

ARCHBISHOP PATRICK MARY O'DONNELL

Paul Martin

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Rev. Dr O.K.Oxenham D.C.L. who died on 26 November, 1991. A priest since 29 June, 1953, he served as Administrator of St Stephen's Cathedral from 1965-1976.

When the coffin bearing the mortal remains of the Most Reverend Patrick Mary O'Donnell, fourth Ordinary of the Catholic Diocese of Brisbane and third Metropolitan of the Province of Queensland, was lowered to rest in the vault of St Stephen's Cathedral in the very hot, early afternoon of 6 November, 1980, an era of Catholic life in the Archdiocese closed. The deceased prelate was one of the missionary Irish who had come to Australia as newly ordained priests in considerable numbers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; he had been coadjutor of the third ordinary, the well-known Queensland figure, James Duhig, for sixteen years; and it was he who attended the Second Vatican Council and commenced the implementation of its enactments.

Opinion about O'Donnell, or 'Patrick Mary', as he styled himself, varied during the episcopate as coadjutor and ordinary, a period of some twenty-four years in all (1949-1973). To many he was seen as vacillating or hesitant, easily secondary to the towering prelate he succeeded; it is only when one spends time with his memory as revealed by speaking to some who knew him well, and by perusing extant papers, that a more balanced and richer picture gradually emerges. It is not surprising that O'Donnell's merit has been obscured by Duhig's reputation - any bishop who followed him in Brisbane would have been contrasted with this notable person - but in O'Donnell's case this was made more acute by the shortness of his episcopate as Archbishop (eight years) and the lengthy coadjutorship; but even more by the changes and uncertainties current in the Church and community then. He did not possess the ability to show confidence, which Duhig seemed to have had in large measure. This coupled with a measure of scrupulosity, particularly in matters pertaining to Canon Law, obscured the depth of the man's spirituality, his desire to do the best for his people

as their chief pastor, and his sympathy for people in difficulty, from those whose acquaintance with him was passing.

It is still too early perhaps to make definite conclusions about all aspects of the O'Donnell episcopate. Yet twelve years after his death and nineteen after his resignation as Archbishop, much can be seen of these years. Although the immediate post Vatican II era has passed, there is still the question of recency. This is compounded by the fact that on retirement, O'Donnell destroyed most of his papers. When asked about this by the Administrator of St Stephen's of the time, he replied: "I don't want to leave dirt lying around about anyone"⁽¹⁾ While it is true that some matters remain confidential, his virtue hinders historical study.

Patrick O'Donnell enjoyed the esteem of many in both Church and State. One must always view testimonials given about bishops cautiously because of their likeness to hagiography, but in O'Donnell's case, there appears to be remarkable unanimity of opinion. All spoke of his virtuous life as a priest and the conscientious manner in which he performed his duties. In April 1972, on the occasion of the golden jubilee of his priestly ordination, Pope Paul VI and Cardinal Rossi, the Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, sent messages to him in these terms⁽²⁾. A year later on the installation of his successor, the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Gino Paro, spoke of the dignified manner in which Patrick Mary had discharged his duties as Archbishop. This comment from a member of the Vatican Diplomatic Service indicates the esteem which was generally felt about him by the Roman Curia⁽³⁾. A similar tone is seen in comments from the State Government on his death⁽⁴⁾. It was often not until people came to know Patrick that they realised the depth of his personality; once he accepted someone as a colleague or friend, the relationship would grow and be enriched⁽⁵⁾.

O'Donnell's priestly life prior to his resignation divides almost evenly between the diocese of Sale and the Archdiocese of Brisbane. I would strongly suspect that the Sale years are his richest pastoral period. Years later in retirement O'Donnell stated that he had enjoyed working in the diocese⁽⁶⁾. He became Administrator of St Mary's Cathedral, pastor of Leongatha and Warragul for approximately three years, and Vicar General to Bishop Richard Ryan C.M. from 1941⁽⁷⁾. During these years he conducted research into the early Catholic history of the Gippsland area and was a noted preacher in the diocese, a fact which brought him to the notice of the Catholic community⁽⁸⁾.

