

## **Third Australian Plenary Council, 3-10 September 1905**

*This is Part 2 of the article by Peter Wilkinson examining the 1905 Third Australian Plenary Council. Part 1 appeared in the Spring 2019 edition. It is also the sixth in the series looking at the particular (provincial and plenary) councils of the Catholic Church held in Australia between 1844 and 1937.*

### **Evangelizing Australia's Aboriginal peoples**

An important item on the 1905 Plenary Council agenda was the evangelization of Australia's Aboriginal peoples. The 1844 1<sup>st</sup> Provincial Council made no mention of this ministry, but the 1869 2<sup>nd</sup> Provincial Council decreed that their 'conversion' be confided to some male religious congregation, denounced the injustices committed against them, and recommended a special vicariate apostolic for north Queensland. The 1885 1<sup>st</sup> Australasian Plenary produced 6 policy decrees (nn. 203-208) for 'propagating the faith among the aborigines' whom it considered "capable of and willing to embrace Christianity", but the predominantly Irish bishops who had formulated the decrees generally ignored them. The 1895 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Plenary Council merely endorsed the 1885 decrees.

In those dioceses and vicariates where missions had been established prior to 1905 to evangelize Australia's Aboriginal peoples, almost all the hands-on work was done by priests and religious from Scotland, Spain, France, Italy, Austria and Germany. Few Irish clerics got involved in on-the-ground activity, though the Irish bishops Brady and Gibney (Perth), Quinn (Brisbane) and Moran (Sydney) were active organizers.

Prior to 1905, the few female religious involved in the Aboriginal missions were the Sisters of St Joseph (1874-1880) and Sisters of Mercy (1880-1905) in Mackay (QLD), and the Spanish Teresian Sisters at New Norcia (from 1904).

### **Mission at Beagle Bay (WA)**

The French Trappist monks began their mission to the Aboriginal people at Beagle Bay in 1890, funded by Propaganda, their French abbey, the WA government, and donations. Bishop Gibney of Perth wanted them to take responsibility for the Kimberley Vicariate Apostolic established in 1887, but they hesitated, even though by 1895 they had a community of 18 monks. While awaiting their decision the vicariate was temporarily assigned to Bishop Kelly of Geraldton.

By 1900 the Trappists had established two more missions, at Disaster Bay and Broome, and were ministering to some 900 people. They had baptized at least 200 adults who had relinquished polygamy and given up contact with the Asian pearlers, and were attending Mass. They had also acquired a 10,000-acre lease in addition to the 700,000-acre native reserve, and had erected a monastery, kitchen, saw mill, workshops and other buildings. They offered food to the Aboriginals for work, cultivated vegetable and fruit gardens, and extended the mission herds of cattle and sheep to 700 head each.

In 1899, however, the Trappists abruptly decided to abandon their Kimberley mission. The reasons are not clear, but a change of leadership in 1897 led to morale and unity deteriorating so badly that the Abbot in France ordered Fr Nicholas Emo to commence a quiet withdrawal without advising Bishops Gibney and Kelly. At the time, Gibney and the original superior were planning to extend the mission, raise more funds, and secure title over the mission land. Gibney had even commissioned three mission boats and was planning a visit. Kelly only learnt of the withdrawal in October 1900.

By early 1900 the mission was in turmoil. The Aboriginals were begging the monks to remain and many monks resented abandoning them. However, Fr Emo dismissed the children, locked the women out of their rooms, put the wine and other provisions under lock and key, and started selling the cattle to finance the monks' homeward passage. Natural disasters destroyed several building, leaving only the church, refectory and kitchen intact.

*General State of the Mission of Trappists since 1890 until Nov. 1900.*

**Baptisms:**

Beagle Bay (males 16 females 45)	117
Disaster Bay ( = 24 = 26 )	99 55
Broome ( = 11 = 22 )	42 13
	258

**Births:**

Beagle Bay (males 11 females 14)	25
Disaster Bay ( = 5 = 2 )	7
Broome ( = 5 = 46 )	51
	83

**Confirmations:**

Beagle Bay (males 16 females 49)	76
Disaster Bay ( = 25 = 12 )	37
Broome ( = 17 = 22 )	40
	153

