

FOUNDATIONS IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition



St Joseph's Convent in Fremantle was established in 1855

Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition

The year is 1855, and the P&O ship *Lady Amherst* arrives in Cockburn Sound after a long, tedious and sometimes dangerous voyage of almost four months. Anchored off Fremantle, the passengers disembark. Included in the group are four French Sisters of the Congregation of St Joseph of the Apparition. A few days later the paper of the day carried the following message: "On the 25th instant, the barque *Lady Amherst*, 400 tons, Reid, master, from London. Passengers (cabin) ... Bishop Serra and four Sisters belonging to a French Institute.

Missionaries sought

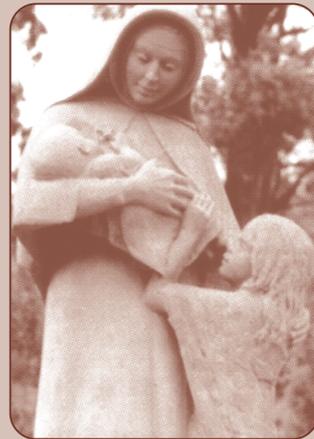
Monsignor Serra, coadjutor of the Perth diocese at the time, had travelled overseas seeking missionaries for the purposes of education and other pioneering missionary work in the new colony and specifically Fremantle. He returned on the *Lady Amherst* with Sister Julie Cabagniol (Superior), Sister Lucy Fieuzet, Sister Zoë de Chamouin and Sister Emilie Petit.

On the day that the *Lady Amherst* arrived within sight of Fremantle, Bishop Salvado was visiting Government House. When he was informed of the ship's arrival he set out for Fremantle in order to welcome the Sisters who were to be initially accommodated in a small dwelling belonging to the mission.

The Sisters' arrival in Western Australia took place a mere 23 years after the foundation of the Congregation by Saint Emilie de Vialar in Gaillac, southern France. The Congregational name was chosen to honour the integral part that Saint Joseph played in the Incarnation.



Eight of the Sisters of St Joseph in Fremantle



Foundress, St Emilie de Vialar



Sr Julie Cabagniol

Residence in Fremantle

It was not long before the Sisters took up permanent residence at Lot 63 Henry Street – almost next door to where the Orient Hotel now stands on the corner of High Street, Fremantle.

The residence comprised a small two-storey wooden house of four rooms. The upper storey served as the convent, with the church and school occupying the ground floor. While the building was most inadequate in size and quite unhealthy, the first convent school was opened onsite on 1 July 1855.

Early expansion

By 1858 the Sisters were renting other similarly cramped quarters on the corner of High and Queen Streets. Another five years on and the growing number of students resulted in the need for bigger premises.

A building initially consisting of four rooms was built on Church property in Adelaide Street and classes were transferred there in 1863. By 1870, the Sisters operated three schools – one for boys and girls under seven, a girls' primary school (free) and a ladies' college for boarders and day pupils. Children of all denominations were educated at these schools.

In 1878, the Sisters obtained a house and land in Parry Street and a school was opened in 1889. This later became St Patrick's Parish School. The reputation for the quality of education offered by the Sisters – the 'French ladies' as they were called – was soon established and children came from all over the colony to benefit.

As the demand for education increased, the Sisters branched out into rural areas. After an eight-day trip by mail coach to Albany in 1878, two Sisters and a young lady commenced classes in what would become St Joseph's, then Ave Maria – a boarding and day school for primary and secondary girls.

In 1889, three Sisters began teaching in Northam with a total of nine students. North Fremantle followed in 1890 (St Anne's) and for a number of years the Sisters travelled to Cottesloe once a week to teach Catechism.

Further expansion

The turn of the century brought further expansion as the Sisters commenced teaching at Beaconsfield (1903 – Christ the King School) and East Fremantle (1905 – Mary Immaculate).

In 1922, a primary school was established in Kalamunda (Mary's Mount Primary School) and this later became a boarding school for primary boys. In 1933, there was a move to the wheatbelt town of Cunderdin (Holy Cross School) and the following year a small beginning was made at Spearwood (St Jerome's Primary School).

As the years passed schools were established at Mt Barker (1943), Mundaring (1953), Hilton Park (1954) and Medina (1956), while a convalescent home for elderly ladies was opened in Kalamunda in 1948, catering for about 20 residents. In 1971, two Sisters joined the school staff at the Beagle Bay Mission and Sacred Heart School.

The school in Adelaide Street, which became known as St Joseph's College, expanded and flourished during the first half of the twentieth century. By 1921, the dwelling house adjoining the convent had been purchased to provide accommodation for Junior and Leaving classes.

A further two cottages were purchased a few years later to cater for growing numbers. Ultimately the College occupied the area from St Patrick's Basilica to the point where the former Ross' Salvage and Handyman Centre and car park are now situated.

Centenary Celebrations in 1955 also brought the laying of the foundation stone for St Joseph's Hospital at Bicton. The 34-bed hospital was officially opened on 11 November 1956.

Relocation...and amalgamation

By the 1960s, the old buildings of St Joseph's were beginning to show signs of disrepair and after much soul-searching it was decided to relocate the Secondary College to Hilton under the name of De Vialar College, opening on 24 May 1968.

Twenty-two years later in 1990 the Sisters faced the major challenge of amalgamating their girls' College with the neighbouring co-educational St Brendan's College, the result of which was the establishment of Seton Catholic College.

Winds of change

The 1970s brought great changes in the apostolates of the Sisters in the Australian Province. This ultimately resulted in the Provincial Council deciding upon a policy of divesting the province of its institutions.

The Sisters began withdrawing, first from their primary schools, then from their secondary schools and finally from their only hospital in Western Australia.

Faithful to the charism of their foundress, St Emilie, the Sisters widened their educational activities and began educating adults in the faith. They started preparing people for Baptism and other sacraments and initiated and taught catechetical programs for children attending government schools.

Others obtained counselling degrees and offered their services to the less fortunate in society, while others worked with organisations like the St Vincent de Paul Society or taught English to migrants.



St Joseph's Convent in Albany was founded in 1878

Lower profile

Since the 1970s the Sisters have had a low profile, however, they feel they are now closer to their patron St Joseph.

Today, the number of Sisters in the Australian Province is less than 50, however, the Province remains committed to do what it can for as long as it can under the mission:

At the heart of the world, to live and incarnate the saving love of the Father. To work towards the growth and fulfilment of all men and women in Jesus Christ and by our lives to witness to the infinite tenderness of the Father.



Boarders returning to St Joseph's Convent, Kalamunda, after their holidays



Summer School of Religious Instruction at the Mt Barker School

Boarders going to evening recreation