

A Patrician Story - Text

Section 1 CONTEXT OF FOUNDATION

Irish society in the 18th and 19th centuries was in a sorry state. Ireland was under the rule of Britain and the country had been occupied by British forces for centuries. A majority of farmers had had their lands taken away because they could not afford the exorbitant rents charged by wealthy landlords. These lands were incorporated into large estates owned mainly by settlers from the British aristocracy.

Penal laws were in force which outlawed public worship by Catholics. Catholic schools were also outlawed and the vast majority of the population was uneducated, oppressed, and living in circumstance of great poverty and hardship. There was a slight improvement in the rights of Catholics with the passing of a bill called Catholic Emancipation in the British Parliament in 1829. Nevertheless, for many decades to follow, most young people in Ireland had no access to education, provisions for religious worship were hampered by antagonism of the rulers, and health care services were the privilege of the wealthy few.

This was the context in which a number of Religious Congregations were founded in the Ireland of that era. Responding to the crying needs of society and Church, the following Congregations came to birth at this time: The Presentation Sisters, The Christian Brothers, The Mercy Sisters, The Sisters of Charity, The Brigidine Sisters, The Patrician Brothers, and the Holy Faith Sisters. Their Founders were courageous women and men of vision and faith who saw great needs and responded pro-actively.

FOUNDATION

Daniel Delany, founder of Brigidine Sisters and the Patrician Brothers was luckier than most young Irish people of his time. Although he was of humble stock, he had wealthy aunts who paid for him to receive an education in France. In his time in France he decided to continue his studies and formation to become a Catholic priest. On his return to Ireland as a priest he was appointed to the small rural parish of Tullow, Co Carlow about 70 Kilometres south from Dublin.

He was immediately appalled at the conditions of poverty, ignorance, and violence in his new surroundings. His first instinct was to return to France but he was prevailed upon to stay and to attempt to improve the religious and human condition of the people. Having assessed the situation he made the improvement of the lot of the children and young people a priority. He formed two small groups from among his parishioners, one of women and one of men. Their main purpose was

to give some form of basic religious education to girls and boys after each Mass each Sunday. Additionally, in so far as they could, given their own lack of training and resources, they would seek to provide some simple form of vocational education for young people, giving them skills and attitudes which might lead them to a trade or some form of self-reliance.

These confraternities were successful in opening up some avenues of hope for young people in the local area. Meanwhile Daniel Delany had been appointed as bishop of the Diocese. To help members of the confraternities to deepen their own religious and spiritual formation, and to set up a more stable structure to continue the ministry of education to local children and youth, Bishop Delany invited some members to consider the prospect of becoming pioneer members in two new Religious Congregations.

On 1st February 1807 at Tullow, Bishop Delany commissioned a number of local women as the founding members of the Brigidine Sisters. Likewise at Tullow a year later, on 2nd February 1808, Bishop Delany commissioned four men as the founding members of the Patrician Brothers.

Thus was formed two new Religious Congregations, placed under the patronage of two great saints of the Irish Church who died in the 5th century, St Brigid and St Patrick. In the years following foundation, other men were attracted to join the Brothers and small Patrician communities set up schools and pastoral aid centres in other parishes in Ireland.

PATRICIANS COME TO AUSTRALIA

At the other side of the world in this era, White Settlement was in its early stages in small parts of the vast continent of Australia. A majority of convicts among the white settlers were Irish Catholics, many of whom were exiled from their native land because of their political views or for comparatively trivial offences.

In time Catholic communities began to form, priests arrived from Ireland to minister to them, and Catholic schools began to emerge. These schools were rather primitive usually built by local communities and staffed by women and men of goodwill but of little education and training themselves. However, the schools were becoming integral parts of fledgling Catholic communities and their growth looked assured in the receipt of some Government monies which helped with the payment of teachers.

The raising profile of the Catholic church in what was deemed to be an Anglican colony fanned flames of sectarianism. In 1875 the passing on the Public Instruction Act by the NSW Governor, Sir Henry Parkes, gave rise to a serious dilemma for the Catholic church. This Act stipulated that

henceforth school education would be 'compulsory, free and secular'. All payments to Church schools were withdrawn making it impossible to pay the all-lay staffs.

Despite this huge set-back the Catholic clergy, backed by the wider Catholic community, took the bold step of going it alone with their own system of education. They wanted their schools to remain places where religious education and spiritual formation were integrated in the total life of the schools.