One document which survives from this period is his book of handwritten sermon notes which commence in 1923 and with some additions continue through to 1939. They are a mixture of texts on the yearly cycle of Sunday readings then in use, of texts for special occasions, such as St Patrick's Day or Sacred Heart Devotions, and also sermons on moral themes such as the Avoidance of Bad Company, Reading, Marriage and the Upbringing of Children, and Death and Judgment. The texts appear

to be partly his own thoughts, but also he used homiletic commentaries of the time to develop his ideas⁽⁹⁾. A perusal of these texts reveals a preacher who desired to assist his hearers to move towards the love of God. Thus on Maundy Thursday, he exhorted the congregation of St Mary's Cathedral, Sale, to venerate the Blessed Sacrament and encouraged them to receive Holy Communion frequently and worthily, according to the moral and ascetical thinking of the time⁽¹⁰⁾. This sermon would have been longer than twenty minutes and his sermons would have reached this length on most occasions. O'Donnell's basic approach was that sermons should be doctrinally based, using scriptural (New Testament) or devotional themes. He moves his congregation towards God and divine things. This style remained with him during his Easter addresses as Archbishop and when conferring the Sacrament of Confirmation, though here he would refer to moral issues in Catholic living⁽¹¹⁾. He had a fine command of English and thus he offered to his hearers an aesthetic delight⁽¹²⁾.

O'Donnell was greatly surprised, when on 18 December 1848, he received a telegram advising of his appointment to Brisbane. Writing to Duhig a few days later, he reveals his attitude to the appointment and to episcopacy in general:

Whilst conscious of the great honour, I am naturally filled with apprehension. I have been a Vicar General long enough to realise the burdens and worries of a bishop. But I am trusting in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary to supply for my deficiencies...

He continues:

I am heartened to be going to your Grace who I know so well and from whom I am sure I will receive fatherly counsel and advice and help⁽¹³⁾.

It is in this letter that Patrick bares his soul - much of the O'Donnell-Duhig correspondence of the coadjutorship shows a courteous, clerical, businesslike, discreet relationship between the two.

His surprise was genuine for he was no ecclesial careerist. He had entertained the Apostolic Delegate, Mgr Giovanni Panico at his presbytery when dealing with the affairs of Italian prisoners-of-war in Gippsland, and a friendship developed⁽¹⁴⁾. However, he was well thought of by the clergy and people of Victoria. Archbishop Mannix, in a barely decipherable, hand-written note congratulated him and referred to the saying that 'you can't keep a good man down'. Cardinal Gilroy, his classmate of Propaganda, also congratulated him but added some words of assurance that the appointment would have divine assistance⁽¹⁵⁾. Duhig advised him of his congratulations and those of the Archdiocese.

O'Donnell's consecration as a bishop took place in St Mary's, Sale, on St

Patrick's morning, 1949. This day was O'Donnell's choice and he invited his classmate as the principal consecrator. Duhig preferred him to be consecrated in Victoria and at O'Donnell's invitation, he preached the sermon⁽¹⁶⁾. He was received civically and liturgically in Brisbane in late April, 1949.

The tone of the next sixteen years was set in O'Donnell's response to the speech of welcome given to him. He saw Duhig as continuing the overall government and planning of the diocese and himself as fulfilling a routine and subordinate role⁽¹⁷⁾. Thus for many years - except when he was in Ireland - O'Donnell assisted Duhig by playing a secondary part at functions, doing visitations, administering Confirmation and addressing the clergy on matters of discipline and priestly living⁽¹⁸⁾.

The most notable matter in which O'Donnell became involved was the Roman Mission of 1956 concerning the relationship of Catholic Action to the Australian Labor Party. The facts of this have been documented elsewhere, but O'Donnell agreed with the Sydney view of episcopal control of Catholic Action, as opposed to the Mannix view and to Duhig's public neutrality⁽¹⁹⁾. Duhig respected O'Donnell's right to a different opinion to his but most the bishops seemed unaware of the harm that the ensuing bitterness would cause the Church in Australia on the Eve of the Second Vatican Council. This bitterness which divided families and Catholic organisations until the early 1970s, severely impaired the continuance of charity in the Church and opened the door to allow secularism and irreligion to grow strongly in public life since the 1980s. O'Donnell as Archbishop of Brisbane led a church in an increasingly secular society⁽²⁰⁾.

