

# ***Recognizing Women in the Church***

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Thank you Bill, and the St Thomas More Forum, for the invitation to speak here tonight.

Perhaps the first woman of faith I should be recognising tonight is journalist Angela Shanahan, who started this forum with a handful of others a few years back. As someone who has helped to run a Sydney forum – The Sydney Institute – for 23 years, I know how hard these activities are to maintain. So, well done.

We probably all remember learning about the theological virtues at one time or another. The three great virtues – faith, hope and charity, or love as it is now more often called. We may also have been told that the greatest of these virtues is “love”. But today it’s not love per se I am going to focus on, but the first of the virtues – faith. And in many ways it is faith that leads to the other two.

On a very material level, faith seems to be all around us these days with the coming of the carbon tax – a faith in the ranks of Labor that has possibly now moved more into the realms of “hope” – hope that imposition of a carbon tax in Australia will work out and that the government’s faith in its new policy direction will soon enough be accepted by a majority of Australians. We shall watch with interest at this exposition of one – if not two – of the great theological virtues.

But it is not faith in the material that I came here today to speak about but the religious faith of a number of significant Australian women and the contribution their faith has made.

Founded in a dire set of circumstances, the Australian colonies emerged from a tough and hellish beginning. If we take a contemporary perspective for a moment, imagine a remote settlement (on the moon perhaps) being conceived as a nation by an exiled collection of the worst of the UK rioters of recent memory. The settlement that was to become Australia, began in the roughest of circumstances, and with distance its great burden.

The Australia that emerged from those beginnings has a secular rather than religious character. And this, even while Australia remains (I would say unfortunately) a constitutional monarchy, its monarch presiding over the Church of England. But our political institutions are quite firmly separated from any connection with religious authority.

Today, many Australian public occasions begin with a brief acknowledgement of the continent's traditional owners, a sort of recognition of our alien presence. For all that, as we know, European traditions of religious belief have been an enduring force among Australians for over two centuries.

Christian faith, in no small way, carved out the institutions and nation building character of the settlement the English claimed and built after 1788. In the first decades of settlement, schools were run by the colony's churches - Protestant, Catholic and even Jewish schools were supported by colonial governments. So, until the colonial education acts of the second half of the nineteenth century made education free, compulsory and secular, Australian children who attended school were given religious instruction.

For all its secular institutional character, Australia built much of its social cohesion around churches until very late in the twentieth century. The churches have underpinned the social welfare system, built and expanded school and hospital systems and provided community programs both on and off shore. Australia also reached out as a nation, internationally, through its churches. Work done as part of aid groups and UN programs today was first undertaken by Australians through the work of its churches. And it was people of faith that kept this all going. At times in the toughest of conditions.

For all this, it has taken a century and a half for the story of the faith that built so much Down Under to be told fully. Much of the published record in the past has concentrated on the patriarchal authorities and public utterances of the men of the church. Patrick O'Farrell, who made a significant contribution to recording the history of the Australian Catholic church, justified his concentration on the clergy in his writings, to the exclusion of most other features of the Catholic church, by saying:

*I still view the Roman Catholic as, historically, a hierarchical and clerically controlled church and make no apology for the continued attention I have given to bishops and priests, their character, policies and conflicts. This appears to me an appropriate reflection of historical reality.*

After the publication of my book *Mary MacKillop's Sisters – A life Unveiled*, Patrick O'Farrell admitted to me that he had been a little too preoccupied with clerical history. In just over half a century, religious nuns and brothers, who are not part of the clergy, laid the foundations of a united Catholic community in the institutions they built and maintained.

It was the bishops who commanded and parish priests who administered to the church's congregations - mostly on Sundays. But the Catholic community would never have grown in the numbers it did, over generations, without the army of nuns and brothers who staffed the schools, hospitals, orphanages, refuges and other community shelters the church offered. And, by far, most of these faithful who gave their lives to the church were women.

It has come as no surprise to me that Australia's first canonised saint is a woman. For once, the church has got it right. Mary MacKillop embodied all that can be said about faith, hope and charity Down Under – but especially what can be said about faith and its contribution to Australian history. This secular society has quite an amount of faith in God in its legacy.

