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THE FIRST REDEMPTORIST MISSIONARY JOURNEY IN AUSTRALIA

The coming of English and Irish Redemptorists to Australia in 1882 opened to them a mission field vastly different from Europe¹. They had come at the invitation of James Murray, Bishop of Maitland, a city or possibly more of a township about 140 kilometres to the north of Sydney. From its situation close to the coast Maitland was responsible for an ecclesiastical district that extended to the north and west to distances that were roughly estimated rather than defined.

The Redemptorist community of four Fathers and two Brothers was established in the little farming settlement of Singleton, some sixty or so kilometres inland. There they had at first charge of a parish of wheat and sheep farmers. From that base, too, the missionaries were to set out for their work of evangelisation. That was an apostolate to which the community was enthusiastically dedicated; they had begun, in fact, before they even reached their new home with a mission in Wallsend, a suburb of the already bustling city of Newcastle. Arrived in Singleton in April of 1882, the community found itself at once fully occupied in organising the care of the parish. That was proving the more demanding by reason of the substantial debt that had been inherited. As a consequence, it was not possible for some months to begin what was to remain the principal occupation of the Redemptorists in Australia. It was not until September that there was a missionary journey to report; and that is the substance of what we now present.

¹ The beginning of the Redemptorist presence in Australia is described in S.J. BOLAND, *Faith of our Fathers. The Redemptorists in Australia, 1882-1982*, Melbourne 1982; ID., *Edmund Vaughan CSsR and the Beginnings of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer in Australia*, in *SHCSR* 25 (1977) 250-271.

The tour through the northern and western parts of the huge diocese is described by the missionary, Father Thomas O'Farrell². He had been a diocesan priest in Ireland before coming to the Redemptorists, and it was not long after he had taken his vows that he was named among the Australian pioneers. It was in Australia, therefore, that his outstanding gifts of eloquence and pastoral sense were revealed. He was by nature an optimist who thoroughly enjoyed the challenges of his new field of work. So much is evident in his lighthearted description of the journey he made in September and October. The description of his adventures is found in a letter he wrote to the English provincial, Father R.A. Coffin³, on 7th December 1882.

The O'Farrell Letter

... Perhaps a bushman's story will interest your reverence, especially when it has something to do with our dear Congregation. So I will begin.

On Sunday Sept. 24th Dr. Murray⁴ was here to preside at the reception and profession of some Sisters of Mercy⁵, and during the day arranged with Father Superior⁶ that one of us should accompany his Lordship, or rather go before, in his projected visit to the northern and most remote part of the diocese.

I was the victim of the arrangement. So on the following Tuesday (26th) I started, as a local paper afterwards stated, "to give retreats before his Lordship". The train took me to Gunnedah – about 150 miles N. W. Here I

² Father O'Farrell's life is related by William J. PACKER, in his manuscript *Necrology of the Australasian Province* in the Archives of the Province of Canberra, vol. I, 1951, 100-105.

³ The letter of O'Farrell to Coffin is of 7th December 1882. It was transferred to the archives of the Dublin Province when it assumed responsibility for the Australian foundations. It was there that I was able to copy it in 1958. There is a copy also in the *English Provincial Chronicles*, vol. II, 244-253. The provincial to whom the Letter was addressed was Father R. A. Coffin, the first English provincial. He had been one of the early Oxford converts and one of the first associates of J. H. Newman's Oratory before becoming a Redemptorist. He died as Bishop of Southwark in 1885. Cfr BOLAND, *Faith of our Fathers*, 83.

⁴ James Murray was Bishop of Maitland 1865 – 1909 and was the first resident bishop of the diocese, which had previously been merely titular. At the time of his appointment he had been the secretary of Archbishop Cullen of Dublin, soon to be cardinal Cullen, and largely through his friendship with Pius IX had been able to exercise some influence in the appointment of bishops in Australia from the 1860s. His influence was apparently seen as appropriate in view of the predominantly Irish character of the Australian Catholic Church.

⁵ The Sisters of Mercy of the Maitland diocese had their novitiate in Singleton, which possibly influenced Bishop Murray in giving the parish to the Redemptorists.

