

# REPORT TO THE 2016 MSC

## CHAPTER

JOHN MULROONEY MSC

In late September and early October 2016 the Australian province of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart held a Chapter meeting. The following is a section of the report to the Chapter by Fr John Mooney MSC, the Provincial Superior.

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When I started to think about this report last month I thought about the reality of the last six years.

It might be good to begin today with the words of Pope Francis from his letter to Religious in the Year of Consecrated Life: *'Live the present with passion and embrace the future with hope, going out to all the world proclaiming the Gospel of Joy.'* And in other homilies, media interviews and visits- he constantly calls on religious to leave their comforts behind and go to the 'periphery'. He is asking us to find our true identity amongst those in the margins.

Again, he asks us to ask ourselves in prayer: 'has my prayer life, my spirituality, my lifestyle, my way of living community, my way of doing my ministry been impacted by my radical, Christ like concern for the poor in my ministry?' Good question!

I wanted to spend the first part of my report in reflection on Religious Life as it has been lived in the past, is lived now and into the future in the western (or 1st) world.....

### *A Context*

As you know, religious life has been very adaptable throughout history, reinventing

itself in response to the challenges in the church and in society.

It began in the *early Christian centuries* with hermits, ascetics living a very radical form of prayer and Gospel living. This was in part a response to the Empire declaring Christianity the official religion of the empire and some Christians wanting to preserve the 'message' in a pure form.

The 5th Century saw the rise of the stable *monastic communities*—groups of men and women living communal life. This was the longest most stable period where little changed and things went on in each new century in much the same way as the last! This period lasted 700 years!

The 12th Century saw the rise of the *mendicants* who sought to live lives of simplicity and poverty and left the monasteries and went on the move to be with the people and the issues. *Eg*, Franciscans and Dominicans.

The 16th Century saw the rise of the *apostolic orders* in response to pressing needs in the church and Society, *eg* the Jesuits

17th to 19th century was the emergence of the men and women's *apostolic orders* (and ourselves)—no longer cloistered.

In the 20th century we see the emergence of the *secular institutes* and *lay movements*, *ie* consecrated laity.

As the world changed, the needs of people changed—and so too did Religious Life and how it responded to those needs. Each of these times saw a gradual change in the image and the basic way of living religious life. And each period of radical change was also met with some official hostility. (We see that even

today, *ie* USA nuns; vocation material in media with no mention of the thousands of women religious out there on the streets with the refugees, with the women victims of domestic violence etc; recent literature on the year of Consecrated life not mentioning the reality today!)

Each of those significant periods of change was very challenging and at times quite painful for everyone involved. As Francis of Assisi said in the 12th Century, 'They will try to drive you back into your monasteries—do not let them'. In the first world *we are right in the middle of one of those periods of change* and it comes with all its uncertainties—I describe it like a 'cloud of unknowing'; there is grieving for the 'way things were' (or at least a perception of the 'way things were'); there are struggles to 'let go'; struggles to change; there can be a sense of 'not much happening' and also things 'as we know them just falling away' and at times there is a frustration in that! I think we all feel bits of each of these things from time to time!

Every religious congregation has a founding story and ours is one that began with Jules Chevalier who had a particular (though not original) insight into living the Gospel in a particular way with its emphasis on the compassionate heart of Christ. We call that particularity 'our charism'—and it determines *why we do what we do and why we do it as we do it*.

And our life is based on three core things that haven't changed through the centuries: (1) Prayer—this is central otherwise there is little time with Christ and nourishment for the spiritual journey (we cannot live as religious unless we live a life of contemplative intimacy with God); (2) Community with all its challenges and (3) Mission—on mission for the Kingdom of God; trying to be prophetic, saying it as it is, speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak (the sick, the poor, the marginalized, the disabled etc); inspiring others to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak; trying to interpret the signs of the times. These have



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been the core tenets of religious life through the ages.

