

History of the Diocese of Broome

1878

With the growth of the pearling industry and influx of migrants in the north of Australia, the Bishop of Perth, Martin Griver, sends his Vicar General, Fr Matthew Gibney to explore the north west of the Diocese of Perth, the area known today as the Kimberley. Fr Gibney travels for 4 months from August to November and speaks highly of the country and people upon his return.

1884

Seeing the need for an expansion Mission in the Kimberley, primarily for the benefit of natives, Bishop Griver invites Father Duncan McNab, a Scot who had always desired to work in the Great Southern Land among the Aboriginal people. Fr McNab arrives in the Kimberley in March and becomes the first priest to be based in the region.

1886

While travelling extensively in the area during the previous years, Father Duncan McNab had met a young Aboriginal man called 'Knife', who could speak English due to working on the pearling luggers. Knife had become his interpreter and together with the help of Father William Treacy, who had just arrived in the region, the three man team build a bush-timber Church.

Local Aboriginal family groups visit, bringing gifts of fish and bush foods, to listen to the missionaries speak of this son of God, Jesus, whose word is "Spirit and life." The seeds of faith were thus first scattered on Kimberley soil.

1887

Fr Matthew Gibney is named the new Bishop of Perth and on April 26th the Apostolic Vicariate of the Kimberley in Western Australia is established. The new Vicariate falls under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Perth and Archdiocese of Adelaide.

1888

Bishop Gibney, in his quest to find suitable missionaries, appeals to Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran, Archbishop of Sydney, who is able to encourage the services of Trappist monks from Sept-Fons in France, to go to the remote Kimberley.

Later in the year Bishop Gibney secures a grant for a 100,000 acre pastoral lease in the Kimberley region.

1890

Two French Trappist Monks, Abbot Dorn Ambrose Janny and Father Alphonse Tachon along with Bishop Gibney, arrive at the Port of Derby. John Cornelius Daly, a former policeman in Derby, offers himself as their Novice and becomes the first vocation to Religious Life in the Kimberley – Brother Xavier Daly. Together, with an Aboriginal guide, they travel to and establish a Mission at Beagle Bay.

Through their guide the missionaries made it clear to the local Aboriginal that they came in friendship and were in fact "brothers" of the much loved Father McNab. This stated relationship ensured a hearty welcome from clan groups and the mission workers came to be well regarded by the local people as friends and protectors.

1892

The first shipment of 7 Trappist reinforcements from Sept-Fons, France arrive to support and expand the Mission at Beagle Bay. Among the new recruits is the brother of Abbot Dom Ambrose Janny, Father Jean Marie Janny.

1895

A second shipment of 10 new Trappist monks from Sept Fons, France arrive. The most notable of these recruits is Father Nicholas D'Emo, a priest from Barcelona who had been with the Trappists in France. Due to his Spanish background he is sent into the growing metropolis of Broome where he can easily communicate with the highly Spanish speaking populous. As a result he is able to have an immediate impact and undertakes heroic work among the poor and marginalised people.

1896

Fr Jean Marie Janny, believing that the Trappists first responsibility in Australia was to the Aborigines, sets about establishing a new mission around the spring country of the Nimanboor on Disaster Bay using the grant of reserve land with 2,002 acres that Bishop Gibney had already secured.

With the help of various tribal groups a new mission, set among scrubby dunes within sound of the sea, is built. The mission is named, the Assumption of our Lady, in honour of the day it opens,

1897

The Parish of Broome is officially established. Fr Nicholas D'Emo becomes the founding parish priest of Broome and assists in the setup of the first school for natives as well as the construction of Our Lady of Peace church in Weld St.

1898

In order to make the vast Diocese of Perth more manageable, a new Diocese of Geraldton is created. Fr William Bernard Kelly is named the inaugural Bishop of Geraldton and at the same time is officially appointed as the first Administrator to the Vicariate Apostolic of Kimberley in Western Australia.

1899

Due to financial hardships and support from the Church in Australia at large, the French Trappists are suddenly instructed to leave the Beagle Bay Mission and return to Europe. Fr Nicholas D'Emo has no desire to do so and insists on staying behind to look after the Kimberley Mission.

