

REMEMBERING FATIMA ISLAND COOK'S RIVER



Left: Fatima Island, historically significant. The island, originally a sandbank, with stonework intact. Built 1901.

Opposite bank, St Magdalen's Refuge, Tempe House obscured by trees.

The original Tempe Bridge with flood gates. Pine trees were planted to mark the end of World War I.

C late 1920s.

(Credit National Library of Australia)

ORIGINS

Our Lady of Fatima was central to certain events in Sts Peter and Paul Parish, Tempe, and thus became part of local history. In the late 1940s Sts Peter and Paul received a new parish priest – Monsignor Joseph Giles (to 1954). Former secretary to the Apostolic Nuncio and a local boy (he had grown up in the parish of St Francis Xavier, Arncliffe) Mons was also the director of the Fatima Crusade for the Archdiocese of Sydney. In his previous parish of Bowral he had promoted public expressions of the faith through tableaux and plays. Tempe provided a spectacular backdrop for these celebrations courtesy of the local river.

The theatrical and adventurous possibilities presented by the island, opposite St Magdalen's Refuge (under pastoral care of Tempe parish), led Mons to pursue its use. He was assisted by the local Labor State MP, Joseph Cahill, who was also the Minister for Local Government (1949 deputy premier; 1952 premier). He, too, was a local boy; living in West Murrumbidgee in the house where his parents had moved in 1915. Before this the family had been parishioners at Tempe (old and new church) and his early education was at Sts Peter and Paul School then close by the river in Station Street.

The first 'bridge' across the river was Tempe Dam – constructed by convicts from 1839. A new bridge was built in place of the dam in the late 19th century. At this time the island's shape was formalised with stone ramparts made of reclaimed convict-hewn blocks. A new, larger, bridge was constructed in the early 1960s. The floodgates that had been a feature of the old were not replaced. Serious erosion of the island's retaining wall started in the 1970s. The tidal nature of Cook's River has contributed to the deterioration – most of the stone wall has been washed away and only a residue of the island remains to be seen at low tide.



Monsignor Joseph Giles, PP



Mr Joseph Cahill, MP

May 2017 – Cook's River looking towards Tempe railway bridge and Wollie Creek.

The river is dwarfed by the high-rise developments on the former St Magdalen's Refuge and adjacent sites in Arncliffe (now named Wollie Creek). The island is invisible, being inundated by the very high tide, only the trees showing mid-stream indicate its location.



PAGEANTS

*Colourful Island Pageant Featured at Christmas – so ran the Catholic Weekly headline for its story capturing the inaugural parish celebrations on 25 December 1948.*¹

The writer continued – the “outstanding feature was an illuminated Nativity Pageant on an island in the Cook’s River on Christmas Night. Tempe Catholics have named the island Fatima Island. It has had no name, and its ownership remained a mystery until the parish priest, the Very Rev Monsignor J Giles, DD, sought permission to hold the pageant on the island. After being referred from one authority to another, it was found that the ownership resided in the Lands Department, and the required authority was obtained. [Tempe Parish leased the island.]²

“Various pageants, representing the events of Christmas, were depicted under searchlight. Loud speakers relayed the voices to a large gathering of parishioners and others³ assembled on the grassy river-banks [Kendrick Park]. The undertaking was described as a miracle of ingenuity. Besides searchlights and amplifiers, a boat⁴ and telephone system from the island, to the mainland were employed. The script had been used successfully at Bowral and other centres. Parishioners played the various roles.

“After the pageant those present moved in a body to the parish centre reciting the Rosary. A crib had been erected under a tree in the church grounds ... and gifts were distributed to the children. At midnight on Christmas Eve Holy Hour was conducted in the church for members of the Men’s Nocturnal Adoration Society. Previously, parishioners had completed a Novena of Masses in preparation for Christmas... at the solemn Christmas midnight hour men of the parish, in the darkened church, held lighted candles and recited the Angelus and other prayers”.

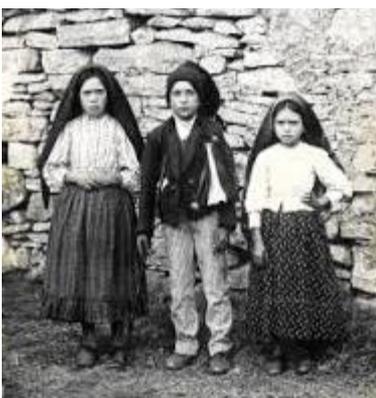
As December 1949 concluded, Mons sought a donkey and three camels for the upcoming Epiphany Pageant on January 6. He hoped to create a “more realistic and dramatic effect than would otherwise be possible”⁵ In 1952 “torchlight processions and pageantry formed part of the solemn celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany by parishioners of SS Peter and Paul’s, Tempe... The celebrations lasted all day, and concluded at 10 pm.... Solemn Pontifical High Mass was celebrated in the parish church by His Lordship Bishop Fox, of Wilcannia-Forbes [a cousin of Mons]. A Carthusian Father (Rev. Father Leclerque) was deacon ... and the Rev Father Fitzgerald, sub deacon. Monsignor Giles was master of ceremonies, and the Right Rev Monsignor Kevin Kelly, PP, DD, VF, of Townsville preached.

