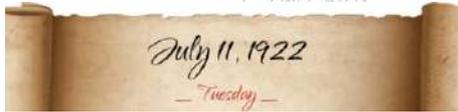


The Holy Spirit Province CELEBRATING THE CENTINARY



Holy Spirit Province History...Part 1



Monday 11th July 2022 marks 100 years since the Passionist Province of Holy Spirit (SPIR) was established. However, the first presence

of Passionists occurred 179 years ago when three Italian Passionists Raimondo (Raymond) Vacarri aged 41, Luigi Pesciaroli aged 34, Maurizio (Maurie) Lencioni 28, and Swiss born Joseph Snell, aged 40, came to Australia in March 1843. Only Snell could speak English (and four other languages). They arrived in Sydney which at that time had a population of 40,000 people and three months later they travelled on to Brisbane which had a population of 800! Their mission was to work among aboriginals on Stradbroke Island twenty-five kilometers off the coast from Brisbane.

The change in lifestyle from Italy must have been amazing. No Italian food, and little enough of what they could produce or procure and no one else with whom to speak their own language. Their accommodation at Dunwich was the derelict buildings which had served to house convict labourers and soldiers in a recently abandoned settlement. Added to this was that they learned Stradbroke was not to be their mission; they were to use their time there to learn aboriginal customs and language.



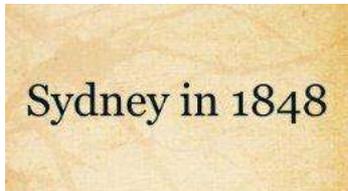
Stradbroke Island is fifty kilometers long and eight kilometers wide at its broadest and had about one hundred and fifty aboriginal inhabitants from the Quandamooka people. They had contact with Europeans and many of them spoke English. They lived in small groups, none of which was larger than sixty people. They rarely stayed more than eight days in one place. Frequently the missionaries followed groups people around, often sleeping under the stars and eating with them. Sometimes

they were not allowed to follow. Funds were low and evangelizing very slow.

By late 1844 plans were being considered to transfer the missionaries to Western Australia, and almost two years later the Passionist General, Anthony Testa wrote to direct them to do this. In June 1846 three of the missionaries left Stradbroke and arrived



in Sydney, only to find there was confusion about where they were to go. The fourth member, Raymond Vacarri began to feel unsafe and within a few months he too left Stradbroke Island and took a steamer to South America under the name of A Wilson. He was identified several years later working as a gardener in a Franciscan monastery!



Another Italian Passionist, Peter Magagnotto set out for Australia to meet up with the missionary band. They had in fact travelled to South Australia, en route to Perth when Peter arrived in Sydney in 1848. He had studied some theology before joining the

Passionists and almost immediately after ordination he was engaged in teaching Philosophy and Theology. Magagnotto stayed in Sydney and lived with the Benedictines. He taught theology and conducted retreats before returning to Rome, via South America in 1853.

The remaining missionaries Joseph, Luigi and Maurice stopped in Adelaide on their way to Perth, and found accommodation with the Bishop. At that time the twelve-kilometer road from Port Adelaide to the city was described as “a road blinded by dust on account of the bullocks carving it up”. For those who know Adelaide today it is difficult to image the description given of it. “The city of Adelaide was forest. It was so heavily wooded that even those who knew the district well could get lost between King William Street and West Terrace”, and “Gawler Street was a mass of deep ruts and holes during winter, so that a bullock was drowned one day trying to cross from one side of the street to the other”.



While in Adelaide the Passionists heard disturbing reports about the inability of the Bishop in Perth to provide funding for the missionaries. The bishop had just accepted a large number of other missionaries into his diocese and had incorrectly expected the colonial government to reimburse the costs of their travel. One year after their arrival in Adelaide, in September 1847, the Bishop advised

the Vicar-General of Melbourne diocese that the Passionists were still in Adelaide and boarding with him. He said at that time their only source of income came from catechetical and language instructions that Joseph Snell was able to provide for a few families.



Correspondence with Rome was slow and indecisive. The three men offered themselves to Bishop Murphy for the diocese of Adelaide. The Bishop encouraged them to have strong faith, as he himself had needed. When he had arrived in late 1844, there was no church nor priest in his diocese. Even in 1847, the Bishop said the only presbytery was in Morphett Vale and there were no county churches. Not long after they received appointments from the Bishop, they received a letter from the General who was disappointed they had not travelled to Western Australia. He gave the options of joining Peter Magganotto in Sydney, offering their services to Bishop Murphy or find the money for a passage home. They had heard Fr Peter was not happy in Sydney and they could not raise the money for a fare, so they were able to confirm what they had already offered Bishop Murphy.



