

THE SEARCH FOR COUNT ROSSOLINI

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Fr Patrick Tynan

My research into the life of Constantine Rossolini began probably as long ago as 1990 when I had a few days free to spend at the Library of New South Wales which has an enormous quantity of 19 Century material, and also to meet up with the Josephite Archivist, Sister Kath Burford, who was kind enough to extract for me all of the letters she had which related to their foundation in Bundaberg. These letters, needless to say, had a lot of information relating to Fr Constantine Rossolini.

Another source I consulted at the time was the Oxley Library in Brisbane under its headings of Gayndah and Bundaberg. Here I found an interesting article on the History of the Catholic Church in Gayndah. These articles stated that Father Constantine Rossolini, the first Parish Priest of Gayndah was by birth an Italian Count. Here, I thought, is an interesting piece of information.

At this point, being occupied with other things, I let the research lapse. As my time for Sabbatical leave approached in 2001 I thought what better thing to do than travel to Italy to further the research on Rossolini; especially to unravel in what sense he was a Count. I allowed only a couple of weeks for this as I planned to spend the rest of the three months leave writing up the story of Rossolini's life.

I had intended to spend the first week at the Vatican Library and the second week at Iesi, Rossolini's birthplace. If any one has ever done or attempted to do any research at the Vatican Library they will know that it is much easier to access that Library on the Internet than in reality. The obstacles to obtaining entry are many and intricate: Swiss Guards, permit officials, door keepers,

special secretaries, systems for obtaining books, keys, card numbers. Anyway, to make a long story short, I finally got in about midday on Monday only to find that books cannot be collected after midday but only in the morning. Tuesday of that week was the Pope's birthday so all of Vatican City had a holiday. That left Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. By this time I had overcome any jet lag, and the secretary was more relaxed after her holiday on Tuesday. I commenced working my way through every book, every reference I could find, Conti, Conto, Palatine Counts *etc. etc.* I found nothing.

I had planned, after leaving Iesi, to spend a couple of days each in Florence and Venice as a tourist, so I told Fr Martin Arnold who was travelling with me, to go ahead and I would meet up with him again later in Rome. On Saturday night at the end of the week in Iesi I attended a prayer service at one of Iesi's many beautiful churches presided over by the Bishop. Straight after it was over I went to the sacristy and asked if any of them knew anyone called Rossolini. The Chairman of a lay group who was there said: my wife's mother's name was Rossolini. There were no Counts in the family, but it was the family for which I was looking.

On Sunday I was invited to lunch with them and to meet the lady's brother whose name was Constantine Ricci. He showed me a gold ring he was wearing with the initials C.R. – Constantine Rossolini - which also stood for his own name Constantine Ricci. It was the gold ring which Rossolini had willed to his family in Italy when he drew up his will and died in Bundaberg in 1893.

Constantine Ricci, a very successful businessman, who works with environmental solutions, drove me on Monday to see some of the places associated with his family, e.g. the Abbey Church of Saint Appolinare, in the vicinity of which had been the family farm. On Constantine's baptism certificate his father is simply

listed as Contadino, farmer. This church is part of the parish of Cupramontana and is also Benedict Scortichini's birthplace and place of baptism. The same Parish Priest I had met in 1990 was there. Constantine Ricci took me to the cemetery at Cupramontana and showed me several family graves. Photographs I have show the Christian name of Constantine has been in the family for generations.

Rossolini was born in the parish of Cupramontana on November 4, 1846. There were at least two other brothers, James and Frank, who would be nominated as beneficiaries in his will. 1846 was a significant year as it was also the year that Pius IX was elected Pope – a Pope who would have the longest reign in history, dying in 1878. Pius IX was also from the Italian Marches area of Italy: the town of Senigaglia.

As a child, Rossolini no doubt attended the now closed elementary school next to the Abbey Church of Saint Appolinare. He then went to the Minor Seminary in Iesi, next to the beautiful thirteenth century church of Saint Mark, a church which is now the chapel of a convent of Carmelite nuns. The college is no longer a Seminary but has been converted into a secondary school, Collegio Pergolese. If any of you are musically inclined you would know that Iesi is also the birth of Pergolese the short-lived but illustrious musician of the 17 Century.