### **The nuns**

I don't intend to dwell on Mary MacKillop here – her life is now more than recognised. But her words to her sisters are worth recalling:

*It is not always the poorest dressed and poorest housed who are the poorest before the searching eyes of God. If the interior be poor and void of self-seeking and self-will then the exterior matters not much. But the Rule insists on houses furniture, everything, being poor, and in keeping with what poor people use.*

Mary MacKillop was describing the essence of her religious order. It was not good enough to simply believe in God and keep the faith. Faith without good works is dead as we learnt in our catechisms so long ago. For these sisters, that faith and good works came in their identification with the people they walked with in their faith. And, in their simple and pragmatic faith and their empathy with the poor, they demonstrated one of the strengths of the Australian ethos – something of the aspiration to build a classless society.

There would be no ladies bountiful among the sisters of St Joseph; no looking down at “the poor” in their wretchedness, bestowing on them superior wisdom or instruction to take the path to God. Mary MacKillop's sisters would join the poor, work with them, help them make the journey.

This sentiment was articulated for me anew by Sister Mary Cresp, a former Josephite leader. Sitting with me in 1996, shortly after she finished her term as Congregational Leader, Sister Mary reflected on her Josephite charism. It echoed Mary MacKillop in a modern era:

*We are an evolving group. We are changing – we can't remain the same ... It's a very rich experience working with the unchurched. You can be brilliant at theology and not find God. The Catholic Church isn't a sect. My charism is found in the stories of ordinary people I have experienced.*

In the archives of many religious orders you can find the records of a faith that did indeed move mountains across Australia, building Catholic school and hospitals, refuges and orphanages. At the pinnacle of the effort now stands the life of St Mary MacKillop, an emblem of that achievement. But, in those archives, are also the names and identities of the many others who served.

In 1995-96, I recorded a number of interviews with a variety of sisters of St Joseph and put them together in *Mary MacKillop's Sisters – A life Unveiled*. The book is a compilation of stories and historical analysis around the nuns and the order. And I did let them speak – there were no questions from me per se. I just let them tell me of their lives as sisters and then I stitched the fabric so to speak.

The voices encompass those of women born in the late nineteenth century to modern young women who entered the order as late as the 1990s. All were inspired to join the MacKillop order either by the spirit and story of its founder or the inspiration of the work of the sisters. In other words, the example and achievement of one had inspired another to walk in her footsteps.

Talking with Sister Callista in Adelaide's Kensington, she reflected on the stories the old nuns had passed on to her from the earliest days:

*Mother Laurence told me stories I had never heard... two nuns at Blinman, a copper mining town [lived in a] convent that was Hessian lined with calico. It was just across the road from the shanty or pub. And it would be full of drinking miners on a Saturday night. The priest was so shocked at the situation – they were only young women – that he spoke to whoever was in charge and said they should be recalled.*

But it was their faith at key moments that drove them on. It gave them the strength and commitment to keep going in what I can only describe as both potentially overwhelming moments along with often loneliness and challenges to their faith.

Sister Juanita Scari told me of what would have been the typical load for a teaching sister in the 1960s:

*In Townsville I was in charge of the sub-primary section. I had eighty-seven children in grade two, and a wonderful lay teacher had eighty-five grade ones. And the floorboards were falling through! We had to be careful with the kiddies. It was so hot in Townsville and we were still in our habits.*

These women's faith also came to the fore as the church modernised in the 1970s and beyond, when individual freedom was extended even to members of religious orders. Finding a niche rather than accepting a posting obediently became the order of the day. The challenge to faith for many was extreme. Why had one chosen religious life when so much of the heavy lifting was suddenly being done by paid professionals.

In the heyday of Australian religious orders – such as in the 1950s with post war immigration – many kept going with the energy derived from their work. There was a purpose and sense of direction that was simple and focused. Teaching Catholic children and bringing them to the knowledge of their faith.

But the sisters' belief in the potential of their pupils, and faith in their vocation, astonished me. With classes of 80 or 90, they sought to mould the talent of every child. One sister, shortly after her novitiate in the 1960s, was given a class of 176 Grade 2s at St Christopher's at Panania. "I was on my own," she told me. And the school resembled little more than an old house.

Sister Lynette could have floundered and said it was impossible. Instead she read to her huge class of children and made up stories to engage them. In the midst of all this, she noticed one little boy named Thomas, with a cleft palate who always wore a raincoat which Lynette eventually realised was to hide his braces which the other children laughed at.

