The Catholic Community in Australia

THE FIRST CATHOLICS IN AUSTRALIA
The first Catholics to reside in Australia arrived with the First Fleet in 1788. They were mostly Irish convicts, together with a few marines. One-tenth of all convicts transported to Australia were Catholic, and half of these were born in Ireland, while a good proportion of the others were English-born but of Irish extraction. Most of the rest were English or Scottish. By the year 1803, a total of 2086 Irish convicts, nearly all of whom were Catholic, had been transported to Botany Bay. Estimates are that about four-fifths of these were ordinary criminals and most of the remainder 'social rebels', those convicted of crimes of violence against property and landlords. Only a very small number could be regarded as genuine political rebels: about 600 in the entire history of transportation, and hardly any after 1803.

THE FIRST PRIESTS
Although many Irish convicts were merely nominal Catholics - in fact, many were quite irreligious - many others diligently and courageously kept their faith alive despite the fact that, for most of the next thirty years or so, priests were only sporadically available to provide them with the sacraments. According to the 1828 Census, out of a total Catholic population of about 10,000, there were 374 adults who had been born in Australia and raised in a totally lay environment, the Catholic faith passed on to them despite the absence of priests. It was not until 1800 that the first priests arrived in the colony - as convicts! One of these, James Dixon, was granted conditional emancipation and permission to say Mass for the Catholics of Sydney, Liverpool and Parramatta on successive Sundays, a practice that continued from 1803 until March 1804, when the Castle Hill rebellion so alarmed Governor King that he withdrew Dixon's privileges. Dixon soon after returned to Ireland, and Mass was not legally celebrated again in the colony until Fathers John Joseph Therry and Philip Connolly, chaplains appointed by the Government in London, arrived in 1820. Their arrival can be regarded as the formal establishment of the Catholic Church in Australia.

THE FIRST BISHOP
The first Catholic bishop in Australia was John Bede Polding. Like the man who prepared the way for his arrival and who became his first Vicar-General, William Ullathorne, and like his successor, Roger Vaughan, Polding was an English Benedictine monk. Polding's dream was to establish a Church founded on monastic ideals, in which scholarship and sublime liturgy, accompanied by Gregorian chant, would civilise and convert the new country, just as they had in earlier centuries in Europe. But Polding's priests were mainly Irish, and this was not their conception of what the Church should be like. Their efforts, and the efforts of the Irish bishops who were appointed to other newly established dioceses, soon combined with Australia's singular

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geographical and social environment to subvert Polding's vision. Irish clergy dominated Australian Catholic life until fairly recently, and it was not until the 1930s that Australian-born priests outnumbered them. Irish priests continued to come to Australia throughout the twentieth century, a few arriving even in recent years.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
At least two Catholic schools were established in the early years of the nineteenth century but neither survived very long, and it was not until the arrival of Therry and Connolly in 1820 that significant development took place. By 1833, there were about ten Catholic schools in the country. From this time until the end of the 1860s, Catholic schools received some government assistance under a variety of schemes, but campaigns for 'free, secular and compulsory' education had begun in the 1850s and it became increasingly clear that Catholic schools would not be able to rely on government aid for much longer. Between 1872 and 1893, every State passed an Education Act removing state aid to Church schools. This was a turning point for Catholic schools and, indeed, for the Catholic community in Australia. Bishops and people decided to persevere with the Catholic system. With no money to pay teachers, the bishops appealed to religious orders in Ireland and other European countries, and soon religious sisters and brothers were responding to the crisis.

THE GROWTH OF RELIGIOUS ORDERS
There were already a few religious orders in Australia: as well as the Sisters of Charity, there were also, among others, the Good Samaritan Sisters, founded by Polding in 1857, and the Sisters of St Joseph, founded in 1866 by Fr Julian Tenison Woods and Mary MacKillop, now recognised as Australia's first saint. By 1871, these 'Josephites' were running thirty-five schools in the Adelaide diocese. By 1880, there were a total of 815 sisters from all orders teaching in schools; by 1910 the number exceeded 5000. The sisters not only set up schools in the cities but also established little parish schools all over Australia, providing a Catholic education for the children of the bush. Their efforts, with almost no money and in the face of considerable hardship, were nothing short of heroic. The largest of the male teaching orders, the Christian Brothers, had 115 brothers teaching in thirty schools by 1900. Under the influence of the religious orders, Catholic schools not only survived but flourished; the sisters and brothers were to be the mainstay of the schools for a hundred years.