### **Today**

As religious today (and particularly here in Australia) we have been 'bashed around a bit' and rightly so by the public response to the story of sins of abuse and denial and indifference to victims *and* we have also been buffeted on every side—there have been the forces in our own western culture, materialism and individualism and a Royal Commission which has brought the church to its knees in the eyes of the general public.

In the midst of all that I have found us collectively as a community and as individuals getting on with things. I have found us to be more grounded in our Charism; clearer about what our core mission is. I have tried to pick up on that and emphasise what I see going on through my newsletters quoting from the founder; from MSC writers and so on. There has been a shift in us from a bit of 'despair' about the future to an acceptance of the 'realities of the present' we live in and some hope about what the future might mean for us.

A past student of Chevalier College (who lately has become involved with Jesuit spirituality and mission) said to me recently: 'what is the special mark of the MSC? What is your 'corporate mission?' I think we have never been clearer: our mission is the same as it was in 1854—through our lives and our communities to make the heart of Christ known and loved! In another phrase—we are called

to be on earth the heart of God. *We were called and are called still to the education and formation of people in a spirituality of the heart of Jesus in whatever ministry and work we do.* That is the core!!! What we do is kind of secondary. Our mission is in the 'how' we do things. For those who always like to think in terms of outcomes: *how we see things, determines how we do things and how we do things determines what we get in the end.* There is almost nothing we do as a 'religious'; that we cannot do as a lay person. So being a religious speaks of a 'way of being' rather than a function or a role. In the pre-chapter meetings we affirmed this again and again and have a strong sense as a group, that this is what we offer to people and the world.

In the midst of any great change there is always a temptation to believe that our choices are limited. That we are constrained by age, by diminishing numbers, by official church expectations that we will carry on as we always have without encountering the depth issues about what is going on in the world; what is going on in the church and what is going on in our own congregation.

I have said it before and others have said it before me - We never had a 'golden age' of our province. There were only men, human as we are here today, all just a bit broken—men, who loved God, grappled and struggled with a sense of being loved by God, men who were sinners, men who cared for persons in need, took on new things, built institutions and dreamt of all sorts of possibilities. Here today in this chapter, we are as human, as broken, sinful and flawed *and* as gifted as they were—and still in touch with the core mission, albeit with a slightly different language, liturgical and cultural expression than the mid-nineteenth century.

In terms of ministry, when I joined in 1972 I was headed (like those around me were) for either missions, schools or parishes—the three core institutional ministries that gave us our identity. I was very much part of a big hard labour force. Now, that is not the case and this

has been one of the biggest shifts in our Province. From large collective institutional ministries we have increasingly moved, by discerning choice as much as by necessity, to much smaller, personalized ministries. The 'exception' that was in 1972 is now becoming more normal. I think we have learned over many years now that we cannot reduce the mission to some traditional institutional ministries (good work though they are) and remain complacent!

The young men who have joined us in recent years are extraordinary men. I say to each of you individually (and I have said this to you before) —You have been formed very beautifully in our spirituality which will be at the heart of whatever ministry you undertake. (Our thanks to your formators and others who have influenced you) I don't think we are asking you to lead the institution that is in existence now! We are not asking you to 'fill gaps'. I think we are asking you to lead the community that is coming into existence—be it here or elsewhere in the world. I know that is putting a huge responsibility on your shoulders but this is all part of our present reality.

Religious life is not dying. Religious life as it has been expressed and lived in the western world is dying. That is a fact! The grieving and dying side of the paschal mystery is amplified in religious life today. The future of religious life is not dependent on the future of this religious congregation—the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. It is the charism and the mission that is not coming to an end.....

Because—It is about the charism, not the congregation! Charisms have a congregation! (Not the other way round)

Charisms endure. Apostolic works fade. In any of our discussions, prayer and sharing - we must not confuse the two. And as Pope Francis says: 'Charisms are not a bottle of distilled water' With all the science and the emerging ecological theology and consciousness we know the universe is not a static place—it is an ongoing, unfolding and emerging event. And we are called to be part

of that and aware of the interconnectedness of all things.

