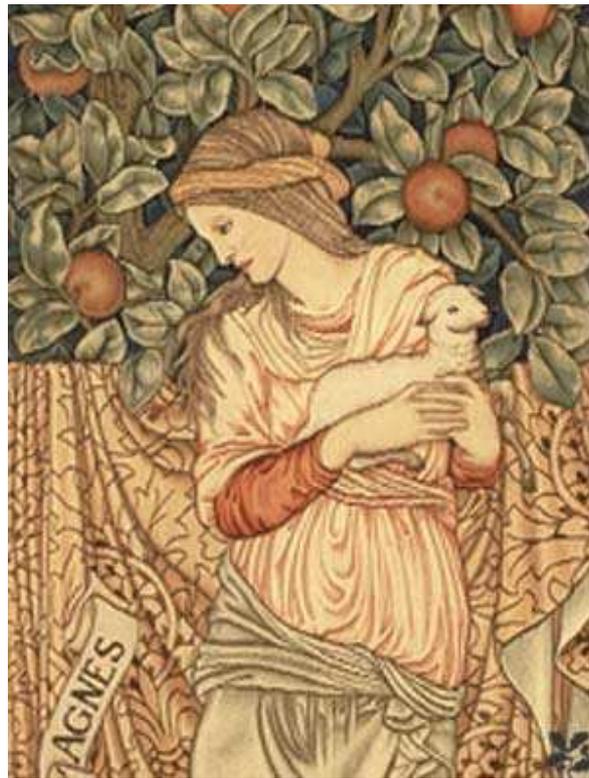


A SHORT HISTORY OF



ST AGNES PARISH PORT MACQUARIE

SHORT HISTORY OF ST AGNES PARISH

PORT MACQUARIE

An untraced decision to send priests with the First Fleet to Australia led to an early association of the Catholic Church with the settlement of Port Macquarie.

Only one year after the penal settlement was founded in 1821 the Church was represented with a visit by Father Phillip Connolly and Mr Columbus Fitzpatrick.

The first Catholics to live as residents in the Hastings Valley which the present Parish first covered when established in 1888, were those among the convicts and troopers who settled this area as a penal outpost in 1821.

Most of these Catholics would have had no "missionary" intentions just a desire to survive, either as convicts to the end of the term of their sentence or as free small-farming settlers in their isolated existence. Although there were examples of peaceful co-existence and also employment of the Aborigines, eg. as trackers and farm workers, the result historically was their complete expulsion from their lands. Mutual fear led to mutual slaughter and many a white man's conscience at the time would have become hardened to the extent that indigenous humans with black skins and to them, pagan beliefs and practices were not really human at all. They could be justifiably killed as representing a continued danger to their lives and

property. An undeclared state of war existed which became virtually an annihilation of the black people, already diminishing through the sicknesses they had no immunity to.

It will be a difficult exercise to reconcile and maybe in some way compensate in just terms those who suffered in those times.

What a sad start, therefore, for the first Catholic community. Only one year after Allman stepped ashore in 1821, he welcomed and entertained Father Phillip Connolly who came by boat to visit and bring the care of the Church to Catholics in this outpost prison.

Father Connolly visited many areas then known as the Hunter and the account of his visit to Port Macquarie comes from the later writings of his travelling companion and assistant, Columbus Fitzpatrick. Father Connolly receives little attention in the history books which are dominated by the activities of that other great pioneer priest, Fr. Therry. John O'Brien (Monsignor Hartigan), put it thus: "Chroniclers of early Catholic Australian History get over a sea of troubles by making Fr. Therry's name a handy stop-gap". "Fr. Therry, of course, visited, or Fr. Therry must have visited, etc." surmounts a lot. The wonder is that Fr. Therry distributed himself as widely as he did and as early as he did; but it would have been quite impossible for the much travelled pioneer to have visited all the places where his admirers have placed him. In the first stages of his career, he had enough work around Sydney and its environs to keep many men busy, and perhaps Fr. Connolly did more on the Mainland than he is given credit for."

