

Dedication of Anita Conroy Café & Hospitality Centre

19th March 2022

It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to speak today about Sr Anita Conroy and to name our Café and Hospitality Centre in her honour in the presence of her spiritual sisters, the Sisters of St Joseph and her biological sisters – Sr Clare, Sr Angela and Mrs Aileen Murphy as well as her niece Ann Maree Naylor.

Marjorie Rita Conroy – Sr Anita, was born in Glenn Innes and spent her early years growing up in a very small rural village called Llangothlin. At age 10, her parents moved the family to Newcastle, conscious of the need to ensure their children had access to further educational opportunities. Anita was enrolled at St Joseph's Merewether, and she recalled later that she and the family quickly became part of a vibrant, welcoming and caring Catholic Parish.

There is no doubt that this experience of family, community, faith and service shaped Anita as a young girl and was perhaps instrumental in developing within her, a desire to be a teacher. Determined to fulfil her goal, Anita moved to St Aloysius' Girls School at Hamilton – the current site of the Catholic Schools Office and completed her Leaving Certificate, the equivalent to the HSC, in 1943 – performing with distinction, and securing a scholarship to Sydney Teacher's College. It soon became apparent however, that with the continuing impact of war, and relocation of her family to Kingsvale, that Anita had reached a crossroads; aged 18 and with the support of her parents, Anita made the decision to defer her scholarship and return to St Joseph's Merewether to work with the Sisters as a teaching assistant, and committing to a plan to then move to Lochinvar to become a Sister of St Joseph. On what was no doubt a hot December morning in 1944, Anita's sisters Clare and Hilda together with her brother-in-law Laurie, bundled into the car drove the then long trip to Lochinvar where she, together with 8 other young women that month, took the momentous step of dedicating themselves to religious life, while continuing to pursue the vocation of teaching.

It is hard to imagine what may have been running through her mind – the anticipation of meeting new people, some trepidation about how her future might unfold, perhaps some

anxiety at the separation from a close knit family, some wonder about what it was that God was calling her to do, but no doubt a steely determination to learn, grow and succeed.

During the following twenty years Anita taught at a variety of Josephite schools and fulfilled her dream of completing a Bachelor of Science Degree at the University of Sydney. While in 2022 we are very accustomed to a large number of school graduates studying at university, in the 1960s for a female, let alone a nun to attend university and study in a domain seen as a man's world was extraordinary. Perhaps it was this experience that later shaped Anita's determination to inspire in her students the belief that they too could look beyond society's expectations and achieve anything!

In 1966, Sr Anita returned as a member of staff to St Joseph's Lochinvar – at the time an all girls 7-12 school boarding and day school; she was instrumental in introducing the new compulsory Science curriculum and setting up state of the art Science Laboratories so that the girls could have the opportunity to engage in rigorous, exciting, investigative science lessons that moved beyond the traditional chalk and talk. Anita's drive, intelligence and leadership did not go unnoticed, and she was subsequently appointed Principal in 1968, a position she held with distinction for 15 years.

It was during her time as Principal that I arrived at the College with 100 other girls from all over New South Wales to commence Year 7. Sr Anita as Principal, together with her Deputy Principal Sr Agnes were the dynamic duo of Lochinvar. They seemed to us as students to have everything running like clockwork and to be determined to provide us with every opportunity to excel. Importantly Sr Anita communicated that our years spent at Lochinvar should never be wasted – an educated life meant a life of possibility; that developing a sense of curiosity together and self-belief and dedication to learning would enable us to achieve those dreams that at times seemed impossible. Sr Anita could, often just by a look, show her approval or disappointment and we respected her so much that we never wanted to disappoint. By the beginning of Year 10 I thought I had a pretty good handle on Sr Anita – she ran a tight ship, could be stern at times, made her expectations clear, enjoyed one on one chats on the playground, seemed to know everything that was going on in the school, could sniff out at 20 paces anyone who was up to mischief and could be relied on to read

every student's report and ask for explanations if it wasn't up to scratch. It was when I commenced Year 10 however, when she became my Science teacher that I discovered another Sr Anita – the skilful, knowledgeable teacher who had a passion for learning, the capacity to inspire wonder, and the determination to ensure that young women used their intellect to question, hypothesise and create. Her lessons that included experiments and dissections were legendary; they ran like a well-oiled machine, and no one ever looked at the clock, except perhaps to groan that time was almost up! During the lesson, she would appear to be everywhere at once, observing quietly, walking silently and then like lightning be by our side asking a question and expecting an intelligent, well thought out response – she never allowed us to avoid a question or say 'I don't know', but she always gave us time to think.

As students came to the end of Year 10, the time when the majority would conclude their schooling, Sr Anita found the time to converse with students about their futures and she actively influenced that future where she saw the need. I found that out firsthand when one minute the plan was to go to secretarial school on a scholarship and then next minute the decision was reversed, and I was invited to return to complete my senior studies – though I did have to justify to Sr Anita why I was the only student in Year 11 not studying a Science course!

To this day I and many other Lochinvar girls have an abiding gratitude for Sr Anita' vision to provide girls with every opportunity to pursue a career and be able to be independent women. Together with the Sisters of Lochinvar, I'm sure she was instrumental in convincing the Bishop of the time that Catholic Schools would need lay teachers who were university trained, to fill teaching positions as Catholic Secondary Schools expanded and the religious became involved in other ministries. The government's agenda of ensuring that Australia offered a world class education that would make our Nation grow and be productive, could only be achieved by lifting the standard of education. To this end, the vision for Catholic education had a plan – to offer scholarships to Catholic secondary school graduates who could not afford the fees to attend University, obtain a degree and a teaching qualification and then return to the classrooms of Catholic schools.

The period of Sr Anita's principalship was a time of significant change in our Church and community and schools were a reflection of that change. Sr Anita took on this challenge and oversaw a significant building program that resulted in an additional wing incorporating a new Library, senior classrooms, a canteen, specialist languages and humanities classrooms and the recruitment of lay staff as the number of students, especially in the senior school steadily grew.

Never one to rest on her laurels, during a sabbatical year in 1984, Sr Anita completed a course in Spirituality and Leadership and subsequently accepted an appointment to establish and lead the Department of Counselling and Special Education, operating from the St Laurence Centre in Broadmeadow to support schools of the Maitland Newcastle Diocese. This foundation led to the establishment of counselling services for people in crisis that still exist today and was instrumental in ensuring that students with special needs were able to access a Catholic education supported by specialist teachers and counsellors. With this service well established, in 1991 Sr Anita moved into ministry and pastoral support at St Clare's Taree where she dedicated her time to working with families in the Manning, where she was much loved and respected, engaging with the Aboriginal community and companioning staff and students until her retirement in 2006.

There is no doubt that Sr Anita lived her vocation, embodied the charism of the Josephites, challenged and inspired a generation of women and left an indelible mark on Catholic education in this Diocese. She was a woman of integrity, determination and courage; a highly respected professional who not only wanted to make a difference, but did so with grace, intellect and tenacity. A reserved and dignified person, she was always warm in her welcome, fully present to those she met and keen to listen to the many stories of those she taught, walked with, supported and loved. It is highly appropriate that today we recognise the enduring gift that she was to this community and remember her legacy through the naming of the Anita Conroy Café and Hospitality Centre.