

## THE COMING OF THE FRANCISCANS TO QUEENSLAND

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It may come as a surprise to some of you that Australia's Cardinal Moran, in a one-penny pamphlet published in 1902, dissented from the received historical research to suggest that the Spanish explorer, Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, landed near present-day Gladstone on the east coast of Queensland.

This thesis has bearing on my topic. At that time—and under royal patronage—all Spanish exploratory naval expeditions were to have on board at least three Franciscans. De Quiros had some eight Franciscan friars on his and so we subscribe to Cardinal Moran's finding that the first Franciscans to visit Queensland did so in 1606.

I believe that we are on firmer ground to acknowledge that the first Franciscan friar and scientist in Australia was Fr Louis Receveur. He accompanied the small French fleet, under the command of Comte de La Perouse; arriving at Botany Bay just after Captain Arthur Phillip. Fr Louis died there from injuries received when in Samoa, and he was buried on the shores of present day Botany Bay.

It was in response to the plight of the Irish Catholic convicts that there was a regular flow of Irish Franciscans to the colonies beginning in 1839 with the arrival of Fr Bonaventure Geoghegan.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to say more about the development of the Franciscan presence in New South Wales. Suffice to say that the first apostolic mission of the friars in 1879, was to the Catholics of the eastern suburbs of Sydney. The friars are still ministering to the parishes of Waverley, Paddington and Edgecliff.

It was an interesting condition of the arrangement between Archbishop Polding (an English Benedictine) and the friars, that only Irish, English and American friars were permitted to be part of the Franciscan Foundation. For the most part, it was a steady stream of friars from Ireland that kept the Franciscan presence alive in this country in the 19th century. However, other provinces did assist, principally the English, Dutch and Belgian.

But of special interest to us is the arrival in Sydney in November 1917 of Fr Severino Mambrini who had come to know Australians while a Chaplain in the first A.I.F. His particular ministry was to Italian migrants in Australia and that took him especially to the canefields of northern Queensland. He is commemorated by 'Mambrini Street' in the Queensland town of Halifax.

In 1923 at the then Apostolic Delegate's request, he made what is probably one of the first religious surveys of any ethnic group in Australia. His desire to found an Italian-Franciscan community was vetoed. He died on 16 December 1940 at the age of sixty-five.

The Franciscan who can truly be labelled the founder of this Province's presence in Queensland was unquestionably Fr Fidelis Griffin. In 1927 he was appointed Commissary Provincial of the Australian mission, with a positive mandate to vitalise and to initiate all the necessary preliminary stages in preparation for forming an independent Province in Australia.

The first task of Fidelis was to have the friars move from their Sydney enclave. However his approach to Melbourne's Archbishop Mannix suggesting a takeover of St Francis Church in Melbourne (originally ministered by Franciscan Bishop Geoghegan) was unsuccessful.

Desperate for priests, Mannix did ask Fidelis for the loan of two priests. This was granted and they began the very successful task of recruiting young Victorians to the Order.

While this was being played out Fidelis was busy up north in Queensland, and succeeded in getting permission from Archbishop Duhig for a foundation in Brisbane.

Duhig offered Fidelis Wynnum, Manly and South Brisbane. But the place chosen eventually was Kedron which was then a very disadvantaged housing settlement for World War I returned soldiers.

What Fidelis saw in Kedron was that it came with quite a few acres of land. It was Fidelis' plan to buy this land from the Archdiocese; for the wily friar had in mind to set up in Kedron a training centre for young men wishing to be friars. When these two Irishmen came to meet about a price for the land, Duhig asked £700 an acre but was beaten down by the friar to £250 an acre.

Our one-time archivist, John Keane, described Fidelis as 'an extraordinary and complex character, strong willed, supremely confident in himself and his own opinion and judgment, fiercely determined, a man of profound yet totally simple faith, amazing vitality and who loved the Order and everything Franciscan'. He was also hot-headed and obstinate.

Of the Archbishop, his biographer, Fr Tom Boland saw him as a man of 'dove-like simplicity and serpentine cunning'.

So the friars took possession of Kedron parish on the evening of 12 June 1929. It is interesting to note that the next year at the Irish Provincial Chapter, Fidelis mentioned the great need and opportunity for a Senior Boys' College in Brisbane.

The parish had previously been in the care of the Archdiocese with Fr Stanaway as Parish Priest. He had first lived with the Wren family in Cremorne Road and set out to build a presbytery which was completed by the time the friars arrived. At the time, there were two other Mass centres: Gordon Park and Bald Hills, as well as a parish at Lutwyche. Fr Stanaway moved to Bulimba, leaving the parish with a debt of £2000.

The boundaries of the parish were clarified: Stafford Road to Rode Road and Gympie Road to Tannery Creek—in all some 300 Catholics.

