

Rare spirit of compassion

THE AGE

June 6, 2009

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SOMETIMES big stories are best told through the struggles of individuals. So when filmmaker Robyn Hughan was looking for a way to illuminate the contested issues surrounding refugees and detention in Australia, she found her subject in Carmel Wauchope. Now, by no account can this silver-haired Benedictine nun be regarded as ordinary. She'd taken a path rarely embraced even among women of her generation. Yet her ability to connect with ordinary people thrust into an extraordinarily fraught situation was something no documentary maker could resist.

So Hughan decided to tell that big public policy story through a single nun's struggle with the system. "There were so many people fighting against detention policies, but what struck me was her ability to connect on the human level," the filmmaker says. Yet even now, the good Sister Carmel is what one might call a reluctant star. She's garrulous, sure, but has to be cajoled to open up about her life to a journalist. Once persuaded, however, what a treasure trove lies within.

For some people, perhaps life's big decisions come as a series of epiphanies. Not so Carmel Wauchope. As a teenager in the late-1940s, growing up in a South Australian town, she grappled with that inner voice that suggested she become a nun. "It was a negative thing at first. When my sister announced she wanted to be a nun, I thought, 'She's mad' — and, of course, she got married and had six kids ... To be true to myself, later on I thought I'd try it. I couldn't go through life pretending I didn't have this thing in my head, but I didn't think I would last."

Decades later, with an enduring vocation as a Sister of the Good Samaritan and long career as a school teacher, when her niece suggested the then Whyalla-based septuagenarian visit the Baxter Detention Centre about an hour's drive away, she balked once again. There was something about the set-up of the place, blocking out much of the surrounding view of the Flinders Ranges for its inmates, that was downright sinister.

"But then my niece, Bernadette, who used to visit the refugees there, rang me up and said, 'Aunty Carmel, we're only allowed to see a few people at one time, and there's a fellow there that no one can get to see otherwise.' So I said OK, and after that I used to go two or three times a week ... You could only visit four people at one time. So, that meant if you went twice a week at least you could visit eight people."

A year beforehand, early in 2001, Wauchope had begun writing to detainees at the Woomera Detention Centre, also in outback South Australia, after a request from a local Catholic priest she knew. "He rang me, saying, 'Do you think you could get some of your sisters to write letters? The detainees think nobody knows they're here and are just so despondent.' So I sent a fax around to all the Good Samaritan sisters around Australia and I got all these letters back."

At the venerable age of 70, when most of her peers were enjoying their grandchildren and a quiet retirement, Wauchope had found an issue she could not give up. She began writing to state and federal politicians, even holding placards outside their electorate offices. She had joined a movement with a surprising number of rural and regional Australians, who

eventually coalesced under the banner Rural Australians for Refugees, to fight what she considered utterly inhumane government policies.

Put to her some of the well-rehearsed phraseology of the Howard years — queue-jumpers, illegals, unlawful non-citizens — and Wauchope shudders. Yet hers is not the carefully constructed response of the activist-lawyer, urban academic or all-round polemicist. She keeps referring to a simple idea, steeped in her faith in the human condition. "My answer to all that is: human beings are worthy of respect," she says.

Although she voted for him, and welcomes the Rudd Government's less hardline approach to the treatment of asylum seekers, she also is loath to embrace Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's recent characterisation of people smugglers as the "vilest form of human life".

She sees the issue through the broader lens of compassion. "I think they're wrong to take advantage of somebody's disaster ... but they provide a way out of a country which is not safe to these people, don't they? ... I don't judge them."

Similarly, unlike some of those with whom she has been at the barricades, she says she can't make a moral judgement on former prime minister John Howard or even his most assiduous immigration minister at the time, Philip Ruddock. "I'd get angry with them, but I don't judge them," says Wauchope. "I don't know their motivations, I don't judge people."

Is this sort of compassion learnt or innate? And is it a trait in which religious folk excel? Wauchope has a hearty laugh at the suggestion that being a member of a formal religious order confers some sort of moral superiority. Such people are as flawed as everybody else, she says. She wonders whether the diminished influence of the church in the lives of ordinary Australians — she has seen for herself the decline in church attendance and affiliation over the years — is a failure of some sort on the part of Christians such as herself, even.

"I kind of feel sad sometimes that we're not what we ought to be," she says. "I was thinking of just that the other day, and I wondered, had we let them all down? ... I wondered if people like me had not stated what we believed in more often. Should we have done more of that?"

For Wauchope, and her generation of prewar Australians, the church loomed much larger. But the Catholicism she learnt from her parents, Bert, a butcher, and homemaker Peg in a modest iron and timber three-bedroom house in Port Pirie, was a broadly based one. The seven children, who used to argue a lot but never debated religion, learnt their catechism with a big dollop of compassion and concern for the welfare of those less fortunate.