As for the future, the question of the charism is a difficult one. We continually grapple with the questions: To whom do we pass on the responsibility of the charism when the professed members are no longer alive? Can the charism realistically exist outside of us? Must it have a future? Can we trust the church of the future to discover those elements of the Gospel of Jesus that inspired Jules Chevalier?

These questions will remain questions for us in the coming years.

Would this short quotation from Johannes Metz in *Followers of Christ* have anything to say to us today: 'Religious congregations are more apt to appear in times of turmoil and disorientation. These are the historical times when pain is deeper and aspirations more acute, when a settled world's values are up-ended, in short, when an old world is dissolving and a new world is in the making.' Charism is at its most active here.

### ***Future***

What future can we look forward to? Well, we do not know what we do not know! ( Jules lived with the same reality in his time.)

Our future of course depends as always on the mysterious hand of God's providence and work in the world! If I could borrow the words of Les Murray: (and I love this line) 'We should not, I suggest, be tempted to see ourselves as a team that has to win for God; He is not helpless—and anyway His idea of a win was the cross!!!'

Having said that, the future also depends on how we, collectively and individually, answer the deeper questions. The answers to any questions we have about the future can only come out of and be lived only within the hearts and lives of each of us! Each of us here in this chapter and also in the hearts of those not present with us today!

There are no pat, easy answers. If we did

have the answers we would be greatly loved and in demand by every congregation in the western world asking us to share our game plan!

I don't think we should worry too much about diminishing numbers—every reading of history will discover that almost every change in the world can be traced to a few people or even one individual determined to make a difference.

Paul Stenhouse shared this quote from Ronald Knox in the 1940's at an Graduation Ceremony at ACU: 'Old landmarks seem obliterated, and...the world seems to have exhausted itself and has no vigour left...We are so engrossed in our own plans, five year plans, ten year plans, and the rest of it, that we assume they must be God's plans too...But for all we can tell, God may be working out of five thousand year plans or a ten thousand year plan of his own; we may still be living, for all we know, in the early church.'

I have a gut instinct that we will get to where we are going by remembering who we are and remain true to the mystery of our charism, and we continue to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God! We can only go forward from a place of deep prayer. In situations where we do not know the way ahead—it is only prayer and contemplation that allows what wants to emerge to show itself.

I have no doubt that God is at work in all this uncertainty and 'cloud of unknowing'.

### ***Our Schools***

Our schools are still a significant part of our contact with young people. The ministry is vibrant and life giving because it is about young people and forming them.

You may remember Chapters forty years ago when the brothers argued strongly at Chapters that as our professed members diminished we needed to consolidate those we had into the one or two schools and abandon the others. *That is not where the*

*spirit was leading us!* Instead the spirit led us to see the way forward was formation and education of lay people in our charism and spirituality. This great ministry has continued and the education and formation of lay people has been our main ministry and is now primarily in the hands of other lay people and they are very good at it. You see the gradual shift!

Through their work and the work of the professed members in schools, there has been a real deepening of appreciation, and living of the charism and Spirituality of the Heart. The ministry is consistent with Chevalier's vision of lay people contributing to the mission. (By contrast of 40 years ago—there are now only 4.7 full-time equivalent professed MSC working at the coal face in our schools).

The formation of staff in the charism and spirituality are key priorities, and so not only are young people formed but so too is a large number of adults, who make a difference not only in their schools but also the community and wider church.

It has been said before at Chapters that these schools are more MSC in spirit and character than they ever were. That is still true. As one who went to an MSC school in the sixties and then worked in them in the 80's and beyond I know it first hand. This is not a criticism of those who loved and cared for me as a student in the sixties but a reflection that they did not have the benefit of the 'Cuskelly re-founding' with a new language to express an age-old spirituality. We worked for many years on how that spirituality might impact on the culture, the life and the teaching in a school. And it does impact for good. The quality of relationships at all levels is different than what it was for me in the 60's.

