

Catholics Seminaries in Australia 1835-2023

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Part 5: Romanisation of the seminary system

In 1901 eighty-seven percent of the clergy ministering in Australia were born, formed, and ordained in Ireland. For decades most Irish bishops had preferred Irish priests to those born and formed in Australia, even though most of the Irish priests were ill-prepared for the ruggedness of outback Australia.

Moreover, the Irish bishops in Australia had never encouraged their own diocesan priests to work among and evangelise the Indigenous peoples of Australia. They had consigned that apostolate to the religious congregations from continental Europe.

1905 Third Plenary Council of Australia

By 1905 Cardinal Moran's diocesan seminary at Manly had been operating for 16 years. It had formed 79 priests for 15 Australian dioceses and a further 54 seminarians from 17 dioceses were in formation. Most had been born in Australia.

In the same year, five religious congregations – Jesuits, Redemptorists, Passionists, Benedictines, and Missionaries of the Sacred Heart – had six functioning seminaries, with small numbers of candidates being formed for the religious priesthood. The first diocesan seminary in New Zealand opened in 1900 in the Dunedin Diocese.

For many years Moran had envisaged Australia as the base for the evangelization of Asia and the Pacific region. When the Third Plenary Council of Australia opened in Sydney on 2 September 1905 with 21 Fathers in attendance - 18 bishops (only 2 born in Australia), 1 abbot and 2 priest administrators – and himself as president, he succeeded in persuading the Council to legislate for the establishment of a foreign missionary college to train Australian priests for missions in the Philippines, China, and Japan (Decree 18).

St Columba's Missionary Seminary, Springwood

The foreign missionary college which Moran wanted came into existence very quickly, as seminarian numbers at the Manly seminary had already exceeded 100 by 1908. Moran purchased a property at Springwood in the Blue Mountains and in 1909 opened his new Sydney diocesan 'minor' seminary dedicated to the great Irish missionary monk, St Columba. It was designed to

prepare priests for the China Mission [**Image # 1 – St Columba’s Seminary**] and its front door was orientated to face China. Boys as young as 12 years were recruited and admitted.

By 1909, Australian-born priests comprised 20 per cent of the total clergy ministering in Australia.

Romanisation of the seminary system

In the first decade of the 20th century seminary formation was significantly influenced by two encyclicals - Pius X’s *E Supremi Apostolatus* of 1903 and *Pascendi Domini Gregis* of 1907 - and the 1907 Decree of the Holy Office *Lamentabili sane exitu*. In his fierce attack on Modernism, Pius X ordered all professors in major seminaries to swear an oath denouncing Modernism and instructed all bishops and religious superiors to prohibit their seminarians all access to secular newspapers and magazines. These instructions would not only dampen theological innovation in seminaries for decades but would limit the seminarians’ social awareness of the world around them. The oath remained in force until 1967 when it was replaced with a revised Profession of Faith.

In 1908 Pius X had placed all seminaries under the jurisdiction of the Sacred Consistorial Congregation and Benedict XV later placed them under the new Sacred Congregation for Seminaries and Universities. This was to ensure that the entire seminary system became increasingly standardised, forcing local authorities to be answerable to Rome for all seminary programs, and obliging bishops to provide triennial reports on compliance.

At Manly, as standardisation and institutional isolation from the outside world increased, greater formalism and clericalism resulted. And as the wider community, where priestly ministry was to take place, became irrelevant to those within the seminary, the divide between seminarians and the local citizenry deepened.

Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide

From its establishment in 1842 the Catholic Church in Australia had been designated as a ‘mission territory’ and placed under the jurisdiction of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide (‘Propaganda’). Like other mission territories, such as Great Britain, Norway, Denmark, USA, Canada, Asia, Oceania, and Africa, Australia’s bishops carried out their ministry with what were known as ‘mission faculties’, usually very flexible and generous.

However, in 1908, with the Constitution *Sapienti Consilio*, Pius X removed the mission territories of Great Britain, USA, and Canada from Propaganda's jurisdiction, but not Australia and New Zealand. And where previously Propaganda had enjoyed the widest of powers, Pius X removed those relating to doctrine, the sacraments (particularly matrimony), rites, religious congregations, and seminaries.

National seminary debate

When Cardinal Moran died in 1911 the Australian bishops had not had an annual meeting since 1894. When they met in 1912 and 1913 under the presidency of the new Archbishop of Sydney, Michael Kelly, their priorities were two: the 'nationalization' of the Manly seminary, and the need for each bishop to receive an annual report on his own seminarian's progress at Manly.

