

THE BRISBANE CHURCH - THE BEGINNINGS

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Like a ship's underwater, a modern city building has a cavernous underground that begins "with a hole in the ground", the excavations for foundations and the removal of thousands of tonnes of earth. All this was especially significant for me as I watched the removal of "sacred soil" from a building site - the site of the foundation of the Catholic Church in Brisbane - the site of the first church.

"Where was the first church building in our city? Who built it? And while looking at this "first", we should take the opportunity to consider some of the other "firsts" in our Catholic history. For example, when and where was the first Mass in Brisbane? Who was the first priest to visit Moreton Bay as it was then known? Who were some of the early Catholic laymen? When was our first school established? In his monumental "History of the Catholic Church in Australasia", Cardinal Patrick Moran who visited Brisbane six times and knew Brisbane's pioneer priests, seemed to provide definitive answers to all these questions. He wrote, "Fr Therry was the first priest who visited the district of Moreton Bay, and that once only in the convict days ... Dr Polding himself visited Brisbane and a considerable part of the inhabited district Moreton Bay in 1843. He landed there on May 24, feast of Our Lady Help of Christians, and on the following Sunday in a temporary chapel celebrated Holy Mass at which about 130 Catholics assisted."

In another section he wrote "the Protestants and Catholics alike welcomed him with characteristic liberality and when he celebrated Mass there on May 5, 1843, they presented to him a sum of sixty pounds, as the beginning of a fund for the erection of a church in Brisbane." He quotes Dr Polding, "we arrived on the feast of the Blessed Virgin, 'Auxilium Christianorum', May 24. The first Mass celebrated was on the feast of the Ascension (May 25, Thursday), the Gospel of which is so appropriate ... Father McGinety and Dean Hanly were the first priests stationed for ordinary missionary work in the Moreton Bay territory. In the diocesan records of Sydney there is the entry: 'Rev M. M. McGinety and Hanly left Sydney December 9, 1843, in the steamer *Sovereign* for Moreton Bay to commence the arduous labours of the mission in that hitherto unavoidably neglected portion of the diocese of New South Wales.' The first chapel in Brisbane was nothing better than a rude shanty which was run up soon after the archbishop's visit in 1843."

Who then was the first priest to visit Moreton Bay? Was it Fr Therry? Not only Cardinal Moran but also Archbishop Eris O'Brien says "even as far as Moreton Bay, Fr Therry journeyed in quest of souls." But despite these authorities, it seems highly improbable that this energetic priest was ever here. He felt it his duty to be here on at least one occasion as a letter of 1830 shows. His strongly worded letter of complaint to the Colonial Secretary protested against two convicts who were soon to be executed at Moreton Bay, "without the attendance, in their last awful hour, of a Clergyman of the Religion which they profess, and in which they wish to die. I feel it to be my duty, as their Pastor to protest ..." So he was aware of the spiritual needs of convict Brisbane. Brisbane, during the convict period, remained a closed settlement. All visitors had to obtain official permission. In the State Archives there are records of the comings and goings of clergymen of other denominations. The Quakers, Backhouse and Walker, who arrived after Easter,

1836, infer, too, that Catholics were present in some numbers. They entered in their travel journal: "4th month, 1st day, being the day called 'Good Friday'. No work was exacted from the prisoners, but they with the military and civil officers, whether Protestant or RC, assembled as on First days in the chapel when the prayers and lessons of the Episcopal Church with a few omissions in deference to the RCs were read in a becoming manner by the superintendent of convicts." The room used as the chapel at the time was in the convict barracks in Queen Street and it could hold about 900 people.

In 1838, the Lutheran Mission was established at Nundah, and records show that Anglican ministers were appointed to or visited the settlement from the 1820s, but there is no record of a visit of Therry or any other Catholic priest. A little room for uncertainty exists, however. In a letter of 1836 to Governor Sir Richard Bourke, Dr Polding wrote, "the settlements of Port Macquarie and of Moreton Bay can only receive occasionally spiritual assistance from Sydney." It was Archbishop Polding and Fr Joseph Snell, the Passionist, who can at this point claim the honour of being the first priests to come to Brisbane, and that was in 1843. Dr Polding considered it a great missionary work, for he wrote to a friend at the time, "Here I am looking after my people in these remote regions, many of whom have not seen a priest for 20 years."

