

Fourth Plenary Council of Australia and New Zealand, 4-12 September 1937

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This is Part 1 of the seventh in the series of articles looking at the particular councils of the Catholic Church in Australia held between 1844 and 1937. It examines the background and factors leading to the Fourth Plenary Council of Australia and New Zealand held in Sydney in September 1937, which brought all the particular churches of both nations for the second time. Part 2 will appear in the Winter edition of The Swag.

After the Australian Plenary Council in 1905, only four particular (provincial and plenary) councils were convened in the English-speaking mission territories under the jurisdiction of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide ('Propaganda'): the Provincial Councils of Tuam and Cashel in Ireland held in 1907, the Provincial Council of Melbourne in 1907, and the 4th Plenary Council of Australia and New Zealand in 1937.

Developments in church governance, 1905-1937

Fewer councils were held in the English-speaking mission territories in this period as Pope Pius X (1903-1914) had announced in his 1908 Constitution *Sapienti Consilio* that the hierarchies of Great Britain, Canada, and the United States were 'established' and the churches there were no longer considered 'mission territories'. Australia and New Zealand, however, were to remain mission territories under the jurisdiction of Propaganda.¹

In 1911, Cardinal Patrick Moran died, and was succeeded by his coadjutor, Archbishop Michael Kelly (1911-40). Moran had convened three plenary councils in 1885, 1895 and 1905, been Australia's most powerful Catholic prelate, and for 27 years had functioned as the Holy See's *de facto* apostolic delegate for Australia and New Zealand.

The 1905 Plenary Council had proposed that the Archdiocese of Sydney be made the 'primatial' see of the Catholic Church in Australia. However, the Holy See rejected the idea, with other plans in mind. It wanted an official apostolic delegate on the ground, to settle disputes and play an active role in the selection of bishops and, in 1914, Pius X established an Apostolic Delegation of Australasia with Archbishop Bonaventura Cerretti (1914-17) the first appointment.

Pius X was succeeded by Benedict XV (1914-1922) who, in 1917, promulgated the new *Code of Canon Law*. He also issued the 1919 landmark Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, setting a new course for missionary activity in the 20th century. Benedict wanted more indigenous or locally-born clergy and bishops in all mission territories, including Australia.

Cerretti was replaced by Archbishop Bartolomeo Cattaneo (1917-33), who saw his principal task as implementing the new *Code of Canon Law* throughout Australasia. Moran had ceased convening meetings of the metropolitan bishops in 1894, and plenary meetings of all the bishops in 1897. Cattaneo immediately convened three meetings of the Australian and

¹ The Church in Australia remained a 'mission territory' until 1976. The Church in New Zealand is still (2019) a designated mission territory.

New Zealand metropolitan bishops in 1918 and 1919, set their agendas, and insisted on presiding at each. All were focused on a single question: which set of laws had precedence - those of the previous plenary councils or those of the *Code of Canon Law*? For Cattaneo the answer was clear – those of the *Code*. This view caused tensions, but Archbishop Kelly and his fellow bishops, rather than take a firm stand, hesitated and procrastinated, with serious consequences for the next plenary council.

Demographic and ecclesiastical developments, 1905-1937

In 1905, Catholics in Australia numbered 824,363 and constituted 20.4 per cent of the total population of 4,032,977. By 1937, though Catholics had increased by 53 per cent to 1,261,220, their growth had not kept pace with the general population and, as a result, their percentage of the 6,871,492 total had fallen to 18.4 per cent (Table 1).

Table 1: Changes in Catholic population, religious personnel, parishes, seminaries, Catholic schools and students: 1905-1937

	1905	1937	Change 1905-1937
Catholic Population	824,363	1,261,220	+ 436,857 (+53%)
Districts (akin to parishes)	421	779	+ 358 (+ 85%)
Priests	921	1,911	+ 990 (+ 108%)
Seminaries (diocesan & religious)	4	17	+ 13 (+ 325%)
Seminarians (diocesan & religious)	74	552	+ 478 (+646%)
Religious Sisters	4,645	9,828	+ 5183 (+ 112%)
Religious Brothers	429	934	+ 505 (+ 118%)
Catholic schools (P & S)	1,052	1,487	+435 (+ 41%)
Students in Catholic schools	105,824	193,986	+ 88,162 (+ 83%)

Source: Official Catholics directories, various years.

