**Journey to Water**

It’s my pleasure to provide you with an opening address for this art exhibition – Journey to Water. I would like to start by acknowledging country – Cammeraygal country and its people, past, present and future. I also acknowledge the country of many First Nations and the First Nations Peoples, their connection with country, the waterholes and rivers and the many diverse ecologies in the MD Basin. “In the creek bed where there is water, the families gather and the children learn their stories of the land”[[1]](#footnote-1). Water is a gathering place for education and transformation. We know this from Sacred Scripture, the story when Jesus met the woman at the well.

And in the same spirit of love, I acknowledge Mary Mackillop and Julian Tennison Woods, who journeyed in this great south land. We understand that Julian was an avid learner of the natural sciences, noticing the unique geology and botany around him. Together this pair left a legacy of education for us and meaningful work for the women who continue the ministry of the Sisters of St Joseph and all they touch.

I would like to thank the Sisters of St Joseph for their efforts to embrace God’s Creation – seeing the need in Creation and doing something about it. At a recent chapter meeting the sisters set a clear intention to respond with compassion and respect for our common home and since then the sisters have begun initiatives to get their own houses and offices in order. Through this exhibition their ecological ministry goes out to the community in a particular way to bring about ecological conversion for adults and children who visit the museum and art gallery.

Through hosting Rachel’s art, the sisters of St Joseph are placing the gift of water before us so that we can see both the beauty of God’s Creation and its diminishment that has occurred in just over 200 years. The Josephite sisters are showing their recognition of Mother Earth, that she must be respected and cared for, looked after as a beautiful treasure, and loved for her life giving gifts of water, as pure joy, refreshment on the journey, and as deeply relational. Water is the source of life and is sacred.

As an artist, Rachel Carroll is bringing into view a series of work created in six locations along the Murray Darling Rivers. Her method was to sketch on location where she also camped before returning to the studio to paint with oil and acrylic paints on hemp and board. Her exploration began in 2006 where she visited the Coorong and observed severe signs of diminishment which were shared by the local Aboriginal people. The river mouth was choking up and this made the water extremely saline. When you first enter the art gallery the paintings on the left illustrate the pink salt lakes and the ephemeral lakes evoking for me a feeling of severe parchment and desolation, loneliness and even abandonment. For me, the Paroo – Virga illuminates an open expanse of river country located in the very north of NSW, close to the Queensland border. This work takes me immediately to the red earthy place of desert country. In this painting one of the globally unique features of the Murray-Darling River system is visible – for a river basin the Murray-Darling Catchment is one of the flattest in the world!

It is here, that I would like to share with you a little about the story of the Murray Darling Basin (Basin). It is a story of many wrongs and great injustice which needs to be reconciled. The ecosystems of the Basin have been wronged, the fish, birds and everything in the system. The First Nations Peoples’ of the Basin have been wronged. The governance of the Basin has been handled appallingly and this continues to today.

Let me begin with an excerpt from a document that was carefully prepared and produced by the ecological agency, Catholic Earthcare Australia in 2004. For some background, *The Gift of Water* is a pastoral letter that was drafted by the late Fr Dennis Edwards and endorsed by the eleven Bishops of the Murray-Darling Basin. It was launched at Echuca on a paddle steamer with the community including school children, teachers and members of the community including the mayor. It encapsulates integral ecology because it brings togerther spiritual, cultural, social, educational and ecological perspectives of the Basin.

In this publication the Bishops stressed the need to restore river flow: ‘We strongly support government and community decisions to restore flow to the Murray-Darling Rivers. This will demand not only water efficient practices and engineering solutions but also realistic limits on how much can be taken from the rivers. It will involve related initiatives such as salinity control in both dryland and irrigation areas, best management land use, and curtailing agriculture, industry and urban development that uses unsustainable quantities of water. We support reducing salt and nutrient loads to the rivers, managing weir pools, limiting chemicals, enabling fish passages and removing exotic species. Taking responsibility for our rivers will mean investing a significantly greater percentage of government funds in improved management of the Basin. We believe that restoring environmental flow is essential for the health of the rivers, for the sake of human communities now and into the future, and for the survival of the diverse species of God’s creatures that inhabit the Murray-Darling Basin.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

From the recent Royal Commission Report on the Murray-Darling Basin (2019), we understand: ‘The Murray-Darling Basin (Basin) is environmentally, economically and socially important to not only Basin communities, but to the nation as a whole. The Basin is the largest catchment area in Australia, consisting of 23 river valleys and over 77 000 kilometres of watercourses, spanning an area of over a million square kilometres and across four States and the Australian Capital Territory. It is a highly variable system, with average annual inflows of 32 800 GL per year, but which have ranged from 117 907 GL in 1956 to less than 6740 GL in 2006. Within the Basin, there are over 30 000 wetlands, 16 of which are listed as Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. The Basin is home to over 46 species of native fish and 120 species of waterbirds. Over two million people live in the Basin, and more than three million people in total depend upon it for water. There are over 40 Aboriginal nations within the Basin, who comprise 15% of Australia’s population of Aboriginal people. Forty percent of all farms in Australia are located within the Basin, and they contribute approximately $22 billion to the national economy. Nearly all of Australia’s rice and cotton and 80% of Australia’s grapes are grown in the Basin. Tourism contributes a further $8 billion. Agricultural industries in the Basin employ 45% of agricultural workers in Australia.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