An example of this: I remember after my 40 year re-union at Chevalier College and I was the Headmaster at the time. After our dinner the buses took us to one of the trendy pubs in Bowral and as we walked in I found half of Year 12 students were in there. When they saw who was there a cheer went up, the mike was grabbed from the band and I was

introduced to all the patrons and after that there was lots of hugs and 'highfives' and I didn't have to buy a drink for the rest of the night. All my classmates could say was: 'but they don't seem to fear you.' 'Fear' has been replaced by 'love' as fundamental to the relationships in our school.

We should be very proud of our Colleges!

Our school Principals are a very fine group of men and women and deeply committed to our charism, spirit and values. They value deeply their contact with and experience of the professed MSC as do the members of our College Boards. As one Principal said to me a few years ago: 'I have worked with lots of other congregations and CEO's and I had no idea that there was this MSC way of doing things. This relational style of leadership from the heart really works. Thank you'.

We have chosen to still remain with a slight 'hand on the tiller' in our schools and still have governance contact between the schools and the Provincial Administration. We have not chosen to go the way of PJP's for the foreseeable future.

I think we can be confident that our college communities express beautifully our charism and spirit. Like any community they are not perfect and don't always get it right but they are committed to living and working in the spirit of our charism and constitutions.

Like all our ministry we must always be in continual discernment as we move forward into the future.

I think it is fair to say that we have learnt how to do an 'old thing' in a 'new way'!

### ***Our Parishes***

We are still committed to a significant number of parishes—mostly in middle class and upper middle class areas of Australia. The men in our parishes exhaust themselves in their commitment to the people. The level of enthusiasm in ministry is still strong. In recent years the Parish committee has been (among many other things) trying to develop in the

parishes a greater consciousness of MSC spirituality and how that might be embedded in the people and life of the parish. Together with this they have been working on developing lay leadership within parish communities.

The Parish group have some serious hopes and dreams about formation of parishes in our charism and spirituality. A lot of effort still needs to be done to make concrete and focus on what precisely is to be achieved and how that might be achieved. There is a call for more formation in heart spirituality in our parish communities.

One of the tensions in trying to embed the charism within a parish community is: what happens when we leave the parish and, for example, the Franciscans take over....Down comes the picture of Jules and up goes St. Francis. A different charism is introduced and emphasised.

I guess in real terms as MSC we touch the lives of the people in our care in a certain place and time. In the last 140 years we have appointed men to dozens and dozens of parishes throughout Australia and New Zealand and then left those parishes and hopefully the people of that time were touched by the charism and spirit of our men. It was true then and is still true even more so today—that wherever there is an MSC it is an MSC ministry.

In the 20's and 30's and even into the 40's we were much more 'mobile' as a group—men going to different parishes in different parts of the country for periods of time. With the increase in vocations in the 50's and the need to have men gainfully employed we became more settled in some parishes and worked to maintain our presence there year after year. This has made the leaving more difficult during these times.

The simple reality is that the Bishops of Australia require that each parish have a parish priest in residence—someone ordained with sacred oil on their hands. Our parish priests are getting older and many of them unable to

think about taking on a new parish and getting to know everyone at this stage of their lives. To bring in large numbers of men from other Provinces is an open question and would require a five to ten year plan of preparing younger men for the responsibilities of being PP. Province members have different opinions on this and perhaps it is an issue for this Chapter. Whatever happens in this regard we will be leaving some parishes in the not too distant future.

A significant work of the Parish Committee has been the restructuring of: 'An MSC review of parish Life and Ministry.' The quality of our men's personal reflections and the feedback from parishioners beautifully affirms our men who have undergone the review in recent years.

Our thanks to the men who have come from other Provinces to be with us in ministry: Our thanks to them for bringing with them their culture and life and our thanks to those of you who have supported, nurtured and cared for them during their time with us.

There have been a couple of significant gatherings of our parish men and parishioners during the last six years and the focus of their time together has been about the future and about lay leadership in parishes where MSC are in ministry.

The work of on-going appraisals of men and women in these ministries has continued apace and is an important contribution to the professionalism of the ministry.

