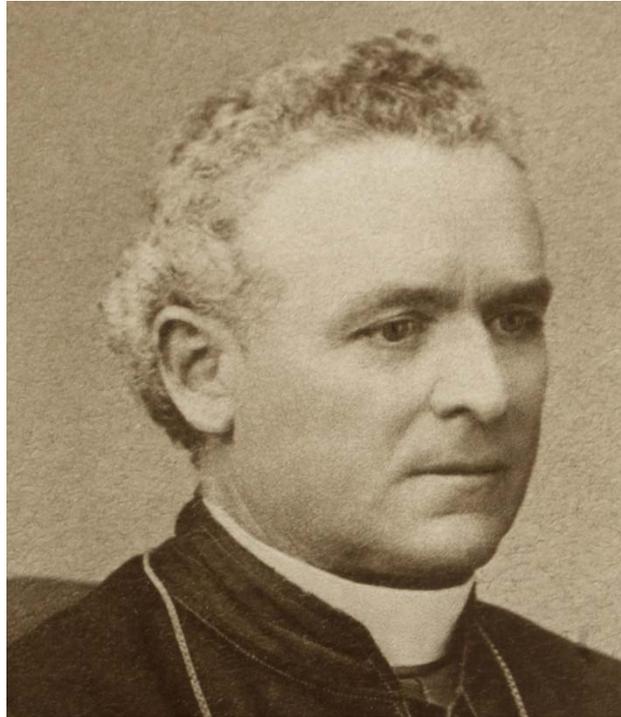


Bishop O'Mahony Sesquicentenary

Mass Homily 25th March 2021: Solemnity of the Annunciation



Consecrated a bishop in Ireland before his departure from his home country, Bishop Timothy O'Mahony arrived in Sydney on the 1st of March 1871. From here, he and Bede Polding, the Archbishop of Sydney, had to make their way to Armidale for his official installation in order for him to become the first Bishop of *Armidale*. Both men were keen that this should happen on the 25th of March, Our Lady's special day, the Solemn Feast Day of the Annunciation.

Taking a brief rest after his long sea voyage, the bishops then embarked upon what was then the very arduous journey from Sydney to Armidale, making it to Uralla on the 24th of March and continuing on to Armidale the morning of the 25th. They cut it pretty fine, but they were determined that the history of the Diocese of Armidale with its bishops should begin under the maternal patronage, care, and guidance of Mary the Mother of God.

This patronage and protection of Blessed Mary has continued since then with the dedication of our original Cathedral to Saint Mary and her spouse Saint Joseph in 1872, and the same for our new and current cathedral in 1919, and with Pope John XXIII in 1961 officially "appointing and declaring the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Rosary the principal heavenly patron before God of the whole diocese".

The sentiment behind these deliberate choices of our forebears in faith for the Diocese to remain ever close and united to Our Heavenly Mother would eventually be expressed many years later by the Second Vatican Council in 1964 when it said that Mary "shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim

People of God.” (LG 68) and that “by her maternal charity, she cares for the brothers and sisters of her Son, who still journey on Earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties.” (LG 62)

But long before these words were written, there stands another word - a single word, an impressive and potent word. That word is “yes”. As we heard in our Gospel, some two thousand years ago the young girl Mary said “yes” to God: “I am the handmaid of the Lord”, she said, “let what you have said be done to me.” Yes Lord, I accept and embrace your will and your plans for me: I will be who you want me to be; I will go where you want me to go; I will do what you want me to do.”

I don't know what the youngish Father O'Mahony was thinking when he was asked to be the first bishop of Armidale and said “yes”. But given his choice of the feast day of the Annunciation for his installation, I imagine he may have thought of today's Gospel passage and of Mary's “yes” which has inspired countless Christians in every generation to say their own “yes” to God -myself included.

Thank God Timothy O'Mahony said “yes”. Two priests that we know of had already said “no” to the requests from Pope Pius IX to be our first bishop. Perhaps they were afraid of the daunting task ahead in this beautiful but untamed part of God's Earth. At the time the new diocese was huge - 700 miles long and 400miles wide; there was no railway and very few roads; there were ten thousand Catholics spread over this huge area with just 3 priests riding on horseback for hours and for days to minister to them; there were as yet no religious sisters or brothers; no cathedral; just 4 stone or brick chapels and a few of timber; 2 presbyteries and 3 schools.

But Timothy O'Mahony, emboldened by the grace of God and inspired by the Blessed Virgin Mary said “Yes Lord, let what has been asked be done to me. I will be who you want me to be; I will go where you want me to go; I will do what you want me to do.” A part of him wanted to say “no”. Speaking to his parishioners before departing Saint Finbarr South in Cork he said, “I must admit that it is to me the greatest sacrifice of my life to be suddenly separated from my friends, among whom I have laboured for years, and whose love and generosity I have so often experienced.” But, he went on to say “regrets are vain when religion calls for sacrifices. Multitudes of our people are daily departing for distant lands.” He was of course referring to the many Irish missionaries who at that time were answering the call to come to Australia and other parts of the distant world.

We are blessed to have had as our first and pioneering bishop one who was described as being “holy, learned, prudent, eloquent, indefatigable, unselfish, unpretending, unswerving, rich in the resources of scholarship, richer in the blessings of the poor, with a hand ever ready to help, and a heart ever gentle to feel.” He got to work straight away. He visited all parts of the vast diocese, secured priests for the diocese, extended our Catholic school system, opened new churches and presbyteries, and saw the opening of the first Cathedral.

Unfortunately, after just eight years, opposition and betrayal from a few individuals created a drama of such magnitude that it became impossible for him to govern and shepherd the diocese effectively so he resigned. But he made it clear that he had no other than charitable feelings to any of his slanderers and prayed for their forgiveness.

Bishop Timothy O'Mahony is one of many missionaries whose "yes" to God has had a profound influence, not only on our own diocese, but on the whole of Australia as they carried the knowledge and love of God to people who otherwise would not have known and loved Him; who would not have known the fullness of life and salvation that only Jesus Christ can give.

This year we celebrate 200 years of Catholic Education in Australia. I think of the many religious sisters, brothers, priests, and lay people who have said "yes" to God and devoted their lives to teaching our children about Him. I also think of our many modern missionary priests in the diocese today from the Philippines, Nigeria, India, Ghana, and Vietnam. Like Bishop O'Mahony, they too may have been somewhat reluctant to leave their home country but have nevertheless said "yes" to God and have given their lives for the Kingdom of God in the Diocese of Armidale.

My hope today is that you and I will be inspired by the "yes" of the Virgin Mary, of Bishop O'Mahony, and of the many other missionaries who have carried the word and the love of God to us for the past 150 years in the Diocese of Armidale. My dream is that they will remind us that the Church in our own time, and you and I as baptized members of the Church, are all called to be missionaries who will carry the word and love of God to others, for our faith is a gift - not to us alone - but to be shared.

May Bishop Timothy O'Mahony inspire us and may the Blessed Virgin Mary pray for us.

Bishop Michael Kennedy

25th March 2021

