

Australia and the Immaculate Conception:

100 Years Ago

By

AMBROSE RYAN, O.F.M.

THE year 1954 marks the Centenary of the Solemn Definition by the Church of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception. By proclamation of Pope Pius XII, the letter *Fulgens Corona*, it is to be a year of special "Marian" celebrations.

We who have been born since 1854 find it hard to realize that there was a time in the Church when people did not pray: "O Mary conceived without original sin: pray for us". Such, however, is the case. This beautiful doctrine of our holy faith has been solemnly decreed by the Church only for the past one hundred years.

That does not mean that the Immaculate Conception of Our Blessed Lady was not piously believed in before. Rather is it true that Our Lady was known as "The All-Pure Mother of God", "The Sinless Virgin Mother", since the early years of the Church. Under a litany of titles including "Queen conceived without sin" was she invoked for centuries. But not at all times, nor in all places. It is certain, however, that from the 11th century, excluding only a period between 1140-1300 when it was seriously called into question and even denied by learned men, this doctrine has been accurately grasped. Only, however, since 1854 has unhesitating, absolute consent to it been demanded by the Catholic Church.

Preparations for Solemn Decree

Back last century in the 1840's Pope Pius IX announced to the Catholic Hierarchy that he intended to proceed to define the doctrine of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception. He asked the Bishops to advise him if they thought the time was "suitable" to do so.

Even to Australia and New Zealand, so distant from Rome in those days and so remote from the rest of the world, the papal letter to the hierarchy eventually came. Our Bishops, few as they were in number, advised the Pope, we feel sure, that they would be happy to see the proposed Dogma published to the world. Their voice was small amongst the hundreds of Bishops contacted, but it was heard.

Meetings

Following on his official letter, Pope Pius IX instructed the leading theologians of the day to draw up the "case for the Immaculate Conception". And this was competently done in a huge array of learned volumes. Not, of course, that our Popes and Bishops really need long and involved works of theology to back their official statements—rather was the "case" prepared to show to the whole world, non-Catholic, Orthodox, Christian, Jewish, that there were full and ample arguments of "Catholic Tradition" why this definition could be made.

Meetings of the hierarchy, meetings of theologians, were also brought together, and in every possible way the evidence for the definition was clarified and contrary arguments disproved.

Long History

And thus a long, long story in the Catholic Church was about to receive its official "The End". For I suppose it is true to say, there is no longer story of a theological debate on a point of doctrine in the Catholic Church, and between Catholics, than the story of the Immaculate Conception,

Surprising as it is to us, there were once powerful and very learned Doctors of the Church ranged against this magnificent dogma.

Take, for example, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. St. Bernard is justly regarded as one of the greatest lovers of Mary that Christianity has seen. Do we not all know his “Memorare”? Yet he was unable to reconcile his mind to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. How breathtakingly profound this doctrine must really be!

If the Redemption of Jesus Christ was for all people as Holy Scripture asserts in many places, how could Mary, God’s most magnificent creature as she was, be exempted from it? This was St. Bernard’s problem. And if you assert that she was “immaculately conceived” surely you do exempt her from all trace of sin, original sin included, and hence from all need of Redemption. To honour Mary, in other words, you appear to dishonour Christ and to take something from His greatest work. Was it not His greatest honour that He was able to lift His holy Mother from original sin by His death on the Cross? And, in her case, to anticipate the work of the Cross by applying His redemptive merits to her as soon as she was capable of being redeemed—in her mother’s womb? In this strain he wrote a Letter to the Canons of Lyons, France, in the year 1140 and advised them “rather to celebrate the Feast of the Sanctification of Mary than the Feast of her Immaculate Conception. It is difficult to see how his latter doctrine can be defended,” thought Bernard of Clairvaux.

[In recent times Father Ailbe Luddy, O.Cist., has ably shown that St. Bernard was confused, as were all others in his day, on the ideas of “passive and active” conception and, because of this, he wrote the letter to the Canons of Lyons. In his own mind he loved Mary dearly and meant not the slightest dishonour to the fairest of God’s creatures. He just couldn’t see how it was possible, without misinterpreting the Sacred text, to defend the Immaculate Conception of a creature].

Confusion Arises

Bernard’s Letter became famous. After all, in his day, he was regarded almost as the “Voice of the Church”. Hence confusion, really sad confusion, arose concerning Our Lady’s entry into the world. Was she in original sin? Sanctified surely like St. John the Baptist in her mother’s womb, and therefore all-holy at every conscious moment of her mortal life, but still begotten in original sin?

