

Centenary of the death of Armidale's first Catholic bishop

By P.J. O'Haire

The Right Reverend Timothy O'Mahoney DD died on Thursday, September 8 1892, in Toronto, Canada.

At the time of his death Dr O'Mahoney was the Auxiliary Bishop of Toronto, but from 1869 until 1877 he had been the first Catholic Bishop of Armidale.

His years in Armidale and his achievements were few, but because he was one of the bishops of our cathedral city, the centenary of his death should be noted.

Timothy O'Mahony was born in Aherla, in the Parish of Kilmurry, twelve miles from the city of Cork, Ireland, on November 17, 1825. He was the eldest of the eight children of Cornelius O'Mahoney and Catherine Murphy. The O'Mahoney family had been stone cutters for several generations and had prospered.

Timothy received his education in Cork, then began studies for the Priesthood at All Hallows College, Dublin. In 1843 he was sent to the Irish College, Rome, to continue his studies and did brilliantly in his course, graduating with a Doctorate of Divinity.

Dr O'Mahony was ordained a priest in Rome on March 24, 1849 and left Rome soon after to return to the Diocese of Cork.

After some years as a chaplain, he was appointed Curate at

St Finn Barre's Parish, South Cork. His name appears regularly as the officiating priest for baptisms from September 1855 until 1869.

He undertook a variety of apostolic work. He was chaplain to the Cork Workhouse for 14 years, and was intensely interested in the Sick Poor Society. Father O'Mahoney's other duties included being the Director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, a position he held for 20 years. He also established night schools for working boys.

Thus, Father O'Mahoney enjoyed a reputation as a zealous and competent pastor, and won the esteem of his people. His appointment as a bishop came as no surprise.

By Apostolic Brief dated October 1, 1869, Pope Pius IX appointed Timothy O'Mahoney the first Bishop of Armidale, Australia. Dr O'Mahoney was consecrated in St Mary's Cathedral Cork on November 30, 1869, then went directly to Rome to attend the Vatican Council which opened on December 8, 1869, and, because of the Franco-Prussian War, was prorogued on October 20 1870.

Bishop O'Mahoney's diocese had only five priests and he needed more, so before sailing to Australia, he toured the seminaries of Ireland seeking recruits for his vast diocese.

When Bishop O'Mahoney sailed for Australia on board the Strathnaver, on November 30, 1870, he brought with him



Right Reverend Timothy O'Mahony.

Calumny mars first episcopate

Fathers Martin Kelly, John Kelly, Patrick Dunne and Felix Schurr, who were ready for immediate service in Armidale, and Rev John Davis, a sub-deacon, who would complete his preparation for priesthood en route. The Strathnaver anchored in Sydney, Australia, on Saturday, March 4, 1871.

The Archbishop of Sydney,

Dr Polding, accompanied Bishop O'Mahoney from Maitland to Armidale. They reached Uralla, (the first parish in the Diocese of Armidale under the old boundary), on Friday, March 24 1871, the 22nd anniversary of Dr O'Mahoney's priestly ordination. Large numbers greeted the new bishop when he arrived in Armidale the next day.

On Sunday March 26, Archbishop Polding presided over the Installation Ceremony in the little chapel on the site of what today is the front office of O'Connor Catholic High School.

Sadly, the new Bishop stayed only four years. His episcopate was marked by allegations which were promoted by misguided discontents and widely reported in the press. In November 1874, Dr O'Mahoney notified the authorities in Rome that he appeared to have lost the respect of his people to such an extent that his remaining in Armidale would have been extremely difficult.

The Pope directed the Bishop to go to Rome so that the allegations could be investigated by a tribunal of Cardinals.

Dr O'Mahoney left Armidale in November 1875 and his case was heard in several sessions during 1876 and 1877.

In March 1877 the Cardinals declared Bishop O'Mahoney innocent of the charges that had been made against him, and decided that he should not return to Armidale because of the adverse publicity his case had aroused.

Bishop Timothy O'Mahoney never returned to Armidale.

The Cardinals favourably recommended Dr O'Mahoney for an appointment elsewhere.

In November 1879 he was appointed an Auxiliary to the Archbishop of Toronto, Canada. The Papal Brief of appointment stated that Bishop O'Mahoney

had ruled the Diocese of Armidale 'by a singular piety and licitude for the eternal salvation of souls.'

Those words were inserted the part of the Pope himself declare a Solemn and Judicial refutation of the base calumny heaped against Bishop O'Mahoney.

The Archbishop of Toronto appointed Dr O'Mahoney Pastor in charge of the Parish St Paul, the original parish of Toronto, and he was there from 1880 until his death in 1892. He built a magnificent Renaissance church, which was dedicated in 1889.

The ordeal in Armidale appears to have taken its toll. About the end of the decade Bishop O'Mahoney's health failed, and his last years were marked by chronic sickness. Bishop Timothy O'Mahoney died on Thursday September 8 1892, aged 66, and he was buried eight days later in a vault outside St Paul's Church, Toronto.

His achievements in Armidale in his own time may have been few, but 100 years later he stands out as a man who succeeded in rebuilding his diocese when given the opportunity.

Bishop O'Mahoney was succeeded in Armidale by an Italian Capuchin friar, Dr Elzear Torreggiani. He was appointed in December 1878, consecrated in March 25 1879 and arrived in Armidale at the end of the year. Bishop Torreggiani died in 1904.