Columbus Fitzpatrick, who when a business man of repute in Goulburn in the sixties wrote reminiscences, claimed that he did . Fitzpatrick was a lad in Sydney when the two priests came there, being too young for a trade, he acted as guide, philosopher and altar boy to the newly arrived clergy, and saw quite a lot of them. A pamphlet he wrote on Fr. O'Flynn and his times has disappeared, but the memoirs which he sent the "Southern Argus", Goulburn, and to "The Freeman's Journal", Sydney, narrate much that is noteworthy.

“In 1822 I accompanied Fr Connolly to the Penal settlement of the North. We got a passage in a little Government brig called the Nelson, and made Newcastle without difficulty where he was sent ashore, but Major Morisett, the commandant was not fond of priests, so Fr. Connolly did not remain but continued his voyage to Port Macquarie where he met with a very different reception from Captain Allman, the commandant of that place. Fr Connolly was entitled to respect and attention as an official chaplain going to minister to the religious wants of the soldiers and prisoners of his own religion, but although Captain Allman was not a Catholic he not only gave him all the honor due to his position, but took him to his own table and made as much of him as if were a brother. I had a fine time of it for the fortnight we remained there, and was very sorry we did not remain longer. I remember a great tall black fellow called Bob Bassett they had at the settlement to catch bushrangers. Fr Connolly was a very stout-hearted man or he would not have gone to Port Macquarie at that time, as steamers were not thought of, and there was a very bad bar or sand-bank at the entrance of the harbour over which the surf beat at times in a fearful

way, but his duty impelled him and he knew no fear. We had a severe squall at the Seal Rocks, but got back to Sydney without any accident".

(1) John O'Brien (Monsignor Hartigan) "In Diebus Illis" (In Those Days), Australian Catholic Record, Vol. XXI No. 1. January, 1944, pages 34-35.

Fitzpatrick was writing this story some forty five years later and John O'Brien goes on to say that the boat he called The Nelson was probably The Lady Nelson, doing service to and from Port Macquarie at that time. Fr. Connolly, however, would have celebrated the first Mass in the later Lismore Diocese.

In 1824, Port Macquarie lifestyle was described by an official survey party thus: "The Government House stands nearly in the middle of the town on a handsome esplanade open to the sea. To the northward, on a rising ground which commands the whole town, are the military barracks, calculated to hold one hundred and fifty men, each of the married men having a small cottage and garden. On the right of the hill are two handsome cottages which are used as officers' quarters.

The remainder of the town, which is extremely clean, is entirely occupied by the prisoners, who are kept as distinct as possible from the military, and who have each a small but neat hut constructed of split wood lathed, plastered and white-washed, with a garden attached. The sites of the street intended to be built as the population of the town increases are regularly laid out and fenced. The spaces between them are at present occupied as gardens and plantations of maize, sugar cane, etc., the latter of which appears to thrive remarkably well

and will at some future time, form a lucrative article of export from this establishment.

We dined at Government House, and a few of us, walking down to the beach after dinner, were highly amused by a dance among the natives. These people are a much finer race than those in the neighbourhood of Sydney, many of them being upwards of six feet high. Their features are also more expressive of intellect and their limbs better formed than any I have seen before. Some of the more civilised are victualled from the King's store of the settlement, and in return perform some of the duties of constable in a more efficient manner than any European possibly could. Whenever (as frequently happens) any of the prisoners attempt to escape into the woods they are instantly pursued by some of the black police, who possess a wonderful facility in tracing them, and being furnished with firearms they seldom fail to bring them back, alive or dead, for which they are rewarded with blankets, spirits, etc., but should the runaways even escape the black police they are almost sure to perish by hunger or the hostility of the other Indians." (*Survey Party report quoted in Port Macquarie News Centenary Issue, July 7th, 1982, page 10.*)

When Fr. Connolly came, the Catholic convicts and troopers would not have been to Mass for years or had much chance to pray and no chance to receive the Sacraments among the hardships of the former and need to watch behind them for the latter. A fair number of the convicts both Irish and others would have been baptised, and brought up as Catholics "back home". Some of the troopers would likely also have

been Catholics. Religion, however, was an institution, with public Church of England services on Sundays, especially when the magnificent St. Thomas's Church on the hill was built of convict bricks and finished in 1828. At the height of convict trooper occupation in 1836, one thousand three hundred souls lived in Port Macquarie, a population not to be exceeded again, after their departure, until some one hundred years later, in 1936.

