

Elizabeth Perkins

REVIEW

A STORY OF A LIVING CHURCH

Prologue: A History of the Catholic Church as seen from Townsville 1863-1983, Dr John P. Maguire, Toowoomba: Church Archivists' Society, 1990.

Dr Maguire's remarkable, scholarly and deeply thoughtful account could also be called a history of Townsville and region from the perspective of the Catholic Church. It is a readable and engaging book that will seize the attention of many people who may have little or no interest in the Catholic Church, but who do have a strong interest in their society in general and in the way a society develops from pioneering outposts to a regional metropolis with a thriving hinterland. But Dr Maguire chose his title carefully: this is not only an account of the beginning of the Catholic Church in Townsville, from the arrival of the first priest in 1866 and a small group of The Sisters of St Joseph in 1872. It also traces the continuity and the evolution in the Church since the mid-nineteenth century, through the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII in October 1962, with its dedication to *aggiornamento*, the process by which the Church addressed itself to the needs of the modern world.

As it happens, the first Catholic Mass in Townsville was said in the Court and Customs House on Melton Hill by Father William McGinty in February 1866, two years before the First Vatican Council was convened, which declared as dogma that declarations made by the Pope from within his papal authority were to be held infallible. *Prologue*, with its lively and balanced accounts of innumerable disagreements and fallings-out between priests, parishioners and bishops, prompts the thought that many a bishop must have envied the Pope. When launching the book in Townsville, Bishop Raymond Benjamin, in a warmly endorsing speech, referred to the controversial nature of Dr Maguire's *History* and indicated that it did not receive its *imprimatur* without some debate amongst those entrusted with such matters.

Some of the greatest scholars of the Catholic Church, and those who have had some influence on its ability to meet the demands of the time, a constant process of *aggiornamento*, have certainly inspired the fervent prayers of their local bishops, not only of thanks for their presence, but also for patience to deal with it. There is perhaps a little in the approach of this book that will give the more conservative Catholics exercise in the virtues of patience and tolerance, but for most the book will be a source of inspiration and hope for the future of the Church. As Bishop (now Archbishop) Leonard Faulkner writes in his Prologue to the book, "This is the story of the living church." From another point of view, in the Foreword, Professor Emeritus Brian Dalton quoted from an earlier speech which he delivered on the occasion of the retirement dinner held in his honour, "I think it is possible that the most remarkable work to come out of the [History] Department during my years as its head will be seen to be John Maguire's history of the Townsville Diocese."

Archbishops, bishops, Reverend Mothers, priests, brothers, nuns and laypersons who played a part in the prologue to the present Church in North Queensland are lovingly recorded, often with such immediacy that they seem to speak from the page. If men such as Bishop Hugh Ryan, and Bishop Faulkner understandably tower in this landscape, other smaller eminences like Mother Mary Benigna Desmond, founder of St Patrick's College, Dean O'Keefe, pioneer priest at Hughenden and Cloncurry, Moya Merrick and Ruth Crowe, Grail founders of St Raphael's College, and many Townsville and regional families, who have served Church and wider community with skill and devotion for several generations, are also alive in these pages. Here also are the history of Palm Island, with its many abuses by whites of human freedom and dignity and the honest efforts of many to rectify these, and of Fantome Island with its record of service by the Sisters of Our Lady Help of Christians and the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. White Priests no less rebellious than some of their Black brothers and sisters were likely to be cautioned by the Bishop: "You'll be sent to Palm Island."

Dr Maguire meticulously and with insight traces the history of churches, schools, colleges, novitiates, brotherhoods, hospitals, and other Catholic agencies from the coast to Winton and Mt Isa. We learn that in 1871 a school was opened in the Catholic chapel at Ravenswood, which, the *Ravenswood Miner* reported, "is presided over by a lady whose ability in imparting instruction is fully appreciated." The establishment of the high school of St Margaret Mary in Townsville in 1963 was initiated by Father (later Monseigneur) Vincent Vandeleur, although Bishop Ryan

believed St Patrick's was adequate for the city's needs: "If you go ahead you'll be on your own; you'll get no help from the diocese." Dr Maguire comments, "Ryan remained true to his word."