This was the famous question that was to call forth endless discussion pro and con for centuries. Discussions were taken up in colleges, in associations of the faithful, in the great universities, at the papal palace before the Popes themselves. Even from the pulpit the people would hear one preacher thunder forth for the doctrine marshalling all his arguments only to be followed by another who would roundly assert that “Mary was sanctified in her mother’s womb: Yes, surely; but not conceived without original sin. To say this would be to toy with the sacred text of Scripture.”

John Duns Scotus

In the early 14th century (1304), when it seemed that the argument in high places was definitely swinging against the doctrine, God brought forward a Franciscan Friar named John Duns Scotus, a native of Scotland, to defend His Immaculate Mother.

This learned man had been educated at Oxford University. England, which was then in Catholic hands. He had gone over to Paris to obtain his Magisterial Degree for the teaching at the famous Sorbonne. And there, in the course of his lectures to the student body, questions concerning the doctrines of Our Lady arose.

The Immaculate Conception was one. What would; “the man of the day”—for the students dropped everything to flock to his lectures—have to say on this most debated question? What,

indeed, since the two great lights of Paris, Bonaventure of Balneoreggio, O.F.M. and Thomas of Aquino, O.P. found no solution to the difficulties and had pronounced, hesitantly it is true, against the Immaculate Conception?

Scotus took the floor, and calmly yet earnestly did he dispose of the various objections. Neither Bonaventure nor Thomas (both afterwards canonised) scared him. He summed up.—When we say that Our Lady was conceived without any stain of original sin we do not exempt her from Christ's Redemption. No! We only invoke Christ's Redemptive power in a higher way, for is it not a more perfect thing on Christ's part to "preserve" Mary free from all sin, which she would have incurred without "preservative Redemption", than to lift her out of sin soon after her conception? Could Christ Who was God do this? There are no limits to God's power so long as the doctrine itself involves no contradiction. Should Christ have done it? Surely He would do the "most perfect thing" for His glorious Mother! Surely He would not leave her for a moment under Satan's power if He could avoid it! "He could do it; it was fitting that He should do it; therefore (we say in full submission to the Church) He actually did it."—And Scotus went on to show that Scripture and Tradition could be interpreted to allow for such a "preservative Redemption" in Mary's case.

The Tide is Turned

History tells us that this completely assured "pious opinion" of John Duns Scotus, as some called it, was the occasion of an immense outburst of debate, argument, recrimination. It is even suggested that the Chancellor of the University of Paris suspended Scotus's lectures following the defence! And Legend has it that he was called back to take his stand against an array of all the reigning "geniuses" of Paris on this point. The Legend, of course, represents the Franciscan Friar as demolishing the objectors point by point in an extraordinary display of memory work and clever distinctions. The "Subtle" Doctor became his tag.

Be that as it may. One thing is sure. Scotus's modest and submissive defence turned the tide of Catholic opinion in favour of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. It was now possible to defend it on theological grounds.

Wanderings

The tide was turned. But an immense amount of water had yet to ebb and flow before theologians were found in unanimous agreement. Bishops, Popes, Yes! even worldly Rulers had to intervene as, step by step, the doctrine advanced to conquer all minds. University after university pledged itself to teach the doctrine, and ordered its professors to take an oath- to this effect before allowing them to parade their wares; church society after church society incorporated this devotion ;amongst its practices; town after town pledged its support; and many a nation declared "Mary Immaculate" to be its Queen. Pious people often made a vow "that they would defend even unto blood" the doctrine of Our Lady's complete sinlessness.

One Example

A great and valiant story in the Church is the story of the defence of Mary's Immaculate Conception.

In a remote village of India, Old Goa, I remember coming across a truly beautiful record of devotion one day in 1939. The record is a plaque inserted into an archway that spans the driveway from the river-front to the town: the Viceroy's Arch, it is called, and the inscription on the plaque tells how "The King of Portugal and his Goanese Viceroy pledge their personal support, and the

support of their people, in favour of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. And they promise, as an earnest of their devotion, to have the lettering of this stone renewed as occasion arises." The last date of renewal was 1831.

You would find similar testimonies all over the Portuguese and Spanish dominions of other days—Mexico, Central. America, South America—for these two nations led the world in sponsoring Mary's cause.

1854

It is 1854, and the fight is almost over. One hundred and ten Prelates are gathered together by pontifical command in Rome to conduct "final discussions". Of these Archbishop Polding of Sydney is one. The theologians of the day were also present. Arguments go backwards and forwards at the meeting as arguments will. There was even hesitation in some minds, for was not this a final summing up, as it were, of theological discussions that had endured for centuries?

Dr. Polding Speaks

Then, as Dom Birt, *Benedictine Pioneers in Australia*, Vol. 2, p. 201, gives it, came the final scene.