In her care of Thomas, Sister Lynette one day had to take him home. He was very poor and his mother was sick with cancer. And every morning that little boy in the second grade had to change the dressing on his mother's face before he went to school. Many years later, Sister Lynette discovered that actor Bryan Brown had been in Grade 4 at St Christopher's, while she was teaching Grade 2. But it was Thomas who had the most effect on Sister Lynette – she has never forgotten him. It was Thomas, said Sister Lynette, who taught her how to pray.

Sister Clare Koch told me, after a community gathering celebrating the many places the order had served, how her group had marvelled at what was achieved with so few resources. As Clare put it:

*There was no limit to where the sisters went. If there was a need, they were there. Really rundown, isolated places that didn't have other services. And the stories! Life in poor old Tingha and so on. What was it? How did it happen?*

As modern times have impacted on this once great army, the number of women in religious orders has diminished considerably. Ironically, this has left individual sisters making their mark as successful professionals. The army has gone but quite a few still live their lives with the faith that once commanded hundreds.

### **Sister Irene McCormack**

The life of Sister Irene McCormack, also a Josephite, captures much of the change undergone by the women of religious orders over the past thirty years. Irene McCormack was killed by Shining Path terrorists in the Andes of Peru in 1991.

For the first twenty years of her professed life as a sister of St Joseph, Irene McCormack followed her postings as a teacher in schools around Western Australia where she had grown up. Apart from her time on the east coast as a novice, Irene McCormack was focussed very much close to home and her teaching work in Josephite Catholic schools. Hers was the story of hundreds of others like her.

But Irene McCormack's universal story at this time also records mounting doubts over what her vocation really meant, as she finished a university degree and took extension classes in theology at the Jesuit institute in Sydney. Her friend and close mate Sister Kath Dawe told me that Irene was "an astute theologian in her own way" and that "she could always tell it as it was".

Sister Irene was already seriously questioning what her way of life – with its petty rules and lack of autonomy – meant in the scheme of things. It wasn't her faith in God that was lacking but her faith in the rule of obedience to what she saw as out-of-date organisational rules. It was a conflict that engulfed the Catholic Church in the 1970s and 1980s and saw hundreds of religious men and women leave their orders.

But Irene stayed. Albeit, only by leaving her years of teaching and Western Australia well behind her. In 1987, she opted to go one of to the poorest countries – Peru – where the Josephites had set up a convent supporting a poorer parish in Lima in 1981. The Josephites had been formed when Australia itself was regarded by the church as a missionary country. By the 1980s, the affluence of average Australian Catholics had encouraged the order to look further afield.

After five months at a language college in Bolivia, Irene began her work in the parish later that year. Her time at the parish was with mixed results; she struggled with language, and personality clashes both among the sisters and within the parish. And there was always the political uncertainties of the Sendero terror which took their toll.

Around them, the parish and the city continued their erratic existence amid guerrilla attacks, government retaliation, power outages, extreme poverty for most locals and the ever burgeoning city population as families moved for the mountains away from the terrorists and towards elusive social mobility.

In 1991, only five per cent of Lima's workforce was fully employed and over half the country lived on wages of less than \$16 a month. In 1989, when a request came to take over from a sick nun in the newly opened Josephite convent in Huasahuasi in the Andes Irene volunteered saying she was looking forward to being in the country again – a “rural girl at heart”.

Irene McCormack found peace in her time at Huasahuasi – a small Andean potato growing settlement 4000 metres above sea level and accessed by a breathtaking single lane dirt road along a ridge with a drop thousands of metres to a river below on one side and a mountain on the other. Here, with one other sister, she developed a small library for the children at a local school, worked with the children in activities to broaden their studies in after school classes and generally supported the townsfolk in their communal and church activities, as well as at outlying settlements further afield.

Irene's community letters sent back to Australia reveal a soul that had found its purpose, and a spirituality solidly founded on a life enmeshed in support of the people she now belonged to. A few days before her death, Irene sat with her old buddie Kath Dawe – on a visit from Australia – and spoke of her wish to be buried in Huasahuasi.

Irene still found the paternalistic and rather brutish ways of the locals hard to reconcile – she had once dispersed a bag of umpire's whistles to the women of the town to blow when their husbands beat them. She ached for better opportunities for the children to move to higher learning. But she had accepted that her role was to walk with the people and hope they would in time push for change.

