

CELEBRATING 150 YEARS!

The arrival of the first Sisters of Mercy in Rockhampton, Queensland 4 August 1873 – 4 August 2023

Mother Mary Vincent Whitty, in whom Catherine McAuley had placed great trust, led the first Sisters of Mercy from Dublin, Ireland, to Brisbane in May 1861. Many requests were made of the Sisters after their arrival but it was impossible to meet the needs of the people, so widely scattered over the state. In 1869, Mother M Vincent returned to Ireland on a recruiting mission and returned to Brisbane with thirty new postulants. The tenacious and assertive Mother M Vincent was now in a position to establish more communities of Sisters and works of Mercy.

Seven Sisters of Mercy arrived in Rockhampton on 4th August 1873 after a sea journey on the ‘Lady Bowen’ along the Queensland coast from Brisbane. The shipping manifest listed the names of just several sisters and then made reference to “A quantity of extra luggage, Sisters of Mercy”. With their leader, Mother Vincent Whitty, were Sisters M Xavier Kenyon, Benigna Desmond, Beatrice Ryan, Malachy Carroll and a postulant, Bridget Whelan (all born in Ireland), as well as Sr M de Sales Gorry, the first Queensland woman to enter the Sisters of Mercy.



The Sisters were met by the parish priest, a kindly Dean Charles Murlay, who took them to a small, dim building in Kent Street that became known as ‘the limestone convent’. This cottage had been the home of Dr William Callaghan and his family. Not at all in the style of Baggot Street, Dublin, this accommodation was typical of what awaited the Sisters when they responded to a need. Whilst the house was in fact cramped and dismal, Sr M de Sales described it as a ‘perfect little convent home’.



The original Convent of Mercy
Kent Street, Rockhampton
Founded 4 August 1873

Several months after the Rockhampton community had settled, Mother M Vincent Whitty, taking example from Catherine McAuley, returned to Brisbane and entrusted Sister M de Sales Gorry with charge of the community. When Rockhampton became a separate diocese in 1882 and the Rockhampton Congregation became autonomous, Sister M de Sales Gorry, with some other sisters, chose to return to Brisbane. Mother M Agnes White was appointed Reverend Mother, and together with the new Bishop John Cani, she laid deep and secure foundations, particularly in raising the standard of education.

The length and breadth of Central Queensland provided many challenges as Sisters travelled distances to minister in coastal and more isolated townships. Rough sea journeys, lengthy train trips and treacherous rides in sulkies took the Sisters to their places of ministry, including:

Mackay (1880); Charters Towers (1882); St Joseph's Home, Neerkol & Bowen (1885); Ravenswood (1890); Mount Morgan & Range Convent High School (1895); Barcaldine (1896); Gladstone & North Rockhampton (1900); Koongal (1901); Rockhampton Mater Hospital (1915); Emu Park (1917); Walkerston (1923); Marian & South Mackay (1924); Sarina (1925); Springsure (1926); Mackay Mater Hospital (1927); West Mackay (1935); Biloela & Farleigh (1939); Bethany Home (1940); Bundaberg Mater Hospital (1946); South Bundaberg & Habana (1952); Theodore (1961) and Yangoru PNG (1963).

Faithful to the mission entrusted to them, the early Sisters frequently lived in harsh conditions and endured great hardships but they were continually motivated by the spirit of Catherine McAuley. Catherine had utmost faith in the Providence of God and these Sisters followed her example, frequently relying on the goodness and generosity of local people who are now part of our Mercy story. We celebrate this occasion with great joy and gratitude and we take the time to honour the four hundred women who vowed their life to God within the former Rockhampton Congregation, now part of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea (ISMAPNG).

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