

This was William Bernard Ullathorne, a 26-year-old Benedictine priest who looked little more than a boy. Yet, if he looked like a boy, Ullathorne had two qualities that were necessary for his survival: enormous self-confidence and a belief in ecclesiastical authority, which he readily communicated to others. His autobiography, written years later, carries a memorable cameo scene of his meeting with Father Therry.

Father Therry arrived whilst I was having some dinner and was at once, as his housekeeper had been, very patronising, spoke to me, as she had done, of my very youthful appearance for a priest, and offered me, no doubt with kind intention, every assistance in his power to settle me in some part of the colony. I knew that his first impulses were generally sound, so after the cloth was removed and we three priests were left by ourselves, I produced the document constituting me Vicar-General and shewing me to be exclusively possessed of jurisdiction in New South Wales. He read it and immediately went on his knees. This act of obedience and submission gave me great internal relief... The next morning as I came from Mass Father Therry met me and said: 'Sir, there are two parties among us, and I wish to put you in possession of my ideas on the subject.' I replied: 'No, Father Therry if you will pardon me, there are not two parties.' He warmed up, as his quiet and sensitive nature prompted, and replied with his face in a glow: 'How can you know about it? You are only just arrived, and you are as yet so inexperienced.'

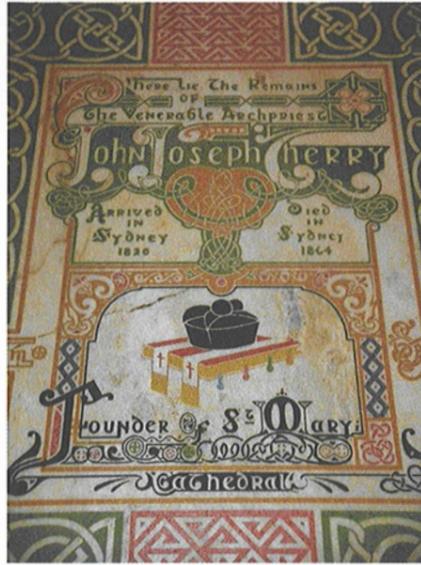
'Father Therry,' I said with all gravity, 'listen to me. There are two parties yesterday. There are none today. They arose from the unfortunate want of some person carrying ecclesiastical authority. That is at an end. For the present in New South Wales, I am the Church, and they that gather not with me, scatter. So now there are no longer two parties.'

In the collection of pictures that we call church history, this is a precious cameo.

Ullathorne knew, however, that against Father Therry's wide and well-earned popularity he was a lightweight. Something more than a mere Vicar-General was needed. And so, on the second Sunday of September 1835, there arrived our first bishop, John Bede Polding, the revered Benedictine saint. The next Sunday Polding was formally installed in his inchoate cathedral and the clergy made their ritual acts of obedience to their bishop. All but one – Father Therry was not there. Within days of arriving in Sydney Polding had moved Father Therry out of the town and posted him off to the south, to the parish of Campbelltown. His friends in Sydney protested to the bishop at Therry's removal. They protested in vain. Perhaps Therry had come to realise that in 1835 the days of the one-man band were coming to an end. Bishop Polding was getting together an orchestra and he himself would be its conductor.

Therry's Last Years

Then he was off again – this time to Van Diemen's Land. Therry stayed on in Hobart and began to build. Meanwhile, Polding, looking for brother bishops, persuaded an Englishman, R.W. Willson, to accept the new diocese of Hobart Town. Willson agreed, on two conditions: that the diocese would be free of debt and that Father Therry would be recalled to Sydney. With that understanding, the new bishop arrived in Hobart in May 1844... where he was met by Father Therry, who told him that there was a debt of 3,300 pounds on the diocese. Another dreary dispute about rights, titles to land, and money! It lasted for 14 years and



poisoned Wilson's relations with Polding.

By that time Therry was well away from Hobart. Having been in the meantime parish priest of Melbourne and of Windsor, he became, in May 1856, parish priest of Balmain. As soon as he got there, he began to plan another church. His life in Balmain ran along the smooth rails of parish duty: Sunday Mass at 9.00am and 11.00am; catechetical instruction at 3.00pm; Rosary/Sermon/Benediction at 7.00pm. Weekday Mass at 7.00am (7.30am in winter). Rosary every evening at 7.00, on Fridays with Benediction. Confession on Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings 'and whenever persons present themselves'. The 1860 *Catholic Almanac* reports: 'Catholics: about 350. Weekly communicants: about 15'. It was an ordered, routine parochial Catholicism, very different from the Church he had known as a solitary priest in the 1820s. In 1858, Archbishop Polding and his clergy cast their minds back to those heroic days when Father Therry had been the only priest on mainland Australia. They determined to endow the pioneer with the title 'Archpriest'. It was a term of honour, an affectionate recognition of a long career of service. In the table of precedence, Father Therry now ranked immediately after the archbishop and the vicar-general. It was a late picking that warmed his ageing heart.

