

Another saint in the making

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Australia has another saint in the making in Dr Mary Glowrey, Sister Mary of the Sacred Heart. .

Mary Glowrey was born in 1887 at Birregurra in Victoria, Australia. Of Irish descent, Mary was the third of nine children born into a loving and prayerful family. 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."

Mary's outstanding academic achievements earned her a University Exhibition, an invaluable cash scholarship. Pursuing her literary interests, Mary began studying for a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne in 1905. However after a great deal of prayer and the encouragement of her father, Mary switched over to the medical course and graduated in 1910 with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery.



She had to complete her residency in New Zealand before returning to build her own successful private practice in Melbourne. She also worked at St Vincent's Hospital and the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital. 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. Falling to her knees, Mary finished reading the pamphlet and knew that God had called her to help the women and children of India. Mary, describing this moment many years later, said: "My life's work lay clear before me now.

It was to be medical mission work in India."

In 1916, Mary Glowrey was elected as the first General President of the newly formed Catholic Women's Social Guild, 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 Catholics sought to change society and protect the most vulnerable in their midst.

During this busy time, Mary also studied for a higher medical degree with a particular emphasis on obstetrics, gynaecology and ophthalmology. She became a Doctor of Medicine in December 1919.

On January 21, 1920, Mary left her thriving career as an Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist. Surrendering herself completely to God's will, Mary sailed for India to become a medical missionary with the Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Guntur. Pope Benedict XV granted permission for Dr Glowrey to practise medicine as a religious 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.

She 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. The small dispensary in Guntur grew into St Joseph's Hospital where Mary, for many years the lone doctor, trained local women to be dispensers, nurses and midwives to help stem the tide of suffering. Mary 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. She also studied and made extensive use of traditional Indian medicines.

In 1943, Mary founded the Catholic Hospital Association of India which has grown to become the largest Non-Government Organisation (NGO) in the health care sector. Mary recognised the vital need to promote the Christian use of medicine to counter the pervasive Culture of Death. Her vision was the establishment of a Catholic Medical College 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.

Mary Glowrey 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. Mary never attempted anything without praying to the Holy Spirit, knowing that with the help of the Holy Spirit all things are possible. For the last two years of her life, she shouldered the Cross of excruciating physical pain brought upon by cancer 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. Sister Mary died on May 5, 1957. Her last words were: "Jesus, Mary and Joseph" and "My Jesus, I love you."

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." 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 almost a decade later.

The history of the Church reveals again and again that it is at times of greatest crisis in culture and civilisation that women and men of faith are raised up, in the providential mercy of God, to stand as beacons of truth. In their very persons, they make present to us in a visible, tangible way, the true dignity of humanity and the calling of love that is the vocation of every man, woman and child. They reveal to us that this vocation is intrinsically linked to our humanity, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, and is the authentic fulfilment of our humanity.

The person of Dr Mary Glowrey stands as one such beacon for our time, a sign of contradiction in the midst of our prevailing culture - a woman, a brilliant doctor, a visionary leader, a person of great holiness transformed by the power of Jesus' love, who in the witness of her person became a source of life for countless thousands. Her capacity 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.

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Those wishing to obtain a copy of the prayer for the cause for Mary Glowrey ([PDF version of the prayer card](#)) should contact the General Secretary of the Catholic Women's League of Victoria and Wagga Wagga at cwlvicw@bigpond.com or on 0425 701 248.

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