

## CAIRNS VICARIATE

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Although the topic of this talk happened far away from Brisbane, it nevertheless has relevance for us at this time because three days ago Archbishop John Bathersby promulgated an Archdiocesan Synod for 2003. A Synod is a mechanism within Canon Law by which the priests and people of a diocese work together with the bishop and contribute ideas to advance the mission and ministry of the diocese. This mood of welcoming directional input from the laity certainly wasn't always evident in the Australian Church 130 years ago.

Sometimes the mood was far different from this. For example, in 1871 Bishop Laurence Bonaventure Sheil O.F.M. of Adelaide excommunicated Blessed Mary MacKillop. By this official church act, Mary was denied the Sacraments of the Church. In hindsight, this excommunication, which was lifted in the following year, appears a misuse of church authority.

A parallel misuse, and probably abuse, of church authority took place in Herberton, North Queensland in 1883, and this time it was not a sentence upon one individual Catholic, but upon all Catholics in the district. The town of Herberton was placed under Interdict; by which ban on the area, priests were forbidden to administer any sacraments there. Whereas excommunication banishes a person from the church community, an Interdict is the most serious of the final steps that can be taken against a whole church community to encourage the recipients to acknowledge the alleged error of their ways. It is meant to coerce the recipients to submit to church authority in order to be permitted to receive the sacraments once again, and is used extremely sparingly.

Historians now accept that, in excommunicating Mary MacKillop, Bishop Sheil at best acted upon inaccurate, biased and incomplete information. At worst, he was also senile, sick and mentally fragile when he decreed Mary's excommunication. Sheil used a writ of excommunication inappropriately, and equally in Far North Queensland, a writ of Interdict was used in an excessive manner.

The person responsible for the Interdict on Herberton was Monsignor Paul Fortini, who as Pro-Vicar Apostolic of the *Pro-Vicariate* of Queensland (today the Diocese of Cairns) had episcopal authority *pro tempore* although not consecrated a bishop. If Bishop Sheil could be excused for his actions because he was medically senile, Fortini had no claim for a similar justification.

The Vicariate, centred on Cooktown, commenced "on the ground" in 1877. By a series of mishaps variously in Rome and in Cooktown itself, Fortini was the fourth priest placed in charge of it in its first six years of existence. The first appointee, a Belgian priest, never showed up; the second, an Italian priest, showed up but his unsuitability led to a public outcry and to his subsequent removal; the third, an Italian named John Cani, did good work there for four years, but was then unexpectedly recalled to Brisbane and soon appointed as the first Bishop of Rockhampton.

And then came Paul Fortini! Rome was running out of available candidates, and here scraped the bottom of the barrel. Fortini was a Neapolitan priest of independent means and unattached to any diocese or congregation (which "freelancing" is no longer possible). He possessed influence in the Vatican and pestered Rome for a prestigious appointment. Although from a wealthy legal family and expecting some great destiny to befall him, in personality he was egotistic, autocratic and short-tempered. He had not previously exercised any pastoral responsibility and, after his debacle in North Queensland, was never granted another such opportunity.

One might suggest that Propaganda (the Roman Congregation responsible for Australian appointments) gave Fortini the Cooktown post out of a twofold desperation: firstly to take care of a posting that was proving continually problematic to fill, and secondly, to get Fortini as far out of their sight as possible. Misreading it as his heaven-sent road to glory, Fortini accepted the Cooktown posting. This probably turned out to be worst episcopal-level appointment in nineteenth-century Australian Catholic history.

Even from the very outset, Rome had doubts about Fortini's suitability, but went ahead with his appointment anyway. He sailed from Italy to Cooktown in June 1882, at the age of 49 years. Although clearly told by Rome that his posting was strictly temporary, Fortini nevertheless had visions of staying and becoming a bishop there. Within a month of his arrival, he took out British citizenship. He then proceeded to concoct his very own recipe for ecclesiastical disaster.

Blunder Number 1 took place in June 1882 (in his very first month in Cooktown). He alienated the priests. There were three priests in the vicariate, all of them on temporary loan from Bishop James Quinn in Brisbane and all older and more pastorally experienced than himself. A newspaper publisher and canon lawyer from way back, Fortini immediately used both talents excessively. Rather than write to the three priests individually, Fortini promulgated his list of twenty-two regulations for priests by publishing them in the local secular press.