"The last half hour of the meeting was one of the most memorable in the annals of the Church. There had been discussions and hard arguments, when Archbishop Polding rose and came forward saying that he was the representative of 11 Bishops in Australia and was come to bow down to the Holy See. 'Thou art Pius, we are thy children. Teach us, lead us, confirm our Faith.' He expressed himself in very simple and touching words. At once the whole assembly was calm—discussion gave way to faith. The Bishops became of one mind and one heart, they wished to be taken to the Pope, to throw themselves at his feet. The Cardinal Legate and whole Episcopate shed tears of joy and consolation. A Jesuit present said 'he had never realised the visible action of the Holy Ghost as he did in that last half hour'."

Dr. Polding, concludes Dom Birt, had taken "a decisive part" in these grave deliberations: Australia's voice had been heard! (Incidentally Dom Birt gives the scene "from a piece of parchment lying before the writer's eyes, evidently prepared at the very date, or soon after." Ibid)

The Papal Definition

Pope Pius IX, after hearing the Prelates, decided that he should hesitate no longer. And so on December 8th, 1854, before a magnificent assembly of the Hierarchy, clergy and laity, he pronounced the Solemn Definition: ". . . to the honour of the holy and undivided Trinity, to the glory and adornment of the Virgin Mother of God, to the exaltation of the Catholic Faith and the increase of the Catholic religion, by the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, we declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her Conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should firmly and constantly be believed by all the faithful."

As he knelt in the tribune of St. Peter's along with the Prelates of the whole Church and listened to these great words, Archbishop Polding was supremely conscious of his part in representing the very outpost of the Catholic Church, our own Australia.

News Travels Slowly

How soon did news of the wonderful definition reach our shores after December 8th, 1854 ? From a Benedictine Journal written up in longhand at St. Mary's Cathedral Monastery, Sydney, we gather that no exact information had been forwarded by the Archbishop on the actual definition of the dogma in 1854 or 1855. Here is the entry in this Journal for December 8th, 1855.

"The Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The Dogma relative to the festival not having, as yet, been formally proclaimed, there was nothing very extraordinary in the Cathedral There was Mass, however, at Our Lady's Altar at six o'clock; and during the seven o'clock Mass her altar was, one might say, a blaze of light."

The Benedictines and clergy of Sydney had to await the Archbishop's arrival home on January 26th, 1856, to learn the happy news.

New Zealand Knew

News travelled slowly in those remote days, we know, yet it is an undeniable fact that over in Wellington, New Zealand, Monsignor Viard, S.M., had heard of, and commemorated, the new definition in 1855. Probably his Marist brethren were sending recruits to the mission field just at that time. In a Pastoral Letter to his people in 1865, now having been made Bishop of Wellington, he recalls the event:

"In this Cathedral of St. Mary, for which we now ask your assistance, was promulgated in 1855 the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin, the Holy Mother of God. This event in the history of our infant diocese, must alone endear it to the faithful. We cannot forget the consolation that the fervour of our people in the celebration of the Triduum then afforded us. We cannot recount the Divine blessings and favours that were then manifest; the conversions; the sudden unloosing of the tongue of a child three years old belonging to parents well known in this city, as may be piously believed in answer to their fervent prayers." (Cardinal Moran, History of the Catholic Church in Australasia, p. 929).

Victorian Gold

And there is also the beautiful story of Victorian gold presented to Pope Pius IX in 1854 by Bishop J. A. Goold, O.S.A., of Melbourne, to remember in this connection. On the 27 day of June, 1854, Bishop Goold addressed the Pope:

"Most Holy Father,

James Alipius, by the grace of God and favour of the Holy See, Bishop of Melbourne, with most grateful feelings and profound homage, offers this gold, dug out of Australasian soil, in the Province of Victoria, as his own gift as well as that of his Clergy and faithful people, to your Holiness, in testimony of fidelity towards the person of your Holiness, and to the Apostolic See. Given at Melbourne."

Underneath this text, taken from the Victorian Ordo of 1855 (note the date), the compiler records that, "His Holiness has evinced, in a most special manner, his paternal affection for his children in Victoria, by having most graciously condescended to order that the Medals to be struck on the occasion of the Dogmatic Definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary should be from the gold of his province." (Victorian Ordo, 1855, in Melb. Public Library).

This seems to indicate that Sydney was the last place in Australia to learn the news. Or, maybe the note in the Victorian Ordo is made in "expectation" of the final decree?

