



THE HISTORY OF ST JOSEPH'S SCHOOL, QUEENSTOWN

Story retold by Anne Kennedy

With schools well established in Invercargill and Oamaru, Bishop Moran was able to fulfil a promise he had made not long after he had arrived in New Zealand in February 1871. On his arrival he was very disappointed to see not the well set up diocese he had expected but a place where very little

had been done to provide for the work of the Church to begin. He set off on horseback on March 17 1871 en route to the most remote part of his diocese travelling over the Pigroot to Naseby, St Bathans, Cromwell and on to the Arrow as it was known. He was met by several Catholic men who accompanied him as he rode in the buggy they had brought with them. The bishop was welcomed to Arrowtown with an address and replied accordingly and after a "good dinner" he spent the night in a small house used by the priest. The next day he was driven in a buggy over the hill to Queenstown accompanied by about fifty men on horseback. On Sunday, the bishop celebrated two masses at the church of St Mary situated down near the lake. The people gave generously to the fund for the bishop's needs. However he left the next day for Clyde feeling despondent about the state of things in the Wakatipu district. Although there were three chapels in the area there were no vestments or sacred vessels for Mass. To add to his troubles the three Marist priests who were working in the area were recalled to the North Island. At this stage, Queenstown and Invercargill were one parish.

Bishop Moran returned to the Wakatipu district in February 1872 and visited most of the small settlements along the way. It was ten years since gold was discovered in the Arrow River and thousands of miners, some of them Catholic, came to make their fortune in the harsh conditions of the Wakatipu district. Father Coleman visited the area and after twelve weeks of missionary work of baptising, saying Mass and preaching in miners' huts and marrying in public halls he returned to the bishop in Dunedin and handed him a wallet with five hundred pounds in it saying of the Irish miners, " Good bishop, they are few but they are good."

In 1873, the Queenstown parish was separated from Invercargill and in April Father Mackay took over the new parish which included Arrowtown. The first baptism of Honora Bell was celebrated on May 7 1873 and the first marriage

was celebrated on August 4 1873 in Queenstown between William and Honora McGuinness.

The first Catholic school in Arrowtown known as St Patrick's opened on June 18, 1873. Later, when the church was built, it served as a school during the week as was the custom in many places. The school was staffed by lay teachers until the Sisters of St Joseph arrived and the school was renamed St Joseph's. The lay teachers lived in a wooden cottage at the back of the church grounds. On November 9, 1873 the foundation stone for the new Arrowtown church was blessed by Bishop Moran and fundraising began to pay for its construction. On that same visit the bishop approved the purchase of an acre of land where the present school, convent and church stands in Queenstown, for the cost of fifty one pounds and five shillings.

The Dominican Sisters come to Queenstown

The first school in Queenstown was under the direction of Mr Sproule and in 1875 had a roll of 65. Fr Mackay taught in both the Arrowtown and the Queenstown school regularly. By November 1879, the school was closed due to lack of funds. More urgent requests for the Sisters were made by the local people and Mother Gabriel and another Sister travelled to Queenstown to make arrangements to establish a school. She lived for a while in a small cottage opposite the church until the large stone house built as a presbytery was offered to them as a convent. Father Mackay moved to the priest's house in Arrowtown. The four sisters chosen for the new foundation in Queenstown were Mother Raymond and Sisters Columba, Rose and Joseph. Bishop Moran, Mother Gabriel and Sister Magdalen accompanied them to help set up the convent and the school. They left on February 8 1883, travelling via Gore to Kingston where they embarked on the paddle steamer SS Mountaineer for the three hour journey up Lake Wakatipu. They arrived at 10:15 pm to be met by large crowds and a band to welcome them. They were led through the crowd to an awaiting carriage on which they drove through the streets lined with people holding lanterns. On their arrival at the stone presbytery which was to be their convent, Mother Gabriel intoned the Te Deum (thanks be to God) for their safe journey. On the following Sunday, the bishop blessed the convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart watched by a huge crowd of local and visiting Catholics and onlookers from the town.

The next day, St Joseph's, which was to be the parish school, was opened with Sister Columba as the head teacher and Sister Rose assisting her. As only a few children attended to start with, classes were held in the church until a school could be built. St Catherine's, "a select school for young ladies" opened the following Monday under the care of Mother Raymond. There was provision for boarders as well as schooling for day girls and the numbers increased slowly. New buildings for the school and the convent were planned

and started. Fundraising events such as concerts and bazaars were supported generously with a four day bazaar raising a considerable amount. These events involved the whole community and were well supported by the wider local community as well.