Limeburners Creek now conjures up thoughts of good fishing, oysters and a new bridge to link the separated sections of the north shore. But in the convicts time, Catholic convicts, with others toiled here to gather the lime for building work in the new settlement. One convict, alias Ralph Rashleigh ("The Story of Ralph Rashleigh") writing years later, recalls the lime burning into the flesh wounds of their back from the floggings. There must have been more cursing of God, mingled with cries for relief and rescue, from many a Catholic heart.

For the sixty seven years between the founding of Port Macquarie in 1821 and the formal commencement of its Catholic Parish of St. Agnes' within the Diocese of Lismore in 1888, the lives of the small number of local Catholics were bound up with hard pioneering years of all relatively isolated communities in the colony of New South Wales. There was moreover the special characteristics of its being established for its first years as a penal township, chosen to isolate selected prisoners who would thus be deterred from escape. It is possible that these men were more recalcitrant types, whom the authorities considered dangerous enough to isolate in Port Macquarie.

Therefore, it is likely that the first Catholic families were some of the early free settlers, rather than local "ticket of leave" convicts.

THE EARLY CHURCH

Catholics in the Port Macquarie/Hastings area for the first 100 years (1821-1920) were quite few and scattered in number compared with other parts of N.S.W. The two main reasons were:-

1. Catholic immigrants (especially after about 1820) came out to join freed Catholic convicts who acquired properties and settled in "clannish" style areas, mainly south and south west of Sydney - e.g. Airds (Campbelltown), Illawarra, Goulburn, Manaroo (Cooma), Wagga Wagga and Riverina, plus the Maitland area.
2. A very large rural project known as the Australian Agricultural Company had control of a vast area stretching from Newcastle to Tamworth, from which deliberate policy excluded Catholics.

It was not until the Catholics engaged from the Maitland area to build the railway northwards to Kendall/Telegraph Point (1910-1920) that larger numbers of Catholic families came to join our pioneers.

The convicts and free-settler Catholics here were most distant from Priest and Bishop at Sydney, Maitland, Taree, Armidale, Kempsey, Grafton, Lismore until the first permanent P.P. in 1888.

The future Oxley Highway route to Yarras, mainly built with convict labour, was first used by Major Innes in 1840 and so linked settlements

along the River. The future Pacific Highway route came later in the 1850's with Port Macquarie being linked via Cundle to Gloucester, Stroud and Raymond Terrace to Maitland and Newcastle.

Travellers came and went overland, to Sydney via Maitland and Wiseman's Ferry or the far quicker sea routes. The primitive nature of the tracks the early Priests and laity travelled on either to give or go searching for sacramental ministry, can only be imagined. The difficulties of communications lasted well into this century with many delays at ferry crossings along the coastal route. It seems obvious, therefore, that Priests and Catholics here would have retained close ties with the former 'Parish' centre at Taree for many years after 1887.

The first Catholic Church at Port Macquarie was the former guard's room situated outside the large convict gaol built in the 1830s. This building was, therefore, also the first "Church" in this Diocese and we have a map and etching of the 1880s showing its location just off Clarence Street and what it looked like. In 1866 a report on its condition and possible use as a Courthouse is as follows:

The roof leaks in several places. "Report on the Catholic Church, Port Macquarie - January 13th, 1866." This building was formerly used as a Lockup by the Military and contained six cells. These, however, have all been removed and the window heads altered. The walls are of brick and are in good condition - the roof leaks in several places but could be repaired at a trifling cost -the floor requires to be taken up and re-laid, and new floor to verandah - the ceiling is a cooed ceiling. This building is not adapted for a court house; as wings would have to

be added to it which would necessitate the raising of the walls of the main building so as to obtain light, otherwise, windows would have to be made in each end. The ground is very much out of level, therefore, the wing buildings would cost more than if the building was on level ground. This building could be made into a Lockup - the walls and the roof are the only portions which could be considered as completed - the internal work, lining of cells etc. would have to be new - the wooden shingling if repaired would probably last four or five years." *E. Fleur, Foreman of Works. Footnote:.* (source - *Colonial Architect - Records re. Courts and Watch Houses*).

