

John Corcoran Wallis (1910 to 2001) A Man of Vision

John Corcoran Wallis (1910-2001), Catholic priest, missionary and founder of the Missionary Sisters of Service, was born on 11 June 1910 in Yea, the second of six children born to Abraham Knight and Emma Kathleen (née Corcoran). John Wallis was educated locally and at the Marist Brothers' Assumption College, Kilmore (1924-26) where attendance at spiritual retreats helped crystalize his decision to become a priest.¹ In 1927, the tall, gangly and 'somewhat weedy 16 year old' began training for the priesthood at St Columba's Seminary, Springwood, NSW and later St Patrick's, Manly. With a special dispensation for his young age, Wallis was ordained a priest at Kilmore on 18 December 1932. Throughout most of his life, Wallis was a priest who went about doing what he referred to as 'the Master's business'.² His daily readings of the scriptures and the liturgy were the core of his theological development and nourished his life. He was a man whose efforts contributed to change in the Australian Catholic Church.



The Wallis family pictured on Fr Wallis' ordination day.

During the 1930s the Catholic Church was renewing its attention to a theological framework for the devotional and intellectual practices of Catholics. Papal Encyclicals refocused the way Catholic men and women should live their lives and ranged from issues such as contraception and abortion to children's education. Two encyclicals were issued in 1931 while John Wallis was training for the priesthood. *Quadragesimo Anno* (On Reconstructing the Social Order) and *Non abbiamo bisogno* (Concerning Catholic Action) were particularly significant in influencing Catholic intellectual thought and activity.³ His interest in the work of the laity through Catholic Action, and his desire to teach disadvantaged Catholics living in the Australian outback, may be traced back to his understanding and interpretation of these two encyclicals. Wallis was involved in the work of Catholic Action and the development of a mature understanding of the proper place of the lay vocation in the life of the Church which became 'the cornerstone' of the Second Vatican Council's understanding of the Church and its engagement with the world.⁴

¹ 'Early history of the Home Missionary Sisters of Our Lady', MSS Beginnings, Missionary Sisters of Service Archive,

² Penelope E Edman, *One Man's Yes to God*, Missionary Sisters of Service, Forrest Hill, 1992, p. 6.

³ A Fremantle, *The Papal Encyclicals in their Historical Context*, New American Library, New York, 1956, pp. 228-235.

⁴ Max Vodola, 'In the Vanguard and ahead of their times: John XXIII, John Wallis, Guildford Young and Vatican II', John Wallis Memorial Lecture, Launceston, 22 October 2012, p. 4.

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In 1937 Wallis was sent to Launceston, Tasmania where, in 1938, he was appointed Diocesan Director for Catholic Action. This appointment allowed him to explore the possibilities of working toward changing the Catholic Church's attitude to ecclesiastical teaching. On his first visit to the small Catholic congregation on Bruny Island in 1933, Wallis met Mrs Kit Hawkins, an anxious and concerned mother who asked: 'Has the Church no responsibility for souls of people in the country – out of sight, out of mind?'⁵ This cry for help was an S.O.S. to the Church; it had a lasting impact on Wallis.



Mrs Kit Hawkins with Fr John Wallis (1969)

Six years after his visit to Bruny Island, Wallis heard of the work of the Sisters of Service (S.O.S) in Canada, founded by Catherine Donnelly. He immediately investigated the possibility of having a 'convent that runs on wheels' operating in outback Australia and began corresponding with Redemptorist Father George Daly, spiritual director of the Sisters of Service.⁶ Wallis instinctively knew that Australian Catholics in remote areas needed an equivalent of the Sisters of Service. In the 1930s he first approached Justin Daniel Simonds, Archbishop of Tasmania, with his vision of women religious seeking out Catholics in isolated areas. He was told 'it would never be approved' because the moral and physical danger would be too much for women.⁷ Yet he persisted with his ideas of a mobile service for Catholics in the outback. In 1941 the development of his ideas were portrayed in his seminal article 'Why Not Peregrinating Sisters?' published as 'Home Missionary Sisters: An Australian Need', in *Emmaus* in 1942.⁸ While obedience was very important to Wallis, he was known as one who found it difficult to accept 'no' for an answer.⁹ Rather, Wallis was happy to argue his point with his Bishop, but if the Bishop insisted, he would offer 'tacit resistance' then go and do what he was told. As he often said: 'Some regulations call for passive resistance.'¹⁰

From September to November 1943, meetings of priests and the laity to discuss the possibility of forming an association of women with a passion to reach out to Catholics in remote locations were held in Hobart and Launceston. Money was raised for the venture and on 8 July 1944, four women committed to serving the church, came together as the Home Missionary Sisters of Our Lady in Launceston. Directly modeled on the Sisters of Service in Toronto, Canada, the community was officially inaugurated on 15 August 1944. On 3 November 1944 they made promises of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience for a period of twelve months.

