

**A VERY RELIGIOUS PLACE'¹:
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CATHOLIC
COMMUNITY AT NUNDAH**

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‘Nundah was a very religious place in my early years’ wrote Fr Alan Brown who grew up in Nundah during the 1920s and was ordained to the priesthood in July 1945. ‘There were four churches - ‘the old green church’, the Methodist Church in Union Street, the Baptist church in Chapel Street facing little Boyd Park with its graffiti covered War Memorial, St Francis Church of England in Cameron Street where Fr Otway was valiantly trying to initiate his parishioners into the beauty of the Anglo-Catholic worship and the Salvation Army Hall in Sandgate Road’.² It is interesting that he fails to mention St Paul’s Lutheran church in Buckland Road, because not only was there a strong Lutheran community present in the 1920s but from 1849 until early in the twentieth century Nundah could boast of two Lutheran churches. The first Catholic church in the district – the ‘old green church’ - was blessed and opened free of debt by Archbishop Dunne on 19 June 1904. It stood beside Buckland Road just over the railway line on land purchased by the Archbishop. The Church of the Real Presence as it was named was always painted green and was the pride of the little Catholic working-class community consisting of mainly Irish and a small number of German families.³

Fr Alan Brown who was a convert to Catholicism continued:

The ‘old green church’ had a fascination for me, probably because it was forbidden territory ... In the dusk I would see the altar against the dark red background, the shining brass door of the tabernacle, the communion cloth hanging from the communion rails, all lit up by the flickering red glow from the sanctuary lamp hanging from the roof in front of the altar.

This was a Catholic church of the time before Vatican Council II and the changes to liturgical celebration that followed this church council.

A Mission Station

The settlement known at first as German Station and later Nundah had a significant Christian history. In 1838, while the Moreton Bay settlement was still a penal colony, Christian missionaries from Germany – Lutherans – settled on a hill, which they named Sion, at the foot of which ran a creek named Kedron Brook now renamed Schultz Canal. Two pastors, Carl Wilhelm Schmidt and Christoph Eipper, along with ten lay missionaries and their wives came to offer Christianity to the aborigines. The instigator of the mission was the Presbyterian, Dr John Dunmore Lang who negotiated with the British government to sponsor missionaries to the aboriginal people of the Moreton Bay district. These young men and women had been trained in their homeland by Dr Johannes Gossener – who earlier in his life had been a Catholic priest.⁴

The colonial administration granted the use of 640 acres to the missionaries. The newly arrived missionaries considered the site of the mission as one of the loveliest places that they had seen. 'Here there is a superabundance of trees, including cedar and even better timber, to which everyone can freely help himself,' wrote Niquet.⁵ The policy of the missionaries was to involve the aborigines in the work of building and gardening and in this way become familiar with their culture and language and encourage them to lay aside their nomadic way of life.⁶ Despite the best efforts of the missionaries, the mission was not a success.⁷ In 1848 the area was opened to free settlers and the German missionaries purchased the land that they had farmed. Rode, one of the missionaries was the first to buy land in the area and acquired a 30 acre portion of the original mission settlement, and later, a further 97 acres.⁸ It was on a part of this land that the present Catholic church 'Corpus Christi' stands.

Archbishop Polding Visits

The present day suburb of Nundah can claim that it was favored by a visit by the first Catholic Archbishop in Australia. The Benedictine John Bede Polding, consecrated in June 1834 as Australia's first bishop arrived in Sydney in September 1835. He, like the Presbyterian John Dunmore Lang, was interested in a mission to the aborigines of Moreton Bay, but it was not until 13 May 1843 that he and the Passionist Fr Snell arrived in the settlement to look into the matter. Polding visited the Lutheran mission, and it would seem that the offer was made for him to take it over because the Germans had decided to move elsewhere, but he preferred his missionaries to start afresh somewhere else.⁹ In a letter to his Vicar General, Dr Murphy he described his visit to the

mission and the efforts of Pastor Schmidt to teach English to both the aboriginal children and those of the missionaries in the school. His conversations with the officials in the settlement and the missionaries themselves prompted his comment: 'The blacks have taken a prejudice against them [the missionaries]. They call their house a house of hunger, because they get nothing ... They complain bitterly that the Germans invited them to work and they kept the crops for their own families'.¹⁰ Later in a letter to Rome dated 10 April 1845, he mentioned the failure of this mission 'I did not deem it prudent to begin our mission on the same site... our missionaries would [need] to be known by the natives and have acquired a sufficient knowledge of the language of the people'.¹¹ On 25 May 1843 the Catholic mission station on Stradbroke Island was founded.¹²

German Station

Until the 1880s the community showed so distinctly its national origins that the district became known as German Station.¹³ This was despite the fact that the land sales of 1865 brought others, besides the German missionaries, to the settlement. The Anglican Bishop Tufnell bought 100 acres and Bishop Quinn the first Catholic bishop of Brisbane also bought land in the district.¹⁴ During the sixties and seventies German Station was an isolated farming settlement consisting of dairy farms, pineapple plantations, market gardens and vineyards. The only local ventures not directly related to the land were the blacksmith shops, the wheelwright shop, and a general store. The coach service opened in 1858 that ran via German Station from Brisbane to Sandgate provided markets for the produce of the farmers not only with the main settlement of Brisbane but also with the small settlement at

Sandgate. The first hotel built in the 1860s became a stopping place for the coach so that passengers could rest, purchase refreshments, and the drivers harness fresh horses. The education of the children had been important to the residents from the beginning of the mission and they established their own school and supplied the teacher. It was not until 1865 that the first state school was built together with a residence for the teacher supplied by the government.

