

THE COMMUNITY OF THE SISTERS OF THE CHURCH: TOWARD AN APPRECIATION  
OF THIS ANGLICAN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA.

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This year is the one hundred and twenty fifth anniversary of the

founding of the Community of the Sisters of the Church (CSC) at Kilburn in London. This Sisterhood became one of the most successful of Anglican Communities and in just thirty years had spread to many parts of the world including Australia, where it became the first of its kind to be established. The success of the Community was due to the dynamic founder, Emily Ayckbowm, and to the dedicated women who continued the work which she had begun.

Twenty five years before Emily began the CSC, the first Sisterhood to emerge in the Church of England since the Reformation had been begun by Dr. Edward Pusey, leader of the Tractarian Movement. This Community at Park Village West, was the beginning of a series of experiments in religious communal life which resulted in the formation of many communities in the following years<sup>i</sup>.

The emergence of Sisterhoods was seen at the time to be as a direct result of the Oxford Movement. While the primary part played by the Movement has to be acknowledged, modern scholastic opinion also proposes other major factors in the revival of Religious Orders in the Church of England. These are namely, the pressing social needs of the time and the beginning of a desire for female emancipation<sup>ii</sup>.

In the Rules of life which the English Communities adopted, the overriding aim was for personal holiness. The primary obligation in all these Sisterhoods was the Divine Office in various forms, to which diverse Active works were added. As a result there was no rigid separation between the Contemplative and Active life of the Anglican religious communities formed in the nineteenth century<sup>iii</sup>.

The training for the Sisterhoods was similar in all groups and consisted of a term as a postulant, then a Novice before full

membership and the taking of vows of poverty, chastity and obedience which were intended to be for life<sup>iv</sup>.

Initially great opposition was experienced to Sisterhoods who engendered dislike and a fear of Rome in many people. Eventually the selfless nursing and social work which the Sisters performed overcame these reservations to an extent. However the earlier suspicion was later reinforced by their association with the long-lived Ritualist controversy.

The attitude of the Church hierarchy also hindered a general acceptance of Religious Communities. For many years there was little episcopal support for Sisterhoods. Even Tractarian Bishops were concerned for many years about the question of perpetual vows<sup>v</sup>. In fact the Bishops always had ambiguous feelings towards Sisterhoods, they liked the social work which they performed, but would not protect them against extreme Protestant attack in the early days.

Over the years the clergy in general have given little thought and less publicity to the significance of vocation in the Sisters' work. As a result of this neglect there has been little knowledge of the Religious Life among the laity. It has also helped retain a feeling that somehow this life is alien to the Anglican Church<sup>vi</sup>.

The lack of support for Sisterhoods has also been reinforced by the fact that even though most Communities had been formed to perform parochial work, they were really independent of clerical control. However while the autonomy of Sisterhoods is emphasised it has to be remembered that most Sisterhoods, particularly the early ones, would never have survived without the backing of powerful male friends in the Church<sup>vii</sup>.

When Emily Ayckbowm became the first Novice of the CSC in April 1870 she had the help and cooperation of a priest, the Rev. R. Kilpatrick of St. Augustine's Kilburn. However no male friend or priest took a real part in the foundation of the Community. Emily had prepared for the foundation of her Sisterhood during earlier visits to several Roman Catholic Orders, as well as studying those founded in English Church in the preceding twenty five years<sup>viii</sup>. By the time of her profession in 1872, she had begun work on the Rule of the Community which took sixteen years to complete and grew out of the practical experience of the Community.

From the Rule it can be seen that apart from a growth in personal holiness, the basic aims of the CSC were "the promotion of the honour and glory of God", the alleviation of human suffering and the advancement of the Church<sup>ix</sup>.

To fulfil these aims the Sisterhood, following its foundation became immersed in a wide range of social work, and large institutions were started for destitute children.

The promotion of secular education which resulted from the Compulsory Education Act of 1875 became for Mother Emily, "the burning issue of the day"<sup>x</sup>. It was the impetus which prompted her to concentrate on education, and even to start schools later in the century for the middle classes. Between 1870 and 1893 eight large schools were built in London which catered for six thousand children. While others began in Liverpool, York, Croydon, Canada and Australia.

Emily's interest in Colonial education grew from her belief, which she shared with many other Victorians, that God had given England her Empire to further the teachings of the English Church. Consequently the CEA gave much financial assistance to

overseas mission work and by 1903 the work had expanded to New York, India, Burma, South Africa and New Zealand<sup>xi</sup>.