The immediate concern of the friars was provision for a school. Land on the other side of Turner Road was purchased from the Council and, by November 1929, erection of the school was underway. The next problem was finding staff for this new school. No teaching sisters were available so Fidelis wrote to the Mother-General of the Missionary Franciscan Sisters in Rome requesting sisters for Kedron. With the personal intercession of Monsignor Paschal Robinson, friar and Papal Nuncio to Ireland, she acceded to the request and arranged for four sisters to be sent to Kedron.

To accommodate the sisters, the friars vacated the Presbytery (now the Parish Hall) and took up residence in the verandah of the new school building where they batched until the new friary was built. Always with an eye to the formation of new friars and following the Waverley friary pattern somewhat, this friary was designed just as an initial small corner of an impressive Spanish-Californian-mission style cloistered college with a towering campanile featuring the chapel at the left-hand end of the long front facade. This friary was blessed and opened by Archbishop Duhig in June 1930.

That same year, Fr Andrew Wogan taught at Father Cain's Brisbane Missionary Seminary in Ashgrove—presently the site of Marist College, Ashgrove.

Following the Second World War there was a significant influx of young men to the Order and a need to explore further options for friars' ministries. With retreat houses in Melbourne and Auckland, Archbishop Duhig approached the friars with the request for a retreat house in Brisbane; but without the assurance of financial assistance from the Archdiocese, the proposal was abandoned.

The next friar ministries in Queensland were in the Diocese of Townsville. At the request of Bishop Ryan, the Fantome Island chaplaincy to the Aborigine Leprosarium began in 1954, with Fr Roch Allen as its first residential friar. The original Catholic Mission here had been established by the Italian friar, Severino Mambini. Then the friars ministered on Palm Island. Roch was there from 1954 to 1963 and Fr Ferdi Parer on Palm Island from 1973 to 1981.

The next major development in Queensland was at Kedron with the establishment of an all-boys' school which now becomes a story of twists and turns.

Late in 1953 a decision was made by the Provincial Administration of the friars to establish a boys' primary school somewhere in the Kedron parish, with it being staffed by the Irish Franciscan Brothers - they refused the request.

In January 1956 the decision was that the friars establish the boys' school at Kedron but that it be a parochial school called 'Padua' with Fr Damian Nolan as Rector. Only one year into existence, the Provincial Chapter of 1957 disowned the project in practice, but the Definitory that met after this Chapter ignored the wishes of the Chapter and a decision was made to continue the school with two friars as teachers for one year, with no reappointments of those two, nor the assigning of others beyond December 1957.

Again, a request was made to the Irish Franciscan Brothers. This time Archbishop Duhig refused them permission to work in Brisbane. The final solution was to turn the parochial school into one owned and operated by the Friars; three were appointed to begin teaching at Padua at the beginning of 1959.

Bearing all this in mind, it is no surprise that the friars refused the request of Fr Ormond Rush to establish a boys' school at St Mary's parish in Bowen!

By 1960 the friars had offered their services to the Bishop of Townsville, Hugh Ryan, and accepted the parish of Townsville West. In 1976 two more Townsville parishes were ministered to by the friars: Belgian Gardens and Garbutt. Five years later there was some rationalization of the Townsville situation with Belgian Gardens and Garbutt, although they remained separate parishes vis-a-vis the diocese, being amalgamated, from the Order's viewpoint, with Townsville West under one Pastor.

Still in Townsville in 1964, there was a request from the Bishop, initially for a friar to be the Catholic Chaplain at the newly established James Cook University. This was agreed to by the friars in January 1965. The request was then expanded—for the friars to provide a rector and assume the responsibility for the administration of the proposed St Paul's College which was the Catholic Hall of Residence at the university. In 1968 Fr Roger Pearson, who held a Doctorate in Sociology from the University of Louvain, Belgium, was appointed first rector to reside temporarily at the Townsville West friary, until in 1969 the friars took up residence at the completed college on the university campus.

There were difficulties from the beginning in providing suitable staff for St Paul's, and since it was foreseen that these difficulties—especially in providing rectors—were unlikely to ease in the future, the province relinquished administration of this University College at the end of 1982.

In the early 1990s the friars began to vacate their parishes in Townsville and, in 1996, established the parish of Saint Anthony of Padua at Deeragun, a fast growing outer northern suburb of Townsville. Today there is a friar on loan to the diocese and he administers Good Shepherd Ministerial Region, Kirwan, and the retired Bishop of Aitape assists at Deeragun.

For many years there had been requests to establish another Franciscan community in the Brisbane area. This came to fruition when, in 1986, a Novitiate was established at Mt Glorious Road, Samford.

In 1992, as there were no novices that year, the friary became a Postulancy House. The next year the property was leased to a local family, the Stevensons, which purchased the property in 1997.

Today there are three Franciscan communities in Queensland: Parish friaries in Kedron and Deeragun, in suburban Townsville, and a community at Kedron, made up for the most part, of retired friars.

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