Rossolini travelled to Rome for his study of theology at the famous Roman College, conducted by the Jesuits. The Rome-Ancona Railway line had just been built. Given who the Bishop of Iesi was by this time it is most likely his ordination was held in his own Diocesan Cathedral, though I have no direct evidence about this.

This brings me to the Bishop of Iesi at the time. Cardinal Carlo Luigi Morichini. This man, more than anyone, must take the

credit for three of his priests being given as missionaries for Bishop Quinn's new Diocese of Queensland. Iesi was, and still is, one of the smallest Dioceses in Italy. It is directly attached to the Holy See. The three young priests to whom he gave leave to go to Australia were all top-rate: Scortichini, Rossolini and Davadi.

In 1848 Pius IX had made Morichini Vice-President of the Council of the Roman State, and, in 1854, Cardinal Archbishop of Iesi. He had actually been involved in assisting with relief work for the cholera outbreak both in Rome and Iesi. The Diocesan Synod he called in 1857 was the first one held since 1772. Prior to his appointment to Iesi he had been involved in diplomatic missions to England and other European countries. He had a very broad vision of the universal church and its needs.

During the unrest in Italy in the 1860s he was taken by the Royal Governor of Marche, Colonel Lorenzo Valori, and imprisoned in the Santo Palazzo of Ancona. He was freed through the intervention of Napoleon III. Rossolini was chosen after ordination by his Bishop to take on the position of his secretary. It was a challenging and interesting time to work as a Bishop's secretary.

In 1867 Pius IX called a General Council of the Church. Much preparation was required beforehand, and Rossolini would have been involved in this. Bishops attended the Council accompanied by their secretaries. There would have been very few Australian Bishops at the Council of the Vatican. No doubt they took note when a short question was asked in part 3 section 4 of the Document on the Church, *Qualle Nella Australia – And what of Australia*. Did the young Cardinal's secretary already at this point know that he would shortly learn a bit more about that distant continent?

The Council closed, as we know, in confusion when Rome was invaded on September 20, 1870. Morichini was to live into old

age and be at the Conclave which elected Leo XIII in 1878. Pius IX's final word on the Council is interesting, especially in view of the forthcoming Synod for our Diocese to be held this year. A Council always passes through three phases. First that of the Devil, then comes that of man, finally that of God.

Bishop Quinn had arranged for his recruited priests from Iesi to travel to Australia via London and Ireland, where they would be given initial classes in English, probably lodging at one of the residential colleges which had been set up as adjuncts to the Tertiary College presided over by Cardinal Newman. These classes certainly would have continued on board ship, since one of their fellow passengers was Jeremiah Long, on his way to Brisbane to become headmaster of Saint James School in the Valley.

The *Storm King* arrived in Brisbane on 2 March 1871. The following Sunday the Italians were welcomed at a High Mass in tiny St. Stephen's Cathedral in which they were Celebrant, Deacon and Sub-Deacon.

It is interesting to note that Scortichini and Davadi were posted as assistant priests initially, while Rossolini was sent immediately to take charge of the Mission at Gayndah.

A steamer took passengers for Gayndah initially to Maryborough where they had to wait for a coach which ran only twice a week. No doubt in Maryborough, Rossolini met Dean Tissot, the French Assumptionist, then an old man and soon to retire on his 50th anniversary and go home to France in 1875, where he lived on into his nineties.

The journey to Gayndah by coach was a hazardous one. Only a few short years before, two bushrangers had been very active in the area. By this time one of them, the wild Scotsman, James McPherson, was safely incarcerated on the island prison of St. Helena. The town of Gin Gin now celebrates a yearly festival in

his honour. He did not waste his time while down on Moreton Bay but involved himself in literary studies, even writing Latin poetry.

The other, and lesser known bushranger who terrorised the mail coach passengers between Maryborough and Gayndah in the 1860s, was a German by the name of Beirmeister. Caught and imprisoned in the Gayndah lock-up, he ingeniously was picking his way out of prison by loosening the mortar between the bricks, until discovered by his gaoler.

The mail coach also took its passengers past aboriginal places of significance like Ban Ban Springs where many now sheltered after being driven from their ancestral land by the new pastoralists.

