

EULOGY FOR SR MARGARET CUMMINS, SM. ST. PETER CHANEL'S CHURCH. 30th March, 2016.

Five years ago this coming May, Sr Margaret's family and her Marist Community gathered together in Marian House to celebrate her 90th Birthday. We gathered in joy and happiness with much laughter and fun. Today we gather again, this time in sadness but with Easter joy, as we farewell Margaret, who was the oldest Marist Sister in the Australian Unit at the time of her death.

Margaret was born in Laggan, near Crookwell, in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales to John and Catherine Cummins and was one of seven children. Her country roots were always strong in Margaret and her character displayed those traits we associate with country women – strength, perseverance, openness, generosity, simplicity and close family ties. The Catholic Church played a central role in the life of Margaret's family and so it was not surprising that in 1940, at the age of 19, Margaret heard and answered the call to religious life - to the Marist Sisters at Woolwich.

On her reception as a Marist, Margaret received the name Sr. Domitilla. She was professed at the end of 1942 and was sent to Mittagong where the Boarding School from Woolwich had relocated during the War years. Though untrained, she taught in school and also studied. It was a testing time for the sisters and students. Conditions were not conducive for a convent or school. Accommodation was limited and some of the sisters and girls slept on open verandahs often in freezing conditions. However, it is remembered as a time of great happiness, lots of fun and lasting friendships. This was Margaret's introduction to her life as a Marist Sister.

On her return to Woolwich, Margaret spent time studying and teaching in the secondary school. She even had a year as a Music Teacher. It is evident that she must have been a most versatile young woman with many talents to her bow and ready to undertake daunting tasks. We can only marvel at her adaptability and her willingness to truly live out her marist calling in a great spirit of faith.

In 1949 and 1950 Margaret attended the St Joseph Sisters' Teaching Training College at Mount Street, North Sydney. Here her giftedness in teaching, especially Infants, showed itself. If one phrase can describe Margaret, it would be 'a brilliant, innovative educationalist'. She was to show that many of her teaching methods were unique and far ahead of her times. She created ways to teach children to read and which some infant teachers have found invaluable. This creative stance brought much satisfaction and joy in her life but also, at times, suffering as Margaret was a strong-minded, quite passionate woman and not given to meekly retreating in face of opposition.

Although so engrossed in her teaching, Margaret's first love was for her life as a Marist Sister with its call to follow Christ by living the Gospel as Mary did. Her main desire was to do 'The Work of Mary'. Her spirituality was simple, direct and very down to earth. One sister has spoken of her willingness to ask for forgiveness and also to forgive. She was totally committed to her Church and the Marist Congregation.

When, in 1951, she was asked to leave country and home and go to Fiji, she went willingly. She was to minister as a teacher in Fiji for many years in Lautoka, Solevu, Levuka and Vatakoula. She always recalled these as very fruitful years. Her musical talents emerged again in Lautoka where she and another Irish Sister, Sr Teresa Moran, a life-long friend of Margaret's, helped the Parish Priest put on musicals. Margaret's sense of fun found a great outlet and life, laughter and joy abounded. Not so when Margaret was moved to Solevu, a remote Fijian village, where she and two others ran the school. Much suffering came there in the form of isolation, loneliness and limited scope for exercising her talents. However, it would be remiss to forget how she loved coaching the Fijian girls in Netball and when she and her team went to the big competitions held around Fiji, great would the arguments be if Margaret thought her team had received unfair or wrong penalties.

From Fiji she returned for a short time to Australia before going back to Fiji and then to New Zealand where she carried out her teaching ministry in Herne Bay, Putaruru and Karori while undertaking university study. She spoke with great appreciation of her years in New Zealand.

However, Australia needed Margaret and on her recall home, her marist journey was to take her to Gladstone in Northern Queensland, Keilor in Victoria, Merrylands, Blacktown and Claymore in New South Wales. She possessed a true pioneering spirit and when asked to begin a new school at Clinton, a suburb of Gladstone she threw herself fully into making St. John's Clinton, the best school possible.

Donna Mason, a current Assistant Principal for Religious Education at St John's writes:

"We feel we were truly blessed to have Sr Margaret for our founding principal as she really set in place so many things that we still hold dear and true and that are key, I feel, to our being unique. One of our School Houses is named 'Cummins'"

Ill-health followed Margaret for many years. It came in many guises. She who loved language and literature, especially Australian ballads which she could recite by heart so easily, and did so to the great delight of others, developed trouble with her speech. Again, a hip replacement ended with complications which left her with a calliper on her leg, impeding her walking. These were real sufferings for this active sister who always wanted to push the boundaries and help people to come to know the love of God for each one.

In the nineties, when our Congregation was discussing new ways to evangelise, Margaret, though still dogged by ill-health, asked to volunteer for a program to teach isolated children in Australia's Outback. For this program, she had to spend about six weeks at a time living with a family on a property in the Northern Territory. Such was her spirit of adventure and daring. Later, when the Marist Brothers opened the Berne's Learning Centre at Lewisham for teenagers unable to cope with ordinary schooling, Margaret became a volunteer.

Again, Margaret was our first Marist Sister to volunteer to move into an Aged Care Hostel, firstly at Plumpton, where we had a small number of sisters in self-care units, and later in St. Joseph's, Hunters Hill and finally at St. Anne's. There she participated in the activities on hand and shone at the General Knowledge Quizes. Even when Margaret's speech was painful for her, she still retained her gift as an entertaining conversationalist, so knowledgeable and so interested in life around her. She could so often see the funny side of incongruous situations and chuckled with delight. Recently, when she was in hospital just before her death, a sister reminded her of fun times dancing the Irish Jig in community and although apparently asleep, a big smile covered her face.

As we look back on Margaret's life, we see how productive it was. She was always so eager to find new ways to help people, especially children. She had known, right up to the end, what it meant to have a loving, united family and the power that comes to each member from that. She knew, too, the love of God and Mary and when she and I used to pray together on my visits to St Anne's, she was always visibly moved when God's love for her was mentioned.

As we come to farewell Margaret, we remember that she was a 'true-blue' Australian. Often Australian slang words tripped off her lips. For instance, she would never use the familiar 'good-bye'. Her farewell, generally with a wave, was 'Hooroo, see you later.' So 'Hooroo', dear Margaret. You have fought the good fight, you have run the race. Now, in the company of Mary, Our Good Mother, may you find in the Risen Lord as He presents you to God, Our Loving Father, those secrets of the 'beyond' you were always seeking here on earth.

Sr Carmel Murray