When Australia’s Catholics in the nineteenth century referred to the highest authority in their Church they often employed vague and pious expressions such as ‘Rome’, ‘the Holy See’, ‘the Apostolic See’, ‘the Pope’, ‘the Holy Father’, ‘the Holy City’ and ‘the Eternal City’. As far as practicalities were concerned, however, what they often had in mind was not ‘Rome’ in some pious or abstract sense but a specific department of the system of papal government. This department was the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith or, to use its Latin title, the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*. From the Latin, the Congregation was commonly referred to in abbreviated fashion as the ‘Propaganda Congregation’ or, simply, ‘Propaganda’ or ‘the Prop.’

The Sacred Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* was (and still is) one of a dozen or so congregations or curial departments, each responsible for a different sphere of activity, through which the Pope exercised his supreme authority in the Catholic Church. In his name, the *Propaganda Fide* Congregation was responsible for promoting the spread of the Catholic faith and directing the life of the Church in the mission lands, those parts of the world which had not yet been Christianized or whose

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1 After a reform of the Roman curia in 1967 it became known as the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples or for the Propagation of the Faith, in Latin, *Sacra Congregatio pro Gentium Evangelizatione seu de Propaganda Fide*. More recently, the adjective ‘Sacred’ has been omitted. See N. del Re, *La Curia Romana* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e di Letteratura, 1970), 194. The dishonest, manipulative and sinister overtones in modern English usage of the word ‘Propaganda’ is derived from the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* via Protestant polemic against Catholicism. However, the original Latin has none of these overtones but is simply the gerundive of the verb ‘propagare’, to spread, extend, promote, disseminate.
people had gone over to schism or heresy and where, in consequence, the regular ecclesiastical hierarchy either did not yet exist or was at an early stage of development.

Suggestions for the creation of such an organization date back to the medieval period and tentative steps were taken in the sixteenth century, but it was not until 1622 that the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide was established by Pope Gregory XV. The specific motivation was to strengthen Rome’s hand in the formulation of missionary policy in the huge colonial territories of Spain and Portugal in order to restore the independence and the spiritual character of missionary work which had become too closely identified with European imperialism and commercial interests.

Its organization and operations badly disrupted by the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide experienced a golden age in the nineteenth century. Benefiting from the collapse of the ancien régime, to which the royal ecclesiastical patronage systems had been attached, the papacy moved into the vacuum to control the whole Catholic missionary enterprise. Not only did the Congregation preside over the period of greatest expansion in the history of the Catholic missions, it was also able at last to exercise freely and fully the numerous and extensive powers, prerogatives and rights that the Pope had conferred on it from the beginning in consideration of the urgency and immensity of its responsibilities. The only limitation on the Congregation’s power was geographical, being confined to the mission territories. However, these territories were vast, covering most of the earth: the whole continents of Asia, Africa and North America, together with Oceania, plus important countries in Europe and parts of Latin America as well.

Within these zones, the Congregation was omnicompetent and ubiquitous, combining executive, judicial and administrative operations. All the functions which were exercised separately and individually by the other congregations and organs of the Roman curia over dioceses under the common law of the Church were, for the missions, concentrated in this single congregation. The Propaganda Fide Congregation was self-contained relative to the rest of the papal system. Some canonists argued that it had the right to make decisions touching on doctrine, questions concerning the sacraments and liturgy and matters of conscience, otherwise handled by the Holy Office of the Roman and Universal Inquisition, the Sacred Congregation of Rites and the