Concurrently with the educational work, the Sisterhood was involved with the care of orphans, particularly destitute girls. In 1875 this work began with female orphans and foundlings at Kilburn, where the first orphanage was constructed. Further orphanages and children's convalescent homes followed for boys as well as girls. When "Broadstairs" a convalescent home closed in 1957, it had received over 70,000 children<sup>xii</sup>.

The ability of the CSC to set up so many large and varied Institutions and to be involved in a wide range of social work was due to the fact that it was financially based on a charitable organisation, the Church Extension Association (CEA), which had been started by Emily in 1864<sup>xiii</sup>. The original aim of the Association was to build free and open churches and to assist church beautification in England and the Colonies. The latter was a trend which was due to the Gothic revival in architecture, which complemented the increased spirituality and sacramentalism which Tractarianism had engendered<sup>xiv</sup>.

By 1867 the CEA had two hundred members who subscribed and worked for the Association and for whom Emily wrote a quarterly newsletter. The newsletter appealed for the donation of all kinds of second hand goods. These were then sold in depots with handicrafts made by the members. The first depot was set up in London in 1867 and one of the last to close was in Adelaide in 1954<sup>xv</sup>. By the eighties the Sisterhood and the CEA had become officially amalgamated, with the Mother Superior as the Chief Executive officer of the CEA. The income of the CEA had risen dramatically in twenty years and it had become one of the largest charitable

institutions in England. By 1892 it had members in every continent where local secretaries carried on the work, looked after depots, distributed copies of the Association's magazine, "Our Work", and collected subscriptions. It has been estimated that the magazine at this stage had fifty thousand readers<sup>xvi</sup>.

Paralleling the growth of the CEA was the number of recruits for the Sisterhood. By 1893 there were over 100 fully professed Sisters with forty Novices and Postulants<sup>xvii</sup>. The overall growth was more rapid than any other Sisterhood, but when the volume of the Sisters' work is considered worldwide, the achievements of so few women are extraordinary.

Twenty years after the formation of Sisterhoods, clergy from the Low and Broad Church having observed the revival of such Institutions in Europe, established the first Deaconess Order in 1860<sup>xviii</sup>. This was to be a service, by women for women, under the control of the clergy, which these men hoped would become the principal group of women workers in the Church.

Subsequently arguments arose between the champions of Sisterhoods and Deaconesses and after much controversy a committee was appointed to look into the relationship of both organisations to the Church. As a result the spiritual side of Sisterhood life and perpetual vows were recognised in 1885 by the Convocations of Canterbury and York. However it was not until the Lambeth Conference of 1897 that the revival of Sisterhoods, Brotherhoods and Deaconesses was officially acknowledged. By this time there were between two and three thousand members of women's Religious Orders, more than at the time of the Reformation<sup>xix</sup>.

In Australia the general recognition of Deaconess Institutions and Sisterhoods took place at the General Synod of the Australian

Colonies in 1891<sup>xx</sup>. Invitations came to the CSC from the Diocese of Brisbane, the Tractarian Bishop of Hobart, H.H. Montgomery and the High Churchman, Bishop G.W. Kennion of Adelaide. Tentative steps had been taken earlier by the Adelaide and Tasmanian Dioceses towards the institution of Sisterhoods but these had not been successful<sup>xxi</sup>.

While these invitations to the CSC can be seen as a natural consequence of a High Church or Tractarian outlook, they were also due to social factors and, particularly, a concern with education. This is illustrated by the fact that during the next ten years, the Low Churchmen, Bishop C.O.L. Riley and his predecessor, Bishop H. Parry of Perth, issued similar invitations because they were extremely keen to begin Church schools in the West<sup>xxii</sup>.

The concentration of the clergy's concern on education had come about because of the various Compulsory Education Acts which had been introduced in the Australian Colonies. A lengthy and frequently intense battle between the Churches and secular forces had ensued, which had resulted in the end of State Aid to Church schools and the decline of the Church of England parochial school system. The Roman Catholic Church managed to retain its parochial system by the increased introduction of Religious teaching Orders from overseas. This eventuated in the establishment of the unique educational system whereby all Roman Catholic schools were staffed entirely by Religious<sup>xxiii</sup>.

After Mother Emily accepted the Australian invitation, a small group of seven Sisters, five orphans and three women assistants sailed in the S.S. Coptic and arrived in Hobart in September 1892<sup>xxiv</sup>. The little group was under the direction of Sister May, later the

second Mother Superior. She was to stay temporarily to organise the work while the other Sisters started the new centres.

