

The Catholic Church in Australia: A Short History 1788-1967, by Patrick O'Farrell, Nelson, Melbourne, 1968, pp.304. Review by Manning Clark.

In the short time that has elapsed since this book was first published critics have begun to make points against O'Farrell. They have accused him of writing too much about bishops, priests and deacons, and too little about the laity: they have accused him of leaving out the history of important missions so that he could write more about the things which really interest him as a catholic layman.

This seems rather unfair to O'Farrell. What he is concerned with is how the Catholic image of Christ was first brought to Australia, and the success or failure of this in high places as well as those in low, in bringing all men into communion with Christ's Vicar on Earth. He writes as one who, in his own words, accepts the divine origin and supernatural character of the Catholic Church. He writes, too, as one who has been moved, and, again as he puts it, humbled and inspired by the procession of the faithful before the human eye.

It may well be that Dr O'Farrell leans to one side or other in his view of who were the true defenders of his holy faith. If so he has been endowed with a commendable charity and a complete absence of spleen or presumption in his account of those who, like the sheep, had gone astray from the only fold and the one shepherd. Others have strutted, pontificated, and attempted to bully their readers into submission to their point view. O'Farrell, by contrast, has written with a becoming dignity, reverence and charity for all men. The portraits of two contenders for the souls of Catholics in the early period – the Irish priests from Maynooth or All Hallows and the English Benedictines from Downside are described with wisdom and understanding.

O'Farrell senses that the church is neither Irish nor Benedictine – that it was and is Catholic. In reading him one senses the weight of what had been said of old – 'Quod semper, quod ubique, quo dab omnibus ereditur'. If, at times stung by the memory of an ancient wrong, as well perhaps by his own early indoctrination into the publications of the evil of the Protestant ascendancy in both Australia and New Zealand, he sometimes allows himself the liberty of a dig at the worldliness of the early Protestant parsons, of how they at times gave the appearance of laying up for themselves treasures on earth, and thereby losing their perception of that place where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, nor do thieves break through and steal, he never allows his irritation to degenerate into slander or rudeness.

The book should be read indeed partly for the brilliant character sketches of men such as Ullathorne, Polding, McEncroe, Vaughan and Mannix. It should be read, too, because the central facts in the story of the Catholic Church in Australia are set out in this volume. Some may want to select different facts: others may want to pass different judgments. Their best course is to write another book. This is the record of a man for whom the gift of the faith is the most precious gift a man can receive. Looking out, as it were, from that entrenched ground he surveys the scene in Australia from the days of the convict ships until the twenty-four jet flight from Sydney to London – seeing it all steadily and as a whole. Indeed the book is a happy union of the discipline of the scholar with the virtues of the man of faith.

That explains perhaps why the writing too, as well as the material, is endowed with the grace and felicity to which most other writing is a mighty stranger.

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