1900

While visiting Rome, Bishop Kelly hears of the impending departure of the Trappists from the Kimberley region. As such he organises for German priests, Pallottines, who were followers of the inspiring Roman clergyman, Vincent Pallotti, to take over the Mission at Beagle Bay.

1901

In April the newly enlisted Pallottines arrive at the Mission in Beagle Bay. The new missionaries include Mission Superior, Father George Walter, English Pallottine priest, Father White, and two German Lay Brothers — Brother Kasperek and Brother Sixt.

1906

With the German Pallottines now fully settled in running Beagle Bay and Broome, Fr D'Emo is free to follow his dream of exploring the greater northern areas. He finds a travelling partner in fellow Spaniard, Fulgentius Torres O.S.B, the Abbot of New Norcia.

With the New Norcia Mission, run by the Spanish Benedictines, doing so well for the aborigines they look to create an expansion mission in the northern Kimberley region. Fr D'Emo and Abbot Torres sail up the coast all the way to Wyndham in the 'San Salvador' searching of a suitable expansion site for the new Benedictine Mission.

1907

The ever expanding Kimberley Vicariate sees the arrival of the first religious sisters in the region. Sister Antonio O'Brien, from Ireland, organises and leads a small band of Sisters of St John of God to an uncertain future in the North West. After calling in to all ports along the coast, they arrive at Beagle Bay Mission.

The Sisters of St John of God not only make relationships with the people of Beagle Bay but they provided all the teaching, nursing, sewing, cooking and washing for the entire community and look after the girls dormitory along with a range of pastoral duties.

1908

After 12 months at the Mission in Beagle Bay, Sr Antonio, accompanied by Sr Benedict Courtney set off for Broome to establish a base for the Sisters.

Through fundraising Sr Antonio is able to organise for a convent to be built, and under Antonio's leadership, the Sisters minister to the people of Broome in the areas of nursing, health, education and pastoral care covering all sections of the multicultural population. The example set by Sister Antonio lays the foundation for the next 100 years of the Sisters of St John of God ministry in the Kimberley.

Meanwhile in the north of the Kimberley, Fr D'Emo and Bishop Torres begin sending materials to Pago to begin construction of the new Drysdale River Mission.

1910

While visiting Rome Abbot Torres engages in talks regarding the structure and administration of the Kimberley Vicariate as well as the newly established Drysdale River Mission. On May 4th, three changes are confirmed by the Holy Father:

1. Separation of the Drysdale River Mission from the Kimberley Vicariate. It is officially named a "Mission Sui Juris" which falls under the jurisdiction of the Benedictines at New Norcia.
2. Elevation of Abbot Torres to Bishop Fulgentius Torres O.S.B
3. Appointment of Bishop Fulgentius Torres O.S.B as the new Administrator to the Vicariate Apostolic of the Kimberley in Western Australia.

1911

Fr Nicholas D'Emo is invited to Lombadina where he sets to work building up a mission and attends to the spiritual needs of the many local people.

1913

Perth is elevated to an Archdiocese on the 28th Of August. Current Bishop Patrick Clune CSSR, an Irish Redemptorist, is elevated and becomes the First Archbishop of Perth.

1915

April 15th sees the appointment of the first Apostolic Delegate for Australia, Archbishop Bonaventura Cerretti. World War 1 begins in the latter half of the year and with the British Empire declaring war on Germany the German Pallottines at Beagle Bay find themselves under suspicion of being spies.

On the 5th of October the Kimberley Vicariate finds itself in further turmoil and distress with the death of Bishop Torres.

1915

Fr Thomas Bachmair is appointed to Lombadina to succeed Fr D'Emo but before he takes his appointment he begins work on a new church at Beagle Bay with the help of the entire community at the Mission.

1916

Since Bishop Torres unexpected death, the search to find a suitable replacement to administer the Kimberley Vicariate had proved trying. The ongoing war meant that none of the Pallottines could be considered a viable option as they were all German and tensions were already high. Archbishop Clune, in an attempt to ease tensions in the region and find a suitable administrator, travelled to Sydney. He met with the Australian Government whose only request was that the new administrator be a British subject. Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Cerretti authorised Archbishop Clune to appoint the successor and a decision was made that given the struggling conditions, the Kimberley Vicariate would benefit more from having its own Vicar Apostolic as opposed to an Administrator from a neighbouring diocese in charge.