⁵ Rev. J C Wallis, 'Home Missionary Sisters: An Australian Need', *Emmaus*, 1942.

⁶ <http://www.catherinedonnellyfoundation.org/cath.html>

⁷ *One Man's Yes to God*, p. 7.

⁸ *One Man's Yes to God*, p. 7 and p. 23, and Penelope E Edman, *Around the Kitchen Table*, Missionary Sisters of Service, Rangeview, 2008, p. 42.

⁹ Interview with Sr Bernadette Wallis, June 2013.

¹⁰ *Inspirations from Father John*, Mementos of John put together on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his Ordination to the Priesthood on 18 December 1932, Missionary Sisters of Service, 2002.

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In 1947 permission was given for the Sisters to live as a Society of Religious Women in Community without public vows. Their first full-scale mission to north-east Tasmania began in 1948 and in 1949 the first mission house was established in Longford, near Launceston.¹¹ The name of the Congregation was changed to the Missionary Sisters of Service in 1971.¹²



The Sisters took their first public vows on 15 August 1951.

In 1950 Wallis enjoyed his first overseas trip to Rome as companion to Archbishop of Hobart, Dr Ernest Tweedy. At a private audience with His Holiness, Pope Pius XII in November 1950, they received the Pope's blessing for the new religious community. The status of the community was also raised to a Religious Congregation with public vows. Less than one year later, in August 1951, twelve Sisters took public vows and the Home Missionary Sisters of Our Lady was formally constituted as a religious congregation. On this occasion Wallis wrote:

In some real sense the Home Missionary Sisters of Our Lady are a modern Congregation – modern in point of time, modern in dress and modern, too, in the ways and means of carrying on their apostolate.¹³



The Sisters on mission with the caravan.

¹¹ *Around the Kitchen Table*, p. 3.

¹² *Around the Kitchen Table*, p. 4.

¹³ *One Man's Yes to God*, p. 39.

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Wallis's method and approach to the pastoral outreach of the Church into the community was ahead of its time; new and modern, it embraced some of the ideals of Catholic Action. His group of 'peregrinating sisters' first operated in Tasmania then extended into New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia. They soon became fondly known, especially in Victoria, as the 'Caravan Sisters' for the miles they travelled in the spirit of the Gospels, seeking out people in small remote communities and isolated properties. Once the congregation was securely established, Wallis ceased to have direct involvement with the order yet he remained their spiritual guide. Notwithstanding his lack of direct involvement, his spiritual teachings remained pivotal to the work of the order. As Catholic historian, Max Vodola has written:

The vision of John Wallis in founding the Congregation ...very much paved the way for a new style of religious life here in Australia, a style of religious life and pastoral ministry very much adapted to the needs of this country, as opposed to importing a 'stock standard' European model. A new style of pastoral ministry and adaptation to new and changing conditions were the hallmarks of the Second Vatican Council...'.¹⁴

Wallis and his vision of nuns living their lives outside convent walls was a radical, effective and eminently successful idea for the times. In a small way, his attitude progressed the changing role of women – especially women religious. His enlightened thinking is one example of his belief that one must 'read the signs of the times!'¹⁵



The Vicar General, Monsignor Cullen (right) farewells Archbishop Tweedy and Fr Wallis as they set off for Rome in 1950,

In 1956 Wallis was appointed parish priest to the new parish of Glenorchy, in Tasmania, a position he held for seven years. Initially the parish had only one church; Wallis soon changed this situation. During his term at Glenorchy, he built the St John's complex, St Monica's church, Chigwell, and planned and built Holy Rosary School. To do this he had to convince an order of nuns to establish a congregation in Tasmania. After approaching eleven orders of nuns and receiving nine rejections to his request, historian Penelope Edman writes that the tenth response propelled him into action. He flew to Sydney where he: 'persuaded the Dominican

¹⁴ Max Vodola, 'In the Vanguard and ahead of their times: John XXIII, John Wallis, Guildford Young and Vatican II', John Wallis Memorial Lecture, 22 October 2012, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Inspirations from Father John*, Mementos of John put together on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his Ordination to the Priesthood on 18 December 1932, Missionary Sisters of Service, 2002.