At the 1913 meeting, Coadjutor Archbishop of Melbourne and former President of Maynooth, Daniel Mannix [[Image # 2 – Archbishop Daniel Mannix](#)], argued strongly for the nationalization of the Manly seminary, recommending that: 1) the administration of the Manly and Springwood seminaries (both free of debt) be transferred to the Bishops of Australia, on condition that they be converted into an Australian National Seminary; 2) the Catholic Hierarchy of Australia, as a body, constitute the Governing Board of the national seminary; 3) both properties be vested in Trustees nominated by the Archbishop of Sydney; and 4) any profits generated be paid to the Board for use of benefiting the seminary.

Almost all the bishops were supportive but hesitated because some senior Sydney priests had concerns about the ownership and control of the assets. Before the issue could be resolved, however, World War I had broken out.

1917 Code of Canon Law on seminaries

In May 1917, at the height of the Great War, Pius X approved the new Code of Canon Law [[Image # 3 – 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law](#)] which came into force at Pentecost 2018. Among its 2414 canons were 20 (cc. 1352-1371) relating specifically to seminaries, defined as 'ecclesiastical corporations and non-collegiate moral persons, with the right to own and administer property for the purpose of training young men for the priesthood'.

The Code, applicable to all Latin Church dioceses, instructed every diocesan bishop to erect a diocesan seminary, and in larger dioceses, a major and minor

seminary: 'If he cannot erect his own seminary, he is to send his candidates to another seminary or join with other bishops to establish a regional (inter-diocesan) seminary or seminaries. The diocesan bishop is responsible for seminary funding, governance, staff appointments, visitation, familiarity with seminarians' character and progress, discipline, and spiritual formation'.

The Code insisted that candidates for admission should be 'boys of a tender age who give signs of an ecclesiastical vocation'. They are to be 'kept with special care from the contagion of the world, formed in piety and imbued with divine things that will encourage the seed of vocation'.

The criteria for admission were 'documentary evidence of legitimate birth, baptism, confirmation, and evidence of life and morals and characteristics that give hope that they will perpetually bind themselves to fruitful ecclesiastical ministry'. If they have been dismissed from other seminaries or religious institutes the bishop is to refuse admittance unless he has knowledge (secretly if necessary) of the cause of the dismissal and is satisfied that there is nothing in the morals, character, and temperament of the applicant inconsistent with the priesthood. Superiors of the dismissing seminary are to provide their evidence to the bishop with a 'gravely burdened conscience'. Seminarians who are 'disruptive, incorrigible, unruly, whose lifestyle and characteristics seem unsuitable for the clerical state, who are not making academic progress, and especially those who offend against good morals and faith, are to be dismissed'.

Each seminary was to have a rector (for discipline), professors, a burser (distinct from the rector), at least two confessors, and a spiritual director, all chosen for their outstanding knowledge, virtue, and prudence. There were to be two committees of priest deputies: one for discipline and one for administration, carefully selected by the bishop.

The formation program for minor seminaries was to include a 'religious discipline' suited to the age and temperament of the students, together with language (especially Latin) and other humanities studies consistent with the general culture and standards of the region. The major seminary program was to include 2 years of philosophical and related studies, and 4 years of theological studies, including theoretical and practical exercises in pastoral ministry.

Specific obligations were laid down for the bishop (cc. 973-1011) when ordaining to the priesthood. He must make a judgment about the candidate's suitability, be satisfied that he is not detained by any irregularity or other

impediment, is not being coerced into the clerical state, and is necessary or useful for the diocese.

The bishop is to assure himself that only those who appear likely to be worthy priests and canonically suited are admitted to minor orders, and for 'licit' ordination, candidates have to have been confirmed, have morals congruent with the order being conferred, be of canonical age (21 years for subdiaconate; 22 years for diaconate; 25 years for priesthood), have due knowledge, have received the lower orders, have observed the interstices (intervals between reception of different orders), and have canonical title.

When the ordaining bishop is sure that all these conditions have been met, he can announce publicly the names of those to be ordained, commission the pastor making the announcement to investigate diligently the morals and life of the candidate from trusted persons and convey his findings in writing and, if necessary, make his own, even private, inquiries. The candidate has to make known to the ordaining bishop, directly or indirectly, his intention of seeking ordination. A bishop ordaining the subject of another bishop requires dimissorial letters from that bishop but is advised not to ordain the candidate if he feels in conscience that the candidate is unsuitable.