When O'Donnell came to Brisbane James Duhig provided for him by giving him his own residence, *Glengariff* of the Beirne family, his own church, St Patrick's the Valley, and an income of 1500 pounds a year, payable in monthly instalments. O'Donnell had to pay all his expenses from this but Duhig, during O'Donnell's overseas missions as coadjutor, always enquired if he needed money⁽²¹⁾.

O'Donnell attended the 1961 Patrician Year Celebrations as a delegate of the Australian hierarchy, and Vatican II in his own right and as James' Procurator. During these overseas' sojourns he wrote regularly to Duhig, informing him of his doings and of the Council's progress. He arranged for *The Catholic Leader* to receive weekly reports of the Council from official sources. Yet O'Donnell's letters are general in their discussion of matters debated in the Council. His only detailed comment is that on the Schema *De Ecclesia* which he sees as a continuation of that of Vatican I and he commends Paul VI's sixty-five minute address at the beginning of the Second Session, 29 September, 1963. Yet as the Council progressed he sounded a note of warning; by Session Three (1964): the pace was "proceeding at a great rate", was sufficient time being given to consideration of complex matters or for an "enlightened conservatism" to emerge?⁽²²⁾ Duhig makes no comment on the Council but writes on diocesan affairs.

A constant theme of Patrick's episcopate was the promotion of priestly vocations. When he visited Ireland, he addressed Irish students trying to encourage them to come to the diocese. He had little success because Irish students were no longer interested and because American bishops could offer better conditions. As Archbishop, Patrick appointed Fr Harry Bliss as the first full-time diocesan Vocation Director and requested the clergy to make a yearly voluntary contribution towards his secretarial expenses. However this brought little result⁽²³⁾.

From February 1965, the health of Duhig declined and it became evident that his grasp of reality was slipping. On 11 March, O'Donnell wrote to the Apostolic Delegate asking for a specific mandate for the Consecration of the Oils on Holy Thursday and to perform Ordinations, advising that Duhig's mind was "full of hallucinations" and his control of the financial affairs needed to be constantly watched⁽²⁴⁾. Notably, O'Donnell did not ask for full faculties as Apostolic Administrator. We are left to wonder if this was indecision on his part or part of the genuine respect he felt for Duhig whom he called "a great man". Patrick succeeded to the Archdiocese on 10 April, 1965, the eve of Holy Week.

His episcopate as Archbishop is in the immediate post Vatican II period. It was one of euphoria and then as the 1960s came to an end, one of disillusionment and tension within the Church. The great question which bishops faced in general with much uncertainty, was 'how should episcopal authority be used?' The Council and the decrees interpreting it placed a greater obligation on the diocesan bishop to consult prudently before making decisions. In addition the Council elevated the status of National Episcopal Conferences by making them legal bodies mandatory in the polity of each national group of bishops. The practical effect of this was that bishops spent more time at meetings in their dioceses and as a national group. The other great effect of this period was the beginnings of the movement for ordinary people to be involved in decision making. This meant that a diocesan bishop spent much time listening to people before making decisions.

Up to 1965, the diocese had been governed in a personal manner by his predecessor. By temperament, O'Donnell would have been much more concerned about canonical procedures than Duhig and this would have caused reform in diocesan structures⁽²⁵⁾. There are six principle reforms which O'Donnell made in these years. They are the creation of the Senate of Priests; the creation of permanent deaneries though deans were not appointed till the Rush episcopate; the Catholic Education Council; the two diocesan Commissions of Liturgy and Ecumenism; the Archdiocesan Development Fund and the decision to sell the Holy Name Cathedral site. In some respects these reforms merely brought matters up which had lingered from the last years of James' episcopate. However, Patrick was one of the foremost bishops to attempt to implement the Second Vatican Council's decrees amongst the Australian Hierarchy.

O'Donnell had long been interested in the Lay Apostolate. He attended the annual Conferences of the Young Christian Workers and at his suggestion a coordinating committee for the more apostolically active groups in the diocese was formed. This was named the Catholic Lay Apostolate Conference (C.L.A.C.) He celebrated a yearly Mass for it and held a meeting with its members at *Glengariff*⁽²⁶⁾.