Nundah

During the 1880s the population of the settlement not only increased but it also became more cosmopolitan. In 1882 the Queensland Railway Carriage and Wagon Company was established in the settlement. Here both train carriages and also trams were built and many Irish families found employment.¹⁵ In the same year the railway line from Brisbane to Sandgate was completed and was a significant contributing factor to the rapid increase in population.¹⁶ With the opening of the railway the government extended other services to Nundah. In 1883 the Police Station was built, a Post Office opened and a Telegraph Office located at the railway station, was manned by a morse code operator. Land changed hands and was sub-divided for rental or resale. Henry Donkin bought a large area of what had been land belonging to Rode.¹⁷ Other businesses were established and there was a building boom in the district.

A Catholic Church

The Catholic population was still small but distinctive in the predominantly German population. According to Archbishop Duhig the Catholics could all be fitted into an omnibus.¹⁸ It was fortunate that such was the case because the nearest church

was St Patrick's in the Valley and later Holy Cross church at Woolloowin - opened in 1886. In 1903 a meeting was called to discuss the building of a Catholic church at Nundah. Whether the land had been purchased or not prior to this meeting is unclear, but the church was opened exactly a year later on 19 June 1904. It was an occasion to be remembered, there was the archbishop as chief celebrant, Signor Benevenuti and his choir with Miss Maunsell accompanying singing Mozart's *First Mass*.¹⁹ The parishioners, the Kruetzer family gave the religious picture, *The Descent from the Cross* and Mr Cox presented the gates in front of the church. When the church was opened there was as yet no resident priest. Father Byrne later to become Bishop of Toowoomba used to come from the cathedral to celebrate Mass. In 1905 Fr O'Leary who lived at St Patrick's, the Valley, was given charge, and in 1910 he was succeeded by Fr Michael Jordan who also lived at St Patrick's, the Valley.²⁰ There was no presbytery at Nundah so Fr Jordan moved to Woolloowin and used to bicycle to Nundah or board with Mrs Fanning, a widow and her sister.²¹

A Parish

Nundah did not become a parish until 1916 and Fr Jordan was appointed parish priest. The Nundah parish was extensive. It went from Junction Road, Eagle Junction down to Banyo and Nudgee, over to Chermside and up to Petrie. A train ran from Petrie every Sunday in time for the 9.30am Mass and then back again after Mass. It was common to see buggies and horses lined up outside the church. Alan Browne recalls: 'They were a devout people who went to worship in the 'old green church', mostly Irish and of first generation Irish descent, with a few German families'.²² In 1915 the Catholic

community decided to provide a Catholic school for their children. The suggestion for this action came from the newly appointed Apostolic Delegate to Australia, Archbishop Cerretti.²³ Land and a house were purchased from Henry Donkin on what was then Old Sandgate Road later named Bage Street. The house had been built by Rode for his daughter and later became the home of Henry Donkin. On the land that had once been an orchard, a section was fenced and a timber school erected. The Sisters of St Joseph were invited to the parish and Mount St Joseph School opened in January 1916. It was not until 1920 that land was purchased in Donkin Street and a presbytery built and dedicated to ‘The Real Presence’.

A New Church

In June 1925 the annual Corpus Christi procession was held, not in the Nudgee College grounds as was the usual practice, but at Nundah. Archbishop Duhig carried the Blessed Sacrament through the church property into Leslie Street, on to Buckland Road and back up Bage Street to the site chosen for the new church. The *Catholic Advocate* 18 June 1925 claimed that it was ‘a spectacle...[that] would compare favorably with the demonstrations of faith in the early days of the Church’. ‘It was a manifestation of Catholic Faith unparalleled in the history of Queensland’, declared Archbishop Duhig.²⁴ The foundation stone for the new church was laid before a crowd numbering 20 000.²⁵ ‘This is holy ground, for Jesus Christ has passed by on this day’, Archbishop Duhig reminded the Catholics of Nundah.

A year later, 1926, the new Corpus Christi Church, the place of worship for the Catholic community of Nundah was blessed and opened. Over the years the dedication of the Catholic community has remained strong and has been ably supported and encouraged by a succession of caring parish priests.

The ‘Old Green Church’ ?

Alan Brown wrote ‘The days of the old green church across the railway line were over; it lay there silent and deserted’.²⁶ The end was not yet, because in 1927 the building was removed to Banyo and on 11 September 1927 it was blessed and opened as the church of St Pius. It remained the Catholic parish church for the Banyo community until on 15 March 1976, it was destroyed by fire. Brown continued: ‘We of the older generation will never forget the dear old Church of the Real Presence across the railway line at Nundah’.

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ENDNOTES:

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2. Brown, The old Green Church, 12.
3. *Brown*, 13.
4. Margaret Outridge (ed) 150 Years Nundah Families 1838-1988 (Brisbane: Nundah Cemetery Preservation ASS, 1989) pp. 5-7
5. Outridge, 150 Years Nundah Families 1838-1988, 8.
6. Outridge, 9.
7. Outridge, 11.
8. E. Roberts 'An Account of the Beginnings of Settlement at Nundah and the Development of that Suburb until 1890', MA Thesis, University of Queensland 1966, 46.
9. Denis W. Martin *The Foundation of the Catholic Church in Queensland* (Virginia, Qld: Church Archivists Press, 1998) 9, 10.
10. Martin, *The Foundation of the Catholic Church in Queensland*, 10.
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14. Roberts, 47.
15. Roberts, 88.
16. Roberts, 88.
17. Roberts, 87.
18. Mark Sayers 'A History of the Catholic Church in Nundah', Australian History Course, Pius XII Provincial Seminary, Banyo, 1982, 7.
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- 21 Sayers, 8.
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- 24 Sayers, 11.
25. Sayers, 11
26. Brown,13