Last year we celebrated 100 years of parish ministry in the Diocese of Adelaide. We have had men in Brompton, Hindmarsh, Croydon, Henley, Blackwood, Millicent, Snowtown, Albert Park, Flinders Park and others as well as chaplaincies in hospitals and colleges, supply ministry, lectures and retreats, in-services and so on. A very significant contribution during those 100 years.

There is need for some on-going serious thinking about our commitments to parish ministry and what we are wanting to achieve as a community.

**Ad Gentes—Our Mission in other Countries**

When we look at the men we still have from Australia working in ministry in Papua New Guinea we see them impacting very significantly in the church and society of PNG. Each of these men is inserted into the local church. They do not work together and their paths do not cross all that often; there is always the danger of becoming addicted to work responsibilities because of a lack of communal life. There is some disappointment about the gradual reduction of MSC presence in Eastern Papua.

These men, each in their own way, are truly inspirational. They are well motivated in our MSC Mission.

Japan offers truly enormous challenges particularly for the younger men who are sent to work in very small parish communities throughout central Japan. One needs enormous courage to work in ministry in Japan. It can be a lonely ministry. As with PNG I always come away from a short visit in admiration of how they do what they do. The four Australian men who are working there are getting older and there are no Australians in sight who will follow them. Japan is a multi-cultural MSC community with men from Indonesia, Philippines, Australia, Japan and more recently, India. It requires serious inculturation to each others cultures as well as to the Japanese culture and demands conscious efforts and self-sacrifices. It has been a challenge for some of the Australian men over the years to 'let go' the old ways of doing things and allow new thoughts and ways of being in ministry. There are significant challenges facing the Region: aging churchgoers; fewer young people engaged with church; vocations; the expenses of maintaining plant that exists etc. For example, in the Catholic community of Japan, there are only about 1000 eligible men for religious life who are practicing Catholics and we have 16 Diocese and maybe 100 religious

congregations all fishing!

There has been a growing ministry amongst the migrant workers from other countries. The ministry is often associated with domestic problems, broken marriages, domestic violence, work related troubles, abuses, overstay of visas, etc.

There will be need for ongoing discernment about the future of the Japan Region and how we will be present there and under whose governance?

While we have few bodies to send 'ad gentes' anymore like we did in the past. There are other ways we have been on mission 'ad gentes'. In the APIA region there is close collaboration between Provincials. We have been able to support a great number of men through the province's resources and the Mission office to be trained in formation and spiritual direction. We have also provided opportunities for men from other countries for further study in English language and academic study as well as gain experience in parish ministry.

You may remember that most of the men on mission in other countries gathered for a mission conference in Sydney a couple of years ago. After attending the conference in the city we spent two days in reflection and sharing on our ministry. This was a very positive and affirming experience for the men.

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Each of these three areas of ministry have been very good channels for our mission. However, we must always be in 'continual discernment' about how clearly these ministries express our unique MSC mission? And, do we express our mission in ministries that clearly identify us as MSC?

**Vietnam**

It is timely to say something about Vietnam. It has now been twelve years since we established a footprint in Vietnam. Our

Superior General said to me once that he thought this is the best foundation undertaken by the Congregation. The growth has been careful, steady and focused on introducing the charism and building deep and strong foundations in the hearts of the men who have joined us rather than the usual great focus on infrastructure first. As I said it has been careful and steady growth. There is still much to be done of course as we move forward through each stage of the foundation of a Province. We have not been rushing things.

The challenges ahead for us are many but the significant ones include: recognition by the Government of Vietnam; building infrastructure; further study and preparation for roles in the province of the future; ministry possibilities; financial support from Australia.....

. Our efforts in Vietnam, while primarily driven by the Australian Province, is a work of the APIA region. It is not possible for us to do what we do without APIA support.

