**Benedictine Wisdom**

Beneath the Southern Cross BENet Conference 2019

**Introduction**

It was just 3 years ago that we gathered in the chapel of Casa la Salle in Rome at the conclusion of the 2016 BENet Conference. This is where *Good Samaritan Education* *(GSE)* accepted the unexpected invitation for Australia to host the 2019 BENet Conference. I join with all from *Good Samaritan Education* in welcoming you, inviting you to participate to the full with both the Conference program and the additional activities that are available. This morning we will hear the story of how Benedictine wisdom has been lived beneath the Southern Cross in Australia. Our story is young yet bold, one of strong and courageous leadership, of dedication and commitment through harsh and difficult times and places. It is a story of courage, brave decisions, of young dedicated pioneering women forging a new life in a new way. It is a story of Benedictine Good Samaritan spirituality received from Archbishop Bede Polding and the Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St Benedict. This is the legacy that *Good Samaritan Education* has received and treasures.

A well known Australian song begins with the words

“**We** are **one, but we** are **many**

And from all the lands on earth **we** come

**We** share a dream

And sing with **one** voice…”

These words could well be words ascribed to our gathering here at the 2019 BENet Conference. We all come with our story, our song, our voice. We gather with the person of Jesus Christ at the centre of our mission as we work to live his gospel.

Narrator: In everything he did and in everything he said, Jesus Christ sang a song. Sometimes, when he cured a sick person, he sang softly and gently, a song full of love. Sometimes, when he told one of his beautiful stories, he sang a haunting panpipe melody that, once heard, is never forgotten. Sometimes, when he defended the rights of the poor, his voice grew strong and powerful, until finally, from the cross, he sang so powerfully that his voice filled the universe.

The disciples who heard him thought that this was the most beautiful song they had ever heard, and they began to sing it to others. They did not sing as well as Jesus had – their voices went flat, they forgot some of the words – but they sang to the best of their ability, and the people who heard them thought in their turn that this was the most beautiful song they had ever heard.

And so, the song of Jesus gradually spread out from Jerusalem into other lands. Parents began to sing it to their children, and the song passed down through the generations and the centuries… Always the song was greater than the singers and never lost its ancient beauty.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Solo voice: *We are standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before us*

*They are saints and they are humans; they are angels, they are friends.*

Narrator: Among the last places on earth that the song reached was a far-off land that would later be called Australia. At first the song was sung there very badly indeed, for the beauty of the song was drowned by the sound of the lash on the backs of the convicts and the cries of fear of the aboriginal people. But even in that world the song was greater than the singers and gradually, in little wooden homes and churches throughout a vast and dry land, the song was sung with love and affection.

Polding: *I am standing on the shoulders of the ones who came before me.*

*I am honoured by their passion for our liberty.*

*I will stand a little taller; I will walk a little longer,*

*And my shoulders will be there to hold the ones who follow me.*

In 1835 I journeyed from Downside Abbey in England to Sydney Australia, “one of the poorest and most desperate places on God’s earth in the early nineteenth century”[[2]](#footnote-2) humming the song of Jesus to a Benedictine melody. This was a new mission field and I needed companions on the journey.

In 1857, I founded the first congregation of religious women in Australia to care for disadvantaged and abused women. Their care of all they served was to be distinguished by compassion and Christ-like attitude They were to be “ready to teach in schools, to visit and assist the sick in their own homes and in hospitals, to instruct ignorant persons in the faith, to conduct orphanages, to reform the lives of penitent women and to apply themselves to every other charitable work”[[3]](#footnote-3).

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*And my shoulders will be there to hold the ones who follow me.*

Gibbons: Archbishop Polding dared to envisage a new model for Benedictine women in Australia. He introduced us to the ancient rule of St Benedict, and we lived our religious life in a new way – responding to the “signs of the times” as presented to us in mid-nineteenth century Sydney.

Polding: With the blessing of Mother Mary Aikenhead, and at my invitation, Scholastica Gibbons, an Irish Sister of Charity, formed and guided five women who responded to the invitation to live the Rule of Benedict in this ancient land that was full of possibility. They called her, with much affection, Mother Foundress.

