

Catholic Thought and  
Catholic Action:  
Scenes from Australian Catholic Life

James Franklin

Connor Court Publishing Pty Ltd

Published in 2023 by Connor Court Publishing Pty Ltd.

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Connor Court Publishing Pty Ltd.

PO Box 7257

Redland Bay QLD 4165

sales@connorcourt.com

www.connorcourt.com

ISBN: 9281922449...

Cover Design by .....

Front cover: Catholic boy scouts at St Patrick's College Manly, Corpus Christi, 7 June 1934, photographer Ted Hood. (State Library of New South Wales, <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/nM7BVKKY>).

Printed in Australia.

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# Introduction

**T**he last recorded words of Jesus are his message to his followers at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts continues the story up to St Paul’s arrival in Rome. That is well beyond Judea and Samaria, but it is not the ends of the earth.

The story of the Catholic Church at the actual ends of the earth resumed in 1803, when officials in the Vatican received an unexpected letter via Irish connections in Rome. The letter described events in a recently established British colony on the far side of New Holland. It revealed that an Irish priest forcibly sent there, Fr Dixon, was exercising his ministry. Despite the major disruption to Church activities resulting from the French Revolution followed by Napoleon’s occupation of Rome, the church functionaries acted enthusiastically in response. They sent Fr Dixon an official letter. It excused him from any defects in canonical forms that may have proved necessary in his difficult circumstances, urged him to organise where possible the conversion of the Pacific Islands, and granted him the impressive title, “Prefect Apostolic of New Holland.” (The story is told in ch. 1)

Fr Dixon returned to Ireland in 1809 and Australia was left without priests. But lay Catholic devotion continued and an organised Catholic community was ready in Sydney to welcome government-approved priests in 1820 (ch. 2). In the two centuries since, a vigorous church, first Irish and then multicultural, developed into a distinctive section of Australian society, comprising one fifth to one quarter of the population. Through its sacraments, sermons, tight ecclesiastical organisation and especially through its own education system, the Australian Catholic community embodied a tradition of ideas and ideas-led action different from the rest of the population.

Australian Catholic history is the story of that unique community and its contributions to the wider society.

The present book is not a complete overview of Australian Catho-

lic history. It presents a series of vignettes which, on their relatively small scale, illustrate the variety of the doings of the Catholic faithful. Those actions were not random or ill-considered, but informed by a tradition of faith and ideas that implied a definite view on metaphysical, theological, moral and political issues.

The Catholic tradition differs from both Protestant and secular ones in two main respects, one theological and one philosophical. Theologically, it emphasises the sacraments and the visible unified institutional Church centred on the Pope and taking orders from Central Command. It is thus embodied in a more definite way than rival traditions; and, just as we can choose our friends but are stuck with our family, so Catholics must live in the same Church as other Catholics, whatever they may think of their views, actions and devotional practices.

Philosophically, Catholic theory differs from both Protestant and most secular theory in its commitment to a natural law ethics – that what is right follows from the inherent nature of things, especially human nature. That was the central tenet of the scholastic philosophy that dominated Catholic philosophy and education for the first half of the twentieth century (ch. 6). And on a Catholic view, objective ethics applies not only to the actions of individuals, but to the collective arrangements of society; the theory of social justice of Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* requires that arrangements like a minimum fair wage be instituted – as explained by Archbishop Mannix (ch. 10). The Catholic tradition has too a strong sense that ethics is not only objective but demanding. If children are not being educated, or women are destitute on the streets, or Communists are taking over the unions, someone should do something about it urgently. If I am on the spot and have relevant talents and resources, “someone” is me. God requires me to take action, and to organise with others to make action effective.