This history touches on all aspects of social history and involves men, women and children of all classes and occupations. It must do this to represent accurately the concerns of the Catholic Church in North Queensland. It also involves the work of other churches, and gives an account of the ecumenical movement which emphasizes the unity of diverse Christian faiths. Dr Maguire is frank about the problems of sectarianism, but he argues convincingly for the idea of unity within diversity, and indeed the record of interdenominational co-operation is impressive. There emerges a conviction that the Catholic Church has played an important role in the forging of a strong North Queensland and Australian identity for its members, since before one can fully experience a national identity it is necessary to find strength and status through closer, more intimate affiliations. The policy makers of national identity are only now beginning to appreciate this fact. It is clear that those who found a place in the Catholic Church, whether they were Irish, Italian, or of other descent, also found a secure place in North Queensland.

Prologue is one man's attempt to present an historical vision of North Queensland set in the perspective not only of world pre-history and history, but of a hope for the future of humankind. Those who are wary of thinking about the wider scope of human possibilities can also happily immerse themselves in this richly informative book, which is packed with detail, and expected and unexpected fact and explanation. Dr Maguire is a fine historian, one who economically relates a chronological story which leads the reader from chapter to chapter. Here in brief are the achievements and struggles of pioneering life, the advent of cyclones Leonta in 1903 and Althea in 1971, the history of Collinsville, the Meat Workers' Strike of 1919, the internment of Italians and other "aliens" at Stuart Prison in 1942, the American presence in Townsville, the foundation and development of James Cook University and many other events which are part of the fabric of North Queensland life. Although this is a Catholic history, explaining much of the complex culture of the Church, it is also simply a human story, and those who read it will know more about themselves and their cultural environment than they did before.

This is a history predominantly of people. Not only does it chronicle the success and the struggles, the heroism and the failings and recoveries of hundreds of North Queenslanders, it also recalls the generations that lived their material and spiritual lives here before the white

settlers came. The book opens with a preface, "In the beginning," which relates the coming of Europeans as the Wulgurukaba might have seen it. It is very brief, because Dr Maguire does not want to tell the Aboriginal story in European words. But from that opening, until the end of the four hundred and fifty page history, the first inhabitants of North Queensland are always present in the book.

Prologue justifies the claim that the history of the Catholic Church in Townsville serves as a microcosm within which to examine the changes occurring now in western civilisation and in the church throughout the world. Of special interest are its delineation of the fundamental changes in western civilisation since 1945, the more recent enlargement of a predominantly male understanding to include the female within the immanence of God, and the need to identify with the poor if we hope to discover true spiritual values. The spirit of the history also questions that assumption which makes some of the thinking of Christians and believers of other spiritual faiths suspect in the minds of just and compassionate people: that the poor must be always with us as objects and outlets for the good works of the more fortunate.

Prologue draws on many primary and secondary sources, archives, newspapers, personal letters and interviews, and there is an extensive bibliography. It will prove a rich resource for researchers, including experts in a wide range of fields and, because it is so readable and well constructed, it will also be an excellent source for less experienced high school students investigating innumerable topics.

Above all, *Prologue* draws on the knowledge and experience of an exceptionally gifted priest and historian, who was educated at the Banyo Seminary in Brisbane, served as parish priest in Ipswich, was appointed as an auditor at Vatican II, and who has worked as a labourer and as a University lecturer.

The book is handsomely designed and well illustrated with maps, and over three hundred photographs. The first plate is a photograph of an Aboriginal family on a foraging expedition, and the last plate is a beautiful painting by a fifteen year old Palm Island girl.

"The book you write must prove to me that it desires me," said the French critic, Roland Barthes. *Prologue* is a book that desires its readers. It is one of those books you consult all your life, and the kind of book you give to the people you most admire.