

# Esther, Mother Foundress of the Community of the Holy Name

October 2011.

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<b>Title</b>	Esther : Mother Foundress of the Community of the Holy Name .
<b>Other Authors</b>	Community of the Holy Name (Melbourne, Vic.)
<b>Published</b>	Melbourne : [s. n., 19--?]
<b>Physical Description</b>	144 p., [3] leaves of plates : ill., ports ; 20 cm.
<b>Subjects</b>	<a href="#">Silcock, Emma Caroline, 1858-1931.</a> <a href="#">Community of the Holy Name (Melbourne, Vic.)</a> <a href="#">Anglican Church of Australia -- Missions -- History.</a> <a href="#">Monasticism and religious orders for women -- Australia -- History.</a>
<b>Notes</b>	Publication occurred between 1947 and 1951.
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Dewey Number</b>	255.98
<b>Libraries Australia ID</b>	<a href="#">4565590</a>
<b>Contributed by</b>	<a href="#">Libraries Australia</a>

Compiler's Remark: Photographs appear on single sided pages between pages 36-37 and 118-119 in the original print. Two "intentionally blank" pages are inserted into this document to preserve the original double sided pagination around these images.

the lantern, lectures could be given on such subjects as English Church History, the Sacraments, and the Life of Our Lord. Sister Agnes was one who exercised a wide influence. A gifted teacher, the strong personality of this first Australian-born Sister left its mark on many lives. Sister Agnes was noted for the emphasis she laid upon right doctrine, and the large place she gave to it in her teaching, as well as for the clarity and attractiveness with which it was presented.

A priest who was often at the Mission House, used to say, illustrative of this devotion to doctrinal teaching: 'If Sister Agnes found a boy knocked down in the street, I know what her first question would be.' And in a lively strain he drew a picture of the Sister bending over the boy and earnestly enquiring:

'Child, in this your hour of need,  
'Tell me, can you say the Creed?'

There remains to be told the story of the notable contribution to friendship with the Holy Orthodox Church made by the Mother Foundress' kindness and hospitality to the Syrians, Greeks and Russians in our midst, especially in those days when they were unshepherded by a priest of their own Communion.

Living near the Mission House were many Syrian and Greek families, and a strong bond of affection united this fraternity to the Sisters. Deeply religious themselves, they could understand better than most the Sisters' wholehearted devotion to the service of God and His Church. When it was found that both the Roman Catholics and a dissenting body were making strenuous efforts to induce the Orthodox to attend their services, the Sisters offered their Mission Room to the Syrians that they might hold in their own tongue such religious services as a layman could conduct. At the first service the

Bishop of Melbourne was present and pronounced the blessing in Arabic, after delivering an address which was interpreted by one of the Syrians, Katarr Keamy, whom the Bishop had authorised to act as Reader. On subsequent occasions Katarr read a Syrian service and either interpreted the sermon given by one of the Anglican priests, or preached himself from a sermon which Sister Esther had sent him during the preceding week. At first the Syrians held their service at night, after the congregation had dispersed from the English service, but after some months this was changed to a morning hour. At one Easter, at least, the Orthodox received the Sacraments at the hands of the Anglican clergy. The Greek Easter, of course, was at a different date from the Western, but the Mission Room was arranged with equal care for the Orthodox festival, and the Sisters enjoyed the fun of the crackers and candles distributed at the close of the service, treasuring Katarr's reply to a passer-by who asked the reason of all this noise on a Sunday morning: 'If the King of England came to Melbourne you would let off crackers. We do this because the King of Kings has come back to us from the grave.' Dear, gentle Katarr, ending his life of faithfulness at the Sanitorium at Heatherton, and coming from there, as long as he was able, to see the Sisters at the House of Mercy, listening hungrily to the organ music played for him by one of the Sisters, asking again and again for his much-loved 'Hail, gladdening Light.'

To return to our narrative: it was thought good to notify the Patriarch of Jerusalem of what was being done for the Orthodox in Melbourne. The Reverend T. Dowling, domestic chaplain to Bishop Blyth, the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, was then leaving for Australia, and His Beatitude charged him to deliver the following letter to the Bishop of Melbourne:

From the Patriarch of Jerusalem to the  
Right Reverend Field Flowers Goe, Bishop of  
Melbourne.

Greeting in Christ the Saviour and God.

Praised be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and of all mercies and consolations, for He granted us consolation in your praiseworthy virtues and fatherly care, proved by your kindness to the sons of the Most Holy Orthodox Church, residing in Melbourne.

The bearer of this letter, the Reverend T. Dowling, English Chaplain, having informed us that there are in Melbourne many persons of the Orthodox Church, who emigrated from Syria, and who are in complete privation and without ecclesiastical help, they find comfort in a manner pleasing to God through your evangelical care and protection.

We, therefore, as leader of those who are executing God's words, beg to tender our thanks on behalf of our Most Holy Orthodox Church, the Mother of all the Churches entrusted to us by His divine grace.

At the same time we warmly beg you to take into your benevolent and spiritual solicitude the abovementioned Orthodox strangers and all others who are not unworthy of your aid, and to be good enough to receive them lovingly, kindly, and meekly according to the teaching of Christ, in order that they may not err and fall into temptation, but that they may obtain the inheritance of heaven.

In thanking you again on behalf of our Orthodox Christians, we conclude in praying the Almighty

to grant your beloved Eminence long life and peace wherever you are, and to bestow upon you the grace of His boundless mercies with everlasting and invincible power and strength.

