

## E-BULLETIN #34

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*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5,16)*

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item 71

### 40-year passage to India

**A conversation with Sr Josapha Lergessner, teacher, tractor driver, orphanage 'mother'**



'LUCKY': Sr Josapha "was lucky to get a mission appointment" which led to her spending most of her life in India, "a land of mystery".

Sr Josapha Lergessner's heart belongs to India, where she spent more than 40 years as a Holy Spirit Missionary Sister. "It was my life, and I still miss it terribly," says Sr Josapha, who celebrated her 80th birthday earlier this year.

She was born Margaret Lergessner in Brisbane, Australia, and the family later grew with the arrival of her younger brother. "I never knew until after I entered the convent that my name was German," she says. "They didn't speak of it, and no-one's around to ask any longer."

She left school at the age of 13 when the job of supporting the family fell to her with the sudden death of her father. "He was only 39," she says. "He had what the doctor thought was a boil on the back of the neck, when in reality it was a carbuncle." He died of blood poisoning within days. "He was a big, strong, hefty man and you couldn't even imagine him lying in bed. "He was the eldest son of his parents and you don't expect a young man of 39 to just drop dead within a week."

Sr Josapha's mother didn't cope with the loss of her husband. "She had a breakdown. She tried to get some work but ... I had to go and pick up some shorthand and typing, and get a job." Sr Josapha was offered a junior position with Eagers, a subsidiary of General Motors, where her father had been employed. Though unable to keep up with shorthand, she loved typing, and her small wage supported the family. "There was no alternative," she says.

At 19 she felt called to religious life.

"Eventually I decided I would enter, but I didn't know where. I went to various congregations on a Saturday afternoon ... they would always ask, 'What are your qualifications?'" These orders, of teachers and nurses, had no place for a young woman who had been working since she left school at 13. With the help of her aunt, Sr Josapha went to the local post office and found a list of religious orders in the phone book. "We went down the list of all these places I had been, and eventually we came across the Holy Spirit Missionary convent, at Aspley [Qld]. "They said, 'We can make use of anybody in the missions'."

The Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters were established in Australia in 1944 when 23 survivors of Japanese prison camps and death ships in Papua New Guinea arrived in Brisbane. A missionary order, the Sisters had been serving the people of PNG before World War II. The survivors were the minority, with the tragic death of 54 Sisters in occupied PNG. The Sisters were invited by then Archbishop of Brisbane, Archbishop James Duhig, to establish a novitiate house, where Sr Josapha first entered the convent.

She was professed in 1956 and was “lucky to get a mission appointment”, in a kitchen in India. “It was India, I thought it would be wonderful. I thought it was a land of mystery.”

She left Australia from Darwin and still remembers what went through her mind on departure. “As I left Darwin it was near sunset and sitting where I was I happened to look down when we took off. “I saw the outline, and I thought, ‘It’s gone, I’ll never see it again’. Because we went for life.” She arrived in Bombay in July 1959. “What a wonderful spiritual people here ... everywhere people are praying.” She travelled to **Indore**, India, almost equidistant between Bombay and Delhi, where her mission would last more than 40 years.

“As the train came in, I heard beggars calling out and I saw somebody try to hold onto the bars of the train, but he had no fingers. He was a leper. “When I had been a young kid I had taken a book that my father had had in his treasure chest, and that was of Damien of Molokai, Damien the leper. I read that hoping my father would never find I touched his book. “And I thought, ‘One day I’ll work among lepers’. “So when I came to that station that morning, that was the first leper I’d ever seen, and immediately my mind went back.

“I arrived in Indore and I never got to the kitchen.” Instead, she spent a few weeks learning basic Hindi before being given a home sciences class to teach. She threw herself into any task asked of her, from driving a tractor in her habit to visiting poor families to delivering more than 40 babies in her time there.

Sr Josapha says she has been “very lucky” that her faith was rarely challenged in India. She got to know a group of students who wanted to enter a religious order but, as in her own case, had no formal qualifications. The bishop eventually gave permission to establish a diocesan congregation, which has grown from four to 280 Sisters.

“It was 1965 when we started that congregation and we could do things which the major congregations couldn’t do at that time, because we had the freedom to do it while the others had to make so many changes.”

Sr Josapha worked with Sr Baptista Simon to teach locals skills such as sewing and help them pay off a sewing machine so they could earn an income and share the skills with others. “It had to be not just for Catholics; everything had to be done irrespective of race, caste, creed.”

When the families ministered to by the Sisters repeatedly developed colds from sleeping on the floor, the order approached a local school for the blind which ran metalwork classes. “They made the beds. They benefited because they made the beds, and our people got off the floor.”