It was good enough for religious worship but not for a Courthouse and this led to the historic one being built on the corner of Clarence and Hay Streets. It seems that mass and other services were held there right through till the first St. Agnes' was built in 1878, it served also as a Sunday School. The first St. Agnes' Parish Church was built of timber. It remained standing for 62 years when it was demolished and replaced by the present building.

In 1871 a young assistant teacher arrived in Port Macquarie - Mary McDonald, who married James Bourne and who commenced Sunday School instruction for Catholics in the old guards room Church. The Bournes lived in a 'large' home in Hay Street on the land where a recently demolished motel stood. Before that it belonged to Lieut. Wilson in the convict period. They must have had a stable, 'mixed' marriage as the Masonic meeting was held in the home on Friday evenings and the Mass for Catholics on Sunday. Maybe Mrs Bourne had the Sunday School there too, before St. Agnes' was built in

1878. The old guards room Church, like many other convict-day structures, had probably deteriorated even beyond its unsatisfactory 1866 condition and the visiting Priests found the Bourne's home so much better and welcoming -with less remembrance of the `stigma' of the 1820/30s convict times.

Rawdon Island (1868) and Beechwood. Rollands Plains was another centre on the way to and from the Macleay district. These areas were in the Macleay district of Armidale Diocese up to 1887/88.

Port Macquarie and the Hastings district became part of the new Diocese of Maitland on November 14th, 1867, with its first Bishop, Dr. Murray. Fr. Coghlan left in 1867 and in 1868 Fr. O'Quinlivan returned to Port Macquarie. He had his first local church built at Rawdon Villa on Rawdon Island in 1868, but was drowned here the following year, 1869. Fr. Coghlan returned for about a year.

When no priest was available at Port Macquarie at this time, Fr. John O'Sullivan who had charge of the Macleay district would travel over from Kempsey. Dr. Angelo Celletti was appointed here in 1871 but died the following year. Fr. O'Sullivan filled in again until Fr. James McGough was appointed to the Manning/Hastings district in 1873.

During this time the main Church centre was at Rawdon island, closer to Catholics in the upper Hastings areas around Martin's Creek and Beechwood. Mass was still said in the room attached to the gaol for Catholics at Port Macquarie until at last land was acquired opposite St. Thomas in Hay Street for the erection of the first Port Macquarie Church in 1878 Fr Foley was then resident priest. In 1887, when the Lismore Diocese was established, it was decided to place the boundary

between Lismore and Maitland just north of the Kendall and Camden Haven area which remained part of the Manning District. Mystery surrounds the choice of St. Agnes as the parish patroness. It is believed that possibly some prominent parishioners had a special devotion to her, or she may have been selected by Father McGough.

THE PARISH PRIESTS

By the end of the "convict" period Port Macquarie became part of the Maitland Diocese and was visited between 1838 and 1851 by three priests from there, Fathers John Lynch, Patrick Magennis and John Rigney. The marriage and baptismal registers at Maitland give the dates of their visits and provide us with the only record of Catholic families living here. From 1852 to the establishment of the Parish in 1888, Port Macquarie was part of the Taree (earlier Cundle) Parish, known as the Manning/Hastings District. Frs. Renus (1852-43), Patrick O'Quinlivan (1854-62), B. Murphy (1862) visited from Cundle. Fr. Renus is mentioned as living here before he left for Bathurst in 1954. Fr. O'Quinlivan "set up stations" here and at Rollands Plains.

After Father O'Quinlivan left the first time in 1862 he was replaced by a Dominican friar, Father Cornelius Coghlan, until 1868 and again from 1869 to 1870. Father James McGough served the area for 13 years from 1872 to 1885. He had a strong influence in the decision to build the first St. Agnes' Church in 1878. Father John Foley served the Port Macquarie parish from Taree from 1885 until Father Walsh arrived to occupy the new presbytery in 1888. Fr. O'Quinlivan when he returned in 1868 lived in Burrawan Street (opposite the present High School on the

corner of Owen Street). He loved swimming and when accompanying a friend from Sydney to Oxley Beach he was apparently drowned in 1869. The friend rode off while Father O'Quinlivan went for a swim and when he returned only his clothes were on the beach. His body was not recovered. He was in his fifties. He is said to have adopted a boy he picked up in his sulky on the way from Taree, who swam ashore from a shipwreck. Descendants of this boy who took the name Quinlivan lived in the Taree area.

