

A MONK IN THE CATHEDRAL

— ‘THE PALACE OF THE POOR’:

John Bede Polding, O.S.B.

By Sister Mary Xavier, SGS

The Link

Resurrection is not a creation, and though St. Mary's now lies lowly . . . yet she shall rise again more glorious and more stately than heretofore. Not one link of the connection between the former St. Mary's and the future St. Mary's will be broken

So spoke the ageing Archbishop, John Bede Polding, O.S.B., on 6 July 1865, at a meeting held in the Prince of Wales Theatre to arrange for the rebuilding of the Cathedral burnt down a week earlier. The Governor, Sir John Young, echoed these sentiments as he rose to speak, recalling some early Australian history:

When Governor Macquarie laid the foundation stone of the first Cathedral in 1821, he established a happy precedent, inviting to peace and union... (But) it will not be necessary to lay a new, but merely to build upon the old foundations.

This being so, any celebration or study of the building of the present Cathedral calls for a look at its predecessor as well. What better way than to look at them both, mainly through the eyes of the person who saw the destruction of the first Cathedral, and then the beginnings of the phoenix-like resurrection of the second — the eyes of Polding, who worked for both Cathedrals?

Botany Bay

In September 1835, Bishop Polding first saw from his ship the building begun by Fr. Therry in 1821. Pictures of the Cathedral about 1834 agree with the description given by the Presbyterian leader, Dr. J. D. Lang, at that time:

... an ambitious edifice built of hewn stone in the form of a cross, and occupying a very conspicuous situation when viewed from the water.

Though still unfinished, it was in use, even though its incompleteness made a romantic appeal in the moonlight, when it looked like an old ruined abbey. Polding hastened to enter it, there to implore God's blessing on the Colony and its inhabitants, including its 20,000 Catholics, many of them convicts. Grateful for Therry's efforts, Polding was officially installed in the Cathedral on 20 September 1835, and the competent choir joined with him in singing the first Pontifical High Mass celebrated in Australia.

On with the building

For 30 years the Cathedral was to be added to through the guidance of Polding, and the generosity of the Colonists, both Protestant and Catholic. Polding's overseas friends helped, too. In his letters, references to it and to the present Cathedral outline the progress of both in Polding's lifetime. He lost no time in using the Cathedral to encourage what he had most at heart — 'after the propagation of religion, the diffusion of sound taste and a love of the fine arts,' as he wrote to his Benedictine cousin-agent, Fr. Heptonstall. Pleased with the unexpected musical talent and expertise of the Cathedral Choir and of other Colonists, he proposed to use them to help defray the cost of a new organ by putting on an Oratorio in the Cathedral itself. There were to be selections from the Messiah and the Creation, 'Gentlemen of the Choral Association and the philharmonic Society' combining with amateurs, and aided by 'the band of His Majesty's 4th or King's Own Regiment.' Tickets were to be 10/6.

Pastoral 1836

A few weeks earlier, 3 July 1836, a meeting had been held in St. Mary's to decide how to get the building under way again. Polding's first Pastoral was delivered to the assembled crowd, stressing how he longed to complete the

Cathedral:

... Show that you are the children and the inheritors of that ancient faith which in ages now far past, raised the magnificent Cathedrals . . . of our native land, noble monuments of piety and munificence . . . Endear your memories to future generations, by largely contributing from the abundance and means with which God has blessed you, to the erection of similar edifices in the land of your adoption, and the heritage and country of your children.

Subscription Lists

At this meeting it was decided to open subscription lists throughout the Colony. Such notables as J. H. Plunkett, R. Therry, Terence Murray and others, persuaded Catholics to give at least a humble 6d a week for the fund. This would mount in a year to about £2500, quite a large sum in those days. Larger amounts, like the £100 and £120 given anonymously by two Protestant benefactors, were contributed as the year went on. Polding prayed that the completed Material Temple would be in its 'spaciousness, durability and usefulness' a fitting symbol of Fr. Therry's 'spiritual ministrations' in the Colony.

Golden Jubilee of the Colony, 1838

This great event was not let pass by Polding. Building had progressed and he was able to move his ecclesiastical and lay pupils from his large but expensive rented house at Woolloomooloo to the building next to the Cathedral on 26 January officially — though lessons did not begin until a week later. He had another Oratorio slated for Foundation Day, but willingly postponed it to suit those who wanted to follow up the Harbour Regatta with parties and dances in the evening. Very likely, he had the Cathedral and adjoining buildings illuminated in honour of the occasion, as were most of the homes and big buildings around Sydney that evening. During the very fine day, most banks and shops were closed, so that all the Colonists could see the great Regatta. Even convict servants had a good time out in the fresh air, waiting on their employers. Polding, however, was hastily called to Wollongong early that morning, Friday, on a 'sick call', so it was just as well he had postponed the Oratorio. He returned in time for the performance on the following Monday. Tickets were a little cheaper this time — 7/6, and a guinea for a family of four. Papers enthusiastically told how there was to be a repeat performance on the Wednesday evening. On that occasion the Acting Governor, Snodgrass, was present.

Ladies, such as Mrs Wallace, Mrs Clarke and Mrs Clancy were among the performers, not to mention several male amateurs. Somebody tried to stir up sectarian strife, however, stating that the organist of St James' Church had refused to cooperate by letting his choir sing at the Oratorio. The organist agreed that he had refused the request, but amicably, he and the Rev Mr Spencer of St. Mary's parting on good terms at the time.

