THE EARLY CHURCH AND ITS CONNECTION WITH ILLAWARRA

Rev. Fr. J. J. McGovern, Parish Priest of Granville and Archivist of the Archdiocese of Sydney addressed the June meeting of the Society on the above topic.

Father McGovern commenced his lecture by giving a picture of the political and spiritual conditions in England at the time of the foundation of the colony of N.S.W. Both were deplorably bad.

Between the discovery of the east coast of Australia by Cook in 1770 and 1788 the American States had gained their independence; there were movements of insurrection in Ireland; the Gordon riots let murder loose on London streets in protest against the first measures of relief granted to Catholics; Britain was at war with Holland and France and Spain had leagued themselves with the Americans against the British.

But, bad as was the political state of the motherland, her spiritual state was still more deplorable and at no time since the days of paganism had spiritual life been in such low esteem. Catholicism had ceased to be an effective force, the Established Church had become so dominated by politics that it was merely a state department and such influence as it retained was merely negative; the Methodist movement had lately begun and was showing signs of great vigour, but as yet was without influence; the Oxford Movement which was to re-vivify the Church of England was still three decades away.
Under these conditions, arrangements were made for the sailing of the first fleet—and there was not even one Anglican clergyman to be found willing to accompany the unfortunate convicts to Botany Bay—soon to be a name of horror in the ears of men. Rev. Richard Johnson, who was Methodist in his leanings came as the only minister of religion for the first and succeeding fleets and he was wholly inadequate to the task of influencing the officials of the settlement.

The HISTORICAL RECORDS OF N.S.W. include in the papers of 1787 an undated letter from Rev. Thomas Walsh, a Catholic priest, to Lord Sydney begging permission for himself and another priest to accompany the first ships but a note added by the editor says that “no reply to this letter has been found, but the proposal was not entertained.”

Yet conditions were pitiable. More than 3,000 persons were transported during the next four years, but nearly 450 died in the year following.

In that year of so many deaths three convict settlers, one Marine settler and the wife of another Marine settler, Catholics who had settled round the Parramatta district, petitioned Governor Philip before his return to England to have a Catholic priest sent out to minister to them.

The Irish Rebellion of 1798-1803 increased the number of Catholics in Botany Bay. Amongst the political prisoners were three priests, Frs. O'Neill, Harold and Dixon. Fr. O'Neill was unconditionally pardoned after two years and returned to Ireland, but the other two, remained for some years. Fr. Dixon was conditionally pardoned to enable him to exercise his priestly functions although on a severely restricted basis and his license was withdrawn after eighteen months when a rumour reached the authorities that the assembled congregation was planning a local rebellion. Fr. Dixon left the colony in 1808 and Fr. Harold who had been banished to Norfolk Island was allowed to return. He was worn out by his years of hardship as a convict and returned to Ireland in 1810.

When Fr. Harold returned to Ireland there was an end to Catholic enjoyment of citizens' rights. There were more petitions but against Napoleon's successes all consideration of the struggling colony was forgotten in England.

The Pope at that time was a temporal ruler and refused Napoleon's demands for co-operation with the result that the Emperor took him prisoner and kept him under close confinement at Savonia and Fontainbleau.

After the release of the Pope on Napoleon's defeat the matter of the Australian Catholics received consideration. Fr. O'Flynn was appointed Prefect Apostolic to Australia and his name sent to England for approval, which was refused in February, 1817.

Mere lack of approval did not deter Fr. O'Flynn and he set out for the colony in March or April 1817 and arrived in Sydney in November. The Governor, Macquarie, would not receive or recognise the priest and ordered him to depart from the colony on the ship that brought him. Fr. O'Flynn evaded the law and went into hiding.
It seems from the letters of O'Flynn and others that Macquarie was personally in favour of his staying and that the Lieut. Governor of Van Dieman's Land had asked that a priest be allowed to settle there but again the official mind prevailed. While the matter was still in abeyance, many of the leading colonists of every denomination presented a petition to the Governor, couched in the most earnest words, asking his authorisation that the priest might be allowed for a time, at least, to minister to the wants of the Catholic portion of the community, 400 citizens, mostly Protestants, signed the petition. Fr. O'Flynn came out of hiding but Macquarie had him arrested and put on a homeward-bound ship.

A petition from Rev. Samuel Marsden through friends in England reached the House and Commons and shortly after the Home Government accepted the offers of Frs. Therry and Connolly for work in the colony. Macquarie, freed from official disapproval, aided their early efforts and laid the foundation stone of St. Mary's chapel. More priests then came to the colony and Bishop Polding arrived in 1835.

On April 17 1833, Fr. Therry visited Wollongong and celebrated Mass in the Barrack Room. Fr. Therry also baptised a number of children and performed the first wedding service to be held in Illawarra.

Fr. J. Rigney, who arrived in N.S.W. in July, 1838 was the first resident Catholic clergyman in the district and his parish comprised the whole of Illawarra. A temporary chapel was put into use the same year and the building also housed a school.

Bishop Polding visited Illawarra in November, 1838 and confirmed a number of children. The Bishop also consecrated cemeteries at Wollongong, West Dapto and Jamberoo.

In 1839 it was decided to build a more commodius place of worship and tenders for a new church were called in March, 1840. Application, for assistance in erecting the building and paying the clergyman's stipend, was made to the Government and received.

The foundation stone of the new church, named St. Francis Xavier was laid on October 13, 1840 by Bishop Polding.

Fr. Rigney established schools at Dapto and Jamberoo in 1839. It is interesting to note that Fr. Murray O.S.B., who is buried at Wollongong fought against the French in the Napoleonic Wars.

NEWS AND NOTES

The Coal Seam Discovery Commemoration project to mark the occasion of the Sesquicentenary of the discovery of the first coal seam in Australia is coming along nicely. An enthusiastic committee has been set up to assist this Society to achieve its objective. Bulli Shire Council has taken the initial steps to acquire a suitable site for the proposed memorial. Saturday afternoon, 2nd August, 1947, is set down as the day when a dedication ceremony will be held—the memorial to be erected later, as and when funds permit. Have you any ideas as to the design or nature of this memorial? If so, let us have a rough pencil sketch—it may be of great help to the Committee.