Archbishop Polding in a Letter to the Abbess of Stanbrook, Jan., 15, 1855, gives an interesting sidelight on the use of Victorian gold for the commemorative medals. "One hundred ounces were sent by the miners," he says, "and from this 300 gold medals were made. Some of the Cardinals wanted a larger medal but the Pope would not agree because other gold would have to be used. . . . Silver medals of exactly the same proportions were also made." (Benedictine Pioneers, Vol. 2, p. 224). And Bishop Goold closes the story when he records: "I received from the Archbishop the gold medal sent me by His Holiness in commemoration of the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin." (From his Diary, Jan. 15th, 1856: Moran, History, p. 781).

Celebrations Announced. 1856

Sydney may have been late, through Dr. Polding's absence, and lack of information, in celebrating the wonderful new dogma. But the festivities, when they did come in December 1856 and in the months that followed, made up for the delay.

Writing to his clergy and people on November 30th, 1856, Dr. Polding announced his intentions:

"As on Monday, the 8th of December, we shall celebrate for the first time after the Solemn declaration of the Dogma by the Church, and our safe' return to our dear flock, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the ever Blessed Mother of God—we exhort our dearly Beloved children in Jesus Christ to unite in honouring in every possible manner, the most glorious of her privileges, defined in that declaration. Let us studiously emulate the exertions made in Europe, and elsewhere, to testify gratitude, respect, and veneration. We shall gladly receive contributions in money, candles, or in other things intended for the decoration of the Church -and altar. On the 8th of December we shall open the jubilee granted by our Holy Father, which will continue for the Metropolitan Church of Mary during the entire Octave of the Feast. We exhort all to prepare themselves to participate in its inestimable advantages, by a retreat of three days, as their circumstances permit..." (Advent Pastoral, 1856; Cf. Benedictine Journal, Nov. 30th, 1856).

A "Word of Mortification"

Just a week after. this announcement, and on the very eve of the festivities, His Grace the Archbishop had to address another, and indeed a most stirring, exhortation to the congregations at St. Mary's. Here it is:

"Last Sunday, the Faithful of this Congregation, were invited to make their offerings, as it might be convenient to them, in kind, or in labour, or in money, for the adornment of the Altar and the Church during the approaching jubilee. The clergy have the mortification to declare that their call has not hitherto been responded to. They trust it has arisen from inadvertence, and perhaps from the shortness of the notice they have been able to give. But indeed they cannot believe that the congregation of St. Mary's will not arouse and bestir themselves in honour of this great Festival."

Times do not change very much, it seems; a "shaking up" was also needed in 1856 ! The exhortation continues:

"Where should the solemn definition of Faith be hailed with devout heart and liberal hand, if not in the Cathedral of the Archdiocese? Where should the Immaculate Conception of the Ever Blessed Virgin Mary be celebrated with inward and outward magnificence, if not in the Church which bears her name ? In all parts of the Northern Hemisphere—in Cathedral town, humble village, the Festival which was kept in honour of the Mother of God, when the Church proclaimed the revelation of her last glorious and long cherished title to be completely ascertained and thenceforward an article of faith, was brilliant and joyous, and grand beyond anything in the memory of man. Let us not, in this

metropolis of the Southern Hemisphere, though we are late in time, be laggard in act and cold in heart. What object to the coldest reason even, is there that has so just a claim to the sacrifice and display of everything that is beautiful and exquisite as the Festival of Our Immaculate Mother? Everything that can greet and symbolize purity never approached by shadow of stain; and grandeur which is the fullness of God's grace, finds here its fitting application, its worthiest devotion. Bring of your richest and best then without stint and without fear ... (Benedictine Journal, Dec. 7th 1856).

Heartfelt words were these, and they were heeded!

11 o'clock Mass, Dec. 7th

At the last Mass on December 7th, along with the "words of mortification," the Dean of the Archdiocese, Father McEncroe, read "The Pastoral Letter of John Bede," By the Grace of God and favour of the Apostolic See, Archbishop of Sydney, On the Jubilee Granted on the Occasion of the Definition of the Immaculate Conception.

It begins:

"To the Faithful of the Archdiocese, Clergy and Laity.

Dearly Beloved. Many and great are the advantages the faithful have received from the solemn dogmatic Definition on the part of the Church of the Immaculate Conception of the ever Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Amongst these, by reason of the practical effects, we may consider the Jubilee granted by our Holy Father, Pope Pius IX, not one of the least. That it may be productive of these effects, we shall repeat the instruction on the nature of a Jubilee, which was issued on a former occasion... "

A long explanation follows concerning the Jubilee and the three conditions for gaining spiritual benefits attached to it is given, namely, Confession, Communion, Prayers for general prosperity of the Church according to the intentions of the Holy Father.