“Despite heavy rain, the church was crowded and, as the skies had cleared when the Mass ended, parishioners joined in a community picnic on Cook’s River Reserve. Festivities included dancing on the lawns, games, with appropriate prizes, for children, and community singing of carols. At evening the parish statue of Our Lady of Fatima was taken to the field and, through a torchlight guard of honour, was enshrined and illuminated during the singing of the ‘Ave Maria’. The statue was then borne to the water’s edge and taken by boat to ‘Fatima Island’ ... where it was enshrined. The Rosary was recited and, amid a fanfare, tableaux depicting the Annunciation, Visitation, Adoration of the Shepherds, the Journey of the Magi, the Nativity scene and the Message of Fatima were enacted by costumed parishioners.

“The statue was later taken over the water by boat, and carried in torchlight procession to the church. Parishioners followed the statue, reciting the Rosary. On the lawn before the presbytery, in front of ... the Crib, costumed parishioners distributed gifts to the children of the parish. These included combs, belts and brushes presented by girls at the Home of the Good Shepherd, Ashfield, and other gifts were donated by the proprietors of Luna Park. The celebrations concluded [with] ... Benediction ...”⁶ A show indeed! Onlookers would line up on the bridge to watch the events and people in cars would slow down to catch a glimpse.



Above: The parish pilgrim statue of Our Lady of Fatima. Mons ordered her from E J Dwyer’s. As the late Tessie Fitzgerald recalled – the paint was still wet when the statue was delivered and arrived only just in time for the first Marian procession. She stood on a small altar on the sanctuary at Sts Peter and Paul and then above the confessional till she was relegated to the choir gallery after the ‘modernisation’ of the church’s interior in the early 1970s.



At left - the seers. Lucia dos Santos, Francisco and Jacinto Marto 1917.

The three shepherd children witnessed the first apparition of a beautiful lady on 13 May 1917 and each month till 13 October culminating in ‘The Miracle of the Sun’. She identified herself as Our Lady of the Rosary. This was at a time when World War I was at its height and the Bolshevik revolution not far off. Francisco died in 1919 aged 10 and Jacinta in 1920 aged 9 – both as a result of the 1919 influenza epidemic. During Pope Francis’ visit to Fatima for the centenary of the first apparition on 13 May he declared the sainthood of Jacinta and Francisco Marto – the youngest ever non-martyrs. Lucia entered the convent, spending most of her long life with the Carmelites, she died in 2005 at the age of 97. Her cause for sainthood has opened. (The village of Fatima was named after a Muslim princess, Fatima – who was supposed to have converted and married a Christian knight. The original Fatima was a daughter of Mohammed.)

WORLD PEACE



Parents of Francisco and Jacinta Marto
12 October 1950. Photo T Doyle.

Only five years after the end of World War II, in 1950, a Holy Year was held and Catholics from around the world participated in the events in Rome and other important centres such as Fatima. Monsignor Giles led a group of parishioners from Tempe (F Lessells, R Smyth, P Ryan and T Doyle) who met the Martos at Fatima. Monsignor Giles left Sydney for Canada and Portugal in May 1950. He summed up the importance of Fatima and the coming ceremonies in October: “the Catholic Church has recognised the miracle of Fatima, where Our Lady appeared to children 30 years ago and told them to pass on God’s message for world peace”.⁷

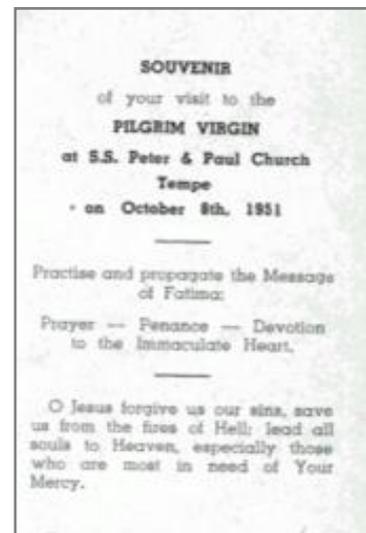
For those who could not travel there Fatima came to them – in the form of the Pilgrim Statue from the Fatima Shrine. At the request of Lucia it was sent on a journey around the world and Sts Peter and Paul Tempe was one of the small number of churches that received the statue in Sydney in October 1951.



Left: Top – Statue borne in procession outside the church on Princes Highway. Children of Mary with banner leading the procession from behind. Parishioners were statue bearers. (The old tram tracks are clearly visible – the site on the other side belonged to the Salvation Army and much earlier, the site of Bellevue, a notable home owned by the Talbot family Today, Ikea, the Good Guys and the Salvation Army’s Tempe Tip occupy the site.)

Below: Interested observers from Speare’s Brickworks watch on as the statue enters the church grounds.

Below right: Reverse of souvenir holy card printed for the occasion.



