

MAGISTER ADEST ET VOCAT TE **The Master is Here and Calls for You**

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At the concluding mass for WYD08 in Sydney, Pope Benedict XVI encouraged young people from every nation to be witnesses of life and love in the Spirit: "Do not be afraid to say 'yes' to Jesus, to find your joy in doing his will, giving yourself completely to the pursuit of holiness, and using all your talents in the service of others!"¹ Almost a century ago, Dr Mary Glowrey said 'yes' to this call, a personal call that she experienced from the heart of Jesus, and in the witness of her very person became a source of life for countless thousands. Shy, gentle and tiny in stature, Mary was initially 'regarded as something of mouse' by those around her.² And yet, she held within her the fire of God's love for humanity and through the example of her life has become an authentic witness to hope. Her capacity to speak anew to the people of our time, and in particular to galvanize a new generation into action in the service of life and the protection of the weakest in our midst, retains a freshness, a power and a potency which transcends the barriers imposed by culture, time and history.

Mary Glowrey was born on 23rd June 1887 in the small township of Birregurra in Victoria. The family relocated to Watchem in the Mallee region when Mary was five. Of Irish descent, Mary was the third of nine children born into a loving and prayerful family. Devotion to Our Lady was always practised in the Glowrey household. Each night the Rosary was said and with it a prayer for priests and doctors. Mary Glowrey recalling that practice many years later wrote: 'When my brother and I were respectively priest and doctor, I sincerely hoped that many another mother added that 'trimming' to the Rosary.'³

From about the age of seven, Mary had prayed to do God's will. She was always deeply thankful to God that this supreme Grace had been given to her at the dawn of reason.⁴ Mary could not have realised then what such a prayer would lead her to and, the level of trust that would be required of her when many years later she boarded a ship bound for a life of service in a foreign land with an religious order whose name she did not know. Nearing the end of her life, Mary Glowrey reflected: 'Whatever else I may have neglected, I have always prayed seriously, if not earnestly, as I might, that God would teach me His Holy Will and give me the Grace to do it.'⁵ It was this openness to the will of God that was to become one of the primary formative factors which grounded and permeated her whole life.

¹ Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Eucharistic Celebration on the Occasion of the 23rd World Youth Day, Randwick Racecourse, Sunday 20 July 2008.

² Anna T. Brennan, 'Tributes to a Medical Missionary Pioneer', *The Horizon*, 1 July 1957.

³ Dr Mary Glowrey, '*God's Good for Nothing*', Glowrey Papers (held by the Catholic Women's League of Victoria and Wagga Wagga).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Glowrey, *op. cit.*

When Mary was ten, she made her first acquaintance with sorrow. On Palm Sunday 1897, her little brother Joseph was born. Mary was passionately fond of him and spent a great deal of time playing with him. Towards Christmas, Joseph became ill and died shortly thereafter. Joseph had taken his last breath cuddled in the arms of his mother and surrounded by his loving family. Mary's father gently removed Joseph from his mother's arms and gave him to a neighbour. This neighbour took Joseph and then dropped him unceremoniously on the bed. Mary later wrote: 'That hurt and gave me a first idea of what death meant.'⁶ It was the 22nd December 1897. Mary felt a pain around her heart, a real physical pain, for many months.⁷

When Mary was thirteen, she won a scholarship to attend school at South Melbourne College.⁸ She was a gifted linguist, writer and pianist but shunned the limelight.⁹ For the remainder of her secondary education, Mary boarded at the Good Shepherd Convent which was situated in the same suburb.¹⁰ At night time, Mary would go into the Convent chapel and in the glow of the sanctuary lamp, read a page or two from a prayer book. One of these prayers seemed to resonate particularly with the deepest desire of her heart and she soon found herself saying it not only in the chapel, but also in all sorts of places: 'Do Thou teach me an entire forgetfulness of myself, O Lord.... Do Thou accomplish Thy Holy Will in me...'.¹¹ Mary later discovered that this particular prayer had been written by Saint Claude de la Colombière.

Providentially, Mary's outstanding academic achievements earned her a University Exhibition—an invaluable cash scholarship. Pursuing her literary interests and love of languages, Mary began studying for a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne in 1905 and at the end of her first year had obtained first class honours in English and History. However after a great deal of prayer and the gentle encouragement of her father, Mary switched over to the medical course. Unwittingly, Mary had fulfilled the preliminary subjects required by the Medical Faculty which included Mathematics, Latin and Greek.¹² She was 18 years old and felt like a fledgling just dropped from the nest.¹³ There were very few women studying, or indeed practising, medicine at that time.

