

“Doing Something About it”: Numurkah’s Tribute to the Sisters of St Joseph

On Sunday 1 December, the parish grounds of St John the Baptist Church, Numurkah came alive as the Mary MacKillop Indigenous Garden and History Trail (the Garden) was officially opened and blessed by Bishop Shane Mackinlay.

The Garden honours the legacy of Saint Mary MacKillop and the profound impact of the Sisters of St Joseph in Numurkah for over 130 years. The Parish Pastoral Council hopes it will bring pilgrims to the town, and help visitors, parishioners and school students alike to further develop an ecological spirituality.

Sr Sue McGuinness rsj, Victoria-Tasmania Regional Leader for the **Sisters of St Joseph**, who travelled to Numurkah for the occasion, extended gratitude to the Numurkah community for capturing the spirit of Mary MacKillop and Fr Julian Tenison Woods so well, and keeping their story alive. “Mary MacKillop would be greatly heartened by the work being continued here in Numurkah,” she said.

Several Josephite Sisters also travelled to Numurkah for the special day, grateful to the Numurkah community for honouring their legacy and pleased to be catching up with old friends. One Josephite Sister in particular, was especially remembered on the day.

The late [Sr Janet Nolan rsj](#), ‘resident Josephite’ for fifteen years was credited with sparking the idea of a memorial to the Josephite Sisters. About ten years ago, after taking ‘one look’ at a newly installed lineup of parish priests’ photographs on the wall of the Parish Centre, she famously exclaimed, “But where are the Sisters?” Needless to say, the Parish Pastoral Council knew she had a point and, thereafter, were determined to publicly acknowledge the contributions of the Sisters of St Joseph to their community. The Mary MacKillop Garden Committee was formed and soon got to work.

St Mary MacKillop founded St Joseph’s, her first school in Victoria and the first school in Numurkah, in 1890. For many years since then, the Josephite Sisters provided quality education and pastoral care to countless children, laying a strong foundation for the future of the town. The Sisters’ commitment to their faith, and their values of compassion and justice, have left an indelible mark on the community, evident in the number of “old boys” and “old girls” who turned up on the day to share stories of their time at St Joseph’s.

Parishioner, Kerry Stone said the parish has now claimed its unique place in Josephite history which they had always known about, but had “never really owned.” “I am so proud of our parish community and what we have achieved,” she said. “Today is a dream come true.”

The Garden, a dream of the parish for over a decade, became possible with the support of Darcy Brennan via the Darcy Brennan Foundation. “Without Darcy’s interest and support this dream would still be only a dream,” said Kerry, adding that the entire Numurkah community will benefit from the unique addition to their town, in the same way that the entire town benefitted from the presence of the Josephites.

The Garden has been a labour of love for parishioners and students at St Joseph’s school. “It’s been wonderful to see how the project has drawn in volunteers as it’s progressed – people seeing a need – weeding, spreading mulch, planting posts – and doing something about it – to paraphrase Mary,” said Kerry.

The Garden features a meandering walking path adorned with Indigenous plants and a series of interpretive signs, one for each decade, which tell the story of the Josephite Sisters’ service in Numurkah and their charism deeply connected to education and the empowerment of the marginalised.

The first sign of the trail acknowledges that Numurkah is on Yorta Yorta Country and extends respect, gratitude, appreciation and sorrow to the Yorta Yorta People, the traditional Owners of the land on which the parish and school are built.

The signage also provides an opportunity for pilgrims to learn more about the local Indigenous culture, the importance of native plants, Pope Francis’ call to *Laudato Si’* action, particularly regenerating the earth, and the Sisters of St Joseph’s charism, characterised by a spirit of humility, simplicity and love wrapped up in the words of Saint Mary MacKillop herself that continue to inspire us today – “Never see a need without doing something about it.”