

Father Thomas Joseph Malachy Murray, OSB: from a soldier for the King to a soldier for God

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Our focus at Mass or any visit to the Cathedral for most of us is on the front: the Altar at Mass or Jesus in the tabernacle. Our eyes may stray to the magnificent Foley Memorial Window, which reminds us why we commemorate each Eucharistic celebration below. Have your eyes ever strayed to the plaque high up on the right hand-side of the nave? Too hard to read? Well, it is in Latin. “Why,” I have asked myself “of all the priests who have served this parish, only one, the Reverend Thomas Joseph Malachy Murray, OSB, was given the honour of being remembered within the cathedral?” Like the question of why there are various cross designs on the roof of the cathedral, I do not know the answer.¹ It is the wonderfully intriguing story of this church.



Thomas Joseph Murray, was born in Ireland around 1778. His early adult years were spent in military service; though since his youth he desired to become a priest, but felt unworthy. Murray served in the British Army led by the Duke of Wellington throughout the Peninsular War (1808 to 1813). Archbishop Polding later referred to him as ‘Colonel Murray’ but retired with the rank of captain. Nevertheless, by the time the campaign ended he was 33 years of age.

In 1820 Murray joined the Cistercians at Melleray Abbey in the Diocese of Nantes, France. The dissolution of religious establishments and the expulsion of religious in France in 1830 saw Murray return to Ireland. Eventually the Cistercians established Mount Melleray Abbey (above) in Ireland in 1833.² Following a petition to Rome he was dispensed from his Cistercian vows.

It was while in England in 1841 that Bishop Polding, who was busily recruiting priests for the colony of New South Wales, was contacted by Thomas Murray. Polding accepted him for the Australian Church and, at the age of 64, Murray travelled with Polding to Australia on

¹ The original Crosses were inspired by Downside Abbey in England where Archbishop Bede Polding was the abbot. The latest Cross (Celtic, at the front), replacing a damaged one, was by the English mason, Paul Southern, who lives in the Wollongong area.

² Former Irish born pupils, who undertook some of their seminary studies at Melleray Abbey and came to Australia as newly ordained priests include: James Maher, Bishop of Port Augusta (1896 to 1905); John Dunne, Bishop of Bathurst (1901 to 1919); Jeremiah Doyle, Bishop of Lismore (1887 to 1909); John Carroll, Bishop of Lismore (1910 to 1949) who served at Moss Vale prior to his episcopal appointment; Patrick Phelan, Bishop of Sale (1912 to 1925)

board the *Templar* in November 1842, arriving in Sydney in early 1843. Thomas Joseph Murray was ordained to the priesthood on 7 February 1846 at 67 years of age and professed as Benedictine with the religious name Malachy by Archbishop Polding. Father Murray was appointed chaplain to Norfolk Island In April 1846, where he remained until 1850, when because of failing health, he returned to the mainland.

On 1 August 1850 Father Murray took up the appointment as an assistant priest at Wollongong. However, in August 1852 when the priest-in-charge, Father Eugene Luckie, was appointed to the Bathurst goldfields, it seems that Father Murray was now in charge. He was not a well man and for almost all of the next twelve months he was responsible for a pastoral district the size of the present local government area of the City of Wollongong. The indications are that he did not have any assistance from other clergy, not like his army days, but Father Murray would no doubt attest he did not need a rank

... .. as for me I want no others now,
No titles do I covet, for I have one anyhow:
They call me Father here around, and I have found it good;
The rich, the poor, the down and out all share that fatherhood.³

During the time that Father Murray was priest-in-charge of the Wollongong District (August 1852 to August 1853), the entries in the register appear to be written by several people; many of the signatures and several of the entries are that of 'T.J. Murray'. The entries for marriages have been completed and signed 'T.J. Murray per E.E.' It would appear not to be laxness on Father Murray's part, but possibly exhaustion or illness requiring 'E.E.' to complete several entries in the parish register. A marriage entry has the signatures of witnesses to the marriage noting 'witnessed by E. Elliott'. The likely 'E.E.' signatory could be Edward Elliott.⁴

A saddening indication of Father Murray's failing health can be found in his recording of the last Baptism he performed on 8 August 1853. Under the various headings, Father Murray wrote of Bridget, born on 23 June 1853; Baptised 8 August 1853; the daughter of a farmer, Patrick Faragher, and Anne Connolly; and the abode (district, village, or estate) as 'Alhambra.' Alhambra is the magnificent palace complex in Granada, Spain. In the final two weeks of his life, his mind appeared to drift back to former days, when, as Captain Thomas Murray, he marched through Spain with Wellington, who resided at Alhambra for three months and while there Father Murray may have visited the palaces.

Father Thomas Joseph Malachy Murray, OSB, died on 22 August 1853, *with The Freeman's Journal* of 27 August 1853 announcing his passing:

Pray for the repose of the soul of the Reverend Thomas Joseph Murray, O.S.B., who departed this life at Wollongong, on the 21st instant, aged 70 years. This excellent Priest was one of the religious community, who were forcibly expelled from the Monastery of Mount Melleray, in 1830, by the invidious Government of Louis Phillippe. Requiescat in peace. Amen.

