

First Plenary Council of Australasia, 14-29 November 1885 - Part 2

This is Part 2 of the article examining the 1885 First Australasian Plenary Council which brought the Church in Australia and New Zealand together for the first time. Part 1 appeared in the Winter 2018 edition. It is also the fourth in the series looking at the particular (provincial and plenary) councils of the Catholic Church held in Australia between 1844 and 1937.

New major diocesan seminary at Sydney

Central to Moran's vision for the Church in Australia was the establishment of a new major diocesan seminary at Sydney with a national reach. He had decided this in 1884 without consulting anyone, and intended use the 1885 Plenary Council to win endorsement.

Prior to 1885 nine small seminaries had opened in Australia, operated for a while, then all closed (Table 2) except one, St Charles Borromeo Seminary at Bathurst, opened in 1876. None produced significant numbers of priests. Moran planned to build his grand major seminary at a magnificent site at Manly in Sydney, and the foundation stone was laid on 19 November 1885, during the Plenary Council.

Table 2. Early Australian Seminaries and priests ordained, 1838-1906

| Seminary | Years functioning | Priests Ordained | Australian-born |
|---|-------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| St Mary's Seminary, Sydney | 1838-1857 | 28 | 2 |
| St Mary's College, Lyndhurst, Glebe | 1858-1877 | 7 | 5 |
| St Mary's College, Hobart | 1854-1860 | 3 ⁴ | 2 |
| St Francis Seminary, Melbourne | 1848-1854 | 4 | n/a |
| St Patrick's College SJ, East Melbourne | 1855-62; 1875-79 | 22 ⁴ | 5 |
| St Aloysius College SJ, Sevenhill | 1856-59; 1875-85 | 21 | n/a |
| St Charles Borromeo Seminary, Bathurst ¹ | 1875 -1891 | 27 | 11 |
| Marist Seminary, Clydesdale ² | 1859-1869 | 0 | 0 |
| St Kilian's Seminary, Brisbane ³ | 1874-1906 | 4 | 2 |
| Total | | 116 | 27 (estimate) |

Notes: 1. St Charles Seminary in Bathurst merged with St Stanislaus College, Bathurst from 1888; 2. None of the students were Australian-born and no student was ever ordained during the life of the seminary; 3. Brisbane had 6 seminarians in 1878; 4. Most of these priests completed only part of their studies at a single seminary, most studying at two or more seminaries during their 6 year training, either in Australia or overseas.

The Manly eminary would to be totally Tridentine, with 4 years of theology. 2 years of Scholastic philosophy, the best professors available, sound text books, and teaching in Latin. It would be the Sydney 'diocesan' seminary, completely under Moran's control and authority - setting the rules, hiring staff, assessing candidates for ordination and ordaining them – but would be open to all the other bishops wanting their own seminarians formed in Australia.



Image: St Patrick's College, Manly, NSW. Source: Explorer Collection. National Museum of Australia

The Council agreed that it was 'highly desirable that each diocese have its own major seminary, [but] given that the state of the Provinces and Dioceses did not permit this as yet, [and as] the Metropolitan of Sydney has proposed to erect a Major Seminary worthy of the Australian Church and in keeping with the demands of Propaganda, every effort should be made to ensure this seminary flourishes'. It also proposed that those bishops who did not have their own seminaries be 'most urgently exhorted to send their ecclesiastical students to this new seminary'.

However, as some of the Irish bishops also wanted some of their seminarians to receive a Roman education, the Council petitioned Pope Leo XIII and Propaganda to support an Australian National College (seminary) in Rome, which the Manly seminary would not interfere with, but serve as a 'feeder'.

Governance of non-clerical religious congregations

Another contentious issue at the Council concerned the governance of non-clerical (especially female) religious. It centered on whether it should be 'diocesan' or 'central' (i.e. not by the local bishop), Mother Mary McKillop having insisted that central governance was essential for her congregation of Josephite Sisters. A vote of 14 to 3 went in favour of diocesan governance, which seemed to have settled the matter conclusively, but when Propaganda reviewed the decrees, it insisted that the one requiring congregations of religious women be subject to the local bishop be suppressed.