Festival music disappears

The Rev Mr Spencer was to get a mention in some of Polding's letters that year. A student for the priesthood, he decided to give up the ecclesiastical life; but he took away some of the Cathedral music! Polding was, like a certain Queen, not amused. He wrote to Heptonstall:

... Mr Spencer has taken with him or put out of the way, a quantity of music arranged for the last festival. I cannot say how much he is censured by the musicians for this nonsense.

Still, a few days later, Ascension Thursday, 24 May 1838, the Choir sang one of Mozart's Masses at the Solemn High Mass celebrated by Polding. It was also the Queen's Birthday, a point he did not overlook, for one of his life-long aims was to keep the Colony's Catholic subjects, who were, of course, subjects of the British monarchy, free from the charge, often made, of insubordination. Yet he insisted on their rights as well, and would brook no injustice or discrimination against them, especially if they had once been convicts.

Meanwhile, subscriptions had been coming in, especially since March of that auspicious year. The Australian, 30 March 1838, announced that the roof of the Cathedral being almost finished in one section, the walls were to be plastered. For this, more money was, of course, needed. Encouraging cooperation, the paper said:

... This spacious and handsome edifice will afford ample and convenient room for the large congregations of Christians who resort to this Church.....

An Organ

Heptonstall got many letters from Polding. On 25 June 1838, the latter reminded him of an earlier apparently unheeded request. (Perhaps the earlier letter was lost in transit, as sometimes happened.) Polding asked his cousin to get an 'Organ for the Cathedral', and added a long list of music:

'Masses in full score and other pieces also for state days; and in like manner some Oratorios. . . ' He wanted, too, 'Manners' pretty Motet for First Holy Communion ceremonies, some Webbs' music for the country churches, and some English Catholic hymns. By this time Spencer had been replaced by Mr. Bushell, who had 'a splendid bass voice' and wanted some bass solos. Polding, in his whimsical way, guessed Heptonstall might feel incapable of fulfilling all these requests, and commented:

Now do not tell me you are about as much in your place in a music shop as a Pig in a Lady's Dressing Room. Tune up or rather down your double G natural and set to quickly.

The organ was to cost about £1000 and to be brought out, as arranged in 1836, free of charge of freight, in a convict ship, for Governor Bourke had been Polding's friend right from his arrival in 1835. Polding wanted an organ with 'some pipes of Novel invention and real power,' for anything less 'would not be fit for the Splendid Edifice' whose dimensions were, he added, '120 ft length, 40 breadth, transepts 90 high, 50 inside clear'. He urged:

'In a word, take counsel with the wise — let me have an Instrument full of Dulcet Sounds — and loud as the Ocean roar when the blasts from the East drive waters into Bondi Bay.'

He drew a plan of the Cathedral, stating:

In this plan, you observe it is proposed to place the Organ on the line of transept or nearly so — in this position it would not obstruct the view. I shall therefore place it in the Gallery marked Organ. That Gallery is in the centre (?) ft, 18 ft in width between columns, 12 in depth — the wings double. I am told this space is quite large enough.

Optimistically, he hoped that money from 'Bench Rents' in the Cathedral would pay for the organ in a few years, borrowing money at 6%.

Government help

Fortunately the Colonial Government of those days helped those who helped themselves, and it voted £350 towards the Cathedral Fund for 1838, on the basis of £ for £ in money raised from donations.

The First Nuns

Early in 1839 (6 January) a rare sight in the Colony was seen, fittingly in the Cathedral. Occupying a front pew was a small group of dark-robed women, Sisters of Charity, who had arrived from Ireland a week before. A scribe of those days, after commenting on their welcome appearance, went on to describe the Cathedral whose roof had been completed. The grandeur of the building was complemented by the 'delicate minuteness' of its ornamentation. He went on:

And we beheld the Bishop standing before the altar, under the canopy of an arch beautiful in the simplicity of its form, and enriched in a manner peculiarly striking and novel by the introduction of stained glass into the ornamental spandrels.

Epiphany Pastoral, 1839

After this service for the Epiphany, Polding delivered his Pastoral, an appeal for help to complete the Cathedral. Part of his words that day said:

The building . . . has now grown up by your efforts into a structure within and without, goodly and pleasant to behold, well suited to its noble purpose.

But more needed to be done, and funds were low:

... We are in debt. . Upwards of £2000 have been paid to the contractors, Brodie and Craig; several hundreds remain to be paid. .

He explained that 'unless the treasury be again replenished by the contributions of the faithful' the work could not go on, adding a topical reference to the Feast-day:

Dearly Beloved, on this auspicious day, when we commemorate the oblations which were offered by our forefathers in the Faith — the Wise Men to the Infant Saviour — let us offer our gold as in testimony of our grateful homage unto Him who has given us to enjoy in the light of the true faith all its richness.

Thus he urged them to finish the ‘naked Sanctuary’, seeing that ‘that part of the sacred edifice destined for the use of the people’ was completed. Dr Ullathorne, Polding’s able helper and his former pupil and novice at Downside near Bath, gave a timely reminder in his long speech on this occasion:

Remember that you are not building for yourselves only, but leaving the best legacy, the noblest and most lasting monument of yourselves to your descendants.....