The Sisters quickly spread themselves from Hobart to work in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. They had arrived in Australia at a time of great change in line with the movement towards Federation. The Colonies were also entering a period of severe depression and extended drought which did not foreshadow an auspicious start to the Community's venture.

As the CSC was an independent organisation, the Sisters had to find funds to start their work and support themselves. While they were financially backed by the CEA, funding had been stretched to the limit by the rapid world wide expansion of the Sisterhood. So in each area where they settled, income was found initially by setting up the Depots for second hand goods which had been so successful in England.

The educational work usually began in each centre by taking over or beginning primary schools, either in rented premises or parish halls. At the same time religious instruction was given in Sunday schools and to State school children. In each State one of the primary schools usually expanded into a girl's boarding school and became a major High school. This happened in all the centres as well as in Canberra. With the exception of the latter these schools were run by the CSC for the best part of eighty years. The Community also became involved in the types of social work which were obviously needed. Missions to the poor were launched as well as activities like prison and hospital visiting. After twelve months in the country they had made such an impression that further invitations were received from the Bishops of North Queensland, Rockhampton, Riverina and Dunedin in New Zealand<sup>xxv</sup>.



While the social work undertaken tended to parallel the work in England, an exception to this was a Dog shelter in which they inadvertently became involved in Melbourne. In Sydney and Perth orphanages were established, while in Adelaide they began a Children's Convalescent Hospital.

The volume and the variety of the Sister's work had to create difficulties, not least with the strain it placed on the time available for the Prayer life, which was the main function of the Community. Over the years there were often only two or three Sisters in isolated areas, sometimes only one, for weeks or months at a time. Consequently loneliness and overwork caused quite a few Sisters to leave the Order which exacerbated the problem for those left. This situation came about because Mother Emily's enthusiasm finally outpaced the capabilities of the Community's numbers. As well she lacked personal experience of the difficulty of pioneering work.

The pioneering Sisters found Australia very different to England. Apart from the heat, the terrors of wild animals like Tasmanian Tigers and poisonous snakes, there were the badly disciplined children, who often only came to school if the weather was not too hot. As one Sister wrote, "Australia is full of horrors in many ways, which there can be no doubt are due to irreligion and secular schools, yet the people seem so nice"<sup>xxvi</sup>.

Mother May, realised through personal experience the difficulties of pioneering work. Apart from Australia, she had been responsible for trail-blazing the way in Canada, Burma and New Zealand as well as nursing in South Africa during the Boer War<sup>xxvii</sup>. She perceived the difficult situation which had arisen by the Community overextending itself and spent most of her term in office trying

to rectify and consolidate the situation.

In the 1920's and 30's the Community started experiencing shortages due to the deaths of many of the original Sisters who had not been replaced by new vocations. This resulted in the handing over to the dioceses of the New Zealand schools, as well as the schools in Ottawa and Madras, while in Australia the Community became virtually a teaching Order.

When the pioneer Sisters had arrived in Hobart they received a very warm welcome from the clergy, government officials and many lay people. They began almost immediately teaching boys and girls in St. David's Old Synod Hall, as education was seen by Bishop Montgomery as the prime need<sup>xxviii</sup> .

Inspired by the Bishop, the Sisters at this stage believed they were going to take over education in Hobart and from the beginning they aimed to prepare girls for University and professional careers<sup>xxix</sup>.

While the CSC did not quite take over education in Hobart, by 1910 the School at St. David's, now known as the Collegiate school, was the largest girl's school in Tasmania<sup>xxx</sup> . The Collegiate school continued to grow and flourish over the years and today as St. Michael's Collegiate is one of the most respected schools in the State.

As well as running this school the Sisters also controlled a school in Holy Trinity Parish. Here the numbers varied, according to the weather, between one hundred and thirty and one hundred and fifty boys and girls. When this school closed in 1910 a similar school, known as Synod Hall or St. David's, was opened and run until 1937.

While the Sisters concentrated their effort on full time

educational work, Sunday schools were also run and a Mission was conducted in Campbell Street for many years<sup>xxxix</sup> .

The CSC always had a very close relationship with the clergy in Tasmania. The Bishop of Hobart and the Dean were always Visitor and Chaplain to the Community and defended the Sisters in the early days against attack<sup>xxxix</sup> . This relationship helps explain the fact that Hobart, one of the least accessible centres in the country, was chosen as the site of the first Novitiate in 1920. This was under the pioneer Sister Phyllis and novices spent three years in training before going to England for profession. The Novitiate was later moved to the more central location of Melbourne in 1928. In 1949 a second Novitiate was opened in Perth where, after the Melbourne Novitiate closed down due to a dearth of postulants, it remained until the Sisters left Perth in 1968<sup>xxxix</sup> .