One such pastoralist was Frank Glynn Connolly and no doubt this was where Rossolini first found lodging. Quinn had performed the marriage of Frank Connolly and Ellen Power in 1861. Connolly and his brother John, who would live to be over 100, were very active in the business and corporate life of the town and would shortly increase their involvement to include the burgeoning mining township of Mt Perry.

Gayndah had already seen the ministrations of priests who would become legends in the Australian Church; Dean Rigney had performed marriages there and Archbishop Polding had visited the area in 1858. Rossolini's immediate predecessor, Father Pierce Power, an Irishman, was buried in the church. Sadly he drowned in the Burnett River shortly after being posted to the town in 1865.

The *Maryborough Chronicle* newspaper noted that on May 7, 1871, the Sunday after Rossolini arrived in Gayndah, he conducted three services. Given the liturgical practices of the period this would have been two Masses in the morning and Rosary and Benediction in the evening.

The population of the town and district was six hundred (European) an uncounted number of the local Waka Waka people, and - wait for it - 2 466 horses, 50 139 cattle, 255 611 sheep and finally 2 266 pigs. Gayndah was primarily a grazing district.

Even as Rossolini arrived in Gayndah in mid 1871 it was already starting to lose population to the neighbouring newly established mining township of Mount Perry. A shepherd called Dingle had found copper on his property in the year 1868 – copper in large quantities. As in all such situations a rush of prospective miners converged on the area hoping to make their fortunes overnight. The newly founded *Mount Perry Mail* noted in February 1872, that a place which one year ago had a population of ten souls, can today boast of 800 inhabitants and which, before another year passes, is likely to have doubled or trebled that number.

Rossolini saw the pastoral implications of this burgeoning town in the area of his mission and acted decisively to build a church there to meet the need. This small wooden church was completed by Christmas Eve 1873. The present beautiful wooden church in Mount Perry replaced it at the start of the 20 Century.

The next pastoral event in the Catholic history of Mount Perry is more remarkable still. On February 6, 1874 the *Mount Perry Mail* noted that a day school in connection with the Roman Catholic Church was opened on the previous Monday and that the teacher was Miss Bertheau. There were about fifty children and they would have utilised the church which measured 34 X 24 feet.

The teacher at this school would have been Marie Emilienne Bertheau, daughter of Charles Zachary Bertheau, a soft drink manufacturer in the town. It is highly likely that she had received her own education at All Hallows in Brisbane because her family was living in Brisbane at a time when she would have

been of secondary school age. The Bertheau family would continue to be parishioners of Rossolini after both he and they moved to Bundaberg.

As soon as Mount Perry became established as a mining town, agitation began for a railway line to connect it with either Maryborough or the new township of Bundaberg. Eventually Bundaberg was chosen as the port of exit for the ore carried on the new line from Mount Perry. Here Rossolini found himself with another pastoral responsibility: the railway gangers who were building the line. In 1879 on 7 September from Mount Perry he wrote to St. Teresa Maginnis, Superior of the Sisters at Bundaberg:

... after having visited all the camps along the railway line I arrived here last Friday evening – the roads are almost impassable – in several places the mud was as high as the horses' flanks. It rained the whole day last Saturday, and still it rains a little so I will not go to Gayndah till next Friday for it will be difficult to cross the creeks.

The railway line was finally opened in August 1881, and, of course, like many country railway lines in Queensland has long since closed, once the demand for copper disappeared on world markets.

Some of the brief accounts that exist about Rossolini's ministry suggest that he actually lived in Mount Perry for a period after it became a larger centre than Gayndah. Given his pastoral sensitivity I think that this is entirely likely. However it would not have been for very long. Only a short distance away his third major centre, the town of Bunda was by now growing rapidly. Bunda was the name of one of the local aboriginal people in the area.

The first Mass we know of, celebrated in Bundaberg, was celebrated by the assistant priest from Maryborough, Fr Thomas

O'Brien, and was held in Walter Adams' Metropolitan Hotel. O'Brien instigated moves for a church to be built and this was opened in 1875. He was the first priest to be ordained in Queensland - even though Irish by birth - and when Dean Tissot retired from Maryborough, was appointed in charge, in his place. Fr O'Brien died suddenly while on a visit to Rossolini in Bundaberg in 1878.