Catholic education

In the years following colonial legislation on education funding, financial support for Catholic schools was progressively withdrawn: in SA in 1851, Tasmania in 1854, Victoria in 1873, Queensland in 1880, NSW in 1882, and WA in 1895. At the same time, the various governments began establishing a mainly secular curriculum in the national or public schools, with or without compensatory rights for the churches to provide some denominational teaching, or non-denominational scriptural reading/instruction. While their aim was to establish a modern Australian public school system providing 'free, compulsory and secular' education, the interpretation of the aim was sometimes murky.

From the outset, the Catholic bishops had opposed a national secular education system, and even more so when state aid began to be withdrawn from Catholic schools. In NSW Archbishop Vaughan, convinced that there would be 'godless' secular education 'in the end', proposed that Catholics must set about funding their schools from their own resources. But the other bishops were wary and distrustful, until Bishop Matthew Quinn offered to cooperate. All the bishops then authorised Vaughan to write a joint pastoral letter titled *Catholic Education*. Published in July 1879, it condemned all schools founded on 'secularist' principles as 'seedplots of future immorality, infidelity and lawlessness', and precipitated fierce sectarian conflict. NSW Premier Parkes used the pastoral letter to abolish state aid, but it was the occasion not the cause of the 1880 *Public Instruction Act*.

Four issues confronted the 1885 Plenary Council: i) how to make Catholic parents send their children to Catholic schools; ii) how to get the Catholic community to finance a Catholic school system; iii) where the schools should be established; and iv) how to find sufficient and suitable teachers.

The Council first restated the principles agreed at the 1869 Provincial Council and added another: 'parents and guardians of children have the natural right and duty to educate their children, either personally or through others' (Decree 235). Propaganda, in its review, added one more: 'it is the Church's right and duty to teach the faith in its entirety and to condemn error and false philosophies' (Decree 234). The Council then insisted that there be a Catholic school in every 'mission' (a subdivision of a 'district', akin to a parish), that it be supported by mission revenue, and that the school be built before the church and used as a chapel in the meantime (Decrees 239-240). To put pressure on parents, the Council decided that 'sacramental absolution is to be denied to those who contumaciously neglect their children's religious education or send them to unsuitable or public schools without good reason or safeguards' (Decree 238). Other decrees concerned teaching the deaf, selecting text books, and paying teachers' salaries.

In 1869, teachers in the more than 250 Catholic schools were mostly lay. The 15 religious teaching congregations of priests, sisters and brothers then in Australia had few members and foundations in just 6 dioceses. The Christian Brothers had only 4 members in Melbourne. By 1885, however, while the schools still heavily relied on lay teachers, 14 more religious teaching congregations of priests, sisters and brothers, mainly from Ireland and England, but also from France and Argentina, had made foundations and were providing some 1450 sisters and 150 brothers to the now more than 600 Catholic schools.

For religious instruction in Catholic schools, and elsewhere, the Council mandated the *Maynooth Catechism*, which emphasised authority and prescribed obligations, and promoted the Irish model of faith and spirituality and Irish devotional practices. The Irish influence at the Council was also evident in the elevation of St Patrick's feast to the highest liturgical rank, and 22 other Irish saints being added to the liturgical calendar.

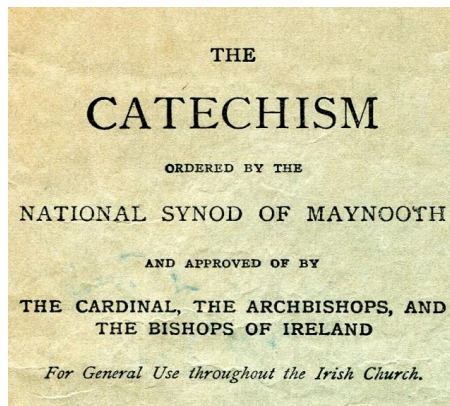


Image: Cover of the *Maynooth Catechism* approved by the 1875 Irish National Synod of Maynooth. its use for every diocese in Australia was mandated by the 1885 1st Australasian Plenary Council and later adapted for Australian circumstances.