Voice 1& 2: At last the song came down to us…

Voice 1: Agnes Clark

Voice 2: Margaret Byrne

Voice 1: Mary Ann Monica Adamson

Voice 2: Agnes Mary Hart

Voice 1: Margaret Clark

Narrator: Like so many millions of people before them, these women were so captured by the song of Jesus as presented by Archbishop Polding through the Rule of St Benedict, that they wanted to sing and dance with it their whole lives.

Gibbons: In 1857 this new way of being Benedictine was birthed. We began by caring for destitute women and girls in an abandoned gaol named the House of the Good Shepherd. In less than ten years Polding would ensure that this fledgling community was to be explicitly Benedictine when he presented his document “Oblate Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St Benedict” to Pope Pius IX for his full approbation.

Polding: These women were called to “imitate the charity of the kind Samaritan who was moved to pity the poor wounded man and having poured oil and wine into his wounds to heal him, afterwards conveyed him to a place of security. In like manner the Religious will use all gentleness and compassion for the unhappy whom they are to tend.” [[4]](#footnote-4)

Gibbons: Visiting the sick and poor in their homes was a constant from the beginning and it also made us acutely aware of the serious educational and social needs of Sydney’s inner-city children. We also often accompanied Archbishop Polding on his journeys into bush parishes, meeting the children and their parents, instructing them in the catechism and preparing them to receive the sacraments.

Polding: The sisters were not trained teachers at this stage but most of them were educated, some very well educated. Their personal backgrounds, along with their experiences with woman and children in welfare institutions, schools and homes, in both the city and the country, meant that in 1861 when they took responsibility for a school for the first time, was not a leap into total darkness.

Narrator: In 1861, there were 13 Sisters of the Good Samaritan. Two of them took charge of the Catholic denominational school in Sussex Street in Sydney. A year later they moved to new premises in Pitt Street following an appeal for new buildings. Two teachers, 325 students, and for a school, a single large area beneath chapel, divided into rooms by sliding partitions. This was the start of the education ministry of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan and the beginning of Benedictine education in Australia.

**Benedictine wisdom in 2019**

162 years after the establishment of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan in Australia, how alive and evident is the spirit of Benedict and the tradition of the Sisters?

*Good Samaritan Education* is shaped by:

Gospel – centred on the person of Jesus Christ

Heritage – Benedictine spirituality

Story – Sisters of Good Samaritan

These three pillars of the spirit and tradition have been visible and experienced in the mission, leadership and governance of Good Samaritan schools since the very early years of the sisters.

Today there is no better way to observe this Benedictine Good Samaritan spirit than to enter into the educational communities founded by the sisters in Australia and now in the stewardship of *Good Samaritan Education*. From the earliest days the Benedictine Good Samaritan ethos and story became well known and loved by education authorities, school communities and families across the whole of Australia. The Sisters taught in many parish and Diocesan primary and secondary schools, in cities, small towns and well into outback Australia. The congregation also established several schools which it owned and administered. “The parable of the Good Samaritan and the Rule of St Benedict are two key influences in the catholicity of the schools founded by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Today the 10 *Good Samaritan Education* colleges, located in the three eastern states of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, are vibrant, contemporary and above all outstanding educational communities that honour their Benedictine Good Samaritan heritage. These 10 colleges educate almost 10 000 students providing Catholic education for girls and boys in secondary, primary and pre-school years. The jewel in the crown of our Colleges is Mater Dei. Established as an orphanage by the Sisters of the Good Samaritan in 1910, today, Mater Dei School and Services is a community-based school that provides education, therapy services and post school programs for babies, children and adults with an intellectual disability or developmental delay.  The underpinning philosophy at Mater Dei is “Inclusion for all".[[6]](#footnote-6)

Currently it is Term 3 holidays for Australian school students. We would have loved to open our colleges to you where, at first hand you would be able to observe how Benedictine Good Samaritan spirit and story is lived each day by the students and teachers. You may choose to visit one or two of the Sydney schools as part of the Conference program. I hope that by introducing you to some of our school community personnel here at our conference, or through various videos today, you will gain a sense of how Benedictine wisdom and values, and the heritage story of the Good Samaritan sisters is alive and flourishing in our *Good Samaritan Education* colleges in 2019.