Soon thereafter, Mary was amongst a group of young Catholic medical students who found themselves at odds with teaching and medical practices destructive to human life. These students used to protest when doctors proposed to carry out treatment that was contrary to Natural Law.¹⁴ The students also approached their priests for help. In response, Archbishop Carr (the then Archbishop of Melbourne) published a booklet titled *Infanticide* in an effort to tackle their concerns. Mary Glowrey had written this booklet and it was indicative of another central theme that was to mark her life—that medicine

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Florence Swamikannu, *A Nun Revolutionizes*, 1972, Ch 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Swamikannu, op. cit., p 33.

¹³ Ibid, p 3.

¹⁴ Glowrey, op. cit.

is, before all else, to be placed at the service of human life and for Mary, this would find particular expression in her medical care of women and children.

In her fourth year of medicine, Mary joined St Vincent's Hospital which had recently become a clinical school for students. Many years later she wrote: 'I can never sufficiently express the gratitude I owe to St Vincent's Hospital.'¹⁵ Mary graduated on the 23rd December 1910 with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery. She completed her residency at Christchurch Hospital in New Zealand. It has been suggested that Mary had to do her residency in New Zealand because no position was available for her at a teaching hospital in Melbourne. Mary herself commented that her appointment caused quite a stir firstly, because she was not a New Zealander and secondly, because she was the first female medical graduate to be granted such an appointment in New Zealand.¹⁶

Following Mary's return to Melbourne in 1912, she was appointed to the Eye and Ear Hospital as the Resident Doctor and later to the positions of Refractionist and Clinical Assistant. She was also appointed as Honorary Physician to Outpatients at St Vincent's Hospital. Mary lived at the hospital so that she could be available at night for emergencies. Her sister, Lucy, had to keep replenishing Mary's blankets and clothes as she was always giving them away to someone more needy than herself.¹⁷ By the time World War I had broken out, Mary had established a successful private practice at 82 Collins St but much of her time was taken up relieving for doctors who were in military service.

A chance reading of a pamphlet about the appalling death rate amongst babies in India, and the desperate need for medical missionaries, fundamentally changed the direction of her life. Mary later wrote: 'It was during this busy period that God deigned to give me my religious vocation. On 24 October 1915, I attended Holy Mass at St Patrick's Cathedral. The day was being celebrated as 'Hospital Sunday'. From the Cathedral, I went to my rooms in Collins St. On the hall table there was a small pamphlet addressed to me.'¹⁸ The pamphlet was about Dr Agnes McLaren, a pioneer Scottish doctor who at the age of sixty-one became a Catholic and at the age of seventy two, went to India to establish a hospital for the care of women.

Falling to her knees, Mary finished reading this pamphlet and knew that God had called her to help the women and children of India. Mary, describing this moment many years later, said: 'It brought me face to face with Christ.'¹⁹ My life's work lay clear before me now. It was to be medical mission work in India.'²⁰ Mary answered: 'Fiat'.²¹ And so it was done, Mary wrote to her parents telling them of her decision and acknowledged the part they had each played in her vocation—her Mother who had taught Mary to always

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Swamikannu, op. cit., p 37.

¹⁸ Glowrey, op. cit.

¹⁹ Swamikannu, op. cit., p 42.

²⁰ Glowrey, op. cit.

²¹ Sister M. Adelaide Orem S.C.M.M., *Out of Nothing: The Genesis of a Great Initiative*, 1968, p 17.

pray to do the Will of God and her Father who had perseveringly asked her to study medicine.²²

Mary was anxious to go India at once but was unable to do so because of the war.²³ Meanwhile, her busy schedule of external commitments continued. In 1916, Mary Glowrey was elected as the first General President of the newly formed Catholic Women's Social Guild which is now known as the Catholic Women's League of Victoria and Wagga Wagga. Deeply concerned about the economic and social inequities that women faced, this inspired group of young Catholic women sought to change society through prayer and action. This was the first large scale organising of Catholic women in Victoria. The League's motto, '*She Hath Put Out Her Hand to Strong Things*', from the Book of Proverbs was first proposed by Mary Glowrey during a retreat at the Sacred Heart Convent in Malvern.²⁴ She could not have realised then how perfectly this motto might be applied to her life.²⁵

As General President, Mary addressed meetings throughout Victoria, wrote frequent articles about health matters for the Guild's newsletter as well as carrying the heavy administrative duties associated with a rapidly growing organisation.²⁶ In addition, Mary started a baby clinic with Dr Eileen Fitzgerald, a fellow doctor and founding member of the Guild, to make information about the healthcare of infants freely available. Mary was also involved in establishing Santa Casa, the Guild's holiday home by the sea for sick and underprivileged children. Mary resigned from the Presidency of the League in 1919 after a health breakdown.

