

Catholic Seminaries in Australia: 1835 – 2023

Peter J Wilkinson

Part 2: Early diocesan and other religious seminaries prior to the 1885 First Australasian Plenary Council

In 1842 Pope Gregory XVI established the Australian hierarchy with a single provincial structure to provide unity and common discipline across the entire Mission. He made Sydney the Metropolitan See with Hobart and Adelaide as suffragan dioceses. When the three bishops met for the 1st Provincial Council held in Sydney in 1844, they said nothing about seminaries.

Melbourne seminaries

On his arrival in Melbourne in 1847, Bishop James Alipius Goold's priorities were to establish



a seminary and a secondary school for boys. In 1849 he opened St Francis Seminary in a schoolhouse next to the church (Image: *Portrait of James Goold*, c. 1850-5, oil on canvas. St Patrick's College in background) and St Francis School nearby to 'provide a full liberal education to advanced clerical and lay students.' (Image: St Francis Seminary and School, Melbourne, c. 1854. Photo dated 1924). The first six seminarians resided in Bishop Goold's house.



Soon after, he was granted prime land in East Melbourne and a £2500 grant to establish a Catholic Diocesan Grammar School for boys.



St Patrick's College boarding school and seminary opened in 1855 with 6 seminarians and 53 lay scholars. (Image: St Patrick's College, East Melbourne 1854-1968. St Patrick's Cathedral spires in background.)

It functioned well until 1858, when debts led to two closures. It reopened in 1862 as a day school only, with 3 seminarians residing at St Francis.

Hobart seminary

Bishop Willson established St Mary's Seminary in Hobart in 1854, to educate and train missionary priests for the colony. It continued until 1860, when debt forced its closure and its President, Fr Bond, took its 10 seminarians - including 9 Tasmanian-born - to Europe to continue their studies at Rome, England, and Ireland. Five were later ordained to the priesthood including 4 born in Tasmania.

South Australian seminary

In 1856 the Austrian Jesuits opened St Aloysius College at Sevenhill SA in the Clare Valley as a secondary boarding school for local and interstate boys. It also served as a novitiate and scholasticate for the Jesuits, and as a seminary for secular seminarians, but closed in 1859.



(Image: St Aloysius Jesuit College, Sevenhill, SA. The former College buildings now function as Sevenhill Wine Cellars. Photo dated 2009)

When the 2nd Provincial Council met in Melbourne in 1862, 7 new dioceses had been established - Perth in 1845, Melbourne, Maitland, and Port Victoria in 1847, Brisbane in 1859, and Goulburn and Armidale in 1862 – but only 4 of the 10 diocesan bishops turned up. Though insufficient for a canonical quorum, those present discussed in secret a proposal for a ‘central ecclesiastical college (seminary) for the Australian Province’, as well as an Australian College (seminary) in Rome. But as neither were considered urgent, no decisions were made. This meeting was never recognized as a council by the Holy See,

An Australian priesthood

The most relevant questions at this time were: is the Church in Australia ready for a local priesthood and prepared to develop it and, are seminaries viable without Catholic boys’ secondary schools? Across all dioceses in 1862 there were just 4 such schools.

In Melbourne, when Bishop Goold was struggling for quality staff, the Jesuit Superior in South Australia urged him to invite the Jesuits of the Irish Province to Melbourne. A rapid response followed, and in September 1865 two Irish Jesuit priests took up residence at St Patrick’s College and reopened it in October 1865 with 30 students. In 1866 over 100 students were enrolled and, when more Jesuits arrived, Goold contracted them to ‘train such Ecclesiastical students as his Lordship may entrust to their care’. The Jesuits saw their role as supporting the diocesan clergy and one priest was assigned specifically to form the seminarians at St Patrick’s. But when he did not return from Ireland in 1867, Goold closed the seminary in 1869.

2nd Provincial Council in 1869

When the 2nd Provincial Council convened in Melbourne in 1869, the three seminaries which had opened in Melbourne (1849), Hobart (1854), and Sevenhill (1856), had all closed and the last 3 remaining seminarians at the Benedictine *Lyndhurst* seminary in Glebe were about to be ordained.

At the Council, Archbishop Polding proposed a new ‘common or provincial seminary’ - but not as a priority. Bishop Matthew Quinn wrote to Bishop Lanigan: “We have said nothing about seminaries, because we do not know what to say. Please suggest something.” The only suggestion, formulated after the Council by Quinn, was: “that a provincial seminary be established in Melbourne under the care and management of the Jesuit Fathers”. However, no action followed and the 1862 proposal for an Australian College in Rome was not even mentioned.

At this time the Irish bishops were content to have the Irish seminaries prepare all the priests they needed. When Dean John Kenny of Sydney rebuked them fiercely for having no interest in an Australian priesthood, other leading Irish clerics identified Catholicism with Irishism and campaigned strongly for more Irish priests to be recruited for the Australian dioceses.

In 1865 a new policy for Irish seminarians intending to work in Australia was introduced. It recommended commencing their formation in Ireland and completing it in Australia, so they could better understand the local context and develop closer relations with the Australian-born clergy. This policy, however, was never implemented.

Hobart, Melbourne and Sevenhill seminaries re-opened

It was not until 3 years after the 1869 Council that the Australian Mission again had functioning seminaries.