As a result of research into Dr Polding's visit and the beginnings of the church in Brisbane, it became obvious that the details recorded by Cardinal Moran and repeated by so many subsequently, were not altogether correct. In an archdiocese such as Brisbane has now become, it is more than idle curiosity to want to know the beginnings accurately - when and where the first Mass was celebrated.

It is clear from the *Benedictine Journal* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* of 1843 that Dr Polding and Fr Snell left Sydney on the paddle steamer *Sovereign* on Monday night, May 8. Since her average time for the voyage was four-and-a-half days, it must have arrived in Brisbane Town on Saturday, May 13. The first public Mass was undoubtedly Sunday, May 14. The Moreton Bay correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald* wrote "the Rev Dr Polding, the RC Archbishop, is sojourning here until the return of the steamer; he celebrated Mass in a temporary chapel yesterday before an attentive congregation; it is understood he will take immediate steps to have Sunday service performed constantly from this time."

Dr Polding did not return to Sydney immediately and there were Sunday Masses in Brisbane for several weeks. Contemporary reports state that 60 pounds were collected for the building of a church and that "about 130 attended the Mass on the first Sunday after his arrival". He visited the Lutheran Mission at Nundah, went to Limestone (Ipswich) and confirmed a number of people in Brisbane and Ipswich.

May 24 and Ascension Thursday (May 25) found Dr Polding down at Dunwich on Stradbroke Island where he had obtained permission to begin the Passionist Mission to the Aborigines. He offered Mass at Dunwich, and that is why he found the Gospel of the Ascension "so appropriate ... Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature." (Mk 16: 14-20). Two months later, on Friday, July 21, the Archbishop and Dr Gregory left Brisbane by the steamer for Sydney leaving Frs Snell, Pesciaroli, Lencioni and

Vaccari at Dunwich. (Dr Gregory and Frs Pesciaroli and Vaccari had arrived on the *Sovereign* on June 4, 1843). By December of that year (1843), two priests were ready to take permanent residence in Brisbane.

"Fr McGimety" was not one of them - indeed Fr William McGinty of Ipswich fame did not even arrive in Australia until 1847 and went to Ipswich in 1852. It was Frs James Hanly and John Kavanagh who arrived here on December 13, not on the *Sovereign*, as Moran says, but on the *James Watt* which had been the first steamer ever to come to Moreton Bay when she brought the Petries in 1837. Fr Kavanagh remained for only six months.

Two important visitors to the Stradbroke Island Mission in early December of 1844 were Bishop Pompallier from New Zealand and Dr Gregory. As the bishop had had outstanding success with his Mission for the Maoris, Archbishop Polding prevailed upon him to inspect Dunwich and the prospects of that Mission. (Meanwhile Dr J. D. Lang was asking 'Do Catholics think they'll succeed where everyone else has failed?')

Early in October of 1845 the lady on the five dollar note slipped into Brisbane Town. Mrs Caroline Chisolm was given free passage to and from Brisbane on the *Sovereign* by the Hunter River Steam Navigation Company in recognition of her noble work. A little earlier she had established a branch at Moreton Bay and accompanied some of her charges (young girls and boys) who were placed with the McConnell family of Cressbrook. There were moves some years ago to have her canonized as Australia's first saint.

To come to the question of the first Catholic church in Brisbane. There is little doubt that the temporary chapel used by the Archbishop of Sydney for the first Brisbane Masses was in Elizabeth Street. Subsequent research into our first church yielded the following confused information, yet the real facts were ultimately able to be drawn from them:

* James Hexton Jnr, born in Brisbane in 1832, later wrote (1909) "the government slaughter yard was at the corner of what is now Elizabeth and Albert Streets, and the Rev James Hanly, the RC priest, lived in a little cottage on the Elizabeth Street frontage."

* In 1886, Carl Gerler, one of the Lutheran missionaries of Nundah, sketched a map of Brisbane as he remembered it on his arrival in March 1844. He positioned the "Catholic church", and quite a way from it, "the house of Fr Hanly", but there were few accurate reference points.