The example of their parents, who gave money to the poor, was quiet inspiration, adds Wauchope. (Indeed, her recently deceased mother, who lived to 104, gives a remarkably spirited denunciation of detention policy in the documentary *A Nun's New Habit*.)

The family were long steeped in the Anglo-Celtic tradition. Her father's family, of English and Scottish origin, settled in Australia in the 1830s. Her mother's family, who came out 20 or so years later, had an Irish background.

Although they were churchgoers, Peg in particular found her eldest daughter's decision to become a nun difficult at first because of the physical separation it would entail.

But Wauchope says she saw it as something of an adventure or experiment. "(It seemed like) you moved to another family. There were seven of us the day I entered the novitiate in Sydney."

It was 1949 — and she was just one month short of celebrating her 19th birthday. It was the first time she had ever left the state, and she was the first one in her family to venture so far out. "It was just after the war, people didn't move like that. You couldn't move around unless you were a soldier."

In a geographical sense, being a nun became something of a ticket to explore Australia. Over 60 years, Wauchope has travelled up and down the country. After early training in Sydney, her first posting was in Thornbury, in Victoria, in the early 1950s. In those days, this now well-established suburb consisted of acres of green paddocks. Equally memorable, she says, was a stint later that decade in Queanbeyan, the satellite suburb of newly developed Canberra. "They'd moved all these new people from displaced camps in Europe, there were lots of Polish people, Ukrainians and Lithuanians ... I think I had two home-grown 'Australian' children in the class — and I had 103 in the kindergarten class. It was just extraordinary."

European migrants were nothing new to Wauchope, who had grown up with several Italian school friends at the local Catholic school. Prejudice of the sort that greeted the asylum seekers in the detention centres and the early waves of postwar migrants who came before them is learned behaviour, rather than innate to the human condition, she says. "Think of little children, they don't know any difference — and sometimes you have a prejudice if you think that the other person, who is different from you, is getting on better than you are."

The antithesis of prejudice, she argues, is kindness. It was not politics or rhetoric that she applied during the many, many visits she made to the detainees at Baxter. It was kindness.

So she talked and listened. The subject matter was not legislation or due process or the effectiveness of mandatory detention. Important as that was, that was the stuff for the lawyers and political activists. Lending a compassionate ear had its own power. So she listened to stories of children, wives, mothers and fathers from which the detainees, mostly men from Afghanistan and Iraq, had been long parted. She took in home-grown roses and other flowers from her garden. She baked cakes, and even made attempts to master Middle Eastern cuisine (that experiment was less successful).

And for all that effort, she reaped the rewards too, she says, citing long-lasting friendships that have transcended the men's release from detention. The understanding she also gained about Islam, a religion she had not previously encountered, was also enlightening. Although, she is a committed Christian she retains an appreciation for all faiths.

"There are so many different paths," she observes. Is that the sort of sentiment Archbishop George Pell might endorse, though? There's a flash of Wauchope's trademark mischievous humour. "I don't know, I've never asked him ... but it's quite obvious, isn't it?"

Next month, Wauchope celebrates her 79th birthday. Technically, she has now retired from official duties and has returned once more to her home town of Port Pirie, surrounded by family and some of the people she knew as a teenager. Yet the spirit in her is far from quenched. Baxter and Woomera are now closed. Most of the men she used to visit are settled into the community and have been recognised by officialdom as refugees. Yet, there are new battles on the horizon.

"They've still got Christmas Island detention centre, haven't they? ... I've started thinking about that. I haven't started letter-writing yet, but I probably will. I remember one of our nuns used to say, 'All that's necessary for evil to triumph is for the good to do nothing.' If you think something is wrong, you must do something."

A Nun's New Habit is screening at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) at Federation Square on Saturday, June 13, at 4pm. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion chaired by Farah Farouque. Sister Carmel Wauchope will be among the panellists.

CARMEL WAUCHOPE CV

AGE 78

FAMILY Member of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, a Benedictine order. One of seven children born to Bert and Peg Wauchope.

EDUCATION St John's, Port Pirie; diploma in teacher training.

CAREER

2 JULY 1949 Entered convent in Pennant Hills, Sydney.

JANUARY 1958 Took final vows.

FROM 1949 Nun, primary school teacher and principal, community worker; sent all over Australia, from suburbs in Victoria, Queensland, and NSW to outback towns such as Mount Magnet, Western Australia and Whyalla, South Australia.

FROM 2001 Refugee activist and prolific letter-writer.

2009 Subject of the film A Nun's New Habit: a documentary of Love, Compassion and Refugees.