

Reflection on the life of Sr Margaret Bubb rsm
St Brigid's Church Dubbo
Thursday 23 July 2015

Sr Margaret Bubb was a woman who loved life. She filled her cup to the brim, and was never happier than when it overflowed to gladden the hearts of others. But on Saturday, the doctors told her there was no further treatment they could offer her for the debilitating medical condition she had battled all this year, and that indeed, her life was draining away. With characteristic realism and practicality, she made the decision to have all life support equipment removed, so she could enjoy conversation and quality time with her sisters Jeanette and Tricia. And by the end of the day, she had taken leave of this life, with unwavering faith in fullness of life to come.

Baptized Shirley Margaret Bubb, she was born at Bondi on the 22 December 1930, the second child of Lucy Ella Hourn and James Albert Bubb. Sadly, her older brother John died in 1980, leaving a wife, Audrey and five children. Her two younger sisters Jeanette and Tricia survive her. Her parents came from a farming background, and as was customary for the times, her mother stayed home to rear the family while her father went out to work as a policeman. These were the Great Depression years between two world wars, so life came at a cost. The family moved from Bondi to Katoomba, where Margaret completed her primary schooling and part of her secondary education. After the war, Constable Bubb moved with his family to Wellington and here, in 1947 at St Mary's High School, Margaret gained her Leaving Certificate with the Sisters of Mercy. It is significant that her academic subjects were balanced by needlecraft and garment construction – a balance she maintained throughout her professional life.

Margaret already felt drawn to Religious Life. But the spirituality of Religious Life in the 1940's was defined by a radical withdrawal from the world. Lucy Bubb wanted her daughter to experience the world before she withdrew from it and encouraged Margaret to wait a year or two. So Margaret took a position in the office of a timber and hardware company and enjoyed an active social life, which afforded her good fun, happy experiences and special relationships. However, the attraction to Religious Life persisted, and Margaret entered the Sisters of Mercy at St Joseph's Mount on 2 February 1949.

Post-war Europe was a ravaged, suffering land, and Australia opened its borders and its heart to the thousands of refugees and migrants who fled the poverty and uncertainty of life in their countries of origin, hoping for a new start and a new life in a new country. Enrolments of "new Australian" children in classes at Parish Schools run by the Sisters increased dramatically. I remember when my young brother started school in Orange, there were 101 children in Kindergarten with one teacher and a microphone. The new postulant, Sister Margaret, quickly found herself in front a classroom, on a daily basis. Under

supervision, she taught children from many nations and language backgrounds up until the retreat before her Reception into the Novitiate on 12 September 1949. This marked the beginning of her ministry as an educator – the ministry to which she gave herself unstintingly and at which she excelled at primary, secondary and tertiary levels as well as cross-culturally and within the Australian context.

Margaret trained as a Primary School Teacher in the second year of her novitiate, graduating with a Diploma of Teaching from the Catholic Board of Education in 1951. She was professed that same year on 14 September, taking the name Sister Mary Margaret of the Sacred Heart. For the next seventeen years, Margaret taught in the Catholic Schools of both Bathurst and Wilcannia Forbes Dioceses at Primary and Secondary levels. In 1962, she also assumed the responsibility of community bursar in Wellington.

In 1954 and 1956, the Australian Sisters of Mercy had responded to the faith, education and social needs of the Melanesian people and the Church in Papua New Guinea. Sisters Irene Carroll and Valda Finlay from the Bathurst Congregation were among the first Sisters to join the mission at Goroka. In 1969, Sister Margaret Bubb also accepted the challenge of an appointment to the Chimbu region of Papua New Guinea. She became a registered teacher with the PNG Department of Education, which qualified her to teach primary and secondary students and she learned Pidgin. However, these were the years before Independence in PNG. Margaret quickly discovered that the emphasis in education was on enabling the PNG teachers to run their own schools effectively. Before long she found herself involved in field training and supervision of indigenous teachers, mainly in village school situations.

While working with teachers, Margaret became aware of a serious problem. Because of a shortage of secondary schools, the majority of children completing primary school were unable to go on to High School, and they had little to offer in the way of practical help to life in the villages to which they returned. With the pragmatism and wisdom of Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, who educated the poor children of 19th Century Ireland in skills that would ensure them a livelihood, Margaret now turned her attention to vocational training for the village children of the Chimbu. With the help of Frank Yur, an indigenous man trained in agriculture, Sinasinar Vocational Centre was initiated. The Catholic Mission had land – an existing farm and a disused air strip, and the boys and girls, assisted by their clans, began with much good will to put up the bush buildings necessary for farm projects, trade store operations and classrooms.