The children of your children’s children will be praying in this place . . . (and) will recall the piety and self-sacrifice of those ancestors who, through many difficulties raised it up for the service of the living God

Debts mount up

Within a week Polding was writing to the long-suffering Heptonstall again:

... I want the charitable assistance of my friends more than ever. The Bench Rents of the Cathedral have hitherto been devoted to its completion. I shall take part of these at least for my Seminary.

Besides supporting those of his students who were without means, he was building new churches at Maitland, Parramatta, Church Hill and elsewhere. There were many calls on his purse.

Did Heptonstall never tire of Polding’s plaintive pleading? On 20 May 1839, he was at it again. He wanted money for the new organ, for the one in use was ‘a weak, vacant, ill-toned instrument’ for which the ‘speculator,’ he ruefully reported, had ‘the modesty to ask 500 guineas.’ Moreover, Dr Reid had recently been ‘instituted Director and Musical Composer to the Cathedral, with a stipend of £50 per ann;’ and Polding had set up a Choral Society of ‘fifty respectable individuals’ who were to ‘be taught music scientifically.’ He hoped, too, to put on another Oratorio or two to pay for the new organ, for which Pugin designed ‘the very costly case.’ The new instrument was ‘a noble Instrument,’ he added, ‘and the price is noble too.’

Convicts in the Cathedral

But the Cathedral was not used merely for music, much as Polding loved it. Directories of those days show that the building could accommodate 2000, and that services were well attended. On Sundays, 550 came to the early Mass; 1800 to the second one, and 700 to the afternoon service. Amongst the congregation from the earliest days were the Catholic convicts, who, Ullathorne tells us, crowded around the sympathetic Bishop’s confessional in the Cathedral, anxious to confide in him, and to hear a kind word, so that he was often late in beginning Mass. Told of the impatience of the waiting free settlers at the delay, Polding would weep, saying:

Others I could leave to another time; but these poor creatures, who have no one to care for them, I cannot.

Well he knew that some at least would be sent away to the country at short notice. Such was his desire to help the convicts, that he got permission quite early from Governor Bourke, and then in 1838 from Governor Gipps to have newly arrived Catholic convicts undergo ten days of instruction at the Cathedral. Here he and his monks and other priests instructed the men, often ignorant, in their religion, administered the Sacraments, and used their valuable experience in telling the men how to render their imprisonment or assignment less arduous by cooperation and good conduct. Such privileged treatment offended many, including Judge Burton, who complained that the Catholic convicts had ‘been seen constantly standing, lying and kneeling about St. Mary’s Church.’ He begrudged them their consequent ‘exemption from labour and assignment, an advantage over their Protestant fellow-convicts, who are forthwith assigned on landing,’ to quote the learned Judge. But Polding was able to continue his charitable use of the Cathedral and its precincts, with their welcome change of air and atmosphere for the prisoners from the crowded barracks nearby, within whose walls fresh air and sea breezes scarcely entered.

Processions

To such varied uses — ‘retreats’ for convicts, Oratorios, public meetings, administration of the Sacraments: for example, the thrice-yearly First Communions ceremonies for hundreds of adults as well as children, and frequent

Confirmations — the Cathedral was put, besides of course, the celebration of Mass, during those first five years of Polding's presence in Australia. Fittingly, then, it was the official parting-place when he was due to go back to the old world for further personnel and financial aid. On Monday 16 November 1840, a procession of thousands of people formed there before setting out for Circular Quay, where Polding and his companions were to embark for Europe. Catholic schoolgirls in flowing white dresses led the way, then came the boys, adults, and clergy, winding along Hyde Park, Macquarie Street, Bent Street, and Macquarie Place.

Almost two and a half years later a similar procession marched in reverse back to St. Mary's, on Polding's return on 9 March 1843. In the Cathedral the Choir chanted triumphantly the Gloria in Excelsis, the Benedicite, and the Te Deum, whilst Polding and his Clergy knelt in thanksgiving before the altar. After the customary address of welcome, Polding, now Archbishop of Sydney, replied in his warm, heartfelt way:

I am unable to express fully the exceeding gratitude and heartfelt joy by which I am animated on being once more placed among you . . . ; and I trust that your spiritual and temporal welfare will ever continue uninjured . .

He told the people of how, when receiving the papal blessing from Gregory XVI his heart had felt enlarged, and he had placed his beloved people of Australia within it.

Oh, the Bells!

Soon after, 4 May 1843, Polding wrote to Fr, Therry, then in Tasmania, reporting on the Cathedral, this time with another project in hand:

I am in daily expectation of eight bells for St. Mary's; the largest weighs nearly 30 cwt. What a delightful thing it will be to hear the Angelus announced. The tower I will set about, and also the lengthening of the Metropolitan (the Cathedral) so soon as I have the funds. The plan of the tower, which must be built with great skill by reason of the continued vibration of the bells, I shall receive very shortly from Mr. Pugin, the celebrated architect.

Doubtless even dearer to Polding than the acquisition of bells for his Cathedral was the fact that Rome had approved his plans to regard it as a monastic Cathedral, with a Benedictine Monastery, of which he was the leader, annexed. This would ensure an object dear to his heart, the recitation of the Divine Office in choir by monks and others, at the regular canonical hours.

Ring out, Wild Bells!

