

Mary Constable's 100th Birthday

We had a beautiful celebration with family and parishioners last week for Mary's 100th Birthday. A few of you were there. Please excuse me if you hear me repeat some of the words and stories.

Imagine the joy this day 100 years ago when Sarah and Arthur Constable welcomed their firstborn, Mary Alice Doreen. Mary was born in, would you believe it, **Hollywood** Private Hospital? From the start Mary's name was destined to be in lights!

It was 1919, so Mary, known to her family as Doreen, was born immediately after World War 1. She was a toddler in the @0's and would have contributed her own roaring energy to the roaring 20's!

The family moved to Moruya and after completing her education with the Good Sams. After school Mary worked for a few years as a pupil-teacher, a shop assistant and a clerical assistant, picking up skills that would serve her well in future diverse ministries. Mary joined the Good Sams in 1942 and given the name Sr Mary John.

She became an Infants Teacher and taught in schools in Marrickville Queanbeyan and significantly Balmain, a place that called her back again, and again, and yet again.

I mentioned that Mary was born just after World War 1. There was a new birth, a new life, in the era after WWII. It was 1948 and Mother Oliverio, asked for volunteers to go to Japan, a country still reeling from war. Put yourself back in time. This must have been a huge ask for many of Sisters who had brothers and relatives who had suffered and died at the hand of the Japanese during the war.

Mary wrote to Mother Oliverio:

Dear Mother,

After much prayer and consideration I feel that I should volunteer to go to Japan. I must admit that I feel presumptuous in offering my poor services, as I fully realise that God has not given me the 'ten talents' but I promise to do my best should I be chosen.

All of us know Mary as one who has talents 'aplenty, and a woman who has always given of her best. Mary was chosen to go to Japan. She was the youngest of the 5 who set off, not even 30.

This was no romantic adventure. Sr Clement describes what Mary and the Sisters were letting themselves in for as they came ashore at Hong Kong, their first stop on their way to Japan.

...they came up against a world which was only 3 years out of war and enemy occupation and internment camps. The scars of war were visible, with hulks of sunken ships in the harbour and ruined buildings along the shoreline.. .. They met refugees from the Communist takeover of northern China. They listened to the fear that soon Hong Kong could be overrun by the Communist armies. The education of the Australian Good Samaritans had begun.

I read this because history may be repeating itself.

Mary set about learning the language and then joined Canisius in Nagasaki in the work of a free dispensary for the poor victims of the atomic bomb. Mary became principal of "Our Lady of the Cherry blossom" Infants School in Sasebo. She befriended many including Masako Mori's family. And also the American military personnel still stationed in Japan. Mary had a soft spot for "the Yanks". There is a lovely letter from an American chaplain thanking Sr Mary John for her amazing help and friendship.

Mary's time in Japan would have overlapped with Christina McKenna, who died at the age of a young 94 yesterday.

Mary was shocked and saddened when she was, without any warning or explanation, moved back to Australia 15 years later. She would have preferred to stay in Japan. But she didn't mope. She threw herself with incredible gusto into teaching at Narrabeen and then other schools.

Last week I spoke with a former student from Narrabeen. Mary running along beside the sidelines yelling out, "Go bash 'em". So un-nunlike, "What do you mean, I'm just encouraging our star player, Craig Bashem!"

Ten years later another career change with Mary beginning nearly 50 years working in social welfare. I read the Book of Happenings for the Balmain Community, Mort Bay from 1988-1902. Mary joined the community in 1991. What that community did - Marie McMahon, Carmel Mahony, Josie

McGarry and Mary Constable was truly remarkable. Mary was involved in Lifeline, Beginning experiences, Solo Parents. Open house hospitality in Balmain, which has continued until this year.

I lived with Mary in Balmain in the 1970s. She was my superior when we closed the big convent in Jane Street. Mary was extraordinary. Her energy. She is living proof that hard work has never killed anyone.

How else to describe Mary:

- Feisty and passionate, no shrinking violet,
- strong views – politically, religiously
- a can do woman who constantly got her hands dirty.
- Mary saw a need and responded.
- Spirit of adventure and entrepreneurial skills to try new things. The bus trips – interstate and throughout NSW!

Mary has a special love for our founder, John Bede Polding. One of the most quoted sayings of Polding is his call to us “to be ministers of Christ's mercy, the messengers of Christ's compassion”. How well Mary has responded to that call. She, like Polding, has always had good zeal for mission. She was born with a missionary heart and a heart for mission.

Lovely to be here to celebrate with you, Mary, your 100th birthday. It feels like a eulogy a funeral without a death!

Mary, Happy Birthday, Congratulations, we are proud of you and we love you.