³ From the poem *The Pastor of St Mel* by John O'Brien, *Around the Boree Log: a selection from Around the Boree Log and The Parish of St Mel's*, 1978, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, p. 76.

⁴ Born in 1813, Elliott was a local publican, who donated £9 towards the building of the Church of St Francis Xavier, and was the agent for the *Australasian Chronicle* (forerunner of the *Freeman's Journal*) in Wollongong. Until about 1858 Elliott resided in Wollongong with his wife, Bedelia, and four children and owned Elliott's Family Hotel on the corner of Crown and Corrimal Streets. He moved to Sydney around 1860 and was publican of Elliott's Family Hotel on the corner of King and Sussex Streets. He died in 1885.

Elsewhere in the same issue there was a rather touching article recounting his life:

It has been our painful duty to record, within the last year, several cases of sudden deaths, arising from that most fatal of vices, intemperance; but these were the reckless ones, who were cut off, and to whom remonstrance and advice was: unavailing, How very different was the life of one who has just been removed from amongst us, full of days and good deeds, namely, the Rev. Thomas Joseph Murray; the venerable gentle man had reached the patriarchal age of seventy three years being somewhat more than the usual span allotted for the life of man. In the early period of life, he had the honour of serving his country in the British army, from which he retired after the Peninsular war, holding at that time, the rank of Colonel, and he is said to have distinguished himself in various actions. Being of a strong religious mind, he then retired altogether from the world, devoted himself exclusively to religion and the service of God. He subsequently became a minister of the Church, and has been attached to the mission in this colony for nearly ten years. He has been the resident pastor of Wollongong for the last three years, where he secured the spontaneous esteem and respect of all classes and all denominations. “Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord,” for “Those who instruct others unto justice, shall shine like stars to all eternity.” — Correspondent of the Herald⁵



A memorial plaque to Father Murray, OSB above the nave of the cathedral on the right has the following inscription, translated from the Latin:

Sacred to the memory of the Reverend Joseph Murray, O.S.B., priest, who after many dedicated years of military service, entered the service of Jesus Christ, donning the religious habit of St Benedict, which ministry he conscientiously fulfilled as a faithful priest. He died at Wollongong while serving this Church, St Francis Xavier, aged 74 years in 1852

For Reverend Thomas Joseph Murray OSB, reports of his death, while writ in stone, were not only exaggerated but premature. (He died on 22 August 1853 not in 1852!) One cannot be sure when the error occurred. The plaque can be seen in the earliest photographs of the interior of the church (around the early 1900s). Father Murray is recognised, along with those priests listed below, with a plaque on the exterior northern wall of the Cathedral inscribed with the erroneous date:

⁵ *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney, NSW: 1850 - 1932), Saturday 3 September 1853, page 4 It was the forerunner of the present-day *Catholic Weekly*

In grateful remembrance of the services of good and faithful priests of this parish once buried beside this cathedral, now at rest at Wollongong Cemetery

*Rev. John Dunne
Priest-in-charge at Wollongong from 1914 to 1924
Rev. Fabian Dwyer
An assistant priest at Wollongong from 1925 to 1929
Rev. Bernard Mahony
An assistant priest at Wollongong from 1917 to 1919
Rev. Joseph Murray, OSB
An assistant priest at Wollongong from 1850 to 1852
Rev. Patrick Ryan
Priest-in-charge at Wollongong from 1888 to 1892*

Lord Jesus Give Them Eternal Rest⁶

Malachy Murray served God until he could serve no more. In every respect, he gave his life to the Church. Perseverance with life's challenges, determination to minister to the Faithful, and fraternal love for their flock were the qualities of the priests who served at Wollongong. Monsignor Rigney had them; so too did Fathers Peter Young, SJA Sheehy, Patrick Ryan, John Dunne, Bernard Mahony, and Fabian Dwyer. Malachy Murray was among that company. The desire of parishioners that he "shall shine like stars to all eternity" did not eventuate. Today the Murray plaque may be given a casual glance, but the life of this good priest would be unknown to many.

This parish has a rich history: a 'wealth' bequeathed to the current parishioners by past good priests and devoted, active parishioners. Remember Father Thomas Joseph Murray OSB: "Those who instruct others unto justice, shall shine like stars to all eternity." Turn the glance upward to the plaque – and thank God for this 'venerable gentle man' who so impressed the Faithful with his 'good deeds' and pray that God grants him Eternal Rest.

⁶ Research by the archivist for this article and for Book II from long known (but apparently previously ignored) sources has at least allowed the story of Father Murray and the correct date of his passing (22 August 1853) to be recorded here. This is one of many stories to be found in *The Illawarra Flame: The Catholic Church in the Wollongong District, 1839 to 1889*, which is available at the Catholic Bookshop or Parish Office