An anniversary significant to the Catholic Schools in the Wagga Wagga Diocese occurs in October 2009. One hundred and fifty years ago, a group of six Mercy Sisters arrived from Ireland in 1859 to the Catholic Parish of Goulburn and nine years later in 1868 they sent a group to Albury. A second group of seven Sisters arrived soon after from Ireland and established themselves in Yass in 1875. The Goulburn arrival was the first Congregation of Religious west of the Great Dividing Range. In Ireland, Sisters of Mercy had set up refuges for distressed women, established schools, visited the sick, the dying and prisoners in gaols, nursed cholera victims and sent members to work in the military hospitals at the Crimean War. In New South Wales, they answered the call from the Catholic Community to take responsibility for schools.

The present schools with a Mercy heritage in the Diocese are the Albury schools of St Patrick’s, St Anne’s and Holy Spirit Primary Schools and Xavier High School; St Mary’s School Corowa, Sacred Heart School Tocumwal, St Joseph’s School Finley, St Joseph’s School Jerilderie, St Joseph’s School Junee; and the Griffith schools of St Patrick’s Primary and Marian Catholic College.
The 19th Century impetus for Catholic schools was due to the desire of Catholic Communities for children to learn not only to read and write and take their place in civil society, but to be prepared for full initiation into Church membership and for their eternal destiny through reception of the Sacraments of Penance, First Communion and Confirmation. In 1880 the post-colonial NSW Government, faced with a largely illiterate population passed the NSW Public Instruction Act and set up a system of ‘free, compulsory and secular’ education. Horrified by the prospect of schools where Faith would not be taught and deprived of funds to support schools, the Catholic Bishops and clergy turned to the Religious Congregations, whose members were trained teachers and who funded their work from Sisters’ dowries, proceeds from fetes, donations at the convent door and fees for music, business principles and elocution lessons.

Catholic schools ran without Government assistance until 1962, when the substandard toilets at St Brigid’s Catholic Primary School Goulburn were condemned. This precipitated the Goulburn schools strike and resulted in Commonwealth Government Funding for all Australian non-government schools in 1963.
In the Wagga Diocese there were also Mercy schools in the towns of Henty and Howlong.

With shifts in population and better transport services in the 1960's these schools closed their doors and the Sisters now equipped with cars, ran a ‘Motor Mission’ providing Education in the Faith for the children in the state schools in towns where there was no Catholic School.

The decision to offer care for families who needed assistance following the death of one or both parents led to St John’s Home Th and a school also being available there in 1956. The Sisters moved from this institution in the 1970’s and the children lived in cottages in North Albury and attended our local Catholic Schools.

The Sisters continue to provide residential supported accommodation for adults and also conduct the Mercy Care Centre at Lavington, which offers professional services to people with a disability. The centre also attends to people who are not easily supported by other service providers, including those of Indigenous background and those who come out of the criminal justice system. These services extend to Wodonga, Orange, Narrabri, Tamworth, Coffs Harbour and Newcastle. In collaboration with the Christian Brothers programmes are also offered in Wewak, Goraka and Mt Hagen in Papua New Guinea.
In the Canberra-Goulburn Diocese, of which the present Wagga Diocese was originally a part, the Mercy Sisters conducted schools in Goulburn, Yass, Boorowa, Cootamundra, Tumut, Harden/Murrumburrah, Gundagai, Grenfell, West Wyalong, Crookwell, Braddon, Waramanga, Murringo, Captain's Flat, Barmedman, Gunning, Bethungra, Binda, Galong, Stockinbingal and Gooloogong. The Mercy Schools founded in Deloraine, Deniliquin and Wodonga were handed to other Mercy Congregations when these were established in those Dioceses.