On the 9th of May, Father John Creagh CSsR, a fellow Redemptorist who hailed from Ireland, was appointed as the first Pro-Apostolic Vicar of Kimberley in Western Australia. Fr Creagh was based in Broome and the kind priest came with a reputation of caring for the poor which saw him immediately regarded as a friend of Aboriginal people.

1918

The Beagle Bay Church is completed and is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus by Fr Creagh. The Church is decorated with shells, including mother of pearl, cowries, volutes and olives.

While the mother of pearl is used to decorate the main altar, the side altars are inlaid with opercula, a rare stone taken from shellfish. Some of the decoration formed the tribal symbols of the Njul Njul, the Nimanboor and the Bard people of the area while others formed the lamb, the fish and shepherd's crook of the Christian faith.

1922

With the war finally over a change is brought to the region with the Kimberley Vicariate being entrusted to the Salesians of Don Bosco.

On the 24th of December father Ernest Coppo S.D.B is consecrated a Bishop and is appointed the first Vicar Apostolic of Kimberley in Western Australia.

1928

The Salesians find their time in the Kimberley Vicariate short lived and request a move to the east coast of Australia. This is granted and the Kimberley Vicariate is once again put under the control of the Pallottines with Father Otto Raible P.S.M appointed as the second Pro-Apostolic Vicar of Kimberley in Western Australia.

1932

Br Joseph Tautz, affectionately known as 'Ginger Joe' from Kunzendorf, Germany builds the bush church at Lombadina Mission. The Lombadina Church is blessed by Fr Raible on the feast of Christ the King, for which it was named.

1935

Fr Raible is consecrated Bishop and becomes the second Vicar Apostolic of Kimberley in Western Australia.

1937

The Drysdale River Mission in Pago is relocated to Kalumburu (20km south) where greater rainfall and a more fruitful area prove to be more prosperous for the remote Mission.

1939

Bishop Raible is granted an area of around 1 million acres around the south of Billiluna Station for the purpose of establishing a Native Mission near the Great Sandy Desert.

1942

After a 3 year saga of searching the Great Sandy Desert for a suitable location, a permanent Mission is finally built and opened at Old Balgo.

1946

Following World War II, priests and religious Brothers and Sisters start moving into the east Kimberley, at the invitation of the Bishop, and a network of parishes and schools spread throughout. The first post-war parish is established in Derby with Fr Albert Scherzinger P.S.M appointed as the first Parish Priest.

1955

A Mission is opened in La Grange which includes a school for the natives.

1959

Bishop John Jobst is appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Kimberley, and the region enters a new phase of activity with the building of new schools, hospitals and housing facilities.

An expansion Mission in Wyndham is opened in February.

1962

Expansion Missions are established in both Halls Creek and Kununurra making the East Kimberley area more accessible.

1963

Perth based builder, Mr Stan Costello, is asked to design a new Our Lady Queen of Peace Church in Broome adjacent to the site of the old church in Weld Street. Due to poor condition, combined with the fact that the building was too small for the growing congregation the old church is demolished but the original bell kept as a symbol of the Church's pioneering days.

1966

The Apostolic Vicariate of the Kimberley is elevated and renamed the Diocese of Broome. Bishop Jobst becomes the inaugural Bishop of Broome and his episcopate is marked by a period of building and organisation that enables the church to keep up with the rapid growth of NorthWest Australia.

1973

An altar for Our Lady Queen of Peace Cathedral is made by Stan Costello and his foreman Harry Gudden. The altar is made of hundreds of pearl shells which were carefully matched for inclusion in the design.

1976

The first Diocesan priest is ordained by Bishop John Jobst at St. Ives Parish, Sydney, NSW on 28th August. He is Christopher Saunders, son of Joe and Joan Saunders.

1981

The Kalumburu Mission which was a "Mission Sui Juris" under the jurisdiction of the Benedictines at New Norcia is transferred back into the Diocese of Broome.

1996

The present Bishop of Broome, the Most Rev. Christopher Saunders, is ordained as the second Bishop of Broome on February 8th.

Today

The Diocese of Broome covers over 773,000 Sq Km of the greater Kimberley region and serves a population of over 50,000. There are now 9 Parishes, 13 Catholic schools and 1 University within the diocese.