In Hobart, Bishop Murphy revived St Mary's Seminary in 1872 at the Bishop's House,



(Image: Bishop's House at 218 Macquarie Street, Hobart. Site of St Mary's Seminary from 1872 to 1873) with Fr Kelsh, a former alumnus, as Rector. But in 1873 he moved it to the military barracks in Davey Street where it became more a 'superior' Catholic boys' school. It is not clear when the seminary formally closed, but in 1886 Bishop Murphy announced his intention to open a new Seminary College in a former convict building at Port Arthur. It appears not to have gone ahead.

In 1882 Fr Daniel Beechinor reorganized Catholic education for boys in Launceston by establishing a two-section school: St Francis Xavier High School (also called a Seminary) and St Patrick's Intermediate Seminary. There are no records of any students who progressed to the priesthood from these seminaries.

Bishop Goold reopened St Patrick's College in Melbourne in 1875 with 6 seminarians but closed it permanently in 1879. The remaining seminarians were sent to Rome, Sevenhill, and St Charles in Bathurst. From 1849 to 1879, the St Francis and St Patrick's seminaries had provided part or full formation for 22 priests.

In 1875 the Jesuits reopened St Aloysius in Sevenhill SA as a Jesuit novitiate and secular seminary and accepted two of the Melbourne seminarians. During its operation, St Aloysius prepared 16 seminarians for the secular priesthood including Fr Julian Tenison-Woods as well as 10 Jesuit priests including Donald MacKillop, brother of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. When it was closed permanently in 1885 Adelaide Archbishop Christopher Reynolds – a Sevenhill alumnus - planned to open a new diocesan seminary, but died in 1893 before he could implement his plans.

Brisbane seminary

Bishop James Quinn established a minor seminary at St Killian's College in 1871 to provide a 'pre-seminary' education for boys. In 1878 six seminarians were in formation, and by 1900 four candidates had been partially prepared for the priesthood, including 2 born in Australia. The seminary closed sometime before 1905.

Bathurst seminary

Bishop Matthew Quinn opened St Charles Borromeo Seminary in Bathurst in 1875 with 12 seminarians recruited from Ireland, hoping they would inspire ‘young Australians to come forward’. In 1881 it was moved to St Stanislaus College campus and in 1889, when the



Vincentians took control and incorporated it into St Stanislaus. (Image: St Charles Borromeo Seminary (1875-1891) and St Stanislaus College) From 1886 to 1889 St Charles was the sole functioning Australian diocesan major seminary.

During its 16 years of operation, St Charles formed 27 priests: 13 in full and 14 in part. The seminarians came from dioceses across Australia: Melbourne (1), Ballarat (3), Sale (1), Sandhurst (1), Bathurst (10), Maitland (2), Goulburn (2), Adelaide (2), and Brisbane (2). One graduate, Patrick Vincent Dwyer, became Australia’s first native-born bishop.

Priests ordained from Australia’s first Seminaries, 1835-1891

Seminaries	Years functioning	Priests Ordained	Australian-born
Bishop’s House, Woolloomooloo, NSW	1835-1837	2 ¹	0
St Mary’s Cathedral Seminary, Sydney	1838-1857	28	3
St Francis Seminary, Melbourne	1849-1854	3	0
St Mary’s Seminary, Hobart ²	1854-1860; 1872-73	14	4
St Patrick’s College & Seminary, East Melbourne	1855-62; 1875-79	19	5
St Aloysius College & Seminary, Sevenhill, SA	1856-59; 1875-85	26 ³	12 ⁴
St Mary’s College, Lyndhurst, Glebe, NSW	1858-1877	7	4
Marist Seminary, Clydesdale, NSW	1859-1869	0	0
St Killian’s College (minor seminary), Brisbane	1871-1905	4	2
St Charles Borromeo Seminary, Bathurst	1875 -1891	27	19
St Francis Xavier & St Patrick’s seminaries, Launceston	1882-1892	0	0
Jesuit Novitiate, Richmond/Kew/Greenwich NSW	1884-1934	0	0
Total priests ordained 1835-1891		130	49⁵

Notes: Many seminarians completed only part of their formation at a single seminary. They often studied at two or more seminaries during their 6-year formation, either in Australia or overseas. 1. Two others were ordained overseas and did not return to Australia. 2. Between 1842 and 1872 nine seminarians – 7 Irish and 2 English - arrived in Hobart

with at least 6 already in major orders (5 deacons, 1 sub-deacon). Three were ordained to the priesthood in the year of their arrival while the others were ordained after 1-6 years of further formation. It may be assumed that all completed their preparation for the priesthood under the supervision of Bishops Willson or Murphy. 3. Ten were ordained as Jesuit priests. 4. At least 12 can be confirmed as born in Australia. 5. Four Australian-born ordinands from these early seminaries were appointed bishops of Australian dioceses: Joseph Wilfred Dwyer (Wagga), Patrick Vincent Dwyer (Maitland), John Henry Norton (Port Augusta), and Christopher Reynolds (Adelaide).

Religious congregation seminaries

In 1859 French Marist Bishop Bataillon opened a seminary at Clydesdale (near Blacktown NSW) to form young Pacific Islander men for the priesthood and religious life who would serve the Marist missions in Polynesia and Fiji. Student numbers peaked at 28 in 1864, but not a single candidate was ordained. The seminary closed in 1869.

The Irish Jesuits opened St Ignatius Novitiate in Richmond VIC in 1884, moved it to Kew in 1886, and then to Greenwich NSW in 1890, where it remained until 1934.

Total ordinations

Prior to the 1st Australasian Plenary Council in 1885, a total of 130 candidates completed a part or all of their formation at the various seminaries established in Australia and were ordained. Of these, at least 49 were born in Australia.