CHAPTER FOUR

AN HORIZON OF TROUBLES, 1843–1852

By authorising the establishment of a monastery in Sydney, creating an Australian episcopal hierarchy and enriching the Benedictine Order in Sydney with a package of privileges and permissions, the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide signalled its satisfaction with Archbishop Polding and his plans. Summarising his dealings with the Congregation in 1842, Polding wrote to Heptonstall, ‘so just see Thomas what one obtains by coming to Rome’.1 It was one of the last occasions that Polding had anything so positive to say about Rome in private for a very long time. He could not have known that his Roman reputation had reached a pinnacle which it would not occupy for long and, indeed, from which it was about to enter into a long period of almost continuous decline which would see the wreckage of all his hopes. Still flushed with Roman accolades, Polding seemed unaware that he was entering dangerous territory. No longer the only bishop in Australia, he needed to cultivate smooth working relations with his new colleagues in South Australia and Van Diemen’s Land. Moreover, partly at his own instigation and partly at the instigation of Rome, the Benedictine Order was now no longer the only religious institute operating in New South Wales, even if it was still the co-ordinating body. Again, he needed to manage with tact and sensitivity his relations with these other institutes, particularly in the light of his plans for Benedictine supremacy.

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At the cardinals’ meeting of July 1837, Cardinal Castracane had observed that nothing had thus far been done for the Aboriginal people of Australia. When Polding travelled to Europe in 1840 one of his objectives was to remedy this neglect. In accordance with his overall policy, his preference was that the English Benedictines would undertake this project but they told him that they had no men to spare.

1 Polding-Heptonstall, 17 February 1842, DownAA/Birt, L 130.
After his arrival in Rome towards the end of 1841, he encountered a priest of the Passionist Order, Father Raimondo Vaccari, who was so excited about Polding’s plan for an Australian Aboriginal mission that he volunteered for the work himself and said that he would persuade colleagues to join him. By arrangement with the Propaganda Fide Congregation, Vaccari and three other Passionists were constituted as missionaries to the Aborigines, with Vaccari as superior. This last part of the plan was decided against the wishes of the Passionist Father General, Father Antonio Testa, who felt that the success of the venture was jeopardised by Vaccari’s unstable personality. Testa finally agreed to the scheme only because he was ordered to do so, presumably by the Congregation. As a preacher and spiritual director of great renown in Rome, Vaccari had influential friends in high places, including at least one Propaganda Fide cardinal, Francesco Orioli.2

Very little is known about the negotiations between Polding, the Passionists and the Propaganda Fide officials, but they seem to have been carried out carelessly if one is to judge from the confusion that appeared about the canonical status of the Aboriginal mission. On 12 June 1842 the Propaganda Fide Secretary, Archbishop Cadolini, obtained from the Pope approval to establish the mission as a Prefecture Apostolic headed by Vaccari and independent of the immediate jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Sydney.3 Polding was later to insist that while in Rome he did not apply for such an arrangement, that there was never any talk of it at the Propaganda Fide Congregation, that, on the contrary, he had urged that the Passionists should be subject to his authority like any other priest working in his jurisdiction and that, finally, he left

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3 Note, 12 June 1842, APF, Udienze, volume 96 (1842, pt 1), folio 811r. Documentation on Vaccari’s faculties are at APF, SC-Oceania, volume 3, folios 78r ff. See also Thorpe, 26–7, and Wilten, 359.