



# Good Samaritans Yesterday

## Our Founders



John Bede Polding was born in Liverpool, England in 1794. Both of his parents had died by the time he was nine years old. He was taken into the care of his uncle, a Benedictine monk, who arranged his education with the Benedictine nuns in Liverpool, and then at St Gregory's in Shropshire. He entered Downside Abbey and was ordained in 1819.

Polding had various roles while at Downside, and was a great loss to his community when he was made Bishop of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land.

Arriving in Sydney in 1835, Polding quickly showed his compassion, especially for convicts, indigenous people and destitute women. He became known as a pastoral leader, who rode thousands of miles on horseback to visit Catholic families across Australia, and was often away from Sydney for months at a time. In 1839 the Weekly Orthodox Journal quoted a letter from Sydney:

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**His labours are incessant, his zeal unbounded.  
Protestants as well as Catholics revere him as a saint.**

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John Bede Polding retired in January, 1874 and died on March 16, 1877. His funeral was attended by over 100,000 people. Fr Sheehy OSB who had known Polding for most of his life wrote at the time:

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**His life was full of energy and movement and an all-embracing love. His last years were full of mercy, compassion and a most divine tenderness.  
What helped him to do this was the fact that he genuinely loved Australia and her people, and was determined from his earliest days in the colony to be an Australian himself.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>X. Compton SGS, The Bishop of Botany Bay, 1976



Mother Scholastica was born Geraldine Gibbons in Kinsale, County Cork, Ireland in 1817. In 1834, she with her family immigrated to Australia. She was professed as a Sister of Charity in 1843 and was elected their Mother Superior in 1856. In 1857, she worked with Archbishop Polding to establish the first congregation of Catholic religious women to be founded in Australia. In the same year, Mother Scholastica was overseeing the opening St Vincent's Hospital, which continues to be a thriving work of the Sisters of Charity today.

The commitment of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan to those who were less fortunate in the fledgling colony of Sydney was quickly evident, with early works including the House of the Good Shepherd for destitute women in Pitt Street and the Catholic Orphan School in Parramatta.

Mother Scholastica was known as a kind and compassionate woman, and was greatly loved by her novices. She always remained a Sister of Charity, finishing her time as Mother Superior of the Sisters of Charity in 1859 and for the Sisters of the Good Samaritan in 1876.

Scholastica went to Hobart and worked in the Sisters of Charity Refuge until 1885, when, 'unable to find any peace', she returned to Rosebank Convent after much pleading from her former novices. She died at the Good Samaritan Convent, Marrickville on 15th October 1901. Two religious congregations continue to follow her path of compassion and commitment

Much has been written of Scholastica in the Congregational Annals and Books of Happenings:

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**She was a woman of great energy and trust in God – full of love of God and her neighbour, especially the poor women who looked on her and loved her as Mother.**

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**It was nothing for her to take the blankets of her bed or the clothes that she wore and give them to the poor.**

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**Rosebank, so much loved by Scholastica was her place of abode. Rising at 4am she would hasten to the Chapel arriving an hour before the community to pray. When Mass, Meditation and Thanksgiving were complete, she busied herself with serving breakfast to the children. Work of the humblest kind occupied her day and she was always working. Lowly duties, mundane and trivial, were but a part of the pattern she was weaving into a beautiful life now nearing its sunset.**

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## Our Early Years

By the mid-1800s European settlement in Sydney was rapidly expanding while the indigenous communities were greatly devastated. For some, Sydney was a place of opportunity and excitement. For others, life was extremely hard. Women in particular, struggled to support their families with no social welfare, no state education and often, nowhere to live.

When John Bede Polding arrived in Australia 1834, he quickly set about providing assistance for these women, and for others on the margins of society – indigenous people, convicts and abandoned children. With his support, the Sisters of Charity began the House of the Good Shepherd under the leadership of Mother Scholastica Gibbons. When this group of women was no longer able to maintain the refuge, Polding gathered five women together, and formed a new Australian religious congregation.