Later that year, 23 October 1843, despite the financial depression then prevalent, Polding happily wrote to Heptonstall that the bells had arrived, and that the tower was rising. He gave some details:

It will be 16 feet square; walls 2ft. 6in. thick throughout; double thickness in the buttresses. At twenty five feet having the bells; the rest of wood; altogether about 55 feet. £140 already subscribed and paid. We have six old ringers, who talk mighty big... I want you to send me a Treatise on bell-ringing which one of the said gents calls "Campanology." Hem, Campanology . . . The first Peal is to be at midnight, Christmas. .

The 'said gents' were all Protestants, an ecumenical touch still observed in a way at St. Mary's, we are told, for bell-ringers in Sydney help one another in the churches of varying denominations.

One wonders if Polding thought of the poet's words as he heard the Bells peal forth for the first time over Sydney, on the 1 January 1844. (They, or their ringers, were not ready for Christmas, after all):

Bells have wide mouths and tongues, but are too weak, Have they not help to sing, or talk or speak.

But if you move them they will mak't appear,

By speaking they'll make all the Town to hear.

When Ringers handle them with Art and Skill,

They then the ears of their Observers fill,

With such brave Notes, they ting and tang so well

As to outstrip all with their ding, dong, Bell. (John Bunyan)

Polding had seen to the blessing of the bells on 28 December 1843, writing to Heptonstall about that time to beg for more help:

Oh, Hepton, Hepton, were you ever in debt? If you were, I pity you. Here am I head and ears, aye to the top of my

crown . . . Now do send me Money, Money, Money, and with the speed of thought. Otherwise my beans will be boiled, bacon grilled, and I shall be regularly dished up. Borrow, if need be, £300 and send it out. In the Tower, I have burnt my fingers. I have been obliged to advance nearly £60 beyond the Subscription list. Tho' it (the tower) is called temporary, yet it will be permanent, being the corner of the intended Monastery of St. Mary.

In lighter vein he was happy to comment on the Bells and their Ringers:

A rival Company of Midland youths have challenged our Bellringers and the challenge has been accepted. It comes off in a Month's time.

A meeting was held on 31 December in the Cathedral to try to persuade the Government to give a fair share of the public funds for the Cathedral and for other churches; but Polding had to appeal to his friend for further help:

Well, dear Hepton, any money? Money, money, money . . . £2400 in debt . . . What will become of me?

That was late in January 1844. Yet, with faith in Providence, he pushed on, as can be seen in a letter, 19 March 1844:

The plans for our new Monastery of St Mary are in progress. The great front is more than 300 feet in length, including the Church. When entirely prepared we will have them lithographed. We hope to have the walls, including the prolongation of the Church and Tower base, five feet high this year.

Debts knocked off.

Polding's trust paid off. By late July 1844 he was able to report to Heptonstall that there was at least 'an appearance of things mending in the commercial world of Australia.' He added:

I have been enabled to knock off all my debts. except the formidable one of £1000 on St. Patrick's and £300 on St. Mary's.

He asked his agent-cousin to borrow £2000 for him at 5% interest — for interest in the Colony at 10% was ruinously high— 'perfectly ruinous.' He expected to get annually generous financial help from the French Society for the Propagation of the Faith, (founded early in that century by an unassuming Frenchwoman, Pauline Jaricot). He could have told Heptonstall of some of the statistics for the Cathedral services that year, especially of the 1700 Confessions heard there during Lent — and of the 1000 people who received Holy Communion in the Cathedral alone on Easter Sunday, when the Bells pealed forth 'their joy to the Lord.'

'A noble pile'

A cheerful Christmas letter told Heptonstall:

The monastery adjoining the Metropolitan Church, when finished, will be a noble pile, being, including the Church, three sides of a quadrangle of 170 feet and upwards. The fourth side is the Cloister connecting the Church and apartments of the community. More than half of this is forward for roofing. It is of stone, 15 feet wide and of similar height. We have constructed it this large to serve now for many purposes.

Busier than ever as the years rolled by, Polding sometimes commissioned one of his monks to write for him. Thus, on 16 August 1845, Fr Harding reported:

The Monastery is progressing rather slowly at present. The Cloisters are nearly half built, besides the library and a vestry adjoining the Cathedral.

Yet Governor Gipps, pleased at the goodwill of the monks, had given them more land nearby so that they could extend the school.

Appeal in England, 1846.

While overseas again in 1846, Polding put out an appeal among his past pupils and other friends and well-wishers in England:

Will you not derive consolation, when you retire to repose, in the thought that you have materially contributed to the greater expansion of honour and adoration to our Divine Lord . . . that through your means, whilst His faithful adorers in Europe give to nature the rest she requires, the hymn of praise is not interrupted, it is taken up in the Antipodes?

Though the day had not yet come when the sun never set on the British Empire, Polding was seeing to it that it never set on Catholic worshippers scattered throughout the world of which Australia was in his eyes no mean corner.

Australia again, 1848.

Soon after his return from his Mother Country, Polding wrote to his friend the Archbishop of Dublin:

.....My community (of monks) fulfil the duty of canons in the Metropolitan Church . . . The entire Office is recited publicly each day....

The sharp eyes of one of the Benedictine Nuns Polding had at long last been able to bring here as the nucleus of a foundation in the Colony took in many details concerning the Cathedral and the Monastery, while she and her young companion waited for their new home — Macarthur's 'Vineyard' near Parramatta — to be got ready for their occupation. She wrote to her former Prioress:

There is always something going on here. . . We have seen ordinations twice . . . Some Sundays ago, about 130 children made their first Communion, and on that same day somewhere about 540 were confirmed, many of them converts.