⁶ The superior of the pioneer band of Redemptorists was Father Edmund Vaughan of an English family with a Catholic tradition of some centuries. He was the uncle of Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, Archbishop of Westminster and Archbishop Roger Bede Vaughan of Sydney. Cfr BOLAND, *Faith of our Fathers*, 404.

rested for an hour and then in company with Father English (an old friend of Father Plunkett's)⁷, the Pastor of the district, took my seat on the coach for a little town some seventy or eighty miles distant called by the unpoetic name of Coonabarabran. Through my partiality for Irish nomenclature I called its inhabitants Coonabarabrannigans⁸. Well, your reverence, not that I say it, never was made such a journey. The coach left Gunnedah at sundown. When leaving home I had no anticipation of a drive of seventy or eighty miles by night, but on the contrary thought all my travelling was to be under a tropical sun. So before starting I left off all the clothes I could decently leave off. There was no help for it now. Off goes the coach under the reckless pilotage of one Jack O'Leary with Father English, myself and a servant girl inside and a Sydney wool-buyer outside. Talk of the rack and other instruments of torture used to disjoint the human frame! They are but gentle appliances compared with the Gunnedah coach. After some twelve or fourteen miles the road became very heavy – and the horses (4) seemed unable to get the coach through the deep sand. Jack used his whip as long as it lasted, and then broke the branches of the trees as we passed – a dozen of which he broke unmercifully upon the poor horses. But it was all useless. Jack and the wool-buyer unyoked the team and rode away to the nearest station⁹ for a fresh team, leaving the three inside passengers to put our limbs back into their proper places. Of course we got out as soon as possible. It was a beautiful night – very very bright but cold, and then it was that the light of the moon revealed to us that the poor horses had been dragging along two coaches instead of one, for a an old broken down thing that had been sent to Gunnedah for repair had been tacked on to the monster in which we were seated. For three hours we remained “bushed” shivering in the cold and afraid to venture far enough to warm ourselves. At length the fresh team arrived and the disjointing process was resumed. Sleep was impossible; conversation was impossible. Father English had taken some sandwiches, but it was a feat to get them opposite the mouth and a still greater feat to secure them without chopping off one's own fingers. Poor Father English made several attempts to get some wine from a bottle, but nearly choked himself and drowned the poor girl sitting opposite. I tried hard to keep myself warm by getting my feet into a bag of corn which fortunately had been deposited with us. Then after the fresh horses returned I secured an old saddle cloth for my knees; but this having been used on a white horse, left me in a deplorable state when the

⁷ William Plunkett, of the family of the Earls of Fingall, had been an officer in the Welsh Fusiliers before joining the Redemptorists. His genial nature made him generally popular among his confreres. At his own request he was sent to Australia. Where he was to succeed Father Vaughan as superior. He died in 1900. Cfr BOLAND, *Faith of our Fathers*, 294.

⁸ Brannigan is an easily recognisable Irish name.

⁹ In Australian usage a station was a large pastoral property.

morning light came. Twice we stopped to change horses after our first misfortune. The second time it was daylight and here we had some tea, without milk, and bacon. During the remainder of the journey Father English and I sat with Jack O'Leary, our fellow traveller having been got rid of. Whole herds of kangaroos (sic) were basking in the morning sun, and here and there crossed our path giving me a full opportunity of observing their awkward but swift movement. At 11½ a.m. after dashing furiously through a creek and up a perpendicular bank Jack sent his team gaily cantering through the little town of Coonabarabran and deposited us at Field's Hotel, where we had quarters engaged.

On that evening (27th) I opened a mission in the little wooden church. Only a few attended the first evening, and those who did come gazed at me as the kangaroos (sic) did at the coach. For they rarely saw a priest and had never seen a missionary.

However, the attendance improved, and by the following Sunday, the news having spread, we had a very good congregation. The mission continued up to Sunday 8th October and was very successful, thank God. A great many old scores were cleared up, the children learned their prayers and some hymns – and the bishop solemnly blessed a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour – which the people had got handsomely framed and is now in their little chapel. The bishop had come by stages from Gunnedah, staying at the stations of some Catholic squatters¹⁰, amongst the rest that of Sir Patrick Jennings¹¹, and arrived in Coonabarabran on Thursday 5th October.

The closing day was a great day. There was a new cemetery to be consecrated, and the bishop determined to have Mass and Confirmation in the cemetery grounds. So at 10 o'clock the people assembled first at the little church, and then walked in procession headed by the "confirmati" in white, the girls in snowy white dresses and the boys and men in white coats. Three tents had been erected – one for the altar, another for the bishop and a third for the children. His lordship first proceeded to bless the cemetery, and went through all the usual ceremonies, followed from cross to cross and around the grounds by all the people. Then Mass was celebrated immediately afterwards and I preached. Confirmation was administered to upward of forty. The bishop followed with a long pastoral suited to the wants of the people, and then finally an address was presented to his lordship, which for earnest

¹⁰ In Australia a squatter was defined as one who settled on crown land for the purpose of running stock. Such a person was seen as a sort of colonial aristocrat. Cfr *Macquarie Dictionary and Thesaurus*, Macquarie University Library, Sydney 1997, 390.