In addition to her medical practice and her strenuous work with the Guild, Mary had also been studying for a higher medical degree with a particular emphasis on obstetrics, gynaecology and ophthalmology in preparation for her medical missionary work.²⁷ She was conferred as a Doctor of Medicine in December 1919.

Formed in an openness and surrender to the will of God over many years of selflessness and prayer, Mary Glowrey left her thriving career as an Ear, Nose and Throat specialist on the 21st January 1920. She sailed for India to become a medical missionary with the Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Guntur. She later learnt that this day was also the first Wednesday of a special annual Novena made to St Joseph by the Sisters of the Society of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in India each year.²⁸ Among their intentions was medical help for their missions.²⁹

A woman of profound faith and brilliant achievement, Mary nonetheless experienced the incredible wrench involved in leaving those relationships of family and friendship that

²² Glowrey, op. cit.

²³ Ursula Clinton, *Australian Medical Nun in India*, 1967, p 19.

²⁴ Ibid, p 54.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, p 16.

²⁷ Ibid, p 17.

²⁸ Glowrey, op. cit.

²⁹ Ibid, p 20.

had sustained and supported her, unsure if she would ever see those dearest to her again, for a country and a culture far from all that she had known and loved. Even after many years in India, Mary would still eagerly watch for the return of the Southern Cross in the sky above Guntur as she felt that it brought Australia to her.³⁰

It is important to note that within the Church, there was a general ban on 'religious' practising as doctors that was not lifted until 1936. However, Pope Benedict XV granted permission for Dr Glowrey to practise medicine and later Pope Pius XI bestowed a special blessing on her medical mission work. Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart, as Mary Glowrey was then known, became the first nun-doctor missionary.

When Mary arrived at St Joseph's Covent in Guntur, she was taken into the Church where there was a lovely statue of the Sacred Heart with arms outstretched over the altar.³¹ Inscribed above this statue were the words: *Magister adest et vocat te* (i.e. The Master is here and calls for you). Mary placed the remainder of her life at the service of the medical and spiritual needs of the people of India, as an expression of her own deeply held love for God and for humanity.

When Mary began her medical work in earnest, she had one small room with a small veranda in the front as a dispensary. The veranda was also the waiting room. 'Inside the room,' Mary wrote, 'was a table with three bottles containing a few drugs, namely, Sodium Bicarbonate, Potassium Zibrate and Epsom Salts. There was a tiny cupboard made of boxes which contained a few instruments, all that the sisters possessed.'³² The searing heat and the lack of water supply were also major problems. During one hot season, the temperature did not fall below 43 degrees Celsius.³³ Night and day seemed to differ little.³⁴

The small dispensary in Guntur where Sister Mary began her medical mission eventually grew into St Joseph's Hospital. Between 1927 and 1936, Sister Mary cared for more than 637,000 patients.³⁵ Submitting her work always to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Sister Mary, for many years the lone doctor, was the driving force in a radically new and visionary plan, unprecedented in that colonial era, to train local women to be doctors, nurses, pharmacists, compounders (dispensers) and midwives in order to help stem the tide of suffering. Mary was convinced that the care of the sick and suffering in India must depend on the people of India, particularly the women, themselves.

Her whole life in India consisted of serving God and the sick. She gave herself wholeheartedly to her patients, for she saw Christ in each and everyone. 'Her life was a continual leaving God for God in His people.'³⁶ Sister Mary could usually be found in the

³⁰ Letter from Mary Glowrey to Dr Eileen Fitzgerald, 29 November 1950.

³¹ Glowrey, op. cit.

³² Glowrey, op. cit.

³³ Orem, op. cit, p 24.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, p26.

³⁶ Authors Unknown, *Account of the Life and Work in India of Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart* (Collated in 1968 by Sister Mary Stanislas).

Church or in the hospital. She would often walk between these two locations reading a medical journal or correspondence. Countless patients flocked to see the 'gentle Sister Doctor.' She often travelled to visit the sick and dying in outlying villages, crouching down to treat patients on the earthen floor of their small straw huts. There was no pretence of any kind about her. She was so humble that she could talk as easily with a child as she could with an intellectual. Sister Mary always appeared to reflect before she spoke, her voice was always very low and soft in tone.

Sister Mary also attended to the medical needs of priests in the different dioceses. Many came to her with great confidence and their confidence was amply rewarded. She would seem to have taken as a special missionary apostolic work, the care of these priests who were working in the mission fields.

