

# **An Overview Of Catholic History On Stradbroke Island**

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## **1) The historical and cultural background to the first Catholic mission among Australia's Indigenous peoples: the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>**

The evangelization of Aboriginal peoples by the Catholic Church had a late and difficult start; due mainly to the initial position of Catholicism in Australia.

In 1803 the British government banned the presence of Catholic priests in the new colony because they were afraid that they could inspire or support uprisings by the Irish prisoners. The formal beginning of Catholicism in Australia dates back to the year 1820, when a change in government policy allowed the Catholic Church to restore its ministry.<sup>2</sup> The newly appointed governor, Lachlan Macquarie, saw religion as an antidote to the spread of immorality—a necessary bastion for the maintenance of order in the colony. By this time other Christian denominations had already been attempting to evangelize the Aborigines.

Since the dawn of Australian colonization, Catholic religious affiliation and Irish ethnic identification had been virtually synonymous. As Patrick O'Farrell, doyen of Irish-Australian history, wrote, the consequence of this was that the Catholics were immediately considered to be a difficult

and unmanageable group, distinct from the other convicts.<sup>3</sup> Excluded from the power structure, the Irish Catholics were feared and looked down upon by the Protestant and British establishment.

In this context, as Endicott has argued, ‘the maintenance of those already Roman Catholic’ became the primary missionary concern of the Irish-Australian clergy.<sup>4</sup> As O’Farrell writes, this could be a mighty task that required from the Church, a full commitment of its ecclesiastical personnel:

The initial problem was to make contact with this inert and dispersed mass of nominal [Irish] Catholics. At first, the new Irish bishops had no idea of the enormity of the missionary problem. Australia’s rapid growth, in population and extent of settlement, far exceeded the ability of the church to provide priests, as these bishops themselves were soon to find.<sup>5</sup>

However, other scholars suggest that the demands of a widely-scattered flock could provide the priests with a good excuse to avoid difficult responsibilities. Flood wrote that:

Concern [for Aborigines] rarely went beyond the annual collection for the Aboriginal missions and the occasional hand-out [...]. The Irish Catholics and their clergy were very much tribal in their outlook: the pressure for Mass and the Sacraments from a large number of widely-scattered white Irish Catholics, who were seen as having first claim on their time, provided the Irish priests with the excuse that there was little time either to attempt to evangelise the Aborigines, or to try to ameliorate their economic and social plight.<sup>6</sup>

The popes and the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, the Vatican department responsible for the missionary work of the Catholic Church, continued to urge the bishops in Australia to undertake missionary activities among Aborigines.

Roman authorities were concerned about the worldwide expansion of Protestant missions and did not agree that the Catholic Church in Australia should focus on the spiritual needs of those who were already Catholics.

When the English Benedictine, William Ullathorne, arrived in New South Wales in 1833, as general vicar of the bishop of the Mauritius Islands<sup>7</sup>, he remarked with regret that the spiritual and material assistance to the Aborigines had been pushed into the background by matters deemed to be more important. A marginalized Church, whose followers belonged to the poorest social classes, devoted its energy to what appeared to be the primary objective: the preservation of the faith and religious practice among the Irish convicts and the social advancement of their descendants. Other pastoral responsibilities faded in the background.

In his book written in 1837, *The Catholic Mission in Australasia*, published after his return to England, Ullathorne made this comment about indigenous Australians:

I much regret that the urgent demands of the European population for our spiritual assistance have hitherto prevented our giving an especial attention to this portion of our mission.<sup>8</sup>

Ullathorne's text is important for other reasons as well. It gives us an insight into the prevailing attitudes towards the indigenous populations during the years immediately preceding the Passionist mission. First of all, like other clergymen after him, in particular the first Catholic archbishop of Sydney, John Bede Polding, Ullathorne utterly condemned the treatment received by Aboriginal peoples up to that time:

These poor creatures have often been treated by the convicts, at the outstations, with atrocious barbarity; who have even been known to shoot them, as game, for sport.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the direct physical violence, often due to competition for land or resources, it was often mere contact with Europeans that caused the break-up of Aboriginal society. The combined effects of land expropriation by the settlers and the introduction of alcohol, tobacco and diseases, had disastrous effects among indigenous Australians.

