

An Address to the Legislative Assembly

Marking the Contribution

of the

Sisters of St John of God in Western Australia

WA Parliament

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(Labor Pilbara)

Mr Speaker – this is a welcome opportunity to formally acknowledge, here in the Parliament, the enormous and ongoing contribution of the Sisters of St John of God to the state of Western Australia.

On behalf of the Labor Opposition we all wish to formally record our appreciation, that we share more widely, with the people of this state, for this lasting, living legacy of the Sisters of St John of God:

- the extraordinary gifts they have brought to us since 1895;**
- their dedicated lives of service to the health, education and pastoral care of communities across this state and beyond.**

We join in welcoming to the House a number of the Sisters, and their friends and co-workers - who are here as representatives of their Congregation – past, present and future.

Last week, in the National Museum of Australia, in Canberra, a new exhibition was launched. It attempts to detail, the vast contribution of the Irish in Australia.

Significant for us - is that, a highlight, of this exhibition, is a tropical religious habit: a long white dress, once worn by Sisters of St John of God, in the Kimberley.

We are reminded, by this exhibit that, on 6 June, 1907, an amazing sight was to be seen, at Beagle Bay, on the Dampier Peninsula, north of Broome.

Wading ashore, in black habits, through waters over a metre deep, were six Irish nuns, Sisters of St John of God. With wet clothes and bare feet they then walked the 11 kilometres to their new home, to the Beagle Bay Mission station, where they worked with the Pallottine Fathers and Brothers in the service of that community- immortalised in many ways, including in the Jimmy Chi Jnr lyrics for Bran NueDae where the people remember the old days and the old

ways “the Fathers, the brothers, the old Irish nuns” in their beloved town by the Bay.

These first sisters were part of a group of nine, almost all of whom came direct from the order's mother house, in County Wexford, Ireland.

Fortunately, after their early years in the Kimberley, the St John of God Sisters gradually adopted the lighter, white habits more suitable for their lives and work in the tropics, and currently on display in Canberra.

However, more important than just a curio, a relic of a bygone time, the habit - in this National Museum exhibit - reminds us all, that: still, today, the Sisters continue their work in the Kimberley region and beyond.

The Minister has, earlier, detailed the work of the Sisters, with particular focus on their activities around Perth and the South West. So it is also right and proper that we pay some attention to the lives and work of the Sisters in the Kimberley; work of which, my colleague the Member for Kimberley and I, are most conscious and deeply appreciative.

Significantly, the Sisters there, are still working actively, in various ways for reconciliation; indeed the Kimberley Sisters, were amongst the first, to apologise for their own part in Stolen Generation chapter of our shared history, in which they became, in some ways, the instrument of cruel government policy.

However, many of that Stolen Generation of children in the Kimberley, educated by the nuns and boarded in their institutions, continue to speak out loudly and favourably of the Irish sisters, recalling how genuine was the Sisters’ love and care for them and how powerful was their example.

The St John of God Sisters have had the good sense to record and document some of their relatively short history. However, I think there is still space for a book - yet to be commissioned - to more fully document the special history of

the Sisters of St John of God in the Kimberley, in what was - for a time - known as the Province of St Francis Xavier.

Let's be blunt. With the distance of history we can now call a spade a spade. The needs, the rights and the interests of Aboriginal people did not loom large in the local landscape here in WA. Indeed there was, lingering, open hostility, from the early settlers, to the interest the Church showed, in the well-being of the Aboriginal community.

However, Bishop Gibney was quickly able to enlist the support of the Sisters of St John of God for this work.

Into that space led by Mother M. Antonio O'Brien; walked Sr Benedict Courtney, and Sister M. Bernadine Greene – who was the first of five Greene sisters from the one family who came out from Ireland to work as Sisters of St John of God in the Kimberley; they were joined by six young postulants, including Sister Margaret Carmondy; Sisters Power; O'Neill; Walker; and McCaffrey.

While in WA generally, the St John of God Sisters role has been significant, in the Kimberley their influence has been simply immense.

In 1907 the Sisters were the first female religious to enter that region and embark on what was to become a shared journey of walking with the Aboriginal peoples of the region.

After Beagle Bay, they came to Broome where they started a school in 1908, within just two weeks of their first arrival in town; they nursed in the Japanese Hospital and the Broome Government Hospital – providing what were unique services for Catholic religious sisters at that time, of working in health care for the entire community in what were public, government hospitals; they went to Lombadina in 1913; then to Derby, where their work is well recorded and long remembered, especially for the Sisters work in the leprosarium from 1936 until it closed in 1986; they expanded their work to Bidyadanga (La Grange) and in

1956, to Balgo where to this very day Sister Alice Dempsey continues on with her work there in adult education.

Since 1907 approximately 130 women of this Congregation have lived and worked with the peoples of this region; 50 of these sisters spent their entire religious life in the Kimberley.

At their peak, the St John of God Sisters numbered around 43 women spread around the Kimberley, a significant voting block and a small army of loving, good will and service.

The Sisters came to the Kimberley initially to respond to the needs of Aboriginal women and children. They did this extraordinarily well, expanding their work to the many mixed race people of the Dampier Peninsula and beyond.

However, it was with the Aboriginal and Asian and mixed peoples of this region that the sisters have the most special of bonds.

