This week Loreto schools across Australia acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the death of Mother Gonzaga Barry and celebrate the life and legacy of this remarkable Loreto woman.

Mother Gonzaga Barry
1834 - 1915

Wednesday 19th May 1875: A courageous and faith-filled woman prepared to leave Ireland. She and her companions were leaving all they held dear and all that was familiar to them. Just one year earlier, in 1874, the first inkling of Australia was rumoured. Bishop O’Connor was going to Ballarat in Victoria, Australia, and was asking for a Community of Loreto Nuns from Rathfarnham. And in the autumn of that year, Mary Gonzaga Barry received a letter from the Mother General. It contained the bare question: Would she be willing to go as Superior with the new foundation to Australia? Ever faithful to the call of the Kingdom, while she wept at the prospect of the distance and the isolation, Mary Gonzaga Barry accepted. And on that day in 1875, when asked by one of the nuns at her beloved Rathfarnham, how she was feeling, she simply held out her two hands and said: “My hands are in God’s hands. He can lead me where he wills”.
**Thursday 20th May 1875:** “As the ship began to pull out of Plymouth harbour we came onto the deck to take our last look at land - it was a beautiful May evening - as the sun went down behind the wooded hill with the castle at the base, sky, trees and sea were all tinted with a golden light and made a lovely scene. I am sure all our sisters thought of Ireland and the loved ones there. We said together the litany of Loreto, a prayer to St Joseph, and recommending ourselves to the Sacred Heart and the Holy Angels, whom we begged to accompany us on our way, steered quietly out of Plymouth harbor. The lighthouse with its red light looked so pretty rising straight out of the water. We lost sight of it with the last points of land and were indeed alone upon the sea, yet not lonely, thank God. Our hearts were full of confidence in our heavenly Father, whose work we were going to do, and in our Blessed Mother’s sweet protection” - Mother Gonzaga Barry.

Mary Barry was born in 1834 into a large well-to-do family in Wexford, Ireland. She was educated at the Loreto Abbeys in Gorey and Rathfarnham. A deep sense of being called by God to do something for the world and for others, led her, at the age of nineteen, in 1853, to enter the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Gorey. She chose “Gonzaga” as her religious name.

In July 1875 Mother Gonzaga Barry and nine other sisters arrived in Ballarat after a long sea journey from Ireland. There in Ballarat they opened the first Loreto school in Australia. Twenty-one years later, in 1896, Mr Frank Coffee, the father of two students at Aston Lodge, Randwick, the first Loreto school started in Sydney, took Mothers Gonzaga and Dorothea to see nine hectares of land at South Hornsby, with the possibility of opening a boarding school there. On the way, Mother Gonzaga, concerned about making the right decision, prayed for a sign.

It had been raining, but as the nuns arrived at the site, the sun burst through the clouds and formed a beautiful rainbow over the estate. Ever after, Mother Gonzaga called it Rainbow
Land. It came to be known as Loretto, Hornsby, until the district was renamed Normanhurst in the early 1900s. And so began our Loreto Normanhurst story.

Normanhurst, in its lovely bush setting, was a world apart from the busy life of Sydney, with a high ratio of nuns to students, most of them country girls. These small numbers created strong bonds between the nuns and students, those ‘dear Loreto children’, that Mother Gonzaga thought of as a ‘row of goodly pearls’. “I would string my pearls on a triple cord, strong and sure”, she said. Loreto schools with their education and way of life centred in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the values of Mary Ward, are indeed that cord.

Mother Gonzaga’s work, together with the other pioneering Loreto nuns, meant that Loreto schools were started in several states in Australia. She also established kindergartens, teacher training colleges and a university college for women. Things were not always easy for Mother Gonzaga. Some of her plans were not immediately successful, she missed her home and family in Ireland, she endured criticism and she also coped with illness and deafness which made her increasingly dependent on the use of an ear trumpet. But she never gave up. Her deep faith in God and trust in the work to which God called her, as well as the support of her friends and companions, kept her going. Because of her we are here today.

Mother Gonzaga was convinced that, “there is no subject of greater importance to a nation as that of its women’s education”. “Win the heart of a little child”, she said, “and you can mould the character of a woman, whose influence will extend, and be still ennobling the world, when we have long been dead and forgotten”. Mother Gonzaga’s wise advice was: “Leave after you something on which others may build”. Nuns and students said of Mother Gonzaga that she was so loving: “It came quite naturally to her; she was so full of the love of God”. Her quiet, gentle presence brought reassurance and a deep and perceptive understanding of each one’s needs, hopes and difficulties.

“What a glorious prerogative it would be for Loretto Girls to be distinguished for their charity”, she wrote. “A far more noble distinction than any this world could give: true Daughters of the Queen of Heaven, the Immaculate Mother of Him, who said: ‘By this your charity, shall it be known, you are my disciples’. This will make you dear to His Heart”. Mother Gonzaga’s words and own example have indeed left us something on which to build, and the discipleship and charity she so desired continue to be hallmarks of a Loreto education. “All around you are possibilities for doing good and making the world richer for your having lived in it”, she said. “Let the worth of your life and daily conduct speak for you; that is a language all understand. Aim at something excellent; our life is largely influenced by what we aim at — our ideals often make our realities. Have enthusiasm for your cause; nothing of much worth is attained without enthusiasm. Be earnest, be persevering, be humble, and then with God’s aid you will succeed”.
A woman of great courage, Mother Gonzaga faced all difficulties with courtesy and equanimity, but never compromised her integrity when she stood for what was right. She was untiring in her spiritual direction and encouragement for all who sought her counsel and her prayer. Though she denied herself comforts of any kind, Mother Gonzaga was generous in her giving to others, even when she had very little to give. She saw suffering as an integral part of life, and accepted her profound deafness and the last painful years of her life with faith and the utmost trust in God.

Mother Gonzaga Barry died 100 years ago on the 5 March 1915. She is buried in the grounds of Loreto Ballarat.

This week we remember this Loreto woman of faith. Her words are timeless for they have the power to inspire and speak to us one hundred years later in the complexities of twenty-first century life. “Always stand in a place where God is to be seen”, she said. And this counsel is lived out today in Loreto communities and schools, in the ongoing work of the IBVM in areas of justice and through the work of Mary Ward International, responding to the needs of our day in many parts of the world.

Mother Gonzaga’s example of utter trust in God and dedication to the task to which she was called, offer us a wonderful model of discipleship and womanhood: strong leadership, courage, gentle nurturing of life, perseverance in the face of obstacles and great wisdom. At her funeral, her confessor, Father John Ryan SJ, said of her: “I have never known a woman of more varied gifts and all so admirably blended. She seemed instinctively to anticipate the wants of her time”.

Eucalyptus Blossoms was the magazine of Loreto Abbey, Mary’s Mount, Ballarat, and it was sent out to all Loreto schools in Australia. On the Feast of St Anne, 26 July 1903, Mother Gonzaga wrote these words which we would do well to set before us and hold in our hearts today:

*Dearest children,*

you who are yet in the fresh bright days of early youth, and who look forward to life as one long summer day, must beware of setting before you in the future a mere butterfly existence; to do so would be to fill your life with bitter disappointments – you are too well-instructed, I should say educated, to fall into this error, you know too well the meaning of life, and for what purpose you have been sent into the world.

Ms Kerry McCullough
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