The Aborigines who had been subjected to the most devastating effects of the colonization were considered as hopeless cases. Some of their children, on the verge of death, had been baptized by John Joseph Therry, a Catholic priest who had arrived in Sydney in 1820. He had pleaded the case for the education of indigenous children with the Governor, Ralph Darling, to no avail.<sup>10</sup> Ullathorne reported only one or two Aboriginal children attending Catholic schools.<sup>11</sup>

According to Ullathorne, in order to achieve positive results it was necessary for missionaries to venture into the most remote areas; making contact with tribes untouched by colonial expansion. Here they would attempt to adopt—within the limits allowed by Christian morals—some of the habits of the Aborigines, in order to gain their trust before guiding them gradually towards a ‘higher condition of life’<sup>12</sup>. These considerations were clearly based on observation of the negative effects of contact between Aborigines and Europeans. However, it is also probable that Rousseau-based influences nurtured Ullathorne’s optimism regarding the conversion of Aborigines as yet unaffected by contact with Europeans, conceiving of them as ‘noble savages’, immune to the vices of the ‘advanced’ societies and thus more inclined to receive the Christian message.

In reality, these hopes did not take into account the fact that Aboriginal beliefs were not ‘simple, childish superstitions’. Indigenous Australians were people who, during at least 40,000

years of continuous occupation of the continent, had elaborated a complex worldview, based on the creative events that took place in 'The Dreaming' and centred on their relationship to the land. It was a culture that bound subsistence activities with the spiritual beliefs of the social group. Key aspects of this culture, such as semi-nomadism and polygyny, typical of most of the Aboriginal societies, were inevitably destined to clash with the plan of creating sedentary communities organized according to the principles of Christian civilization.

Moreover, with the advance of the frontier in the North, the growing of conflict and also with the Aboriginal reluctance to integrate into a society that presented itself in the form of a penal colony, the settlers' attitudes towards Indigenous Australians worsened during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the 1830s, the idyllic description of the Aborigines written by James Cook in 1770<sup>13</sup> had been gradually replaced by their representation as 'primitives' much in the terms proposed by the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, who wrote that the life of the 'uncivilized populations' was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'<sup>14</sup>.

Traces of this negative vision can also be found in the writings of Ullathorne, who comments that the Aborigines 'have been considered, by those who have written on the subject, as the last and least intelligent of the human race'<sup>15</sup>. According to this Benedictine, the tribes were in perennial conflict, and the only artefacts made by them were instruments of aggression, such as the boomerang. Naked and wild, they mistreated their women and occasionally practised cannibalism. Their existence was dominated by their fear of evil spirits and mysterious superstitions, behind which it was difficult to discern any belief in a Supreme Being or Divine Providence<sup>16</sup>. The absence of temples, statues and idols confirmed that Aborigines did not

have an authentically religious spirit as it was understood by the European culture of that time.

Thanks to Ullathorne's text—one of the first accounts of Australian Catholicism—we can comprehend some of the main obstacles to the evangelization of Aboriginal peoples: the brutal or immoral treatment of Aborigines by many settlers; the extremely low opinion of Aboriginal society and culture generally held by Europeans; and the evident contradictions between Christian values and the lifestyle of colonial society<sup>17</sup>.

In addition to these difficulties, which convinced public opinion that 'nothing can be done for the Aborigines'<sup>18</sup> and that all efforts at evangelization were a waste of time and money, Ullathorne believed that, for the time being, the urgent needs of the Catholic convicts made it impossible for the Catholic church to send out missionaries among the Aborigines in the most remote areas. Such a project would have to await more favourable conditions.

Such conditions were met once the Catholic Church began to establish its own hierarchy in the colony—no longer dependent on the far-away bishop of the Mauritius Islands. It was the first Catholic archbishop of Sydney, John Bede Polding (1794-1877), English and Benedictine like Ullathorne, who founded the first Catholic missions among Indigenous Australians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After being nominated Apostolic Vicar of New Holland, of Van Diemen's Land and of the adjacent islands by Pope Gregory XVI in 1834, on 5 April 1842, Polding became the head of the new metropolitan and archiepiscopal See of Sydney.

Already in 1840, worried about the total lack of Catholic missionary initiatives among the Aborigines, he had written to the *Société Pour La Propagation De La Foi* (Society for the Propagation of the Faith) in Lyon:

I have felt sincere and deep regret for not having a priest to devote to the conversion of the savage nations. I am convinced by my own experience that the faith would easily spread among the tribes which are removed from all intercourse with the Europeans, with whom any contact is commonly a source of corruption. These savages, the object of so much contempt, appear to us intelligent, cheerful and very deserving. I have had from time to time the opportunity of seeing them, and when I speak to them of religion, I find it very easy to make them comprehend.<sup>19</sup>

Polding also wondered:

When shall this portion of my flock be able to receive the care of some devoted pastors who, going in search of the savage, would endeavour to preserve him from the corruption of our cities—would keep him in the bosom of his solitude and there speak to his well-disposed heart?<sup>20</sup>

