

Julian Tenison Woods, the Human Journey: Priest, Founder, Friend

By Sister Janice Tranter

It is a great joy to be here this afternoon to launch this remarkable work on the life of Julian Tenison Woods — priest, founder, friend, a missionary and scientist, a man in all things deeply attentive to the providence of God.

This collection of Sister Jan's articles and papers over a 35-year period invite us not simply to study Father Woods, but to encounter him. It draws us into the human journey of a man whose life was marked by extraordinary energy, deep faith, profound suffering, enduring friendships, and unwavering devotion to the mission of the Church.

What emerges throughout these pages is not a distant historical figure frozen in piety, but a deeply human priest. We see his formative years in London, shaped by a large, loving and gifted literary family. His Irish parents, father of Catholic upbringing and Anglican mother, both implanted in him a firm sense of care for those in need.

He was also shaped by early experiences of loss and struggle. We see a young man wrestling with illness, identity, vocation, and purpose — a young man whose growing love for the Eucharist and devotion to Mary gradually drew him toward the priesthood despite opposition and uncertainty.

We are reminded that holiness is not born in comfort or certainty, but often through perseverance, sacrifice, and steadfastness amidst complexity.

We also meet some of the remarkable people who shaped Father Woods' spiritual life — his spiritual guides. Men such as St Peter Julian Eymard, who profoundly influenced him, St John Vianney, Father Frederick Faber, and many others whose encouragement helped form the priest he would become. And what a priest he became!

Ordained in Adelaide, Australia after a long and difficult path that traversed through the Passionists and Marists, through England, France, and Tasmania (or is that part of Australia?), Father Woods lived his vocation not simply at the altar, but on the dusty roads of rural Australia. Travelling across isolated communities in Penola and beyond, he encountered what he described as the "spiritual desolation" of children deprived of religious education. It was there that the seed of a new religious congregation took root.

The story of his friendship with Mary MacKillop is perhaps the most providential and fruitful friendship in the history of the Church in Australia, if not all Australian history. Together they shared a vision for a religious community marked by simplicity, poverty, missionary zeal, and trust in God's providence. As this book reminds us, that friendship would bear extraordinary fruit for generations of Australians through the founding of the Josephite Sisters.

Sr Jan reminds us that Mary Mackillop was not his only friend. In these pages we see how his magnificent humanity (to borrow Pope Leo's latest expression), won him many and varied friends: botanists, poets, barons, governors, priests, and a multitude of ordinary people, but Fr Woods' declared his greatest friend to be none other than Saint Joseph!

A recurring theme throughout his life was fruitfulness born from sacrifice. Father Woods experienced misunderstanding, rejection, illness, exhaustion, and disappointment. Yet again and again, he surrendered himself to God's providence and continued the mission before him. As Sr Jan notes, his life followed the pattern of "submission to the designs of God's providence, and zeal for God."

The book also highlights Father Woods' profound impact upon the Josephite story here in our own region. We read of his role in giving "life-breath" to the Perthville Institute from which the Lochinvar foundation emerged. We see how his retreats, teaching, guidance, and personal presence formed generations of Sisters. The text beautifully describes how, when he was among the sisters, "he was among the family."

That spirit — deeply human, joyful, missionary, and grounded in prayer — became part of the spiritual inheritance of the Sisters who later came to Lochinvar.

For us in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle, this connection is especially significant. Father Woods preached missions and retreats throughout our diocese — in Sacred Heart church Hamilton, St Mary's on the Hill, the Junction, Lambton, Raymond Terrace, Maitland, East Maitland, Morpeth, Paterson, Branxton, Muswellbrook, and Murrurundi. His footsteps are woven into the early spiritual history of our local Church.

Yet perhaps what strikes most in reading this work is the extraordinary breadth of Father Woods' humanity. He was a scientist respected by his peers, a gifted preacher, a founder, a writer, a missionary, and a man of deep friendship. He knew how to teach, to encourage, to laugh, to accompany, and to suffer.

Father Woods reminds us that the Gospel is lived through the entirety of one's life and personality. God worked not around his humanity, but through it. This book captures that beautifully.

I want to sincerely congratulate Sr Jan and all who helped her along the way in bringing this work to fruition. It is clearly the product of deep scholarship, affection, and spiritual insight. This collection is more than scholarly; it succeeds in allowing the reader not merely to learn about Fr Woods but to meet him.

I suspect many readers will indeed meet Father Woods in these pages — his courage, his zeal, his humour, his struggles, and his enduring trust in God.

As the book recalls, when Father Woods preached to the young Josephite community at Perthville in 1877, he reminded them that their fruitfulness in the Church would come through “a generous, hidden, poor way.” That message remains just as relevant for the Church today.

It often strikes me how Sr Jan and other Josephite Sisters speak with such love, respect, and affection for Fr Julian Tenison Woods, and this reminds me how little I and many others seem to know him. I am sure this work of Sr Jan will help to bring Father Woods out of the shadows.

It is with great pleasure that I formally launch Julian Tenison Woods, the Human Journey: Priest, Founder, Friend.

May it inspire many people to rediscover the life, spirit, and witness of this extraordinary priest.

Most Rev Michael Kennedy

Bishop of Maitland-Newcastle

Blessing

In the beginning was the Word;
the Word was with God
and the Word was God.

Blessed be God forever.

The Word became flesh
and lived among us
revealing the way of truth and life
inspiring countless women and men
who echo the living Word from one generation to the next.

Blessed be God forever.

The living Word echoed in the heart of Julian Tenison Woods:
a priest, a founder, a friend.

A scientist, a musician, a dreamer, a searcher
who with Mary MacKillop set in motion a way of life and education that continues to
change Australian society.

Blessed be God forever.

Living God, hear our prayer this afternoon

as we launch *Julian Tenison Woods, the human story: Priest, Founder, Friend*.

Open our ears to hear your living Word

in the words of this book lovingly written and compiled by Jan.

Open our hearts to be inspired by the human journey of a good man

whose life was shaped in all its blessings and challenges

by a vision for your Kingdom

and a deep abiding love for your people and creation.

May your Holy Spirit continue to inspire writers and publishers,

librarians and educators, scientists and poets, musicians and artists.

Bless all who gather this afternoon

that through them, your Word may echo in this place and this time

And may almighty God bless you with peace,

the Father, X and the Son, X and the Holy X Spirit.

Amen.