Contact with friends and family in Australia was limited in the early years, when letters took months to arrive. Despite her commitment to going to India for life, she did have an opportunity to visit after more than a decade in India. “I only came back the first time in the 1970s, and already Australia had changed.” She had suffered a burst ovary and was sent home to recover. Instead, she spent the time gathering essentials to take back to India. Her luggage on the return flight included more than nine suitcases and several stovetops. But, eternally grateful to Qantas, she wasn’t charged for any of it. And though she dreaded having the luggage searched on arriving in Bombay, the customs officer merely pointed at the nearest door. “He said, ‘Madam, the exit is over there’. It was too much to go through.”

It was on that first visit ‘home’ to Australia that Sr Josapha realised her understanding of home had changed. “I was anxious to go back [to India], the whole time I was here. “When you went there, you went forever, so if you stayed aloof and kept with your kind, you would never settle in. But when you mix with the people and learn their language, it becomes home.” Sr Josapha became fluent in Hindi, which was used for prayers and liturgies as well as everyday communication, and the order took to wearing a white sari as their habit.

One day the Sisters took in two children whose parents had died. They were joined almost immediately by two more children, and Sr Josapha’s orphanage had begun. “Then I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if it was like a family, if we had a baby? How can we get a baby?’” Sr Josapha visited a local hospital where two baby girls had been abandoned: a healthy one-year-old and a sickly infant just a couple of weeks old. “The younger one was all shrivelled up, she’d been found abandoned, and she really looked so weak.” Despite the doctor’s advice, Sr Josapha took the ill child, and told the doctor: ‘At least before she dies she will know somebody wanted her.’ Instead, she thrived under the Sisters’ care and is now married with a child of her own. “I love her to bits,” Sr Josapha says.

When Sr Josapha was asked to “move on” by a bishop, she returned home to a country she hadn’t been part of since her twenties, and to an order that no longer wore a habit. “I lived outside my congregation for 35 years so I’m having to learn how to be part of the congregation and at the same time learning to be an Australian again. “It was very difficult. When I came back I was at a loss at what to do here.”

By chance, she told a member of the World Conference of Religions for Peace that she was “looking for somewhere to belong”. She was immediately invited to join the group, and was elevated to convenor before stepping down two years ago. Eager to keep busy, she now works with anti-trafficking groups and visits refugees in detention.

She admits to being a little sketchy on Australia’s modern history, and is now catching up on the years she missed. “Many things have happened in Australia and I don’t have a clue,” she says.

She still misses her rapidly growing family in Indore, the Sisters she left behind, and the country where she feels most at home. “It’s just that feeling of familiarity that I miss.”

by Sharyn McCowen  
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item 71

## solitude and the pre-dawn prayer



Sr Naomie-Ruth Vanakulasingham’s community of Benedictine nuns give to the church through the fullness of prayer. Yet her monastic life has found an unlikely pairing in the use of digital technology, says Dan McAloon of the Broken Bay Institute.

A life of prayerful solitude inside a Benedictine abbey is so far removed from the rush of the digital age it would appear that the two are incompatible.

No so. It’s what you choose to take from the digital world that matters, says Sister Naomie-Ruth Vanakulasingham, a Benedictine nun who lives in a community of religious women at Jamberoo in the NSW Southern Highlands.

Sr Naomie is studying a bachelor of theology degree through The Broken Bay Institute, University of Newcastle [NSW]. So far all her coursework has been completed online. “I have

done five units through Broken Bay and now after a break I'm coming back to my studies and I love it." Online learning, she says, complements the monastic life.

"We have a very full life of prayer and work," says Sr Naomie. "To go online for study we need special permission, but given my disciplined life in community it's a very attractive, practical way of learning." Sister Sr Naomie-Ruth entered the Benedictine community 15 years ago, at age 26. "I was all set up for life, I had a career that I loved and I assumed that I would marry."

But the memory of coming to the abbey on retreat years before with a youth group never left her. "That first encounter with the nuns really stayed with me. My first remark was, 'I wish I could live this life'."

The Abbey is well known as a retreat centre where people of different walks and faiths come to stay at cottages located on the grounds. "You have to be open and reverence the other person's spiritual path – whether Hindu, Buddhist or Anglican – it's irrelevant," says Sr Naomie. "They have to go back to the world to do good."

"My goal at the end of my journey is to be one with the Lord. Prayer is my whole life," she says. "We give through the fullness of the prayer, or we are not living our vocation. It is our gift to the church."

There is something very profound that this community of religious women should wake at 4 am and in that lonely hour when the circadian rhythm slows, and so often the spirit leaves the body, pray for those of us who are sick, anguished, or afraid of the dawn.

This is their prayer:

*"Lord our God, As we keep watch with you this night we commend all people and their lives to you. We remember in particular all those who are working. Those who in their suffering cannot sleep. Those who are afraid of the day about to dawn. May they all come out into the light of your Day. We ask you this, through Jesus, our Lord."*

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