We can see here some of the themes we have already mentioned; particularly the prioritizing of pastoral care for the non-indigenous population by the local Church, and the illusory conviction that it would be easy to convert Indigenous Australians to Catholicism. Polding's views of tribal Aborigines as untouched by the corruption of society seemed to be inspired by the myth of the Noble Savage. I believe that his romantic attitudes towards Aborigines resonated with other strong aspects of his personality. According to Frances O'Donoughe, Polding had a habit of contemplation, and

Love of solitude and silence at least partly accounted for his long absences from Sydney. God immanent in nature, in the magnificent blue mountains, in the splendor of streams and the profusion of wonder in the primeval forest spoke to him as to many a saint and mystic, poet and artist.<sup>21</sup>

For Polding the Maneroo area in Central-Western Queensland was a 'fine open country with a people altogether fitted to it, untainted by Sydney's vice and gambling, simple and ready to be moulded to a good Christian life'.<sup>22</sup> We should also consider these aspects of Polding's personality, in order to understand his dream of establishing a new Christian community among 'pure, innocent Savages'.

## 2) The Passionist mission

Confident in the capacities of the Aborigines, Polding was determined to find a remedy to decades of negligence by the Church. On one of his trips to Rome in 1842 he met Pope Gregory XVI, a Benedictine himself and a strong supporter of missionary work. Although he would have preferred to recruit Benedictine monks, Polding accepted four Passionist Fathers for the mission to the Aborigines. These priests, Fathers Raimondo Vaccari of Rome, Luigi Pesciaroli of Canepina (Viterbo), Maurizio Lencioni of Lucca and the Swiss Joseph Snell, were the founders of the first Catholic mission among the Aborigines<sup>23</sup>.

The four Passionists arrived in Sydney on March 9, 1843, and then proceeded to their final destination—that is, Stradbroke Island in Moreton Bay opposite Brisbane Town—<sup>24</sup> on which a small village was located at that time. This mission lasted only a few years. Already in 1846, the year of Confalonieri's arrival in Australia, Pesciaroli, Lencioni and Snell had abandoned the island once their efforts 'to convert and civilize' the local Aborigines seemed to have failed. Vaccari stayed on alone for another year, spending more time in obtaining police protection against the growing hostility of the Aborigines than in evangelising. In 1847 he also left the mission forever—disillusioned and mentally exhausted.



There were several reasons for this outcome. There was the lack of preparation of the missionaries who, according to John Mackenzie-Smith, arrived in Australia 'enthusiastic, unrealistic and poorly-briefed'<sup>25</sup>. The Passionist Fathers did not speak English and had great difficulty in trying to understand the language of the local Aborigines, with its variations among different groups. The impossibility of communicating properly with the people they intended to evangelize, as well as with the Europeans they depended on for their sustenance, was the source of continuous frustration among the four priests.

Then there was the great difficulty of getting accustomed to living in a recently colonized area, in a sub-tropical climate which was very different from that of France or the Italian Peninsula. The acquisition of practical skills required to overcome the difficulties that they encountered on a daily basis, were beyond the capabilities of priests accustomed to living in European religious houses where more contemplative and intellectual pursuits were cultivated. Moreover, Moreton Bay was not the type of 'uncontaminated' place far from European influence which, according to Polding, would have offered the best conditions for the announcement of the Gospel and the teaching of the Catechism. The village of Brisbane had already become a source of rum and tobacco for many Aborigines, while on Stradbroke Island a number of European fishermen had fathered children by Aboriginal women. The missionaries quickly became aware of the fact that the contact between indigenous peoples and the Europeans living in the Moreton Bay area had started producing the same negative results as in the south of the colony.

A diary written by a Sister of Charity in Sydney in the 1840s, Sister Baptist de Lacy, can offer us insights into some of the tensions on the Island and the growing mistrust towards Europeans, including the missionaries. These pages were

written after Polding's first visit to Stradbroke, Brisbane and some surrounding areas in 1843 when he had obtained from some Aboriginal families at Dunwich, the permission to bring three local children—two boys about 9 years old and a 10 year old girl—back to Sydney in order for them to be instructed and educated in that city. The diary focuses on one child in particular, a little girl who was left with the nuns at Parramatta:

She was a child of quick and lively character, of a most affectionate disposition and after a few weeks' residence she became as a dear child to each of the Community, who looked forward to the happiness of having her sufficiently instructed to receive the Sacrament of Baptism, when they were suddenly deprived of their favourite; late in the evening when little Black Mary was fast asleep after the fatigues of a day spent in the playful gambols of childhood, a letter was received by the Rev. Mother from the Archbishop requiring that the dear child should be sent early next morning to Sydney as it was found necessary to send the children back to their parents. A man of depraved habits who was the Pilot at Moreton Bay had infused into the minds of the people that the Europeans only wanted the children to destroy them. But the immediate return of the little folks refuted the calumny. It was motives of revenge which actuated this wicked man to invent so base a falsehood as the Archbishop found it necessary to tell the Governor about the disorderly life he had led for many years.<sup>26</sup>

There was also disagreement about both the legal status of the mission—particularly regarding its dependence on Rome or on the Archdiocese of Sydney—and the baptism of the children. The Passionists were inclined to baptize only children on the verge of death. What was the use of baptizing children who had received only a little rudimental religious instruction if they continued to live with their families, whose 'paganism' was too deep to be eradicated? Polding had a different opinion; he believed that no opportunity should be neglected in order to bring Aboriginal children closer to the Catholic faith.

Besides these factors, which were also understood by contemporary commentators, there was another cause for the premature conclusion of the first Catholic mission: an underlying incapacity to overcome significant cross-cultural barriers. By then the Aborigines were wary of the Europeans. Even though they felt that the motivations of the missionaries were different from those of the other colonists, Indigenous Australians regarded the missions mainly as an opportunity to obtain resources for their survival, which was ever more threatened by the advancement of the colonial frontier. When the missionaries were able to satisfy their demands, the Aborigines appeared to be friendlier and willing to listen to religious instructions; otherwise they showed indifference—if not downright hostility.

In fact, these European Fathers arrived in Australia when the colony of New South Wales was in the middle of a severe financial crisis. The Passionists could not be self-sufficient and they needed a constant supply of resources. As Cardinal Moran wrote in his history of the Catholic Church in Australasia, ‘there was a great scarcity of money in the colony on account of the failure of two banks in the preceding year. Everything that had to be bought by purchase was very dear’<sup>27</sup>. All of this caused severe stress and frustration for the missionaries.

Other misunderstandings were inevitable. Taking fruit from the mission garden without the priest’s permission was considered a theft to be reported to the police by the missionaries; but to the ‘thieves’ it was only fair for them to take what was growing on their land. Aboriginal reluctance to give up the semi-nomadic life of hunter-gatherers and fishermen in favour of a sedentary, more labour-intensive life as small farmers, was viewed by the missionaries as inborn laziness and lack of a ‘work ethic.’ According to the Passionists, Aboriginal cultural expressions such as body painting or propitiatory ceremonies

before a hunting and fishing expedition, revealed a barbarian nature which was impossible to eradicate.

By 1844 the Passionist missionaries had become convinced that their only hope lay with the children. They thought that if they managed to separate the children from their parents in order to educate them, slowly but surely they would be able to create a stable, Christian, 'civilized' community. During some periods, possibly when scarcity of resources made it difficult to support the children, the adults would leave them at the mission, but would then come to reclaim them when conditions improved. This situation was frustrating for the four priests and also for Polding. Finally, it must be pointed out that the four Passionists, especially Father Vaccari, adopted an initial strategy whereby they accompanied the Aborigines in their movements and activities on the island, with the exception of the religious ceremonies that were taboo for outsiders. This attempt to adopt a semi-nomadic life, sharing bush tucker and shelters with the local Aborigines did not last very long. The missionaries simply found it too hard. For the Passionists as well as for most of the early missionaries, the reflections of the German Pallottine, Father Georg Walter, held true. Based on his own experience among the indigenous populations of the Kimberley, in the remote north-west of the continent, he wrote:

The basic rule for every Missionary is to adapt himself to local conditions and to the lifestyle of the people to whom he tries to bring the light of faith. He [the missionary] works differently in different countries. The problem with the Aborigines is that it is impossible to follow their nomadic ways, they are too harsh for those who are not used to them.<sup>28</sup>

### 3) Catholicism on Stradbroke in the post-Passionist period

The Passionist fathers were the first and only resident priests in the history of Stradbroke Island.

After a pastoral vacuum of around 20 years, in 1865 Stradbroke and the surrounding areas were included in the pastoral responsibility of the 'Logan and Albert Mission', centred around Logan Village; this mission included Cleveland, Dunwich, Southport, Tweed Heads, Coochin and Boonah. Later, Stradbroke has been included in the pastoral responsibility of Beaudesert (1885); Brisbane (with Cleveland, 1892); Wynnum (1904); Cleveland (1925); Manly (1936); Cleveland again (1966) and finally the Moreton Bay Islands Parish (from 2002).<sup>29</sup>

There is scant information on the pastoral care provided to Catholics in Dunwich by clergy members between the late 1840s and the 1870s. Among the first known priests to visit Dunwich for pastoral reasons was Fr. Benedetto Scortechini, an Italian priest who had arrived in Queensland in 1871, brought by Bishop James Quinn (1819-1881).<sup>30</sup> His visits to the Island, for pastoral and scientific reasons, were associated with the Benevolent Asylum, opened at Dunwich in 1866. In October 1880, Fr. Scortechini visited Stradbroke with the Colonial Botanist, Frederick Manson Bailey. They named a new species of orchid in honour of James Hamilton, Superintendent of the Benevolent Asylum: the *Dipodium Hamiltonianum*.