Bishop Moran took great interest in the school and the well-being of the Sisters and the children. As an appreciation of the work he took the Sisters for a trip by paddle steamer up to Paradise at the head of Lake Wakatipu. Trips by buggy were also arranged to Arrowtown, where they dined with Father Mackay at the presbytery and also to Cardrona, Shotover, Kainergie and Lake Hayes Falls. The Bishop would examine the children in the school as was the custom, and he was very well pleased with their progress which he attributed to the Sisters' teaching skill and care. He was always very proud of the children's singing at Masses and concerts and praised them and their teachers for the high standard they achieved.

The new schools are opened

On July 15 1883 Bishop Moran returned to Queenstown to bless and open the new school buildings which had been designed to serve both as a school with St Catherine's school room and dormitory upstairs and St Joseph's School downstairs. Folding doors separated the lower classrooms from the Church which could be drawn back when Mass was celebrated with the classroom becoming the body of the church. The opening ceremonies followed a solemn high mass, the last to be celebrated in St Mary's Church, featuring "an imposing procession" to the new school. This was followed by the presentation of a comedy play and an operetta by the pupils of the "select school". Later in the week the St Joseph's children presented a very impressive concert which was very well received. On July 24 some children received their first communion and the Bishop confirmed children and adults from the parish. During the mass the bishop spoke about how pleased he was with the "zeal, faith and generosity of the congregation of Queenstown and the Arrow."

The parish and the schools continued to grow in the 1880s with regular visits from Bishop Moran who had a special interest in and affection for the people of the Wakatipu area. They, together with his many other faithful people, were greatly saddened by the news of his death on May 22 1895 in Dunedin.

His successor was Bishop Michael Verdon, an Irishman who was consecrated on May 3 1896 in Dunedin. Bishop Verdon's first visit to the parishes of Queenstown and Arrowtown coincided with a mission that was to be given by Father Hanley. He was met and welcomed at the wharf by a huge crowd of the Catholic and local people complete with the Queenstown band. On the Sunday that followed the bishop confirmed parishioners and noted the need for a new church and the building fund began that day with a generous

donation from a parishioner. While in Arrowtown the bishop noted the need for a new convent. By the end of 1887 the plans for both projects were taking place. Stone was quarried near Arthur's Point for the church and brought by the dray load to the site of the present Queenstown church. It became a community project and the Catholic community greatly appreciated the help of many local people who were of other faiths. On October 3, 1897 the foundation stone of the new church was laid and as was the custom money was placed on it by all present to pay for the building.

The same month the bishop inspected the new cottage which was being prepared as a convent for the Sisters of St Joseph. They arrived in Queenstown on October 23 1897 and the next day were driven to Arrowtown by buggy where they were greeted by a huge crowd who had walked eight miles from the town to escort the Sisters into the town. Mother Mary McKillop lost no time in getting her Sisters settled and the school established.

Meanwhile the work continued on the Queenstown church funded by more concerts and bazaars. The people's energy and hard work enabled the money for the new church building to continue. Their efforts were well rewarded when on May 29 1898 the present St Joseph's Church was blessed and opened by Bishop Verdon and the hard working parish priest Father O'Donnell (who served the Queenstown parish for twenty years and died there on May 3, 1917 and is buried in the Queenstown cemetery).

On February 12 1933, the Golden Jubilee of the arrival in Queenstown of the Dominican Sisters was celebrated by Bishop Whyte with a Pontifical High Mass. St Catherine's Secondary School at Queenstown had closed in 1929 as the need for a boarding school no longer existed. On August 30, 1943, due to a serious decline in the school roll, St Joseph's School in Arrowtown closed bringing an end to a forty six year old relationship between the Sisters of St Joseph and the people of Arrowtown. The closure also brought to an end the life of the seventy year old Catholic school built on the faith and hard work of faithful lay teachers, religious women, priests and generous members of the Arrowtown community. This leaves St Joseph's School, Queenstown as the only Catholic school in the Wakatipu area.

The old St Joseph's School was demolished early in 1966 with only one classroom left standing. This was divided into two classrooms which were used until the new St Joseph's School was ready for use in the third term. Demolished at the same time as the school were the dormitories attached to the convent which had been part of the old boarding school. In April 1967, work began on a new wing to take their place. This was a two storied building with three rooms on the first floor and two music rooms, a sacristy and a laundry on the ground floor. The opening and blessing by Bishop Kavanagh of the school and convent took place on October 15.

The Dominican Sisters staffed St Joseph's School for more than one hundred years but this came to an end in 1997 following the unexpected death of Sister Peter. The school has been in the capable hands of lay teachers since then. The story continues ...

Sources

Sister Mary Augustine McCarthy OP. (1970) *Star in the South*, John McIndoe, Dunedin

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