The story of Irene McCormack's death is widely recorded. At dusk on 21 May 1991, a band of Sendero terrorists stormed into the village of Huasahuasi to look for those they claimed were supporting US enemies of the people. They were also looking for "the nun" who had been distributing Caritas food – seen to be a corrupt US import. The nun who was involved with the Caritas food was Sister Dorothy who was not there at the time.

The ways of the Sendero were well known and Irene should have been warned so she could escape by hiding along the banks of the river. But the convent was some twenty minutes walk from the town square and it happened too quickly. Irene was on her own, with Sister Dorothy not due back for another day.

The terrorists found the convent. Irene had no way to escape before they arrived. After grabbing her at the front door, the Sendero led Irene and four men of the village among a crowd of townsfolk to the main square where, over the next two hours, they conducted a mock trial. At the end of an hour or so of this mayhem and terror, all five individuals were shot dead at point blank range as they lay on the ground.

Irene was the first to be killed – and by a young female terrorist. Much of the story lends itself to a Calvary crucifixion scene.

In her last two hours of life, Irene McCormack, a ordinary Australian nun, showed heroic virtue and a strength of faith that fits a hero. In the many stories from school days – of the martyrs of old and the heroes who suffered persecution - Irene McCormack's last moments match any.

She would have known her fate from the moment the terrorists included her with the men on trial. Probably she knew from the moment they forced her to come to the front door of the convent. It was a familiar Sendero action. And, in her death and the way she faced it, Irene McCormack demonstrated not only her devotion to the people she served in Huasahuasi, but also the faith she had in her God and the life she had chosen as part of that faith.

Irene McCormack was no saint. She struggled with the rule of the convent for many years; she was often a bit of a rebel. Her final mission in the Andes was a choice made, in part, out the personal struggles Irene was experiencing at the time of her decision. Not entirely self sacrificing, and a way of moving on from uncomfortable situations. But, in Huasahuasi, Irene McCormack settled; and saw the purpose of her life as a vowed sister.

Sister Irene is buried in the cemetery that hangs high above the village, and so remains with the 6000 inhabitants of that small settlement. Visitors and tourists come and go and today the town square looks quite a deal more prosperous. The Sendero are long gone. And Australia has left one more small mark on the globe in a far away corner. The story of Irene McCormack has become the stuff of legends, now inspiring new Catholic endeavours and even schools.

## **Enid Lyons and Joyce Harmer**

I'd like to finish with two Australian women of faith not included in that marvellous array of religious women. One of these was the mother of twelve children and Australia's first woman to take a seat in the House of Representatives. In many ways, Dame Enid Lyons has been forgotten as a trail blazer in the records of Australian history.

She was a convert to Catholicism and the wife of Joseph Lyons, a Tasmanian Labor premier in the 1920s and Australia's conservative prime minister through most of the 1930s.

Enid Lyons' faith crossed boundaries; it was a faith she expressed in her language, her speeches and her music. It was also a conservative faith in keeping with the church teachings of her day. With Joe Lyons, Enid expressed solidarity with those less fortunate. Against prevailing notions of economy, she spoke up in the party room for child endowment and even persuaded Robert Menzies, around the time of the 1946 election, that the Liberal Party should have a policy favouring child endowment.

As a Tasmanian federal MP, speaking up for the "little" man came easily to Enid Lyons – from potato farmers to widows. Her natural affinity in parliament was with members of the Country Party, in particular Larry Anthony – Doug Antony's father. These MPs represented rural electorates like Enid Lyons' electorate of Darwin, where many electors faced problems of remoteness, precarious and fluctuating markets and the costs of distance.

As a professional – even as her husband at times faced sudden loss of income – the Lyons faith was always to trust in their personal talents – a sort of "God will provide". As she faced widowhood, after April 1939, Enid Lyons believed she could earn for her family through her broadcasting and writing.

In 1973, asked to give the Silver Jubilee Sir John Morris Memorial lecture – a lecture set up to honour the founding of the Tasmanian Adult Education Board – Enid Lyons delivered an address on the key principles that had guided her in life. She called her speech "The Role of the Christian Moralists in Present Day Australia".

The Australia that she then saw was one of diminishing Christian values and public figures ready to defend such values. In general, there was nothing extraordinary in apathy about the wider public good: "Only a relatively few in any society seek the general good rather than their own personal welfare," she reflected. But it was apathy in leadership that troubled her.