"In fulfilment of this (last) condition of the Jubilee, we ordain that it will be fulfilled by all who shall assist at Mass on three days, successive or interrupted, not of obligation, with this intention; or, if they have not the opportunity of hearing Mass, they shall recite the seven Penitential Psalms, with the Litany of the Saints, on three different days; or, if they cannot read, shall, instead thereof, recite the beads. And we earnestly hope and recommend that the prayers of all be accompanied by Almsgiving, and most especially by Contributions to the Society of the Propagation of the Faith, or for the relief of the Sufferers by the Inundation which have caused so much calamity in France...

And whilst we declare that the Jubilee will continue during the time specified (Dec. 8th till Trinity Sunday), we strongly exhort our beloved Clergy to fix upon some one week, at their principal residence and stations, during which the faithful shall be invited to gain it; and we desire this to be so arranged, that the Clergy may assist each other, and the faithful may have the opportunity of choosing other than their ordinary confessors, if they feel so disposed ..." (Inserted in Benedictine Journal).

THE FESTIVITIES

"The Festivities in honour of our Immaculate Mother commenced in the Cathedral this evening with Solemn -High Vespers," writes the Benedictine Chronicler on Dec. 7th, 1856. "His Grace officiated, assisted by the Fr. Dean as Assistant Priest, and Fr. John (Gourbeillon) and Dr. Ignatius (McClennan) as Assistant Deacons. During Vespers the Sanctuary looked very beautiful. Guided by the tasteful directions of Fr. Abbot Gregory, six tubs, with orange tress growing in them, were placed in different parts of it. The orange trees were about five feet in height ... Over the altar was

suspended from the roof, a magnificent canopy of watered silk. Our Lady's Altar was also very beautifully decorated. The back of it was lined with white watered silk, and it was hung round with white and blue silks. A corona with six candles, suspended from the roof, hung before the altar. What with flowers, flower vases and candlesticks, the altar itself was entirely covered. During the Vespers it seemed almost one blaze of light ... I do certainly believe that never on any former occasion did the entire sanctuary look near so beautiful." (His Grace's exhortation at the 11 o'clock Mass must have received prompt attention!).

Another Pastoral Letter, Publication of the jubilee, was read at the Vespers. It is a beautiful, high-sounding document, one of Australia's finest Episcopal statements, bearing witness to Dr. Polding's burning devotion to Our Blessed Lady (given at end). He thanks God for the dogma, enumerates all the wealth of traditional evidence for the Immaculate Conception, and exclaims: "It is a spectacle of wonder and consolation... that the occupant of that lowly chair, who appears little more among the potentates of earth than did the Blessed Virgin among the daughters of Judah, should speak with that calm clear voice, and be welcomed and obeyed in his utterance..." (Also found inserted in Benedictine Journal, December 8th, 1856).

"The Feast of Our Immaculate Mother has at length arrived. Every endeavour is being made use of to keep up the solemnities of the entire octave with magnificence. For this purpose there will be Pontifical High Mass today, *Missa coram Episcopo* on Thursday; and on the Octave day there will be another Pontifical High Mass. There will also be each morning a course of spiritual exercises.....Morning Prayers at 5.30 a.m.....Meditation, a lecture, and finally Mass at 7 o'clock. The evening service during the Octave will consist of a lecture, a meditation, night prayers, and Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament."

And then the Chronicler joyfully records:

"The Catholics of Sydney did something to evince their love of Mary, by the manner in which they attended the various services in the Cathedral on this, her own dear Feast. The Cathedral was crowded to excess at the various Masses, and if possible, even more so at Benediction. His Grace celebrated High Mass at 11 o'clock... The finest voices that were in Sydney took part in the singing during the Mass. The singing was indeed truly magnificent."

Crowded congregations were present from day to day, morning and evening. Father Maurus (O'Connell) alternated with His Grace in giving the exercises and the lectures. On the Thursday at the *Missa coram Episcopo*, "the Cathedral was so crowded that one would imagine the day was a holiday of obligation." On the Sunday His Grace assisted at the High Mass in *cappa magna*, and on the Octave day, Monday the 15th, the entry in the journal is:

"This day was, in every respect, kept up in the Cathedral as grandly as the Feast itself. It was even more so, for at the end of Mass, solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was given, . and a grand *Te Deum* sung, the choir, and those on the sanctuary singing alternate verses. Thus ended the solemnities in the Cathedral in honour of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception."

FESTIVITIES RE-OPENED

But this was not the end. For those who had been prevented from making the jubilee, and for those "who were ignorant of its having been proclaimed" His Grace re-opened the Festivities at the Cathedral for three days at Christmas time. Crowds flocked around again.

May 1857 saw the jubilee celebrations at St. Benedict's, at Petersham and at "Sacred Heart" Church. Confessions were very heavy. Archbishop Polding was in each place, one after the other, to help the local priest and to inspire the people with something of his own enthusiastic devotion.