On the 2nd of February 1857, Agnes Clark, Margaret Byrne, Mary Anne Adamson, Agnes Mary Hart and Margaret Clark became the first of Archbishop Polding's new Australian Congregation. Under the guidance of Scholastica Gibbons, they became known as The Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of Saint Benedict. Archbishop Polding wrote part of the Rule for the Sisters himself, saying:

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**The name indicates the scope, since the Religious are called to imitate  
the charity of the kind Samaritan who was moved to pity the poor  
wounded man, and having poured oil and wine into his wounds to heal  
him, afterwards conveyed him to a place of security. In like manner,  
the Religious are to use all gentleness and compassion for the unhappy  
whom they are to tend...Therefore as directed by their Superiors the  
Sisters are to teach in schools, visit and assist the sick in their own  
homes and in hospitals, to instruct ignorant persons in the faith, to  
conduct orphanages, to reform the lives of penitent women and to apply  
themselves to every other charitable work.<sup>2</sup>**

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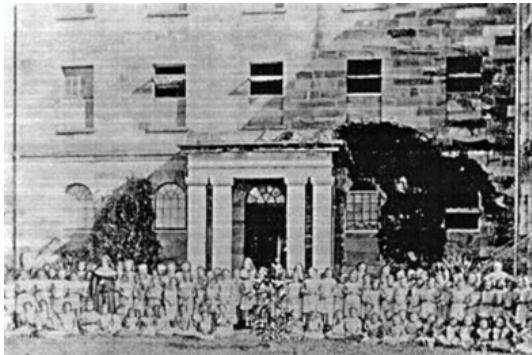
### Pitt Street



In the early years, Scholastica Gibbons played a crucial role in the life of the congregation. Under Polding's direction, she encouraged the Sisters in their ministries. The Sisters began working in a women's refuge in Carters' Barracks, an old building once used as a prison in Pitt Street, Sydney. Some of the Sisters walked many miles in their efforts to tend the sick and those in need. They became well-known for talking to people outside the confines of their convent, most unusual at the time.

<sup>2</sup>Rules of the Institute of the Oblate Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St Benedict in the Archdiocese of Sydney, Australia: Scope and Character of the Institute

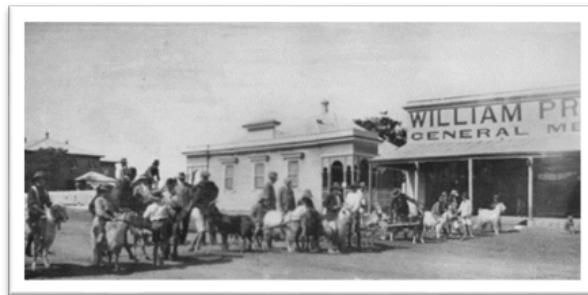
## Parramatta Orphanage



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The orphanage was dingy, overcrowded, unhygienic, and often stinking due to the lack of lavatories and the sewer that often drained from the Lunatic Asylum next door into the orphanage courtyard. The Sisters had no control over the number of, or which children who ended up with them. In one report it was noted that the 'children were clean but without boots'. While there were indeed orphans, many were the children of mothers in the Lunatic Asylum or in gaol, some were runaways from drunken and violent parents, others had been through significant trauma, and had seen great poverty, violence and death. Few had experienced 'normal' family life.

## Rural Communities



As well as local visits, some of the Sisters began to accompany Polding on his missionary work. These were long and difficult journeys, often by horse and cart or by ship. The Sisters' main role was to prepare children for the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation.

This meant the Sisters became well-known throughout the regional districts, and many new members of the Congregation came from

these areas. It also meant that the Sisters were asked to open schools, with education becoming one of their main ministries. The first school was set up in Sussex Street in the heart of Sydney in 1861, with many others following across Australia.

## St Magdalen's Retreat



The work begun at the refuge in Pitt Street was continued at St Magdalen's Retreat, Tempe, in Sydney, where the Sisters looked after girls committed to their care by the courts. Opened in 1887, Tempe, later known as the Good Samaritan Training Centre, closed almost 100 years later in 1983.

The Sisters cared for unmarried mothers and women who were seen to be at risk. The Sisters provided accommodation for over 40 women and built laundries which provided work for the residents. By 1900, over

100 people worked a daily routine in the laundry.