

Mother Mary Gonzaga Barry (1834 – 1915)



Mary Gonzaga Barry was the founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or Loreto Sisters, in Australia. An inspirational leader, she initiated a philosophy of education that was noted for its foresight and comprehensiveness.

Mary Barry was born in 1834 in Wexford, Ireland. After being educated at the Loreto Abbeys in Gorey and Rathfarnham she entered the IBVM at Gorey in 1853 at the age of 19, receiving her religious name, 'Gonzaga'.

In response to an appeal by the Bishop of Ballarat, Dr. O'Connor, Mother Gonzaga was asked to lead a mission to Australia to begin a Loreto school in Ballarat.

With nine companions Mother Gonzaga arrived in Melbourne on 19th July 1875.

After spending a night in Melbourne, the group travelled to Ballarat via Geelong and was received by an enthusiastic crowd at the station. M. Gonzaga and her nuns stayed at the St. Alipius Presbytery until a property in west Ballarat was purchased and opened as Loreto Abbey, Mary's Mount, in September 1875.



M. Gonzaga believed that the world needed 'wise, loveable and well-educated women' and to this end she ensured a broad education was provided in the schools she founded. Soon after establishing the school at Mary's Mount, Mother Gonzaga founded a Loreto Day School in Dawson Street Ballarat and to ensure that a Loreto education was as widely available as possible took over the running of the Parish Schools of St. Joseph's Ballarat and St. Aloysius Redan.

Mother Gonzaga was a pioneer in teacher training and established a Teachers' Training College on the Dawson Street site in 1884, one of the first providers of tertiary education for women.

She was deeply committed to the liberal education of girls from kindergarten to tertiary levels and the welfare of the women and girls and brought together groups to work for those in need, such as the Ladies of Charity in Ballarat which grew to number five hundred and Loreto past pupils who established the Loreto Free Kindergarten in Melbourne.

Mary Gonzaga died at Mary's Mount, Ballarat, in 1915 having established communities and schools in every mainland state in Australia.