Two days ago, on 23rd July 2019, a report was released to review the state of the Barwon Darling River by the Natural Resources Commission of NSW. The backstory is that a plan for the Barwon-Darling River was put in place at the end of 2012 to last for ten years. Interestingly, the Barwon Darling Plan was approved by the NSW Gov before the Federal MD Basin Plan was enacted. The report is a devastating critique of the changing nature of water use and licenses. Only one group of people have benefited – the irrigators upsteam in the Basin. The rules were changed to benefit them. One of the rules that changed was the gauge of the pipeline from 5 inches to 2 feet – an increase of 300% of the water taken out of the river.

The fact that the water management plan for NSW states that it prioritises the river for the communities and then actually serves one small group of people. A few thousand individuals who are ultimately in it for a quick monetary return, with enormous costs to the ecosystems, Aboriginal people, and the nation is clearly stated in this latest report. Here is an excerpt from the executive summary that may be of interest:

“The Barwon-Darling is an ecosystem in crisis. Communities that live along the river are also under extreme stress. The catchment, and those of upstream tributaries, have been highly modified by development over the past several decades, impacting the systems’ resilience. An intense drought, significant upstream water extraction, an apparent climate shift and the rules in the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated and Alluvial Water Sources 2012 (the Plan) have all contributed to poor ecological, social and cultural outcomes.

Communities who can no longer fish, swim or drink the river water have called for the Plan to be fundamentally overhauled. These calls have been matched by graziers who have struggled to provide for their stock as the river has dried up. At the same time, irrigators have been criticised even as they too have been unable to pump due to ‘cease to flow’ events increasing in frequency and duration.

As a result of these events, the former Minister for Regional Water, the Hon Niall Blair, requested that the Natural Resources Commission (the Commission) bring forward its statutory review of the Plan. This review considers the extent the Plan has contributed to environmental, social and economic outcomes, and provides advice on whether changes to the Plan provisions are warranted. This is the Commission’s draft report for public consultation. The final report will be delivered to the Minister for Water, the Hon Melinda Pavey in September 2019.

The Water Management Act 2000 (the Act) clearly prioritises protection of the water source and dependent ecosystems, followed by basic landholder rights including native title, and then other extractive uses. The current Plan has not effectively achieved this prioritisation.

The riverine ecosystems in the Barwon-Darling are under great pressure as indicated by recent mass fish kills immediately downstream of the Barwon-Darling Plan area. Aquatic species such as the river mussel have suffered losses that will take decades to recover, if they recover at all. A highly variable, unregulated river such as the Barwon-Darling needs to be managed not just for long term averages, but for its extremes. Instead, changes to the water sharing rules in the Plan area have resulted in an increased allowance for extractive use at lower flow classes that are critical to the environment.

These provisions benefit the economic interests of a few upstream users over the ecological and social needs of the many. The Commission recognises that altering the rules of the Plan cannot in itself fix all of the issues and concerns identified for the river system. However, there is clear evidence to indicate that the Plan rules are resulting in more frequent and longer cease to flow periods. It should also be recognised that the Barwon-Darling is a unique system, and development of the water sharing plan is inherently complex. The Plan must be able to cope with a significant amount of uncertainty and risk, with a wide range of potential impacts from upstream extraction, and climate variability. In amending and then remaking the Plan, the Minister for Water and Minister for Energy and Environment should first and foremost ensure environmental flow needs and basic landholder rights are met, delivering water when and where it is needed to protect threatened species and support communities.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

There is some hope for us to realise in this story when we take a community approach and look to the future, and not just the present. We can recognise that substantial justice can be served. For the species, for the people and everything else.

**What signs are there of hope for the Basin?**

Did anyone watch the ‘Four Corners’ program on the 8th July? It was called “How taxpayers are funding a huge corporate expansion in the Murray-Darling Basin”.People have been found guilty of water theft. Since 2018, a person was appointed to check peoples’ use of water. A grape grower admitted to stealing 13, 078 million litres of Murray river water. This form of enforcing the limits of extraction are a step in the right direction towards irrigators becoming accountable and being transparent about their water use. It shows us that the story can change for the Murray-Darling Basin. It required a public viewing on the Four Corners Program and is a result of an investigation that can be furthered.

A potential outcome could be water audit of the whole Basin. Prof Quentin Grafton and Prof John Williams at ANU have been calling for a proper water audit of the whole basin and have suggested that it could be done for less than $20 million. Putting this into perspective $4000 Million has been spent on improving water use efficiency over the last decade. A whole Basin audit would cost less than 1% of what has already been spent. Who benefits from not having the transparency? There is interest in shedding light on where the water is, who is using it and what it is being used for. At this time the Farmers Federation is in support of this proposed next step. There is scope for a community petition to support this work to show the Government that we care about the water and the implications for the whole system.