Like their counterparts in Hobart, the two pioneer Sisters who arrived in Adelaide to begin the work of the Community received a most enthusiastic welcome. Bishop Kennion was an innovative man who had earlier organised a group of women to perform social work which he hoped would lead to the formation of a properly constituted Sisterhood<sup>xxxix</sup> . However the venture failed and Miss Lang, who had financed this group, helped Bishop Kennion to persuade the CSC to come to Australia. She also helped finance the Sisters' voyage, travelled to England to accompany them on the trip and gave them a house for their use in Adelaide<sup>xxxix</sup> .

Initially the Sisters travelled widely throughout South Australia and opened new branches of the CEA. This helped them to become known and aided their meagre finances. They also started teaching and parish work, opened a Collegiate school, later St. Peter's, as well as beginning a children's convalescent hospital at Glenelg<sup>xxxix</sup> .

The Community also began Mission schools at Gawler in 1902 and over the next few years more Diocesan schools were started. By 1911 the Community ran four of the twenty five Diocesan schools in Adelaide and were educating one quarter of the children in the Diocesan system. Several more schools were opened in the next few years, but after WW1 these schools were slowly given up. The Community concentrated its efforts on St. Peter's Boarding school until it was handed over to a lay principal in 1969<sup>xxxvii</sup>. Today the school is run by the Diocese of Adelaide.

Considering the long involvement of the CSC in education in South Australia it is not surprising that on the fiftieth anniversary of the CSC in South Australia, Bishop Robin said that it was impossible to measure the contribution which the Sisters had made to the life of the Church and the whole community of South Australia<sup>xxxviii</sup>.

A similar sentiment from the government of West Australia was expressed several years later when Sister Rosalie, one of the pioneer Sisters in Perth, was awarded the OBE for services to education in that state<sup>xxxix</sup>.

The second wave of pioneering Sisters, led by Sister Vera, had arrived in Perth in November 1901. Mother Emily had taken the decision to establish a centre in WA before her death. This had been in response to repeated requests from the Diocese of Perth<sup>xl</sup>. Once again the financial prospects for the Community were poor, as a second group of Sisters arrived a few weeks later with thirty orphans to be cared for. The Sisters had limited money and there was no suggestion of any financial help from the Diocese. So as in all the other centres the Sisters opened a Clothing Depot to help support themselves and their charges.

Despite the initial financial strain, the great heat, lack of personnel and the illness of the Sisters, the Community also started parish work and a school in Perth, later Perth College. Education was also undertaken in Kalgoorlie and by 1911 the Community was running four schools altogether.

The major undertaking in Perth apart from the schools was the establishment of an orphanage at Parkerville, about twenty miles from Perth. Sisters Kate and Sarah had come from England specifically to run an orphanage for infants and older children. The first building on the block of land which the Community bought at Parkerville was a house of waste timber, built free of charge by two local men<sup>xli</sup>.

For many years the Home was supported by Perth College. However even after recognition and support came from the public, and a government subsidy was obtained, the Community always struggled to make ends meet. This was because of the continual increase in the number of babies and children in their care<sup>xlii</sup>.

By 1930 the Community desperately needed help in staffing Parkerville and appealed to their friend Archbishop Le Fanu of Perth. He had spent a long time in Queensland where he had established a very close relationship with the Sisters of the Society of the Sacred Advent (SSA). One of that Community's many ventures was a similar orphanage to Parkerville, the Tufnell Home in Brisbane. Le Fanu appealed to them for help and for the first and only time in the Society's history, the Sisters agreed to work outside Queensland. In 1933 the SSA took charge of Parkerville until the end of 1941 when the CSC was again able to take up the work<sup>xliii</sup>.

During the time of the absence of the CSC from Parkerville, Sister

Kate had established another home for half caste children which she conducted for twelve years until the return to the Orphanage<sup>xliiv</sup>. The Community continued to run Parkerville for a few more years, but due to recurring staffing difficulties after WW11, the Home was reluctantly handed over to the Diocese in 1947. In the familiar pattern of the schools run elsewhere by the CSC, Perth College continued to expand. It had always been a most academically successful institution. It is of note that among the first graduates of the University of Perth there were five women, two of whom were from Perth College<sup>xlv</sup>.

