

(Melbourne)

Sister's charity holds a message for popes

WHEN enormous attention is being paid to a Queenslander who has rocked the foundations of traditional Australian politics, the death of one of Australia's great 20th century women has passed with too little notice.

Across every group which makes up this country, from prime ministers to paupers, from establishment figures to the newest migrant, from the rich to the starving poor, Sister Mary Fabian was regarded as one of the most outstanding people they had met.

She died two weeks ago at 87, after spending 58 years of her life as a nun of the 160-year-old Australian Sisters of Charity.

Until the last few months of her life, she cared for others.

Her most famous role was as founder of Melbourne's St Vincent's Private Hospital, a feat she achieved by an amazing manipulation of church, state and financial figures.

But there was another side to Sister Fabian's character which she refused to make public while she was alive. She was one of the strongest voices alerting her church to the problems which have become obvious and tragic in many areas, and in arguing for changes for the future.

As a young nun, she was approached by the legendary Archbishop Daniel Mannix to expand the maternity hospital then being run by the Charity nuns for impoverished mothers, to look after the single women and children whose "situation" had been created by priests.

There was almost total opposition to the idea from church officials but, as she did with hundreds of initiatives throughout her life, Sister Fabian's leadership prevailed.

Until the last few months when age and illness caught up with her, Sister Fabian kept in touch with scores of the children of those liaisons, and their children. Her loyalty meant the views she



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formed over the years in which she administered the secret side of her maternity hospital, stayed within her order and the Church.

But, should some future Pope restore the rule which pertained for the first millennium of Christianity, that celibacy of the clergy should not be compulsory, there will be notes in the Vatican which attest to the views of Sister Fabian.

Among them will be her strong opinion about what created some of the more appalling human problems which have emerged in recent years in the Catholic Church.

Significantly, the problems have not involved the order of nuns she joined so long ago. The Sisters of Charity attracted this powerful personality because they looked at the broad sweep of human needs.

They are best known to the general public for their St Vincent's public hospitals in Melbourne and Sydney, but they have operated private hospitals, schools and institutions for the dying in most Australian states.

There are few Charity nuns who, like Sister Fabian, have not confronted the problems facing all humans across their life spans. Such experience does not inspire abuse.

It was typical of Fabian, as the rich, poor and her peers always knew her, that when she retired in 1985 from running the St Vincent's Private Hospital she founded, she did two things. She let everybody involved know she would not visit the place again, to let the new managers have their freedom. She also concentrated on something she had



Mourned widely: Sister Fabian inspired thousands.

been involved in at the hospital, care of the dying.

She came to the conclusion that the happiness of many old and dying people was best served if they were cared for at home, rather than in specialist hospices, while agreeing the latter were more appropriate for some.

For many years, until late last year, and despite several major operations to keep her own declining body going, Sister Fabian led a group of carers, nuns and lay people in visiting the dying, especially those who had little family or other close support.

She visited more than 40 such people every week.

Sister Fabian's talent for leadership was partly a product of her strong will, but it also stemmed from her beliefs and her experience. She understood prejudice and abhorred it. And people of many backgrounds recognised it and were willingly brought into the extraordinary circle of Sister Fabian's friends and supporters.

She is being mourned today as much in the Jewish, Greek, Italian, Aboriginal and many other "ethnic" communities as she is in the old Irish Catholic tribe which spawned her order of nuns.

How she managed to create St Vincent's Private Hospital

from nothing is typical of her leadership and the support she inspired.

The millions of dollars needed for the new building on Melbourne's Eastern Hill were simply not available to the Sisters of Charity or to the Melbourne church. Banks would not lend the money without guarantees and the Vatican would not approve the project unless the finances were in order.

Sister Fabian went to a variety of people and put her case. The Jewish community organised the finance, at 2 per cent below bank rates, then Victorian Premier Henry Bolte introduced a unique bill to the Victorian Parliament to give a government guarantee (which was never needed) and Sister Fabian simply wrote to the Pope asking for permission.

SHE won it. Significantly, in the last act of his record-breaking premiership, Bolte introduced the St Vincent's Private Hospital (Guarantees) Bill. It was seconded jointly by then Labor leader Clyde Holding and the Country Party leader Peter Ross-Edwards.

It is one of the few acts of the Victorian Parliament which was passed unanimously in both chambers.

In the decade and a half she ran the hospital, Sister Fabian never turned a single patient away, though it was a private hospital. She had a secret color code system for admissions which she looked at every morning.

The rich paid, the poor were treated for nothing and she quietly talked to the "doubtfuls". Thousands of men and women from every culture and religion learned to respect and follow Sister Fabian's leadership.

Had she not spent her life directly helping others, she would have made a great first female Prime Minister.

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