This whole endeavour is a real positive for us and just shows what can happen with a vision and minimal number of human bodies plus other resources such as finances to support the endeavors of the men. At the general Chapter before last we did get a bit of a rebuke from the chair about going into Vietnam from Australia without first securing the support of other APIA provinces. However, I do not think we would have the same result as we have today if we had three different provinces working on the establishment of the mission. Going in first, taking to the deep, trusting in God's providence and our own common sense and Australian way of doing things, making the decisions and then seeking support from other Provinces I think was the best way to go.

Vietnam will remain a most important priority of the Australian Province resources for the next 20 years (and more).

### *Lay MSC / Lay Professed Council*

What remarkable people we have in ministry with us. They are a very diverse group. Actively involving the laity in the heart of the MSC mission is living the dream of the Founder, Jules Chevalier.

Lay MSC refers to those people who have made a public commitment to living a 'Spirituality of the Heart' and sharing in the mission of the Congregation. It also refers to the many people in some of our ministries (and outside any formal ministry) who live this without making any formal commitment.

With a view to entrusting more responsibility to the Lay MSC, a Lay/Professed Council was established some seven years ago. The emphasis of the group (among other emphasis) has been in promoting a ministry to young adults. All MSC schools have appointed someone to foster the spiritual growth of interested past students.

There is an energy and commitment amongst our lay MSC that wants to continue to explore ways forward and continue the journey as we come to understand more deeply the original vision of Jules Chevalier.

So many of our Lay MSC simply call themselves an MSC and feel accepted as such. What a wonderful thing!

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Whatever we decide about ourselves at this Chapter:

—Our life must always be sustained by an experience of God; silent time with God is a non-negotiable;

—Our life is be lived in 'brotherhood';

—Our lives will continue to inspire others by the simple witness of our lives; this is the thing I see everywhere—people touched by our humanity, our ordinariness, our non-clerical mindset and who we are as human beings;

—Our ministry and mission, in whatever

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place and time, will always tend towards the marginalized; and

—Will be open to lay people.

And I would add—silent prayer with others and a sharing of 'what came up in my prayer' must continue in those communities in which it is common practice and encouraged in others; and where possible spiritual direction is essential.

In terms of our commitments in ministry as a Province: during the last six years we have (and in no particular order):

—Strongly affirmed our commitment to young people through our ministry of education and supporting the on-going work of formation through the Chevalier Institute;

—Strongly affirmed the ministry at Douglas Park, Heart of Life, Shoreham and those engaged in adult education/formation

ministry;

—Strongly affirmed our on-going commitment, in conjunction with our APIA brothers, to the eventual establishment of Vietnam as a Province of the Congregation;

—Strongly affirmed our engagement with lay people;

—Strongly affirmed the ministry with Aboriginal people of the north;

—Strongly affirmed and encouraged those working in more personalised ministries and an openness to responding in new ways to the needs of the church and the world.

During our pre-chapter meetings it was quite clear that our overall 'priority' is to live well as MSC and be on earth the compassionate and merciful heart of God. (and we thought that may be enough to say)!

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The MSC first came to Sydney from France in 1885, in order to establish a supply base for their new missions in New Guinea that had been founded in 1882 near Rabaul, on the island of New Britain.

The MSC originally settled in the Eastern suburbs of the expanding city of Sydney. Within a few years the congregation began to accept local Australian vocations and a mission seminary was established at the Sacred Heart Monastery, Kensington (opened 1897). The foundation continued to grow and within a few years a separate MSC Australian Province was erected in 1905 with Father Pierre Marie Treand as the first Provincial.

In the following years the Australian MSC accepted a variety of ministries at the service of the Church not only in Australia but also in the islands of Oceania, and in Asia. Today there are about 150 members of the Australian Province.

In Australia we work in Parishes, among youth in Colleges, in Spirituality and Retreat Centres, among urban and traditional aboriginal Australians, in Tertiary Institutions, in Media, in hospital chaplaincies and among people suffering with HIV/AIDS, as well as in Justice and Peace ministries. Overseas, there are Australian MSC working for the development of the local churches of Papua New Guinea and the Islands of the Pacific, in China, Japan, India and Vietnam, as well as in Media and communication.