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Sisters that “No” was not the answer the Lord expected them to give to his request that they should come to Tasmania’. So convincing was his appeal to the Dominicans, that they agreed and arrived in Tasmania in January 1959.¹⁶

The next major phase of Wallis’s life began with the Second Vatican Council which opened in October 1962. Wallis followed all developments enthusiastically. As the Council’s documents came off the press, ‘he “devoured” them and spoke about them regularly, frequently and often!’. His informative and insightful commentaries of Vatican decisions and their anticipated outcomes for the church, the laity and the congregation were widely distributed. He ‘fed the Sisters on a diet of sixteen conciliar documents’ and not only introduced them to the documents, ‘but lured us inside them, walked us around them, in them, climbed up and down through them. His enthusiasm knew no bounds. He wanted everyone to see, feel and taste what he saw and felt and tasted.’ Vodola draws illuminating parallels between the work of John Wallis and that of Pope John XXIII. He believes they were both men who intuited change; they ‘discerned changing conditions in the Church and in the world’. Furthermore he sees them as men who ‘were able to return to the biblical imperative given by Jesus in the Gospel to “read the signs of the times”’.¹⁷ Wallis always described Vatican II as the ‘biggest event in his life’.¹⁸ The Catholic Church’s relationship to the world formed one of the themes of Vatican II. Wallis’s enlightened attitudes to pastoral teaching began in the 1930s. His early promotion of nuns moving wherever their presence was required and allowing them to journey freely in the community is illustrative of his significance as a Catholic intellectual.

In 1964 Wallis was appointed Vicar for Religious, a position he retained into the 1990s. In December 1982 he celebrated the golden jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood. By the time of his retirement he had also become well known for leading retreats, something he valued and practiced as part of his own spiritual development. He served under six Archbishops, served in ten different parishes, some for more than one period; had been Missions Director, Founder of the then Schools Provident Fund (now the Catholic Development Fund), Founder of the Catholic Bookshop in Hobart, Vicar for Religious, retreat director, hospital chaplain, and founder of a religious congregation.¹⁹

After sixty years as a priest, in 1992 his very important work was recognised by the Australian government. Father John Wallis was awarded the Member of the Order of Australia in the General Division ‘For Service To Religion’.²⁰

Wallis is described as ‘a man of God and a true pastor for his people, seeking them out in their homes, in hospitals and prisons’.²¹ Two of his most constantly used phrases and tools for teaching were ‘*humano modo*’ or ‘in a human way’, and ‘*suprema lex caritas*’, that is ‘the supreme law is love/charity’.²² Fundamental to his belief was his view that the Sisters of Service were ‘called to be a



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¹⁶ *One Man’s Yes to God*, p. 27.

¹⁷ Vodola, p. 4.

¹⁸ *One Man’s Yes to God*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Archbishop Adrian, *Eulogies and Homily for the Vigil Liturgy and Mass of Christian Burial for Father John C Wallis*, St Mary’s Cathedral, Hobart, 7 and 8 August, 2001, p. 10.

²⁰ http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/honours/honour_roll/search.cfm?aus_award_id=885808&search_type=quick&showInd=true

²¹ <http://www.johnwallisfoundation.org.au/about-john-wallis/>

²² Sr Bernadette Wallis, MSS, *Eulogies and Homily for the Vigil Liturgy and Mass of Christian Burial for Father John C Wallis*, St Mary’s Cathedral, Hobart, 7 and 8 August, 2001, p. 2.

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“journeying” community, going into the highways, byways and skyways of the outback’.²³

The young John Wallis often displayed tendencies to resistance, a trait that remained with him throughout life. He is also described as a man who was ‘not a stranger to pranks’, and his sense of fun and delight in the ridiculous, ‘saw him through many sticky situations’. In later life, while still enjoying a strong sense of joy and wonder, people experienced him as a man of deep humanity, understanding, compassion and wisdom, as well as a keen sense of humour.²⁴ Wallis’s passion and ability to embrace the ideals of the 1931 Encyclical on Catholic Action and later effectively communicate the radical changes instigated by the edicts of Vatican II, his teachings and spiritual guidance from the 1930s to the 1990s, cannot be underestimated.

John Corcoran Wallis was a priest for sixty-nine years. The once shy, tall, and gangly teenager who, against the odds, entered the priesthood at the very young age of sixteen, grew into a man of solid stature both physically and spiritually. He was a man sometimes underestimated by his peers and at times very much on the periphery of Church life, ‘going about his work’ with little fuss and fanfare.²⁵ He died on 3 August 2001, aged 91, and was buried at Cornelian Bay Hobart. The John Wallis Foundation was established in 2010 by the Missionary Sisters of Service to continue the vision and mission of Father John and the Sisters. It honours the memory of this enlightened Australian priest.

Fay Woodhouse
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²³ *Inspirations from Father John*, Mementos of John put together on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his Ordination to the Priesthood on 18 December 1932, Missionary Sisters of Service, 2002.

²⁴ <http://www.missionarysisters.org.au/our-founder/>.

²⁵ Vodola, p. 2.