**Another story of hope**

In March 2019, a conference was sponsored by the Redemptorist Fathers at their property St Clement’s in Galong situated on the South West Southern Slopes of NSW. The participants of the event, *An Australian Ecumenical Response to Laudato Si’,* visited a farm at Boorowa hosted by local farmer David Marsh. His work on the farm began in the nineties and displays to all who visit a visibly vibrant story of ‘Regenerative Farming’.

In short, regenerative agriculture is a system of farming principles and practices that seeks to rehabilitate and enhance the entire ecosystem of the farm by placing a heavy premium on soil health with attention also paid to water management, fertilizer use, and more. It is a method of farming that improves the resources it uses, rather than destroying or depleting them. A great deal of emphasis is placed on looking holistically at the agricultural ecosystem. Key techniques include conservation tillage, diversity, rotation and cover crops. The overriding theme is: If you take care of your soil, it will take care of you. There is absolutely no doubt that the same theme applies to water: *If you take care of your water, it will take care of you.*

**Global signs of hope for the Murray Darling Basin**

There are two examples that I would like to highlight that are occurring on a global scale. Firstly, the UN General Assembly declared 2021 - 2030 the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. The aim is to massively scale up the restoration of degraded and destroyed ecosystems as a proven measure to fight the climate crisis and enhance food security, water supply and biodiversity. More than two billion hectares of the world’s deforested and degraded landscapes offer potential for restoration.

Ecosystem restoration is defined as a process of reversing the degradation of ecosystems, such as landscapes, lakes, rivers and oceans to regain their ecological functionality; in other words, to improve the well-being of ecosystems to help meet the needs of society and I would add and to meet the needs of unique ecosystems to continue to flourish and diversify. This can be done by allowing the natural regeneration of overexploited ecosystems, for example, or by planting trees and other plants. Ecosystem restoration is fundamental to living the call to care for our common home. It is also a pillar of international environmental conventions, such as the Ramsar Convention on wetlands and the Rio Conventions on biodiversity, desertification and climate change.

A second global example, the ‘Season of Creation’ is an ecumenical celebration held every year. Beginning on 1st September and concluding on 4th October it is a time to pray with and for Creation. It is also a time to act in solidarity to care for the poor and the Earth as individuals and communities. This year Pope Francis has endorsed the ‘Season of Creation’ for 2019 which is hoped will transform many more parishes, schools and the whole Catholic Community to journey with churches worldwide.

**What might this exhibition mean for people who see it?**

One thing is very clear, we human beings need to reflect deeply and change. Rachel’s art can help us and here are some ways that you may like to consider:

* Stop and give thanks for the water you drink, the water you dive into when you swim and take a shower;
* Show concern for the rivers of life and talk about the precious gift of water;
* Take the time to rest and reflect. You might be surprised by what this simple act illuminates in your life;
* Call on Mary, Mother of Jesus, to help you look upon water through eyes of wisdom,
* Be inspired to learn about country like Julian Tenison Woods;
* Show compassionate care and gentle kindness to all, like Saint Mary Mackillop;
* Open your eyes, your mind and your heart to see creation like St Francis of Assisi, as our kin.

In conclusion, the waters of the Earth heal and hold, connect, and communicate God’s love for all of creation. When we take time to listen and learn from the song of water, we tap in to the wisdom of the water cycle in the ebbs and flows of tides, the interconnection between freshwater and sky, the life sustaining relationships in the rivers and life on land. We are only beginning to understand and integrate with depth our responsibility and shared vocation as humans and as Christians this all-consuming tenderness to care for water. An essential practice in our Christian lives is ongoing discernment of God’s will for us. In order to do this, we must cultivate a listening heart. This listening of discernment requires a humility, attentiveness and openness to receive what is being communicated. This listening includes the voice of creation, the song of water that sings of the giving and receiving of life cycles; the interconnectedness of oceans, canals, rivers, and streams; the vast life that it holds deep within and brings forth. For many of us, hearing this song of water entails learning a new language which re-orients us to a position of awe, humility, and curiosity.

So, with you, it is my pleasure to open this art exhibition ‘Journey to Water’. In the spirit of Mary Mackillop and Julian Tenison Woods, marking the occasion of 130 years since Julian passed into eternal life, and in full acknowledgement that we are living in the midst of an ecological crisis and the Murray Darling Basin crisis. We hear the call to live Laudato Si’ which for me means to live in sublime communion with the precious gift of water – to see the dire need for restoring our relationship with creation and to respond by getting to know better our sister water and her life giving journey across the Murray Darling Basin. To begin this ‘journey to water’ I invite you to look at the work of Rachel Carroll this evening and discover for yourself the song of water in her art and in your life.

Jacqui Remond

25 July 2019

1. Santa Theresa Church Murals booklet [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Catholic Earthcare Australia, The Gift of Water, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Royal Commission Report 2019, page 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Natural Resources Commission (2019) *Review of the Water Sharing Plan for the Barwon-Darling Unregulated and Alluvial Water Sources 2012, Executive Summary.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)