**Marriages:**

Beagle Bay ( )	25
Disaster Bay ( )	12
Broome ( )	19
	56

**Deaths:**

Beagle Bay (males 6 females 5)	11
Disaster Bay (males 1)	1
Broome ( )	11
	23

**The Appropriated in the Mission:**

com Coll. Mission	£ 1486.18.2
- Bays, Sisters	97.15.10
- Propagand of the Faith	1651. 2. 6
- Government or Dead	2165. 7. 8
- Sundry Items	326.19.1
- Sin Order	877.12.0
	5648.26.1
	1227. 6. 7

**Expenditure of the Mission:** £ 11,058.9.4

**Summary:**

£ 11,058.9.4
5648.26.1
1417.2.1

*Beagle Bay 1<sup>st</sup> Nov 1900*  
Fr. Nicholas Emo

General State of the Mission of Trappists since 1890 until November 1900  
Source: Brigida Nailon CSB *Emo and San Salvador*, Echuca, Brigidine Sisters, 2005: (II):143.

After Emo had sent 8 monks to Palestine and was planning to send more, Bishop Gibney, once informed in June 1900, placed an injunction on the sale of the mission cattle, initiated negotiations with the German Pallottines to take over the mission, and in August inspected the mission personally. Any prospect of the Trappists taking responsibility for the Kimberley vicariate was over.

The mission had cost some £11,000 over ten years, with only some £2,000 coming from the WA government (see image). The Trappists had performed 255 baptisms, 153 confirmations, and 48 marriages, and recorded 37 births and 23 deaths in Broome, Disaster Bay and Beagle Bay. Their collaboration with the mixed Filipino/Aboriginal communities in Broome, Beagle Bay and Disaster Bay had irked the Chief Protector of Aboriginals, who worked against their proposal to parcel out land to the Filipino/Aboriginal resident families.

As the *WA Land Act 1898* provided for land grants or leases to Aboriginals only, the government blocked their proposal, reneged on its promise of 'land in fee simple', and withdrew financial support.

### **German Pallotines at Beagle Bay**

In January 1901, Bishop Gibney successfully negotiated to have the German Pallotines take over the Beagle Bay mission, and the first group arrived the following April: the German superior Fr Georg Walter, the English Fr. Patrick White, and two German Brothers. They immediately purchased the mission cattle and the mission property in Broome from the Trappists, on terms, while Fr White reopened the school at Beagle Bay, and the Brothers erected new buildings.



Image: Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Beagle Bay, WA

With few priests, Fr Walter recruited the two remaining Trappists, Frs Emo and Janny, to minister in Broome, while Bishop Gibney reminded Walter that the 10,000-acre lease carried the condition that there had to be a minimum 12 mission staff.

In December 1902 four more Pallotines arrived, including Fr Heinrich Rensmann, who was soon preaching and instructing in the local Nyul-Nyul language, looking after the school and catechesis, and preparing several women and children for baptism. Three more Brothers arrived in March 1903.

As money was short and the debt heavy, the Pallotines increased their cattle to 1800 head and pigs to 150, and employed 25 Aboriginal workers. They also entered into a 10-year commercial pearl-shelling contract with the mission boats, but a drop in shell prices only increased their debt.

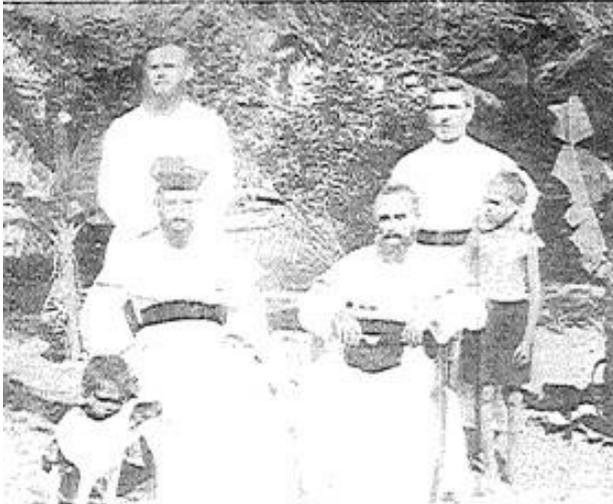


Image: The first Pallottine consignment at Beagle Bay.

Source: Walter, Georg, *Australien - Land, Leute, Mission*, 1928, p.137.

In 1903 the WA government began to remove Aboriginal children from their families and send them to the mission stations which, from May 1903, received a per-person subsidy. The Beagle Bay mission was now paid £250 per annum, even though it had no religious Sisters to care for the young girls.