**It is the charism that attracts many to accept the invitation to join *Good Samaritan Education*. We often use Claude Marechal’s words- charism can be described as:**

**A story to enter**

**A language to speak**

**A group to which to belong**

**A way to pray**

**A work to undertake**

**A face of God to see**

**Claude Marechal**

**The mission of *Good Samaritan Education* is to sustain and nurture communities of learning in the Catholic tradition.”**[[7]](#footnote-7)

**The spirit of The Rule of Benedict nurtures our colleges and guides the model of governance in all aspects of our colleges and of *Good Samaritan Education* *… "arrange everything so that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from”*** (Rule of Benedict, 64:19)

Challenged by the Parable, guided by the Rule of Benedict and inspired by the lives of the sisters, the *Good Samaritan Philosophy of Education* guides the vision of Catholic education for all staff of the colleges and governance personnel.

*The Voice and Experience of Women in Leadership* statement,now published with the *Philosophy of Education,* presents *Good Samaritan Education’s* commitment to:

* advancing the full participation of women in the life and mission of the Church
* promoting effectively an understanding of the personal dignity of women, in accord with the teaching of the Scriptures and the Church
* to encouraging and advancing the full participation of women in the life and mission of the Church as well as academic, cultural, economic, social and political life to better reflect the fullness of the Divine
* to taking appropriate action against any form of discrimination or marginalisation of women so that the image of God that shines in all human persons without exception may be fully respected
* to ensuring that women participate, at the highest levels, in the leadership of the Colleges of *Good Samaritan Education*
* to ensuring that women participate, at the highest levels, in the governance structures of both *Good Samaritan Education* and its colleges

Our *Good Samaritan Education* collegescontinue to be shaped by their commitment to the Benedictine values. These are actively taught and demonstrated on a daily basis in our colleges. Colleges often focus on one or two values each year as their theme for prayer, action, commitment to service. This year the theme for *Good Samaritan Education* is the Year of Benedictine Wisdom through the lens of Hospitality and *Conversatio.*

A very strong characteristic of each of our Colleges is its connection to its local and broader community through its Social Justice program, outreach service and fund raising which provides a practical response to the question “Who is my neighbour?”. The parable challenges us to embrace all whom we meet.

**New governance models**

To enable our colleges to fulfil their responsibilities successfully a strong, sustainable governance structure is required. Good governance has been a significant priority for the sisters in their ministries from the early years as Trustees of their colleges to the establishment of *Good Samaritan Education.*

With the inspired leadership of these courageous women - Sr Mary Ronayne sgs, Sr Helen Lombard sgs, Sr Sonia Wagner sgs and Sr Clare Condon sgs – each building on the foundations of governance of those who came before them, college leadership and governance of the colleges were transferred to lay leadership over a period of forty years. Two strategically and purposefully planned major governance changes have been successfully negotiated and implemented by the sisters in this period. These two changes are underpinned not only by the brave leadership of congregational leaders, but also by prayerful, consultative and informed planning, an “attentive ear” to the signs of the times and finally, discerned decision making. Decisions as I have experienced them have never been rushed.

**College Boards established**

From early 1970’s, in the spirit of the Vatican II, (*Lumen Gentium and the Declaration on Christian Education)[[8]](#footnote-8),* the sisters, with the leadership of Sr Mary Ronayne, took deliberate steps to strengthen their commitment to lay leadership across college life and governance.

The gradual incorporation[[9]](#footnote-9) of the 10 collegeseach with a board of directors, with management oversight and employment responsibilities commenced in 1981 with all colleges incorporated by 1993. This was again a real exercise in discernment and a deliberative response to the “signs of the times”.

By 1996, Superior of the time, Sr Sonia Wagner, established *Good Samaritan Education* Council (*GSEC*), an advisory Council to the Superior and her Council. There was an overt commitment by the sisters and the colleges to strengthening the Good Samaritan Benedictine identity and a shared sense of mission.

Significant programs and documents were developed where the charism and values were imbedded in the *Philosophy of Education*, the *Teaching and Learning Framework* and the *Formation Program*. These documents guide the teaching and learning of the curriculum across the colleges while Benedictine Good Samaritan values imbedded in the documents guide the manner in which the college is conducted.