From time to time she, Sr. Magdalene le Clerc, was called upon to play the organ. She related on one such occasion:

Indeed, I never thought I could have mustered courage to sit down before such an enormous pile of pipes; certainly the performance was a very humble specimen of skill. Yet the whole was not so bad but it might have been worse, and I was complimented for my well-meant attempt.

(Actually, from other accounts, she was an accomplished musician.) She mentioned, too, the forthcoming consecration of a Bishop to be performed in St. Mary's. Her companion, Sr. M. Scholastica Gregory, sister of Dr. Gregory, O.S.B., had her comments to make, also, in a letter dated 22 March 1848, written from St. Mary's, where she and the other Sister were living for the time:

The Archbishop and priests are often in the confessionals till 11 at night, and even later; and hundreds flock to Communion weekly. The Church (Cathedral) is crowded to excess not only on Sundays and Festivals, but on ordinary days also. Everything far surpasses my expectations . . . We celebrated the Feast of our Holy Father St. Benedict yesterday in first class style, grand Pontifical High Mass sung by His Grace . . . We were in a snug little corner to ourselves, where we could see and not be seen.

(Scholastica was very fond of Polding, and the feeling was reciprocated, for they had known each other since she was a young girl. During the voyage she had confided to her Diary one night, 'The comfort my good Father gave me and continues to give falls like dew from Heaven . . . ' Years later (1877), the Australian poet, Henry Kendall, in his Ode to the just deceased Archbishop echoed these words: A fount of learning, with a heart like dew.')

Another organist arrives, Bishop Charles Davis, O.S.B.

Music in the Cathedral was given a boost by the arrival of Polding's one-time pupil and novice at Downside, Bishop Charles Davis, 8 December 1848. One who got to know him well whilst a monk in St. Mary's later wrote of this lovable man, who was a very accomplished organist, besides playing several other instruments:

It was a veritable treat to hear him pedalling the scale passages in the Creed of Mozart's Twelfth Mass. He always used to play that Mass from the full orchestral score . . ., and did so many a time in St Mary's Cathedral

He (instituted) a reform in the singing of the Cathedral Choir; . . . and (whenever) the choir had to take part in any grand function, the Bishop himself would always make up for them a fine bowl of generous egg-flip to strengthen their voices.

Sad to say, this gifted and popular Bishop died within a few years; and his body lay in state in the Cathedral for two days, and was visited by thousands who went to pay him the last tribute of affection.

He had worked for the fledgling Sydney University as well as for the Cathedral, and was missed in more fields than one.

Dr. Gregory's Report to Rome, 1851.

Another death cutting off a promising young life had occurred even earlier; Sr Scholastica died in 1850, three years to the day that she had left England for Australia. Polding saw that her brother needed to be consoled, so he sent him not long after back to England and Europe for a while, combining business with the needed holiday. Part of Gregory's work was to tell Propaganda, Rome, how the Church was progressing in the Colony. He and Polding prepared the statement, part of which ran:

... The Cathedral Church of St Mary now in process of enlargement (but without interruption of any of the usual services), is of course, here (Sydney). Its size and position adapt it admirably, not only to the convenience of Catholics, but to the edification of strangers, numbers of whom are to be seen assisting at almost every function.

The streams of worshippers pouring in and out of the Cathedral at the different early Masses, has, we have often accidentally discovered, produced a striking effect in the edification of those who are without.

It has become possible to display in some not unworthy manner the eloquent beauty of the Church's ritual... (through) the good taste and moderate richness of its appointments, and the devout carefulness with which the rubrical directions for ceremonies are observed . . . The Sanctuary of St Mary's . . . is most successful in offering to the senses and hearts of the worshippers . . . the much needed consolations and the attractive glories of the Catholic Church.

Elsewhere the Report emphasised that the school for both lay and ecclesiastical students attached to the Cathedral was labouring not only for the producing of 'the results of a sound and liberal education,' but also to develop 'the taste and power to appreciate them.' Polding's earlier expressed aim was thus still in the forefront of his busy mind.

Fr Therry again in Sydney

In 1856, the founder of St. Mary's, Fr Therry, was stationed at Balmain. In August 1856, he made a generous offer to Polding of £2000 towards the building fund, provided the people of the Colony subscribed four times that amount. This was probably meant to pay for the raising of the tower and spire at the southern end to a height of 200 feet. And on 3 August 1857, a huge meeting was held in St Mary's about the proposed University College of St. John's, for which the Government was willing to give £ for £ donated by the faithful and friends, up to the value of £20,000 all told, besides the salary of the President. Polding explained at this meeting that the cultivated taste, which, if not in itself good morality, is the appropriate garb of good morality (was needed together with) knowledge, reasonably accurate and profound, the calm strength of a well-trained and balanced judgment, the modest and patient consideration of the wants and feelings of others, to bring about 'lasting political influence.' (He was not after influence for the sake of influence and power, but for the good it could do for society.) He gave in broad outline an idea of the 'long and bright' ancestry of Catholic scholars, urging his flock to keep the pursuit of scholarship and truth equally bright.