The priests did not stand for this and, as a result, all three of them departed the vicariate within a month. Unwilling to admit to Rome that the priests had walked out on him, Fortini asserted that he had been required to dismiss them at the insistence of the laity - which was untrue. Rome checked the matter, and learned that Fortini had lied.

Blunder Number 2 took place in August 1882 (his third month in Cooktown). He closed the Cooktown Catholic school. There was a Catholic school in Cooktown, led by a female lay teacher. Local Catholics had raised 400 pounds to build the school, and had enrolled fee-paying non-Catholic children to assist in meeting the teacher's wage each week. Non-Catholic parents had been promised that their children would be exempt from Catholic religious instruction. Fortini did not approve of this exemption, the lay teacher declined to rescind it, and Fortini sacked her. The parents refused Fortini's intended changes, and the school closed because it was no longer economically viable.

Blunder Number 3 happened in September 1882, during Fortini's fourth month in Cooktown. Having driven out the priests, Fortini next seriously alienated the Catholic laity. The Catholic laity were Irish, and Fortini did not think they gave him due respect. In September 1882, a priest in Townsville wrote to the Archbishop of Sydney saying that Fortini, even though he had only halting English, publicly disparaged to their faces the Irish-born churchgoers, who made up a large majority of his congregation. From Sydney, Archbishop Vaughan let Propaganda know the exploits of their Cooktown appointee.

What next?! Blunder Number 4 happened in October 1882, Fortini's fifth month in far north Queensland. He began trouble in Herberton and topped it off with an Interdict. On his first visit to the town, Fortini established a lay committee to raise funds for a presbytery; a chapel already existed. Fortini wanted a presbytery larger than a resident priest would need so that Fortini, in the Italian style, could also use the building as his summer "palazzo" (palace) to escape the coastal summer humidity of Cooktown.

When money was raised, Fortini began buying the timber and engaged a builder without any consultation with the committee. When he refused them any input, the committee ceased raising funds, the project went into debt, and the builder sued Fortini for unpaid bills. The laity reluctantly paid the builder to avoid the Church any embarrassment, but then the timber merchant initiated the same legal process. This time the laity allowed the church property to be repossessed by the court, and then purchased it at the subsequent sheriff's auction in their own private names.

When they refused to include his name on the title deeds of the land on which the church and unfinished presbytery stood, Fortini placed the town under Interdict, meaning that no priest was permitted to offer the sacraments in the town. This impasse lasted for seven months. One effect of the Interdict may have been the choice of venue for a wedding by two Herberton Catholics. Their nuptials occurred at Nyleta on the other side of the Herberton Range; certainly, the Interdict did not at that time allow a priest to marry them in their home town.

By then, however, Rome had experienced more than enough criticism about Fortini's mishandling of almost every situation he heavy-handedly touched. Rome acted decisively against Fortini, months before becoming aware of the Interdict. As it happened, not more than a month after Fortini had imposed the Interdict, Propaganda in far-away Rome had chosen his successor, and ordered the return of Fortini to Europe as soon as the newcomer arrived. And that is what happened.

When Fortini's successor, John Hutchinson O.S.A. reached Cooktown in June 1884, Fortini left for Italy a few days later. Respectfully cool towards Fortini's foolishness, Hutchinson was welcome to the Herberton Catholics, and the title deeds of the church property were soon re-written to his satisfaction in accord with standard ecclesiastical practice.

A modest presbytery was completed and within four years a sizeable wooden church (dedicated to St Patrick and still in use almost 120 years later) was built. Fortini became simply an irksome memory, akin to a nightmare recalled with incredulity.

As a seminarian in Rome in the early 1900s, the future Archbishop Sir James Duhig of Brisbane met Monsignor Fortini in his retirement. With his own legendary tact, Duhig later wrote, 'Monsignor Fortini was by no means suited to the conditions on which he found himself (in northern Queensland)... The circumstances became known to the Holy See and, in less than two years from the time of his arrival, the good Pro-Vicar was recalled to Rome, where he spent the evening of his life teaching modern languages and preparing for heaven.'