

A history of the Jesuits in Australia

So recent is the European history of Australia that one reads with surprise that the Jesuits were the first Religious Order of priests to enter and establish Houses in South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and the Northern Territory. They were only the second such Order to arrive in Sydney.

Beginnings

The first two Austrian Jesuits set foot in Adelaide in 1848, the first two Irish in Melbourne in 1865, and three more Austrians along with one of the first native-born Australians to become Jesuit landed in Darwin in 1882. From 1848 to the present, over five hundred men have worked as Jesuit priests, brothers or scholastics in Australia, New Zealand, and on their Mission in India.

Three groups of Jesuits worked here as separate 'Missions' – the Austrians in South Australia, and later on the Aboriginal Mission in the North, and the Irish in the eastern Colonies – until 1901, when all three groups were merged to form the Australian Mission.

Two common missions

Despite the obvious differences between Austrians and Irishmen, there was much in common between the two groups who began the work of the Jesuits in Australia. Both Provinces trace their history to the original Jesuits. The first College in German-speaking Europe was founded in Vienna by St Peter Canisius in 1552. In the time of Ignatius himself, two Jesuits were sent to Ireland to report on the state of the Church there.

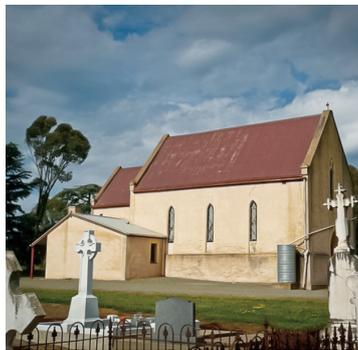
Both groups sent outstanding men to Australia in the early years, and the first Superiors of each group put their stamp on the work of the Society of Jesus for the next several decades. They both shared the nineteenth century understanding of what it was to be a Jesuit, which included a strong sense of the doctrinal and moral supremacy of the Catholic Church, strict orthodoxy, strong obedience, respect for learning and teaching, and a commitment to preach the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, a series of meditations that directs the retreatants to listen to the workings of God within the individual, and to look for Him in the creation, the hearts and minds, and the market-place of those around them.

Both groups found in Australia a set of circumstances completely different to their own countries. With the quality of the men, the vision of the leadership, and the opportunity to build something from the beginning, both the Austrians and the Irish Jesuits quickly embarked upon a series of creative undertakings that have helped serve the Church well ever since.

They came from an Ireland of several tenant cultures, Catholic and Protestant, English and Irish, the Pale and beyond. They knew Catholicism curbed in by restrictions and discrimination. The Austrians came from an absolute monarchy, where student-led opposition to that authority resulted paradoxically in the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Hapsburg domain.

'We have no convicts'

In Australia both groups found the Catholics to be a minority of the population, unlike at home, and rather despised for their Romanism by the leadership and educated circles of the Colonies. It was a Church in Australia where Catholic people were counted among the poorest, and least educated, and associated with convict origins of the country. 'Why should a Roman priest come here?', asked the Governor of South Australia in 1843, 'we have no convicts'.



The Immaculate Conception Catholic Church at Mintaro, established by the early Jesuits.



Sevenhill.



The Austrian Jesuits in the south, and the Irish Jesuits in the east threw themselves into the work of building up the Church in terms of its pastoral structures, its need for education, confidence, and the opportunity to be helped deepen in its spiritual life. Within twenty years of arriving, the Jesuits had been inundated with requests from Bishops to found schools, open seminaries, establish an Aboriginal Mission, open up parish districts, undertake a University College, edit magazines, establish libraries, run Retreat Houses, act as theological advisers, give Retreats and Parish Missions, and defend the Church in public against any attack.

The Austrian Mission 1848

In 1848, the Year of Revolutions in Europe, the Jesuits were expelled from a number of countries, as they were being identified as the key factor in the alliance between throne and altar, which the liberals of the day saw to be an obstacle to political and civil rights. Reports were coming back to Germany of the success of the immigrant groups which had settled in the new colony of South Australia, and when one such group asked for chaplains, the Austrian Provincial asked for two volunteers.

Most of the expelled Jesuits were going to the United States, or Canada, or South America, but the call to go to Adelaide was one to an almost unknown destination, as the colony had only been established twelve years earlier.