By 1937, parishes (only designated as ‘parishes’ from 1928) had increased by 358 (+85%), priest numbers had more than doubled to 1,911 (+108%), as had those of religious sisters (+112%) and religious brothers (+118%); there were 13 more seminaries (+325%) and 478 more seminarians (+646%); and an additional 435 Catholic schools (+ 41%), and 88,162 students enrolled (+83%).

The new ecclesiastical Province of Perth was established in 1913 with Perth as the Metropolitan See, and 3 new dioceses had been erected: Wagga Wagga in 1917, Toowoomba in 1929, and Townsville in 1930. Australia now had 5 ecclesiastical provinces, with 6 archdioceses, 16 dioceses, 1 abbacy nullius, and 2 vicariates apostolic (Table 2).

Table 2: Demographic and ecclesiastical data for the Catholic Church in Australia, 1937

State/Territory	Total Population	Catholic Population	Province: Archdiocese/Diocese/Abbacy/Vicariate Apostolic	Year Est.	Parishes ¹ /Mission Centres	Priests (Dioc. /Relig.)	Relig. Sisters	Relig. Bros.	Catholic Schools (Primary /Second)	Catholic Students
			Province of Sydney	1842						
NSW	2,711,543	304,187	Sydney (AD)	1842	118	267/165	2,031	299	179/43	48,272
		38,343	Maitland (D)	1847	29	63/8	440	22	47/9	7,848
		51,416	Goulburn (D)	1862	36	67/15	410	31	56/17	6,741
		23,000	Armidale (D)	1862	22	35/0	210	12	32/11	3,783
		35,928	Bathurst (D)	1865	21	53/8	353	31	41/26	6,027
		30,570	Lismore (D)	1887	24	42/8	269	12	37/15	4,936
		29,685	Wilcannia (D)	1887	23	32/0	218	11	27/19	3,942
		<u>25,000</u>	Wagga Wagga (D)	1917	<u>20</u>	<u>36/0</u>	<u>200</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>26/4</u>	<u>4,230</u>
		538,129			293	595/204	4,131	416	445/144	85,779
ACT	11,043									
			Province of Melbourne	1874						
VIC	1,856,991	250,000	Melbourne (AD)	1847	104	187/137	1,563	190	220/57	40,083
		55,412	Ballarat (D)	1874	38	90/21	398	20	47/10	6,752
		35,833	Sandhurst (D)	1874	29	48/9	250	8	29/18	5,150
		<u>13,208</u>	Sale (D)	1887	<u>13</u>	<u>23/0</u>	<u>89</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>13/3</u>	<u>1,272</u>
		354,453			184	348/167	2,300	224	309/88	53,257
TAS	239,570	33,106	Hobart (AD)	1842	25	36/4	187	15	26/8	3,651
			Prov. of Brisbane	1887						
QLD	994,580	121,000	Brisbane (AD)	1859	75	120/27	875	67	61/67	14,500
		23,500	Rockhampton (D)	1882	26	41/5	257	18	34/7	4,805
		11,000	Cooktown (VA)	1887	10	0/17	91	0	13/4	1,839
		22,500	Toowoomba (D)	1929	19	38/12	168	22	17/7	4,173
		<u>20,366</u>	Townsville (D)	1930	<u>19</u>	<u>29/3</u>	<u>143</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>21/9</u>	<u>3,664</u>
		198,366			150	228/64	1,534	122	146/94	29,981
			Prov. of Adelaide	1887						
SA	591,797	52,339	Adelaide (AD)	1842	42	59/31	558	47	56/26	7,516
		11,127	Port Augusta (D)	1887	15	23/0	62	0	15/2	1,122
NT	5426	<u>1500</u> ²	Victoria & Palmerston (D)	1847	5	0/6	9	5	0/0	0
		64,966			62 ²	82/37	629	52	71/28	8,638
			Province of Perth	1913						
WA	460,542	62,000	Perth (AD)	1845	42	78/16	877	46	60/27	10,856
		2,600	Geraldton (D)	1898	9	1/32	34	29	9/10	500
		6,500	New Norcia (AN)	1867	10	11/1	112	20	15/4	1,115
		<u>1,100</u> ³	Kimberley (VA)	1887	<u>4</u> ³	<u>0/7</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>3/0</u>	<u>209</u>
		72,200			65	90/56	1,047	105	87/41	12,680
Australia TOTAL	6,871,492	1,261,220 (= 18.4% of the total population)	5 Provinces 6 Archdioceses 16 Dioceses 1 Abbacy Nullius 2 Vicariates Apostolic		779	1379/532 Total (all): 1,911	9,828	934	1,084/403 Total (all): 1,487	193,986

