

a centenary of canberra's catholics

In the first in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital by 2009 Canberra Citizen of the Year Bishop Pat Power, we look at Mgr Patrick Haydon, Canberra's first and only parish priest.

Man of the people and confidant of prime ministers

Driving along Haydon Drive in Bruce or calling into nearby Calvary Haydon Retirement Village, there is the opportunity to remember the Parish of Canberra's first and only Parish Priest, Patrick Maurice Haydon.

When he was appointed to Queanbeyan as a 22-year-old newly ordained priest in 1912, he was a priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney. Queanbeyan parish, which incorporated what is now known as Canberra, was part of that Archdiocese even though the Diocese of Goulburn had been established in 1862.

Fr Haydon became Parish Priest of Queanbeyan in 1918 when the change of boundaries brought it into the Diocese of Goulburn.

When the Parish of Canberra was established in 1928, Fr Haydon became its parish priest, already very much at home in the territory which he had been serving from Queanbeyan all his priestly life.

By the time he died in 1949, the Diocese of Goulburn had been elevated to the status of the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn.

From that point onwards, the Archbishop of the day has been notionally parish priest of St Christopher's Parish and the priest in charge has had the title of Administrator.

Historian, Fr Brian Maher, writing in *Planting the Celtic Cross*, paints a graphic picture of Fr Haydon on his motor bike visiting people in the work gangs, celebrating Mass in all kinds of primitive circumstances, even hearing Confessions on the back of his Harley-Davidson because

that gave greater privacy than inside the hall.

Fr Maher points out that one of the Mass centres was Springbank homestead, the footings of which survive today on Springbank Island in Lake Burley Griffin not far from the National Museum.

Fr Haydon is depicted responding to the needs of the community during the Great Depression cooperating with his colleagues in other churches to provide meals for needy people.

Fr Maher says: "Some people were disturbed when Fr Haydon gave each unemployed man at dinner a bottle of beer and a packet of cigarettes; these luxuries were provided by Fr Haydon's sisters, Elizabeth and Mary Haydon."

I experienced similar generosity from Mgr Haydon as an infants pupil at St Christopher's School when our beloved parish priest shouted the whole school an ice cream.

I have many other fond memories of this gentle giant and often wonder if he first influenced me to begin thinking of the priesthood.

I often reflect that those first thoughts came to me around the time of my First Holy Communion.

That day, 24 April, 1949, was one of mixed emotions for our class as Mgr Haydon had died unexpectedly five days earlier on 19 April. I still remember Fr Steve Wellington, who stepped into the breach, saying that Mgr Haydon would have wanted the First Communion to go ahead.

Canberra's first parish priest was a great community builder,



Photographs above and below from the book *Monsignor P M Haydon: A Memoir*, by W Farmer Whyte.

leading by example and involving people at every level.

The material needs of the burgeoning parish were great with St Christopher's Church-School beginning in 1928 and the Good Samaritan Convent in the same year, the presbytery (now the Archbishop's House on Commonwealth Avenue) in 1931, St Patrick's Church-School, Braddon in 1935 and St Christopher's Church in 1939.

Remembering that much of the fund-raising would take place during the Depression, everyone's resources were stretched. Yet, the dances, fetes and other social activities did much to bring everyone together and to allow a whole range of talents to be brought to bear on the endeavours. It was a great exercise in bonding.

A man of the people, Patrick Haydon was just as much "at home" with senior church dignitaries and, in fact, was made Vicar General himself in 1940 and promoted to the highest rank of Monsignor (Prothonotary Apostolic) in 1941.

great life, greatly lived. The story of a much-loved priest whose days were spent in the service of God and man, and whose passing is mourned by all who knew him.....[On his death] at Canberra, aged 59, men and women of all creeds and classes were joined in sorrow. For he had been the friend of all, his heart as wide as the world, his love and charity boundless."

In the days when Catholics in other parts of Australia were sometimes struggling for recognition and there was not always a good relationship with other churches, Patrick Haydon did much to create a healthy climate in Canberra.

This was generously acknowledged by *The Canberra Times* in its leading article the day after his death. He was described as "a builder in Canberra" but one who built much more than edifices of stone.

"Great in stature, he was a true Australian endowed with the generosity of nature which we count as a superlative element of Australian character and spreading good-will in his earthly walks.

"Although he has been marked by distinctions of office, he is affectionately regarded by most people still as Father Haydon, for it is thus most of Canberra first knew him and his modesty and humility remained unaffected by the elevation that his works and faith had earned.

"During the development of Canberra, a happy feature of community life has been the absence of sectarian bitterness that has sometimes cast a transient shadow over other cities.

"This Christian good will was early nurtured in the pioneering days when priest and parson shared hall, school or whatever other building was available for services and church activities.

"Father Haydon was an exemplar of a happy brotherhood that was established among the Christian Churches in Canberra in its early days and has touched other aspects of city life."

As we prepare to celebrate Canberra's 100th birthday in 2013, Catholics can be justly proud of Patrick Maurice Haydon's contribution to Canberra's history.

● **Next month: Sylvia Curley.**



He was a confidant of Catholic prime ministers James Scullin, Joseph Lyons, Frank Forde and Ben Chifley and had a warm relationship with Robert Menzies and was greatly respected in the general Canberra community.

W Farmer Whyte's Memoir begins: "This is the story of a

Go to Australia's biggest Catholic Gift Shop on line
www.catholicgiftshop.com.au