



Bishop James Quinn

BISHOP JAMES QUINN AND THE ROMAN CONNECTION

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James Quinn, the first bishop of Brisbane, (1859-81) described by his contemporaries as ‘very handsome’, [with a] ‘tall and stately figure’ with ‘grace and ease of...movement’ and with ‘ready and pliant conversational powers...[and] high and noble qualities of mind and heart,’¹ has featured in a number of talks and writings within the last years. These concentrate mainly on his role as founding bishop of the diocese. They document his ecumenism, his pastoral initiatives in education and migration and his relationship with his priests, the laity and the men and women religious who worked in the diocese of Brisbane during the years 1861–81. All agree that to him belongs the title of the founder of Catholic education in Queensland and they applaud his foresight in initiating a scheme of immigration that brought over 3000 Irish settlers to the diocese in the years 1862-63.²

He was a pastoral man. We read of his care of the third class Irish passengers on the *Donald McKay* on the stormy passage to Australia in 1860 and learn that he was willing to offer any priest who volunteered to minister in his diocese an exeat from the diocese and a passage home if he was dissatisfied in Queensland.³ Why then did his brother Matthew in 1863—two years after James arrived in his diocese—have to send a message to warn him that reports of his arguments with the clergy in his diocese were circulating in Dublin and could reach the ears of Archbishop Cullen and injure his prospects of promotion?⁴ Was the cause of the dissatisfaction his autocratic style of leadership?⁵ ‘For all his gifts of nature and grace he found it impossible to allow others free initiative’ was the assessment of Xaverius O’Donohue.⁶

Or did James Quinn who claimed that ‘he would do what becomes a bishop’⁷ ‘abase himself to exalt his office’ as one historian claimed?⁸

If such were the case then the question can be asked: Was the Irishman James Quinn who received his priestly formation in Rome during the 1840s—a time when the pope was both a spiritual and temporal ruler—a churchman more suited to minister in Europe rather than in the pioneering conditions and democratic character of Australia?

Who were his role models—the popes of his time, Gregory XVI, Pius IX, perhaps Paul Cullen the Cardinal Archbishop of Dublin? The future bishop of Brisbane was aged 18 when in August 1836 he entered the Irish College in Rome. This was a time of political unrest in Europe. Within the Papal States, a revolt led by a local network of revolutionaries (the *carbonari*) had—without bloodshed—removed the northern provinces from the rule of the pope in 1831 and the Austrian army put a stop to any further open rebellion. The pope, Gregory XVI, (1830-46) who had been a Camdolese monk, exercised rigid ecclesiastical discipline and strong repressive political control. He had been a member of an ultraconservative clique of cardinals (the *zelanti*) who saw any change or modernization as evil. During his pontificate Rome remained a place of ceremonial splendor and also the scene of a proclamation of papal monarchical absolutism. History records examples of James Quinn’s love of church ritual and ornate ceremony.⁹ Can we also see traces of repressive control in James’ leadership of his diocese?

It is not surprising, given the attitude of Pope Gregory, that the general tone of the Roman seminary training was strictly disciplined and conservative.¹⁰ James Quinn studied there for twelve years and was ordained on 15 August 1846 and for two years acted as a tutor both in the Irish college and in Propaganda College and also helped with the administration of the Irish college. By 1848, when Bishop of Murray called him to the Dublin diocese, James Quinn had graduated with doctorates in Philosophy and Theology and was pursuing studies in Canon Law. Critics of the education offered in the seminary claimed

that it was closed to innovation in methods and was unwilling to recognize problems.¹¹ Although Giovanni Perrone, the Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Roman College at this time, is credited with introducing the relatively new treatment of the relationship between reason and faith into classical theology, nevertheless, the courses offered have been described as ‘a qualitative disappointing education’. The General of the Jesuits argued that the course in Philosophy failed to discuss works of the scholars who were pioneering the Thomastic renaissance, but concentrated exclusively on authors from the preceding century. It would seem that the future Bishop of Brisbane had received a scholarly—if conservative—priestly formation in Rome, and had witnessed a style of church leadership that was autocratic.

It was during these years in Rome that James Quinn made contacts with contemporaries who were to hold positions of authority and influence both in Rome and overseas. The Rector of the Irish College at the time of James Quinn’s entry was Paul Cullen who was to become the Cardinal Archbishop of Dublin and was influential with the Vatican authorities. Some argue that the Bishop of Brisbane modelled his centralist diocesan organization on that of Cullen in the archdiocese of Dublin.¹² Tobias Kirby, the Vice-Rector of the college, was to become Quinn’s contact with the authorities in Rome. In Australia his brother Matthew became the Bishop of Bathurst, a relative, James Murray, was appointed Bishop of Maitland, and Timothy O’Mahoney the Bishop of Armidale, and Robert Dunne joined him in Brisbane and was appointed the Vicar-General of the diocese. These contacts gave Quinn leverage not only with the authorities in the Vatican but also status due to his friends and relatives among the Irish bishops in Australia.

Quinn’s manner was preemptory as the quote from his letter dated 22 June 1863 to Mother Vincent Whitty indicates. She was the leader of the community of Sisters of Mercy who accompanied the bishop to Brisbane. He wrote:

You express a hope that everything is settled perfectly to my satisfaction. I must tell you my dear Reverend Mother that I am full of apprehension for the success of the community. I must tell you that you are the cause of that apprehension. I shall explain to you after the retreat of the clergy is over the grounds of my stress.¹³

He exercised a leadership as understood by the theology and culture of the time. It was based on the sacredness of his office.

