

The Church In Australia Before 1840

The initial establishment of the Catholic faith in Australia was the work of the laity. From the first fleet on, there were many (mainly Irish) men and women who clung to their Catholic identity, but, for the first thirty years, Catholicism in Australia was virtually priestless.

The first priests to arrive (Fathers James Dixon 1800, James Harold 1800 and Peter O'Neill 1801) were themselves convicts, transported for suspected complicity in the 1798 rebellion. In 1803, Fr Dixon was given conditional emancipation and permission to exercise his priestly duties, celebrating Mass publicly in Sydney, Parramatta and the Hawkesbury in rotation. However, this situation was short lived and the permission was revoked as a result of the Castle Hill rebellion the following year. By 1810, the three had returned to Ireland.

In 1817 Father Jeremiah O'Flynn arrived, but he lacked government authorisation. This plus his actions here, led to his deportation in 1818. He is believed to have left the Blessed Sacrament behind in the cottage of James Dempsey, which became a meeting place for prayer for some Sydney Catholics.

Local Catholic support for O'Flynn, coupled with frequent petitions for priests, finally convinced the British Government, and in 1819 two Catholic chaplains were appointed, each on a salary of one hundred pounds per annum. These were Philip Conolly and John Joseph Therry, who arrived in Sydney on 3rd May, 1820. At the time, there were already six or seven thousand Catholics in the colony.

In 1821, Fr Conolly took up his residence in Tasmania, while the entire mainland settlement was Therry's parish. Other priests were to follow these first two - notably Fr Daniel Power in 1826 (he died 1830), Fr Christopher Dowling (1831), Fr William Ullathorne (1832) and Fr John McEnroe (1832). By 1842, there were twenty-four Catholic chaplains in the colony.

As the number had begun to increase, the civil authorities felt the need for a single ecclesiastical authority with which it could deal, rather than the several, often conflicting, individuals.

Therefore the Bishop of Mauritius, whose diocese included Australia, appointed Ullathorne as Vicar-General. Oils for Baptism and Confirmation still had to be brought from Mauritius, Rio de Janeiro or London and this, plus other major and minor inconveniences, led to mounting pressure in London and Rome for an Australian Bishop. In 1834, John Bede Polding, an English Benedictine, was appointed Australia's first Catholic bishop. He arrived in Sydney in September, 1835, and was soon involved in care of the convicts and long missionary journeys.

The final step in the church structure was the establishment of a hierarchy. This took place in 1842, when Sydney was raised to an archbishopric and new dioceses of

St Matthew's

Hobart and Adelaide were established. To these were added Perth in 1845, while the first church council was held in 1844. This council placed the church in Australia under the patronage of Mary, Help of Christians.

The lives of these early priests and those who followed them were hard ones. They faced loneliness, isolation, the lack of spiritual support, as well as the physical hardships of heat and cold, poor accommodation, poor food, insects and other pests: all this on top of the constant travel over distances not experienced at home. Some Mass centres were 100 miles from their base. To quote Fr P.J. Hartigan in "The Men of 38", "Having gone no further than 'up the old Boreen' at home the long roads of Australia were a sermon on Eternity."

Before the churches or chapels were built, these travelling priests said Mass where they could, often in the houses of individuals. At Windsor the new Convict Barracks were used, until they became the hospital, and Mass was then said in Patrick Garrigan's house. When the congregation outgrew the house, a barn, made of slabs, was used.

Despite the need for a church, finance was the obstacle. However, a bequest of five hundred pounds in the will of James Doyle (1836) enabled a start to be made. The foundation stone was laid at the end of that year and St Matthew's Catholic Church, which is still used for worship, was finally completed and opened in October, 1840.

St Matthew's