The Irish bishops especially, looked to the emergence of the Religious Congregations in Ireland and invitations were extended to these Congregations to send Sisters and Brothers to Australia who might teach in, and administer, the Catholic schools. In this way the burden of staff salaries would be eliminated as the Religious would receive simple support from local parish communities and would not be paid.

Among the Religious to respond to the Bishops' invitations towards the end of the 19th century were the Patrician Brothers. In March 1883, the pioneer Patricians (...names) arrived in Australia and established the first Patrician community at Maitland in NSW.

PATRICIANS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL SETTINGS

In the years to follow the 1883 arrival at Maitland additional Brothers came from Ireland and, in response to invitations from Bishops and parishes, the Patricians established communities in a variety of country locations. Life was not always easy for the Brothers in this early phase of Patrician presence in Australia. At times, relationships with local clergy were strained as Brothers often felt that they were a mere work-force to do the bidding of the clergy. Besides, most of the Brothers were young, and many had poor teacher-training. They had come from a simple rural life in Ireland which was very different from that of a pioneering bush society. In November 2007, on the eve of Bicentenary year, Brothers from Sydney visited every country graveyard where Patricians lay buried.

It was sad to note that a majority of headstones recorded deaths of Brothers at early ages, almost all in their 20's or 30's only. Just imagine what it must have been like for these men prior to their deaths. They were sick and weak, on the other side of the world, far from their families and relatives whom they had never seen since leaving Ireland. No telephones, and a letter would take at least six weeks via coach and ship. A question that remains with us to haunt and challenge us now is : WHY DID THEY DO IT ?

INNER CITY PHASE

Meantime, Sydney's population was expanding and Catholic parish communities were consolidating in the city's inner suburbs especially. The Irish dimension was strong in these emerging parishes. Gradually, the Brothers withdrew from country settings, responding to invitations to open boys' schools in inner city communities. Before the end of the 19th century the Brothers had moved to Ryde, settling there in 1890 and opening Holy Cross College in 1891.

By this time, a number of young Australian men had become Patrician Brothers and the Irish-Australian blend among the Brothers was a positive factor in enabling close identification within the mainly Anglo Celtic communities which they worked. It has always been a policy and tradition of the Brothers to work in close partnership with the local Church and in parishes that could generally be called 'working class'. The Brothers never opted to run privately owned Congregational schools.

It must be remembered that through all these years, Catholic schools received no government monies to help with buildings, running costs, or salary payment. The Catholic schools were totally maintained and supported through generous funding by local Catholic communities, augmented by the modest school fees of students. Fetes, raffles, and other fund-raising initiatives were an integral part of Catholic school life to provide classrooms and basic resources. Catholic schools could not afford clerical and support staff in those times. All such tasks, including cleaning and maintenance, were carried out by the Brothers and students.

Although it is over 40 years since the Patricians left the inner-city, alumni from those schools still come together with the Brothers for a function each year to re-visit memories of the 'good old days', in a show of affection they still hold .

MOVEMENT TO WESTERN SUBURBS

The 1940's and 1950's saw the commencement of Sydney's rapid expansion west-ward. Newly-married couples from inner-city headed to western suburbs where housing was available and a great influx of migrants , mainly from Europe, created Australia's first big wave of multicultural intake. Migrant hostels at Villawood, Cabramatta, and Warwick Farm provided stopping places for newly arrived as they negotiated more permanent residence in surrounding suburbs. Many Southern Europeans especially were also able to acquire small plots of land which were soon turned into market gardens.

A big percentage of the new migrants were Catholics making it necessary to create new parishes. Accordingly, the need for new Catholic schools arose. Responding to these needs, and responding

to the invitation of Church authorities, the Brothers moved first to Granville (1942), and later to Blacktown (1952), to Fairfield in 1953 and to Liverpool in 1954.

It was not long before these schools were bursting at the seams, placing great pressure on the Brothers and on the local parish communities. As yet, no Government money was coming to Catholic schools. Providing classrooms to keep pace with increasing enrolments was a major expense. Class sizes were enormous by present-day standards. Forty or fifty students per class were not unusual, often much higher, especially in primary schools, and as yet, very few schools had non-teaching staff.