In 1968 the decision to leave Perth had been taken by the CSC and the Sisters decided to hand over the school to the Province of Western Australia. This was because the Community felt that each of the Bishops in the four Dioceses of West Australia was a friend of the school. This gift made Perth College unique in that it is the only piece of Provincial real estate in existence<sup>xlvi</sup>.

Today a Council runs the school and is responsible to the Provincial Trustees of the Anglican Church of Western Australia. It has been seen that in Hobart, Adelaide and Perth where the CSC was invited by Bishops, the Sisters were warmly greeted and experienced little lay or clerical censure. Much of this was of course due to the dominant churchmanship which prevailed in those dioceses. The suspicion and dislike which the Sisters experienced in Sydney and Melbourne, where they arrived without episcopal sanction, may have been foreseen if they had appreciated the antipathy which existed between the poles of churchmanship in those cities.

Initially things got off to a very bad start in Melbourne. The city was more badly affected by the Depression than elsewhere, and when

the banking system collapsed in 1893, unemployment reached thirty percent<sup>xlvi</sup>. The Sisters were often down to their last penny, and so were very glad for donations of food and money. Added to their dismal financial state they found few friends among the clergy, and they were subjected to violent attacks in the Victorian Churchman Newspaper<sup>xlvi</sup>.

To add to this bad state of affairs the Sisters believed the Church in Melbourne was in a state of stagnation, "so different to Adelaide and the enthusiasm of Sydney"<sup>xl</sup>.

Despite the general hostility of the clergy there were a few who were keen for the Sisters to start a Church school, as there were only two such schools in Melbourne. An added incentive for the Sisters to press ahead with this project was their opinion that the children educated in the State schools were terribly ignorant both generally and religiously<sup>1</sup> - a point of view which had been picked up during the religious education classes which they had been giving.

In 1895 they began a school which was named St. Michael's Collegiate. The original concept of the school was for it to be in competition with the State schools. This was despite the fact that the Sisters could see there was definitely an opening for another expensive private school<sup>li</sup>. It was quite a few years before the school was on a viable financial footing, but it began to expand rapidly in the twentieth century and developed into St. Michael's Grammar School. The management of the School was transferred to a council under the Archbishop of Melbourne in 1972, and by 1979 it had become the first Anglican coeducational school in Melbourne<sup>lii</sup>.

On the Sisters arrival in Melbourne they also had began a Depot

for second hand goods and soon afterwards a young worker's club<sup>liii</sup>. Another venture which began accidentally, expanded rapidly and continued for over ten years was the running of a Dog Shelter. Over the years many donations for the Sisters' work were given by satisfied customers of the Shelter. The Community felt it was a very good way to become known, as well as an alternative focal point to the orphanage in Sydney and the Children's Hospital in Adelaide<sup>liv</sup>.

The great feeling of clerical distrust which the Community experienced in the early days in Melbourne was alleviated when Archbishop H. Lowther Clark gave the Sisters his support and volunteered to be their Visitor in 1905. While expressing his pleasure in their work he insisted they attend the Diocesan Assembly as did the Community of the Holy Name (CHN). The Sisters were not terribly enthusiastic and one wrote to England that "I suppose we will have to go and sit humbly in a corner"<sup>lv</sup>.

By 1937 Melbourne had become the headquarters of the CSC in Australia but despite the change in attitude which had occurred with the Archbishop early in the century, it was not until the sixties that the Community felt that it had finally been accepted as an integral part of the Melbourne Diocese. While the Sisters always expressed the view that they found it much harder to become established in Melbourne than elsewhere, in the conservative Evangelical centre of Sydney, outright hostility to the Community lasted much longer.

The backdrop to this animosity in Sydney began in 1884 when the liberal Churchman, Bishop A. Barry, brought a motion before the Sydney Synod proposing the approval of Deaconesses and Sisterhoods. While approval was given for the Deaconesses it was



rejected for Sisterhoods. The reasons given for the rebuff of Sisterhoods were life long vows and their independence from Diocesan authority<sup>lvi</sup>.

In 1891 a motion approving of both Sisterhoods and Deaconess Institutions was passed at the Australian Synod, although the former were opposed by the Sydney representatives<sup>lvii</sup>. The passing of this resolution brought about the immediate introduction of the "Bethany Deaconesses" by the Rev M. Archdall and other Evangelicals. It also gave a mandate for the establishment of Sisterhoods and the invitations to the CSC.