Sources: ABS. Cat. No. 3105.0.65.001 Australian Historical Population Statistics; Australasian Catholic Directory for 1938 and 1939 (both data sets are for 1937). The above table uses the data in the 1938 Directory except for the Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston.

Notes: 1. The term 'district' was replaced in the Official Directory by 'parish' in 1928. 2. The Summary of Statistics in the 1938 Directory does not give any data for the Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston, but the 1939 Directory does provide data for 'Darwin'. 3. The Summary of Statistics in the 1938 Directory gives data for the VA of Kimberley in a special table for 'Vicariates (Missions to Aboriginals in Australia and Oceania)'. Parishes are listed as 'Mission Centres'. 4. This is the European population only. Full-blooded Aboriginal people were not included in the official Australian Census until 1967.

Seminary developments, 1905-1937

In 1905 St Patrick's College, Manly, was the sole seminary in Australia preparing candidates for the diocesan priesthood. Operating since 1889, it was educating 54 seminarians from all dioceses (including those in New Zealand) and 71 candidates, mostly Australian-born, had been ordained. Several religious congregations also had formation houses in 1905: the Benedictines at New Norcia in WA (novitiate in 1904); the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in NSW (scholasticate in 1897, novitiate and apostolic school in 1904); the Passionists in NSW (novitiate in 1890) and SA (scholasticate in 1896); and the Jesuits in NSW (novitiate in 1890). The 1905 Council legislated to establish "a foreign missionary college" to train Australian priests for missions in the Philippines, China and Japan (Decree 18)², and St Columba's Seminary in Springwood was opened in 1910.



Image: St Columba's Seminary, Springwood, NSW

Archbishop Kelly convened two plenary meetings of the Australian bishops in 1912 and 1913, and their priority concerns were two: the 'nationalisation' of the Manly seminary, and obtaining annual reports on the progress of their own seminarians.

For the first concern, Melbourne's Coadjutor Archbishop Daniel Mannix had a proposal: that Sydney's Manly and Springwood seminaries be administered by the Bishops of Australia; that the Manly seminary become the Australian National Seminary with the Catholic Hierarchy of Australia as the Governing Board; that both properties be vested in Trustees nominated by the Sydney Archbishop; and that any profits be returned to the Board for seminary use. Most bishops favoured the proposal, but some senior Sydney priests balked at the transfer of ownership and control of the assets.

In 1914, Australian-born Manly professor Terence McGuire criticised the bishops for continuing to prioritize the importation of overseas-born (mainly Irish) priests, and claimed they were damaging an Australian priesthood. He called on them to rely on Australian-born priests and to establish an 'Australian national seminary and Catholic University of United Australia', possibly at Manly. Shortly after, the Manly *alumni* established the Manly Union

² This became the Springwood minor seminary opened in 1909.

with the aim of nationalising the Manly seminary and making it ‘the great ecclesiastical University of the Commonwealth’. They told the bishops that if they supported the Union and its aim, the priests would give their financial support and cooperation. But World War I intervened and the issue to be dropped.