The schools were still mainly staffed by Brothers but it became necessary to engage more lay teachers. Many of these teachers accepted the low salaries affordable in the Catholic system. They saw teaching in a Catholic school in the circumstances as a vocation and, along with the Brothers, they were heroic in 'holding the line', especially in the mid and late 1960's when the system almost reached a point of collapse.

Despite the hardships and lack of resources, there was a great spirit of optimism and collaboration in Patrician schools of those times. In the great cauldron of multiculturalism that characterised Catholic schools in the western suburbs, the Brothers and their co-workers found it easy and fulfilling to be in solidarity with families seeking to establish themselves in a new environment. The Patrician schools sought to provide settings of inclusion and hospitality, along with earnest striving for the attainment of personal bests. There was a healthy 'can do' philosophy where students came to realize that their achievements ought not to be a prisoner of their post codes. Religious faith and spirituality were integrated into the total lives of the schools and partnership with local parish communities were highly valued. Sport too had a high profile, in the conviction that boys enjoy team games and that sport provides many advantages in social development, in physical activity, and in the making of lasting friendships.

As Australia became more multicultural the older sectarian divides diminished. Besides, the wider society came to view Catholic schools more positively. In that context, Governments felt safer in allocating money to Catholic schools. The NSW State Government offered Catholic schools per capita grants for students for the first time in 1968.....\$12.00 per year for each primary student and \$18.00 per year for each secondary student. In the early 1970's, the Federal Government introduced per capita funding as well as limited funding for buildings. Government funding is now a given and accounts for over 80% of recurrent expenditure in Catholic schools.

The increased funding enabled the Catholic system to pay more equitable salaries to lay teachers, and, even to remunerate staff holding positions of special responsibility. This period saw a rapid increase in the numbers of lay teachers coming into the Catholic schools to supplement the work of

the Brothers. The proportion of Brothers on school staffs had gone from over 90% in the 1950's to less than 5% in the 1980's. By this time hardly any young men were opting to join the Brothers and some Brothers were transferring from schools into other forms of ministry

TRANSITION

Within a span of about 50 years in the last century, a majority of Catholic schools went from being fully staffed by Religious Sisters and Brothers to the present situation where there are hardly any Sisters or Brothers teaching in schools. In that time, there have also been very significant shifts in society and in the Catholic Church itself.

Nevertheless, Catholic school education retains a high profile. In city suburbs, in Regional and rural settings throughout Australia the Catholic school presents a positive face of the Church to the world. Women and men of religious faith and spirituality continue to nurture what is best in the compelling story of Catholic school education in Australia. The new 'carriers of the flame' are committed, in creative fidelity, to the integration of faith and life within school communities.

PATRICIAN CHARISM & SPIRITUALITY

All Catholic schools share a common goal, aspiring to shape the lives of their communities according to the life and teachings of Jesus. However, each school's culture is shaped by its own story. Many Catholic schools owe their beginning to Religious Congregations. Because of the vision and aspirations of their founders, and because of the circumstances and responses of pioneer members especially, each Religious Congregation brings its own flavour to the manner in which it participates in the mission of the Church. More formally, this is known as the special GIFT or CHARISM that the Congregation brings to the life of the Church and to society.

Charism is not static. It is a dynamic entity. While remaining rooted in what is best in the founding stories and traditions, it also remains open to fresh forms of expression in changed and changing circumstances.

Features of the Patrician charism include:

A spirit of welcome and hospitality; being at ease with the ordinary and the human, while favouring 'the battlers'; close identification with local Church and local community; Religion & spirituality part of 'the package deal' in schools'; an optimistic, 'can-do' spirit.

An underpinning of the charism is found in that prayer commonly prayed in Patrician-linked schools ---The Breastplate of St Patrick. The prayer gets its theology and spirituality from the patron of the Patrician Brothers, St Patrick, and his followers in the early Christian church in

Ireland. Its theme of the presence of Christ in everyone and all around us is both uplifting and challenging.

A distinctive religious symbol of the Patrician Brothers is the Celtic cross. The Celtic cross consists of the traditional Christian cross but has a circle at its centre. A popular belief is that the Celtic cross comes from the time of St Patrick in the 5th century and that the circle symbolizes aspects of the ancient Celtic and pre-Christian spirituality.

