

# **Mother Xavier Maguire: A Woman of Faith and Vision**

## **Book Launch**

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### **Sacred Heart College, Geelong**

Mother Xavier Maguire was quite some lady! In so many ways, it was a privilege and pleasure to research her life which ended up as a Master of Theology degree and this publication. Here I would like to thank most sincerely those who gave me so much assistance to bring this project to its completion – my academic supervisors, Fathers Max Vodola and Austin Cooper OMI, the Sacred Heart College staff, in particular Claudette and Catherine, and the book's editor, Kevin Mark.

I like to think that this study makes a small contribution to some of neglected aspects of the history of the Catholic Church in Australia.

The first of these is the contribution made by women religious to the life of the Church. One only has to think of the educational, health and social welfare institutions established throughout the country and for so long staffed and led by congregations of women religious since the Sisters of Charity arrived in Sydney in 1838.

The second aspect is the absence of much research into the lives of so many of those intrepid leaders. If we look at the Sisters of Mercy, there are several histories of individual congregations and a small number of biographies of individual leaders of Mercy foundations. However there is really nothing much about founders of individual communities which eventually became absorbed into larger entities. Mother Xavier is a good example of this category.

The third aspect which we need to consider is her lasting impact on the city of Geelong through the works of mercy she established, many of which continue to this day. She can truly be considered an important and influential founding citizen of the city which was a prosperous and growing place when the Sisters of Mercy arrived.

Another aspect which warrants further examination is her influence on the culture and ethos of the Sisters of Mercy in Victoria, in particular on those characteristics of the former Melbourne congregation.

Bishop Goold once stated that Mother Xavier had "... great talent for management." This she amply demonstrated especially in her twenty years in Geelong. But more than that – she had a great talent for leadership. In the system of governance established by Catherine McAuley, new foundations such as the one made in Geelong were autonomous. In addition they were expected to be self-perpetuating and self-supporting. In the early difficult years of the Geelong foundation, shortage of personnel and precarious finances caused much concern to Mother Xavier although eventually these burdens were somewhat alleviated. To Mother Xavier devolved the responsibility to lead the community and to make all the important decisions. Up to a point she was beholden to nobody and her letters back to Baggot Street give evidence of this.

What about her legacy? This legacy is significant and enduring albeit much changed and may be found in the social welfare and educational institutions which trace their foundation to her initiatives. From the beginning of the foundation, she appeared to have a fairly clear idea of how she wished the works of mercy she hoped to establish be organised on the one site and as well, knew what kind of buildings she wanted and worked assiduously for nearly twenty years to realise her plans. This college which is celebrating its 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishment is a lasting testimony to her vision.

It is hard to measure her influence. Influence is an elusive concept, hard to define and even harder to measure. Is it able to be found in ideas, attitudes, or ways of thinking and doing things or might it be expressed in the ethos and culture of an organisation? However it is seen, there is no doubt that Mother Xavier was an influential figure in the Sisters of Mercy, both in Dublin and Geelong, and particularly in the latter convent her influence would have contributed greatly to its culture, ethos and ways of living religious life. It might also be argued that her influence in Australia extended beyond the convent she founded all those years ago.

The life and legacy of Mother Xavier is kept alive mostly at Sacred Heart College, the school she established in 1860, but in many ways, as far as the wider public is concerned, it is largely unacknowledged. For twenty years she was a noteworthy figure in the emerging church in the Geelong area and the institutions she founded gave much to the social, educational and

cultural life of the town. She also had a profound influence on the Sisters of Mercy in Victoria, many of whom later belonged to the Melbourne Congregation.

I hope you enjoy reading about her and come, as I have, to have a lasting admiration for such an important and influential person.

Thank you

Helen M Delaney RSM