The following month, November 1880, Scortechini invited his friend, Julian E. Tennison Woods, to give a mission for the Catholics of the Logan district. This included a visit to the Benevolent Asylum at Dunwich where there were then more than fifty Catholics.

The number of Catholics at the Asylum increased; reaching 134 in 1887 and peaking at 545 in 1922, according to the statistics provided by Joseph B. Goodall in his doctoral research on this

institution. With regard to the various Christian denominations operating at the Asylum between 1886 and 1946, Goodall observed that:

There was little alteration in the proportions of the major denominations represented over eighty years. However there was some change amongst protestant groups. Lutherans were originally prominent, corresponding with the comparatively large number of German inmates. Wesleyans gave way to Methodists, but in time the Presbyterians attained greater significance among the inmates.<sup>31</sup>

Goodall also assessed the involvement of the Christian Churches in the first twenty years of the Benevolent Asylum. His remark is interesting because it highlights the contribution of a lay Catholic man in times when the presence of the clergy was irregular:

Another diversion was the Sunday church service. The major denominations varied their involvement in the benevolent asylum from heavy to very little. No interest was taken for the first twenty years (1866-1886), either in attending to the dying or conducting funerals for the dead. The superintendent read the protestant funeral service and an inmate attended to Roman Catholics, with the tacit knowledge and sanction of the churches. No church building was provided until a governor's wife, Lady Chelmsford, after visiting Dunwich, arranged for a Church of England chapel to be built from her anonymous donation. Some ministers and priests visited regularly from once a week to monthly; others made a token gesture according to their personal motivation. "The Roman Catholic clergy have also paid their regular statutory visits and special visits to the sick", reported Dr Smith laconically in 1889. [...] The burial service was conducted by either the superintendent or his assistant for protestants, and by an inmate for Roman Catholics.<sup>32</sup>

In the lack of a proper Church building, the Asylum—and in particular its Victoria Hall—became the physical space where Mass and other religious services were conducted for Catholics, until an old house was turned into the Church of St Martin de Porres in the early 1960s.

A 1994 interview with Fr Gabriel Nolan, by local historian Peter Ludlow, confirms that there could be long gaps within the pastoral care provided by the clergy to the Catholic faithful at Dunwich:

My predecessor at Dunwich was Father Joe Butler, who for many years had visited the Benevolent Asylum there. When it was transferred to Sandgate just after the war, he transferred his visits there for some time. No priest visited Dunwich for a few years until I began my visits there in the early 1950s. I was not asked by the Archbishop to go but because it was in my Parish, I thought it my duty.<sup>33</sup>

In the absence of clergy, it was the local lay Catholics who maintained the faith alive on the Island. In an interview with Michael Aird, Gwen Graham summarised this very well:

First we used to go to church in the hall [of the benevolent Asylum, ed.] with the inmates. Auntie Bethel Murray was always there, she used to take us for Sunday School, we would go to her house every Sunday. She would see that we were ready for Confirmation and things like that. The priest only came once a month but Auntie Bethel organized a service every Sunday. We used to say the Rosary every Sunday.<sup>34</sup>

According to parishioner Rose Borey:

I can remember Fr Butler, he was the only priest I knew as a child. He came to give us our First Holy Communion and Confession, Benediction and Mass every fortnight. Then Fr Nolan from Manly came a few years after Fr Butler left. He baptized my daughter Leslie and we did not have a church up until that time and we used the public hall for our services. My Auntie

Bethel Murray set up the hall for mass each week, she was the one that kept the faith going. After the institution broke up she used to teach the children Catechism and take them over to the Presentation Sisters at Manly every so often.<sup>35</sup>

