

In Commemoration of William Bernard Ullathorne, OSB

By Neil Dwyer
Archivist
23 March 2024

One can easily glide over reading the early history of the Catholic Church in Australia once the story of John Joseph Therry is told. There would be some interest in the Englishman and first bishop in Australia, John Bede Polding OSB, but more as a prologue to the story of the Irish clergy dominated Church. It would be onto Cardinal Moran, Eris O'Brien, and Michael Kelly. For some there may be a pause over how to pronounce the surname of the Benedictine who came to the colony twelve years after Therry, but there would be little to read anyway. After all William Bernard Ullathorne was English and those early writers of Church history (such as Moran and O'Brien) and 'John O'Brien' (Father Patrick Hartigan), who wrote of Irish mothers, Irish priests, and country churches were Irish or of Irish descent. In O'Farrell's view 'the Irish judgement of Ullathorne had been harsh – a snob. The Irish saw in Ullathorne his air of confident superiority.'¹ Providing governance to a fractious Catholic community in the early 1830's required a dominant character and Ullathorne – confident, forthright – was ideal for Vicar-General of the colony.



The life of William Ullathorne is told in the second book of our Parish history, *The Illawarra Flame*, but suffice to say Ullathorne was born, lived and died a Yorkshireman. He was born at Pocklington, Yorkshire on 7 May 1806, moved to Scarborough with his family when he was ten years old and later went to sea as a cabin boy for three and a half years. On his return to England, young Ullathorne, aged 16, entered the Benedictine's Downside Abbey, near Bath as a student. He was ordained in September 1831.

To serve God more fully the young priest offered his services to Dr Morris, OSB, Vicar Apostolic of Mauritius, Madagascar, South Africa, and Australia. The Vicar Apostolic accepted the offer and appointed Ullathorne to the Australian colony with full powers as his vicar-general. The young Vicar-General was 26 years old when he arrived in the colony in February 1833. Ullathorne found the colony's only priests, Fathers Therry and McEnroe in Sydney, Father Dowling in Newcastle, and Father Conolly, in Van Dieman's Land – all acting independently and without supervision. There were no church buildings: St Mary's was incomplete, while a church was half completed at Campbelltown and another had begun at Parramatta but fallen into ruins. There was dissension among the Faithful and difficulties with the colonial administration, both due to a lack of ecclesiastical governance, and all this begged attention. Tact and strength of character by the young vicar-general would be required.

Father Ullathorne regarded the plight of Catholics in the colony as one of 'spiritual destitution.' This was a view shared by Bishop John Bede Polding who arrived in Sydney in

¹ O'Farrell, P., *The Catholic Church and Community: An Australian History*, NSW U Press, Kensington, 1985, P.48

1835 as the Vicar Apostolic of Australia with three priests and four ecclesiastical students. There was only one answer: Bishop Polding sent Ullathorne to England in 1837 to gain more priests for the Church in Australia. The lack of success in England – he only recruited Father Charles Lovat, who had been a Jesuit in England, but left the Order before coming to Australia – caused Dr Ullathorne to turn to Ireland where he obtained seventeen Irishmen. He visited the National Seminary, Maynooth College, and made a plea for priests in a sermon at the College on Pentecost Sunday, 1837. Seven young seminarians responded to Ullathorne's call for labourers for the harvest: John Rigney, Michael O'Reilly, Francis Murphy (later the first Bishop of Adelaide), John Fitzpatrick, Edmund Mahoney, John Lynch and Thomas Slattery. In addition, Ullathorne brought a thousand volumes of theology, canon law and sacred literature from Europe. It was an eventful trip for Ullathorne. In Dublin he met the two leading religious women of the age: Catherine McAuley, who had founded the Sisters of Mercy in 1827, and Mary Aikenhead, who had founded the Sisters of Charity in 1815. Ullathorne was particularly impressed with Mary Aikenhead and she sanctioned five Sisters of Charity to accompany him back to Australia.

His visit to England and Ireland was significant for another reason. Ullathorne published a pamphlet *The Catholic Mission in Australasia* in London in which he damned the convict system in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land. The 1837 pamphlet had an immediate success selling over 80,000 copies, went into six editions and was further published in French, German, Dutch and Italian. As a result, Ullathorne appeared before a Select Committee of the House of Commons On 8th and 12th February 1838 to explain the convict system in New South Wales. The forcefulness and bluntness of this Yorkshireman's evidence resulted in the ending of transportation to the East Coast of Australia in August 1840.



William Ullathorne left Australia for the last time in 1840. After a couple of appointments as Vicar-Apostolic in England, Ullathorne went to Rome in 1848 to negotiate the restoration of the English ecclesiastical hierarchy. The new hierarchy was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX on 29 September 1850 with Nicholas, Cardinal Wiseman as the first Archbishop of Westminster and Dr Ullathorne as the first Bishop of Birmingham. (John Henry Newman preached at his enthronement). Ullathorne held this episcopal appointment for 38 years and was installed in the first new English cathedral since the English Reformation, St Chad's in Birmingham. St Chad's is one of only two minor basilicas in England; the other is Downside Abbey. The church was built by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin: completed in 1841, it was raised to a cathedral in 1852.² On the death of Cardinal Wiseman in 1865,

Propaganda selected Ullathorne to succeed him but was overruled by Pope Pius IX, who appointed Cardinal Manning.

Dr Ullathorne also wrote extensively, publishing *The Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God: an Exposition*, in 1855, which was also translated into French and German; *History of Restoration of English Hierarchy* in 1871; *Endowments of Man* in 1880;

² Archbishop Polding attended Bishop Ullathorne's installation and obtained from Pugin architectural plans with which Polding built several churches in New South Wales.

