

a centenary of canberra's catholics

In the 12th in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power pays tribute to Good Samaritan Sister Clare Slattery

No history of Catholic education in Canberra would be complete without reference to the key role played by the diminutive but formidable figure of Good Samaritan Sister Clare Slattery.

Founding principal of Catholic Girls High School, Braddon, (now Merici College) from 1959 to 1964, she filled a similar task in the foundation of Catholic Girls High School, Griffith, (now St Clare's College) from 1965 until her retirement in 1975.

Her pioneering work in these capacities had a profound influence not only on the hundreds of students passing through her care but on the direction that Catholic secondary education would take in the national capital.

Good Samaritan historian Margaret Walsh gives the background to a great enterprise.

"In July 1958, the Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Dr Eris O'Brien, presided over a meeting with major superiors of six different congregations of religious women to finalise individual approaches he'd made to them for the staffing of a new central secondary school for girls in the city of Canberra.

"The building of the new school was already well under way and these superiors had agreed to staff it with religious from each of their congregations: Brigidines, Presentations, Sisters of St Joseph, Goulburn Sisters of Mercy, Ursulines and Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

"The meeting unanimously voted to have a Good Samaritan as the new school's leader, since the Good Samaritan congregation had pioneered Catholic education in Canberra in 1927 and sustained it there, single-handedly, until 1954.

"The meeting was in July and in November 1958 the Good Samaritan superiors appointed Sr Clare Slattery as Headmistress of the Canberra school."

In 1927, the year before the designation of Canberra as a parish, St Christopher's School

An outstanding model for women in authority

was opened at Manuka with the first principal Mother M Dympna.

Her name is recorded today below the altar in St Christopher's Cathedral.

Until the opening of St Edmund's College in 1954, St Christopher's School catered for girls and boys through to the Leaving Certificate.

Prior to Archbishop O'Brien's initiative, the Good Samaritan Sisters had been considering establishing a girls secondary college at Red Hill.

Sr Clare had been recognised in her congregation as an outstanding talent leading to her being made responsible for the formation of the young Good Samaritan Sisters.

She was always considered to be ahead of her times. Margaret Walsh writes of the pivotal role Sr Clare played for 25 years in the Good Samaritan training college.

She could well have been describing Sr Clare's relationship with her students at Braddon and Griffith when she wrote about her impact on the trainee sisters.

"She had an interest in the one who was different - the social misfit, the intellectual, the non-intellectual, the questioner, the sister who hated teaching, the one secretly grieving over a family crisis she could not share.

"Each of these found understanding, sound psychological and spiritual advice, and increased confidence from Clare's practical wisdom and on-going support."

As college chaplain at Catholic Girls High School Griffith from 1966 to 1971, I was privileged to have had some personal insights into this remarkable character.

It would have to be said that Sr Clare put the fear of God into her students with her no-nonsense approach, but she also had a heart for the strugglers.



She would often take me aside suggesting how I might come to the aid of one of the students who was in some sort of strife.

I remember on one occasion one of the younger girls sought my intercession when she was in trouble with Sr Clare after a complaint from another teacher.

When I told Sr Clare that I believed the student was being unfairly judged, she listened to what I had to say without comment.

Later the teenager told me that her headmistress (then in her late 60s) had called her in and apologised to her. To me that was just another sign of Sr Clare's greatness.

But she was no push-over. I recall another occasion, in Manuka, when I was approached in the street after school by three likeable rascals who had been temporarily suspended by Sr Clare. (I think smoking may have been the crime.)

Just as we were deep in conversation, Sr Clare and Sr Consilio drove by on their way home to the convent.

Sr Consilio later told me Sr Clare had commented "There they are trying to get Father Power's help. That won't get them out of trouble!"

Sr Clare set very high standards for her students and for her staff, but she never lost sight of their individuality. She



challenged the brighter students to realise their potential, but she was also aware that not everyone is similarly gifted. She helped her students to have pride in themselves and to make the best of their opportunities.

She once wrote: "No plan of education can be judged by its results on a girl at the end of her school career..." "The value of any particular education should be considered when its products have reached maturity. It is what girls are like in their 30s that matters much more than what they are like in their teens."

Many of Sr Clare's ex-students have made outstanding contributions to the life of Canberra in the fields of law, medicine, nursing, the public

service and journalism, but it has been particularly in the leadership of Catholic education in the nation's capital that Sr Clare's protégés have blossomed.

Among her ex-students are Moira Najdecki (nee Jeffrey), Archdiocesan Director of Catholic Education, and Rita Daniels and Catherine Rey (nee Meere), principals of Daramalan and Merici colleges. Professional and dedicated lay leadership in Catholic education had its beginnings in Canberra under Sr Clare as an outstanding model for women in authority.

Many years after this great lady's death in 1980, her influence lives on in those she inspired in a myriad of ways to develop their God-given talents.