In 1907, a leprosarium was opened on Peel Island. Until its closure in 1959, priests and nuns provided pastoral care to the patients. When the Catholic priest from the mainland visited the Catholic community in Stradbroke he also went to Peel Island. Among the religious orders associated with Peel Island were four Our Lady Help of Christian Sisters who, after training in obstetrics and tropical diseases in Sydney, spent three months in 1940 at the leprosarium while on their way to another leprosarium on Fantome Island, near Palm Island. Sr Rosa McGinley writes that it was Dr Cilento who arranged for them to receive more specialized training at Peel, where there were 46 Aboriginal lepers who were about to be transferred to Fantome Island. Dr Cilento himself lectured and trained them in dispensing medicines and tooth extraction. According to local historian Peter Ludlow, the small number of Catholic faithful at Peel (around 12 to 15, including staff and patients), also had relationships with the Sisters of Mercy, since blood tests had to be taken to the Mother Hospital on a regular basis, and the Sisters visited the patients.<sup>36</sup>

In the 1940s one patient gave a hut that was converted into a little church which has been renovated and re-blessed last year. Services were held in rotation at Peel by the various Christian denominations, but Ludlow observes how there was a strong ecumenical spirit at the leprosarium, long before the word 'ecumenical' became current in Church language. Father Gabriel Nolan in 1994 remembered how, when he conducted Masses at Peel, 'anyone, regardless of their religious beliefs, was able to attend'.<sup>37</sup>



#### **4) Milestones in the recent history of Catholicism on Stradbroke Island**

In 1966, on Stradbroke Island a donation by a local man, Bob Kelly, who—when he was alive—few suspected was a Catholic, made possible the construction of a new Church that still stands today: the Church of St Paul of the Cross, dedicated to the founder of the Passionist Order, as a sign of continuity with the early history of Catholicism on the Island. Four years before, that link had been re-established when Fr. Edmund Toohey was the first Passionist to return to Dunwich after 1847. The opening ceremony of the new Church was held on December 4th 1966, in the presence of the Brisbane Archbishop (Patrick O'Donnell), representatives of the Passionist Order, local clergy and politicians and the local Catholic community.<sup>38</sup>

With regard to milestones in the recent history of the Stradbroke Catholic community, during the 1970s and 1980s Aboriginal Catholics from Stradbroke were also involved in the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council, established in the early 1970s in Queensland. For at least two decades, this Council gathered many Indigenous peoples from all parts of the State and beyond; not only to express and share their Catholic faith, but also to discuss and act on issues such as land rights, racism, and educational and work opportunities for Aboriginal people.

In 1986, the special place that Stradbroke deserves in the history of the relationships between the Catholic Church and Indigenous Australians was officially acknowledged when Auntie Rose Borey was designated as the first Aboriginal person that John Paul II met when he walked on the Dreaming Track in Alice Springs. She presented the Pope with an Aboriginal translation of the Lord's Prayer. In the 1980s, Brisbane Archbishop Francis Rush—in an effort to increase the liturgical profile of Aboriginal Catholic people in the archdiocese—gave Rosemary Bell the authority to be a Minister of the Eucharist anywhere in the archdiocese. She has also been a Curriculum Advisor for Catholic Education.

Rosemary was one of a group of Aboriginal women from Stradbroke who have been a gift to the local Church also on the mainland. Two others were Evelyn Parkin and Auntie Joan Hendricks. Evelyn Parkin became the first Catholic theologian in Cairns as co-ordinator at the ecumenical indigenous Wontulp-Bi-Buya College. Since the 1980s, Auntie Joan Hendricks has worked in Aboriginal education in primary and secondary schools, local church and community organisations, in government and internationally at the United Nations Indigenous Peoples Forum. She was awarded the Australian Catholic University's highest honour, Doctor of the University in 2012, and was State Finalist Senior Australian of the Year 2013.

In 1990 on Good Friday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, a special memorial service for rites of passage and mourning was started on the Island, with an ecumenical character—and not only for Aborigines—to remember those who passed away.<sup>39</sup>

Then in 1993, a great celebration was held on the island to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the Passionists, with the participation of the Passionist Superior, as well as Jesuit Frank Brennan and the late Monty Prior who was an Aboriginal deacon from Townsville.

The Passionist mission has too often been classified under the definition of 'failure' because the four priests were not able to create that Aboriginal Christian community that they dreamed of when they sailed from Europe into the blue waters of Sydney Bay. However, we should wonder whether this missionary enterprise had an important role in the history of Aboriginal rights—and land rights in particular. When the Passionists were still on the island, in 1845, Archbishop Polding was interviewed by a NSW Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines. His answers to the questions of the commission were startling, and they revealed an exceptional capacity to

identify himself with the Aborigines and understand the injustices that colonialism was inflicting on them. First of all he rejected the idea that Indigenous Australians should be classified at the bottom of the ‘scale of humanity’ with regards to their intelligence and capacities. Then he blamed the dispossession of their land as the number one injustice and the cause for the total lack of trust Indigenous peoples had in the white invaders, including the missionaries. And he uttered the famous words:

