

In all the proud history of the Church in Australia, perhaps no incident has captured the imagination of Catholics as has the famous incident of the preservation of the Blessed Sacrament in the house of William Davis, during those sad days of the penal repression of Catholicism. There was born a strong aspect of our religious national character and while historians have argued over the details of the event, ordinary Catholics have delighted in the incident and cherished it as their own.

The state of the Church in the early 19th century made for an unpromising and depressing prospect. The great majority of the Catholics of the infant penal colony were Irish and in bad need of catechesis and evangelisation. Very many did not practise the Faith, many indeed knew little about the Faith beyond the simple fact that they were Catholics. A great number had been transported to New South Wales as convicts, sometimes for real crimes, sometimes for what we would today call political crimes: seditious opposition to the British rule of Ireland. Other Irishmen had come out to the colony as free settlers, to make a new life. Many prospered, both of the free settlers and of the emancipists, or freed convicts. No matter what their circumstances, though, one thing still rankled many: the unjust restriction of their religious liberty by the colonial government. The Anglican civil authorities recognised the value of some degree of religious ministry, but in their eyes the only valid one, was by the ministers of the Established Church of England. Catholicism was a superstitious and backward creed and her priests were likely to be no more than treacherous agents of sedition. It was on these grounds that Father Dixon, the first priest to say an authorised Mass in the colony had been deprived of his permission to function in 1804, only months after it had been granted. Father Dixon ministered surreptitiously out of the eyes of the authorities, until he returned to Ireland in 1808, leaving the little colony without any priests to serve the needs of God's people in this remote and fearful place.

One can therefore imagine the delight of the sincere Catholics of New South Wales when, in 1817 a priest arrived with a mandate from Rome, no less, declaring him Prefect Apostolic of New Holland. This was the famous Father Jeremiah O'Flynn. Father O'Flynn was an impetuous and often imprudent individual who had taken it into his mind to volunteer his services for the remote Australian mission. He had certainly received the Pope's permission for this, but the British government was less convinced of his utility and denied him permission to take up the post of chaplain to the Catholics of New South Wales. Despite that, he embarked anyway and upon arrival in Sydney, he presented his credentials to the Governor, Lachlan Macquarie, assuring him that his governmental authorisation would be arriving on the next ship. Whether Father O'Flynn was just relying on divine providence in this matter, or whether he thought it generally did not matter, is uncertain. What we do know is that Governor Macquarie took a severe dislike to Father O'Flynn and was determined to remove him from the colony as soon as possible, especially when the promised governmental authorisation naturally failed to arrive on the next boat (or any other) as the priest had promised.

For six months Father O'Flynn busied himself ministering to the Catholics of the colony. Whatever faults he may have had, and poor judgement was clearly one of them, he always showed himself a zealous priest, concerned for the good of souls and anxious to gather together the Lord's flock. Bishop Ullathorne, who later recounted his activity during those brief months in Sydney records that not only did he say Mass privately, marry, baptise and bury, but he even took into his own residence a number of poor and abandoned elderly people to care for them - surely an expression of a good Christian heart. Time and time again Father O'Flynn petitioned the Governor for permission to offer public Mass, and always Macquarie refused him. He complied, as he saw it, by offering only a private Mass each day in a small room, to which, as he wrote to a supporter in Ireland, no more than nine or ten persons could come. At last Macquarie gave orders for the priest's arrest and deportation and although he went into hiding and was concealed by one good Catholic family after another, he was soon discovered and imprisoned.

Before his reluctant departure from the little colony, Father O'Flynn had been enabled to make a wonderful provision for the religious devotional life of the flock he was leaving behind. What he left as he boarded the ship was no less than the Blessed Eucharist itself. Some say that Father O'Flynn had been interrupted as he said Mass and was unable to consume the Sacred Host, others, that he left it deliberately for the consolation of the people. Whatever the case may be, the Blessed Sacrament consecrated by Father O'Flynn became the focus of Catholic life and devotion for nearly two years until, it appears, a visiting French priest finally arrived in Sydney, said Mass and consumed the Sacred particle.

In the meantime, the Catholics of Sydney, harried and oppressed, troubled by so many afflictions of their difficult and lonely life, found in the Blessed Eucharist the consoling presence of Christ Himself. A prominent Catholic of the colony, William Davis, whose house stood at the corner of Harrington street and

Grosvenor St enjoyed the dignity of welcoming his Lord into his own home there and as the months passed constant prayer was maintained before the little tabernacle of simple cedar containing the pyx which held the Lord. On Sundays large crowds gathered and the people prayed before the Blessed Sacrament with intense devotion. In those times when it was not possible to have a priest, it was standard practice for Catholics to meet and sanctify the Sunday with the rosary, a few other devotions and of course, someone would read out the Mass prayers. The little congregation at William Davis' cottage had a special intention which was the object of their constant prayers during those years. They prayed to God to send them a priest. By now there were ten thousand Catholics in the Colony, and they had no one to confess their sins to, no-one to bless their marriages, nor offer Mass, perform the last rites or supply all those other ministrations for which the people needed a priest.