



NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION OF INSPIRATIONAL AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC WOMEN

Between June 30 and July 6 the Diocese hosted the **NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION OF INFLUENTIAL AND INSPIRATIONAL CATHOLIC WOMEN**. This Exhibition featured 45 women from across Australia, including Peggy Nijam from this Diocese, in photographic images curated by the Council for Australian Catholic Women and Bishops Commission for Church Ministry, to coincide with the 10th Anniversary of the report into the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, “Woman and Man – One in Christ Jesus.”



The Exhibition has been travelling around the Dioceses of Australia since late last year. During its travels, the Exhibition has received warm acceptance and accolades from audiences. People have shown appreciation for the focus on ordinary women making an extraordinary contribution and sharing their expertise, knowledge and wisdom in the general life of the Church, in Catholic Education, Catholic Health and Catholic Social Services, as well as the many wives and mothers ministering to families and the community. The Exhibition is a small sampling of this wonderful part of the Church.

Many people from the **Ballarat** community gathered at the Mercy Congregational Centre on Wednesday, June 30th for the Opening of the Exhibition, which was opened by Peggy Nijam. Sr Rita Hayes rsm welcomed all to the gathering and affirmed Peggy as a wonderful role model for the Church in Ballarat. Also present was Ms. Kimberley Davis, Director – Office for the Participation of Women (Australian Catholic Bishop’s Conference) who travelled from Canberra. The Mercy Associates, Ballarat East, hosted the days of the Exhibition and offered hospitality to all who attended. It was heartening to see a cross section of people from the community take time over the two days to view the exhibition.

In **Warrnambool**, the venue for the Exhibition was St Joseph’s Church Gathering Space, and was hosted by the Women at the Well group. Cr. Jacinta Ermacora, (Warrnambool City Council) officially opened the exhibition on Friday evening, July 2. She spoke of another inspirational woman, Mary Mackillop, whom the women of the South-West could almost claim as a local. Kimberley Davis again travelled to attend the Exhibition. She spoke of how all women who gladly participate in the life of the Church want only to be valued and acknowledged. The Exhibition was open throughout the weekend and many people took the opportunity to view it, especially after the Masses.



The Opening Addresses by Peggy Nijam and Jacinta Ermacora follow:

OPENING ADDRESS: BALLARAT - Peggy Nijam

When I was invited to be part of this exhibition, I had mixed feelings, because I am aware of equally qualified women everywhere, but I have always wished to promote women's causes so I see myself as representing very many today.

I was especially pleased by the choice of this gathering place and the involvement of the Ballarat Mercy Sisters and their Associates, because these sisters were the ones who invited me to begin serious theological studies in 1985 and often lent me books along the way. I needed that sort of encouragement and I thank them sincerely.

At my age I am able to look back and to see so much change, especially in the lives of women. Pope Paul VI (who was Pope 1963-1978) cited four signs of the work of the Holy Spirit in the modern age as follows:

- 1. The abolition of slavery;*
- 2. The sharing of workers in management;*
- 3. The end of colonialism;*
- 4. The emancipation of women.*

Forty years ago in my parish, all I was allowed to do was clean the church and I did so. Now, things have certainly changed. These changes are signs of new freedom and opportunity and are God's work in the world and in the church. I find it really hard to believe the restrictions, the limitations, and the low expectations I had for myself all those years ago. I look at my children and grandchildren and see how different it is for them. Thank God. At one time I was on the Parish Council at the Cathedral. Most of the members were professional men and there was a heavy focus on maintenance and finances. A year later there was a changeover and a number of women came on board with a new emphasis on people and needs. A balance is so crucial at every level. Women are truly needed.

I'll tell a story about my lovely granddaughter Georgette, now twelve years old, who has never known anything but love and affirmation. She was swimming in a wetsuit aged about nine off the coast of Cornwall with her family and heading into the deep. My daughter Tracy knew she was a good little swimmer but the locals were horrified and called out to warn her. She looked back and called out "Don't worry. I'm an Australian. I can do anything." Isn't that great?

I have four sons and five daughters and one son is here today. He is very good at doing résumés and particularly likes helping unconfident people. If an unassertive married woman comes along he will list the great range of skills which go into the raising of a family. This makes for a jolly good resume! One day I was in a dress shop in the Mall, being served by a girl. She saw my signature on the bank slip and said "Are you Jeremy's mother?" Then she said with a big smile "He got me my job" She needed that help and that encouragement.

Quite a lot of years ago I sat behind a young family in the Cathedral, near the back of the church. I would say they had four children under six including a baby. The mother was pretty, tired-looking and her hair was dragged back by a rubber band. When it came to Communion time, neither husband or wife went up to the altar. I nearly cried. They were trying so hard to belong. A very clear message rang in my head, I was only guessing but it spoke loud and clear to me. I wanted to tell them how much God loved them, how enormously acceptable they were and how sacred their little family was. In other words I wanted them to hear the Good News for them.