Treasures in the Cathedral

Within the next few years Polding kept at his work of completing the grand plan of the Cathedral, adding and embellishing, getting some works of art by the old masters to adorn its walls; some old and valuable music folios from European monasteries; and beautiful vestments from Europe, although the Benedictine Nuns at 'Subiaco', near Parramatta, produced some good work also, young Colonial girls by this time having augmented their numbers. Even as early as 1848 Polding had got the help of the Colonial-Secretary, E. Deas Thomson, son-in-law of his old friend Governor Bourke, to get such objects into the Colony free of excessive duty. Deas Thomson was 'to inform His Excellency the Governor that the Articles of Foreign Manufacture, . . . Books, Chalices, Church Ornaments, etc., (were to be used) for Ecclesiastical purposes only, and not as Merchandise.'

Pastoral Appeal, 1862

In 1862 the Government withdrew State Aid from religion—not yet from denominational education, though that could be foreseen — and so Polding got out one of his most eloquent Pastorals, appealing for the help of his flock, not only in Sydney, but throughout the Colonies;

....St. Mary's is waiting for the testimony of your love and service!... The first church of this once dreary land, first in time as in dignity; first, as being that from which the dear, saving consolations of Catholic faith flowed in our early times into many of the weariest, saddest, most broken of hearts that ever throbbed in human breasts...

He went on to explain his idea of a Cathedral. It should be the crown of all men's efforts . . . the humble offering of their best and most beautiful; the type of the spiritual glory with which they believe that God's grace invests the souls of His saints . . . It is the palace of the poor, and a pledge for them of the splendours of their eternal home....

Lastly; it is the soul-stirring protest against narrow, merchandising selfishness.

He hoped that 'every man, woman, and child who professed the Catholic faith, . . . even if they lived in the lonely regions of the Colony,' would help finish the Cathedral. His appeals did not fall on deaf ears, and by the middle of that decade, the Cathedral was well on the way to completion. A description current then tells that the 'extreme length of the Cathedral, with recent additions was 165 feet, 9 inches, and its extreme breadth 96 feet.' It could accommodate a congregation of about 4000 people, but it was sometimes too small for the crowd that on special occasions tried to enter it. 'The ceiling, supported by pillars of hardwood cased in polished cedar, was beautifully groined; the groined work being also of polished cedar. The height of this ceiling to the top of the walls was 47 feet; and 61 feet to the summit of the groins.'

Underground work of Dr Gregory and the Monks

Sometime in the 1840's, Gregory and the monks had excavated beneath the building, dividing the space into rooms, with a 10 foot wide corridor running the whole length. The height of these rooms was 10 feet, and lighting was provided —apart from gas, not long before introduced into the Colony —by panes of glass let into the floor of the Cathedral itself in strategic places, and by windows opening into the walls of the foundations. Here there were bedrooms, studies, a library, reading rooms, and such offices, for the use of some of the monks, an economising of space much to be admired. Money saved in the purchase of land was able to be used for the Cathedral, another point to be considered.

The move to Lyndhurst

After about ten years from the completion of Gregory's excavations, the monks and the students moved to Lyndhurst, joining forces with the monks and pupils there, in an effort to rationalize and to offer commercial as well as classical classes to the Lyndhurst students, for some of them wanted to learn the ways of the business world as well as of the ancients.

Good Samaritan Sisters

The underground rooms vacated by the monks and students were in 1857 put to other uses. In the 1860's, some of the Sisters of an Institute founded in 1857 by Polding in Sydney, the Good Samaritan (called for its first decade or so, the Good Shepherd), conducted a school in the library and studies. They came each day from their Mother House in Pitt Street (on the site now occupied by Central Railway Station), where they already had a large school for girls. A reference in one of Polding's letters for 1862 shows that the Sisters were already at the Cathedral School then, coming daily from their Pitt Street Convent.

Fire!

Amongst the most momentous years of Polding's eventful life, surely 1865 stands out — for in that year, 31 years to the very day after he had been consecrated Bishop for Australia, on the Festival of Sts Peter and Paul, his work of 30 years literally went up in smoke. But after the initial shock, Polding, encouraged by the sympathy of people of all classes and creeds, optimistically set to work again to resurrect rather than create the Cathedral, as has already been seen. There was now no Cathedral in which to hold meetings, so one was held each evening for a week at Lyndhurst, from Friday 3 July to Tuesday of the next week. People gave or promised generously, and in less than a week already over £10,000 was promised or subscribed. Polding gave £500, and the Protestant Governor, Sir John Young, 40 guineas. At the huge meeting held in the Prince of Wales Theatre on Thursday, 6 July, a week after the fire, the Hon

Terence Murray, President of the Legislative Assembly, who had been present at the 1836 appeal, where, on the steps of the old Cathedral, he had practised his powers of persuasion, gave an eloquent eulogy of the work of Archbishop Polding and of the recently deceased Fr Therry. He hoped 'the new building would rise far greater in its noble proportions and architectural beauty' than that then in ruins. Others who spoke were Deas Thomson, William Bede Dailey, former pupil of Polding, Fr McEncroe, and so on. Those were days of marathon speechifying.

Letters to Bishop Goold, Melbourne.