Given in the Holy City of Jerusalem, this 8th day of August, 1892.

(Signed) GERASSIMOS,

Patriarch of Jerusalem.

There was a crowded congregation in the Mission Room on that Sunday in September when the Reverend T. Dowling preached, for he bore a letter and benediction from His Beatitude Gerassimos, Patriarch of the Holy City and of all Palestine, to the Orthodox Christians, and the present of a vestment and service books also. A fortnight later the Syrians' reply to His Beatitude was read at their service.

The Bishop of Melbourne had given permission for the Syrians to be married and buried by the clergy of the Anglican Church, and also for the children of Syrian parents to be baptised in the Anglican Church. Holy Baptism was administered according to the rites of the Orthodox Greek Church, with triple immersion in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. The anointing of the Chrism was deferred until the arrival of an Orthodox priest with the necessary holy oil. Sister Esther had the whole service written out in note-books, the rubrics carefully underlined in red. One copy is in her own beautiful handwriting. Some of the baptisms took place in St. Peter's Church, and then the great tub, painted with Greek symbols by the Mother herself, had to be carried from the Mission House for the ceremony. Marriages according to the Orthodox rites were celebrated in the language of the people for the Greeks and Syrians. All details were arranged with great care. The Reverend E. S.

Hughes, who was zealous in his care for the Orthodox Christians, would study the service beforehand with Katarr, the Russian Consul would be present to interpret the Oath, and the Sisters would go off to Fitzroy or thereabouts to fetch 'Saleeba's bride', or whoever it might be. Several photographs record these happy events, which must have been a delightful mixture of formality and homeliness. The Russian Consul showed great interest in the Syrian services, and when he attended he would read a portion of the Holy Scriptures in Greek. '75 men, 4 women; the Russian Consul read the Gospel in Greek.' When the numbers are recorded, as on this occasion, the proportion of men is always very great.

The visit of the Jerusalem Chaplain aroused great excitement and enthusiasm, and hopes were entertained of securing an Orthodox priest. Conferences begun at the Mission House would be continued at the office of the Russian Consul, when Sister Esther, Mr. Hughes and Katarr would confer with Count Poutiata about the matter. Letters were sent to Jerusalem, St. Petersburg and Constantinople, but it was some years before the negotiations were brought to a successful conclusion. Count Poutiata had died and his successor in office, Baron Ungern-Steinburg, though not a churchman, did his best to help. The offer of Theophanes, Archdeacon of Jerusalem, to send a married priest was refused, and the Russian Consul guaranteed that if a monk from the Russian Mission in Jerusalem were brought out, he should be paid by the Russian Government.

In September, 1897, the Sisters were honoured guests at the reception given by the Orthodox Christians to Pater Dorotheus, Archimandrite. This priest came originally from Constantinople, and was sent on a Mission to Bagdad, where he fell into the hands of the Turks and was taken prisoner. On his escape his superiors sent him to Australia, with

instructions to pay his respects to the Anglican Bishop and not to celebrate the Divine Liturgy until he had done so. The Archimandrite came to see the Mission Hall, and was present at the (English) service the following Sunday, pronouncing the Blessing in Greek, as he had as yet no English. The Mission Hall congregation was astonished at the apparition in the gorgeous robes, seen now for the first time in Australia. There was much friendly welcoming and exchange of courtesies when Sister Esther inspected the Greek Church, then emerging from the reconstructed Chalmers' Chapel in Victoria Parade, and when the Archimandrite accepted the certificates of those who had received Holy Baptism at the hands of the Anglican clergy.

The ikons which have adorned the walls of the Mission House chapel for many years were presented to the Mother Foundress in token of the love which the Orthodox Christians bore to the Sisters. The two smaller ikons were the gift of the Russian Consul. A sheet of paper detached from its context bears prayers and directions in the Mother's handwriting for what must have been the Consul's funeral service, for after the Kyries comes the prayer: 'We beseech Thee on behalf of the soul of Thy servant Alex Poutiata who is lying before Thee, that all his sins ——' And here it breaks off, unfinished.

When Canon Snodgrass, then Warden of the Community, was in Jerusalem in 1924, His Beatitude the Orthodox Patriarch told him that the work of the Sisters in Melbourne was remembered every Thursday at the Divine Liturgy in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and would be 'till the end of time.' In the year 1925 the Mission House was honoured by a visit from Archbishop Kinites of the Eastern Orthodox Church, who called to express the thanks of his communion for the kindness and sympathy extended to his people by the

Sisters. Some years after this it was possible to show further hospitality to the Orthodox. The Syrians had shared with the Greeks the ministrations of the Greek priest, but they longed to hear their religious services in their own tongue, and always took advantage of visits from Sydney of the Arabic-speaking priest to hold services in the Mission Hall. Now they had brought to Melbourne a Russian priest who could speak Syrian, and while the building which they had bought was being adapted to their purpose, the Mission Hall was once again the scene of the worship of this devout people.

In the last hundred years there has been a growing movement towards the reunion of Christendom, and the rapprochement has been most marked between the Eastern Orthodox Church and our own. In the signal services rendered by Canterbury to persecuted national churches and isolated groups of Christians, the aim has been, not the absorption of these groups into the Anglican Communion, but the preservation of their identity until the tyranny was overpast and the national character of such churches could reassert itself. We see in the story related above, this same pure, disinterested love and care under conditions local to Melbourne, and once again we recognise how the actions of our Mother Foundress are in harmony with the best traditions, the most significant and Christ-like activity, of the Church of her baptism.