I am making myself black, putting myself in that position and taking away all that I know except that this is my country, that my father lived by pursuing the emu, and the kangaroo, and I am driven away from my hunting grounds, that my children and tribe are subjected to the grossest barbarities.<sup>40</sup>

Although there is no direct evidence, it cannot be excluded that Polding’s capacity to look at the colonization of Australia from an Indigenous perspective—which was unique in the elite social groups of the times—may have been inspired by the personal contacts and better understanding that he acquired during his visits to Stradbroke Island and through the correspondence with the Passionists. Polding’s words since then, have inspired many people in the Church, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, during the long battle for the recognition of land rights, which was eventually successful also for Quandamooka people of *Minjerribah* in July 2011.<sup>41</sup>

If we think of those dramatic years of the mid 1840s, when the Passionists were active in this island, also under this perspective it is probably time to reconsider the frequent use of the word ‘failure’ in association with this missionary enterprise.

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## ENDNOTES:

1. This section of the paper is a modified version of my chapter ‘Catholic missions among Indigenous Australiana in the 19th century’ in Girola, S. and Pizzini, R., Eds. (2013). Nagoyo: The Life of Don Angelo Confalonieri among the Aborigines of Australia 1846-1848. Trento, Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino: 85-104
2. I am referring here to the institutional and hierarchical aspects of the Church. Indeed the Church was kept alive in Australia by the lay people when the priests were absent in the early phases of the European settlement: ‘The first Australian Catholics were lay people’ (Campion, E. (1988). *Australian Catholics*. Ringwood, VIC, Penguin Books: 3)
3. O’Farrell, P. (1992). *The Catholic Church and Community : An Australian history*. Kensington, NSW, New South Wales University Press: 3
4. Endicott, M. A. (1988). *The Augustinians in Far North Queensland 1883-1941*. Brookvale, NSW, Augustinian Historical Commission: 185.
5. O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community*: 198. With particular reference to the Toowoomba (Queensland) area, Fr McNab admitted the difficulties of the local clergy in catering for the needs of both the white population and the Aborigines: ‘The local clergy cannot supply their [the missionaries’] place, even if they were all willing, for they are too few for the Whites and people are dying without the sacraments through the want of priests. There is no place at [Clermont] nor at Nanango. How can one priest at Toowomba attend to 3,000 Catholics scattered over a wide district and be of any service to the Blacks?’: McNab, D. (1979). ‘Select Historical Documents: A Mission to the Queensland Aborigines, 1875-1878.’ *The Australasian Catholic Record* 56(4): 429-435: 432. See also Wilson, M. J. (1982).

‘Evangelisation of Aboriginal People in the NT.’ *Nelen Yubu* (13): 28-37: 30: ‘the Australian Church was preoccupied with the problems of coping with a rapidly expanding colony and showed little interest in an Aboriginal Apostolate’.

6. Flood, B. (1979). ‘Bishop Doody and the Aborigines.’ *The Australasian Catholic Record* 56(2): 115-126: 117.
7. In the initial stages of the new British colony, the Catholic Church depended ecclesiastically on the diocese of the Mauritius Islands.
8. Ullathorne, W. (1837). *The Catholic Mission in Australasia*. Adelaide, Libraries Board of South Australia: 47.
9. *Ibid.*: 47.
10. Eddy, J. (1964). ‘John Joseph Therry: Pioneer priest.’ *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 1(3): 1-14: 8.
11. Ullathorne, (1837). *The Catholic Mission in Australasia, 1837*: 47.
12. *Ibid.*: 47.
13. This is how Captain James Cook, using rather poor grammar, described the Aborigines in a report about his exploration voyages in Oceania: ‘From what I have said of the Natives of New-Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans; being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life.’ (quoted in Goosen, G. C.

- (1997). *Religion in Australian Culture: An anthropological view*. Sydney, St Pauls Publications: 87).
14. Hobbes, T. (1991). *Leviathan*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 89: 'And the life of man, solitary, pored [poor], nasty, brutish and short'.
  15. Ullathorne, (1837). *The Catholic Mission in Australasia*: 44.
  16. *Ibid.*: 45-47.
  17. Harris, J. (1990). *One blood: 200 years of aboriginal encounter with Christianity: a story of hope*. Sutherland, NSW, Albatross: 46
  18. This idea was so deeply rooted in Australian society that during the 1930s a missionary of the Sacred Heart, during a Festival of the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Melbourne, was still compelled to attack 'the current notion' that nothing could be done for the Aborigines, because they were too degraded: see Boland, T. P. (1999). 'John Healy : Justice for the Aboriginal People.' *Proceedings of Brisbane Catholic Historical Society* Vol. 6: 89-101:95.
  19. Harris, *One blood.*: 114-115.
  20. Moran, P. F. (1896). *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia: From authentic sources : containing many original and official documents in connection with the church in Australasia, besides others from the archives of Rome, Westminster, and Dublin, which are here presented to the public for the first time*. Sydney, Frank Coffee: 304.
  21. O'Donoghue, F. (1977). *A study in the life and work of John Bede Polding*. St Lucia: Brisbane, University of Queensland Press: 469.
  22. *Ibid.* 474.