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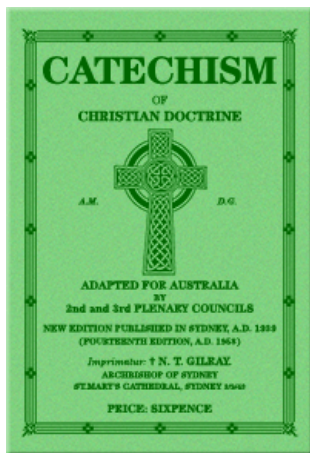


Image: Cover of the 14th edition of the Australian adaptation of the *Maynooth Catechism*, mandated for all Australian dioceses by the 1885 1st Australasian Plenary Council

Mixed marriages

No substantive changes were made to the 1869 Council legislation on mixed marriage, but Propaganda insisted that the faithful be carefully instructed on the difference between ‘mixed religion’ and ‘disparity of cult’ as they related to marriage, and that the *cautiones* must never be dispensed, and always followed up.

Evangelisation of the Australian Aborigines

Of the first four efforts to evangelize Australia’s indigenous peoples – at Stradbroke Island (QLD) in 1843, at Albany (WA) in 1846, at Port Essington (NT) in 1846, and at New Norcia (WA) in 1846 – only the Benedictine mission at New Norcia was still functioning in 1885.

Though the 1869 Council had strongly denounced the injustices perpetrated against the Aborigines, it’s only decisions were to seek out another male religious congregation for the evangelization of the Aborigines, and recommend to Propaganda that a new vicariate apostolic be erected in the northern section of the Brisbane diocese where many indigenous people were living.

Vicariate Apostolic of Queensland

In 1877, eight years after the Council's recommendation, Pope Pius IX established the Vicariate Apostolic of Queensland, stating that it would be 'most favourable for converting the natives'. He assigned the vicariate to Italian diocesan priests of the Seminary of Saints Peter and Paul for Foreign Missions, but they spoke no English, had little success, and in 1884 the vicariate was handed over to the Irish Augustinians. But neither the Italians nor Augustinians really attempted to evangelize the indigenous peoples, so the 1885 Plenary Council unanimously agreed that 'a [dedicated] prefect or vicar apostolic be appointed for the spiritual care of the Aborigines in Queensland', and that the new vicariate be entrusted to the Spanish Augustinians in the Philippines.

Northern Territory Jesuit missions

Following the establishment of Darwin in 1870 and the construction of the Darwin to Adelaide telegraph in 1872, the Scottish priest and missionary in Australia, Duncan McNab, lobbied in Rome and London for the establishment of missions to the Aborigines in the Northern Territory. McNab had already worked among the Aborigines in Queensland since 1875, first at Mackay, then at Gympie, Kilcoy, Durundur and Bribie Island, and Bishop James Quinn had permitted him to work for their better social conditions in Brisbane. But when McNab was appointed a Commissioner for Aborigines, Quinn considered him a government tool and withdrew his support. In 1878, McNab appealed to Pope Leo XIII and in 1879 travelled to Rome where he succeeded in getting the pope to authorize a Jesuit mission to the Aborigines. Back in Australia, he persuaded the Austrian Jesuits in Adelaide to establish a mission in the Northern Territory, rather than in Queensland.



Image: Fr Duncan McNab (1820-1896), 'apostle' to the Australian Aborigines of northern Australia. Source: Broome Catholic Diocese website

The Austrian Jesuits had arrived in Australia in 1848 and established their base at Sevenhill in the Adelaide diocese. After Pope Leo XIII authorized their mission to the Aborigines in 1882, four Jesuits travelled to Port Darwin (NT) and established what became known as the Jesuit Aboriginal Mission. Fr Anton Stele SJ, vicar general of the Darwin Diocese (1882-1904) and mission superior, set up St Joseph's Mission (1882-1891) at Rapid Creek, near Darwin, among the Larrekia and Woolner peoples, and by 1885 the mission had its first baptisms - 14 children. The next year, Queen of Holy Rosary Mission (1886 -1899) was established at

Daly River, a more remote area, among the Waigat and Woolmonga peoples, and at both missions the Jesuits used the 'Reductions' model of Paraguay, allocating private agricultural plots to each married Christian couple. The SA Government contributed £100 per annum, and other support came from various sources.



Image: Jesuit missionaries and Australian Aborigines at the Daly River Mission, NT (1886-1899)

At the 1885 Council Fr Strele presented a glowing report on the Jesuit mission (in Latin), and used his visit south to raise funds. However, when he ran into difficulties with bishops refusing permission to fundraise, with McNab also collecting for a northern mission, and the Council's decree forbidding no more than one collection annually for the 'national mission to Aborigines' (Decree 206), he sailed for America and Europe in desperation to raise money, but left his confreres in the Territory leaderless.