***Good Samaritan Education* established**

At the Sesquicentenary Mass of the foundation of the Good Samaritan Sisters in February 2007, Sr Clare Condon, Superior of the Congregation welcomed all to the celebration with these words:

*We do not know the future that God has in store for us.*

*We live in trust.*

*So let us at this time rejoice in our tradition.*

*Most of all let us pray earnestly to God*

*that we will build on that tradition,*

*to bring to life afresh all that is goodness*

*for our world,*

*for our Church,*

*in our time and*

*through our calling as followers of*

*the Parable of the Good Samaritan.*

Clare Condon sgs, Welcome to Sesquicentenary Mass, 2 Feb 2007

“… *that we will build on that tradition, to bring to life afresh all that is goodness for our world, for our Church, in our time…”*

We know that interpreted in a theological sense, “signs of the times” arise because God continues to speak and act in and through human history. Followers of Benedict are called to attend to these signs in a spirit of humility and expectation that God’s Word continues to be revealed in contemporary settings. In 2008, with their usual attention to the everchanging environment of the contemporary world, the sisters, with the leadership of Sr Clare Condon, asked the question “Where to from here?” for the 10 Good Samaritan colleges in Australia.

The incorporated boards for each of the colleges had been functioning effectively for 15 to 27 years. The Boards were firmly established as a successful and appropriate governance structure which remained contemporary in both ecclesial and civil environments. Why consider any change now?

With an appreciation of planning for the future from a current position of strength, and, a recognizable disposition on the part of the congregation to allow matters to move forward in the spirit of partnership and responsible stewardship, *Good Samaritan Education Council* was given the task of co-ordinating a consultation and discernment process regarding future governance. Workshops were facilitated across Australia for sisters, governance personnel, and college leadership teams. A key document in the workshops was the booklet, *New Times New Challenges,* compiled bySr Mary McDonald sgs*.*

# *Good Samaritan Education* C*ouncil* in April 2010 presented its report from this extensive consultation/discernment process to Sr Clare and her Council for consideration and decision.

Sustainability was core to any future model of governance.

The chosen governance option was the one discerned as best able to:

* sustainably maintain and develop the distinctive contribution of Good Samaritan Catholic colleges to church and society
* sustainably develop inclusive, hospitable and locally responsive community
* sustainably honour the voice and experience of women in leadership of the college community and in governance structures
* sustainably continue the development of lay leadership of the college community and in governance structures
* sustainably support property and finance arrangements that provide for the governance structure of the colleges and the cost of alienation of property.

**Announcement of *Good Samaritan Education***

At the 2010 *Good Samaritan Education* Conference, which gathered many sisters, company and board members, college leadership teams, Sr Clare announced her intention to seek canonical approval from the arch/bishops of the 5 dioceses in which the colleges are situated, to establish a new ecclesial community to be known as *Good Samaritan Education.* This new ecclesial community, comprised predominately of lay people, would assume responsibility for the governance of the Good Samaritan schools. A delighted conference audience received Sr Clare’s decision with a standing ovation. Colleges were pleased. The Benedictine/Good Samaritan spirituality, heritage and ethos would continue to be nourished under the new governance model. For the colleges the new model brought little change in their governance procedures with the local board retained as the governing body for the college. The model allowed also continuing relationship with the sisters through their participation in colleges in many and varied ways.

With Statutes developed and approved by the congregation and the arch/bishops, *Good Samaritan Education,* was launched on 22 July 2011. Assembly members and a governing council were appointed to commence the work of fulfilling its purpose. *Good Samaritan Education* was entrusted “to foster an ecclesial community …to share in the mission of the Church especially by the ministry of Catholic education…in accordance with the beliefs, teachings and legislation of the Church and the Charism of the Institute and *Good Samaritan Education’s* Philosophy of Education.” (Statutes 5:2,7)[[10]](#footnote-10) The transfer of colleges and land followed over a period of 5 years.

In the Australian Church and in Catholic Education the launch of *Good Samaritan Education* as a new ecclesial community was a significant historical and canonical moment.

*Good Samaritan Education* was entrusted with a share in the mission of the Church, assuming the Sisters’ rights and obligations pertaining to the ministry of Catholic education. *Good Samaritan Education* was called to ensure that *In All Things May God Be Glorified - In Omnibus Glorificetur Deus.[[11]](#footnote-11)*

The mission of *Good Samaritan Education* is grounded in the:

* Parable of the Good Samaritan
* Rule of Benedict
* *Good Samaritan Education* Statutes
* *Good Samaritan Education* Statement of Charism
* *Good Samaritan Education* Philosophy of Education

In 2017 the Statement of *The Voice and Experience of Women in Leadership* was included as a key document.