It was a grateful yet worried Polding who wrote to his friend, Bishop Goold, 8 July 1865, pleased that £13,000 had already been donated towards the rebuilding. Polding was anxious to return to Bathurst, where he had been engaged in spiritual ministrations when the fire had consumed the Cathedral. On 22 September another letter winged its way southwards to Goold. A temporary 'cathedral' of wood was under way:

The wooden building intended to be used as a temporary church is proceeding rapidly towards completion. Oh, what a relief even this will be. We now have on Sundays five Masses in the Seminary (Lyndhurst)—at each a cram to suffocation . . . I cannot help applying to myself the words of St. John, *ilium crescere, me autem oportet minui*.^{*} I contrast Sydney with Melbourne. Wardell, 'the eminent architect' was engaged to draw up the plans for the new Cathedral, and by September 1866 (when Polding was overseas on Church business, such as getting further official approbation for his new Sisterhood) the masons began setting the huge blocks of stone into the solid rock 20 feet deep down. Bringing these foundations up to ground level took money and time, so that only two years later, 8 December 1868, was Polding able to bless the corner stone.

Polding at Darlinghurst Presbytery.

Now living at Darlinghurst Presbytery, for his Cathedral home was no more, Polding kept his dear friend, Dr Gregory, *au fait* with Sydney news. He was pleased to say, on the last day in January 1868 that he was more than satisfied with the work of the contractor, John Young; adding:

The Cathedral foundation is nearly completed. We are preparing for the next contract which will be for at least £25,000. We have £19,000 in hand. The Finance Committee have husbanded their means very well. They have paid extra expenses by means of Interest, and added £2000 to the Principal. We are engaged only on 200 feet or so; and this portion with Sacristy and Chapter Room, the foundations will be completed by March. It is an awful (i.e. awe-inspiring) work and Wardell has swung up his design far beyond what was proposed at first. It will require £300,000 to complete it.

(Was this the understatement of the century?)

Not only the Cathedral

Other churches were going up in the Archdiocese at the same time, such as the one in Newcastle, all calling out for money. Polding was almost regretting that he had engaged Wardell, so grand and expensive were his plans. Fortunately for Australia, he did not give up! Gregory learnt a few more facts in a letter of 19 May 1868, from Wollongong:

The foundations . . . for 200 feet of its length are completed; a noble work certainly; in some places 20 feet deep. A greater variety of soil and subsoil I do not think possible in the same extent of ground. I wish we had taken more time to consider, and not pitched so far on the sum proposed to be expended. The present plan is altogether beyond the means of the Colony — £300,000 will be required to roof it in. And I do not think any part can be made available for use under £80,000. We now have. £19,000 which in a moderate plan ought to give us a usable part of the skeleton of the Church. But Wardell, though a good, is a most expensive architect; so much so, that a proverb goes: if you want to be ruined, put yourself into W's hands.

There were yet more demands on Archdiocesan funds. There were St Vincent's Hospital and a new school in Kent Street, for instance. Still, Polding was more pleased and proud than otherwise to tell Gregory, in a P.S. to a letter of 9 September 1868:

**He must increase, I must decrease.*

Our Collection for the H.F. is £895. Not bad, is it?

Moreover, the temporary ‘cathedral’ had eaten up money Polding had been saving for the paying off of a mortgage on Lyndhurst. As well, he was funding £400 for the education of the younger clergy, church collections for this purpose being too low — not surprisingly, considering the many calls on the faithful of the Archdiocese.

St Andrew’s Cathedral takes the lead

In his November letter to Gregory, Polding spoke of the blessing of the corner stone of St Mary’s, to be held on 8 December, commenting: ‘St Andrew’s is to be consecrated on the Feast day.’ (That is, on St Andrew’s day.) Did he feel some pious regret and even envy at the loss of the first St. Mary’s, which would have been completed, paid for, and consecrated by this time — only for the fire? He wrote:

All the Protestant bodies are going ahead in money matters and in united action.

Man proposes — fire disposes, yet again!

Unbelievably, the wooden ‘cathedral’ doing temporary duty for the real one still so far off completion, was burnt down a month after the blessing of 8 December 1868. On Epiphany night, 6 January 1869, just 30 years after Polding’s 1839 Epiphany Pastoral Appeal for the former St Mary’s, the Colony’s Catholics were stunned by yet another fire. This time it was, however, a cultural rather than a financial loss, for all the valuable and rare church items salvaged from the first fire went up in smoke, irretrievably. Writing to Gregory from Melbourne, 1 February 1869, Polding grieved:

The temporary wooden church has been burnt, whether by accident or design will never be known. The time, half past three in the morning, and other circumstances compel me to believe it the work of an incendiary . . . A sad loss, and Oh! dear Gregory, greater in one sense than the former, inasmuch as the whole of the sacristy and its contents are destroyed. .

He blamed himself for leaving ‘so much valuable property in a mere wooden structure, so liable to accident.’ Yet there was a good side to this event:

The people have come forward nobly with their offerings in order to build another temporary Cathedral. Fortunately the one destroyed was insured for £1500. Its cost was £2300, so this is a clear loss of £800. It is expected that the next one can be put up for £3300. It will be of brick: roof, iron and slate.

But he felt much being ‘stripped of all except two mitres and the stole’ the Pope had given him. Indeed, he was beginning to believe himself, he added half in jest, but half in earnest:

A Jonah to be flung into the sea for the wellbeing of others.

Progress

By 27 March 1869, however, he was in much better spirits, and wrote to Gregory: . . . Our new Cathedral is progressing gloriously; the work is magnificent. Our temporary Cathedral is proceeding rapidly. It is an immense concern. A church, brick, iron, slate: 170 ft. x 56 ft. Sacristies and other offices all over 220 feet to be begun and completed in three months: yet such will be the case, if, as we have reason to believe, the church be ready for Whitsunday.