¹¹ Sir Patrick Jennings, at one time premier of New South Wales, remained a steadfast supporter of Catholic causes, notably in the issue of schools. Cfr J. LEGRAND (ed.), *Chronicle of Australia*, Ringwood, Vic. 1993, 407.

Catholic loyalty and apostolic simplicity could not be surpassed. It was read by a little doctor, a native of Birmingham, and the burden of all their professions was that they would never forget the Rosary, the Daily Acts, the three Hail Mary's and all they had been taught at the mission. The sun was broiling all the time, but a tall man held an umbrella over the bishop's mitre and Father English and myself were supplied by the girls with parasols. My head, not having much hair to protect it, was wrapped up in a white pocket-handkerchief. Your reverence can imagine how I looked as I made the several processions through the cemetery with my parasol and handkerchief! In the evening I closed the mission, and next morning started in company with the bishop and the little doctor, who drove us, for Baradine, a village thirty miles distant, where a few Catholic families resided. We remained that night at Baradine, heard the confessions of the people, gave a little instruction, said the rosary and catechised the children, twelve of whom were confirmed next morning. In our drive to Baradine we called at a little wooden shanty, where we had a cup of tea, the great bush beverage. The family were Protestants, but they were very kind. Before we left one of the girls (she had been out among the calves and pigs when we arrived) produced her portfolio of crayon sketches; and really without exaggeration they were the finest I've ever seen. She told she had never learned to draw. To meet such a thing in the wild bush astonished me.

When the confirmation was over we were again on the road. The bishop, who is an early riser, got hold of a bell, and at 5 o'clock made the rounds of the village to the several houses where the confirmandi lived or where we were sleeping. Father McGrath, the priest of Coonamble, had arrived the previous evening with a buggy and five horses (!) to take us to Coonamble fifty miles further north. At 9½ we were in the buggy, Father McGrath managing his pair of horses splendidly, while our guide or outrider led another pair with the one he was riding. I may tell your reverence that for the remainder of the trip this was always the style, except that sometimes instead of starting with five horses we had seven. The Coonamble people met us some six miles outside the town with a four-in-hand and several buggies and horsemen. It was seven o'clock when we arrived. An address was presented to the bishop in the little chapel, which they had enlarged for the occasion by tacking on another wooden building after first pulling down the gable.

Next day, Wednesday 11th October, I opened a mission. It was very hard work up to the following Sunday, and the bishop took a missionary's share throughout. Coonamble is a very rising place. The land is very good along the Castlereagh on which Coonamble is built. By a strange coincidence nearly all the squatters are Catholics. There are twenty-two Catholic squatters in the district. One of them, a Tipperary man named Tobin, gave £

500 to the bishop for a new church, but when your reverence hears that in one station alone he sheared half a million sheep you will not wonder. No place needed a mission more. My regret was that the time was so short. However, the bishop promised to return there in a fortnight and make it on our way home. His lordship promised to lay the foundation stone of a new church for them on his return. Accordingly, we returned for All Saints' Day, and on the Sunday following I had the happiness of seeing laid the first stone of a new church to be dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. *Deo gratias et Mariae!* In the interval of a fortnight we had travelled a great deal. Father McGrath and myself with the usual five horses started on Monday 16th for Walgett, the "Ultima Thule" of the diocese. It is situated on the junction of the Namoi and Barwon or Darling rivers. Coonamble was very hot, but Walgett was much nearer the "ignis eternus". We stayed a night at Mr. Tobin's on the way and arrived in Walgett Tuesday nearly roasted. Father McGrath had his white coat and hat, I had merely what they call here a "puggery" (i.e. a calico handkerchief covering the hat and falling down over the neck and shoulders to protect the spine from sunstroke). Our quarters at the Hotel Walgett were under an iron roof, so that when I awoke each morning I found myself exactly in the condition of a boiled leg of mutton.

