

Sisters of St Joseph – founded in Penola South Australia

Founding Story

The story of the Australian and New Zealand Josephite Sisters reflects in many ways, the energy, harshness and challenge of the early years of the European development of Australia. It drew on the experience of the co-founder Rev Julian Edmund Tenison Woods who visited the congregation of [Sisters of St Joseph in Le Puy France](#). Unlike some other Sisters of St Joseph we were not founded from this group but in recent years have found much common [language and vision](#).

[Julian E Tenison Woods](#), born in Southwark, England, in 1834 came out to Australia arriving in Tasmania in 1854. His education had been varied and rather eclectic and he spent some time in the Passionist and Marist Congregations. He worked as a journalist and was both poet and scientist. He was ordained in Adelaide in 1857 and given the parish of Penola. It was there in 1860 he met [Mary MacKillop](#), an Australian, born of Scottish parents, who was working as a governess. Mary and Julian had a deep sense of call to respond to the needs of the isolated children in outback Australia who were not receiving any education.



There was no religious congregation that was able to respond to these widespread needs and the Spirit worked through these two very different yet equally passionate people. The first Josephite school was opened in Penola SA in 1866 and Mary became Sr Mary. Fr Woods wrote the first Rule for the Sisters in 1867 and the first school in Adelaide was opened. This rule had a clear statement on a lived expression of poverty and a form of central organisation so that the Sisters would be free to move across dioceses wherever they were needed. In the first five years 40 schools, convents and four charitable institutions were founded in South Australia. In 1869 Sisters were sent to Queensland.

A community of Sisters were sent from Penola to Perthville New South Wales (NSW), and arrived on the 16th July 1872. Bishop Matthew Quinn of Bathurst changed the character of the Congregation from one governed by Central Authority, as upheld by Rome in 1873, to a Diocesan Institute. Some of the Sisters returned to South Australia to the central group but Sr Hyacinth felt the responsibility for the young Irish women who had been brought to Perthville by the Bishop to care for the children and remained to provide leadership to the new group.

Father Julian Tenison Woods inspired the Sisters of St Joseph, Perthville, and guided the newly emerging Institute under the direction of Bishop Quinn, bishop of Bathurst.

Communities of Sisters were later sent from Perthville to Whanganui, New Zealand, 24th April 1880; to Goulburn, NSW, 13th August 1882; to Lochinvar, NSW, 2nd September 1883; and Westbury, Tasmania, 24th May 1887.

In response to the Second Vatican Council these five Congregations of Sisters of St Joseph, while retaining autonomy as independent religious associations formed the Australian-New Zealand Federation of Sisters of St Joseph, which was established, and its statutes approved, by the Sacred Congregation of Religious on 28th July 1967. These Sisters of St Joseph were initially referred to as 'black' Josephites in contrast to the 'brown' because of the colour of habits worn; eventually they were referred to as the Federation Sisters in contrast to the Central, that is, those who still maintained central government.

Meanwhile the Central group continued to respond to calls for Sisters from all the mainland states. The story was not without challenge as Mary MacKillop was excommunicated in 1871 (lifted in 1872); the Sisters were required to leave Queensland in 1879 (returned in 1900) and in 1883 Mary was required to leave Adelaide. Many of these challenges were related to the concept of a religious congregation which did not belong to a single diocese and the Irish Bishops in particular had difficulty with this. The rule needed to be approved in Rome and Mary went to Rome in 1873 and the next year returned with the rule approved.

The new rule still maintained central government. Rome, however, had modified the expression of poverty to ensure the Sisters would be able to carry out their ministry. Fr Woods felt that by accepting this revised rule Mary and the Sisters were disloyal to his vision. This misunderstanding was compounded by difficulty in communication and was never fully resolved. There were issues of divided loyalty among the early sisters and this also got linked in the psyche of many sisters to the relationship between the Federation and Central groups. They were often simplistically and incorrectly categorised as for or against Mary or Julian.

The past forty years have seen a gradual movement towards reconciliation. The leaders of both groups have directly worked for this. The cause for beatification of Mary MacKillop has become a shared endeavour. The changes in society have also contributed to shared responses to emerging areas of need. Both groups have responded to calls for assistance from overseas and are finding in their shared vision the capacity to work together for the good of all.