



## Diocesan e-News

### FAREWELL TO MUCH-LOVED SR RITA HAYES

Sr Rita Hayes will be remembered as a larger than life woman who lived her life for others up until her last breath. Close friend and fellow Sister of Mercy Sr Veronica Lawson said anything Sr Rita took on, she handled with grace, compassion, competence and humour.

A staunch advocate for social justice and the human rights of asylum seekers and the disenfranchised, Sr Rita was a member of the Ballarat Refugee Support Group, Australian Catholic University Social Concerns Committee, Moving Towards Justice, Ballarat Multicultural Centre and the Ballarat Shower Bus.

Sr Rita was instrumental in establishing the Lisa Lodge Hostel and Hayeslee House for young women and families in need. She also helped establish Ballarat's Lifeline and was the Congregation Leader of the Ballarat East Sisters of Mercy from 1994 to 1999.



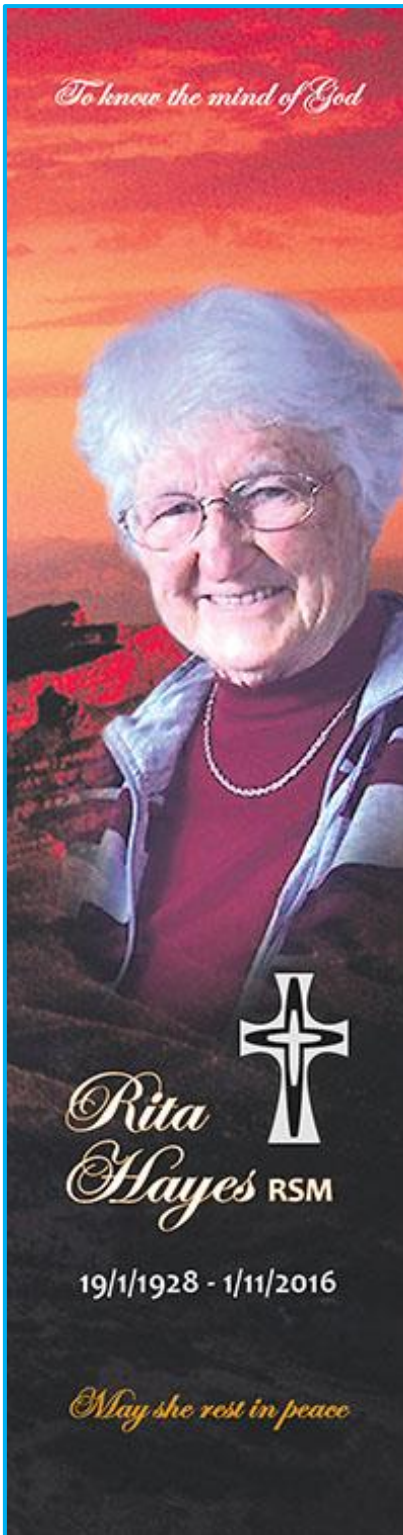
"The door of her Ballarat home was always open," Sr Veronica said. "It was not uncommon to walk into her home and see her sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by a Sudanese or West Papuan family." Sr Veronica said one young Ballarat Sundanese woman had broken down after hearing about her death. "She told me Rita had been like a mother to her since she arrived in Ballarat ten years ago," Sr Veronica said. "That story could be replicated a thousand times over. She was a friend and a mother to so many."

Sr Rita was born on January 19, 1928 at the Charlton Bush Nursing Hospital. She was the fourth child of six children to parents John and Alice Hayes. In 1938, she came to Ballarat for her schooling boarding at Loreto College and then Sacred Heart College before joining the Sisters of Mercy in 1945. Sr Veronica said Sr Rita was humble, fun-loving, irrepressibly mischievous and had a heart of gold. During the celebrations for the Centenary of Federation she was honoured in an exhibition of Australia's most outstanding women.

Sr Rita died on Tuesday, November 1. She was 88. She was remembered at a Funeral Mass at St Alipius Church, Victoria Street Ballarat East on Friday, November 4.

*Article courtesy of the Ballarat Courier, text by Melissa Cunningham*

**[Sr Veronica Lawson's Word of Remembrance and Fr John McKinnon's homily can be read below:](#)**



“To know the mind of God”! The little card I have in my hand and that you have in your hands features this extraordinary motto. It was the motto Rita chose at her first profession in 1948, at just twenty years of age, the motto that was to guide her life as a Sister of Mercy for another sixty-eight years. When I spoke with her niece Kaylene, she told me how much she and all the family loved Rita, something I had seen for myself again and again. She then made this comment, “But she is with the God she loved so very much”. How many of us are so transparent when it comes to the love of God in our hearts? How many of us can so openly claim to be committed to a single-minded God search? How many of us radiate God’s love in a way that it is the first thing that enters a niece’s mind when reflecting on her life? Rita’s God search was ever so joy-filled and creative. It took the form of utter commitment to God’s people and to God’s marvellous world. Rita was at one and the same time contemplative and relentlessly engaged in addressing the justice/mercy balance for all of Earth’s inhabitants. She was both dreamer and doer. She was attentive to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor down to the very last detail. Her door was a door of mercy—always open.

