

## Catholic Seminaries in Australia: 1835 – 2023

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### Part 1: Australia's First Seminaries in Sydney

#### Vicariate Apostolic of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land

In 1819 the 9000 Catholics living in New Holland and Van Diemen's Land were part of the Vicariate Apostolic of the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius, Madagascar, and New Holland (with the adjacent islands). Its bishop, English Benedictine Edward Bede Slater, resided in Mauritius and had never visited his distant flock in *Terra Australis*.

However, in 1820, Bishop Slater sent two priests, Fathers Philip Conolly and John Joseph Therry, to care for these isolated Catholics and, when Fr William Ullathorne OSB arrived at Sydney in 1833 as Vicar General of New Holland, he found that both priests had cared well for some 22,000 Catholics scattered across the colony.

In 1834, after much pleading, Pope Gregory XVI established the new Vicariate Apostolic of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land, and appointed the young English Benedictine, John Bede Polding, as its first bishop (Image: Young Bishop John Bede Polding OSB, Vicar Apostolic of New Holland and Van Diemen's Land).



On his appointment, Polding stated publicly that “a seminary for the express purpose of educating clergy for this mission seems absolutely necessary” and linked his hopes for a locally educated clergy to his ‘Benedictine dream’.

#### First Sydney seminaries

Before departing England in March 1835, Polding had recruited 6 seminarians whom he had designated ‘catechists’ so each could receive a £100 government stipend. The first seminary began aboard the *SS Oriental* on its passage to Hobart and Sydney with Polding instructing the seminarians: 3 Benedictine sub-deacons – John Spencer, Henry Gregory, and Joseph Sumner – and 3 secular seminarians – John Kenny, John Harding, and John Gorman. All were English except Kenny, a Scot.

On arrival at Hobart, Polding assigned Kenny to Fr Conolly as a catechist. and on arrival at Sydney in September 1835 assigned Harding to Norfolk Island as a catechist. He sent Gorman home.

The Benedictine sub-deacons resided at the Bishop's House at Woolloomooloo where Polding continued to form them in theology, pastoral ministry, and community life. They

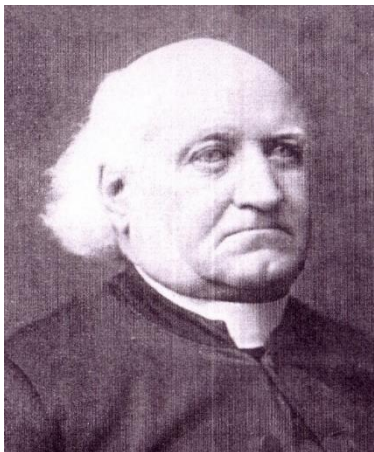


were soon joined by four others: Irish-born Richard Walsh and Michael McGrath, and local-born Maurice Reynolds and Thomas Ferguson. On 8 May 1836, in St Mary's Cathedral, Polding ordained Spencer and Gregory to the diaconate, and the next day ordained Sumner to the priesthood, the first in

Australia. (Image: St Mary's Chapel and adjacent buildings in Sydney around 1835. The foundation stone was laid in 1821)

In January 1838 the *Australian* newspaper advertised: 'Seminary of St Mary's adjoining St Mary's Cathedral. This institution will be opened *pro forma* on the 26<sup>th</sup> of this month. Studies will be commenced on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February'. It was to be a modest new seminary/school which Polding was putting under the care of Fr Charles Lovat, a former English Jesuit and professor at Stonyhurst College whom Ullathorne had recruited in 1837 for the New Holland mission.

Enrolments began with 14 students, among them the young Tasmanian-born Daniel Vincent



O'Connell who in 1848 would become the first Australian-born candidate ordained to the priesthood. (Image: Daniel Vincent Maurus O'Connell, OSB: First Australian-born Catholic Priest. Photo courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Hobart. Photo taken in Launceston around 1890)

Seminarian numbers peaked at 26 in 1849.

### **Polding's Benedictine dream**

Polding's dream for the Church in Australia was a Benedictine abbey-diocese at Sydney, with an English abbot-bishop presiding over a community of mainly Benedictine priest monks. Before leaving England, he had sought permission to set up his Benedictine monastery and novitiate on arrival in Sydney, but both the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide and his own English Benedictine Congregation had refused. After further attempts in 1837 and 1839 Polding won approval for the monastery and novitiate, but not the extra Benedictine personnel he wanted for the daily monastic liturgical services and for the missionary work he planned to undertake.

Polding wanted the abbot-bishop and monks to have effective control over the diocese's future: the monks electing a new abbot-bishop whenever required, the abbey-diocese's vast territory dotted with smaller monastic communities served by monk-missionaries with

secular clergy assisting, and Benedictine nuns and other religious all working together in harmony and pooling resources under an uncommonly unified Episcopal-cum-monastic leadership. In 1851 Polding even petitioned Rome to make Sydney a Benedictine diocese 'in perpetuity' with the monastic community holding a perpetual right to elect the local bishop. However, Rome refused, insisting that future bishops be chosen from both religious and secular priests, that an adequate number of local priests be trained, and that a Tridentine seminary be established.