Sydney had not originally been on the Community's agenda in Australia. However Sister May was persuaded by the rhetoric of Dean Dundas of Hobart and some supportive clergy in NSW to personally examine the situation<sup>lviii</sup>. On her arrival in Sydney she was feted by an enthusiastic group of clergy and well wishers. May later described the welcome in Hobart and Adelaide as "most earnest" but that in Sydney as "wonderful". Consequently the decision was made that circumstances were right to begin work in NSW<sup>lix</sup>.

A short while later the Community arrived in Sydney, without episcopal invitation or sanction, as Bishop Barry had been replaced by the Evangelical Saumarez-Smith. The enthusiastic welcome which Sister May had earlier received quickly deteriorated into a wildly heated debate over the legitimacy of the Community. The polemic which ensued, raged in church and secular newspapers for several years, and was fuelled by the problems the Community was having in England at the time.

An example of how heated the debate became can be seen in one letter to a newspaper in which the introduction of the Kilburn Sisters was seen as "an organised plot to destroy the Protestant character

of the Church of England"<sup>lx</sup> .

When the Sisters named a school they had started "The Chatswood Church of England School", the Diocesan Synod questioned the validity of the Community's membership of the Church of England. In a letter to Mother Emily , Sister Hilda who ran the school, felt it unnecessary to defend the Community against this accusation and wrote, "there are a good many Popes in the Church of England, certainly in the Sydney Diocese"<sup>lxi</sup> .

Mother Emily who at the time was besieged from many sides in England may have agreed with this generalisation. The Community in England had found itself under attack from rival charitable groups and the Protestant alliance. Added to this was the defection of twenty Sisters who were dissatisfied with aspects of the Community's life, and who helped fuel accusations of cruelty in the orphanages. Allchin believes that the extraordinarily rapid development of the CEA and the CSC led to the attacks upon them which helped to revive the earlier fears of Sisterhoods and their popish tendencies<sup>lxii</sup>.

The Archbishop of Canterbury became involved in the controversy, probably from the best of motives. However he ran up against Mother Emily, a personality who was as strong and unbending as he.

Archbishop Benson supported Sisterhoods and was the Visitor to at least one. However he was concerned like other clergy with the question of vows. The canonical obedience of Sisterhoods also worried him as he believed, correctly, that many saw themselves as Church wide rather than under the jurisdiction of the Diocesan bishop. This he felt left them vulnerable to outside attack.

So not surprisingly the Archbishop wrote to Emily suggesting that

her Order should have a fixed Constitution as well as a Visitor. Further he was happy to volunteer for the position as long as certain conditions of submission were met. He was supported in these criticisms by Lord Nelson who was chairman of the Patrons of the CEA. Mother Emily responded by dropping all male Patrons from the Association. Benson was appalled at such unbelievable effrontery and called her "the most comical Mother in the Universe"<sup>lxiii</sup>.

Archbishop Benson also criticised the CSC policy of looking after illegitimate babies as encouraging vice. Emily ignored the criticism and as there was no resolution of the conflict between the pair the debate was taken up by the press, where the controversy raged for all of 1895. While the Community was exonerated on the charges of cruelty and mishandling funds, the dispute was not resolved until after the death of both the Archbishop and Emily. While the arguments over the CSC in England and Sydney continued, the Sisters followed their supporters' advice and got on with establishing themselves. They started schools and ran Sunday schools as well as caring for orphans and foundlings. They also became very involved in Mission work, feeding the unemployed and visiting gaols and hospitals.

The first school which the Sisters started in 1893 began initially at Edgecliff, then moved to Bondi. The orphans were originally housed in the same premises as the school. It was known as the National High School and was run on the same principle as the Melbourne school, that is, in competition with the State schools. It grew fairly rapidly and was to become a boarding school in later years, and eventually was named St. Gabriel's, soon after a final move to Waverley<sup>lxiv</sup>.

As the numbers of orphans in the care of the CSC continued to grow, several orphanages were established and were eventually amalgamated into one location at Burwood. In 1907 the orphanage was relinquished, renamed the Bishop Stone-Wigg and survives today as the Church of England Children's Home<sup>lxv</sup>

From 1912 the CSC became involved in the Diocese of Bathurst. The Sisters worked there until 1929 in close collaboration with the Brotherhood of the Good Shepherd. A Hostel was run in Dubbo to enable children from the Far West to attend the local high school. In Gilgandra a Day and boarding school was run as well as a smaller school in Deniliquin<sup>lxvi</sup>.

