

## **Mother Loyola Fraser csb (1918-2008)**

*In her, the love of God and of literature were beautifully blended*

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Joyce Eva Fraser was born in Gundagai, NSW on 23 December 1918 to Walter John Fraser and Eva Bibo Fraser (nee Mackenzie, also spelt McKenzie). She was the youngest of four children, sister to Walter, also known as David), Charles (later Fr Charles Fraser sj, legendary Classics Master at St Ignatius College, Riverview), and Marie. Their father was a highly respected solicitor in Gundagai and Tumut and their mother a gifted singer and pianist. In her memoirs, *The Last Leaf Left*, Joyce speaks of her father's 'clarity of mind and penetrating judgment' recognised locally in the citation presented on his premature retirement. His early death profoundly affected the family.

Joyce was educated at Brigidine College, Randwick (1930-1934) and Our Lady of Mercy College, Goulburn, where her love of music and literature was nourished. She taught music before entering the Brigidine novitiate at Randwick in 1939. Upon profession of vows as Sister Loyola, her first appointment was to Coonamble, NSW, for four years. Her Leaving Certificate literature classes are still remembered there, the impact of a young and spirited intellect.

At Sydney University (1945-51), Mother Loyola's BA (Hons.) was followed by an MA in English Language and Literature (1951). She was awarded the Sydney University Women's Graduates Association Award for the best English essay of 1946. A chance encounter with the poem, 'Carrion Comfort' kindled a lifelong passion and her thesis on Gerard Manley Hopkins, examining his journals, letters, prose and poetry, and exploring their impact on the faith of the 'star of Balliol'. 'Understanding with great clarity his most difficult poems', she wrote in her 1998 *Memoirs*, enabled the poems to be unlocked for countless students.

Returning to teach at Brigidine College, Randwick, in 1951, she was appointed principal of the College in 1954 where she remained for fifteen years. During that time, the Wyndham Scheme in NSW in 1962 created new challenges, with the addition of Sixth Form, the need for greater resources and broader subject options. Sr Loyola responded to the Catholic Education Office's request that Brigidine College become a regional school. This was a highly divisive move, driven by her eagerness to educate the widest possible range of students. As principal, she had written, 'we shall not condemn ourselves to a sterile learning that does not teach us how to live and wondered if the old have failed the young as transmitters of truth'.

As principal, Mother Loyola was keenly aware of two incipient dangers — larger numbers, mass groupings and the collateral submerging of the individual with advanced equipment, objective techniques and the diminution of the personal influence of the teacher... machine teachers, cipher-children'. She critiqued the new system while embracing the opportunities for wider and deeper education and enriched learning.

She was an exacting teacher: her ex-students can still quote from her quixotic French grammar rules. She was merciless, too, towards floating participles and 'purple' prose. Her influence was enormous, awakening for many of her students 'a lifelong love of poetry'.

More complex programs, increased pupil enrolments (the College had over 700 students in 1968) and new facilities all added greatly to the adventure of Catholic Education'. College examination results were encouraging at this pivotal time — Commonwealth Scholarships show the College adapting to radical change under her leadership.

At Brigidine College, Indooroopilly, Queensland, Mother Loyola brought a new emphasis to the Arts in education. As Principal (1969-1973), Head of the English Department and later, as an innovative librarian (1973-1980), she relished the emerging technological developments in learning and new facilities that funding from Commonwealth grants offered. The Radford Scheme imposed new demands in secondary education: moderation meetings, an expanding curriculum and

the implementation of internal assessment. Under the Radford Scheme, music, drama and art gained momentum at Brigidine College. Appropriately, in 1995, the college recognised her through the establishment of the annual *Sister Loyola Fraser Prize for Appreciation of the Arts, Poetry, Painting and Music*.

In 1982, while in Scarborough, Queensland, Loyola spent some months doing extensive research on Brigidine Spirituality and the influence of St Francis de Sales on the life of Bishop Daniel Delany, founder of the Brigidine Congregation. Returning to Indooroopilly in 1985, she moved into adult religious education. A course at The Cenacle in Brisbane led her to begin home retreats: 'Spirituality drenched with literature', as one eager participant wrote. The groups flourished for more than a decade from 1986.

Between 1991 and 1998, Mother Loyola wrote three books for private circulation. In *How Right It Is* (1991), the literature that had shaped so many minds found new expression. Drawing on Annie Dillard, Yeats, Hopkins, Hildegard of Bingen and others, she explored their struggle towards faith in the midst of suffering and doubt, a recurring theme in her classroom and later, in adult groups. She quoted James McAuley harvesting his apples:

'Something is gathered in, Worth the lifting and stacking'.

For Mother Loyola, that 'something' was faith illuminating life. The book is a treatise on the love of God, given and received.

*Not Love Them the Less* (1994) examines Simone Weil's life and works, particularly her essay "The love of God and Affliction". She explores the mystery of human suffering, reflected in life and literature, in 20 chapters from Sophocles to Patrick White, cameos of poignant moments in world literature. She sees Weil's 'real gift to the world' as perhaps 'the contagion of the divine'. In schools and in adult groups, she had never shrunk from addressing that mystery.

In *The Last Leaf Left* (1998), personal memoirs and reflections probe the theme of diminishment: insights harvested from theology, literature and the

mystics, coupled with a frank autobiography. She may have left the classroom but still had much to contribute to eager learners in their later years.

Sister Loyola's final years at Randwick brought her the challenges of age and impaired sight, yet she remained in contact with many of the ex-students who held her in high regard. Her final years were reflective and prayerful, and she died on 3 March 2008.

'Wisdom shared unstintingly', one ex-student wrote, on learning of her death. Another expressed it thus: 'She made words dance'. After her Mass of Christian burial at St Brigid's, Coogee, Sr Loyola was buried at Eastern Suburbs Memorial Park Cemetery.

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