Patrick's episcopate was marked by a number of controversies in Church and State. The most outstanding of these related to the publication of Paul VI's encyclical on artificial contraception, *Humanae Vitae* in late July, 1968. The matter was discussed in forums at the University of Queensland campus and in the media. Patrick issued a brief statement endorsing the encyclical, but declined public comment, leaving this to the Rev. B.J. Wallace of Banyo⁽²⁷⁾. Other controversies of the time included accusations of heresy by Mr R F Bergin of the *Voice of Fatima*, and unsatisfactory teaching at Banyo Seminary, concerning Rev. W.J. O'Shea's articles on the Human Knowledge of Christ as expounded by the U.S. biblical scholar, the Rev. R. Brown S.S. This became a protracted debate between Mr Bergin and the Rector of the Seminary, the Rev. Dr W.A. Smith. The debate was stalemated and O'Donnell received the Smith-Bergin correspondence. He made no public or private comment on this but he read the correspondence carefully. He concluded it would seem, that there was little substance in Mr Bergin's claims⁽²⁸⁾.

Speaking on *Meet the Press*, a Television Current Affairs' Program hosted by Mr Reg Leonard, O'Donnell declared that he had read the American Bishops' statement on the Vietnam War and had concluded that the war could be morally justified⁽²⁹⁾. He made no public comment on the moratorium against the war in 1970. He declined to make any comment on the Springbok emergency of 1971, and on the issue of Sunday trading in hotels indicated that he did not favour this, but that this was only his own view. Basically, Patrick did not want to bind Catholics to policies which may be shown to be incorrect or to which there were alternative permissible opinions⁽³⁰⁾.

O'Donnell's episcopate covered a period of increasing disaffection within the Church as attempts to implement the Council continued. A number of priests left the practice of the priesthood. Writing to the Catholics of Brisbane at the beginning of Lent 1971, he summed up his attitude to the Post-Vatican II Church:

We are not unaware that the changes in liturgy and discipline affecting the spiritual life of all of us... while they have satisfied the longings of most of the faithful, have seemed bewildering to some, and even to others, insufficient in their scope.

He continues:

It is well to remember that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church in every age and in every vicissitude... 'Let not your hearts be troubled not let them be afraid'. Defections have unfortunately occurred... but while we pray in all charity for those who have gone their own way, we must rely on our confidence in the promise of God that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church (31).

In this letter it would seem that we see O'Donnell's mature episcopate.

Any study of P.M.O'Donnell would be incomplete without reference to his Hibernianism. He declared himself a member of the Irish-Australian race and saw his spiritual home as Holy Trinity Church, Fethard (32). In the early Irish summer of 1969, O'Donnell took part in consecration ceremonies at this church and he declared his spiritual reliance on its heritage. He was most proud of his lineage and of his second name (33). During his episcopate he held a special Mass at St Stephen's to mark St Patrick's Day and on retirement published an article on the Irish Catholic heritage (34). The Irish hierarchy accepted him as an associate member on his visits to Ireland and during Vatican II. Yet he chose to live in Brisbane and die there in quiet retirement for he stated that he was "a Queenslander" (35).

O'Donnell exercised his episcopacy at a time of change in Church and State. He was overshadowed by his predecessor and by the Anglican Archbishop and Primate of Australia, the Rt Rev. P.N.W. Strong. His tension in public hid his kinder side and he was not prone to promote his own reputation. He called himself "a transitional archbishop", but in many ways this belies the achievements of his episcopate. He set the ground work for the post conciliar Church in Brisbane, and although he appeared vacillating, he moved the diocese in some new directions. As coadjutor he was proud of the erection of the new premises for St Leo's and Duchesne Colleges within the University of Queensland at St Lucia, for which he had worked for some years; but in his episcopate there was something much deeper: he was a man of faith and prayer who had immediacy with his people. In many ways, he was a fine priest, but a reluctant bishop (36).