EUCCHARISTIC CONGRESS 1953

In preparation for the Eucharistic Congress [an international event] in Sydney in 1953 six rallies in honour of Our Lady of Fatima were held and more than 3400 Children of Mary took part. Large crowds of men, women and children also attended. This was a time when the Korean War (1950-53) had shown how easily a local conflict could assume an international dimension with both sides of the Cold War involved in assisting/resisting the communists’ push south.

“The rallies were held [in February] at Waverley, Erskineville, Chatswood, Concord, Earlwood and Manly. The parish church in each of these parishes is dedicated to Our Lady. Congregations present joined with the Children of Mary processionists in the recitation of the Rosary and in singing hymns in praise of the Most Blessed Sacrament and the Mother of God... The Children of Mary, in regalia, marched behind the bright banners of their individual parish sodalities...

“At Erskineville the procession went from the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour to nearby Erskineville Oval ... More than 400 Children of Mary from Erskineville, Enmore, Broadway, Rockdale, Penshurst, Waterloo, Rosebery, Tempe, Golden Grove and Newtown took part.

“About 1000 people were present.... After recitation of the Rosary and singing of the Congress hymns, the Rev Father Norbert, CP, preached a special sermon on Our Lady of Fatima.

“At the Earlwood rally 300 Children of Mary ... marched A large number of parishioners from Earlwood and nearby parishes also took part... Solemn Benediction ... climaxed the afternoon’s ceremonies ... Director of the Fatima Apostolate, the Very Rev Monsignor J Giles, PP (Tempe), preached the special sermon. Many people to-day were longing for a terrestrial paradise, but war was pushing them along the road to absolute despair, he said. They forgot that man’s true destiny should be eternal happiness which could only be gained by fulfilling the commandments of God. Even in this life real happiness could only be gained by loving our neighbor as ourselves, Monsignor Giles said. ‘What greater means have we of appreciating the love of God than through the Eucharist — the Sacrament of Love — and what greater means have we of appreciating the Eucharist than through the Rosary?’”⁸



Above – home altar of Our Lady of Fatima – surrounded by flowers and candles. Children of Sts Peter and Paul dressed as nuns, priests and various characters in the Fatima story – presbytery grounds. Mid 1950s.

CHILDREN’S RECOLLECTIONS

I was an angel in a Christmas pageant and we were taken out to the island in a row boat ... Monsignor Giles was a very holy man ... we went to the island for a pageant a few times following the statue which was carried shoulder high with a light shining on its face. M O’Dea McGrath; I do remember going to a pageant at the park and seeing the play on Fatima Island ... Mum and Dad were always excited and would talk about it. I remember we had to wait until dark and the island would be lit up. M Rose Curtis; Monsignor organised various events down in the Tempe Park including the annual Christmas Play on the island, we would happily swim across to the island during the setting up stage until one day Lindsay Smith grabbed hold of a rat thinking it was a stone!!! E Ellem;⁹ At Mons’ farewell party Joe Cahill made a speech, jokingly concluding – ‘When am I going to get my island back?’ B Collins.¹⁰

RECENT YEARS

In the 1990s, after Tempe parish was amalgamated with Enmore, Fr Norbert CP (Marrickville) would assist the PP by saying Mass at Tempe and visiting parishioners. He also revived the practice of rosary in the home with the parish statue of Our Lady of Fatima once again ‘on the move’. In 2014/15 many locals along the river – from all walks of life – were keen to see Fatima Island restored as part of the rejuvenation of the river. Members of the community at Sts Peter and Paul joined with them and signed a petition to Marrickville Council for action to save and restore the island. Unfortunately, its condition continues to deteriorate. Today the church is no longer open for regular worship. As a result of immigration in recent years large numbers of Muslims live in the district, especially south of the river, and they too can relate to Fatima. Reflecting on the island’s history and significance inspires us to hope for its restoration – as Monsignor Giles proved, where there’s a will, there’s a way.

Mary Barthelemy
13 May 2017

Notes

- ¹ *Catholic Weekly* 6 January 1949 p 2 (edited)
 - ² Eric Ellem; email response to enquiry for memories of Fatima Island 2013. “I always understood that it was the Tempe Parish who leased the island and naturally Monsignor Giles had the ‘naming rights’.”
 - ³ Parishioners from nearby Arncliffe also attended and some played parts in the pageants as well (conversations with the author).
 - ⁴ Marie Byron Molloy recalled that her husband, Pat, who owned a fish shop at Tempe had rowed Mons, and the statue, out to the island. In those days Botany Bay supported a lively local fishing industry.
 - ⁵ *Catholic Weekly* 29 December 1949 p 3
 - ⁶ *Catholic Weekly* 10 January 1952 p 2 (edited)
 - ⁷ *Sunday Herald* 14 May 1950 p 7
 - ⁸ *Catholic Weekly* 12 February 1953 p 5 (edited)
 - ⁹ Recollections of Fatima Island, email responses to author’s enquiry 2013. ¹⁰ Recollection of Brian Collins to the author, 2017.
- The assistance of Prof Ian Tyrrell in locating the picture of the island in its entirety was invaluable. He has done extensive research on the river and its history and plans to publish soon; one to watch.