One day I was giving out communion in the same church. I was going through a bad time myself but I had a most wonderful insight. By the grace of God I realized that each person coming up to me was as sacred as the host I was holding. That awareness has never left me.

I've also come to see that family life is absolutely sacred and that parenting is the most wonderful thing in the world. I know of the love, the self-sacrifice, the slogging hard work, the sleepless nights, the generosity, the stresses and strains etc. etc. etc. These lovely people need to hear the Good News in all its beauty and affirmation.

I'd like to share a bit of my faith history and what has led me to so many things. Fifty-two years ago, when I was thirty, my twelve day old baby girl died of meningitis. I was an average Sunday Catholic at the time and was absolutely amazed because I had a wonderful experience of the presence of God soon afterwards. I kept saying to myself "Why would this happen to me. I'm not a holy person". With this wonderful sense of love and consolation came an absolute certainty that my Jane was with God and that I was experiencing her love and God's love for me, just as I was, warts and all. This gave me a conviction of the reality of an afterlife and a tremendous faith in the things of God. I gradually developed a love of scripture and that too seemed to come alive for me.

When I got into study I majored in theology and pastoral studies. Along the way I worked in my own parish as a pastoral associate. After completion of studies I qualified as a marriage counsellor with Relationships Australia. But a visit to my family in the United Kingdom and three months with the Jesuits in Wales led me to Spiritual Direction work. I gave many retreats throughout the Diocese and this one-to-one work enhanced my awareness of the goodness and sacredness of each person.

A long time ago I was working in the TAB and a little man called Les came in every day with small bets for himself and his mates. He was often drunk, but he would lean on the counter with a twinkle in his eye and chat up the girls. On one occasion he even urinated in the public space to the horror of the staff!! One busy day a very well dressed man was behind him and grumbling about all the little bets. I said "Excuse me, this gentleman hasn't finished" Little Les was stunned and said "You called me a gentleman" and I said "And so you are". He died soon after and there was one notice in the paper, from the pub. Now he is a gentleman in the Kingdom.

I find that when I let go of something I love through necessity or conviction God seems to expect something more. Last year I stopped being a special minister which I loved doing because I couldn't manage the steps up to the altar without a stick. In no time at all I was nominated back on the Pastoral Team and now am the Chairperson. Life goes on.

Thank You for listening. I now declare this Exhibition open.

OPENING ADDRESS: WARRNAMBOOL - Jacinta Ermacora

I was thrilled when Pat Starkey rang and invited me to open this Exhibition. I'd like to begin by sharing with you a recent experience of mine, learning about Australia's most famous prominent and inspirational Catholic woman - Mother Mary MacKillop.

On a sunny winter Sunday morning a few weeks ago, a group of us from the Billington Family Group travelled to Penola for the day to find out about Mary MacKillop's life in our district and the works she did. What inspired me about Mary MacKillop was that she was virtually the founder of the Catholic Education System in Australia, that no matter their religion or how poor Mary MacKillop was determined to offer every child a chance at education.

In reading about the women in this exhibition I notice that quite a number are active in education – living the legacy of Mary MacKillop's vision and determination. There are so many things one could glean from this exhibition but I'd like to highlight to you a couple of things that jumped out at me.

When I was here earlier this afternoon I couldn't help notice the diversity of women's stories from around the country. So many different ways to be inspirational: some inspire through the simplicity and 'ordinariness' of their Catholic life, like May Murphy from Rockhampton. Others are inspiring revolution like Fran Spora of Bathurst who wants more respect for Catholic women within the Church's traditions and hierarchy.

Others still are quietly living the revolution like Sr Mary Cleary of Toowoomba who is active in parish ministry conducting funeral ceremonies, baptisms, and liturgies. Sr Mary has also obtained a marriage celebrant qualification and it seems to me she is hoping to be able to conduct weddings one day.

I noticed also that nearly every order of Religious women is represented in this exhibition, either by works done by Sisters or wonderful women educated by Sisters. As a product of, in my case, the Ballarat Mercy Sisters, I think we can be very appreciative of the nurturing and inspiring role that our religious sisters play in the lives of women.

I feel safe is suggesting that each of you here tonight represent a mirror image of this national exhibition in diversity, faith and womanhood.

I'd like to congratulate the Women at the Well – South West for taking the initiative and hosting this important exhibition. Perhaps one day an exhibition of local prominent and inspirational Catholic women will be in this gathering space.

In closing I would like to congratulate all of you for attending this evening and I hope you enjoyed the stories in this exhibition as much as I have. It is both a pleasure and an honour to declare this exhibition open.

This photographic exhibition is currently touring dioceses around Australia but for those who may not have the opportunity to view it we are pleased to offer it through the website.
<http://www.cacw.catholic.org.au/>