Everywhere he would speak of “Mary the Immaculate who places herself near the throne of grace to plead for all who invoke her aid.” Everywhere there came to his lips the inspiring words of his splendid Pastoral announcing the jubilee:

“She is the prudent Abigail who knows how to soothe the irritated David. She is the intrepid Judith, who with fearless stroke cuts off the head of the infernal Holofernes. and liberates Bethulia, the city of the children of God. She is the beautiful Esther, excepted from the law of condemnation, whose supplications for her people will not be denied. The Blessed Mother of Jesus is the administratrix, whom He, its King and Ruler Supreme, has placed over the kingdom purchased by His blood. Ruling from the Cross, to His own Blessed Mother did he assign, to a Mother’s love did he bequeath, the care of those millions to whose heart-allegiance he had made good his claim.. Even as the King of Egypt, in that dread famine which laid waste his lands, had but one response, ‘Go to Joseph’, so in the spiritual famine, in the absence of God’s grace which afflicts us, the response from on high is ‘Go to Mary’. Go to Mary. She is my Mother, she is your Mother; she has the authority of a mother with me, she has the love of a mother for you... Obtain her patronage, Dearly Beloved, and you may say, ‘with her all good things have come to me.’”

Sydney’s celebrations for Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception were also a great demonstration of Archbishop Polding’s intense devotion to Mary. How this Benedictine monk really loved her! In the first days of his priesthood he re-organised a sodality in her honour in his monastery church in England; he abetted Father Therry’s special request that he “have the new colony dedicated to Our Lady” (1841) ; year after year he ordered special devotions in her honour in thanksgiving for his “miraculous escape”, as he believed it to be, from shipwreck in Western Australia (1852), and, later, he promised “that as long as the Benedictine community existed in Sydney these devotions should be continued”; to thank Mary for Bishop Davis’s recovery from serious illness he added “Queen conceived without original sin, pray for us” to the Loreto Litany three years before the Definition. And wherever he went on the mission in Australia he preached beautifully about the holy Mother of God. The “Month of May” devotions were held with every sign of splendour and devotion in St. Mary’s Cathedral as long as he was associated with it. And how his heart really overflowed when the Catholics of Sydney crowded to the festivities of 1856-71 He was thrilled to think that he had inspired the greatest demonstration of love for the Blessed Mother ever seen in the Southern Hemisphere.

ALL AUSTRALIA JOINS IN

Writing of Australia’s celebrations in general to honour the new dogma, Cardinal Moran penned the following lines in 1895:

“Nowhere was this solemn definition of the privilege of our Immaculate Lady received with greater enthusiasm and delight than in the Australian Church, which under the title of the Help of Christians honours her as Chief Patron. Triduums of thanksgiving were celebrated in the principal churches, and even the humblest Catholic homestead in the various colonies felt the thrill of the universal rejoicing.” (History, p. 447).

A STORY OF DEVOTION

The celebration of the jubilee was till then, and for decades after, the greatest single demonstration of piety towards Mary seen in the new Australian (and New Zealand) Church. Had. we only reports of the various spiritual festivities in all important centres to hand—we have only

those of New South Wales, and Wellington, New Zealand—what fine picture of united devotion to Mary Immaculate could be sketched ?

Up till 1854-56 this was the greatest united effort of devotion towards Mary, but from the very dawn of our history away back in 1606 when Spanish navigators set out to discover the Southern Land, and landed at the Espiritu Santo Islands, Our Lady's name was linked with the new continent. "In the Name of the Most Blessed Trinity ... and in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God," had De Quiros, the Spanish Captain, claimed possession for Spain "of all southern lands as far as the South Pole."

One of the first acts of the First Australian Synod, 1844, was to ask the Pope to declare "Our Lady, Help of Christians" Patroness of this new Catholic province. And in the same Synod and others which followed later, we always find our Bishops drafting regulations concerning the worthy celebration of Our Lady's Feasts, prayers in her honour, instructions on her virtues in the schools, and the Family Rosary. At no time was Our Blessed Lady neglected in the Australian Church. Her rosary, as all Australian Catholics know, has been our precious heritage since the first Irish political convicts were brought to our shores. It was recited on the transport ships, it was said "in the barracks", a pious group of freed-convicts used to gather in Sydney homes to say it together two or three times each week. And the settlers in outback places—how they loved their Rosary!

LASTING EFFECTS OF 1854-56

The Festivities of 1854-56 marked a new increase of piety towards Mary in Australia, so we are told. Are there any lasting memorials of this? It seems there are.

Firstly, St. Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, Mother Church of Australia, is always known after the Definition as "Mary Immaculate, Help of Christians". Archbishop Polding had seen to that.