I am a sacred person . . . I have been ordained and received the Holy Ghost: anyone attacking my character commits a most gross and sacrilegious act.¹⁴

In some instances the Roman authorities upheld his actions.¹⁵ But Archbishop Polding who received many of the complaints relating to Quinn's dealings with individual priests and women religious observed that in many cases Dr Quinn 'was right in the main, but wrong in the manner.'¹⁶

In 1869 James Quinn as Bishop of Brisbane was back in Rome as one of the 700 bishops—18 of whom came from Oceania—who attended the Vatican Council (1869-70). This church council was called by Pope Pius IX (1846-78) who was elected pope two years prior to James returning to Ireland. Some historians would claim that the period was a time of crisis in the church.¹⁷ Two opposing parties had formed within the church: the Gallicans and the liberal Catholics in one, and the Ultramontanes—those opposed to modern freedoms—in the other.¹⁸ Each held different theological and political conceptions of authority within the church. This resulted in questions regarding the infallibility and primacy of the pope along with the role of the bishop within his diocese and his relationship to the pope in the office of teaching in the church becoming issues needing to be resolved at the Council.

At Pius' election the more liberal minded hoped to see 'an alliance between liberalism and liberty'. For several months the authority of the papacy was at a peak. Gradually, it was seen that Pius, while

concerned about the welfare of his subjects in the Papal States was not prepared, because of the opposition of the Curia, to step beyond a policy of paternalism. Metternich an Austrian statesman believed ‘the Catholic Church [was being] led by a man with the fire in the heart, but weak in planning and without any real ability to lead.’¹⁹ The Vatican Council defined the role and authority of the pope, implemented a policy of centralisation within the authority structure of the Church and thus came out on the side of the Ultramontanes.

Unfortunately, because the Council was interrupted by Garibaldi and the Italian nationalists in September 1870, it did not complete its agenda and the powers of the bishop in his diocese were not clarified. According to James Quinn’s biographer, his copy of the discussion paper on the bishop’s jurisdiction in his diocese, prepared for the council, is well annotated thus giving some indication of his study of the topic.²⁰ This omission resulted in confusion within the authority structure of the church. The bishops returned to the teaching of the Council of Trent 1545-63—the bishop’s jurisdiction in his diocese was ‘absolute and perfectly complete, legislative, juridical and coercive’.

With his Roman experience James Quinn would have taken an interest in the political turmoil that led to the unification of Italy in 1871 and the dissolution of the Papal States with the declaration of Rome as the capital. It would seem credible that the position in the Papal States, the advice given to the Pope by his advisors and his decisions, would have been a topic of interest and conversation at the meetings of the bishops. To what extent did this influence James Quinn’s style of leadership? The first Bishop of Brisbane, formed in a model of Episcopal authority that was being swept away by the tide of history, was set adrift and forced to choose what he believed to be the most appropriate style of leadership on his diocese.

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ENDNOTES:

1. *Tyr-Owen: Sketch of the Life and Labours of the Right Rev. Dr. O'Quinn*, 1881, p.1.
2. a) Yvonne Margaret McLay, *James Quinn: First Catholic Bishop of Brisbane* (Armadale, Vic: Graphic Books, 1979), p. xvi; b) William James O'Shea, 'Building a Diocese: James Quinn, Bishop of Brisbane 1859-81' in *Good Shepherds 1859-2009* (Brisbane: Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives, 2009) p. 11; and c) Xaverius O'Donoghue, *Mother Vincent Whitty* (Clayton, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 1972) p. 3.
3. Quinn to H.McManus, 18 June 1862. Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives.
4. Dunne, 'Ship Diary'. 10 September 1863. Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives.
5. Patrick O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson 1977) p. 130.
6. O'Donoghue, *Mother Vincent Whitty*, p. 3.
7. Quinn to John Forrest, 10 February 1868, Brisbane Archdiocesan Archives.
8. T. L. Suttor, *Hierarchy and Democracy in Australia 1788-1870* (Melbourne: University Press, 1965) pp. 290-4.
9. *Brisbane Courier*, 28 December 1863.
10. Robert Aubert, Johannes Beckmann, Patrick J. Cornish, Rudolf Lill (eds) *The Church in the Age of Liberalism* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), p. 46.
11. *Ibid.*

12. Neil J. Byrne, *Robert Dunne: Archbishop of Brisbane* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1991) p.54.
13. James Quinn to Vincent Whitty 22 June 1863. *The Correspondence of Mother Vincent Whitty 1839 to 1892*, (eds) Anne Hetherington and Pauline Smoothy.
14. *North Australian*, 17 November 1864.
15. The issue related to the departure of six young Irish priests unauthorised departure from the diocese. Their action was triggered by what they considered as unreasonable, Quinn's regulations relating to the weekly reporting of parish finance. O'Shea, 'Building a Diocese' p. 11.
16. 18/12/1862, S. R. Oceania, vol. 7, p. 798. McLay, *First Catholic Bishop of Brisbane*, p.69.
17. Aubert, Cornish, Beckmann and Lill (eds) *The Church in the Age of Liberalism*, p. 285
18. Gallicanism - a long-standing movement in France with parallels in other countries claiming considerable independence for the local bishops from the papacy.
Ultramontaniam - 'beyond the mountain' a contemptuous name used by the Gallicans for those who maximised papal authority and looked for all solutions 'beyond the Alps' to Rome. Gerard Collins, *A Concise Dictionary of Theological* (London: Burns & Oates, 1975), p. 307.
19. Aubert, Beckmann, Cornish and Lill (eds) *The Church in the Age of Liberalism*, p. 59.
20. McLay, *James Quinn: First Bishop of Brisbane*, p. 9.