Necessity had meant that the community was separated by individual appointments. Luigi Pesciaroli, still struggling with English was appointed assistant priest in Mount Barker where the parish priest was living in a small hut, and there was no room for another lodger. Luigi boarded with a Catholic family in Mount Barker for seven months but had no money to pay for his rent. He wrote many letters describing the missionaries experiences which have helped inform us of the experience. He never mastered English and the parishioners kindly donated him a fare home! He returned home and died in Corneto, Italy in 1874.



Joseph Snell was appointed parish priest of Morphett Vale in 1848. He had two predecessors but he was the first resident priest. Both the church and his residence were very basic. They had been built by volunteer donations and labour. The church opened in January 1846 and was the first Catholic church in South Australia, It was twelve meters long, six meters wide and five metres high. A small room was added as a vestry. This was not his preferred ministry, nor was it his true desire to live without a Passionist community. In time, Joseph opened a Catholic school with Catholic teachers which was considered a courageous action at that time.

Maurice Lencioni was appointed to the Bishop's house and spent thirteen years attached to the Cathedral in Adelaide where he taught theology and music and he was given charge of the choir. Maurice assisted Joseph and together they were able to build a church in Marion. Given that Morphett Vale was a twenty-seven-kilometer journey on rough roads, Maurice must, like Bishop Murphy, have spent a lot of time in the saddle!



Joseph Snell was unwell, and in January 1861 on medical advice he requested Bishop Geoghegan who had replaced Bishop Murphy in 1858, to grant him a holiday. While in Carisbrook one hundred and sixty kilometers north east of Melbourne, Joseph suffered a heart attack and died. He was buried there.

Maurice was now alone but he continued to work actively. He was spoken of as being loved by the people and clergy. He wanted to return to a Passionist community. He had been in Australia twenty years and Bishop Geoghegan gave him his permission and blessing to return home. Friends ensured he had the required fare.

In March 1864 he was preparing to depart when he caught pneumonia and died a month later. Maurice is buried in the Passionist cemetery at Glen Osmond.

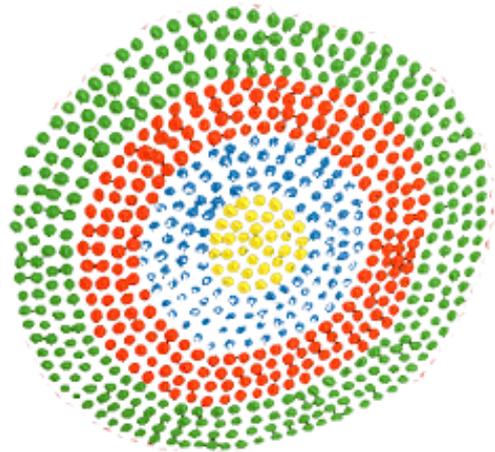


The Mission to the aboriginals was short lived. In some respects, as Luigi Pesciaroli described in a letter to the General, the mission never began. Their stay on Stradbroke Island was short lived, though it must have seemed a long trial to the missionaries. The planning was poor, Bishop Polding was unhelpful, Raymond Vaccari was disruptive, and it must be said, nearly all of the men were unsuited for such a task.

Eventually the four men dispersed. The Mission was judged a failure, but how do we judge failure? Their time on Stradbroke Island and their work among aboriginal people has left a Passionist heritage to this day. Their work in

Adelaide was critical given the lack of priests, and their good will was remembered when the Passionists requested to establish a community in Adelaide twenty-two years after Maurice died.

Peter Magagnotto left Sydney for California where gold had been discovered. He built churches in Northern California, and was made Vicar General. He moved to Nevada and the General sent a community to be with him. Later, Peter was asked to go to Valparaiso in Peru to check on a rumour that the gardener at the Franciscan monastery was Raymond Vaccari. Peter was able to confirm this rumour. Vaccari had become a Franciscan brother. Peter returned to Rome in 1865 and three years later while in a poor parish at Catel Porziano outside of Rome, he died as the result of a stroke. He is buried in Rome.



We will explore more in **Part 2 (To be continued.....)**
 By Fr. Brian Traynor CP

