportive of the Province Leadership Team and the development of Good Shepherd vision.

In 1994 Bernadette was elected Province Leader at the Provincial Chapter. Her leadership faced a different landscape in Australia and New Zealand from that of 1973. The number of sisters had decreased significantly. While many lay people were employed in Good Shepherd work, Bernadette and her team recognised that lay people shared the Good Shepherd charism. They encouraged a development in understanding, that while there were different lifestyles of sisters and lay people, anyone committed to Good Shepherd vision and values was an active contributor to Mission.

Another important contribution Bernadette made at this time was commissioning the building of twenty units in Abbotsford which would provide for the ageing needs of sisters. It was designed to help maintain the independence of sisters for as long as possible. In other parts of the Province plans were also undertaken to enable adjustment to ageing whilst maintaining independence and participation in ministry.

In 2000 at the completion of her term of office, Bernadette was appointed Vicar for Religious in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. She was in this role for six years and with her knowledge and experience of religious life she assisted many individuals and congregations in a time of continuing change.

Bernadette lived in the Units until shortly before her death. She enjoyed the lifestyle of Units with its combination of independent living and community. Hospitality was a highlight for her and she listened, entertained and gave of her kindness and wisdom. In the last months of her life when she needed extra nursing care she transferred to Mary McKillop Aged Services. This time was not easy for Bernadette as she let go of her long and committed life. Her death at the end was peaceful and she now knows the faithfulness and goodness of her Good Shepherd God.

Last night we had a sharing of memories about Bernadette. Many stories were told and many more will continue to be shared over these next days and weeks. Bernadette lived a remarkable life of faithfulness. Like Mary the mother of Jesus, Bernadette set off for the hill country. Deeply aware of her Good Shepherd call and inspired by St. Mary Euphrasia, Bernadette went out with her hopes and fears but also with her intent to enable the continuing evolution of Good Shepherd mission. She brought with her an ability to read the signs of the times and an understanding that real growth comes through consultation, dialogue and respectful relationships. As a leader she was able to make difficult decisions and had the wisdom to understand that change,

whether on personal, community, Province or Congregational levels, happens at different rates. She learned to live peacefully with what she could change and what would need more time. This gave her a tranquillity and came from a contemplation of the mystery of God in our world.

Bernadette I believe was able carry responsibilities of leadership over many years because of her ability to relax. She enjoyed the company of people. She enjoyed experiencing new cultures. She had a wry sense of humour. And of course, as many in many countries know, she loved to play cards as a way of relaxing and connecting. It was her nature to be unassuming and with this came a genuine simplicity which enabled her to be patient and compassionate towards others.

Until the end of her life, Bernadette was interested in the journey of the Congregation. She was up to date with documents and newsletters that were sent out and found her viewpoints in the light of current information about religious life and the mission of the Church. She maintained communication with sisters in many countries through cards, phone calls and the internet. The insight which guided her through years of leadership remained; that to be faithful to the inspiration of St. Mary Euphrasia we need to respond to the call of the Good Shepherd today and be ready to change to keep the mission relevant.

Most of all Bernadette loved others and was loved by many. Along with her family we will miss her kind, wise presence among us. With gratitude in our hearts we will continue to remember Bernadette and all that she has given us. Perhaps these words sent to us by Sister Bridget Paily, member of the Congregational Leadership Team who is with us here today, sums up what remains real and true.

“Those we hold in our hearts never truly leave us. They live on in the kindness they have shared and the love they have brought into our lives.”

Anne Dalton
4th January 2019