

John Bede Polding

John Bede Polding OSB was an English cleric who became the first Catholic bishop and archbishop in the colony of New South Wales. He was born in the north of England in 1794. His parents died when he was 8 and he was cared for by his uncle, a senior Benedictine monk. He was educated in Benedictine schools and entered Benedictine religious life around the age of 16, taking the name Bede in honour of St Bede and his uncle. He was ordained a priest aged 24 and worked in a number of ministries including parish priest, prefect, novice-master, and sub-prior in his monastery.

Around the age of 40, Polding was appointed bishop and became ‘Vicar Apostolic of New Holland, Van Diemen’s Land and the adjoining islands’. He departed England, arriving in Sydney via Hobart in 1835. His work immediately made an impression on the colonial authorities, and he was respected by Catholics and Protestants alike. Consequently, upon the arrival of each shipload of convicts, the Catholics among them were placed at his disposal. Polding and his assistants saw each convict personally and ministered to them before they were sent to their various destinations. A committed missionary, he travelled extensively throughout the colony and established numerous schools and churches.

In April 1842 Polding was appointed the first Bishop of the new Catholic diocese of Sydney; soon afterwards he was made Archbishop. He desired to create an Australian Benedictine monastery to train priests and bring culture and learning to colonial society, and also

desired that the new diocese should be Benedictine. Both pursuits were ultimately unsuccessful, due partly to the number of Irish amongst the Catholic clergy and population, and the political and social impact of the end of convict transportation.

In 1843 Polding established the first Catholic mission for Aboriginal people in the colony, on Stradbroke Island. He returned to Sydney with three Aboriginal children with the intention of educating them; their families demanded their return, threatening to kill the missionaries, and the children were returned after several weeks’ absence.

Polding was quite concerned about the impact of colonial settlement on First Nations peoples. In 1845 he gave evidence to a NSW Legislative Council Select Committee: *“I am making myself a black, putting myself in that position, and taking away all that I know except that this is my country, that my father lived by pursuing the emu, and the kangaroo, that I am driven away from my hunting grounds, that my children and tribe are subjected to the grossest barbarities... The Aborigine will demand, ‘What right have you to come here? We have not asked you to come, and you take away our lands, you drive away our means of subsistence.’”*

In an 1849 pastoral letter to the Catholic population, he wrote: *“The wretched unfortunate Aborigines of the country – the first occupants of the lands over which your flocks and herds now roam – have a very strong claim upon you. Nor will the Lord hold you innocent if you have not used your best endeavours to promote their temporal and eternal well-being”.*

Polding passed away in Darlinghurst, Sydney in 1877.

YOU ARE...

You are John Bede Polding, the first Catholic bishop in Australia.

YOU DID...

You worked tirelessly throughout your life to establish the Catholic Church in the colony and promote your Benedictine values. You were respected by colonial authorities and advocated with them on behalf of Aboriginal peoples, as well as being responsible for removing Aboriginal children from family and country.

YOU WANT...

You want to see the Catholic Church established and thriving in this land. You want those in power and those under your care to be aware of the impact of colonialisation on First Nations peoples.