CHAPTER NINE

DIVISION OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY, 1858–1865

The Congregation de Propaganda Fide was aware that rapid economic development in the British colonies of Australia in the 1840s and 1850s resulted in a spectacular increase of population, from just over 190,000 in 1840 to well over 1,000,000 in 1860.1 Substantial numbers of these new settlers were associated, however loosely, with the Catholic Church. It was generally assumed in ecclesiastical circles by the late 1850s that the Australian mission would need to be expanded to provide dioceses, clergy, churches, schools and other pastoral services for the large number of Catholics crowding into the colonial capitals and trekking to newly-opened up districts and towns inland.

The last readjustment of the ecclesiastical system had been in 1848 when the Dioceses of Melbourne, Maitland and Port Victoria had been established. However, of these, Maitland was scarcely a diocese in its own right, functioning as little more than a titular see with an Australian locality name for Polding’s coadjutor bishop resident in Sydney, Charles Davis, and Port Victoria, with its bishop Rosendo Salvado living a couple of thousand kilometres distant in New Norcia, virtually existed only on paper because of the lack of European settlement on the northern coast of the continent and the complete failure of an early attempt to evangelise the local Aboriginal people. Even after the removal of the Port Philip district from the Archdiocese of Sydney by the creation of the only real diocese of the 1848 group, Melbourne, Polding’s direct territorial responsibility remained immense, stretching from the Murray River to Cape York and from the Pacific coast far into the interior.

I

We have seen how Archdeacon McEncroe had written to the Pope in 1851 urging that the survival of the Catholic faith in Australia depended

---

on the prompt provision of extra dioceses staffed by more bishops and priests. He also argued that it was important that these bishops and priests be Irishmen because Australia’s Catholics were largely Irish and, moreover, Ireland was the only source of the required numbers of missionaries. Rome was sufficiently impressed by McEncroe’s arguments to refuse Polding’s application that the Archdiocese of Sydney be assigned indefinitely to the care of the English Benedictines, but at their meeting on 10 May 1852 the cardinals of the Propaganda Fide Congregation deferred further consideration of the reorganisation of the Australian Church until they had received advice from Polding and his suffragan bishops. In his letter of 4 June 1852 the then Prefect, Cardinal Fransoni signalled to Polding the need to divide his extensive and populous diocese and suggested new divisions based on the settlements of Goulburn to the south and Brisbane to the north as outlined by McEncroe.

Disputes in Western Australia, Tasmania and New South Wales in the 1850s distracted the Congregation from following up the matter of administrative restructuring. But the issue was not forgotten by McEncroe. Undeterred by the lack of immediate practical results from his 1851 appeal, he was determined to keep the issue alive at Rome. In 1854 and again in 1858 meetings of the Sydney clergy called for more bishops and priests to minister to a growing Catholic population, who, they added, being Irish, preferred Irish to English pastors and this information was passed onto the Congregation by McEncroe.

In response to the first of these notifications, Fransoni sent a circular letter to the suffragan bishops of the Australian province seeking their opinions about new dioceses. In association with the second, McEncroe explained to Fransoni’s successor, Cardinal Barnabò, that daily experience convinced him of the correctness of the position that he had placed before the Pope seven years before. McEncroe activated his Irish network in support of his position. In 1856 he wrote to the Archbishop of Dublin enclosing a copy of his 1851 letter to the Pope.