Fr. Cornelius Coghlan was the only Order Priest (Dominican) to be in charge of this area. He must have been a fairly fiery Irishman. He had troubles with the officials at Port Macquarie gaol in 1866, leading to him being banned from there. His spelling of "Hennery Parkes" (Henry Parkes) M.P. in his defence letter would not have helped. The Benedictine Diary of those times records Fr. Coghlan as attending a three day retreat in Sydney and "he is remaining in Sydney for a time." *(Sr. Assumpta O'Hanlon "Dominican Pioneers in N.S.W.")*.

Fr. Coghlan was born at Clonfert, Galway, in 1792 or 1798, studied in Spain and was Prior of Dundalk in the 1830's. "A forthright man with the courage of his convictions he was often at variance with men of opposite views." He responded to Bishop Polding's call for missionaries in 1842. In 1844 he was "reported to have been a genial pastor, who won the affection of Catholics and Protestants alike." In 1863 he served for six years "in that wild coastal region - loved far and wide for his zeal and open-handed giving". He retired to Dapto and died there in 1872 in the fiftieth year of his Priesthood.

The famous `Dean' John Lynch was the first Parish Priest of this area, between 1838 and 1843. As a young, newly ordained Irish Priest, he was recruited with several others by the first Australian Bishop, Dr. Bede Polding OSB to come out as "missionaries" to help Frs. Therry, Connolly and others whose flock had greatly grown and spread since their arrival in Sydney in 1821.

Fr. John Lynch's magnificent story can be read in "The Men of 38." He came from Dublin and Maynooth Seminary and was only 22 when he and Fr. Edmund Mahony were sent to take charge of Maitland. This `Parish' comprised virtually all the present Dioceses of Maitland, Armidale and Lismore, with the limits of very thin settlement being northerly to Armidale on the tablelands and Macleay on the coast. John O'Brien, the poet-priest, (Mgr. Hartigan) writes of him thus:

"He was a first class horseman and as hard as the horse that bore him. He went further north than Armidale, and combed the whole of the intervening country. His rounds often meant a journey of a thousand miles (1600km) and there were times when on his return a sick call was waiting which brought him half way round the map again. During 24 years at Maitland he baptised 4100 persons - some of them Aborigines. He shared the shepherd's hut and the appalling spare bed as hard and as corrugated as a shire road, and vermin-infested as well. He lived on the salt junk and the malicious damper washed down with post and rail tea and where he got his vitamins is one of the mysteries of those heroic times."

Fr. Lynch would have ridden along the "inland" track which avoided the major river crossings, staying likely at the homes (settler's huts) of those he cared for, at Hastings River, Rolland's Plains and Port Macquarie. His photograph shows a man of strong, large features and physique. He moved north to Armidale in 1866 when the new Bishop (Murray) came to Fr. Lynch's prized first Church at Maitland. He then was in charge for some years after Armidale's Bishop O'Mahoney was consecrated to start that Diocese in 1869. He later returned to Sydney at age 55 and later spent his last seven years at Campbelltown where he died in 1884, aged 68. Archdeacon Rigney, who came out with him in '38 and also served in this area, was celebrant of his Funeral Mass. John O'Brien's high praise of these men cannot be improved on, "Hard hitting men they were, men of a virile piety and a powerful Faith, and extraordinary was the influence they had with the people. They moved among them, knew them, improved their lot and made them religious in spite of themselves. In temporal as well as in spiritual affairs they worked for them, lived for them. It was they who picked out the likely bit of Crown land and advised the newcomer not to let so good a chance slip by. Sometimes it was their money that paid the first commitments; frequently it was they who moved to the rescue when hard times came knocking at the door. And if so much is true of their solicitude for their flock in material things, what can be said of the Higher Calling which was the real reason of their being here at all?"