CONCLUSION

John Joseph Therry's claim to our respect rests on a somewhat unglamorous, yet quite real, base: he came and he remained. On the foundations prepared by lay people before him he erected the first structures of the Church in mainland Australia. That was his vocation and he stuck to it. When he came, he intended to stay for only four years; he remained here for 44 years, until his death. Nothing and nobody could persuade him to go. His fidelity to his mission was so everyday that it went unremarked. It is, however, the most remarkable thing about the Archpriest and those for whom he stands.

Fr Therry died on 25 May, 1864. His remains are buried in the crypt of St. Mary's Cathedral, beneath a stone which names him as founder of the cathedral. When Pope Paul VI visited the cathedral crypt in 1970, he fell to his knees and kissed that grave. Even in death, John Joseph Therry commands attention.

INFORM

This is an edited version of an essay first published in *Faith and Culture: Bicentennial Reflections*, edited by Margaret Press & Neil Brown (Manly: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1988), where references are to be found. Used with the permission of the author.

BIO:

Edmund Campion was born in Sydney in 1933 and educated at St Ignatius College. He obtained his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Sydney in 1954. He then went on to complete a Master of Arts at the University of Cambridge as well as theological studies through the Catholic Institute of Sydney. He was ordained as a priest in 1961 and after curacies at several Sydney parishes was appointed a lecturer in History at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, subsequently becoming Professor of History there. Following his retirement in 1998, he was appointed an Emeritus Professor. In 2005, the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) was conferred upon him at the University of Sydney.

INFORM

Informative
Intelligent
Inspirational



"The priest who planted the tree of the Catholic faith in Australia, and who protected and cared for it almost single handed for ten years, was a secular priest – John Joseph Therry"

Archbishop and historian, Eris O'Brien

Archpriest John Joseph Therry
Founder of the
Catholic Church in Australia



Father Therry
R.C.

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2014 marks the 150th anniversary of the death of Fr John Therry who is rightly considered the founder of the Church in Australia. Sydney priest and historian Edmund Campion tells of Therry and his role in the beginnings of our Church.

The Sydney Gazette for 6 May, 1820, carried the following news:

On Tuesday arrived from England and Ireland the ship Janus, Captain Mowatt, having on board 105 female prisoners and 26 children. She sailed from the cove of Cork the 5th of December, entered the harbour of Rio the 7th of February, and delayed a fortnight. Passengers, Rev. Philip Conolly and Rev. John Joseph Therry.



INTRODUCTION

And so, on Tuesday, 3 May 1820, Father Therry sails into our history. He had few illusions. The son of a middle-class trading family from Cork, he was educated privately and then he entered the Carlow seminary. Ill-health broke off his seminary studies before he was ordained at the age of 25. Working first as a curate in Dublin he then became secretary to the bishop of Cork. Cork was the port from which the Irish convicts sailed to New South Wales. One day young Father Therry saw a wagon-load of manacled convicts being taken to the port. He ran into a bookseller's, emptied his pockets and bought what prayerbooks he could. These he gave to the convicts. Some have seen this as Therry's moment of election-like Gregory the Great seeing the English slaves in the Roman market and vowing to bring Christ to England – the plight of the convicts touched the soul of the young priest in that Cork street and made him dedicate his life to them.

Whatever about that, he got to know Father Jeremiah O'Flynn, whose six-months underground ministry in Sydney had been terminated in May 1818. O'Flynn could tell him of the Catholics awaiting a priest, of how Mr. Davis of Charlotte Square had welcomed him, of Mr. Lacey's house in Parramatta where he had administered the sacrament of Confirmation to colonial youths, and of how he had left the Blessed Sacrament in Mr. Dempsey's house in Kent Street.

CONVICT ANCESTORS

The history of Catholicism in Australia begins in January 1788, when the First Fleet arrived. The Catholic convicts brought their faith with them and kept it alive, however fitfully, throughout the succeeding years. **Almost uniquely in world history, Catholicism in Australia was founded not by bishops, nor by monks, nor by nuns, nor by priests, but by the laity – and convict laity at that.** Here is truly a Church of Sinners. Here, right from the start, the saint and the larrikin can be found in the one person.