CATHOLICS IN THE POST-WAR ERA
The 1950s were a boom time for Australian Catholics. Numbers grew rapidly, increasing the proportion of Catholics in the Australian population. Many parishes were established in the new suburbs of the major cities and the number of priests, sisters and brothers continued to expand. The impact of all the effort expended on education was felt as Catholics made noticeable advances in socio-economic status, drawing near to the Australian population as a whole.

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in educational attainment and prosperity. There was a high level of attendance at Mass and other devotional ceremonies, and many Catholics belonged to parish sodalities such as the Sacred Heart Sodality (for women) and the Holy Name Society (for men; it was reputed to have 100,000 members at one stage). At home, large numbers of families recited the Rosary every night or at least once a week, and in the community Catholics stood out because of practices like never eating meat on Fridays. The Catholic community had grown to be what the Irish bishops of the nineteenth century had worked for and dreamed of: a thriving Church based on the Irish model.

Yet in just a few years all this would change, partly in consequence of the enormous social change that Australia underwent in the 1960s and 1970s. One element of this change was the huge post-war influx of non-English-speaking immigrants, including more than a million Catholics from Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Germany, Croatia, Hungary and numerous other places. When it came to religion, these people had different aspirations, expectations, needs and patterns of participation from those of Catholics of the Irish mould. They needed to be able to attend Mass in their own languages and they needed schools for their children, and the Church responded in practical ways, obtaining priests from the main countries of origin of the immigrants and building new schools and churches at a phenomenal rate.

Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council, also known as Vatican II, was the most significant twentieth century event in the Catholic Church. Held in Rome from 1962 to 1965, the Council was made up of the Pope (at first, John XXIII, and after his death in 1963, Paul VI) and all the bishops of the world. Its aim, as Pope John declared in announcing his plans to hold a council, was to ‘open the windows of the Church’. Vatican II presented its teachings in the form of sixteen documents. These dealt with many matters such as the promotion of Christian unity, the recognition that non-Christian religions contain much that is true and holy, and the right of all people to religious freedom. But it was the four principal documents which were to bring about major changes in the practices of the Church and the lives of its members. These documents were on liturgy, Divine Revelation, the Church itself and its role in the modern world.

LITURGY

The document on the liturgy, the first document released by the council, instigated a revolution in Catholic worship, with changes including the celebration of Mass in the vernacular rather than Latin and the redesign of churches and rituals to emphasise and encourage the active participation of all present.

SCRIPTURE

For several centuries, ordinary Catholics had been discouraged from reading the scriptures themselves, and were instead advised to rely on their priests and teachers to interpret it for

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them. This attitude only began to change about the middle of this century. By the time the document on Divine Revelation was released, not only were Catholics not discouraged from reading the Bible, they were 'forcefully and specifically' urged to do so!

SERVANT LEADERS
The document on the Church, instead of emphasising the hierarchical nature of the Church, with its Pope, bishops and priests, as the Church's teaching about itself had traditionally done, presented the Catholic Church primarily as part of the whole Christian community of faith, or 'People of God'. Its emphasis, therefore, was on the role of each baptised member of the Church. The hierarchy's role, still very important, was seen as one of service to the faith community.

THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD
The document on the Church in the modern world, the last and easily the longest released by the Council, has had an enormous impact on the way the Church interacts with the rest of society. It firmly situated the work and interests of the Church in the world and society: nothing that is genuinely human is to be regarded as alien to the Church. Many current Catholic movements for social justice, world development and peace, including liberation theology, owe their intellectual origins at least in part to this document.

TODAY'S CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
The outcome of all these changes in society and the Church is that today's Catholic community looks very different from that of the 1950s. Mass attendance rates have fallen; the number of priests, sisters and brothers is declining and their average age is increasing. The relationship between clergy and people has changed. Old forms of devotion like the Rosary have nearly disappeared but there has been a growth of interest in alternative forms of prayer borrowed from a variety of cultures and traditions. An array of leadership roles which were once the preserve of priests and religious - in education, health care, parish life and many other fields - has been filled by lay people, and lay people (by no means all Catholics) comprise virtually the entire staff at Catholic schools and the majority of students at Catholic theological colleges. Some Catholics see these changes as a tragedy which the bishops either have been powerless to stop or have conspired to promote, but most regard them as welcome evidence of a Church prepared to adapt to meet changing circumstances. Yet the changes that have taken place have primarily been changes in rules and practices. The Church's teachings have been re-interpreted in the light of modern understandings of history, sociology, the sciences and other fields of human endeavour, and then re-expressed in language more suitable for the times. By and large, however, the teachings themselves have not changed.


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