The 1917 *Code of Canon Law* defined seminaries as “ecclesiastical corporations and non-collegiate moral persons, with the right to own and administer property for the purpose of training young men for the priesthood”. It wanted to keep young boys (adolescents) showing signs of a vocation from “the contagion of the world” (c. 1353), and emphasised the need for every diocese, or cluster of dioceses, to have a diocesan or inter-diocesan seminary, and preferably both a minor and major seminary (c. 1354).

Benedict XV’s *Maximum Illud* called for all missionary activity to break with the existing Eurocentric and colonialist mentality, move to a greater appreciation of cultural differences, and separate missionary activity from political alliances. The promotion of colonialism through religion had to cease, for the Catholic missionary is “an ambassador of Christ, not a messenger of his own nation”. He wanted the local churches to become independent of foreign missionaries, and have their own indigenous (locally-born) priests and bishops.

Key to this was Benedict’s insistence on the formation of locally-born clergy who would “one day be able to take up the spiritual leadership of their people”. His successor, Pius XI (1922-1939), followed up with the appointment of numerous indigenous bishops in India (1923), China (1926), Japan (1927), Indochina (1937) and Africa (1937). In Australia, where by 1919 only 4 Australian-born priests had been appointed bishops, and then only to the smallest rural dioceses, change was slow, as there was much resistance.

Benedict was also critical of mission churches producing local clergy of inferior quality, insufficient local priests for spiritual guidance, and few local bishops for governance. He abhorred feeble and faulty formation programs and insisted on more and better seminaries to develop local clergy.

After WWI, discussions on Mannix’s 1913 proposals resumed, but soon floundered on a range of issues. The Holy See had offered the Australian bishops a building in Rome to serve as an Australian College (seminary), but they rejected it. By 1921, the bishops were deadlocked on the seminary issue and, unable to resolve it, they sought a decision from Rome. In 1922 Propaganda instructed them to set aside the ‘national seminary’ proposal, and for all the dioceses to ‘make provision for the establishment, as soon as possible, of provincial and diocesan seminaries’.

In 1923 a Victorian provincial seminary, Corpus Christi College, was opened at Werribee, and by 1937 a total of 3 diocesan seminaries and 19 religious houses for clerical formation were operating, with a total of 552 major seminarians.

Selection of bishops, 1905-1937

The 1885 Plenary Council had legislated that the ‘senior priests’ – understood as diocesan consultors and irremovable rectors - of each diocese had the right, whenever a new bishop or coadjutor bishop was required, to gather, consult, and propose the names of the best three candidates (*ternus*) and present them to the bishops of the province, who would then

forward the *ternus* to the Holy See with their own comments or, if opposed to some names, add or substitute their own recommendations with their stated reasons. This process was only slightly amended by the 1895 Plenary Council.

Up to 1905 only one Australian-born priest, Patrick Dwyer, had been selected for Episcopal ordination. From 1905 to 1937 another ten were selected and ordained, the most significant being the new archbishop of Hobart, Justin Simonds. He had been the unanimous choice of the senior priests of Hobart and took office just four months before the 1937 Council.

Following *Maximum Illud*, the Holy See wanted more locally-born bishops in Australia. To achieve this, it appointed the tough and abrasive Archbishop Giovanni Panico (1935-48) as Apostolic Delegate, who immediately set about diluting the influence of the six Irish archbishops, especially the powerful troika of Mannix (Melbourne), Duhig (Brisbane) and Killian (Adelaide). Panico executed his plan with three swift moves: Kelly's long-standing coadjutor, Michael Sheehan, was 'invited' to resign and retire; Australian-born Bishop Norman Gilroy was appointed Kelly's coadjutor with right of succession; and John Lonergan, Mannix's vicar-general and trusted deputy, was appointed to the vacant see of Port Augusta.³

The Holy See also had a plan to radically change the system for selecting candidates for Episcopal appointment. In the 1937 Council's *schema*, Propaganda had drafted legislation to: 1) further limit the number of priests to be consulted for the *ternus*, and then only 'singly' under a grave obligation to secrecy, and only before the 2-yearly meeting of the bishops; 2) allow the bishops to draw up names only every second year at their plenary meetings and not, as before, when a new bishop or coadjutor was needed; and 3) have all lists of names sent first to the Apostolic Delegate. The bishops were told that the changes were 'the explicit mind of the Holy See', and the sole concession they could get was to have the phrase: "the bishops will take care that ... they will send to the Apostolic Delegate only the names of the most suitable candidates" inserted in the decree. It was a last ditch attempt to ensure that their *terna* might get preference over the *terna* of the Delegate.

