“You will be given the crown of unfading glory”

Interment of the mortal remains of Bishop Robert William Willson

Interring the mortal remains of Bishop Robert William Willson in the newly completed crypt of this cathedral is an important moment for the Catholic community in Tasmania. It fulfils a wish of Bishop Willson who intended to return and retire here (actually in a pub) following a trip to England in 1865. Sadly, a stroke on the outward journey and his subsequent death in England prevented his plans being realised. Now, 152 years later his wish has been fulfilled.

The Englishman who had cared for the Catholic community in Nottingham was chosen as the first bishop of Van Diemen’s Land. The people of Nottingham both Catholic and Protestant appealed to the Pope not to send him from them so much was he universally respected and admired. He served as bishop in this far-flung British colonial outpost for over 20 years.

When Bishop Willson was consecrated as Bishop of Hobart Town in 1842 there were just three Catholic churches here – St Joseph’s in Macquarie St, St John the Evangelist’s in Richmond and St Joseph’s in Launceston. There were only three priests serving the Catholic community - Fr John Joseph Therry in Hobart, Fr Thomas Butler in Richmond, and Fr Ambrose Cotham in Launceston.

Arriving in Hobart Town in the evening of May 11, 1844, after a 94 day journey from England, his boat, the Bella Marina, was greeted off Bruny Island by a rowing boat with the pilot who was to guide them into Sullivan’s Cove, and he was offered apples which he and his accompanying priests found delicious to eat. Alighting from his ship he went straight to St Joseph’s Church to thank God for a safe journey. Next day, May 12, at a High Mass, he formally took possession of his diocese.

He was a pastoral and compassionate bishop with a special concern for those of his flock who were convicts. Bishop Willson would personally visit the convict ships when they arrived in the Derwent, and address the Catholic prisoners, both encouraging them and urging them to moral living. He would then visit them in their allocated places. He would willingly listen to their grievances and represent their reasonable requests to the authorities. He had a special concern for those to be hanged. He would visit the prison stations at Risdon, Bridgewater and Browns River on Sunday afternoons. The convicts knew that they had a real and concerned friend in their bishop.

He visited Maria Island, Port Arthur and Norfolk Island, often seeking improvement of the conditions of the convicts by speaking with their overseers.

In 1860, in a letter to Bishop Willson, James Boyd, Civil Commandant of Port Arthur, wrote, “I can affirm from personal observation, and the abundant voluntary testimony of the prisoners and paupers themselves, that, one sentiment has animated them towards your Lordship’s person, namely, that of mingled gratitude, respect and affection”. He went on to comment that many a convict was “induced to enter upon an amended career” as a result of the bishop’s pastoral solicitude.

It was commented that the good bishop was held in veneration by many who would say, “God bless Bishop Willson”, and this, the commentator said, came “from lips that seldom before pronounced the name of the great God except to blaspheme”.

After a visit to Norfolk Island in 1852 and being horrified by the tortures carried out on the convicts there Bishop Willson took a ship to England in 1854 and spoke to a committee of the House of Lords. They received his report and recommendations favourably. It was principally because of his representations on behalf of the convicts that the government resolved to close the penal colony on Norfolk Island.

He had great pastoral solicitude towards the small and struggling Catholic communities in the key settlements on the island. Letters between the bishop and the Catholic communities at Launceston, Richmond and Hobart Town reveal the mutual love and affection between these communities and their bishop. Laying the foundation stone of Church of the Apostles in Launceston on 15 September 1864 he said, “I felt proud of you today; you all looked so grand”.

Similarly, Bishop Willson had great esteem for his priests. Thus, in a letter to a friend in Europe he said, “I have great comfort in my super excellent clergy. They are indeed models of zeal, piety, self-restraint and kindness”. He would show little acts of kindness towards his priests, like giving a visiting country priest an envelope containing a pound note. They responded with expressions of their deep affection towards him. Writing to him in 1853, just prior to a trip to Europe, the priests said, “None can know, none can experience as we have your kindness, your affection, and your love”.

Likewise, his love for even the youngest of his flock was attested to from the personal experience of his biographer Fr Thomas Kelsh who had attended a boys’ school, St Mary’s Seminary, established by the bishop in Hobart in 1854. He wrote: “Bishop Willson’s proverbial love for children was often realised in St Mary’s playground, where he might be seen joining in the games of the little ones, and finding means of giving some healthy advice even when taking part in a game of marbles.”

His efforts to promote Catholic life were many, and included the formation of the Hobart Town Catholic Library in 1846. This library was not only a repository of Catholic literature but the location of talks on the Catholic faith. He established the Catholic Young Men’s Society in 1857.

A particular passion of the bishop, dating from his time in charge of the Catholic mission in Nottingham, was the promotion of a revival of medieval Gothic architecture. In this he shared the ideals of his very close friend the great English architect, Augustus Pugin, who sought to give expression to the highest standards of beauty and reverence in church design and furnishing. Through Pugin he obtained designs for churches, as well as exquisite items of stained glass, carved stonework, vestments, liturgical vessels and much more, forming the precious core of Tasmania’s outstanding Catholic cultural heritage.

We now have in our midst a priest and bishop of the highest order. As priest he had a particular concern for the dignity of everything associated with the worship of God. He clearly loved the sacred liturgy and wanted it celebrated with reverence. As a pastor he freely moved among all in society. He could engage with the House of Lords, be in close relationship with government officials in Van Diemen’s Land, and yet play marbles with young people and sit with convicts listening to their stories and sufferings. He was universally loved and respected. We have among us a holy man, a man of great compassion, a true priest, a true pastor, an outstanding bishop.

It is fitting that this exemplary bishop be interred here in this cathedral which he commenced, though never saw its completion. He is now buried on the island which he embraced as his home and now abides among the Catholic people whom he served with extraordinary devotion.

In his first letter St Peter encourages those in pastoral leadership to be true shepherds of the flock entrusted to them. This Bishop Willson did. He promises pastors that “when the chief shepherd appears, you will be given the crown of unfading glory” (1 Pet 5:4). I am sure that this bishop, our first bishop, in meeting the Chief Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, would have been given a “crown of unfading glory”.

Tonight as we place his mortal remains in crypt of the cathedral we honour him. We rejoice in the gifts of grace so evident in him. We can turn to him and ask him to intercede for this Archdiocese of which he was the first apostle.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

Friday, 28 April 2017