

# "The Presentation Sisters"

Through the 100 years plus time frame of a Catholic community, served by Religious Sisters, The Presentation order has been a dominant part of God's presence in Coraki.

In the 1990's, a young person with a calling to serve Christianity in far away places, would look to third world countries. Turning the clock back to 1890's, Australia was an emerging country, firing the imagination and religious zeal of established European Catholic orders. Many of the Religious, both Priest and Nun, to represent orders in Australia, came from Ireland. Our Presentation order had a Mother house in Lucan and brought their special trademarks of Faith to the North Coast region of NSW. As many of the settlers had Irish affiliation, and most of the Priests were Irish, it was inevitable that an Irish flavour of Catholicity developed.

The history of the Presentation order in Coraki has been well covered, this article will try to avoid repetition of the known facts. Perhaps the relationship of Religious and Laity is an area that leaves something to be said.

It seems obvious, that in the early Catholic Parent or Student, there was an attitude of awe placing Sister on a high pedestal. Part of her duty was to instil respect, a respect tinged with fear, fear of the Almighty and fear of a swift whack, when the miscreant stepped out of line. How often they spared a thought for Sister as a person is very unclear. Clothed in a heavy serge habit and probably wearing button up boots that squashed a corned corn or bunion, Sister was above the effects of temperature in a tropical summer! I fancy it was not so, and that Sister had much suffering to offer to her Lord.

It was at the instigation of Fr Doyle, that the Presentation Sisters came to Lismore in 1886. They spread their activities to Coraki in 1896, and made the future of Catholic education in that town a less formidable task. Those first Nuns were Mother Mary Berchmans, Sisters Mary Conception, Brigid, Cecilia, Columba, and Ursula. Naturally they came by boat; a special boat was commissioned the following Sunday to bring Bishop Doyle and some of those attending the official opening of the Convent. It was a red letter day for Coraki. The St. Carthages choir, and many well wishers of other faiths joined the celebration.

The original convent suffered the all too common Coraki disease of fire. Church and Convent were destroyed in 1904, a sad disaster, but also a rallying call to the Catholic community. The building in Adam Street opened its doors as home to the community in 1905 and closed as a convent in 1986. It was a building of strong aesthetic appeal, but probably giving little of what modern architecture would call essential living comfort.

Some interesting insights into Coraki Convent life of the 1940's appear in the publication "Centenary". World War 2 made an impact on Convent and School life. Blackouts became necessary, because of proximity to the RAAF training base at Evans Head. Until blackout blinds were made and fitted, blankets were hung on the windows of the dinning room and school preparation achieved around a blanket draped hanging light, that cast a circle of illumination of the dinning room table. Then a gloomy trip up the stairs to bed in the dark.

Wartime tradesmen were a scarce commodity and steel supplies allocated to more important factors than leaking roofs. Sister, recently arrived in Coraki, hastened to shut the classroom window during a heavy shower. She was given the advice -- "Don't close the windows, Sister, it comes in worse if you close the windows". The children knew the drill. Speedily they pushed half the desks to the back of the room and the rest right up to the blackboard. They explained "That's where the rain comes in the roof; the inkwells overflow and ink goes everywhere" That week I fitted as well as I could up front, taught those at the back across a watery expanse and wore my goloshes in class!"

Then came drought years and contingencies of wartime. Once more Sister's words "To get water to the top floor of the convent in normal time we used a pump-a hundred pumps to a bath. As the tanks went dry, "the young sisters"(two of us) had to carry water from the tank at the Church. We set off with our buckets every afternoon after school. As the winter approached we decided to boil up the copper each night, so piling up the wood became part of the chore. Wartime rations were rather sparse, but, thanks to the generous farmers, we had plenty of milk. Since we couldn't spare kerosene for the primus we invented an ingenious way for heating some milk. We filled a large bottle, corked it firmly, suspended it with a contraption of string into the copper. Sometimes it worked. Other times we had no hot milk to drink but there was plenty in our baths. Encouraged by our success we decided that maybe we could make toast at the fire. There was no prospect of butter but toast sounded more interesting than plain bread. Again results were unreliable and sometimes the toast was seasoned with ashes. On one unforgettable night we served a sister with a slice which proved to have a live coal in it."

It is fact that, wherever and whenever Religious live in an area, they will rapidly become part of the overall community. The Presentation Nuns became a vital part of cultural activity, their ability as Musicians and Music Teachers, added a common bond to the entertainment of the area. They were probably far better informed on the living conditions and family situations of their parishioners, than many of those parishioners would have felt possible. The junior reporting staff, of say 100 students, probably filled in more of the lurid details of "home," than their unsuspecting parents foresaw. Long before the days of radio and television, the teaching sisters had access to an unabridged version of "Neighbours." They no doubt had many an inward smile when matching up the Sunday Mass family picture and acquired cameo word pictures.

On the other side of the coin, the laity probably had some very erroneous notions of the people who lived beneath the habits. Once more to borrow from the Coraki section of "Centenary." "Before Sister entered she was a fine horsewoman. Her brother kept a riding school and, with him, she followed "the trots." Just down from the Convent in Coraki there was a paddock where horse races were held. When it came to the Latin grace after lunch, Sister stood with hands piously joined but with one eye on the racecourse. We paused for the 'Pater Noster in silence 'Suddenly, Sister's eyes lit up, the dimples appeared, she clapped her hands and cried 'They're off'."

An element of bluff can be a handy commodity. "A sister in the secondary school became ill and somebody was called to take over her Algebra class. She had not done any Algebra since her study days. As a precaution she took with her a key where all the problems were worked out. Unfortunately she placed it on a desk in front of a tall country boy who said 'Sister, when are we going to start Key Algebra?' Put that away' she said 'when you can do ordinary Algebra it will be time to start Key Algebra'."

The nuns lived in their convent but were very aware and interested in all facets of their parishioners lives. They at times let fall snippets disclosing something of the person not usually seen. I remember Mother (Sister) Kieran telling me stories of the horses on the cobbled streets of Dublin, going from their stables to work at The Curragh, Irelands most famous racetrack. Her recall of girlhood, still saw the warm breath of those blanketed thoroughbreds steaming in the cold winter morning air. She still heard the rhythmic "clickety - clop" sound of iron shod hooves on the pavements.

Sister Angela, when in hospital at Coraki, was able to look out upon the golf course. It was on a visit there that she spoke to me of her love of the game as a girl back "home" in Ireland. Her choice of serving the Lord meant giving up the joy of playing golf.

Mechanisation came late to the Coraki Convent. It was after Vatican II; a logical progression from things like modified habits, and more access to public places. The first Holden car arrived and Sister learned the driving routine. Children waiting for a country bus, had their garden weeding duties lightened by Sister performing impromptu bending races. The vacant space behind the school, amongst the camphor trees was an excellent raining ground. Wheels had come to stay.

The Presentation Sisters were a strong arm of Christian friendship to the Koori people. One of their first pupils was "Aunty Emily" Wilson, respected by all the people of Coraki. Sisters Veronica and Colleen (both local girls) and Margaret conducted a special Ministry to the Koori people, it has to be a special prayer that the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of all to establish better relationships.

The first decade has flown since the Presentation sisters retired from Coraki. Their influence will live on in the years to come and hopefully Sisters and Laity will continue to pray, one for the other. The Coraki Parish was honoured to welcome home Sister Maureen to present a homily and retreat in this Renewal year of St. Joseph's.

One hundred years of service from the Presentation order, has left a durable imprint of Christ's love for his people.

—Their lasting contribution made, to all who shared their touch,  
May memory never, ever fade, in truth they loved us much."