You can imagine the privilege that each member of the Assembly and the Governing Council of *Good Samaritan Education* felt as she/he took on the responsibility of this new ecclesial community – treasuring the past heritage, and committing to a present that is faithful to Catholic education while planning for a future that will continue to build Christ-centred learning communities in the Good Samaritan Benedictine tradition.

The Statutesof *Good Samaritan Education* is the legal and canonical document which outlines the Purpose, Functions and Procedures for *Good Samaritan Education.* Sr Clare, in her address at the Launch, said “Those who are called to be members of this ecclesial entity are invited into…communion with God and with one another”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Their first task is “to nurture this ecclesial communion…especially through the promotion of a spirituality of communion in keeping with the Benedictine tradition”[[13]](#footnote-13). An immediate and ongoing challenge for the Assembly and Governing Council was togrow in understanding of what it is to be an “ecclesial community”.

Following the great formation work lead by Sr Helen Lombard in the 1970’s, formation in the Benedictine Good Samaritan tradition bequeathed to us, and formation in governance, remain key priorities of our work.

Multi-modal formation programs, recognizing participants as adult learners, had already been active with colleges and boards. With the commencement of *Good Samaritan Education* they were developed further to include all new governance personnel. An encompassing formation program is provided every year in various forms and to various members of *Good Samaritan Education.*

Formation encompasses:

* Staff – induction for staff
* Leadership – Leading in a *GSE* college
* Mission – Staff Immersion – Kiribati, Philippines, Japan; Student immersion – Santa Teresa Indigenous Community; participate in International Benedictine Short Stay Student Exchange Program.
* Governance – Induction for New Directors, Company Members, General Assembly and Governing Council Formation, Benedictine Pilgrimage
* Other formation experiences across *Good Samaritan Education* – Year of *Conversatio* Twilights, Principals, APDP and Business Managers Conferences.

Immersion programs were one of the opportunities for governance and college personnel to gain a deeper awareness and appreciation of the Good Samaritan Benediction tradition. Appropriate programs have been created for students, staff and governance personnel. These immerse participants in the work of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan and the heritage of the Benedictine tradition.

If you are interested in the outcomes of short-term immersion programs*,* Monica Dutton, who led many of the *Good Samaritan Education* immersion programs, presents her findings in the workshop - *Transformative Formation: The Contribution of Short-Term Cross-Cultural Immersion*.

*Journey to* *Good Samaritan Education[[14]](#footnote-14)* is a history of the story compiled by Sr Mary McDonald. For us it is an immediate reminder of all the steps taken to reach the end goal, but for future generations it will provide an interesting insight and a detailed account of the unfolding of the Benedictine Good Samaritan story in Australia.

For 162 years in Australia the Benedictine Good Samaritan song has been sung and story has been told. Archbishop Bede Polding and the Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St Benedict were the first voices to be heard. Australia is the richer for the great gift that has been given through these pioneers and through the many, many sisters who have gone before us. It is now the task and the responsibility of *Good Samaritan Education* to be stewards of the tradition and keep the story alive in our schools, in our communities and where ever our outreach takes us.

It is our hope that the ancient wisdom and the contemporary nature of the Rule of Benedict, the spirit of the Good Samaritan and the story of the Good Samaritan Sisters will continue to enable our Catholic education communities in Australia to “seek peace and pursue it” so that *In All Things May God Be Glorified.*

1. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, (former Bishop of Sydney), *The Song of Jesus.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lucy Hughes Turnbull, *Sydney: biography of a city,* Random House Australia, Sydney 1999, p 223 Cited in Margaret Walsh, *The Good Sam,* John Garratt Publishing, 2001,  *p 40* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *RB:Scope and Character of the Institute*,n.1, Missionary Sisters [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walsh, M, *The Good Sams,* John Garrett Publishing, 2001, p 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sr Clare Condon, Foreword, *Prophets of Parables and Peace,* 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mater Dei School website [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Formation for Mission, A Handbook, *Good Samaritan Education,* 2011*, p4* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium, The Documents of Vatican II,* Chap IV, 33.

   Declaration on Christian Education*, “Gravissimum Educationis”, The Documents of Vatican ll,* p647 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Corporations Act 2001,* www.legislation.gov.au [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Statues of *Good Samaritan Education #5.2,7.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Statues of *Good Samaritan Education, Preamble.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. GS Archives, November 13, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Statues of *Good Samaritan Education* #19.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Journey to* *Good Samaritan Education,* 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)