Australia’s Foundation Day 1870

On the anniversary of the founding of the Colony in Sydney, Polding wrote his January letter to Gregory, saying *inter alia*, that the temporary building was in use:

We have a most excellent brick, stone and iron building, far larger and more commodious. It is very cool, even on a hot day; it is well attended. At a later date it will make a first rate Seminary; but when? Years and years must elapse before we can use the noble church we have in hand. The altar end is towards Hyde Barracks. . . Young, the contractor, is doing his work admirably. The walls are of an average height of 7 feet, in some parts higher, in others less . . . But there is no disguising it; I am fearfully in debt. . .

At 75 years of age, he probably wondered if he would live to see an end of such haunting money troubles. By June

1871, he was deeper in debt:

Our contract for St. Mary's is drawing to a close. The walls are all round twenty-three feet high: the columns, very graceful, are capped same height. Unfortunately we have to make up more than £3000 to complete our side of the contract. The next will be a heavy one — £13,000— but it will carry the outer walls to their full height, complete arches of nave, so that the aisles may be roofed if desirable to do so. And this, who will see?

The Good Samaritan Sisters' new Convent in Pitt Street

Yet resiliently, the now aged man was seeing also to a new convent for his Good Samaritan Sisters, whose old one, the former Carter Barracks, was a death trap, a hazard to life because of its crumbling from dampness. He had put out a Pastoral in October 1870, appealing for help for the Sisters and their charges at Pitt Street, destitute women and girls, saying:

Yes, our burdens just now are many and heavy, but you see clearly that we cannot spare ourselves. There is no help for it . . . We commend the work to the cooperation of all in the name of the "Good Shepherd", who came on this earth 'to seek and to save all that were lost.' May the love of Him dwell in your hearts.

(One notes the original title of the Sisterhood still clinging, although it had been changed to 'Good Samaritan' in 1866, while Polding was in Rome, in order to distinguish it from a French Sisterhood of the Good Shepherd, whose Sisters were already in Melbourne.)

Pentecost Pastoral 1871

Polding's final Pastoral Appeal for the Cathedral fittingly appeared at his beloved Whitsuntide. He remembered, he said, how six years before, our dear old Cathedral, clothed with so many cherished memories of griefs and blessings, was totally destroyed by a cruel fire, and for a moment every Catholic heart was saddened, and was almost overwhelmed.

Yet, he went on to say,

.....what a bright glow of faith and sympathy succeeded, what generous gifts from Catholics and non-Catholics were heaped up for the work of restoration, and how speedily it was seen, that a new Cathedral, of fairer and larger structure, would replace what we had lost . . . We set to work in most joyful hope, and the noble plan was elaborated, of which so large a portion is already realized.

Then he gave details of the work so far, showing that already £30,000 had been used up in the building, summing up the things he had been telling Gregory:

There have been.....three large contracts, the first for the wide and deep foundations down on the deep and solid rock; the second, for the first stage above ground; and the third, carrying the plan all round the capitals of the strong and graceful columns that are even now calling upon us for the superstructure.

He implored especially the 30,000 Catholics in Sydney and suburbs to rally round in no spirit of calculation or grudging, but, as (became) their Catholic spirit and origins so that the next contract could be entered into, and the first portion of the Cathedral be completed.

Success of Polding's appeals

On the Feast of their mutual Spiritual Father, St Benedict, in 1873, one of Polding's last extant letters to Gregory, though despondent in some ways, showed that the Cathedral was progressing still:

As regards St. Mary's a good spirit prevails. We have been collecting these last six weeks at the average rate of £100 per week. We are about to enter upon another contract which will carry up the walls outside, their full height, those of the nave parallel, 40 feet — work for four years at £3000 per year

But Polding was dead before those four years had fully elapsed. And early in 1874 he was happy to hand over to the newly-arrived young and eminently capable Coadjutor Archbishop of Sydney, Roger Bede Vaughan, O.S.B., 'the temporalities of the Archdiocese.' Polding's part now was still more fervent prayer.

The end of the part of ‘the Bishop of Botany Bay’ in building the Cathedrals

So came to an end the direct part played by Polding in building both Cathedrals, the first and its successor, of which he had spoken in 1871 as being equal ‘with . . . the best buildings that men have ever executed in this southern hemisphere.’ Let those who can study the Cathedral’s architecture and appreciate its undoubted rare quality in this hemisphere, make the final judgment on this point. For the layman, it is impossible not to give to Polding’s vision the credit it deserves, especially when it led him to keep on, despite the temptation, all too natural in an old man, to give up trying. Perseverance is part of the Benedictine heritage, and surely Polding exemplified it in a remarkable degree, working as he did for over forty years to put up a Cathedral worthy of the Lord, insofar as mere humans can do so. Is it any wonder that the spirit of Polding seems to pervade the Cathedral, within whose unroofed walls he, as tradition says, often prayed, even though he probably never offered Mass there, unless a private one with a small group of friends?

References: Polding’s Correspondence from Archives such as Downside Abbey Archives; Good Samaritan Archives, Glebe Point; Sydney Archdiocesan Archives; Stanbrook Abbey Archives (copies of letters from these are kept in Benedictine Sisters’ (Pennant Hills) Archives.) Polding’s Pastorals, etc.

Nihil Obstat: Peter J. Kenny, S.T.D. Diocesan Censor.
Imprimatur: Peter J. Connors, D.C.L.
Vicar-General, Melbourne