These Sisters were multi-skilled, and for over 100 years, in this region, they have undertaken enduring work, and lived extraordinary, dedicated lives, of service, in education, nursing and pastoral care.

Not long before she died, in 2007, after a good part of 67 years at Beagle Bay, my old friend Sister Bernadette O'Connor was asked whether she wanted to go home to Ireland. 'Now why would I want to do that?' she replied. 'These are my people! This is my home!'

The Kimberley has been blessed with the lives and work and example of so many – but they include Sisters Alphonse Daley for her life of service at the Derby Leprosarium; and Sisters Ignatius Murnane, Francis Dunne; Sisters Cabrini Gleeson; Antoinette Kelly; Germanus Kent; Stella Bryant; Marcella Morris; Mary Reilly and many more.

As well as the ongoing work of Sister Alice Dempsey in Balgo, the Sisters of John of God Sisters work continues actively to this day in the Kimberley: in Broome with the social work and counselling services of Sisters Dolores Tunnecliffe and Leone Collins; with the ongoing pastoral care and presence of Sisters Philomena Hockings, Veronica McCarthy & Joan Mansfield; and, up until very recently, in Derby with Sisters Camille Poidevin and Sheila Murphy.

This House will understand me paying particular attention and tribute to one of the Sisters, Sister Pat Rhattigan; daughter of long term Kimberley Labor MLA Jack Rhattigan, whose family lived and worked for many years in the East Kimberley at Turkey Creek. Sister Pat Rhattigan is a one-eyed Kimberley girl, if ever there was one!

As just one example of the Sisters' ongoing contribution, with Sister Pat we see a life time dedicated to education: initially with pre-school, then primary, secondary and finally tertiary education – where she enlisted the support of the Sisters of St John of God in securing the foundation of the Broome Campus of the University of Notre Dame Australia dedicated in particular to the provision of University Education for the Aboriginal community of the Kimberley, where she was the first Campus Director.

Sister Pat is currently involved in an active partnership, archiving the shared history of the work of the Sisters of Sisters of St John of God with the Aboriginal community of the region; this continues the work of empowering local people with the knowledge of their personal and shared family histories, foundation stones upon which they can continue to build secure lives into the future.

The St John of God Sisters in the Kimberley and beyond, embodied and modelled and encouraged all, but especially the aboriginal women and Asian and mixed race people with whom they worked, to have confidence in themselves in the knowledge that they were as good as anyone; as capable as anyone of achieving absolutely anything.

We take the opportunity of acknowledging the presence of Congregational Leader Sr Brid Ryan and the absence because of ill-health of Australian Regional Leader Sr Pauline O'Connor; we acknowledge the other Sisters, not only those present today in the gallery but their sisters in religion, living in various parts of Western Australia and beyond, including those still in the Kimberley.

We know that in response to great need and suffering in Ireland this group of women came into being, taking up the work of nursing the sick, especially the poor, in their homes.

When the first 8 Sisters of St John of God first came out from Ireland to Western Australia in 1895 it was to respond to the local call for help to respond to pressing health needs of the people of Western Australia.

The Sisters first home and convent and hospital at 227 Adelaide Terrace was on the site of what is now the Novotel, and these days perhaps is even better known – not altogether inappropriately - as the site of a very busy Fenian Pub!

Certainly better known is the Sister of St John of God foundation at Subiaco where they have been active since 1898; and from where they have spread out to Coolgardie, Kalgoorlie and the Goldfields; to Bunbury and Geraldton and beyond.

Not only did the Sisters endure in Western Australia but they continued to answer the call in other destinations around the state, and around the nation and around the globe.

As well as their foundations around WA, the Sisters expanded their services to Ballarat in 1915; Warrnambool, 1940 ; Brighton, Victoria 1947; Lower Hutt, New Zealand 1954; Geelong, Victoria 1974 and Pakistan, 1980

The Order's official history, published for their WA centenary in 1995, does in its title detail the Sister's motives: 'The Love of Christ Urges us'!

In the popular mind of many, the Sisters are most closely identified, with the 12 St John of God Hospitals that are part of their lasting physical, tangible legacy.

However, the Sister's legacy is, also, actively in play, in many other ways.

For example, in their work through the St John of God's Health Care Social Justice program, which assists people experiencing disadvantage, especially in its commitment to regional WA.

Services under this program are aimed at filling gaps: especially in health care; and feature, primarily in regional areas. As well as housing programs for homeless youth, their work includes specialist post-natal depression & mental health and drug & alcohol services in Bunbury & Geraldton.

Their work features maternal health & parenting programs in 13 Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley, Pilbara, Midwest and Gascoyne regions of WA.

The pioneering spirit, on which St John of God Health Care is based, continues to give strong focus on developing female leadership.

We note that this congregation of women are not JUST an important part of our state's history.

For many of us, for our families and for our communities and constituents, the Sisters and their dedicated lives of service have touched and continue to touch the lives of so many others: in times of sickness; and in health; at times of birth; and at times of death; with nursing care; and palliative care. The Sisters and their co-workers have been there.

I say to the sisters that you and your colleagues have – like the seeds spilling out from the open fruit of the pomegranate, which is your emblem – flooded our state with the values that you have lived and championed.

You have helped to shape our past; your foundations continue to contribute to the quality of life we share; and you have gifted us all a lasting legacy of loving

care that goes on in different ways, in enduring shape, into the future - well beyond us all.