Evangelization of Aboriginal peoples, 1905-1937

The 1905 Plenary Council had received reports on the missions to the Aborigines in Beagle Bay (WA), New Norcia (WA) and the Northern Territory and had approved an offer from the New Norcia Benedictines to establish a priory in the Kimberley vicariate. It had also considered Geraldton Bishop Kelly's request to be relieved of the administration of the Diocese of Victoria and Palmerston (NT), and repeated all the earlier decrees on Aboriginal evangelization.

Up to 1937 very little direct effort had been made by the Irish bishops and priests to evangelize Australia's indigenous peoples. The exceptions were Bishop Matthew Gibney and Fr John Creagh CSsR. Similarly, few Irish female religious congregations had established dedicated ministries to Australia's indigenous peoples, with the notable exception of the Irish Sisters of St John of God in the Kimberley and the Irish Sisters of Mercy at Mackay (QLD).

³ He died before Episcopal ordination.

By 1931 the Communist media were declaring Australia's Aborigines 'an oppressed class', and missionaries as 'agents of colonial oppression'. They demanded the 'liquidation of all missions and so-called homes for Aborigines, as these are part of the weapons being used to exterminate the Aboriginal race by segregating the sexes and sending the young girls into slavery' (*Workers' Weekly*, 24 September 1931).

Beagle Bay (WA) Pallotine mission

In 1905 the German Pallotine mission at Beagle Bay was in crisis. The superior lacked support from his congregational Brothers, and more Pallotines were desperately needed. A new superior removed the trouble-making Brothers in 1906 and gathered sufficient mission staff to retain the land lease.

In 1907 nine Irish Sisters of St John of God arrived at Beagle Bay and the WA Government began sending Aboriginal girls to the mission. By 1909 there were 94 girls in care. When five more sisters arrived, a convent was opened in Broome.



Image: A group of 'stolen' Aboriginal children in the Kimberley. Taken from their families with few rights and freedoms, their childhoods were short-lived and harsh. Source: Broome Historical Society and Museum

With the promulgation of the *WA Aborigines Act, 1905*, the Chief Protector became the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and half-caste child under 16 years of age, and the WA Government looked to the church missions to care for and educate the 'removed' children of mixed-blood born to Aboriginal women who had been prostituted to lugger crews by their own tribesman.

Though financial and personnel problems persisted at Beagle Bay, the government adopted a more positive attitude and offered the Pallotines the Filipino/Aboriginal community of Lombardina, a government feeding station, which they accepted and staffed. An exceptional cyclone there in 1910 caused severe damage and took 40 lives.

In 1910 Bishop Kelly was relieved as Vicar Apostolic of the Kimberley and replaced by the Spanish Benedictine Abbot – and recently ordained bishop - Fulgentius Torres, who retained the position until his death in 1914.

With the mission's continuing debts, the Pallotine superiors in Germany sought to withdraw from Beagle Bay in 1911, but no other religious order would take it over. A massive effort by one of the Pallotine priests turned the financial situation around and the WA Government now authorised more girls, mostly of mixed descent, to be sent to the mission. By 1913, the mission was caring for 84 girls (28 full-blood and 56 half-caste) and 36 boys (3 full-blood and 33 half-caste), while another 11 children lived with their parents. No new Pallotines had arrived from Germany since 1904, and no more would arrive until 1925.