They often rode one hundred miles in a day to attend a sick call. With the oil-stocks tied round their necks they swam swollen rivers to anoint a dying man. Sore and weary with the vestments strapped on the

pommel of the saddle they made their way from hut to hut, sometimes fifty miles apart, their jaded horses scraping up the suffocating dust in summer-time, and in the winter floundering through the slush and bogging to their knees.

But they made it, and on the earthen floor of the settler's humpy, with packing cases rigged up for an altar, they taught and preached, and preached and taught again the living miracle of the Mass. In little knots of threes and fours they instilled it into the children, the forebears of the Catholics of the present time. So if today in Bush and Town you can find so many families who cherish the Holy Sacrifice as warmly as their fathers did, if on the long white roads outback they are still doing their ten and twenty miles to go to Mass - with all credit to the men who came after - it is to Fr Lynch and the likes of him that we owe the thanks for the spade-work. If in a world that is hardening there yet remain Faith, Hope and Charity – these theirs be.

In St. Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, on August 28th, 1887, Bishop Jeremiah Doyle was consecrated the first Bishop of Grafton. It had already been already decided to transfer Port Macquarie and the upriver Hastings districts into the new Diocese from Maitland as the 1888 Australian Catholic Directory describes the Diocese thus: "Comprising the Territory of portion of the Eastern Coast district of N.S.W. from Point Danger on the North to Mt. Lindsay and from the Western base of the latter to a point ten miles south of Mount Sea View thence to a point ten miles South of Port Macquarie." St. Agnes' Parish

was not established by Bishop Doyle till the next year 1888 when he appointed Fr. Walsh it's first resident Parish Priest.

Bishop Doyle visited Kempsey at Christmas 1887 where he is recorded as performing two Baptisms. It appears he retained strong links with the Lismore/Tweed area where he had served as a young pioneer priest of the Armidale Diocese since 1868. In 1900 he was successful in renaming the Diocese from Grafton to Lismore but, must have been sure of this many years earlier as St Carthage's Cathedral was begun in 1894 and opened before Bishop Doyle's death in 1907. These points were significant as for many decades; until better communications were established, Port Macquarie and the Hastings suffered from their relative isolation from the Bishop's centre in Lismore.

The appointment of Father John Curran as Parish Priest gave the Parish a new impetus. His first task was to replace the old slab church. The plan he put forward was visionary given that there was not a great many Catholics in Port Macquarie.

An immense fund-raising effort finally led to the opening of the fine gothic type church on the hill in the centre of town in 1941 where it dominates the skyline. His next major effort was building the beautiful stone terraces which adorn the front of the church. Finally he raised the funds for a new school at Wauchope which was opened in 1953.

During this period Port Macquarie was very much like other Parishes. There were the basic spiritual practices beginning with Mass on Sunday and weekdays. The sodalities such as the Holy Name

Society for men, the Sacred Heart Society for women and for younger women the Children of Mary. Missions, usually led by the Redemptorist Fathers, were a triennial feature of most Parishes.

On the social side, this was usually linked to various fund-raising activities such as House Parties, Housie, Talents Quests and so on which were also the main sources of Parish income.

Father Curran was succeeded by Monsignor Thomas Farrelly. At the same time Wauchope and the upper Hastings was formed into another Parish leaving Port Macquarie with Rawdon Island, Telegraph Point and Lake Cathie as the outer limits of the Parish.

Life in the Parish continued much as before except that in the late sixties signs began to emerge of a sustained growth in the population. This led to the building of a secondary school separate from the primary school in Hay Street. (*The Primary School had been in existence since 1913, see Sisters of St, Joseph – page 23*). At the same time a new Parish Hall was constructed, mainly to raise funds through Housie to meet the cost of the new St. Joseph's Hastings Regional Secondary School. As the name suggest the school was intended to provide secondary education for the pupils of the feeder primary schools in the district.

With the passing of Monsignor Farrelly in 1969 three significant factors emerged that were to radically change the direction of the Parish of Port Macquarie. The first of these was the impact of the Second Vatican Council, the second the sustained growth of the

population of Port Macquarie and the third was the appointment of a new Parish Priest, Father Leo Donnelly. The pastoral direction of the Parish was to be dictated by the first two factors up to the present time – 2008.