Rita was born (in 111 degree = 44 degree C heat) in Charlton Bush Nursing Hospital on 19th January 1928, the fourth of six children for John and Alice Hayes. She was baptised on February 12 in Culgoa. The story of her various names is worth the telling. Her own account goes like this, “Baptised Rita Ann, Mum and Dad planned that I would be called Ann, but by the time I came to life, Danny O’Hagan was also part of the family. Danny came straight from Ireland aged 18 and went up to Culgoa to do seasonal work. He was taken into the family and never really left. Danny called me by the Irish form of Ann, which is Nancy or “Nuncy” as Danny said it. Aged 11, I went to Ballarat to school. Mum said that if I couldn’t be Ann, I wasn’t going to be Nancy. It was a cow’s name. I would be called by my first name, Rita. When I became a Sister of Mercy, I became Sister Aloysius. I am Nance to most people in the area in which I spent my early years, and Rita to people elsewhere.” For some of her friends, she became blessed Rita of Culgoa

Rita’s first school was the Cocum Reserve State School. In June 1938, she came to Ballarat where she boarded for six months with relatives and attended Loreto College in Dawson Street. She was desperately homesick and did not want to return after the holidays. Her mother’s all too early and sudden death at this time brought heartache and difficult decisions for her father who begged her to return to school in Ballarat, this time to the boarding school at Sacred Heart College. Rita acquiesced reluctantly and, for us as for Rita, that move was to be an extraordinary blessing. Rita’s SHC school companions remember her as fun-loving and irrepressibly mischievous, life-time characteristics that have brought joy to so many people. In retrospect,

Rita would name her behaviour at this time as “challenging”. It was not until she left school and reconnected with her roots over a two-year period that she was able to deal with the death of the mother she so loved.

Rita joined the Sisters of Mercy in August 1945. Her profession on March 3, 1948 inaugurated a life-long ministry of mercy, first in secondary education, and then in social work. The vision of Catherine McAuley who established the House of Mercy for young women at risk in early 19C Dublin was in Rita’s DNA. The establishment of Lisa Lodge (1970), a home for young women on probation, was her first venture into this field. When Rita and Teresa Van Dyk returned home to St Martin’s late one night and informed us that they had just delivered a baby who refused to wait till they could get her young mum to the Base, we knew that boarding school supervision and secondary teaching was not the challenge that Rita sought. Rita was more at home helping to establish havens like Lisa Lodge Hostel and Hayeslee House and services such as Grow and Ballarat Lifeline. While she was immensely proud of teaching so many women to sew and to type, her life as an educator was too far from the edge for Rita.

From 1973 until early 1988, Rita’s ministry base was the Ballarat Diocesan Family Service. She combined work with on-going study for a BA in Social Work at the University of Ballarat. She took time out in 1984 to complete an MA in Community Development at Regis College in Denver Colorado. On her return to Australia, Rita was asked to head up the Diocesan Family Service. She faced the never-ending challenges of this work with competence and compassion, a powerful combination in any leader. Sharing community with Rita at this time was both a joy and an inspiration. Our lives in Howard Street, Ballarat North, were full of surprises.

May to November 1988 took Rita to Kew where she filled in as Assistant Coordinator at the Good Shepherd Day Centre. She then had the opportunity to pursue one of her long-held dreams, namely to work as a volunteer at the Jean Vanier Centre in Canberra. This lasted a short eight months. The tragic death in a plane crash of Cairns Mercy Sr Nadia was the catalyst for Rita to move to Cairns in July 1989 as Diocesan Director of Centacare. Rita remained in that role for five life-giving years. “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties [of the people of Cairns], especially those who were poor or in any way afflicted, these [became] the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of [this grace-filled, mercy-filled follower] of Christ’ (Gaudium et Spes 1).

If Rita thought she was due for a break, it was not about to happen. In September 1994 she was elected for a five year term as Congregation Leader of the Ballarat East Sisters of Mercy. We were privileged to have her as our leader and grateful for the vision she brought to the role. The burgeoning Mercy Associate Movement was a special interest of Rita’s over these years and remained so until the day she died. She rests in the knowledge that Mercy Associates have taken a new path with renewed vigour under new leadership.

In the celebrations for the Centenary of Federation, Rita was recognised as one of the ordinary Australian women who had led extraordinary lives. Characteristically, she made nothing of this and few of her friends were aware that her story was included in the exhibition in honour of Australia’s outstanding women. Further public recognition was to follow in the form of an honorary doctorate from the University of Ballarat and a Victorian Government Council on the Ageing Achievement Award.

