

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

David Hilliard

Catholicism was planted in South Australia by a small company of Catholics who had emigrated from Ireland and England. Initially, as they had neither priest nor church, they met for worship in private houses. Their first priest William Benson arrived in Adelaide in 1841. In 1842 Rome subdivided the vast diocese of Sydney, creating a diocese of Adelaide which embraced the new province of South Australia. Francis Murphy was appointed as first bishop. The **first Catholic churches** were built in Adelaide (1845) and at Morphett Vale (1846). The first portion of St Francis Xavier's Cathedral in Adelaide was opened in 1858.

South Australia in the nineteenth century was a strongly Protestant society. The largest religious denominations were the Anglican (Church of England) and Methodist churches, and Baptists, Congregationalists and Lutherans were stronger than anywhere else in Australia. The great majority of South Australian Catholics were of Irish descent. Catholics comprised only 10-15 per cent of the colony's population and included few wealthy families or benefactors. Their style of **piety** and worship was very different from that of their Protestant neighbours. Despite a degree of separatism, as a small and widely scattered minority they were not aggressive in their Catholicism and were keen to be accepted by the wider community. Following the ending of state aid to religion in 1851, the Catholic Church, like other denominations, attempted to become financially self-sufficient, while also grateful for funds raised overseas, especially from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith based in France. Bishops were preoccupied with finding sufficient priests to administer the sacraments and undertake pastoral work. Church life locally was dominated by the raising of money in small amounts to support the clergy and pay for churches and schools.

Religious congregations of women and men from many different countries have played an important role in South Australian Catholic life, undertaking pastoral, educational and **social welfare work**. The first community to work in South Australia were Jesuit priests and brothers from Austria who came to the Clare district in 1848. They built a church and started a winery at Sevenhill and from this base provided a pastoral ministry throughout the northern areas of the colony. The first religious congregation of women was the **Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart**, founded by Mary MacKillop and Father Julian Tenison Woods at Penola in 1866. From the late nineteenth century various religious orders of priests made foundations in South Australia and were given charge of parishes in and near Adelaide: Benedictines (1875), Carmelites (1881), Passionists (1896), Dominicans (1898), Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (1913). Other religious orders began work in Adelaide in the 1940s and 1950s. By the 1960s the archdiocese of Adelaide had more clergy who were members of religious orders than diocesan clergy, although this is no longer the case.

At the centre of the church's pastoral strategy was the ideal of having **Catholic schools** for all Catholic children. The Australian bishops regarded the government ('secular') education systems that were set up in each colony in the late nineteenth century as a danger to faith and required Catholic parents to send their children to church schools wherever these existed. From the mid-nineteenth century the number of children enrolled in Catholic schools in South Australia grew rapidly, from 1100 in 1866 to 5300 in 1900.

From the late nineteenth century the institutional structure of Catholic Church expanded. The number of churches in South Australia rose from 8 in 1855 to 102 in 1900 and 157 in 1940. In 1887 a new diocese was established to cover the north of the colony, with its headquarters initially at Port Augusta, from 1951 at Port Pirie. The first bishop was John O'Reily. Adelaide then became an archbishopric. In the early years of the colony, local churches were grouped into missions served by travelling priests. From the 1880s these were replaced by geographical parishes, each with its own resident priest. In Adelaide and the country, many new parishes were created, most of them with a primary school staffed by teaching sisters. The first South Australian-born priest

was ordained in 1883, but until the 1940s priests were recruited mainly from Ireland and continental Europe. Among diocesan organisations with parish branches were the Catholic Young Men's Society, the Catholic Women's League, the St Vincent de Paul Society, the Holy Name Society, the Knights of the Southern Cross, the Legion of Mary, the Catholic Guild for Social Studies and the National Catholic Rural Movement. Charitable institutions were founded to meet particular social needs. These included orphanages, homes for unmarried mothers, a hospital, homes for aged men and women, and boys' and girls' reformatories. Catholics became active in South Australian **politics**, especially in the Labor Party.

From the late 1930s South Australia experienced a rapid growth in manufacturing industry which led to an economic and social transformation. After the Second World War, to meet the demand for labour, the state drew large numbers of immigrants from the United Kingdom and Europe. This wave of **migration** boosted the size of the Catholic community. Between 1947 and 1966 the Catholic proportion of the state's population rose sharply, from 13 to 20 per cent. In suburban Adelaide many new parishes were created and there was a wave of church building. The number of enrolments in Catholic schools in South Australia jumped from about 9600 in 1946 to 24,500 in 1960, 44,700 in 2003. The introduction of state aid during the 1960s removed a long-standing Catholic grievance. It also enabled the gradual replacement of religious congregations by lay teachers and the reorganisation of Catholic education. The South Australian church became more indigenous in its leadership. St Francis Xavier Seminary, to train South Australian candidates for the priesthood, began in 1942 and by the 1950s the Australian-born clergy outnumbered those who were Irish-born.

The **Second Vatican Council** (1962-65) pushed the South Australian church into many new directions: **ecumenism**; changes in worship, with English replacing Latin in the Mass; a greater involvement of lay people in leading worship and in pastoral ministry; the creation of parish pastoral councils; increased study of the Bible; a greater openness to the wider community, to issues of social justice, and to new thinking in many areas. Women

became prominent in parish and diocesan leadership and took up the study of theology. In Adelaide the church encouraged new lay movements, based on small groups or communities, which met regularly in private homes for mutual religious support and social action.

In 2007 the Catholic Church is the largest religious denomination in South Australia, comprising some 21 per cent of the state's population. The traditions inherited from the past provide a strong base for the church to preach its message and meet the needs of a very different society in the twenty-first century.