* J. J. Knight in his *In the Early Days* (1895) says "the Roman Catholics assembled in an old shed which then stood at a point opposite the Theatre Royal in Elizabeth Street".

* At the time of the death of Fr Hanly in 1895, the Brisbane correspondent for Sydney's *Freeman's Journal* wrote "the young priest was sent to Brisbane and Archbishop Polding, who with Dr Gregory was here, celebrated Mass at the old Court House, now the spot where the present telegraph office stands" (*Men of '38*, p.112) that is now the

1879-built Edward Street half of the GPO, built on the site of the convict women's prison, later the Police Courts.

* As we recall, Cardinal Moran said that the first chapel was "a rude shanty run up soon after the Archbishop's visit." Victor L. Gray quoted this in his 1909 book *Catholicism in Queensland*, and in the Oxley Library's copy someone has pencilled in at the bottom of the page (p. 64) "Mr Wm Ingram states that this old shanty was situated opposite the Theatre Royal in Elizabeth Street."

* Barton's *Jubilee History of Queensland* (1909) says "RC services were conducted in a wooden building at the upper end of Elizabeth Street, loaned for the purpose."

* In the Catholic archives in Brisbane are several handwritten pages by Mr J. A. Hayes, an early pupil of St James's and later Mayor of Sandgate. He was considered "an excellent authority" on Church history in Brisbane and he seems to have written them for Archbishop Duhig in the 1930s, stating "Archbishop Polding celebrated the first public Mass in a disused government store. It was situated at the rear of the Carlton Club Hotel, it might be said, in what is now Elizabeth Street. By April 1, 1844, Fr Hanly with a little voluntary labour had erected a small slab church 40ft by 20ft on the site of the present St Stephen's School. The slabs came from Milton Hills, the settlement officials providing some sawn timber for flooring and roofing purposes. The roof was of bark which was subsequently replaced by shingles. This church served the Catholic community until the opening of the old stone church in 1850. Gerler's map of 1844 shows the position of the church".

* In 1943, commemorating the centenary of the first Mass, Archbishop Duhig said "when Dr Polding arrived ... he had to officiate in a temporary building. This was probably a part of the old convict settlement building and is said to have been situated in Albert Street, between Elizabeth and Charlotte Streets, on the site now occupied by the Queensland Machinery building. There appears to have been nothing more than this temporary disused government edifice for Catholic worship until the building of old St Stephen's".

* John O'Brien wrote "soon after coming, Fr Hanly built a small weatherboard church on a grant of land which Dr Polding had secured from the New South Wales Government." (*Men of '38*, p. 102).

* The late Fr Alan Brown wrote "once I was driving Archbishop Duhig up Albert Street and as we passed the Forum Theatre, he pointed and said 'that is where the first Catholic church in Queensland stood'."

* One person who disagreed with Archbishop Duhig's earlier location was P. W. Shannon. In a series of historical articles for *The Catholic Leader* during 1943 he wrote "it is unlikely that anyone still living remembers the first primitive building used as a church before the erection of old St Stephen's, but I have spoken with at least two men, now dead, who remembered it well, and one of whom, Mr W. J. Connolly, had actually assisted at Mass in it. The other was a non-Catholic, but their statements agreed in locating it about the rear of Perry's building in Albert Street but some distance back from the present frontage ... It was used as a church from 1844 to 1850, and Albert Street in that neighbourhood was unsurveyed till about the time it ceased to be used."

* A speaker at the Royal Historical Society of Queensland, Mr Allan Morrison, said "Catholic services were carried on in an old convict barn in Elizabeth Street, near the site of Perry House." Considerable confusion than surrounded the exact location of the old chapel.

The first point to clarify is that for seven years the old barn in Elizabeth Street was used as the chapel. No church was built. Fr Hanly, no doubt, carried out some improvements and maintenance, but it seems that the authority, Mr Hayes, placed too much credence in Gerler's sketch, or perhaps he was confused with the slab school which Fr Hanly built some years later when the present St Stephen's Cathedral land grant was surveyed and handed over (1845-46).