Recent historical research has given us a more accurate picture of those convict ancestors of ours. For the most part, they were a bad lot. On some ships up to 30 percent of the Irish convicts were there for 'crimes of violence', not just pub brawls, as some have liked to suggest. Half of them were murder, manslaughter or assault. On the other hand, it should be said that the great majority

of Irish convicts were transported for the minimum period of seven years, indicating perhaps that they were not hardened criminals but people driven by hunger or poverty. Petty theft was their usual crime; farm animals their usual targets. Once they had worked out their time or been granted a pardon, most of them became useful members of the new society.

In this their religion played a part. In character it may have been closer to Italian Catholicism than the legalistic and clericalist Irish-Australian church most of us grew up in. To try to assess it by counting the heads at church or the volume of financial contributions may be as misplaced as similar questions put to test the authenticity of contemporary Italo-Australian Catholics. Its characteristics may have been more intangible. The Catholic faith in colonial Australia was a poem that gave life meaning or respite. It was also a folk culture that one shared with others, a bond of loyalty. And it was *there*.

Surgeon Peter Cunningham, who travelled out on five voyages with convict ships, wrote that the only signs of religion he ever saw were among some Catholics whom he observed unostentatiously 'counting their beads and fervently crossing themselves and repeating their prayers from the book'. In the bush, convicts and others were known to go aside on Sundays for prayer. Some kept the Good Friday observances. In the absence of a priest, laymen emerged as spiritual leaders. In Sydney a stonemason, James Dempsey, who may have been a Carmelite tertiary, read prayers with those condemned to death.

It was at Dempsey's house in Kent Street that Father O'Flynn left the Blessed Sacrament before he was expelled in 1818. Columbus Fitzpatrick, who was a boy at the time, recorded the events many years later

Mr. Dempsey secured the assistance of five or six other religious old men, whose whole duty and pleasure was to watch and pray in that room, in which an altar had been erected and a tabernacle placed to receive the holy pix. This room was converted into a little chapel, and it was no unusual thing on a Sunday, when Catholics could assemble to join in the prayers at Mass which were being read in that room, to see many of them kneeling under the verandah, aye even in the street, much to the amusement of the scoffers, who said we ought to be sunstruck. >



1840s coll.

ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL.

1890s coll.

The building of St Mary's occupied much of Father Therry's time – a reminder to latter-day Catholics that from earliest times getting the church built (and paid for) was a constant theme in the history of Australian Catholicism.



FATHER THERRY
IN 1810
From a miniature bearing his signature

John Joseph Therry as a young man.

THERRY'S EARLY MINISTRY

In 1820, there were six or seven thousand Catholics in the colony and the priests had to make a start somewhere. They lodged with Mr. Davis and used John Reddington's pub for Mass. They called a meeting to open a subscription to build a chapel. It was a success: not only did prominent Catholics such as James Meehan, William Davis and James Dempsey join the committee, they also won the support of Protestants such as Captain John Piper and the merchants Robert Jenkins and Francis Williams. What would the chapel be like?

Early in 1821, Father Conolly left Sydney for Van Diemen's Land. With Conolly out of the way, the younger man was free to pursue that immortal clerical avocation, building. He dreamed of a vast Gothic structure on land given for the purpose by the government on the outskirts of town. The economy was buoyant and Therry planned on a grandiose scale. By October 1821, the foundation stone was ready for Governor Macquarie to lay. Then the money began to dry up. In 1828, an observer described St. Mary's by moonlight as looking like a ruined abbey. There were fears that the unfinished roof would be blown away by a strong southerly. It was not until December 1833, a dozen years after the foundation stone, that the first Mass in St Mary's could be celebrated there.

The building of St Mary's occupied much of Father Therry's time – a reminder to latter-day Catholics that from earliest times getting the church built (and paid for) was a constant theme in the history of Australian Catholicism. For Father Therry, however, there were other demands. He wrote

I have to celebrate Divine Service and give public instruction at Parramatta or Liverpool once, and in Sydney twice on every Sunday, frequently to visit the hospitals, and attend all persons professing the Catholic religion who may be in danger of death, within a circuit of about 200 miles. In order to discharge these and other duties, I have frequently been obliged to procure three or four horses in the course of a day.

The stories of these years are part of the Therry legend: how he would keep a horse always saddled at his door, so that if he rode one in tired another could take him to a sick call immediately; how he had himself pulled by rope across a flooded river to hear a condemned man's last Confession; how he ran to Government House with evidence of a condemned man's innocence and won a pardon with only minutes to spare; how he argued for the rights of Catholic convicts not to be sent to Protestant services, even where there was no Catholic Mass available...These are stories to delight a legend-maker.