The years 1970-75 were mainly focused on developing with parishioners a new outlook to Church mainly built around constructing Liturgies in keeping with the directions set by the Council. In line with liturgical participation, efforts were concentrated in creating a greater participation by parishioners in Parish affairs. A Finance Committee and a Pastoral Council were formed and a Parish Giving programme installed to give budgetary certainty to the Parish.

The Parish made its first foray into the area of Care. In 1973 land was made available for the construction of a St. Vincent de Paul Centre. Then in 1975, with the assistance of generous grants from the Commonwealth Government a thirty unit Hostel was constructed and at the same time a nearby fifty bed Nursing Home, which was failing financially was acquired and with the establishment of Lourdes Hostel and Nursing Home the Parish became committed to the care of the frail aged in a significant way. Today there are four Hostels and two Nursing Homes catering for over two hundred frail aged and two hundred and twenty retirement units.

Similar growth has taken place with Centacare which was founded in 1993. The programmes are mainly directed to a variety of human needs, the disabled, the homeless, a youth refugee. *(The full extent of this ministry may be found elsewhere on the parish website).*

Education has always been a focus for the Parish. In 1970 there were 210 primary students and 84 junior secondary students. Today three primary campuses accommodate over fourteen hundred students, and two junior secondary schools have an enrolment of 1300 pupils between them. The senior secondary schools are unique. One of these MacKillop Senior College prepares academically inclined students for the Higher Schools Certificate. The other campus, Newman Senior Technical College prepares students for the Higher School Certificate but concentrates on Vocational Education. MacKillop has an enrolment of 400+ students and Newman enrolls 350 students.

With the growth of many Ministries in the Parish it became obvious that the Parish lacked focus and all of these endeavours needed to be place in the context of an articulated, inspiring and actionable vision to bring about unity of purpose of the activities of the Parish. Consequently in 1991 over a two day period the Vision of the Parish was shaped and with it the Mission statement describing how the Parish would go about making that vision a reality in the daily life of the Parish.

ST AGNES PARISH VISION

EVERYTHING IS TO BE ORIENTATED
TOWARDS THE PRAISE AND GLORY OF
GOD.

In the book of revelation, St John envisages all humanity gathered around the throne of God, offering together with the Angels a prayer of adoration as they cry out “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God...”

In its own imperfect way the community of Christ’s faithful reflects that heavenly kingdom. So the central focus of the faith communities which make up the totality of that community of the Church Universal will be worship.

In order to create a people in His own image who would, from east to west, offer this song of praise to His Father, Our Lord missioned His followers to go out and teach all nations, proclaiming a message of Good News to all people, teaching them to observe His instructions, and to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

ST AGNES PARISH MISSION

The St Agnes’ Parish Community strives to make our Vision a reality by a commitment to:

+ HOLINESS IN THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

We will assist each other to develop and enrich the grace life of our Baptism by providing and fostering appropriate liturgies, renewal programs, opportunities and places for prayer, such as retreats, missions and prayer groups.

+ PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS OF
SALVATION

We will assist the Bishop, our Pastors and each other to proclaim the Good News. Through the dedication of resources to pastoral programs we will assist the family to evangelise the young and to increase and deepen the faith life of adults. Central to this endeavour will be the Liturgy of the Word in the Eucharist.

+ MINISTER WITHIN THE FAITH
COMMUNITY

We will minister to each other as members of our worshipping community. This ministry finds its expression in the services of those in Holy Orders, namely our Bishop, Priests and Deacons as well as those who minister in other ways within our faith community.

+ THE SERVICE OF ALL,
PARTICULARLY THOSE IN NEED.

We will respond in faithfulness to Christ's command of love by reaching out to those in need to the extent of our available resources, both human and material.

THE SISTERS OF ST JOSEPH

The story of the Sisters of St Joseph and their involvement in the Port Macquarie Community dates back more than a century. It is a story of devout dedication and extraordinary persistence against innumerable difficulties and hardships which some might find hard to conceive in this modern age.