That perspective, explicitly or implicitly, has been behind the Catholic contributions to Australian life described in this book. Catholic remote-area missions were premised on a belief that aboriginal Australians were entitled not only to hear the word of God but to be protected against toxic aspects of both black and white cul-

ture (chs 3-4). A commitment to the inherent equality of the worth of persons was behind the Mabo decision of the Catholic-dominated High Court, which declared that indigenous Australians had rights in land that could not be ignored by the white colonisers (ch. 15). Similar views were behind Arthur Calwell's 1940s plan for mass immigration, which held that refugees in war-torn Europe had some right to Australia's unused spaces (as well as being good for Australia) (ch. 12). The untiring anti-communist organising of Dr Ryan (ch. 7) reflected not only knowledge of Stalinist atrocities, but a presumption that a materialist philosophy like Leninism could only result in a view of humans as expendable, fit only to be shovelled into mass graves if they were not on the side of "history". If Freemasonry was a godless ideology, as Catholics believed (not entirely correctly) then it was certainly unsatisfactory if society were dominated by Freemasons (ch. 9).

It is also characteristic of the Catholic tradition to act communally and institutionally as well as individually. The mass is a communal celebration, not a collection of people praying privately, and Catholic action for good is also typically collective. The poor Catholic communities of 1821 and the later rural ones portrayed in "John O'Brien's" *Around the Boree Log* overcame the challenges of sparse populations to create a virtuous and faithful common life (chs 2 and 5).

Catholic religious – priests, brothers and nuns – were trained in isolated seminaries and convents to be a special class of dedicated workers wholly devoted to the church cause; their memoirs testify to a unique institutional culture very different from the way of life of most Australians (ch. 11). Charitable action for the worst-off in society was done on a large scale through institutions such as the Magdalen laundries that took in destitute girls (ch. 8). In the fight against communism, Catholics provided not only the intellectual firepower but the organised foot soldiers to fight in the unions (ch. 7). Calwell's action for European refugees was successful because solidly supported by the Catholic-dominated Labor Party of his day. The Cahill government was effective partly because it was based on organised Catholic lay mass societies (ch. 13).

There are lessons to be learned. History is not *for* lessons, and historical study must be pursued on its own terms in an effort to understand what really happened, not what one would like to have happened. Nevertheless, once that has been done, there may be lessons arising which it would be stupid to ignore.

The story contains both extraordinary role models to inspire imitation and avoidable disasters that stand as warnings.

St Mary MacKillop is the perfect exemplar of a type of sanctity seen again and again in Australian Catholic history – practical, inspired by faith and well-informed on theory, energetic, institutionally organised in a way that created benefits for many, especially the worst off. Her model was followed by missionaries such as Bishop Gsell (ch. 4), country priest and poet “John O’Brien” (ch. 5), anti-communist speaker and organiser Dr Ryan (ch 7), Archbishop Mannix (ch. 10), immigration minister Arthur Calwell (ch. 12), and the early Sisters of Charity who took in large numbers of destitute girls (ch. 8). Confident, larger than life and outward-looking figures, they got action. A comparison with the present day shows up too many contemporary Catholics as lazy, soft, uncommitted, ignorant of Catholic ideas and culture, afflicted by modern nervousness and over-concerned with internal church disputes. The lessons are obvious.

But along with those achievements, something went seriously wrong. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was probably the world’s most intensive external investigation of the Catholic Church, and most of its adverse findings were justified. The sexual abuse crisis and its coverup were the most prominent but not the only devastating outcome of a religious culture that became ingrown, self-satisfied and inaccessible to outside or inside scrutiny. The ability of the serial pedophile priest Fr Ridsdale to continue his offending although it was known to his superiors (ch. 14) depended on the Church acting in a coordinated way to “protect its reputation” without regard to the welfare of victims. Less well known but also with severe impacts on powerless victims was the near slave labour endured by young women in Magdalen laundries (ch. 8) and the persecution of homosexuals by a Catholic police commissioner (ch. 13). Those events were

not one-off mistakes but the results of an unaccountable institution implementing a body of ideas not subject to internal or external criticism. Again, the lessons are obvious.

Australia is by world standards a notably successful state and culture. Its Catholic tradition has been one contributor to that success. Cardinal Moran's vision of the Australian Church as a base for the Christianisation of Asia and the Pacific and a counter to secularisation at home is a live one. It needs to be informed by knowledge of the two centuries of Australian Catholic history, which put into perspective the shallow disputes and discouragements of the present day.