That no church was built is shown in Dr Gregory's letters of application of the late 1840s to the Executive Council in Sydney, "from want of the necessary funds a chapel cannot at present be erected at that place" (that is, Brisbane). Secondly, it was reported in the *Moreton Bay Courier* of January 5, 1850 that "the old Government building at present used as a place of worship by that portion of our community professing the Roman Catholic faith is to be sold by auction on Wednesday next ..." Anxious to avoid any sectarian strife that St Stephen's was still not ready for use, the Police Magistrate, J. C. Wickham, arrived before the auction to call it off. He said, according to the *Moreton Bay Courier* "some time ago his opinion was asked with reference to the proposed sale of the building and that several applications had been made to purchase the ground on which it stands; but that he had always recommended the reservation of the building until such time as the clergymen of the RC church officiating here should be provided with other places to use as a church and a parsonage, and he had invariably represented that the sale of the building before such time would cause a serious inconvenience to many of the inhabitants. The building had accordingly been reserved. He hoped that he should be furnished with information of the time when the sale would be convenient."

The first Mass was said in the new St Stephen's Church in Sunday, May 12, 1850. Present were the two most influential Catholic laymen in Australia: Mr Justice Therry and the Attorney-General, Mr J. H. Plunkett. Both were in Brisbane for the opening of the Circuit Court on the following day.

The *Moreton Bay Courier* of June 1 reported "Government Sale: The materials of the old government building at North Brisbane lately used as an RC Chapel were sold on Wednesday last by public auction to Mr W. Sheehan for twenty-eight pounds. The materials are to be removed within two months." This old government building then was quite accurately described as "a disused store" and "a convict settlement barn". It was, in fact, one of the first convict buildings of 1825, the first Commissariat Store. Extended in 1827, half was used for storing corn and the other half as a slaughter house. After the new store was built in 1829, it was referred to as "a long low barn or a corn store" on official maps. During the early years, living quarters at one end were occupied at different times by the Commissariat Clerk, the Surveyor Dixon, and Parker, the Superintendent of Agriculture. It seems to have been a slab structure.

Constance Petrie describes it thus: "Just at the corner of Elizabeth and Albert Streets where a public house now stands (the Royal Exchange Hotel), there used to be a large building erected for holding and threshing the maize grown by the prisoners. It was built with walls of ti-tree logs notched into one another, the roof was thatched with blady grass and it had a wooden floor.

"Bags were nailed all round the walls to prevent grain flying through the openings when the corn was threshed. Alongside this barn a short-sentenced prisoner lived in a slab hut; he was a sort of clerk, and kept books which showed the quantity of grain coming and going" (Tom Petrie's *Reminiscences*, p.238). Several official plans and drawings of this building, our first church have survived; a building measuring approximately fifty-five metres by six metres. Several official maps, too, survive to pinpoint accurately this building. It was on a corner of one track which led up to the wharf (North Quay) and another which led down to the gardens (Botanical Gardens) and it was partly correct that people later situated it as Miss Petrie says, "at the corner of Elizabeth and Albert Streets", or where the Forum Theatre now stands.

What was not taken into consideration was that after the visit of Governor Gipps in 1842, and the survey of the city blocks and intersections as we now know them, the corner occupied by this building assumed a different position. It did in fact end up by being on the opposite side of Elizabeth Street and about 85 metres up from the Albert Street corner. It was then correct to position it as "at the rear of the Carlton Hotel" or on the site of the Theatre Royal. Some of the building occupied the present footpath. By superimposing the early maps on the contemporary layout of the city squares, its position is accurately determined.

An application form preserved at the Oxley Library lists the first Catholics who attended the chapel. Under the Bourke Church Act of 1836 the government subsidised the privately subscribed amount pound for pound (up to 100 pounds) of all clergymen of the major denominations. The only condition was that the clergyman had to submit the signatures of at least 100 adults in need of his ministrations.