“The priest who planted the tree of the Catholic faith in Australia, and who protected and cared for it almost single handed for ten years, was a secular priest – John Joseph Therry” – Archbishop and historian, Eris O'Brien

THERRY IS SACKED

In 1825 there arrived Thomas Hobbes Scott, first archdeacon on a salary of 2000 pounds with allowances. Archdeacon Scott's aim was to make the Anglican Church in Australia as near an established church as possible. The Church and School Corporation of 1825 granted one-seventh of the lands of New South Wales for the purposes of the Church of England and schools in the colony. In June 1825 Therry published in the *Sydney Gazette* an announcement of his hopes to establish his own schools in the face of the state-supported Anglican schools. Therry ended his notice with a courteous expression of his unqualified respect for the Anglican clergy-but, alas, the phrase appeared in print as a 'qualified' respect for Anglican ministers. Although he could prove that the insult was not his, Therry had made too many enemies in high places. His official position as chaplain was cancelled and his salary stopped. In Hobart, Therry's nominal superior, Father Conolly viewed all this with distaste. In

letters to Bishop Poynter of London, Conolly constantly denigrated Therry: he is imprudent...he is too fond of newspaper fame.

MONEY PROBLEMS

Father Conolly went on to express a most serious charge against his brother priest. He has, he wrote to the bishop,

a strong propensity to collect contributions from the people for his own use. ...I defy any priest to do his duty and obtain, as he has, any considerable property from the people without conniving at their vices or going at least very near conniving at them.

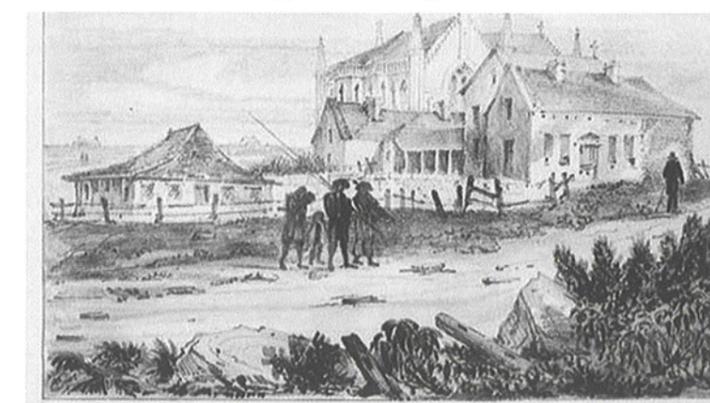
Governor Darling too noted that 'Mr.Therry is acquiring wealth'. It would be poor history, not to notice Father Therry's ability to acquire land and holdings, his infection by the curse of the golden sovereign. Despite considerable dispersal of his estate in his final years, on his death he left (mainly to the Jesuits) over 4000 acres in holdings that ranged from a coal-mine in Pittwater to grazing land at Bowral. It is possible to say, in extenuation of Father Therry's acquisitions, that he had a family at home in Ireland who depended on his help – he sent them money through his friend, the temperance campaigner Father Mathew who, much to the family's chagrin, took a commission on the transactions. It is possible too to say that his income went largely to help the poor and needy, most of which is unrecorded. We know too that he gave Caroline Chisholm money on at least one occasion.

Still, a cloud of questions hangs over Father Therry's financial enterprises. To make matters worse, he seemed to carry in his mind no clear distinction, such as a canon lawyer might require, between what belonged to him and what belonged to the Church.

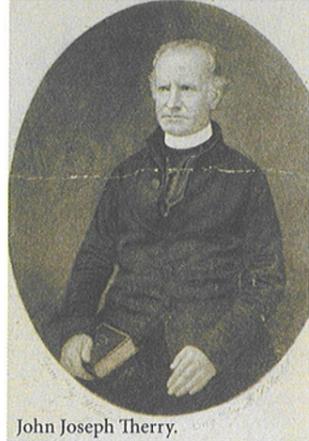
CHANGING TIMES

The days of this frontier religion, however, were beginning to pass. Mrs. Roger Therry's bonnet was one indicator of things to come; it was the first time Sydney had seen a lady's bonnet, rather than a shawl or mob-cap, at Mass. Clearly, Catholics *were* becoming a different class of people.

Then, in February 1833, there arrived the man who thought he could pull it all together because he was vested with powers of Vicar-General of the Bishop of Mauritius. >



CATHOLIC CHAPEL (Hyde Park)



John Joseph Therry.