

# From Services to Silkwood and Beyond... The Migrant Apostolate

*Sr. Mary Jeanne La Spina*

It was already dusk, and Ginger, our smallest draught horse, trod carefully in the shallows of Liverpool Creek, drawing the sulky with me and my brother on board. The Franciscan Sisters were coming to Silkwood, and Father Natali had no convent, bedding, or food for them. Money was scarce immediately after World War II, as most of the Italian cane farmers, including my father, had been interned for up to three years, since the far north of Queensland was declared a war zone because of the threat of a Japanese invasion.

My brother and I had organized a bush dance in Silkwood to raise funds for the Sisters. At the end of that night, we handed Father Natali eighty pounds, a sum which later that year would take me eighteen weeks to earn as a full-time clerical worker in Melbourne.

There were more sulky rides in January 1948 that took us this time to neighbouring farms for fresh milk and oranges for the Sisters' breakfast. Fasting from midnight, this breakfast was long overdue at eleven a.m.! The Sisters had been driven the twenty miles from Silkwood to Cowley to attend Mass.

So it was that I met the Franciscan daughters of Elizabeth Hayes for the first time in my own home. Elizabeth, and even Francis of Assisi, were strangers to me then. At twenty-one years of age, it puzzled me why five Sisters would travel a thousand miles from Brisbane to bury themselves in Silkwood, a small railway siding with the larger towns of Tully and Innisfail eighteen miles either side of it. What a waste, I thought!

Here I am now, looking back over a span of forty-six years, with an ever deepening awareness of Elizabeth Hayes and the far-reaching effect of her fourth vow, which challenges each of her followers to be faithful to the missionary charism. To this day, any appointment, even to an inner city apostolate, is seen as a "mission." And as a daughter of migrants working for present-day migrants, it inspires me to look back to Elizabeth's earliest days in Sevres, France, where she disclosed her preference for the migrant apostolate by opening a mission for immigrants there.

Silkwood, for her, could have been the Sevres of France or even the Belle Prairie of the Mississippi. It is a thousand miles from the seat of parliament, a place of hardships where only the pioneering spirit could survive.

The Bishop of Cairns had already appealed to the religious congregations working in his diocese to open a school for the children of migrants, whose number more than doubled for seven months each year when the cane cutters and their families moved into barracks for the harvesting season.

Sisters were numerous then, yet no group other than the Missionary Franciscan Sisters responded to the pleas from Silkwood. That same strong sense of mission that drew the daughters of Elizabeth Hayes to Silkwood would call them north across the equator to Papua New Guinea, out into the red heart of our continent to Dajarra and Tennant Creek, and

across to the northwestern tribal lands and islands of our aboriginal people. Our sense of mission and readiness to respond patterned the commitment of the Foundress. I feel that my own life, when it draws to a close, will be a song of thanksgiving for that unquenchable spirit of mission, caught from and passed on to me by the daughters of Elizabeth Hayes.

Three and a half years after that memorable breakfast, as I donned the postulant's garb in Kedron, the Novice Mistress handed me a letter from Mother Jarlath in Silkwood, welcoming me into the Franciscan Family. Her words are still etched in my memory: "I have prayed earnestly to Mother Foundress to send us vocations from the North ..." She was writing the letter six miles from the home of my childhood, and receiving it put me completely at ease.

That instant sensation of belonging among the Sisters has unfolded a secret understanding of charism which has deepened into personal conviction for me over the years. Yes, I do recognize the particular charism of Francis, Clare, and Elizabeth within the order, but I ask myself: How is it perpetuated? Is it a bright flame that gradually warms our hearts as we become more exposed to it and finally sets us aglow with its brightness? I guess there's some truth in that. But what gives me deeper satisfaction is the thought that when God created me for my eternal destiny, He implanted deep in my being the charism which, in the timing of His Providence, would one day lead me to recognize the family I belonged to, and instantly make me feel at home there. That's how it was for me.

In fantasy I like to see the ceremony of light at the Easter Vigil, with Francis and Clare going up together to light their tapers from the Christ Candle, then passing on the flame to Elizabeth, and we, in turn, bearing the light to one another.

In a similar mood of fantasy, I would see us for the centenary of our Foundress, gathered with lighted candles around a large map of Australia (and Papua New Guinea, our offspring!), placing these lights wherever our Sisters have been missioned since 1930. The group in the tableau would appear diminished in number and represent an aging community, yet I would be mindful that frailty never quenched the ardour of Clare, Francis, or our courageous Elizabeth, who had a lifelong battle with poor health.

Through pastoral ministry, the caring professions, aboriginal apostolate education, I see our Sisters facing the challenge of the times, and in particular answering the strong call of Our Holy Father to a New Evangelization.

At the time of writing this, I am involved in the ongoing formation of a hundred and twenty leaders of Italian and Spanish nationalities being trained to evangelize Catholic migrants in the Archdiocese.

Lay movements are presently growing in confidence, and taking on the mandate given to them in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Christi Fidelis Laici*, *Redemptoris Missio*, and the more recent messages from the Holy Father. Within them are found schools of evangelization where these documents are studied. In Rome, December 1991, as a delegate representing Catholic Fraternities within Australia, I was buoyed up with hope on learning of the accountability and strong affiliation these worldwide movements bring to the Catholic Church, and of the direction and recognition they in turn receive through the Pontifical Council of the Laity.

In June of 1993, Bishop Paul Cordes, Vice-President of the Pontifical Council, presided at a convention in Brisbane for all the lay movements of Australia. The convention provided an opportunity for exchange of ideas, and served as a forum for setting a direction so that the

various groups can go forward together in reaching out to the un-churched in our midst. Many of these un-churched are migrants.

In every age there are migrations. People are uprooted because of war, famine, lack of employment, or political unrest and discrimination. The church that was home to them is now foreign. They are incapable of changing language and customs overnight. Church and sacraments are gradually relinquished, while faith clings to traditional devotion. Most migrants remain un-churched. In this way a vacuum is created, and proselytizing sects can rob the people of their heritage.

When in 1988 I took on pastoral care of Italians in the Diocese of Sale, Victoria, I directed my energies toward teaching the Word of God. At first, even some of the Italians (who did not come to the Bible classes) were suspicious. A delegation of five women presented themselves to the parish priest, to ask if I were a real nun since I was teaching the Bible! By the end of that year, the Jehovah Witnesses were being greeted at the door with: "We have a Sister to teach us the Bible!"

Now, in my sixth year of ministry, I praise God for Sister Cecilia, who has made it possible for us to have a convent for ourselves in this diocese. With true missionary spirit, she has taken all nationalities in her stride, working with our Maltese parish priest, leading prayers and faith-sharing groups in the English language, animating the liturgy with her musical talent, and bringing solace to the sick even where conversation is limited to simple words and gestures.

Reaching out! Elizabeth's fourth vow! And from those first five Sisters who I felt in my youthfulness wasted themselves caring for migrants in the sticky heat of the tropics, I myself now look back over forty-six years of service. I hope to continue, with my sister companion, sharing our charism with the Australians at the southern tip of this land. For nine months of the year it is cold, and my bones often complain, for, after all, I am a tropical fruit! But we come home to a fire in the hearth, and the inner glow of God's Spirit, whose power is at work within us to overcome all obstacles and help us begin again.

Neither of us drives a car or even rides a bike around the hills. Cecilia walks. I get lifts with workers to neighbouring towns within a radius of a hundred kilometers. A horse and sulky would come in handy here!

Over the years our Sisters have been called by many names. Who knows, we may yet go down in the history of Gippsland, Australia, as the *sulky Sisters!*