In 1926 at the urgent request of the Bishop of Canberra-Goulburn the Sisters began a school in Canberra. This establishment, which initially grew very rapidly, was also named St. Gabriel's and was supported by the Sydney school. However during the Depression of the thirties the situation became non viable for the Community and the Diocese took over responsibility for the school. Today it is the Canberra Church of England Girl's Grammar School<sup>lxvii</sup>.

Debate concerning the CSC finally settled down in Sydney. The Synod ignored the Sisters as far as possible and visits from the Sydney hierarchy were few and far between. Archbishop Mowll came to Speech Night in 1935 and surprised the Sisters by speaking warmly of his connection to the Community through the Superior, Mother Adele who was his second cousin. While he only made one other visit, he was very kind to the Sisters when the School had to be evacuated during WW11<sup>lxviii</sup>.

At the present time the relationship between the Diocese and the Community is described as cordial and in 1992 the Sisters received a message of congratulations, from the Diocese of Sydney on their

centenary in Australia.

In the sixties the radical changes which were occurring in society and the Church resulted in a thorough revue of the Community, its role and relevance. A searching examination was made by the Sisters of the way in which to approach their active vocation - the alleviation of human suffering and the spread of Christianity - in a drastically altered world. This presented a dilemma.

Initially the work of the CSC had been Mission work among the poor. In fact the basic motivation for founding the Sisterhood had been Emily's desire to work for the poor. The move away from this primary object had been initiated by her desire to supply a Christian education to all. The Sisters came to the conclusion that their future lay in reverting to the original aim of caring for those who live on the fringe of society - the poor in body or spirit<sup>lxix</sup>. The realisation that there was no longer the capability, or in some cases, the desire to retain the large highly visible institutions which had become the focus of the work eased the difficulty of the Community's decision to withdraw from this work.

The retirement from the Australian schools began with St. Gabriel's in 1965 and finished with St. Michael's Collegiate, Hobart in 1973. The Sydney school was the only one to close down while the others were handed over to committees to run. Today they continue to flourish.

In 1966 after the Sydney school had closed, a new experiment in Community life was begun at a small house in Glebe. This was as a result of the influence on some of the Community of Charles de Foucauld and to the Orders founded in his name, particularly the "Little Sisters of Jesus"<sup>lxx</sup>. These Orders try to emulate Foucauld's way of life by living in a hidden, simple way as he

believed Jesus did at Nazareth.

Therefore among the Little Brothers and Sisters there is no distinctive habit worn and no large properties or expenditure. The work they perform to support themselves is manual unskilled labour like the work of the people they have chosen to live and work amongst, either in rural or urban areas.

The prime mover in Foucauld's influence on the CSC was Sister Helen, an Australian, who felt his approach was a proper exposition of what the Religious Life should be and often was not. The Mother Superior, Dorothea was also very interested in Foucauld and so after spending time in France with the Little Sisters, Helen was involved in the first experiment at Glebe. The aim in this venture was for the Sisters to share as far as possible the lives of the residents of the area and just to offer friendship by their presence. The hope was that just by being approachable barriers could be broken down, and the vocation of spreading their faith be accomplished through friendship and the way they lived<sup>lxxi</sup>.

Therefore the Sisters lived in the same sort of house and worked at the same sort of jobs as their neighbours. One Sister worked as a cleaner at an animal house at Sydney University. Another was employed in a Christmas Tree factory, while others worked in laundries and hospitals. One even worked as a cook at Deaconess House<sup>lxxii</sup>.

Although the venture has not been publicly presented as such, a continuing aspect of Foucauld's thought is seen in an endeavour which Sister Helen began in the early seventies and still runs today on forty acres of land at Dondingalong in Northern NSW. Here the Community shares with its neighbours the common problem of running a small farm. The agricultural methods used are at the

forefront of innovative ecological and environmental practises necessary in the climate. Apart from its function as the Australian Novitiate, the aim for the property, which is known as "The House of Prayer", is to be a spiritual centre. The location on the North Coast of NSW was chosen because of its geographical accessibility to Sydney, Melbourne and the Solomons, where the CSC began work in the seventies. Spiritual and emotional guidance is given to those in need, as in the other centres in Sydney and Melbourne, through teaching and visiting in the parish, running retreats and spiritual workshops. Accommodation is also available for visitors who can stay in the main complex or in one of the three hermitages which have been built on the property. The Sisters have also reached some of the people who live a "hippy-type" alternative life style in the area and have become a middle ground between them and those who live more conventionally<sup>lxxiii</sup> .

In the centenary year of the founding of the CSC the Sisterhood began two new ventures. The first was the building of a new Provincial centre at East Burwood in Melbourne. Here accommodation is available and there are also facilities for Conferences and retreats, while a wide range of spiritual programs and workshops are offered.