Rita’s 20th century contribution to the Australia we want and the planet we want is exceeded only by her more recent 21st century activities. The turn of the millennium marked for Rita the 73rd year of her life and the beginning of sixteen years of free-wheeling. There was no stopping her. Members of countless groups can witness to her struggle for justice: her West Papuan and Sudanese friends; the former Ballarat Refugee

Support Group; ACU Social Concerns Committee; Ballarat AETA; Moving Towards Justice; Ballarat Multicultural Centre; the Shower Bus supporters; the Faith Commitment and Ecotheology Class; the local Mercy International Reflection Group with its focus on the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor; and above all, her Mercy Sisters and her family for whom she was both friend and inspiration.

Rita, to know the mind of God was quite a motto-more aspirational than most of us would dare to articulate. It was your motto. It was your constant search. In so many ways, you revealed the ways of God to us and to all who knew you. In that, you surely brought us closer to the mind of the God with whom you were fully united on the Feast of All Saints. You completed the work you were given to do with unparalleled vibrancy. You never spared yourself in the effort. Rest well from your labours! Yours was a graced and gracious life. Your family, your sisters and your friends declare you blessed!

#### Homily from Sr Rita's Funeral Mass – Fr John McKinnon

Today's Gospel Reading is so appropriate for this Year of Mercy. It is a fitting one for a true daughter of Catherine McAuley, and it is precisely the right one to provide a context to hold our memories of Rita: The Spirit of God is upon me. God has sent me to bring good news to the poor....to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favour.

I am thrilled to have been asked to lead this celebration this morning, and to have the opportunity of sharing with you some of my reflections on Rita. In the process I praise and thank the God whose trusted messenger she was. I have known Rita for just under fifty years, and a deep friendship has developed over that time. So many of you could say much the same thing. Over these last few days, Rita's death has had me pondering deeply. I am still finding it difficult to pin down quite how I am feeling. I resonate with St Paul, in his comment to his friends in Philippi [as we heard in today's Second Reading], I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy.... because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. It is not just joy. It is admiration, but it is more, too, than both those – something I cannot quite identify. The gospel, the good news, is a beautifully rich experience. Rita could share it with me and with so many others because she understood it so well and lived it so richly.

She was a thoughtful woman, but essentially was a woman of action. That is what I particularly admired about her. She did not just barrack for the right causes. She got in and did something practical.

As Veronica illustrated so well, she had a soft spot for the battlers at school. She was the ideal woman to give concrete shape to Lisa Lodge and to provide a solid and reliable presence for girls otherwise in danger. Her heading up the Diocesan Family Service was right down her alley, even if at times she had to face what she felt as inertia from others who did not share her dream. She experienced more freedom, I think, when she was invited to Cairns to consolidate the Family Service in that diocese. In all this, she was inspired by the example of Catherine McAuley and empowered by the Spirit of the God who had anointed her for the work of mercy.

After her time as Leader of the Ballarat Mercy Congregation, she got back to work letting the oppressed go free. She regularly visited the Maribyrnong Detention Centre, being friend and providing hope and support to refugees detained there. She developed a particular interest in refugees from West Papua; and here in Ballarat formed deep friendships with her beloved Sudanese families.

As more recently the shadow of institutional sexual abuse spread over the Church, deeply damaging some, particularly those immediately affected and their families, but also bewildering and deeply hurting all of us, she was acutely aware of the Church's need to reach out pastorally somehow to care for and support those in need. I respected her so much

for this. She offered understanding and friendship to those she knew, and took an active interest in the local largely lay group, Moving Towards Justice.

Deeply imbued with the spirit of Catherine, she was aware, too [as Veronica mentioned], that young women were no longer joining the congregation as they had in the past. Rather than sit and lament, she sought to share the spirit and mission of Catherine with people who chose to remain in their lay state and to spread the good news from there. She was particularly proud of the way that Mercy Associates here in Ballarat opened their lives to the call of mercy and sought ways to deepen that spirit and to support each other in their mission to the world.

But for Rita the gospel was more than hard work and advocacy. It was always good news, and life called out to be enjoyed. Never a scriptural literalist, nevertheless she did warm to Isaiah's vision of life lived with God, as recorded in today's First Reading, as a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. She was a great cook and enjoyed entertaining and being entertained. I shared her enthusiasm – always in a receiving capacity. Personally, I have shared many joy-filled days with Rita. I don't know precisely how many times we went camping in the Flinders Ranges. Accommodation was basic, but the food and wines and the beautiful setting ensured that everything tasted exquisite. Rita and whoever else was with us shared the cooking [and if I could manage to look busy for long enough, the washing-up, too]. My role was the transport and security. The evenings were so often still, the conversation real, with the sheer beauty of the spot gently but insistently invited us to wonder and prayer.

Along with Paul and his friends of Philippi, we confidently, if reluctantly, entrust Rita to our gracious and merciful God, proud of her having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

My sense of heaven is that it will be more a dance [at least in between the courses of the feast] than rest. Rita will be a natural. May she dance forever – in peace!