

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT BY HON JOHN CASTRILLI
SISTERS OF ST JOHN OF GOD

24 March 2011

Mr Speaker, I seek leave to make a ministerial statement and to move the following:

That this house endorses a certificate of appreciation being presented to the Sisters of St John of God in recognition of their enormous contribution to the pastoral care, education and health of our communities since 1895 and that special acknowledgement is made to the Sisters' selfless devotion to the people of Western Australia for the greater good of humanity.

This statement is made to ensure that the recognition and appreciation of the sisters is recorded in *Hansard* to remain forever as an important part of Western Australia's history. I wish to welcome to the gallery, and make this statement in the presence of, the much loved Sisters of St John of God. I acknowledge in this place today the congregational leader, formerly known as mother general, Sr Brid Ryan. I also wish to acknowledge the Australian regional leader, Sr Pauline O'Connor; however, I understand that, unfortunately, ill health has prevented Sr Pauline from attending today.

The congregation of the Sisters of St John of God was established in 1871 in Wexford, Ireland, at a time when there was much suffering following the great famine. Some of the first members were nurses, and they began to nurse the sick, both rich and poor, in their homes. The congregation branched out in 1895 when eight sisters responded to the

call for help to address the urgent health needs of the people of Western Australia.

Members of the chamber will be aware that the 1890s were years of extraordinary growth and development in the Swan River Colony, and the discovery of gold in Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie saw a rapid influx of people.

With little or no infrastructure in place, the lack of hygiene and harsh living conditions led to disease and ill health.

The Bishop of Perth, an Irishman named Matthew Gibney, was a visionary man who looked for practical solutions. It was his letter to the mother superior of the Sisters of St John of God in Wexford that led to the sisters' decision to come to Western Australia and to ultimately play such a major role in the future of health and education in our state.

The sisters endured a 34-day journey by sea and arrived in Albany on 23 November 1895. They then travelled by train for two days to Perth.

The eight sisters, with an average age of 28, set up residence at 227 Adelaide Terrace. The 15 rooms in which they lived were to become their home and hospital until they moved to Subiaco in 1898.

Not long after their arrival in Perth a call for help came from Kalgoorlie, where there had been an outbreak of typhoid fever. Two of the sisters answered the call by nursing and caring for the ill while living in tents in the Goldfields. They were later relieved by other sisters, who were relieved by yet others.

Their sacrifice was the greatest, as some of the sisters themselves succumbed to the disease. Despite the harshness of the conditions and

the losses, the sisters remained and continued to serve the people in whatever capacity they could.

The Sisters of St John of God Hospital was established in Kalgoorlie in 1897, which was the beginning of 80 years of service by the sisters in that region. Schools followed in Kalgoorlie in 1900, 1903 and 1904.

While we sit here today in relative comfort surrounded by modern-day infrastructure and modes of transport, it is difficult to comprehend the life experiences and living and working conditions of the pioneer sisters and those who were to follow.

It is difficult also to comprehend the courage and endeavours of these young women who left their families and homes to travel to the unknown on the other side of the world.

It is difficult to comprehend the selflessness that enabled them to endure those hardships for the benefit of the people of our state, who, to the Irish sisters, were people from a foreign world.

The sisters continued to not only endure, but also come to Western Australia as well as answer the call in the eastern states and other countries.

They established health care services in Ballarat and Warrnambool in Victoria, and in Goulburn in New South Wales, but it was in Western Australia that the sisters' influence was so immense. They opened hospitals and schools from the Kimberley to the south west and east of the Goldfields.

The sisters established the Kimberley mission at Beagle Bay in 1907, a school in Broome in 1912 and a leprosarium in Derby in 1936.

The sisters were multi-skilled and undertook whatever tasks were necessary to provide the appropriate care for their patients; there were no prejudices or barriers. Since 1907, more than 130 sisters have served in the Kimberley, 50 of whom spent their entire religious life in the Kimberley establishing and working in infant health clinics, primary education, pastoral care and the leprosarium that operated for 50 years until it closed in 1986. Once again, it is difficult to comprehend the hardships the women endured in an extreme and hostile country and the isolation that they would have felt more than 100 years ago when they chose to walk with the people of the Kimberley.

The sisters opened Bunbury Hospital in a house in Bury Hill in 1927, and established St John of God Hospital in Belmont in 1934, the St John of God Hospital in 1935, the Mosman Park convalescent home in 1937 and the hospital in Northam in 1947.

Perhaps we can all take some lessons from the sisters on how to get things done. The sisters had a great vision. In a book penned for the sisters' centenary celebration in 1995 called *The Love of Christ Urges Us*, author Sister Eugenia Brennan outlines the journey of the sisters and of their great vision. This is exemplified by the sisters' identifying and purchasing land in the then emerging municipality of Subiaco on which today stands the current hospital. Sister Brennan writes that today's 10 St John of God hospitals are an even greater testimony to the foresight, wisdom and organisational abilities of successive generations of the sisters. She writes that the unbroken, undiminished commitment to the heritage initiated by these women who first established the St John of God hospitals in Australia is their most powerful memorial. I could not agree more.

My personal involvement with the sisters has been mostly with the sisters from St John of God Hospital in Bunbury. I ask the other sisters to forgive me if I single out a couple of those sisters who are special to me. Sister Killian aided the birth of my two daughters, who were born at St John of God Hospital in Bunbury, making a special time even more special. Sister Killian aided in the delivery of a sizeable portion of the Bunbury population. She is now 94 years old. When she was 18, she left her family to come to Western Australia. She, like many others, sacrificed her own family and homeland to serve our people. As well as Sister Killian, Sister Leonie, who has a gentle serenity; Sister Bridie, who has given much pastoral care within our prisons; and Sister Romanus, whose special qualities brought peace to the dying as she ministered them in the early days of palliative care, have each had a big impact on my life. The impact that these four sisters of St John of God have had on me has been mirrored by the experiences of countless other individuals throughout the length and breadth of Western Australia.

Central to the existence of the sisters is the spirituality that has influenced, empowered and sustained these women in everything that they did and continue to do. The sisters do not just engage in nursing, education and pastoral care; they administer to the body, the mind and the soul, and they give peace and dignity during the darkest moments and give joy and hope for those who will recover.

Now, as so many of these much-loved sisters are in their senior years, I pay tribute to the Sisters of St John of God. I offer my acknowledgement and gratitude to the families of the sisters who too sacrificed the loss of their loved ones to a far-away country so that the people of Western

Australia could benefit from their services. I invite my parliamentary colleagues to join me in formally acknowledging the enormous contribution the Sisters of St John of God have made to Western Australia

I ask the house to acknowledge a deed of appreciation to be presented to the Sisters of St John of God in recognition of their enormous contribution to the pastoral care, education and health of our community since 1895, with special acknowledgement of the sisters' selfless devotion to the people of Western Australia for the greater good of humanity.