Walgett is seventy miles from Coonamble, and only one priest being in the district, it is seldom visited. (Father McGrath's district or parish is about as large as England; Father English's in Gunnedah is as large as Great Britain, if not larger). A large proportion of Walgett's population lives in tents. I visited some of them and found many Catholics in a very unsatisfactory state. They have entirely forgotten their religious obligations; and when I invited some of them to the mission the reply was "Oh, I'm too old for that; I leave it to the youngsters", meaning the children. I held forth in the courthouse, and on the last – Sunday – when closing the mission, I came down on them so hard that there was a general rush to the confessional, and the bishop and myself were kept busy up to 12 o'clock and all the next morning until we left. They will soon have a new church there also.

On Monday, the bishop and myself alternately driving, we arrived at a house, where no amount of persuasion could get the man who owned the place to go to confession. All the family went and three of the children were confirmed – but the old man was obstinate. The children are taught by a resident tutor – one Paddy Fitzpatrick from Cork. Nearly all the large farmers or squatters have such a tutor in the house, and these are all real characters. One had been a public school teacher but had drunk himself out of a situation – another an officer in Her Majesty's service – another an old German Lutheran with huge spectacles – another a Dublin tradesman.

From this station, where I had the honour of sleeping at right angles to his lordship in a room about six by seven, we made our way to the Mac-

quarie district. At our first stay the bishop was “riled” very much by an enormous big girl who asked as confirmation name Australia. This custom has grown fashionable among non-Catholics – calling the children by the names of towns and districts. Further on we came to the river called the Womerawah and stayed at the house of an old Kildare man, who for more than forty-three years has never omitted to have the Rosary in his house. It is customary in some places where Mass is but seldom celebrated that some good layman will read a sermon or the prayers at Mass and teach catechism; but alas, it is only in very few places.

This part of the country was very badly off for rain. They have had three bad seasons and some of the squatters have lost a hundred to two thousand head of cattle. Thank God this season’s turning out beautifully. I liked the people of the Macquarie very much. After a drive of a hundred and twenty miles we got to Mt. Harris, and here we stopped for a few days administering nearly all the sacraments except Holy Orders. On Sunday 19th October we had a grand day at Mt. Harris. All the people gathered in to the Masses and confirmation, and the overseer of the station, Mr. Egan, had killed a bullock for the occasion. The death of the bullock was an interesting operation. A number of bullocks were yarded and then got into a shed covered with hurdles on top of which stood a man with a long spear which, at the first opportunity he plunged into the head of the beast and it fell without a groan. Then the rest were let out and the dead beast was cut up.

Another eighty miles brought us back to Coonamble, from whence we started to Dubbo in the evening of laying the foundation stone. The train goes from Dubbo to Sydney, which place we reached in time to pay a visit to the new bishop of Auckland¹². Then we took the steamer to Newcastle, and after six weeks’ absence reached Singleton on the 8th November. We had some narrow escapes in the course of our drive from Coonamble to Dubbo. The devil, I suppose, was angry at all the good we had done. But thank God we got home safe and sound. And now I have just returned from a “slashing” mission in Sydney, our first in the metropolis. Father Hegarty and myself came home in great glee.

That concludes Father O’Farrell’s account of adventures which he so evidently enjoyed. His rather more reserved superior, Father Vaughan, adds a sort of postscript concerning the Sydney mission. “It has been most suc-

¹² John Edmund Luck was Bishop of Auckland, NZ, 1882 – 1890. He had been a Benedictine in Ramsgate, England.

cessful and has led to a request by the Marist Fathers for a mission in the adjoining and principal parish of St. Patrick's"¹³.

Father Vaughan further claimed that this mission in Sydney marked a new era in the missions in Australia¹⁴. It is a claim that undoubtedly has much justification in the new field where they were bound to be a novel experience for places such as those described by Father O'Farrell and almost as much so even in the emerging cities like Sydney. One can hardly doubt that the work of the Redemptorists was greatly benefited by the fact that the Archbishop of Sydney was the nephew of their superior. But much credit must also go to the experiences catalogued by Father O'Farrell. Bishop Murray proved most enthusiastic in reporting his experiences shared with the missionary, and his enthusiasm was increased by further experience in a similar missionary journey with Father James Hegarty, known to his Redemptorist confreres as Boanerges, the Son of Thunder. The missionary apostolate so inaugurated has continued to be the principal work of the Congregation in Australia.

¹³ *Chronica Cong. SS. Redempt. in Australia*, in archives of the Redemptorist Province of Canberra, 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*