In January 1904, while the other priests were in Broome and Disaster Bay, Fr Rensmann was alone in Beagle Bay running the mission with 8 Brothers. When he died unexpectedly, he was replaced temporarily by Fr Russell of Geraldton and a lay teacher hired to run the school. Four more Brothers arrived in May 1904, but there were too few priests, and when Emo continued marrying Aboriginal women to Filipino and other Asians against Walter's wishes, he was dismissed.

In August 1904 the WA Government established a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Natives in Western Australia under Commissioner Walter Roth. Roth visited Beagle Bay in October 1904 and found the missionaries more concerned about their cattle and growing their assets than improving the lives of the Aboriginal residents. His Report had not a single word of praise for the German mission, stating that the resident population had dropped by half, that there were no Sisters, that the residents should not qualify for the government payments for indigents, and that in future the "Lands Department should protect the interest of natives when issuing title to land to missions".

The Pallotines' pearling venture had also created enemies among the Broome pearlmen, who said they should be training and supplying Aboriginal labourers, not employing them to compete. The Broome police sergeant also told the Commission that Beagle Bay was more of a 'squatting business' than a mission.

Compared to the three other WA Aboriginal missions, the government disfavoured Beagle Bay. From 1896 to 1899 the Trappists had received no funding, while New Norcia had a fixed grant of £450. In 1900-1901 the Trappists received just £250 for 37 children (£6 per child), while the Anglican Swan Mission was paid £718 for 40 children (£17 per child), and New Norcia received £450 (£7 per child) for 64 children. In May 1904 the government agreed to increase funding for all children removed to the missions to the same level as the Swan Home.

At Beagle Bay Fr. Walter lacked support from the Pallotine Brothers, especially after he excommunicated one Brother. When the Trappists pressed hard for their outstanding debt, the Pallotine Superior General suggested that they could take the whole mission back, and in March 1905, 6 months before the Plenary Council was due to start, tensions at Beagle Bay were high. Fr Russell and the lay schoolmaster were under attack and more Pallotines were desperately needed.

### **New Norcia Benedictine Mission (WA)**

The Spanish Benedictines had established their mission of the Aboriginal people of the Victoria Plains in 1846. In his 1904 Report, Commissioner Roth stated:

the oldest aboriginal institution in the State is in a most flourishing condition, continues to carry on very excellent work, and is well worthy of the support extended to it by the Department; [it has]an annual government subsidy of £450, educates over 50 children in its school, and has a total of about 200 aboriginals and half-castes under the charge of the Mission; average cost to the Department is £2.5s. per head per annum.”

Data for 1905 in the 1906 *Australasian Catholic Directory* shows the mission having 18 priests (6 secular and 12 religious), 38 religious Brothers and 11 religious Sisters, with 5 churches and 3 primary schools for 180 students.

In 1900 Abbot Rosendo Salvado OSB, who had also been Bishop of [Port] Victoria (NT) from 1849-1888, wrote in his last Report to Propaganda that the twofold object of the monks was:

instructing the *Indigeni* in religious matters so they can become good Christians and save their souls, and at the same time instructing them in manual trades and mainly in agricultural occupations so that, by this practice, they can obtain the necessary means to live as good Christians wherever they are.

When Salvado died in December 1900, he left the mission to his Spanish successor, Abbot Fulgentius Torres (1903-1914).

### **Jesuit Mission to the Aboriginals in the Northern Territory**

The Austrian Jesuits at Sevenhill (SA) had wanted to establish an Aboriginal mission since 1866. In 1869 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Provincial Council endorsed their proposal, but it was not until 1882 that they established their first mission at Rapid Creek in the Northern Territory, followed by Daly River in 1886, and Serpentine Lagoon in 1889, all in Bishop Salvado's diocese of [Port] Victoria. When Salvado resigned in 1888, the Jesuit superior, Fr Anton Strele, was appointed Apostolic Administrator of the renamed Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston.