Mercy Sisters worked alongside other religious Congregations in the Diocese. In Albury they collaborated with the Christian Brothers to form St Patrick’s School from St Brigid’s and CBC and also amalgamated St Joseph’s with Aquinas Colleges into Xavier High School. In Griffith, the Sisters’ school, St Patrick’s and the Marist Brothers’ Primary School joined to form the present St Patrick’s Primary and in 1970 the secondary schools of St Patrick’s and St Brendan’s became Catholic High School, the present Marian Catholic College. In nearby Cootamundra, in 1967, the Mercies and the De La Salle Brothers had combined two single-sex schools to form a single co-institutional and co-educational secondary school, Sacred Heart school, the first of its kind in Australia.

As population increased and Commonwealth Grants became available, and a much more specialised school curriculum was introduced, lay teachers took on roles in Catholic Schools and from 1965 the Catholic Bishops set up Diocesan Catholic Education Offices. The Sisters’ schools progressively passed from their stewardship to that of the Diocese and into the hands of generous and committed lay staff. In the Wagga Diocese one Sister continues on in an administrative and faith education role in the Catholic Schools Office while other Sisters continue their ministries in education, health, welfare and pastoral work along side lay colleagues, as needs arise in local and wider communities.
The Mercy Sisters had nursed for the victims of the Dublin cholera epidemic of 1832 and had sent Sisters to nurse in the military hospitals during the Crimean War. In the 1920’s they took responsibility for Health and Aged Care in Young and Cootamundra.

In Albury the Mercy Hospital was established in 1945, with the new hospital opening in 1957. The Sisters opened an aged care facility in Albury and another at the Cootamundra Mercy Hospital for the aged and frail Sisters. When general nursing education passed from Mercy Training Schools to tertiary institutions in the 1970’s the Sisters reviewed their health services. In recent years the Albury Mercy has developed a range of non-acute services, including aged care, rehabilitation and palliative care. In 2007, to enable the continuation of Mercy Health care in the Diocese, all health and aged care services entered Mercy Health Inc. which is sponsored by the Mercy Melbourne Congregation.

The contribution of the Sisters has been not only to the Catholic Community in Catholic Education and Health Care, but also to the broader community. Many will remember the Sisters who broadened their horizons through piano or violin lessons or lessons in Art of Speech or Elocution or again who helped them find employment with commercial skills in typing and shorthand.
Catherine McAuley was the Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy.

Catherine was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1778. Her father died when she was five but he was a great inspiration to her as through him she learned to respect, comfort and support the poor, sick, ignorant and oppressed.

After her mother died in 1798, she lived with relatives until she moved in with the Callaghans, an elderly couple whom she cared for until their deaths.

With the inheritance she received from them, she founded the House of Mercy on Baggot Street, Dublin in 1827 to provide shelter for homeless servant girls and women, education for poor children and visitation of the sick poor in their homes and in hospitals.

Catherine founded the Sisters of Mercy in 1831 to continue these works of mercy. She died ten years later in November 1841.

Today Sisters of Mercy, with their associates and co-workers, minister throughout the world wherever need calls and their resources permit.
Celebrations for the Sesquicentenary

On Sunday 25th October, Archbishop Coleridge will be the main celebrant at the Sesquicentenary Mass in Sts Peter and Paul’s Old Cathedral. Afterwards there will be a luncheon in the grounds of the former Mercy Convent. Guests will have the chance to view the Sesquicentenary Mercy exhibition, the historic Chapel, Convent and School.

The Sisters are also planning for a travelling Sesquicentenary exhibition, which is being professionally curated and will give visitors an insight into the spirit, life and work of this group of women.

The exhibition will be officially opened in Goulburn on the Sesquicentenary weekend and will travel to other centres of significance to the Congregation to make it available to parishes, schools and the broader community. From late 2009 to March 2010 it will be on the road.

The 2009 venues are:

October 24, 25 & 26: Goulburn Trinity Catholic College Study Hall

Oct 31, Nov 1 & 2 Young, Hennessy Hall

Nov 6, 7 & 8 Queanbeyan Arts Centre

Nov 14, 15 & 16 Yass Mount Carmel School

Nov 21, 22 & 23 Albury, Sacred Heart Parish Hall

North Albury

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Schools with a Mercy Heritage

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