### **Immediate problems**

The immediate problems in 1835 were four: insufficient priests (9 only) for a mostly Irish Catholic population of around 26,000, the Irish Catholics wanting Irish priests, the British colonial government wanting only English priests, and the English Benedictines unable to supply any extra personnel.

The success of the seminary, therefore, was critical. But whereas Polding wanted it to produce Benedictine priests, most of his seminarians wanted to be secular priests. On his visits to Europe in 1840-43 and 1846-48, where he tried to gather funds for 'the absolute necessity to erect a seminary', he consistently linked the seminary to his Benedictine dream and stated publicly that he preferred priests and seminarians coming to Australia to join the Benedictine order and to live in community. While he was happy for Irish seminarians to complete part of their studies at the All Hallows Seminary in Dublin, when they arrived in Sydney Polding preferred that they 'receive the [Benedictine] order and religious habit', convinced that having small groups of Benedictine priest monks on the mission would best avoid clashes between secular and regular clerics. However, his attempts to recruit newly arrived secular clerics into the Benedictine Order, especially Irish, not only had mixed success but were counterproductive. After 1850 not a single student or priest who had completed his studies in an Irish seminary joined the Order.

Also militating against Polding's Benedictine dream was the unstructured nature of the Church in Australia. Between 1820 and 1876 both priests and bishops were constantly on the move. There were no parishes – only 'districts' - and no parish priests. Stability was rare.

While St Mary's Seminary was part of the Benedictine cathedral monastery, many of its presidents and professors were neither Benedictines nor English and it lacked a true Benedictine ethos. Fr Ullathorne had attempted to instil that ethos early on but in 1850 Bishop Henry Davis OSB separated the Benedictine novices and postulants from the other students. When the question of whether a Benedictine monastic priesthood or a secular (mainly Irish) priesthood was best suited to the needs of the Church in NSW, it could not be resolved. The issue came to a head in 1851 when several Benedictine lay brothers left the monastery and Polding suspended the seminary president.

In 1852, amidst the crisis, Polding opened a new St Mary's College at *Lyndhurst*, near Glebe.



(Image: St Mary's College *Lyndhurst*, Glebe NSW, 1852-1877) primarily to educate the sons of 'respectable' free settlers and prepare them for Sydney University which opened the same year. When the monastic community and novitiate moved to *Lyndhurst* the cathedral seminary continued to operate, but only as a preparatory school or minor seminary. While *Lyndhurst* functioned as

an ecclesiastical seminary for both Benedictine and secular priests, it had few seminarians and was regarded by most of the secular clergy and laity as a thoroughly Benedictine institution. Also, by this time anti-Benedictine and anti-Polding sentiment was high and manifested in frustration with the direction and achievements of *Lyndhurst*.

The issue over Benedictine/secular priesthood erupted again in 1854, this time over the lack of discretion in admitting novices and postulants to the monastery, and the validity of the Benedictine vows. Several Benedictines sought permission to become secular priests, with some claiming that the Benedictine Order was a barrier to the local priesthood, and that not a single native of Sydney has been ordained a priest. From 1838 to 1847, all 20 of the seminarians formed at the cathedral seminary and ordained to the priesthood were immigrants who had commenced their studies in England or Ireland. The first Australian-born candidate was not ordained until 1848.

Over the 42 years (1835-1877) that Polding's seminaries operated, 36 priests were formed either fully or partially: 24 Benedictines and 12 seculars. Just 7 were born in Australia. Fifteen had arrived in Australia as seminarians, including six already in orders. Another 4 were ordained deacons. Four priests and 2 deacons left sacred ministry after ordination, and most married.

The steady stream of locally born secular and religious priests so sorely needed in the Australian mission had not eventuated, and the recruitment and formation of candidates for the secular priesthood had been short-lived. Of the 48 priests working in the Sydney Archdiocese in 1854, just half had spent time in the Sydney seminaries. The last three seminarians formed at *Lyndhurst* were ordained in 1869, and from then until 1875 the Church in Australia did not have a single functioning seminary.

Despite almost universal agreement that Polding's Benedictine dream was unworkable and unrealizable, even when St Mary's Cathedral, the earthly centre of his dream, was destroyed by fire in June 1865, he continued to cling to it until his death.

When Polding died in 1877, one of the first decisions his successor, the English Archbishop Roger Bede Vaughan OSB, made was to close the *Lyndhurst* seminary permanently and secularise the remaining professed Benedictine monks.

In his assessment, Cardinal Moran was brutal: “His [Polding’s] seminary failed, his college failed, his religious community failed, his Monastic Cathedral failed, his long-cherished scheme of setting the seal of the Benedictine Order on the whole Australian Church melted away like an idle dream”.