The Jesuit mission peaked in 1891 with 13 Jesuits, but soon after fell into financial difficulties. By 1892 it was bankrupt. Strele, in reporting to the 1895 Plenary Council, sought to have the mission continued, and the three missions were subsequently amalgamated in New Uniya. However, in 1896, when the Austrian and Irish Jesuits in Australia were

considering a merger, the Irish superior visited the mission and found only 15 children in the school, the mission struggling, and the diocese deserted. By 1897 only one Jesuit priest and 5 Brothers remained. Though 4 Austrian Jesuits were added, when the diocesan administration was transferred to Bishop Kelly of Geraldton in February 1898, the Jesuits lost interest. They maintained the mission until 1899, when it was closed as an 'inspiring failure'. The last Jesuit departed in 1902 leaving the diocese in the care of Fr Ryan of the Geraldton diocese. The small Catholic community was then mainly served by transient priests.

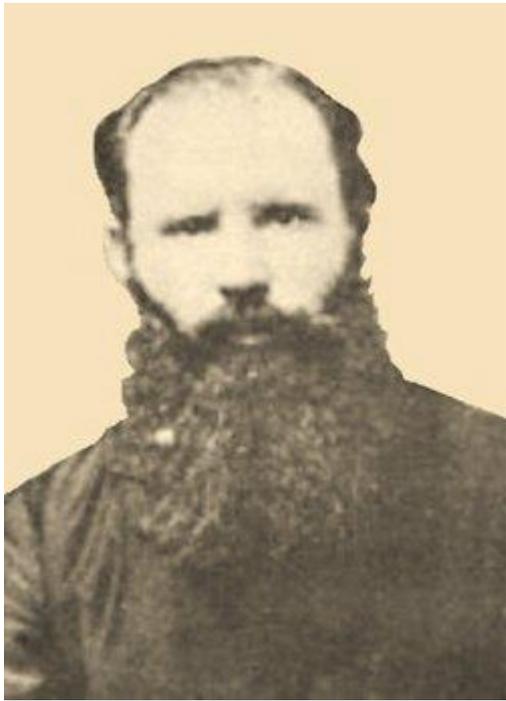


Image: Fr Donald MacKillop SJ (1853-1925), brother of St Mary MacKillop

The Jesuits had tried to align their goals with those of the settler colony, removed the Aboriginals from contact with the Chinese 'coolie' workers, and trained them to replace the Chinese. Fr Donald MacKillop SJ said that "Religion is primary in our intention, but in a manner secondary in our practice.... [We] must first civilize the blacks." The Jesuits used the Paraguayan 'Reductions' model of mission, teaching 'self-reliance' in a kind of socialist framework, and seeking to 'induce industry, honesty, unselfishness, and working for the individual and general good', so that 'each man works for himself, his family and the community'. The adult labourers negotiated their daily workload with the missionaries and some young men learnt trades. But the lack of a narrative of 'need' did not assist the Jesuits' fundraising efforts.

After 20 years of intense effort, they had baptized just 197 infants and 78 adults, and another 78 on their deathbed. The Jesuits acknowledged that it would take several generations of Christianising before any lasting results could be achieved.

### **Queensland Vicariate Apostolic for Aboriginals**

The Vicariate Apostolic of Queensland for the Aborigines was gazetted in 1887, but never formally erected. When the Irish Augustinians took charge, the local indigenous people were not their prime concern, and on 10 May 1887 the territory was renamed the Vicariate Apostolic of Cooktown. At the same time the last Aboriginal resistance to European advance on their traditional lands was playing out. When it was put down, a new Government policy of missions or reserves emerged, with the Aborigines to be provided with food and protection until they died out. The Queensland *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897* made all Aboriginal reserves subject to the Act, and all missionaries in charge of Aboriginal settlements made Superintendents under the Act.

Apart from the aborted efforts of the Passionists in the 1840s, the disinterest of the Irish Augustinians in the 1860s, and the failed efforts of the Italian secular clerics in the 1860's and 1870s, the most productive missionary activities in Queensland up to 1905 were those of the Scottish Fr Duncan McNab and the French Fr Pierre Marie (Paul) Bucas in the 1870s and 1880s. McNab was a visionary, politically active and practical, while Bucas was more pastoral and focused on local needs. Bucas established an Aboriginal community in Mackay, with an orphanage for Aboriginal children run by the Sisters of St Joseph - until their expulsion by Brisbane Bishop Quinn in 1880 - and the Sisters of Mercy. Neither priest received strong support from Quinn. No further serious attempt to evangelise the Queensland Aboriginal peoples would be undertaken until 1920.



Image: French priest, Pierre Marie (Paul) Bucas (1840-1930). As first priest in Mackay, he established a community for displaced Aborigines in 1874 and St Joseph's orphanage for Aboriginal children, operated by the Sisters of St Joseph until 1880, then the Sisters of Mercy until 1885 when it was moved to Neerkol.