References

1. Rev. O.K.Oxenham to the author, 1987.
2. Brisbane Diocesan Archives (hereafter B.D.A.) O'Donnell file. O'Donnell replied to the Papal message in April, 1973. Mgr G.Para's comments occur at the installation of his successor, Most Rev.Francis Rush at St Stephen's Cathedral on 29 May,1973.
3. Rev. T.P.Boland to the author, 22 February,1992.
4. B.D.A. O'Donnell papers.
5. Mr T.J.Moynihan to the author, 20 February,1992.
6. P.M.O'Donnell to the author, February,1976.
7. He became a Domestic Prelate with the title of Monsignor in 1944 as Vicar General of Sale Diocese.
8. There seems to be two series of historical articles in the 1930s and at the time of his appointment to Brisbane in 1948, for *The Advocate*.
9. Thus he refers to Ryan Vol.II and *Short Sermons* p.42 (author unknown).
10. O'Donnell states that the permission of one's confessor should be sought for frequent Holy Communion.
11. Thus at Confirmation conferral in St Stephen's on 29 July,1962, O'Donnell preached walking up and down the central aisle. At that time pledges of abstinence from alcohol (boys) and alcohol and tobacco (girls) were administered in Brisbane and he commented on them. The practice seems to go back to Archbishop Dunne (1882-1917).
12. Parishioner Mr 'D' Thomson to author; Rev.B.J.Wallace to author et al.
13. P.M.O'Donnell to J.Duhig, 21 December,1948. B.D.A. op.cit.
14. The earliest letter in the B.D.A. collection is dated October, 1943 and is from Mgr.Panico thanking O'Donnell for his hospitality at Leongatha.
15. D.Mannix to P.M.O'Donnell, N.T.Gilroy to P.M.O'Donnell - B.D.A. op.cit.
16. The other person discussed was the long-standing classmate and friend of O'Donnell, Mgr.J.English, as a preacher. O'Donnell sought and received the approval of the Propaganda Fide Congregation for this date for episcopal consecration.
17. Speeches at reception, 28 April, 1949. B.D.A. op.cit.
18. Thus in December 1949, Duhig asked O'Donnell to address the clergy on sermon preparation and to remind them about the prohibition against attending Race Meetings.
19. For an account of the Episcopal View see Graham Williams, *Cardinal Sir Norman Gilroy*, Sydney Alba House, 1971, Ch.3, 'Cardinal Gilroy and the Movement' pp.50-58.
20. Of course other factors influenced the growth of secularism, but I feel this one needs to be given some weight for it weakened the Church at a crucial time.
21. A humorous occurrence some years later when the Brisbane City Council approached Duhig for outstanding rates and interest for *Glengariff*. Duhig indignantly referred them to O'Donnell.
22. O'Donnell-Duhig correspondence 1963 et al. B.D.A. op.cit.
23. O'Donnell made an impassioned appeal to Senior students at the first Mass in the new chapel at St Joseph's College, Gregory Terrace. *Senior School in May, 1964 - Personal Recollections* (Senate of Priests' Minutes - B.D.A.)
24. B.D.A. op.cit.
25. cf. O'Donnell to Propaganda Fide Congregation re sale of Church Properties. 15 June,1965.

26. It was founded in 1968 and Patrick said Mass for it and met with its members at *Glengariff* in 1971 and 1972. (It was dissolved in 1973.)
27. He appeared on *This Day Tonight* on Channel 2.
28. The file discloses that Mr Bergin had little support amongst the clergy of the diocese. The number of 100+ is quoted as supporting Fr O'Shea.
29. *Meet the Press*, Channel 7. 25 December, 1967. Personal recollection.
30. Mr T.J.Moynihan to author, 20 February, 1992.
31. Pastoral Letter, 21 February, 1971. B.D .A. op.cit.
32. B.D.A. Program of the Mass 14 May, 1969, Trinity Sunday, op.cit.
33. Rev. T.P.Boland to author, 1987.
34. *Catholic Leader*, Brisbane, 11 March, 1979, B.D.A. op.cit.
35. Spoken to C.L.A.C. delegates, November, 1972 - *Glengariff* - personal recollection.
36. This is the theme of Fr W. Hayes' panegyric at Fethard, 6 November, 1980.

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