



In 1875, some three hundred years after the death of Mary Ward, the first band of Loreto sisters came from Ireland to Australia, led by Mother Mary Gonzaga Barry. (The journal kept by Mother Mary Gonzaga Barry is available in the school's Learning Resource Centre {LRC}). Three members of this first band of sisters are buried in the school's bushland cemetery, a visible connection with the school's history and origin. Their stories, and those of the other Loreto sisters who have died at Loreto Normanhurst, are captured in Theresa Elliott's IBVM book "Resting Beneath the Rainbow", also accessible from the Loreto Normanhurst LRC.

Mary Gonzaga Barry

Mary Gonzaga Barry was born in 1834 in Wexford, Ireland. She was educated at Loreto schools and entered the IBVM in 1853. Despite initial misgivings – she was over 40, deaf in one ear, and considered her best years behind her – Mary Gonzaga Barry responded to an appeal from the Bishop of Ballarat for Loreto sisters to come to Australia to establish schools for Catholic girls, at the time of the gold rushes in Victoria. The work of the sisters was far-reaching and well-respected.

In an amazingly short time, the schools in Ballarat run by the IBVM were meeting a variety of needs in the district: preparation for university-entrance, theological education and retreats, unique kindergarten facilities, free parish-based education for those who could not afford fees, specialist tuition in music and drama, and practical education in home management. The schools modelled what Gonzaga Barry called 'a sensible school for girls'.

F. Meagher et al Loreto Normanhurst 1897-1997: A century of memories p3

Mother Barry was herself an educational visionary, respected in the Australian education world for her educational innovations and establishment of schools, pre-schools and teacher training colleges. She was one of the earliest proponents of a holistic education, and was influenced by the writings of Froebel. Aware of a chronic shortage of professionally trained teachers who could teach in this way, in 1884 Gonzaga Barry established a teacher training college in Ballarat, followed, in 1896, by the opening of the Albert Park College in Melbourne. She believed that continual professional development fostered excellence in teaching. In calling for 'A Women's Education Congress' where the Heads of girls' schools could meet in mutual support, she demonstrated Mary Ward's passionate belief in the capacity of women and the value of their particular insights:

Nothing but mutual advantage can arise from an interchange of ideas and experience; in short, what is to prevent [the Heads] from taking an independent, original view of education from a woman's standpoint and so checking and correcting and completing the theories on education still in vogue and which we owe nearly all to men – often to 'doctrinaires' and charlatans?

M. G. Barry (1891). Eucalyptus Blossoms. In P. a. p. s. o. L. i. 1891

Resistance

Early resistance amongst traditional Victorian families to the notion of education for girls prompted Gonzaga Barry to wage a sustained campaign to convince parents of its worth. In 1886, she established a biannual school magazine, Eucalyptus Blossoms, which had a two-fold purpose: to showcase the talents and achievements of Loreto students, and also to promote her ideal of a complete education for girls, and most particularly, the value of a university education.

Under Gonzaga Barry, Loreto students were amongst the first in Australia to receive university-standard lectures in preparation for tertiary studies. The curriculum at Loreto Ballarat included several languages, higher Mathematics, the study of Fine Arts, Music, and Science, including Chemistry and Astronomy. While being conscious of maintaining high standards, 'lest it should be thought we are so occupied with prayer and piety as to neglect work', Mother Gonzaga realised that an education should not be solely geared towards achieving high grades.



Loreto Normanhurst

Rather it is the achievement of personal maturity, full adulthood, individual character formation, together with the ability to contribute responsibly to the family, the Church and society which is stressed in all her reflections. It is also clear that in her view, this responsible adulthood could only be reached by a balanced development of the religious, intellectual, physical, artistic and affective aspects of the person.

M. I. Wright Educating for Uncertainty p 37

Social Justice

Like Mary Ward and others before her, Gonzaga Barry had a commitment to social justice. This sense of social justice was passed on to the students, a tradition which continues today. In 1889 Mother Gonzaga called upon her ex-pupils to form a 'Federation': to unite and, as a body, provide services to those less fortunate than themselves. By 1912, Mother Gonzaga had sufficient support from this 'federation' to open a free kindergarten in South Melbourne, with voluntary help being provided by members of the Loreto Past Pupils' Association. In addition, she continued to open schools across Australia.

Loreto Normanhurst

Gonzaga Barry established Loreto Normanhurst in 1897, as a boarding school for the daughters of Catholic families from country New South Wales.