Walter Adams whose Metropolitan Hotel was the location of the first Mass in Bundaberg was the leading layman in Bundaberg during Rossolini's ministry. An Englishman by birth he had become a Catholic through his Irish wife. From being a member of the town's Progress Committee, he rose to be Alderman and later Mayor for two consecutive terms. He led the opposition, in the Bundaberg Debating Club, to the use of Kanaka labour in the canefields. It did not stop them from being used. The death rate among these workers was appalling. Adams himself used Kanaka labour in his own cane field - he probably could not compete against his neighbours without taking this step. The treatment of these workers varied, depending on who was the cane grower or mill owner in charge in the particular case. The statistics for the year 1888 are given in the book, wages, number of white, number of black workers in each plantation.

I am not going into the politics of the arrival and departure of the Sisters of Saint Joseph from Bundaberg, I am sure Sister Margaret will do that for us when the time comes. I would simply like to give some of the facts.

My own theory of how Rossolini invited them to Bundaberg is this. The Sisters had come to Yatala where Scortechini was in charge in 1875. Rossolini probably met up with his fellow countryman at the Diocesan retreat that year and learnt from him what a valuable pastoral strategy they were for the mission. Hence he wrote and asked Mother Mary if there were any Sisters available for the new mission of Bundaberg.

This led to their arrival there in 1876 but, sadly, they would be gone by the end of 1880. The Bundaberg foundation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph was the last of twelve schools they opened between 1870 and 1876.

In Bundaberg, as in most centres, the local church building was used as a school on weekdays, reverting to a church on Sundays. The Bundaberg church measured 48 x 24 feet [In passing we might note that it was the same width as the Mount Perry Church, but 14 feet longer. Someone with the appropriate skill could calculate how many people such buildings could accommodate for a Sunday Mass. At the time we speak of, very few of these early churches would have had more than one Mass on any given Sunday. Scortichini's church at Cleveland, which survived into the 1970s was enlarged by adding verandahs on both sides].

However I digress. To go back to Bundaberg and the work of the Sisters there (which began in 1876); Rossolini, unlike most of the Irish priests who had communities of Sisters, had a close working relationship with them which could at times be called warm, even affectionate. The Sisters likewise found Dean Tissot in Maryborough and Pierre Bucas in Mackay, congenial priests to work with.

The Bundaberg 'Nunnery', the word used by a contemporary directory, had four members, Sister Teresa Maginnis, the superior, and Sisters Francesca, Joseph Mary and Mary Columba. Mother Mary McKillop seems to have been resident with them for several months between March and July 1878.

Rossolini's remarks made at the school prizegiving after the mid-year examinations for June 1879, show how pleased he was with what was being done in the school. The local paper quoted him as saying

... my dear children never since I have been in Australia have I spent two happier days than today and yesterday. Yesterday, in listening to your examination, and today in having the pleasure of handing you the prizes awarded you by the good Mother General.

The Sisters, as well as teaching school, took in a small number of boarders; one of Sister Teresa's letters mentions as many as seven. While Rossolini was absent in Gayndah or Mount Perry they visited the sick and tended the dying. They instructed converts and cared for the church and the sacristy. Sometimes a visit to a sick person could involve a five mile round trip on foot.

By 1879, Rossolini and the Sisters could see that what was happening in other places where the Sisters laboured, would also happen in Bundaberg and great consternation began to be felt on both sides. The Catholic and secular press both carried articles on the situations as they arose.

Sister Teresa wrote to Mother Mary in November 1879:

I am really sorry to see the Catholic paper, so called ...# I cannot think how any man could do such a thing as our good Bishop has done ...To read it, one would think the Bishop had no hands in it. May God forgive him ... Don't let the letter make you ill, but make you strong for the battle you have to fight ... Fight like a good soldier ... Don't take the Sisters away yet. Who knows what Almighty God has in store for his poor children. Father told me he wished to be remembered to you and by all means defend yourself.

We now know of course that if Mother Mary had taken all the advice that Sister Teresa, Rossolini and other well-meaning people were giving her at this time, she would not be now known as Blessed Mother Mary. The Saints handle their lives in a different way to the rest of us.

