

„Innocence and Penitence Hand Clasped In Hand“:
Australian Catholic Refuges For Penitent Women, 1848-1914

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CONTENTS

| | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|-----|
| Abstract | | i |
| Declaration | | ii |
| List of Abbreviations | | iii |
| List of Tables | | iv |
| | | |
| Introduction | | 1 |
| | | |
| <u>PART 1</u> | <u>BELIEFS AND PRINCIPLES</u> | |
| Chapter 1 | The Penitent Woman | 31 |
| Chapter 2 | Her Social Context | 62 |
| | | |
| <u>PART 2</u> | <u>TREND TOWARD RESPECTABILITY</u> | |
| Chapter 3 | Clientele of the Refuges | 91 |
| Chapter 4 | Aims of the Refuges | 116 |
| | | |
| <u>PART 3</u> | <u>IMPACT OF THE CHANGES</u> | |
| Chapter 5 | Means of Reformation | 147 |
| Chapter 6 | Success of the Refuges | 178 |
| | | |
| Conclusion | | 212 |
| | | |
| Bibliography | | 222 |

ABSTRACT

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Catholic religious sisters in each of what became the Australian states opened a refuge for penitent women - those who bore the stigma of disgrace through failing to meet society's standards of female sexual behaviour.

Their transgressions may have taken the form of working as a prostitute, becoming pregnant outside of marriage, being known to have engaged in pre-marital or extra-marital sexual activity, or of demonstrating a likelihood of engaging in one of these activities.

This thesis contends that for several decades the object of the refuges was to serve the immediate material and spiritual needs of the women, but that through the influence of secular domestic ideology and evangelical Protestantism, the reformers changed their aim to inculcating the penitents with the values of feminine propriety and social usefulness.

It aims to show compassion for the penitent women and empathy with the reformers who tried to alleviate their suffering. However, it will be critical of the social structure that created inequality of wealth between classes and inequality of opportunity between the sexes, and of the moral code that set narrow limits for acceptable female activity and strict censure of any deviation.

DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Kellie Louise Toole and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|------|
| Archdiocesan Catholic Archives of Adelaide, SA. | ACAA |
| Archives of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, Adelaide, SA. | ARSM |
| Archives of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, NSW. | ASGS |
| Archives of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Tasmania. | ASGT |
| Diocesan Historical Commission, Melbourne, Victoria. | DHC |
| Heritage Room, Good Shepherd Sisters, Victoria. | HR |
| Private Collection of Sister Marie Foale, R.S.J. | MF |
| Mercy Centre, Sisters of Mercy in Queensland. | MC |
| Mortlock Library of South Australiana, SA. | MLSA |

LIST OF TABLES

| | page |
|--|------|
| 1. Number of Penitent Women in the Catholic Female Refuge, 1883 - 1912 | 13 |
| 2. Admissions to Australian Catholic Refuges, 1897 - 1914 | 30 |
| 3. Women Most Frequently Admitted to the Refuges | 98 |
| 4. Destinations of Penitents Leaving the Catholic Female Refuge, 1884 – 1895 | 125 |
| 5. Number of Penitents Entering Domestic Service | 125 |