New Norcia mission in WA

Rudesindo Salvado OSB, Bishop of Port Victoria (NT) – which he never visited - and Abbot of the New Norcia community of 58 monks, also presented a report (in Latin) to the 1885 Council on the Benedictine Mission to the Aborigines in WA. He and his Benedictine companion, Bishop Jose Serra, had established the mission in 1846 with the original aim of creating among the indigenous peoples of the Victoria Plains a 'largely self-sufficient Christian village based on agriculture'. But after the local population's decimation by introduced diseases in the 1860s, the mission concentrated on providing practical education to the Aboriginal children brought in from all over WA. The new aim was to 'civilize and evangelize' them, but with great sympathy for their indigenous culture. During the 1860s and 1870s the mission flourished: new buildings were erected, wells were sunk, and various crops harvested. The monks worked closely with the Nyoongar people, teaching them agricultural skills and supplying food. They studied the Nyoongar language and customs and recorded them in writing. In 1881 Salvado advised his fellow bishops that all the government officials wanted was for the Aborigines 'to be kept quiet'. In 1885 '100 black aboriginals are lodged, clothed, educated and supplied with everything at the Mission by the Missionary Monks There are 2 schools for black children, one for boys and another for girls' (*Catholic Directory for 1886*).

Kimberley mission in WA

Although plans were being drawn up for another mission to the Aborigines in WA, by 1885 they had not matured. Between 1882 and 1888 the Kimberly region experienced a massive pastoral land grab, and in 1885 rich new pearl-shell beds were discovered off the coast near Broome. Pearlising ships, manned by Filipinos, Malays and Japanese pearl-ers, sheltered in the coastal creeks during the lay-up season, and the pearl-ers were developing close relations with the local Aborigines. This concerned not only government administrators, but propelled a new Catholic outreach, initiated by the new Bishop of Perth, Matthew Gibney.



Image: Bishop Matthew Gibney, Bishop of Perth (1886-1910). Source: Wikipedia

As vicar general Perth, Gibney had investigated the possibility of a mission in WA's North-West in 1878, and his bishop, Martin Griver, had asked the WA Governor for a 50,000 acre reservation to establish a Catholic Mission for the 'Christian civilization' of the local Aborigines, a principal policy objective of the British Government. In 1879 the *WA Catholic Record* called for a religious congregation to take on the task, or for an 'apostle' prepared to 'labour to a great extent in vain'. The apostle was Fr Duncan McNab who, in 1883, had moved to Perth at the invitation of Bishop Griver and become the chaplain to Aboriginal prisoners on Rottnest Island. Both Griver and McNab wanted assistance and redress for the Aborigines, whose lands had been taken without compensation.

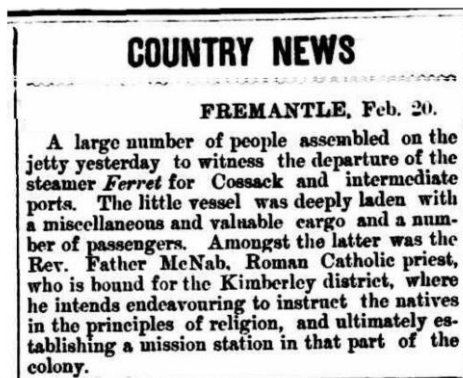


Image: WA newspaper article, 20 February 1884. Source: Broome Catholic Diocese website

In 1884 McNab sailed north to Goodenough Bay, near Derby, to set up a personal 'Native Mission to the Kimberley Aborigines', and later that year sent Griver the names of several missionary congregations who had promised to evangelize the Aborigines. For a while he was joined by two other priests, but the mission was destroyed by fire in 1887, and McNab, exhausted, went to Melbourne where he died in 1896.

The Kimberley mission was discussed at the 1885 Plenary Council, which recommended the establishment of a new vicariates apostolic.

Policies on Aboriginal evangelization

The 1885 Council produced 6 decrees (203-208) setting out the future policy direction for Aboriginal evangelization. They state that the Aboriginal peoples is capable of and willing to embrace Christianity, that land reserves should be set aside for them, that religious congregations should be recruited to instruct them in religious and practical matters, that an annual collection for the Aboriginal missions be held in each diocese, and that the bishops should protest against their persecution by the colonists.

