

The 150th Anniversary of Villa Maria Monastery 2015

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(Talk given at Villa Maria community sesquicentenary dinner, 15 July, 2015)

The Villa Maria community, established in Sydney on Tarban Creek at Hunters Hill in 1847, is the oldest surviving Marist community in the southern hemisphere, and according to the Society Index, the 2nd oldest surviving Marist community worldwide.

This building in which the present community lives was commenced in 1863, and completed by Christmas, 1865. It was built by a contractor using stone quarried on the site; the French lay-brothers in the community assisted with the woodwork and plastering. Over the years a number of extra buildings, and an extension to the main building, were constructed.

The St Joseph chapel was built by Fr Claude Joly sm in 1863, before work on the main building commenced. Holy Name of Mary church was built as a community chapel between 1867 and 1871; it eventually became a parish church, and was extended in 1903-1904. The sandstone building currently used by the Refounding and Pastoral Development Unit was built in 1874 as a convent for a couple of 3rd Order of Mary Regular sisters who assisted with cooking and domestic chores at the monastery. In 1883 the building we now know as the Chapter Hall was built as an early attempt to increase the seating capacity of Holy Name of Mary church, and originally provided a direct line of sight to the church sanctuary. The building which the Marist sisters now occupy was built in 1903-1904 as a new kitchen for the monastery, with upstairs being available for overflow accommodation for the sisters when needed. In 1929 a western wing incorporating the present kitchen was added to the main monastery building; that same year bathrooms and toilets were finally built on to the southern wall of the main building: until 1929 residents at Villa Maria had to make do with chamber pots and external privies, and the amount of personal washing that went on may have been problematic.

We may think we have our difficulties as a community from time to time, but a bit of historical perspective suggests that we don't do too badly. Some years ago I wrote the following description of the Villa Maria community as it was in the mid-1890s:

"The Villa Maria monastery community in the second half of the 1890's was not a happy community: Zephirin Muraire, despite enjoying the respect and esteem of most of his confreres, was an authoritarian and narrow-minded superior; John Baptist Coue was, in the words of one of his confreres, "well-known for finding nothing good anywhere and especially in his own home"; Louis Rigard showed a lack of frankness and (quote) "evaded the instructions of superiors with continual shrewdness"; and Didier Gallais, at Villa Maria from late 1893 until mid-1897, was susceptible to "fits of bad humour and public outbursts". Finally, Charles Murlay, whom Claude Joly thought would have made an excellent Carthusian, had an austere and unsociable nature. Laughter was apparently a scarce commodity; Aubry was anxious to retain the jovial Francis Jaboulay, who arrived in disgrace at Villa Maria in 1897 after allegations of misconduct with a nun: [Joly told the superior general] "His good humour would do something to improve the life of this community in which cordial mutual relations are rather scarce".

For most of the time that this house was owned by the Oceania Province, from 1865 until 1971, it carried out a number of concurrent functions:

- Firstly, it was **administrative headquarters** for the Marist Pacific Missions. Villa Maria was the link or the conduit between the Marists in the field in the Pacific missions and the Marist Superior General back in Europe. And because of the distance and time needed to get answers back from Europe, particularly in the early days, the man on the spot in Sydney often had to use his own judgement to solve various difficulties and crises. John Rocher, Victor Poupinel, and Claude Joly, were each in their own ways, outstanding administrators.
- Villa Maria was also a **supply base** to receive stores and equipment from Europe and send them to the various Mission stations. Before Australia had a developed industrial

and manufacturing capacity, all sorts of materials had to be imported from England and Europe. In the early days all those materials came out to Villa Maria to be unpacked, and then repacked for various destinations in the Pacific. In later years that task was done in the city, close to the wharves.

- It was a **house of recovery for the sick and wounded**. The Pacific in the 19th century was a dangerous place. A number of Marists lost their lives under attack from the local people, and others were wounded survivors. Perhaps less dramatic, many missionaries were laid low with various sicknesses and diseases, and came to Villa Maria, sometimes to die, sometimes to recover. In the period 1837 to 1859, 25 Marists died in the Pacific through attacks from local people, shipwreck, or disease (There were fewer than 100 Marists in the Pacific in 1859).

- **Ministry to diocesan clergy:** Especially in the 1860s and 1870s, when there were no other large religious houses in Sydney, this house hosted diocesan retreats, and Victor Poupinel in particular also provided hospitality to diocesan clergy trying to recover from alcoholism, or working through a crisis of vocation;

- **Transit house** for Marists coming to the Pacific from Europe. Each year from 1837 up to the beginning of the 2nd World War, a new group of missionaries would be sent out from Europe and typically they spent time at Villa Maria recovering from the sea voyage from Europe prior to going to their posting in the Pacific.

- **Working Farm:** particularly in the 19th century the monastery was self-sustaining for meat, fruit and vegetables, and dairy products, and had its own vineyard and winery until at least 1906. The main focus of the winery was the production of altar wine for use at Mass, but a basic table wine was also produced for community use.

- **House of Second Novitiate:** From the 1890s until the 1960s, Villa Maria was a house of second novitiate. After they had been in the field for 10-15 years, missionaries were brought to Sydney for a 6 month “refresher” and retraining programme.

- And finally, and a secondary role to the primary Pacific Missions focus, was that the French priests at Villa Maria provided the **local Catholic parish clergy**. Originally we had responsibility for the parish of Ryde, which included Gladesville and Hunters Hill, and then from 1890 when the Ryde parish was divided, the Marists cared for the Hunters Hill area, which they still do to this day. And they built 3 significant sandstone churches in the 19th century: St Charles Ryde in 1856, Holy Name of Mary at Villa Maria (completed in 1871) and St Peter Chanel’s at Woolwich, built between 1892 and 1901. Those churches are all still standing, although St Charles was rebuilt and enlarged in the 1930s.

So even this most basic of outlines reminds us that this house and community has a long and very proud history. It’s good, therefore, that we take the opportunity tonight to celebrate that past and remember the many hundreds of Marists who have lived and worked here before us.