Ordained only a few weeks, Fathers Kranewitter and Klinkowstroem set forth on what must have been a real journey of faith and trust. They needed those virtues. Leaving the Alps and verdant countryside of Innsbruck, they arrived in high summer in Adelaide, a struggling township where dust storms blew down wide and open unmade roads. The Mission was a complete bungle. Dissension had fragmented their immigrant group, and it dispersed upon arrival. Not speaking English, they could not find the Bishop's house until eight o'clock in the evening, where they arrived unannounced; the letter of introduction from the Archbishop of Munich not yet arrived! Fr Klinkowstroem was forced by ill health to return to Europe four months later. Eight days after landing in Adelaide, Fr Aloysius Kranewitter travelled north with the man who had sponsored the immigrant group.

They stopped where they could lease a property, about eighty miles north of Adelaide, and there when Brothers George Sadler and John Schreiner joined him in April 1849, they built their first House, and the Austrian Mission in South Australia commenced.

Over the next fifty years, the Austrian Fathers and Brothers virtually created an Abbey Diocese from the settlement which they named Sevenhill. The European population of the new colony, founded only twelve years earlier, was steadily advancing to the north, and the Jesuits accompanied them. Some of them undertook extraordinary horseback journeys, going almost three hundred miles north, visiting shepherds, squatters, and mining camps, seeking out Catholics wherever they were, and returning after a thousand-mile circuit journey of a month, and this they did several times a year.

Their reputation as skilled bushmen, able to find their way and water over land without tracks, was strong for generations. At Sevenhill they planted vines, making it the oldest Cellars in the Clare Valley, and opened



Fr Kranewitter

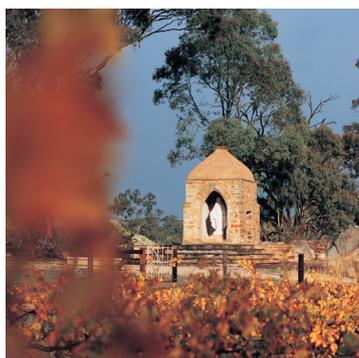


a College. It functioned as the first Catholic boys' school in the colony, attracting students from other colonies, and it served also as a Seminary for the training of Diocesan priests, and as a Novitiate for the Austrian and the Irish Jesuits, and a Scholasticate for the training of their young men.

1852

In 1852, the Bishop had assigned the entire north of the Colony to the care of the Jesuits, and the growth in European settlement saw the beginning of many new towns in this area.

From Sevenhill the priests would set off to provide Mass at various centres, and in time a little church would be built there. Later, a Residence for two Fathers and a Brother would be built, and thus throughout that area they eventually built seven Residences in major towns, and some thirty churches, as well as supplying a further twenty-five Mass centres. One of the diocesan priests they trained was Julian Tennyson Woods, later to found the Sisters of Saint Joseph with Blessed Mary MacKillop. Another was Christopher Reynolds, later to be the Bishop and then first Archbishop of Adelaide.



From Sevenhill, and their House at Norwood in Adelaide, they set off to give numerous Retreats in parish Missions, and they conducted the priests' Retreats, year after year. On one visit in 1875, the Bishop blessed or opened no less than seven of their new churches just in one fortnight. Like the colony itself, the Mission was constantly plagued with debt, and would not have been viable without the work of the Brothers, who together had such an array of skills and trades that Sevenhill was able to operate successfully as a Mission, and support the Jesuit communities working from other centres. Unlike the Irish, the Austrians shunned controversy, and were involved in no public disputations. When the extraordinary event of the excommunication of Australia's first Saint, Blessed Mary MacKillop took place in 1871, the Jesuits at Norwood realised that the Bishop's act was invalid, and gave her shelter. Mary MacKillop's brother Donald had been a student at Sevenhill, and had entered the Jesuits, and was later to become Superior of the Northern Territory Mission.

After the 1880's the Austrians sent out only one or two extra men to South Australia, but made a significant contribution of manpower to the new Aboriginal Mission that was beginning along the Daly River. Little by little, the Austrians transferred their works over to the diocese as local priests some of whom they themselves had trained, became available. By 1898 they had handed over all but two Residences and two churches. In 1901 the Austrian Mission was merged with that of the Irish Jesuits in the east, and that chapter of Jesuit history in Australia came to an end.