Groundwork of Christian Virtues in 1882; and *Christian Patience* in 1886. He participated prominently in the First Vatican Council of 1869-1870 and on the return to his diocese wrote *The Council and Papal Infallibility* the same year, which went to two editions. Bishop Ullathorne wrote his autobiography in 1868, which covered his life up to 1851, including his visits to the Illawarra. He revised the manuscript later in his life and it was published after his death in 1891. In 1942 it was published under the title *From Cabin-Boy to Archbishop*.

It was on his journey across France to Rome in 1854 for the determination and proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, that Bishop Ullathorne was fortunate to meet the Cure of Ars, Saint John Marie Baptist Vianney, (1786-1859) on 14 May. "He spoke of God so good, so amiable, so loving and his hands, his shoulders, his very person seemed to gather on his heart," Bishop Ullathorne wrote later, "It was impossible not to feel God alone was there ... Then there was a word about being in the Heart of Jesus, and in that word, one felt he was THERE."



William Bernard Ullathorne OSB
archbishop of Cabasa.

Dr Ullathorne retired as Bishop of Birmingham in January 1888 and Pope Leo XIII made him titular Archbishop of Cabasa (Egypt) on 27 April 1888. He withdrew to Oscott College, Warwickshire where he died on 21 March 1889, the Feast of St Benedict, and was buried at St Dominic's Convent, Stone, Staffordshire. (This week is the 135th anniversary of his death.) William Ullathorne lived and died a forthright Yorkshireman. On his deathbed he was asked to renounce the devil and his response was plain: "The Devil's an ass!" In Yorkshire parlance: He dread now't! A monument dedicated to him is in the crypt of his cathedral in Birmingham. Before he died, Ullathorne 'paid Newman a last visit and the Cardinal insisted against all canon law in kneeling for the Archbishop's blessing, saying "I have been indoors all my life, whilst you have battled for the Church in the world." This was true.'³ In far off Australia, Monsignor John Rigney was chosen as the celebrant for the Requiem Mass in St Mary's Cathedral for the repose of the soul of the late Archbishop Ullathorne.

In Sydney was the entirety of the article by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in its edition of Saturday, 23 March 1889 was 'The Right Rev. Dr Ullathorne, the ex-Roman Catholic Bishop of Birmingham is dead.' Sydney's Catholic newspaper, the *Freeman's Journal*, at least recognised his passing and his significance to the Church in Australia. In part it quoted from an English newspaper which 'not long-ago advocated Dr Ullathorne's claims as the founder of the Church in the colonies:

Australia will soon be a great confederation, powerful abroad and peaceful and progressive at home: Catholics hold the first places of rank and influence there, and the Cardinal-Archbishop of Sydney is to-day a more conspicuous personage than many archbishops in, European lands. But it will always be remembered that the founder of the Australian Church was a simple monk

³Ullathorne, *From Cabin-Boy to Archbishop*, p.xxiii

who returned to England without distinction or decoration beyond that of having laboured for the salvation of souls wherever he could reach them.⁴

The Church which awaited Archbishop Patrick Moran was built on the foundations laid by Dom Ullathorne OSB, fifty years before.

William Bernard Ullathorne put the Church in Australia on a firmer footing and his role in the Catholic history of Australia appears to lack due recognition. His place in history may not have been assured as he had one drawback for the chroniclers of the time: He was an English Benedictine and the history of Catholicism in Australia for at least the first hundred years was recorded by Irishmen or those of Irish descent. Their kinship with the struggles in Ireland during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries showed through in their writings: promoting to their readers a history of struggle with an unsympathetic people (the English) who did not understand them (the Irish, and, consequently, Australian Catholics).

Despite this Ullathorne's greatest work awaited him in Britain. In 2006 the Archdiocese of Birmingham and the English Benedictine Congregation celebrated the bicentennial of the birth of William Bernard Ullathorne. *'Throughout all his years Bishop Ullathorne worked tirelessly.'* the Most Reverend Vincent Nichols⁵, Archbishop of Birmingham, said in his homily commemorating the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the birth of Bishop Ullathorne. *'He struggled with all the contemporary issues, the list of which is still much the same today: with issues of faith and science; with issues of the relationship of Catholicism to other faiths and, of course, with all the various dimension of ecumenism.'*⁶ Archbishop Nichols noted that *"we thank God for Bishop Ullathorne, so much the father of this Diocese. We thank God for his steadfast faith, his assiduous building of the pattern and traditions of the Diocese, for his commitment to the training of men for the priesthood and to the fostering of the religious communities of women."*

There was also a sermon given by Abbot Paul at Birmingham Oratory to mark the occasion. Abbot Paul in opening referred to Ullathorne as *'founding father of this great Archdiocese and greatest among the many great bishops of the Catholic Church in 19th century Britain.'* In closing Abbot Paul made this declaration: *Tonight, I would propose, and I know that it is right and just to do this, that we should begin to work as well for the beatification of William Bernard Ullathorne. What more attractive and worthy a candidate could there be?*⁷

William Bernard Ullathorne bore the imprint of a Yorkshireman: straightforward, at times blunt, and a great fighter, as a churchman, on issues of Faith – inside and outside the Church. He was regarded as one of the four great English Catholic churchmen of the nineteenth century (along with Wiseman, Manning, and Newman). Australian Catholics too owe much to William Ullathorne and we should support in prayer his cause for beatification.

⁴ *Freeman' Journal*, Saturday, 30 March 1889, p.17

⁵ Now the Most Reverend Vincent, Cardinal Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster and President of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

⁶ Homily by the Most Reverend Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Birmingham commemorating the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the birth of Bishop Ullathorne, preached in St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham on 7 May 2006.

⁷ Abbot Paul, *"I will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth"*.
www.belmontabbey.org.uk