When war with Germany broke out in 1914 government officials became concerned that the German missionaries might be aiding the enemy. They were watched closely, security measures tightened, and all mail censored. The Superior, Fr Bishofs, was labelled a spy.

With a change of Chief Protector, fewer children were sent to the mission, government support was reduced, and surveillance increased. In 1914 the Irish Redemptorist priest, John Creagh, was appointed administrator of the Kimberley Vicariate, but not ordained a bishop. Creagh too was not trusted by the authorities, due to the 1914 Easter Uprising in Dublin. All the missionaries had movement restrictions imposed. Creagh returned to Perth in 1922.

Apostolic Delegate Cattaneo now recommended that the Kimberley Vicariate be entrusted to the Salesians of Don Bosco and divided into two mission fields, with the Salesians and Pallotines sharing the burden. The suggestion did not sit well with the Pallotines, whose heroic efforts to keep the mission alive and intact, but the Italian Salesian, Ernesto Coppo, was appointed Vicar Apostolic of The Kimberley in 1922, ordained bishop, and arrived in 1923 with a multinational Salesian group of 4 priests and 3 brothers. He made his base in Broome, left the Pallotines in charge of the Beagle Bay and Lombardina missions, and opened a third (Salesian) mission at Carnarvon. His request to open a fourth mission at LaGrange was turned down. However, by the time more German Pallotines had arrived in 1925, the Salesians had vacated the Kimberley Vicariate. Most had moved to Melbourne and Brisbane to minister to the Italian immigrant communities there, and in 1927 Bishop Coppo resigned.

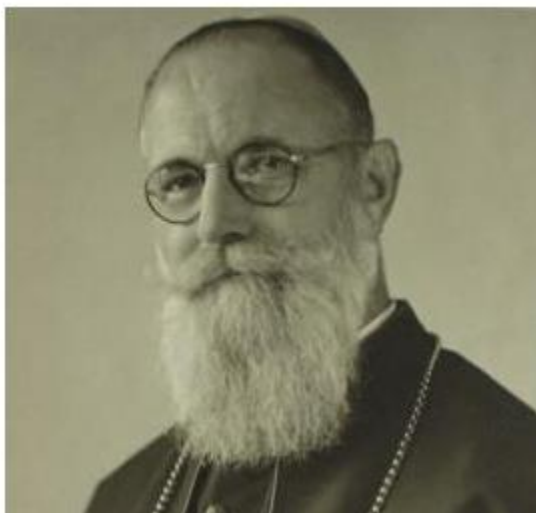


Image: Pallotine Bishop Ottone Raible (1887-1966), Apostolic Administrator (1928-35) and Vicar Apostolic (1935-58) of the Kimberley Vicariate

The Pallotines continued their ministry in the Vicariate and in 1927, when Fr Púsken was appointed Protector of Aborigines, all government surveillance was lifted. An offer by the St John of God Sisters to care for lepers was, however, turned down.

The German Pallotine, Otto Raible, arrived as Apostolic Administrator in 1928, and when he was appointed Vicar Apostolic and ordained a bishop in 1935, the Pallotines finally had full authority.

Though the Pallotine mission continued to struggle financially, Raible expanded the Pallotine's activity into anthropology and ethnology, acquired a second cattle station lease at Rockhole, and purchased a farm at Tardun in the southern wheatbelt which, cultivated by the Pallotines, became a productive asset. Another 11 Pallotines arrived from Germany between 1930 and 1934 and in 1935, Raible received Episcopal ordination in Europe. On his return he brought an expert in tropical medicine and extra staff to establish a missionary training college in Melbourne.

By 1934 leprosy had become a major problem in the Kimberley, as had police brutality and the chaining and massacre of Aborigines. In 1935 a massive cyclone claimed 141 lives in the Broome district, and almost completely destroyed the Beagle Bay mission buildings. They were still being rebuilt when Bishop Raible travelled to Sydney for the 1937 Plenary Council.

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 published in his article "The Fourth Plenary Council of Australia & New Zealand" in Annuario Historiae Conciliorum, Vol. 38 (2006) No. 2, pp. 451-466.