Secondly, Sydney Archdiocese was dedicated especially to Mary Immaculate.

Thirdly, Perth Diocese and Port Victoria (now Northern Territory) were dedicated to Mary Immaculate, at the intercession of Dr. Serra, O.S.B., a short time before the Definition. The original copies of Pope Pius IX's confirmation of these dedications, with Indulgences granted, were received in Perth in 1854 and are still preserved in the Archdiocesan archives.

Fourthly, in the Benedictine religious communities (the Community at St. Mary's was disbanded soon after this date) special devotions were held in December. And the Sisters of the Good Samaritan founded with Dr. Polding's help were given, as part of their religious habit, a blue ribbon in honour of Mary Immaculate.

And, of course, the use of prayers and invocations in honour of "Mary conceived without sin" begun by Dr. Polding in thanksgiving for Bishop Davis's recovery from illness, and by Dr. Serra for his Associations of the Immaculate Mother in Perth and New Norcia, were now confirmed.

WORLD WIDE MOVEMENT

Within two years of the Sydney Festivities Our Lady appeared at Lourdes to confirm directly, as it seems, the great definition. This thrilling apparition, the greatest apparition of Mary that the world had known, added immense drive to the growing cult of the Immaculate Mother. The "Marian Age" was begun. Since that date one has only to number the shrines, chapels, churches, dedicated to Mary Immaculate and Our Lady of Lourdes in Australia and New Zealand to see how we, too, have joined in the world movement to honour the dogma and its sequel at Lourdes.

ARCHBISHOP POLDING'S PASTORAL LETTER, 1856

Publication, in the Archdiocese of Sydney, of the Jubilee, granted by our Holy Father Pius IX, on the occasion of the Definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception

John Bede, of the Holy Order of St. Benedict, Archbishop-Assistant to the Pontifical Throne, Prelate of the Household of His Holiness Pius IX, etc., by the Grace of God, and of the Holy Apostolic See, Archbishop of Sydney, and Metropolitan of Australia. To the Faithful of the Archdiocese, Clergy and Laity, Grace and Blessing.

“The time has at length arrived, Dearly Beloved, when we also, in our far distant regions, are to celebrate the jubilee granted by the Holy Father in honour of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God. In the fullness of time it is now placed on high as a dogma, bright and clear in the intellect and utterance of the Church, as it has ever been a doctrine loved and cherished in her heart. We are somewhat late in joining our voices to the general acclamation and homage of Christendom; let a gratitude by so much the more earnest and thoughtful show, that we do not the less vividly appreciate the great object of every jubilee—the crushing of the head of sin. *Fecit mihi magna qui potens est*; this is the simple and sublime sentence which, uttered in solemn and significant accent at the Centre of Unity, has been heard by Christian ears above the din of war, and the boasts of science, and the jangling of world peace. *Fecit mihi magna qui potens est*; may you all, Dearly Beloved, during the jubilee sing your Magnificat with a more intelligent gratitude, having experienced within yourselves those “great things”, a true penitence and a holy love, wrought out by the efficacy of His blood, whose foreseen merits conferred upon the Blessed Virgin, His Mother and our Mother, that most noble and singular gift of Redemption, her Immaculate Conception.

“The monuments of venerable antiquity in both Eastern and Western Church testify that this doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin has always existed within the Church as a doctrine received from the beginning, and marked with the character of revelation. Amongst all nations of the Catholic world, wonderfully propagated, it has ever accumulated whatever of explanation, and illustration, and confirmation, could be given to it, by the patronage, and zeal, and science, and most intimate conviction of the Church. For indeed the Church of Christ, the diligent keeper and guardian of the dogmas committed to her, changes nothing in them, diminishes nothing, adds nothing.

“The Holy Fathers and Doctors of the Church, taught by the heavenly oracles, have, from the earliest ages, when they have been engaged in explaining Scripture, in defending true doctrine, or instructing the faithful, vied with each other in setting forth and extolling the peculiar sanctity of the Blessed Virgin, her dignity, her entire immunity from all stain of sin. And so, when they cited the words in which God announced the remedy prepared by His mercy at the very beginning of the world for the restoration of mankind, and crushing the fraudulent serpent, raised up a wonderful hope for our race, saying “I will put enmities between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed”, they taught, that in this divine oracle was brightly and distinctly foreshown the merciful Redeemer of mankind, Jesus Christ the only begotten Son of God, that the Virgin Mary was designated to be His most blessed Mother, and at the same time special prominence was given to the peculiar characteristic enmity of each against the devil. Wherefore, as Christ the mediator between God and man, having assumed human nature, blotted out the handwriting of the decree against us, and, as a conqueror, affixed it to His cross; so, that holiest Virgin, bound by close and indissoluble bond to Him, did together with Him and through Him, pursue the everlasting enmity against the baneful serpent, and with abounding triumph, did, with immaculate foot, crush his head.