Another distinctive symbol, worn by Patrician Brothers on ceremonial occasions, is the green sash. Green points to the Irish origins. In the 1880's, Patrician Brother, Aloysius Howlin, was granted a private audience with Pope Leo X111. He was thus favoured because as a young man he had served as a soldier in an Irish Battalion in defence of the Papal State. Bro Aloysius sought permission from the Pope for the Brothers to wear a distinctive green sash. Permission was given and the green sash became part of the formal dress of the Brothers from 1888 onwards.

BICENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

The year 2008 was a big year in the Patrician story. It was the year when Brothers and friends celebrated the 200th anniversary of foundation, the Bicentenary of the Congregation.

The planning, the organization and the celebration of the main public events was a great experience of support and affirmation for the Brothers and was an occasion of wonderful collaboration among the Patrician-linked schools.

The first Bicentenary event was an Indian immersion experience for two weeks in January. A pilgrim group of students and staff from the schools journeyed together through South India touching base with Indian Patricians and visiting institutions caring for children and adults in circumstances of great need.

On St Patrick's Day, 17th March, students, staff, clergy, special guests, and friends of the Brothers gathered at the Olympic site in Homebush Bay for a Mass of Thanksgiving. This was an inspiring liturgical experience, with the students excelling themselves in active and reverent participation in the ceremonies.

In the last week of April, school communities, Brothers, guests, and friends were back again at Homebush Bay. This time, the Patrician story was re-told in an extravaganza

of drama, dance, music and song. In a lively concert at the ACER Arena, the audience of 7,000 + was engaged and entertained in a balance of themes , some solemn, some lighthearted, but all meaningful.

The final major, public event was a Bicentenary Dinner at the Liverpool Catholic Club in October. Over five hundred members of the extended Patrician family gathered to look back in gratitude on the celebrations and spirit of goodwill that had characterized the Bicentenary year. A feature of the evening was the award of special presentations to a small number of staff who had records of lengthy and outstanding service to the Patrician story.

The year 2008 was a glorious year, a year in which the Brothers and the school communities honoured the past, show-cased the present , and formed aspirations for a hope-filled future.

A snapshot of the Patrician story is captured in an anthem composed by Amanda McKenna to mark the year of Bicentenary...

PATRICIAN OUTREACHES

At first the Patrician foundations in the United States, India, Australia, and Kenya, had Ireland as their source. It was Irish men who went to those far-off lands to enable Bishop Daniel Delany's vision of a Catholic education for all to become a reality. Certainly Bishop Daniel did not entertain thoughts that his small band of men would branch out to countries he had not even heard of.

But by the 1960s the Australian section of the Patrician congregation had become large enough to consider foundations of its own.

In 1968 then the Brothers in Australia were able to respond to a request to administer a school in Aitape, Papua New Guinea. Two Brothers were sent from Fairfield to begin with. Many more were to follow, mainly from Australia but also from Ireland and India. By 1988 young Papua New Guinean men were asking to become Patrician Brothers.

Those who became Brothers taught in schools, worked in local parishes, or became medical officers.

Today there are three Patricians from Australia in Papua New Guinea continuing to train young men as Patricians so they can minister to the spiritual, educational, and medical needs of children and adults in the remote villages of the Sepik River region.

With the reintroduction of government aid to Catholic and other private schools from the late 1960s, schools were able to afford to employ more and more lay teachers. Because of this development, Brothers and Sisters who had been involved in schools were gradually able to move into ministries other than teaching.

For the Brothers a few did leave the classroom to work in the area of schools retreats, parish work, or hospital chaplaincy. But most continued to minister in schools until they reached an age when they thought it was time to move on.

Today there are Brothers involved in parish work and adult education. There are Brothers who visit the sick and those in retirement villages. There are Brothers who minister as chaplains in hospitals and in gaols.

As we now enter the second decade of the 21st century, very few secondary students in Catholic schools know very much about Sisters and Brothers. Fifty years ago nearly all of the teachers in Catholic schools were either a Sister or a Brother, now there is hardly a one: that's progress, the situation has changed.

For more than eighty years in Australia, when there was no government money for Catholic schools, Sisters and Brothers worked with Bishops and priests and parishes to make Catholic education happen. Now government finance is available; the need for Religious in schools is no longer vital; and so, in the main, they have moved on.

But in so many ways their legacies live on in the schools they established. Today's school communities very much value and enrich the heritage and spirit of those who have gone before. They appreciate that by valuing and celebrating the good things of the past they are ensuring the opportunity for a better future.

The End