The founders of the Sisters of St Joseph were Fr Julian Tennyson-Woods, a Priest who was born in London in 1832, and Mary MacKillop, a nineteen year old governess. Fr Tennyson-Woods, who also was a scholar and scientist, had been invited to accompany Bishop Robert Wilson to Australia to serve in Tasmania. He worked in the outback of South Australia in the middle of the last century, and he was so distressed by the lack of opportunities for country children to receive even the minimum education that he sought the assistance of Mary MacKillop.

She was asked to establish a religious order of women to teach in small country centres of the outback. The MacKillop family, were of Scottish stock and Mary had been hired to teach the children of her relations.

Under the guidance of Tennyson-Woods, Mary gathered around her a group of young women with similar aspirations and began to teach in the Parish centered in Penola in the south east of South Australia in 1867.

Fr Tennyson-Woods wrote a rule of life for them and they began to live as a religious congregation at that time.

There was a great difference however, between their congregation and the religious orders in existence then. The remarkable thing was that they had a vision of an Australian Order to be established to live as religious and to work under conditions that had not been experienced before; appropriate to the rough, hard Australia of the mid 1800's.

This new young Australian order was going to operate in little country towns and mingle with and become part of the communities where they lived. It was a startling new departure and attracted much attention and not a little opposition.

In 1873 an event of considerable significance occurred. Until then the order had been centralised and was to be located at North Sydney. The then Bishop of Bathurst proposed to Tennyson-Woods that another strand be initiated – a decentralized version of the Sisters of St Joseph, based on Diocesan or district boundaries, each congregation of Sisters being independent within its own Diocesan limits. This was the second development within the foundation. It was started by Sisters Mary Quinlan and Hoolohan at Perthville near Bathurst and was formally constituted in 1876.

From that foundation, various new foundations were begun, including one at Lochinvar in the Diocese of Maitland in 1883. From here, at the request of the then Bishop of Lismore, Fr Carroll, the

first Port Macquarie community was formed and took up residence at the present convent in 1913. They were Sisters Dominic, Rose Alocoque and Dorothea.

The village site of Lochinvar, twelve kilometers from Maitland where the Sisters set up the convent in 1883, seems to have been an appropriate choice to begin a venture which would eventually send out branches into many small village locations. It was into these isolated places, to poor children cut off from religious instruction and education that the Sisters were founded to go.

The bush Parishes often had no resident priests and opportunities for the Sacraments were irregular. Fr Tennyson-Woods had met many such children through his travels in his large parish of Penola in South Australia.

Living in these remote areas, in communities of three or four, the Sisters' life was very hard by today's standards. Classes were held in Churches or Church halls which offered little privacy and had to be converted for Church use at the week ends. They were supported by the local people.

A small weekly school fee was paid by those parents who could afford it. In many Convents one Sister taught music to individual pupils and music fees were a source of revenue without which the Sisters could not have lived.

After school, the Sisters, always walking in pairs, visited sick and lonely people in the homes of those whose children had missed school. They spent time in community and private prayer and in study. The Sisters attended to their own housework and sewing and also saw to the cleaning of the Church and to the Church linen. Once a year they returned to the Mother House at Lochinvar, to meet their Sisters, make a retreat and probably to have a holiday.

In July, 1913, there were thirty one students enrolled in the new school which was opened that year at Port Macquarie. It is interesting to note the increases in the school populations over the years.

The Villages which were chosen for convents nearly a century ago have now grown into significant towns and the schools have become large and complex establishments.

Some towns however have grown very little during that time, and whilst there are still some communities of Sisters in some, other Convents have closed and the need for Sisters seemed greater in the rapidly developing centres.

For a while the growth in population was matched by a greater number of Sisters in Convents, but in recent years these numbers have declined as places are filled by lay teachers, and Sisters take up other avenues of service apart from teaching.

Whilst the education of children is still held to be the primary work of the Sisters of St Joseph, many are engaged in other fields – in

social work, parish support systems, in the missions and in educational administration at Diocesan levels.

The relevance of Religious life is not dependant on the work religious do, but rather on the sort of people they are and on the future they point to.