Thirty-three Fathers and twenty-nine Brothers had worked as members of the Austro-Hungarian Mission in South Australia and in the Northern Territory. Of those numbers, ten were Australians. When the merger came, twenty-eight declined the rare opportunity offered of returning to Austria and stayed to live out their days in this country. Strange to us, one of those who went 'back' was Thomas O'Brien, who had been in 1866 the first Australian to enter the Society.



The Austrians had built their thirty churches and seven Residences, the parish structures of what later became an entirely separate Diocese, that of Port Augusts (or later Port Pirie). They had seen to the establishment of as many schools as churches, mainly staffed by the Josephite Sisters. From Sevenhill they had set off to found the Northern Territory Mission, and they had conducted their College as a School, Seminary, Novitiate, Philosophate and Retreat House. They had taught, advised and given spiritual counsel to the majority of clergy and religious of South Australia, and in doing this they established a very close rapport with the priests, which still continues.

The Irish Mission

The work undertaken by the Irish Jesuits in 1865 and later was of a similar character to the Austrians, but in the urban contexts of Melbourne and Sydney. They opened schools, developed parochial structures in two great areas known as the Richmond Mission and the North Sydney Mission, they undertook the training of Diocesan priests in Melbourne and Sydney, and their advice was sought by the Bishops. The Melbourne to which the Irish Jesuits came had exploded into growth after the gold rushes of the 1850s. When gold was discovered in late 1851, there were an estimated 9,000 Catholics in the Colony, increasing to 100,000 by the time the Jesuits came, fourteen years later.

1851

In 1851, there had been two Catholic Churches in Victoria, and ten years later there were sixty-four. Melbourne's population had increased five-fold. There were needs in all directions, but the Bishop was desperate to ensure that, first and foremost, the Jesuits might open a college so that Catholic laity might be trained for involvement in the leadership of the colony. The Catholic people were still largely identified with the poor Irish.

In the parish of Richmond to which the Jesuits went, forty-seven of the fifty-eight young women married in that area over the previous few years gave their occupation as 'servant'. The Bishop saw the needs to be the building up of a stable parochial structure, the exhortation and instruction of a largely ill-informed laity, the training of local candidates for the priesthood, and the provision of schools to facilitate an upward movement of a socially and educationally depressed laity. The night they arrived, the Jesuits began preaching in the city.

They assumed charge of Saint Patrick's College, which had closed in a bankrupt state three years earlier. Very quickly it became a success, though Fr Lentaing found the boys to be 'lively, precocious little Colonials, who preferred play to study'. At that time there were less than seventy Jesuit priests in the Irish Province, and the commitment given to Australia was formidable. They did feel at ease here – 'Australia is, for the Irish priests, only Ireland transplanted', wrote one. Within seven years of the arrival of Fr Joseph Dalton, SJ, the first Irish Superior, there were twelve Jesuit Fathers and Brothers working in Melbourne, and this number had increased to nineteen by 1879, the year they went to Sydney.



1890

By 1890, the Irish Province had almost thirty percent of its personnel in the Australian Mission. Among the first Jesuits to this country was Joseph Lentaigne who had been the first Provincial of the newly established Province in 1860.

William Kelly has been described as possibly one of the most erudite men and most gifted speakers in the 1870s in Australia. The Jesuits threw themselves with relish into the controversy over secular education, appearing on platform after platform to argue the case for a separate Catholic system of schooling. The flavour of the age was caught by a report in the daily newspaper, when Fr William Kelly took on the Head of Melbourne Grammar School who had denied the eternity of hell! William Kelly was the champion of the Catholic Irish, and a thousand of them crowded out the Melbourne Town Hall to hear his rebuttal.

The audience 'endorsed with great heartiness the views of the lecturer' in a talk that lasted nearly two hours and a half hours, and he 'was warmly cheered at intervals during his address', and all this because he had proved Hell to be everlasting!

