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Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart

Summary

Known as the Josephites or the ‘Brown Joeys’ (on account of the brown habits they wore), the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart were founded in Penola, South Australia in 1866 by a teacher, Mary MacKillop, and an English priest, Reverend Julian E Tenison Woods. Both were concerned about the needs of children in remote areas growing up without Catholic education or religious training.

Unique to their ministry was their view that, to do their best work, members of their flock needed to move out of the convents and into the community. This belief, in effect, saw the Sisters adopt an administrative structure which eventually saw Mary McKillop excommunicated in 1871. The order was removed in February of 1872, and a full Episcopal investigation of the order cleared her of any wrong-doing. It did, however, impress upon her the need to obtain higher authority to conduct her ministry in the way she saw fit.

In 1873-74, Mary MacKillop went to Rome to seek approval for what was, essentially, a cloisterless organisation of women religious. She returned victorious, with Constitutions for this new and different kind of religious institute in hand, a document that defined an administrative structure specifically suited to Australian conditions. It allowed for the sisters to leave their convent and serve the poor in the districts where they lived.

Even today, Josephites live among ordinary people in houses of two or three providing education and support for the children and families living in rural areas as well as the cities.

Details

The Josephite’s administrative structure was/is very different from what preceded it. The Constitutions provided for groups of convents and schools arranged in provinces administered by a Superior General with a Council. Each of the provinces was then administered by a provincial, delegate of the Superior General. This form of administration, known as central government, was distinct from other institutes under diocesan control, with the bishop as ecclesiastical superior.

This difference created problems for their sustained existence in some locations. The sisters were obliged to leave Bathurst, New South Wales in 1876 and the entire state of Queensland by 1980, due to the respective Bishop’s refusal to accept central government of the Institute.

In 1888, a decree from Rome constituted the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart as an approved Regular Congregation with a Mother House in Sydney, New South Wales.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Resource Section
Catholic Female Refuge, 2006,
http://www.samemory.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?c=1554

Archival resources

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection
St. Margaret's Hospital (Darlinghurst, N.S.W.) records, 1894-1998

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