Image: Front cover of the *Acta et Decreta* of the 1st Australasian Plenary Council, published in 1887

Ecclesiastical discipline

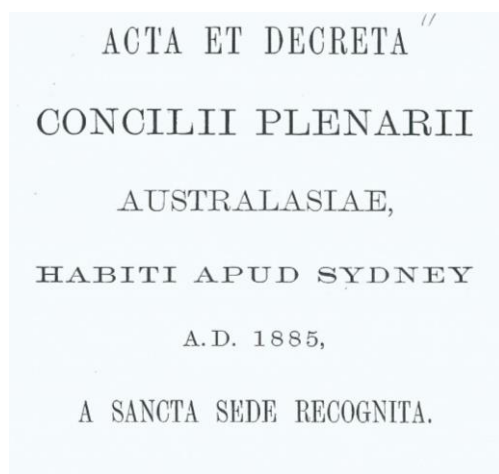
Councils always aim to correct abuses and the use of 'reservation of sins' - to a higher authority than priests - and 'censures' to enforce them, is common. The 1844 Council had reserved seven sins: premeditated homicide, abortion, perjury, bigamy, sexual solicitation, and attempted absolution of a sexual accomplice. The 1869 Council added mixed marriage before a Protestant minister or civil official. The 1885 Plenary deleted perjury. The 1844 Council had introduced the censure of 'suspension' for priests failing to record baptisms and marriages in their registers, and the 1869 Council imposed 'excommunication reserved to the local bishop' for two Catholics marrying outside the Church. The 1885 Plenary simply repeated the 1869 censure.

Administration of temporal goods

The 1844 Council forbade priests from incurring personal debts, insisted that all church property be safeguarded with title deeds, and that debt on such property not be incurred without canonical permission. The 1869 Council mandated bank accounts, financial records, inventories, financial returns, personal wills for priests and bishops, clergy sustentation, and rules on mission debts, building contracts and building alterations. The 1885 Plenary introduced 9 more decrees, almost identical to those of the Irish Councils of Thurles (1850) and Maynooth (1875), mandating all church property to be held in trust in the name of at least 3 persons (including the bishop and 2 priests), the appointment of a diocesan secretary to supervise trust matters and, where church property valued at over £200 Stg. was to be alienated, the need to have written consent from the diocesan consultors and the Holy See.

Decrees, decisions, Pastoral Letter, other letters, and *recognito*

Following the close of the Council on 29 September 1885, the approved *Acta et Decreta*, arranged in 32 chapters, were sent to the Holy See for examination prior to approval. Propaganda reviewed them and sent its recommendations and comments to the Congregation's full membership in November 1886. The Congregation, having considered all matters in March and April 1887, recommended that Brisbane and Adelaide be made metropolitan sees, that dioceses be erected at Grafton, Wilcannia, Sale, and Port Augusta, that the Vicariate Apostolic of Queensland be renamed Cooktown, and that two new vicariates apostolic be erected: Queensland for the Aborigines, and Kimberley. The Holy See also approved the establishment of a hierarchy in New Zealand, with Wellington being named the metropolitan see in 1887.



Minor corrections and amendments were made to some decrees, and others were suppressed or deleted, including the one requiring religious houses to be subject to the local bishop. The 272 amended decrees and Propaganda's recommendations regarding the new territories were approved by Pope Leo XIII on 24 April 1887 and the *recognitio* (approval) issued on 1 May 1887. The decisions on the new dioceses and vicariates came into effect with the Apostolic Constitution dated 10 May 1887, though the Queensland Vicariate for the Aborigines was never formally erected.

The 1885 Council also composed a Pastoral Letter to all the faithful to be read at Sunday Masses throughout the nation. It set out the new regulations and explained the principles on which they were based. But whereas the 1869 Pastoral Letter had emphasized the danger of 'indifferentism', the 1885 Pastoral urged Catholics to 'better their station in life', foster 'family prayer', set up 'temperance societies', and for parents to acquire land which they could pass to their children, and encourage their sons to acquire a useful trade or profession.

In a gesture of solidarity and communion with other churches across the world, the Council sent letters to the Pope, the Prefect of Propaganda, and the bishops of Ireland, the United States, Germany, Spain, and China.

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.

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