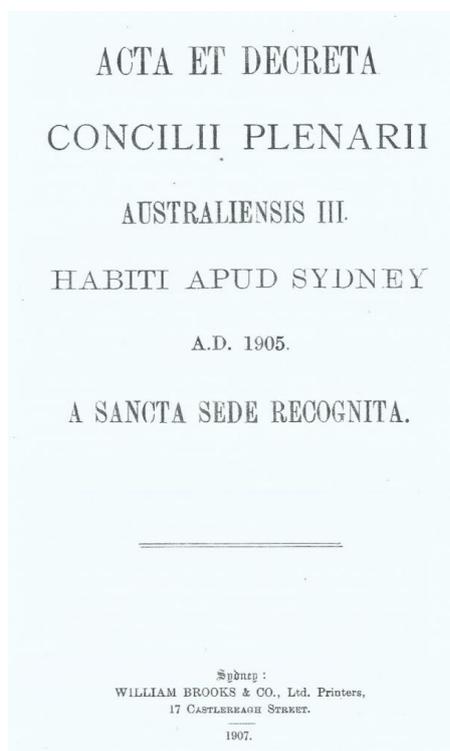
## 1905 Council and Aboriginal evangelization

The 1905 Plenary heard reports on the missions to the Aborigines from Bishops Gibney (Perth) and Kelly (Geraldton), Abbot Torres (New Norcia), and the Pallotine Fr Walter (Beagle Bay), and approved an offer from the New Norcia Benedictines to establish a priory – with ‘*nullius*’ jurisdiction and annexed to New Norcia - in the Kimberley vicariate. Bishop Kelly of Geraldton also sought to be relieved of the administration of the Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston (NT). Paradoxically, while none of the Irish bishops encouraged their own diocesan priests to work among and evangelize the indigenous Australians on their doorstep, they legislated to establish “a foreign missionary college” to train Australian priests for mission in the Philippines, China and Japan (Decree 18). The Council also reproduced *verbatim* all the earlier conciliar decrees on Aboriginal evangelization.

### ***Acta et Decreta***

After Cardinal Moran closed the Council on 10 September 1905 with a Solemn Mass and a sermon on ‘The Aims of the Catholic Church in Australia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’, the *Acta et Decreta* were sent to the Holy See.

The 1905 Plenary had been a reworking of the 1895 Council, which in turn was a re-working of the 1885 Council. All its new decrees were inserted into the earlier ones and set out in 6 chapters titled: Faith, Ecclesiastical Persons, Sacraments, Discipline, Education, and Ecclesiastical Forum. The 371 decrees included 3 new ones in the Preamble stating that all the decrees would bind across the nation, and another 42, many of which were merely petitions for various faculties and permissions. All the new decrees were original. There were no recommendations for any new dioceses or vicariates.



Among the 9 appendices were the 1866 Roman *Instruction on the Election of Bishops in Australia*, the 1869 Council decrees (in English) on mixed marriage, a statement on Leo XIII's 1891 Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*, and the Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Socialism, setting out what aspects could be lawfully accepted and what must be rejected.

When Propaganda reviewed the *Acta et Decreta* of the Council, Cardinal Moran was advised that as many of the decrees were merely 'petitions' they should be addressed to the Pope as such. In February 1906, in the name of all the bishops, Moran submitted 12 petitions, including: that Sydney be made a primatial see, and that bishops be permitted to unite independent houses of female religious into institutes. The Roman Cardinals recommended the rejection of all 12 petitions save one: use of the texts of the Divine Office approved for Ireland. Forced amalgamation of religious houses was unacceptable, and Sydney as a primatial see was denied. The Holy See was already considering the establishment of an apostolic delegation instead.

Pope Pius X approved the decrees on 4 September 1906 and official confirmation was announced on 24 September 1906. The decrees were inserted into the 1895 legislation and published in 1907 with the appendices.

*Acknowledgment: In preparing this article many primary and secondary sources were consulted. However, special acknowledgment is given to the original research of Dr Ian B Waters in his unpublished doctoral thesis Australian Conciliar Legislation prior to the 1917 Code of Canon Law: A Comparative Study with similar Conciliar Legislation in Great Britain, Ireland, and North America, St Paul University, Ottawa, 1990.*