Similar canons (cc. 539-591) applied to the admission of religious candidates to postulancy, novitiate, religious profession, and formation for the priesthood.

From 1917 onwards, the popes and Roman dicasteries gave increasing attention to priestly formation. In 1922 Pius XI issued his Apostolic Letter *Officiorum omnium* emphasising the importance of Latin for seminary studies, and in 1931 promulgated the Apostolic Constitution *Deus scientiarum Dominus*, accompanied by the *Ordinationes* setting out a uniform set of goals, methods, and instruction for the reform of seminary studies, and called on religious superiors to raise their standards for accepting new members. In 1924 the Congregation of Seminaries and Universities promulgated the Decree *Quo uberiore* requiring diocesan seminaries to prepare a triennial report covering all aspects of seminary administration and pedagogy, and in 1928, under the rubric of 'promoting personal hygiene', counselled modesty in seminary shower rooms and encouraged the promotion of sports.

The control of the entire seminary system – diocesan and religious - by the Holy See was now well advanced and the new laws began to apply immediately in all Australian dioceses and religious congregations.

[Image # 1 – St Columba’s Seminary]



Image: St Columba’s Missionary College, Springwood, NSW, opened in 1909.

[Image # 2 – Archbishop Daniel Mannix]

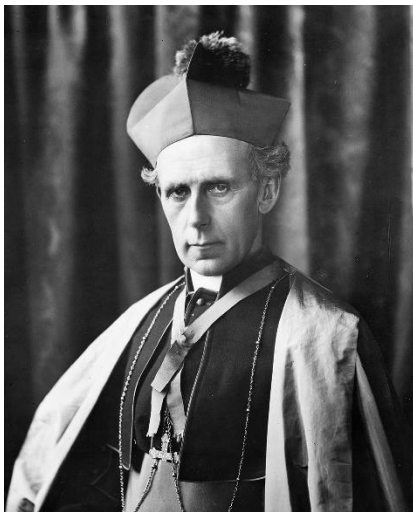


Image: Archbishop Daniel Mannix, Coadjutor Archbishop of Melbourne (1912-1917) and Archbishop of Melbourne (1917-1963).

Image # 3 – 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law

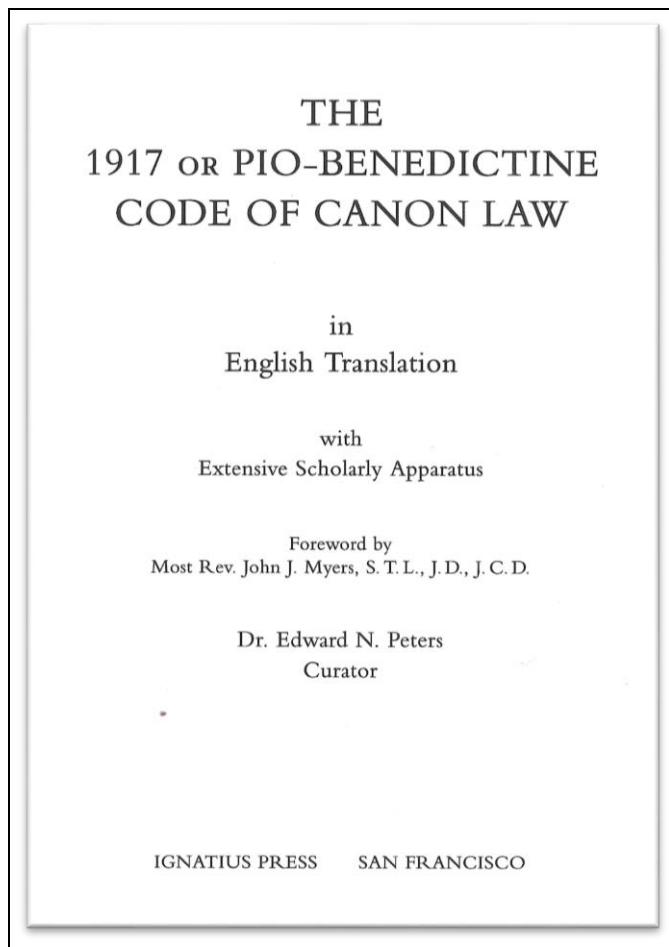


Image: Cover of 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law