In a democratic society, the fundamental was the morality of human dignity, she argued. But while she agreed that "the few may not coerce the many", there was a "common right" for any minority to proclaim its views and press its arguments "in the face of overwhelming numbers". Enid Lyons had come to the end of her life and was witnessing her Christian faith – which had been mainstream when she was a child – now a diminishing reality among the signposts of public morality.



Few in Australia in 1973, she professed, were “pressing for the Christian ethic”. As Enid put it, “The danger lies not in disagreement, but in indifference; not in argument but in apathy.

For Enid Lyons, from a Christian perspective, there were many moral signposts Australians had forgotten by 1973. The debt Australia owed Papua New Guinea for its part in saving Australia in World War II was one, any real attempt to make the many non-Anglo settlers streaming into Australia feel at home was another. Along with a failure to solve the dilemma over race and Indigenous Australians, a “go-slow” ethic in the workplace, and true equality for women against the “triumphant male” culture in public and private life.

And there was more. She strongly opposed the permissive society with its growing pornography, abortion and the breakdown of family life reflected in growing divorce statistics.

But, in all of her enunciated principles for the Christian moralist, Enid Lyons believed her task was to propose and not impose. She was an advocate not a disciplinarian. Her modus operandi was persuasion not dictatorship.

Without a doubt, Enid Lyons would find today’s society holds even more dilemmas for a Christian moralist. Even her own extended family – from some 50 grandchildren – would have offered occasional challenges to some of her moral codes. In many ways, we all do now – that’s modernity of course.

Enid Lyons’ moral code guided her life as truly as any. She made history as a pioneer of women’s equal opportunity in government. While doing this, she raised her very large family in the shadow of the Catholic church’s strict teaching against birth control. And never questioned it. And she believed in the power of the printed word, of broadcasting and spreading her message. Her sense of recorded history was ahead of her day in many ways.

My other woman of faith who has lessons for us all lives quietly today in Sydney. She is Major Joyce Harmer who came to prominence in the case of accused child murderer Kathleen Folbigg. Joyce Harmer was, at the time, serving with her husband Hilton as a court chaplain at Sydney’s Magistrates courts. The couple had carved out a unique reputation among the courts community and well beyond over years, but the Folbigg case made Joyce Harmer famous.

Joyce Harmer grew up in a strict Salvation Army home in Queensland’s Gympie. Her father’s austere, often violent, rule saw her leave home as a teenager. She married her childhood sweetheart, Hilton, at the age of nineteen. They left a year later for the Salvation Army training college in Sydney.

Over more than 40 years, Joyce and Hilton served not only their congregations, but communities both rural and urban, families in distress, mothers and children needing a bed for the night, addicts in rehab, and victims and accused in the justice system.

Along the way, Hilton Harmer almost died of encephalitis as a young father. This left him incapacitated and emotionally vulnerable for many years. As he faced recuperation from the side effects and the mood swings and depression, Joyce carried the family and vocational load. They also reared four children of their own.

To encounter Joyce Harmer is to encounter a personality imbued with a unique spiritual strength and capacity for taking on others' burdens. One woman lawyer described the aura around Joyce as a sort of "spiritual fragrance". It almost shocks with its force. She is gentle, yet unperturbed in any situation of tragedy or disaster. Joyce stills the distressed; she seems to draw from some inner well of trust and faith that is infectious.

And she is no fool – she never wastes her efforts. Knows when to pull back if she is being taken for a ride. There is always a sense of purpose in her generosity. And she is ordinary in her joys – delights in red roses for an anniversary, recognition from the media and her darling husband who adores her. But, in everything, her faith guides her.

When Joyce Harmer set off for the Salvation Army training college in 1961, she was indeed a rookie and she can laugh about her inexperience now. Over five decades, her belief in prayer, her genuine love of people and the integrity of her response to the experiences she has encountered have moulded Joyce Harmer into the leader that she is.

Joyce Harmer, now retired from formal service as a chaplain, is not a commander, but she does have an army. They come to her all the time through networks and need. And Joyce is always there for them. Her leadership is magnetic not advertised. "I'm just there for them," says Joyce.

In so many women of faith, that simplicity and sense of service has sustained Australia in ways we have all too often taken for granted. In my view, it's time we spoke of them more often.