23. The main data for this section on the Passionist mission has been gathered from: **Thorpe, O.** (1950). *First Catholic Mission to the Australian Aborigines*. Sydney, Pellegrini.; **Moran**, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia*, *op. cit.*; **Martin, D. W.** (1988). *The foundation of the Catholic Church in Queensland*. Toowoomba, QLD, Church Archivists' Society: 27-45; **Mackenzie-Smith, J.** (2002). 'Dunwich: Convicts, Passionists and shattered hopes' in Brisbane: Moreton Bay Matters. M. Johnson (ed.), Brisbane, Brisbane History Group. 19: 1-10; **Suttor, T. L.** (1965). *Hierarchy and Democracy in Australia 1788-1870 : The formation of Australian Catholicism*. Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.
24. The area they worked in, which was then located in the northern part of the colony of New South Wales, was included in the new colony of Queensland in 1859.
25. Mackenzie-Smith, *Dunwich: Convicts, Passionists and shattered hopes*, 5.
26. From the diary of Sr Baptist de Lacy held at the Sydney Archives of the Sisters of Charity: 27-30. Information on the children taken to Sydney from Stradbroke Island by Archbishop Polding can be found in: Forster, G. M. (1979). 'To protect, to instruct, to make Disciples of Christ : Aborigines, Islanders and Doctor Polding.' *The Australasian Catholic Record* 56(2,): 160-175.
27. Moran, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia*: 414.
28. Walter, G. (1982). *Australia: Land People Mission*. Broome, WA, Bishop of Broome.: 151.
29. This data has been found in Hickey, C. ( 2004?). *Archdiocese of Brisbane churches, mass centres and parishes 1843-2004*. Brisbane, QLD, Archdiocese of Brisbane.



30. Information on Fr Scortechini's visits to Dunwich has been found in Tynan, P. J. (1989). *Pioneer priest and botanist: Benedetto Scortechini*. Toowoomba, QLD, Church Archivist Society.
31. Goodall, J. B. (1992). Whom nobody owns : the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum, an institutional biography 1866–1946. *School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics*. St Lucia, Qld, The University of Queensland: 131.
32. Ibid. 130-131.
33. Father Gabriel Nolan, interviewed by local historian Peter Ludlow on 1/12/1994. The interview has been published in Ludlow, P. (2000). *Moreton Bay people: The complete collection*. Stones Corner, QLD, P. Ludlow: 156–158.
34. Interview with Auntie Rose Borey, Dunwich, 25/1/2013.
35. Interview with Gwean Graham, Dunwich, 6/2/2013.
36. MacGinley, R. (2010). *An eloquent witness: The Sisters of Our Lady Help of Christians*. Strathfield, NSW, St Pauls Publications: 99-100; see also MacGinley, R. (2002). *A dynamic of hope: Institutes of women religious in Australia*. Darlinghurst, NSW, Crossing Press: 313.
37. Ludlow, *Moreton Bay people: The complete collection*: 156.
38. (1966). New Dunwich church has historic links with Stradbroke Is. *The Catholic Leader*. Brisbane: 5.
39. Interview with Fr Gerry Hefferan, 25/5/2013.
40. New South Wales Parliament Legislative Council Select Committee (1989). *Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines, with appendix, minutes of*

*evidence and replies to a circular letter.* Woden, ACT, Popinjay Publications: 6.

41. On 4 July 2011 in a public hall on the island, where the Federal Court held a special session in Dunwich to enact an historic verdict. At the conclusion of a lawsuit which began in the courts of Queensland 16 years ago by a local indigenous man, Ian Delaney, the judges acknowledged that the Native Title, indigenous land rights had never been extinguished by colonial occupation for the Quandamooka. While other decisions of this type have already been made in Australia, until now it has always happened in remote areas of the northwest of the Country, never in areas close to large urban centres. ('The island rediscovered: The Australian Federal Court recognises the rights of the indigenous people of Stradbroke Island', in *L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly English Edition, No. 28, 13 July 2011, p. 10.)

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