“And the Holy Fathers saw this singular triumph of the Blessed Virgin, her surpassing innocence, her purity, her sanctity, her integrity from all harm of sin, the original ineffable abundance and grandeur in her ‘of all heavenly graces, and virtues. and privileges they saw it everywhere in the divine records; they saw it in that Ark of Noah which, divinely constructed, escaped perfectly safe and unharmed from the wreck of the whole world; they saw it in that ladder, which Jacob beheld reaching from earth to heaven, on the steps of which the angels of God were ascending and descending, and on whose summit rested God Himself; they saw it in that bush, which on holy ground Moses beheld all burning, and amidst the flame of fire not consumed nor suffering any the least loss, but verdant in beauty and flourishing; they saw it in that tower, impregnable before the face of the enemy, from which hung a thousand bucklers, and all the armour of the strong; they saw it in that enclosed garden, which cannot be rifled, nor broken through by any snares of deceit; they saw it in that resplendent City of God, whose foundations are on the sacred hills; they saw it in that most august temple of God, which, glowing with divine splendours, is full of the glory of the Lord; and in countless other instances of the like kind have the Fathers in succession taught us to behold a special foreshadowing of the lofty dignity, the unspotted innocence, and the sanctity which having never at any time been exposed to blemish, ever dwelt in the Mother of God.

“In addition to this summary as it were of divine gifts, and in describing the original spotlessness of the Virgin of whom Jesus was born, the same writers apply the words of the Prophets, and unite in celebrating the same august Virgin as the pure dove, the holy Jerusalem, the lofty throne of God, the ark and dwelling place of holiness which Eternal Wisdom built for herself; as that Queen who abounding in delights, and leaning on her Beloved, proceeded altogether perfect out of the mouth of the Most High, beautiful and intimately dear to God, and never spotted by any blemish of ill. And when the Fathers and writers of the Church dwelt in heart and mind on the fact that the Angel Gabriel in announcing the sublime dignity of the Mother of God, did by command, and in the name of God Himself, style her ‘full of grace’, they taught that by this peculiar and solemn salutation never elsewhere heard, it was signified that the Mother of God had been, from the first moment of her existence, and was, the seat of all divine graces, adorned with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nay, a very treasure house of those gifts all but infinite, an unexhausted abyss, so that, never having been subject to malediction, and united to her Son in benediction, she merited to hear from Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit, *benedicta Tu inter mulieres, et benedictus fructus ventris tui*, ‘Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus’.

“And therefore our Holy Father the Pope confiding in the Lord that the seasonable time had arrived for defining the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary the most holy Mother of God, which the divine oracles, venerable tradition, the perpetual instinct of the Church, the singular accord of Catholic prelates and the faithful throughout the world, the Acts and Constitutions of his Predecessors had united in proclaiming as the constant belief of the Church; all these things having been thoroughly and diligently weighed, with assiduous and fervent prayers to God, he, the Supreme Head of the Church, decided to proceed without delay to define, formally and authoritatively, the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin, and thus to satisfy the pious desires of the Catholic world, and in her to honour more and more her only begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ, since all honour and laud offered to the Mother redounds to the glory of the Son.

“In humility then, with prayer and fasting, the Holy Father, by authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and by his own, declares, pronounces, and defines the doctrine, which holds, that The Most Blessed Virgin Mary in the first instant of Her Conception was by the singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Saviour of the

human race, preserved from all stain of original sin, to be revealed by God, and thereupon to be by all the faithful firmly and constantly believed.

“And thus, Dearly Beloved, when the world thinks not of the Church, or thinks only to despise her, she speaks from her appointed seat and claims to be heard ‘as one having authority’. It is a spectacle of wonder and of consolation; of wonder, that the occupant of that lowly chair, who appears little more among the potentates of earth than did the Blessed Virgin among the daughters of Judah, should speak with that calm clear voice, and be welcomed and obeyed in his utterance; of consolation, that our dear Mother is to be greeted with renewed love and honour,. she who covets love and honour only as they extend the faith and love of her Son, who is God blessed for ever. Do you, my dear children, bear ever this thought with you in your gratitude and jubilation, and if in the warmth of your hearts you would desire to hear her voice, think that all she ever says and does is comprehended in that great saying of hers at the marriage feast. ‘Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it’.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen. ‘By order of the Most Reverend the Archbishop,

H. G. ABBOT GREGORY, D.D.,

Vicar General Feast of St. Francis Xavier, 1858.”