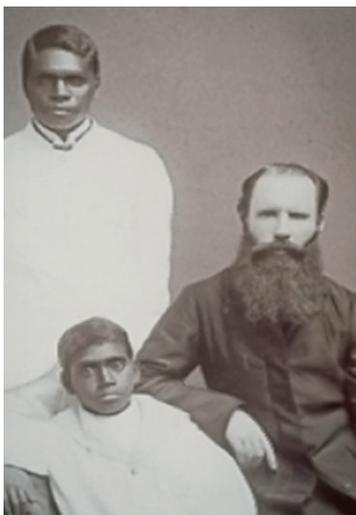
Joseph Dalton put his stamp on the Australian Province through the works he founded during his two periods as Superior of the Mission. It was he who sent the Jesuits into Saint Patrick's College, who built Saint Ignatius' Church at Richmond, and opened Immaculate Conception at Hawthorn, and who purchased 'Mornane's Paddock' as the site for Xavier College in Kew.

Arriving in Sydney, he founded Saint Aloysius' College, and six months later Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview. He took charge of the North Sydney Mission, and opened the presbytery there. Of all his works, only one has not survived, and that was Saint Aloysius' College Dunedin, New Zealand, opened in 1878.

The Aboriginal Mission

Shortly after the opening of the Sydney works, the Austrian Jesuits sent a group of four men from Sevenhill to establish a Mission amongst the Aboriginal people around Darwin, and along the Daly River. Nineteen Jesuits worked there over the next twenty years, eleven Brothers and eight priests. They attempted to implement a missiology based on that of the Paraguay Reductions where the Jesuits in South America established self-governing colonies of native people.

They seemed more open than any other contemporary missionaries to the culture of the aboriginal people, allowing some of the ceremonies, attempting to work with the one tribe in its own territory, and were painstaking in their study of the native language. It took them four years and twenty-six editions to translate, correctly they thought, the Lord's Prayer! It was Donald MacKillop who gave the vision to this enterprise, and his letters to the city newspapers castigated the Europeans for their treatment of the aboriginal people, in language that is still audacious. They worked to the point of breaking the health of a number of them, and MacKillop himself was forced to leave the Mission in 1898. Their model called for the establishment of villages of aboriginal people, working on agricultural plots, and hindsight teaches us that it was simply the wrong model. Plagued by disasters, the ruination of their crops, and great floods, the Mission was declared a failure and closed in 1899 after a second flood had destroyed all their work.



Donald MacKillop



From Mission to Province

Throughout the twentieth century, the Jesuits in Australia continued to pattern of the works established by the Austrians in Adelaide, and by Fr Dalton in Melbourne and Sydney. Doctor Mannix, Archbishop of Melbourne, showed special predilection for the Jesuits, and under him the ministries of the Society in Melbourne increased greatly, such as the founding of Newman College at the University of Melbourne in 1918. In 1922 Jesuits undertook responsibility for the new Seminary for Diocesan Priests in Victoria, and opened their own Noviciate and Philosophate in Melbourne in 1934.

When Australia became a Vice-Province in 1931, Fr John Fahey, an Irishman, became the Superior. When it became a Province in 1950, another Irishman, Fr Austin Kelly, was named as the first Provincial, and it was he who founded the Australian Mission in India the following year. Under him, the fifties were a decade of great growth. University Colleges were established in Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Hobart. Adding to the Seminary undertaken in New Zealand in 1946, a second Victorian Seminary was accepted in 1959



Fr Austin Kelly

Over the last decades there has been a check and decline in the number of Jesuits in Australia, as with all Religious Orders. Changes have been made to the leadership of institutional works, and leadership has been transferred to lay colleagues in numbers of cases. The themes of the Jesuits works in Australia have continued to be consistent with those enunciated by the pioneer Jesuits in Victoria and South Australia. The issues of social justice, on the Aborigines in South Australia and on the conditions of working people in Melbourne, have developed into new forms of involvement with the indigenous people, and with the establishment of social justice ministries. The traditional Jesuit ministry of the intellectual apostolate and theological reflection on the circumstances of our day, has continued with the work of the Theologate, the Colleges and Schools, and the work of writing and publication. Publishing has been a consistent work in the Province since the Austrian Jesuits founded the Messenger of the Sacred Heart in 1880.