The second venture which was undertaken followed a request for help from the Bishop of Melanesia. Three Sisters, one each from Australia, England and Canada, went to the Solomon Islands in a joint mission with the Brothers of the Society of St. Francis from Brisbane. Initially the work began in Honiara where the Sisters and Brothers provided pastoral care. They were involved in visiting in hospitals and homes as well as giving religious instruction in schools. The unexpected outcome of this endeavour was the laying

of the foundations for a flourishing branch of the CSC which exists today<sup>lxxiv</sup>.

By 1977 a complete revision of the Rule and Constitutions had been written, which was again updated in 1984. After this it was realised that the Rule and Constitution has to be seen as fluid and transitional.

The revisions were an attempt to redefine what the religious life was all about. The result has been that overall the Community has become much simpler and more informal, with as few regulations as possible. The concept of unquestioning obedience has given way to one of personal responsibility. In line with this outlook is the greatly modified nature of the hierarchical structure of the Sisterhood with much less power centred in the Mother Superior. It has not been easy for the Community to find a new direction in the last twenty five years. In Glebe, for example, the ethos of the Community has changed and moved on from Foucauld because the needs of the area have developed. There is now a new emphasis on working within the local parish<sup>lxxv</sup>. At the present time the Sisters perform spiritual and social work in several parishes in the area around Glebe. They are also available for spiritual counselling and as well conduct retreats and non-religious workshops on meditation.

Today living in a much more hidden way than in the past, the first priority in the Community's life remains as always, prayer, followed by Christian service and community support, just as Mother Emily envisaged. However there are now no specific areas of Active work in which all are involved.

Change is the order of the day and there is great uncertainty regarding the future of the Sisterhood. This is intensified by the



continuing problem of the lack of new recruits.

At present three of the Sisters of the Community are ordained priests. The first of these was ordained in Canada ten years ago and for a while ran a parish. There has been little opposition to ordination from within the Community. This is seen to be because the Community was allowed to come to terms with the situation without the hysteria which has surrounded the controversial move in Australia and England<sup>lxxvi</sup>.

While Women's ordination to the priesthood may possibly be seen as a barrier to the future attraction of aspirants to the Religious life for women, the Community does not agree with this view. The Sisters believe that the two vocations are quite separate. Anglican Sisterhoods have now worked in Australia for over one hundred years, but sadly it is often the case that members of the Church are ignorant of the Sisters' contribution or even their existence. Little publicity has been given to the work of these women, which may be commensurate with their numbers but hardly with their achievements.

While it is difficult to adequately assess the many accomplishments of the Community of the Sisters of the Church in Australia, it is amazing that so few women have done so much. With never many more than thirty Sisters in the country, these women have made a remarkable contribution, particularly in the care and education of thousands of children and the promotion of Christian citizenship.

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- iv. Vicinus M., Independent Women, London, 1985, P.57
- v. Chadwick O., The Victorian Church, Part 1, London, 1966, P.510
- vi. See The Advent, Christmas, 1928, P.18-19 (The Newsletter of the SSA)
- vii. Vicinus, Op.cit., P.50
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- xi. Valiant Victorian, Op.cit., P.72-4

- xii.Ibid., P.102
- xiii.Allchin,Op.cit., P.206
- xiv.Chadwick,Op.cit.,P.213
- xv.A Valiant Victorian,Op.cit.,Ps.9-10;63.
- xvi.Ibid., P.55
- xvii.Ibid., P.147
- xviii.Vicinus,Op.cit., P.57-8
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- xxiv .CSC,The Beginning,PP,ND,P.1 The pioneer Sisters were Lucy,Hannah,Irene,Phyllis,Bridget and Rose.
- xxv.Quarterly Chronicle,April 1894.P.58
- xxvi.Australian Archives,Handwritten letter from Sister Hilda to Sister Caroline,Waverley House,July 16th.ND
- xxvii.Valiant Victorian,Op.cit., P.201
- xxviii.Ibid.,P.129 -the Bishop enrolled his two sons in the school,the younger of whom was later Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery.
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- xxx.Quarterly Chronicle,March 1910,P.14
- xxxi .Sister Elizabeth May,A History of the CSC in Australia,(Australian Archives - A typewritten paper delivered to the Melbourne Historical Society in 1970).
- xxxii.Our Work,Jan 1905,P.70
- xxxiii .Our Work,March 1930,P.58;CSC Newsletter,Vol 25 No 3

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