The Editor was Fr James Breen, who sided with the Bishop in the controversy surrounding the Sisters' departure from Queensland

The laity were much more outspoken in their criticism of the now ageing and - at times - sick Bishop, in his manoeuvring to remove the Sisters from Queensland. The rallying point for their anger in Brisbane was the Parliamentary Librarian, Denis O'Donovan. A petition he organised for them to stay in Queensland, gathered over one thousand signatures, a lot for Brisbane in 1879.

He also organised a concert at South Brisbane to raise money for their fare to leave Queensland. It was a great success and Quinn's decision to attend at the last moment did not result in people feeling any more friendly towards him, since it was clear where the blame lay for the Sisters' going. Hardly anyone even spoke to him that evening.

Rossolini seems to have gone to Brisbane more than once over the issue of the Sisters' leaving Bundaberg.

Nevertheless on 20 June, 1880, Sister Teresa wrote that the news had finally come – they were to go. It was impossible to remain in Queensland while the Bishop continued in his authoritarian stance. She mentions that Rossolini was grief stricken over the news. Walter Adams gave a moving address of gratitude and farewell in the church on the day before their departure.

They left Bundaberg only three weeks later for New South Wales where Archbishop Vaughan gladly welcomed them.

Within a short time, the substitute Sisters of the Diocesan Order set up by Quinn had come to Bundaberg. It was not a happy arrangement. Some of its members were unstable people who had left Mother Mary's institute.

Rossolini's comments in a letter to Mother Mary [27/8/1880] are intriguing:

I do not know how to deal with these new arrivals. I suppose I must use them as the Australians use the Dugong fish ... the worst is that I cannot explain it. Were I to do so, the scandal would be greater still.

After the initial turmoil Rossolini worked with the newcomers and by the next year, 1881, their number had risen to six. Subsequently they started a school in Bowen, 400 miles to the north. The Bundaberg community received candidates and carried on the work of education until it was disbanded in 1896 by Bishop Robert Dunne.

Before concluding this section one other item should be noted from the Bundaberg letter of Sister Teresa. She states in one of her letters to Mother Mary that Rossolini had been asked by Archbishop Vaughan of Sydney to take Rockhampton (as first Bishop). Unfortunately Sydney Archives has no record of this letter. This was in August 1878. As it turned out, fellow Italian Giovanni Cani was appointed to Rockhampton.

Most Parishes at the end of the 19 Century were establishing branches of the Hibernian Society. The Bundaberg Branch was set up in June 1886. Walter Adams was at the forefront of the new branch. Ever afterwards the members of the Society were to be found at any Parish major event, dressed in regalia. They would be there in force at Rossolini's funeral.

The final thing that must be included was Rossolini's new Church which was opened in 1888. It was built so that it could be enlarged, and thereby completed, which it was in the 1920s.

The architect chosen by Rossolini for the new brick Holy Rosary Church was probably the leading colonial architect of the day, Francis Drummond Greville Stanley. The buildings he designed are now heritage listed throughout South East Queensland.

Photographs show that the church was above the level of the disastrous 1893 floods. Today it lies in the heart of the CBD of Bundaberg. It must be one of the most beautiful churches in non-metropolitan Queensland.

As Bundaberg continued to grow, Dunne, in 1886, sent Rossolini a curate, Fr Andrew Monaghan. After five years he was replaced by another Irishman, Fr John Mimmagh, who would be there when Rossolini died in November 1893.

The cause of death was stated as cancer of the liver. No doubt this was associated with the change of diet he would forcibly have had to undergo in moving from a Mediterranean to an Anglo-Saxon culture. There were no pizza parlours or take-away pasta in colonial Queensland.

His funeral was a major event in the town of Bundaberg. It proceeded around the entire main block in the town, coming back to the church where the internment took place. In addition to the whole Catholic population, there also took part the Mayor, Members of Parliament, civil officers and the general public.

The Michelin Tourist Guide for Italy (1989) states that the inhabitants of the Marches have a reputation for friendliness, piety and diligence. Rossolini was a man of whom the Marches could be justly proud.