Sister Mary was said to radiate Christ by word and example. The poor were the people of her choice and incurable patients had a special place in her heart. In the hot season, the cradles of the babies and the beds of the mothers had to be surrounded with wet curtains or cloth to keep them cool. Mary would wake several times during the night to soak these curtains and then hang them up again. If a patient was seriously ill, she would sit beside them until they become more settled. When on duty in the 'Gate of Heaven', which was Sister Mary's name for the ward for incurable patients, she went around tenderly covering the exposed feet of her sleeping patients.³⁷

Mary's medical and missionary service was deeply respectful of the people of India and their culture. This, again, set her apart from the prevailing attitudes demonstrated by many Western contemporaries, and was manifested in a particular way by her study and extensive use of traditional Indian medicines. One can see in this, a reflection of Mary's ongoing openness to the truth and beauty of God, and to recognising this truth and beauty wherever it was to be found.

Not long after Mary's arrival for her mission, propaganda about birth control being spread by Dr Marie Stopes reached India. Convicted of the long term catastrophic impact of such fallacious arguments upon society's understanding of the intrinsic value of each human person and of human sexuality, Sister Mary was galvanised into action.

Mary's seemingly impossible answer, which came to her while making the Stations of the Cross in 1921, was for the establishment of Catholic Medical and Nursing Colleges in India in order to train professionals whose medical care would be grounded in an understanding of the absolute inviolability of human life and placed at the service of life. For the remainder of her life, Sister Mary worked and prayed to achieve this dream.

In a letter to the Mother General of the Congregation in 1931, Mary wrote:

"The evils of the day are great, and these evils, deplored by our Holy Father [Pope Pius XI], are rendered greater by the fact that so many doctors teach and practice what is contrary to natural law. To fight this evil, it is absolutely

³⁷ Swamikannu, op. cit., p 73.

necessary that there should be doctors, and especially medical women, thoroughly grounded in Catholic principles. For years the fight against this evil has been the object of my intention, as I say in the Office – Grant that I may praise thee O Holy Virgin; give me strength against thine enemies.”

A few years later, Sister Mary wrote papers on Medical Aid to the Missions, Euthanasia, Eugenics and Sterilization for the 1936 International Medical Congress in Vienna. Hitler had come to power in Germany almost three years earlier and just two years later, Austria would be annexed. Sister Mary could not attend the conference but her Mother General had the papers translated into Dutch, German and Italian. These documents were sent to the Holy Father via the Apostolic Delegate of India. Shortly thereafter, Pope Pius XI donated a piece of land in Rome for establishing a Catholic Medical College. Sadly, World War II broke out and the scheme was unfulfilled.

Finally in 1943, Mary founded the Catholic Hospital Association of India (CHAI) which has grown to become one of the largest Non Government Organisation (NGO) in the health care sector. The first meeting of the Association was held on 29th July 1943 while war raged close by and casualties streamed across the border from Burma. The principal object of the Association was to teach and safeguard Catholic principles in medical and nursing practice.

These must surely be recognised as profoundly prophetic steps on the part of Sister Mary, given that the noxious seeds sown by Marie Stopes, and her American counterpart Margaret Sanger, have now borne their full fruit. A pervasive culture of death is inculcated in many Government and international institutions where anti-life philosophies are perceived not only as normative but are increasingly being forced upon the unwilling.

In 1952, Mary accompanied Reverend Mother Jacquellini, her Regional Superior of the Society of Jesus Mary Joseph, to Holland for the election of the Mother General.³⁸ It was the first time that Mary had left India since her arrival some thirty one years earlier. Whilst in Holland, Mary endured a major operation to remove a tumour, which though seemingly successful, was the prelude to the years of suffering that were to end her life. As soon as Mary had recovered from her operation, she travelled to Ireland to see if, pending the establishment of a Catholic Medical College in India, her fellow nuns could be trained as doctors at the University College, Cork.³⁹ Unfortunately, she failed ‘to win this privilege for the Indian nuns.’⁴⁰

In December 1953, another tumour was removed. After just a few hours, Sister Mary was already picking up the threads of the work she had put aside just before the surgery. She endured another operation in 1955. Mary felt her bodily strength deteriorating as never before, so much so, that after assisting a serious operation she remarked: ‘I felt that I should have been the patient on the table or at least the next

³⁸ Clinton, op. cit., p 37.

³⁹ Clinton, op. cit., p 37..

