

a centenary of canberra's catholics

In the fourth in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, 2009 Canberra Citizen of the Year Bishop Pat Power looks at Lady Mary Scholtens

The former stay-at-home mum who wears her greatness lightly

Mary Scholtens stood proudly at her husband Jim's side when he was knighted personally by Queen Elizabeth II on the Royal Yacht, Britannia, at the end of the 1977 royal visit.

The honour recognised all that Sir James had done over the years as head of protocol in the Prime Minister's Department. She treasures the Christmas card she receives from the Queen each year.

I joked with Mary in 2004, when she was made a Papal Dame in the Order of St Gregory the Great by Pope John Paul II, that to be made a Dame on top of being Lady Mary would make her a Duchess!

But like Jim, Mary wears her greatness lightly and finds most satisfaction in the company of family and friends, especially enjoying seeing the younger generations making their mark on the world.

Mary is unashamed in her love for Canberra and has always seen it as a great place to live.

Arriving in the national capital from Queensland as a 16 year old in 1939, Mary took up residence at Gorman House which at that time was a women's-only hostel.

Her happy times there over a four year period are chronicled by Alan Foskett in *The Memories Linger On*.

I was happy to be at the book launch with Mary and the family on 11 April, 2010. Jim was to be called to his eternal reward just three months later.

Canberra was still just one parish in those days when Mary joined with some other like-minded Catholic young women to form a group of the Ladies of the Grail and later the National Catholic Girls Movement which was to be the forerunner of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) in which Mary's children would play a key role in the 1960s.

She recalls Monsignor Haydon's support in those days.

Mary's first position in the Prime Minister's Department as a stenographer led her later to be appointed to the personal staff of the war-time Prime Minister, John Curtin.

Because of the then PM's dislike of flying, Mary accompanied him on many train trips, including two to Perth. She never imagined that her future husband would later occupy an important role in the Prime Minister's Department.



James and Mary Scholtens ... enjoyed their retirement together.



Mary Scholtens (then Maguire) on board a train to Perth in World War 2 with then Prime Minister John Curtin (far right), his wife Elsie and private secretary Mr McLaughlin.

RIGHT: With James on board the royal yacht Britannia in 1980 on their 35th wedding anniversary. The Queen found out it was their anniversary and invited them to come on board for dinner. James was an organiser of the royal visit.



Mary and Jim met while working in Canberra but married in Brisbane in March 1945 before returning to Canberra in June 1946. Jim who had a Dutch background first came to Canberra in 1942.

Mary very proudly and gratefully states that she was a "stay-at-home mother" to her six children when they were growing up, while being actively involved in community and church affairs.

Her community activities included the Turner Pre-school Association, the Good Neighbour Council and the Turner Progress Association. In later life she was the first lady director of the Canberra Southern Cross Club.

As a devout Catholic, she was very much involved in the parish and school life of St Patrick's, Braddon.

She worked for Pregnancy Support and, notably, was

most energetic in her various roles in the Catholic Women's League in which she served a term as national president.

Mary attributes her earlier lay formation in her first days in Canberra as being significant in preparing her for future apostolic work.

When Archbishop Cahill in 1976, asked me to help form a Diocesan Laity Council, I was delighted that Mary and her good friend and kindred spirit, Leone Carse, were also asked to be part of the council which was to be a forerunner of future diocesan pastoral councils.

Mary showed the best of leadership qualities. Confident and self-assured and a good public speaker, she had the great capacity to draw out the best in others, enabling them to make their own unique contributions. I suspect that is exactly how Mary and Jim related to their children.

When the children grew up Mary and Jim were pleased to be able to attend daily Mass, a practice which they faithfully observed almost up to the time of Jim's death. One of Mary's few regrets is that it is no longer possible to get to Mass as often as she would like.

The Scholtens were always great supporters of the priests and there was a special bond between Mary and Fr Tommy Wright arising out of them sharing the same birthday. I know how much Tommy treasured that friendship.

Jim and Mary enjoyed the retirement phase of their life even though they continued at a pace with voluntary work and spending more time with their grandchildren.

Early in the piece when someone asked Mary what was it like having Jim retired, she quipped "Half as much pay and twice as much husband!"

The capacity congregation which celebrated Jim Scholtens' funeral Mass at St Vincent's Church, Aranda in July 2010 was as much a tribute to Jim and Mary's fruitful marriage as it was to Jim's wonderful life.

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