Within six months the Centre was opened as a registered vocational Training Centre. The Centre aimed not only to teach skills, but to encourage enterprise. And so a percentage of the sale of all produce was paid to the students. As Manager of the Centre in 1972 and 1973, as well as Area Advisor for the region, Margaret received high praise from the PNG Department of Education for her excellence as a teacher, her unassuming but professional

relationship with the trainees, her artfully designed training programs and her sensitivity in playing down her own leadership role in order to effect a sense of ownership and responsibility in staff and students alike. Margaret always felt she was being called to break new ground. She was continuously setting up new programs according to need and the Vocational Centre answered a need in a densely populated area of the Chimbu for several years.

In 1974, Margaret returned to Australia, and after gaining a Diploma in Religious Education at the National Pastoral Institute in Melbourne, she was appointed to Dubbo to work in Religious Education in the Catholic Schools. This was the time when administration and teaching in Catholic Schools was passing from Religious Orders to the laity. Margaret's role was again, an enabling one, assisting lay teachers become effective and committed in their new roles. She was also convinced of the need for parents to appreciate their role as educators in the faith of their children. Adult Faith Education was a natural outcome from this insight.

When Margaret was called back to the Goroka Diocese in PNG in 1979, she had this new set of skills and experience to take with her. She became the Coordinator of Religious Education in the Goroka Diocese. Once again, the emphasis was on being there as a catalyst to encourage responsibility and growth in autonomy. This time, Margaret's work was not only with teachers, but also with catechists, Parish leaders and women Religious. In 1984 she conducted a twelve month renewal program for the Sisters of St Therese, an indigenous PNG Congregation. Adult education came to mean more than passing on skills and information, but rather offering strategies and processes to bring about change and consolidation. Margaret earned the trust and respect of the people of PNG, ex-patriot colleagues and Church personnel. Her whole PNG experience challenged her strength and competency, as well as her attitudes, values and beliefs. But this contact with another culture was also greatly enriching. During this time Margaret became Regional Superior of Goroka Province of the Sisters of Mercy and a member of the first Council of the United PNG Mercies. . It was her great joy to return to PNG in 2006 to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Sisters of Mercy there.

Margaret gained some notoriety as a ham radio operator when she inherited radio equipment from her brother, John. Beginning from little knowledge of radio and electricity, she progressed to passing the requirements for receiving an amateur operator's licence in PNG in 1981. Her own station P29NUN was set up with the help of ex-patriot friends. Operating originally from an antenna made up of two pieces of wire attached to a broom handle, her call card, designed by a Goroka friend was unique: "Nun on a Broomstick". She made contact with people in over fifty countries, demonstrating that new technologies could be adopted to improve communication. She received a special Award for her ham radio communication in 1982.

We Bathurst Mercies probably remember Margaret most of all for the ministry of the last third of her life – her enthusiastic embrace of PRH – Personality and Human Relations – a process for human growth and development emanating from the genius of the late Andre Rochais in France. She recognised in PRH a potential for all people – with or without belief in God – to access and awaken the spiritual dimension of their being. She became a licensed PRH educator in 1986 and brought the gift of PRH to Central Western NSW. Not only did she become proficient as an animator of PRH sessions herself, but with typical thoroughness, she became a qualified trainer of other PRH animators, travelling to Canada and Thailand on numerous occasions to participate in the leadership of workshops and conferences. There are many people who acknowledge their debt of gratitude to her for her gentle, professional accompaniment of them on their journey towards integration and maturity.

Margaret took advantage of several opportunities for travel and spiritual renewal, which recharged her energies for ministry. But the trip of a lifetime was the trip to Canada in 2008, which the three Sisters undertook together, courtesy of Tricia's generosity. Tricia has been outstanding in her support for Margaret and Jeanette in their life and ministry as Sisters of Mercy. Margaret retired from formal ministry in 2000, but she continued her involvement with the Mercy Associates here in Dubbo, encouraging their leadership and growth in potential. She became a pastoral presence, engaging in Parish and civic community pursuits (including membership of the Bridge Club)..

Margaret's story tells us something of what she accomplished in her lifetime. But it also gives us a privileged perspective into who she was: a woman of integrity and determination (even to the point of stubbornness!) – reliable, resilient, efficient, resourceful, industrious; innovative, dedicated, with a deep concern for people and a desire to make the face of Christ visible in her ordinary actions, performed extraordinarily well. She had a capacity to ask a question that opened up the new, and was quite fearless in her search for the truth.

The loving sympathy and prayers of the Sisters of Mercy reach out to Margaret's family, her sisters Jeanette and Tricia, her nieces Robyn and Kath and her nephew Tony and his wife Julie, her cousins Annette, Laurelle and Reg who are here today and her many friends. Our grateful thanks to Jeanette and Tricia and Sisters Carmel Muir and Margaret Hart, the doctors and nurses in Dubbo, Sydney, Wyong and Gosford, Sister Shirley Garland our Community Leader and the Sisters of Mercy in the Dubbo Community for their care of Margaret during her last illness.

In the Book of Daniel we read that "Those who instruct others unto justice will shine like stars for all eternity". You have surely earned your place in the firmament of heaven Margaret. Shine brightly!

Patricia E Powell rsm