⁴⁰ Ibid.

one.⁴¹ That same year, St Joseph's Hospital cared for 45,728 in-patients and 562,454 out-patients with another 8338 patients attended to by the mobile dispensary that travelled to nearby villages. There was only one other doctor onsite to help Mary.

For the last two years of her life, she shouldered the Cross of excruciating physical pain and suffering which she bore with extraordinary courage and patience. The sisters who witnessed her apostolate of suffering have described the calm, serene joy radiating from Mary's face, which struck all who approached her. This gives evidence to the truth that sanctified suffering produces real peace and nearness to God.

As the cancer spread, Mary became completely bedridden although she still continued to deal with her very large correspondence. One of her fellow sisters described Mary's bed as being 'covered with papers of every conceivable kind.'⁴² Mary's condition eventually became so serious that her superiors decided that she should leave the unbearably hot plains of Guntur and go to their hospital in Bangalore. Mary would have known that she would never return but, in simple obedience, she left the place of her life's work

On the 21st of November 1956, the Feast of Our Lady's Presentation, Mary was sent a new and lasting cross. In trying to help her nurse, Mary grasped the rail of her bed with her 'good' right arm but the bone had become brittle as result the cancer that had now spread throughout her body and the arm broke, never to be mended. This incident meant the end to her writing. She could also no longer hold her Rosary beads. She just had to lie on her bed bearing her suffering and accepting God's Holy Will which she had always sought to do. During this last illness, Sister Mary managed to translate the revised Holy Rule from Dutch into English with the book suspended over her bed so that she could read it.⁴³ Sister Mary's only regret, in her own words: 'I have not done enough. I could have done more.'⁴⁴

Her intense suffering gave physical expression and, in a way, summarised the whole reality of her life—a woman poured out, giving all her personal resources for the life of others and so a women who in her very person was to make tangibly present the reality of God's concrete, physical self-giving for humanity in his son Jesus.

Sister Mary had followed so closely in the footsteps of Jesus, healing, teaching, consoling and sacrificing all for love. She was free now to lay aside the stethoscope and prescription pad, which God had given her the grace never to abandon in His service.⁴⁵ Mary died on Sunday the 5th of May, 1957. She was sixty nine years of age. Her last words were: 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph' and 'My Jesus, I love you.'⁴⁶

⁴¹ Swamikannu, op. cit., p 156.

⁴² Authors Unknown, op. cit.

⁴³ Florence Swamikannu, op. cit., p 165.

⁴⁴ Authors Unknown, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Florence Swamikannu, op. cit., p 166.

⁴⁶ Authors Unknown, op. cit.

When she was laid out in the Chapel, ‘everybody noticed the change in Sister Mary’s face—she looked so beautiful and even youthful.’⁴⁷ At her requiem Mass, the Bishop of Guntur described Mary Glowrey as a ‘special creation of God...a great soul who embraced the whole world.’⁴⁸ It was in Bangalore, where Mary Glowrey so courageously lived the final months of her life, offering her suffering to God for her dreams for India, that St John’s Medical College was eventually built a little over a decade after her death. One of her fellow Indian sisters was amongst the first intake of medical students.

And so the natural question that arises in response to the life of Dr Mary Glowrey, Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart, is “How?” How did she find the strength day after day for her work, in conditions that posed so many obvious external difficulties and no doubt with many hidden interior challenges that only she herself could know about? How did she remain faithful to a vocation that asked so much of her, which required of her a commitment that in many ways seems madness to the today’s modern “me” generation? How did she endure the excruciating physical suffering of her later years with such courage? Are we simply encountering here another seemingly ‘super-human’ person, to be admired from afar by the rest of us ‘mere mortals’ but ultimately to be looked upon as someone totally unlike ourselves?

The simple answer to these questions, as Mary Glowrey herself testifies, is prayer – real prayer, a life of genuine daily dialogue with Jesus in the truest sense, not just in the “lip service” sense that so many of us engage in. Her relationship with Jesus was alive, her surrender to him became total, and so her heart was formed after his own in what it means to be poured out in total love on the Cross. Her life was one of deepening conscious surrender to the Holy Spirit, allowing her heart to be transformed by the power of God’s love in the midst of the often very challenging experiences of her life, so that the Love that she had surrendered her life to became incarnate in her very person. As a fellow nun who knew her well said:

‘It is almost certain that Sister Mary never attempted anything and never finished anything without seeking the aid and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Such was her devotion to and union to Him in her daily work. This proved again and showed her deep humility in her realisation that without the gift of the Holy Spirit she could do nothing, but with Him she could attempt all things. She did attempt the impossible at all times and she tried to inspire others to attempt them also.’⁴⁹

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Authors Unknown, op. cit.