Fr Hanly's 1844 application records the signatures (or X mark) of 160 Catholics all living within eight kilometres of Brisbane Town, most being in or within one-and-a-half kilometres. More than twenty-five of the men gave their address as the Military Barracks and included Patrick Monaghan, Captain of the 58th Regiment. Forty-six of those Catholics gave sixty-two pounds, five shillings (during 1844). William Sheehan, for example, gave five pounds, although one pound was by far the usual amount given. William Sheehan was an enterprising businessman in early Brisbane, establishing the St Patrick's Tavern in the 1840s. In fact, he was the first owner of the the allotment on which the Catholic Centre now stands. He presented Bishop Quinn with a large sterling silver trowel for the laying of the cathedral foundation stone in 1863, and we can see a memorial window in the cathedral bearing his name and date of death.

Another subscriber of interest is Mr G. S. Le Breton, son of the Governor of the island of Jersey, and Fr Hanly's first convert. He seems to have made the preparation for Archbishop Polding's visit and to have been influential in having Stradbroke Island reserved for the Passionist Mission. Two of his grandchildren were well known - Br Le Breton of the Christian Brothers and Agatha who contributed to the Catholic papers under the pen-name of 'Miriam Agatha'.

Subscriber No 31 who gave one pound was James Davis, perhaps better known as Duramboi. When a 15 year-old in Scotland he 'lifted' two shillings and sixpence from a Presbyterian church collection plate. He was sentenced in 1824 to transportation for seven years. Under Captain Logan he escaped from Brisbane in 1829, fled north and was eventually accepted into an Aboriginal group in the Maryborough area. During thirteen

years of tribal living, he forgot the English language and when he made contact with Andrew Petrie's exploring party in 1842 he was unable to communicate with them. When he returned to Brisbane he was pardoned and married a few years later by Fr Hanly. He made more than adequate restitution for the sins of his youth for in his will he left 800 pounds to the church, half of which was for the cathedral building fund.

These then were some of the classes of early Catholic worshippers - the son of a British Colonial Governor, a self-made Irish immigrant, and a pardoned convict who left over 10,000 pounds when he died - a good example of convict rags to riches indeed!

The first edition of the *Moreton Bay Courier*, June 1846, announced the arrival of the Collector of Customs, Mr W. A. Duncan. William Augustine Duncan was a man of great ability - a musician and a scholar. Due to a change of fortune, Governor Gipps secured this government appointment for him. He was born a Scots Presbyterian, converted to Catholicism, and came out to New South Wales with Dr Ullathorne in 1838 as a teacher. The following year Bishop Polding appointed him editor of the newly-founded Catholic paper, *The Australasian Chronicle*. He was deposed by subscribers for failing to toe the anti-union Irish policy of Daniel O'Connell. He then established his own paper, the *Weekly Register*, but it was short-lived. In Brisbane he was soon on the board of the Catholic school and acknowledged as the caretaker of the chapel. He trained and conducted a choir which was accompanied by his daughter's playing on a small harmonium. In his spare time he wrote pieces for St Mary's Cathedral choir in Sydney and translated from the Spanish an account of the voyage of De Quiros which he published. He is said to have been adept in five foreign languages. In the late 1850s he returned to Sydney. It is most appropriate to recall Mr Duncan. When the Holy Name Cathedral site was sold in 1986, it severed one link, because it was there that he had built his mud-brick house, 'Dara', the future so-called palace of Bishop Quinn. Early in 1987 another link was severed - nearby Duncan Street became known as Chinatown Mall.

The last 'first' concerns the school. As was so often the case, the chapel served as the school room five days of the week. The Catholic school established by Fr Hanly in 1845 was apparently the first successful school in the free town. As Hector Holthouse recounted in the Queensland Education Department's official history *Looking Back*, "Several sporadic attempts at organised teaching were made but it was not until Rev J. Hanly established a Catholic school in a primitive slab-walled building in Elizabeth Street in 1845 that Brisbane once again had a regular school. Michael Bourke and his wife, Mary, each on a salary of thirty pounds a year, opened it with a total of fifty-six pupils".

The Theatre Royal has been demolished for some years. The Carlton Hotel has fallen, and that is why I was taking such an interest in the excavations for the Myer Centre. On a strip of that land stood the first Catholic chapel - the first seven years of our foundations: church, school and priest's residence.

Fr Denis Martin, the Brisbane Archdiocesan Archivist, has researched the beginnings of the Catholic Church in Brisbane.