

CAPUCHINS CELEBRATE IN ARMIDALE, NSW

February 17-19

The celebration of the Centenary of the death of Pioneer Capuchin Bishop Torreggiani of Armidale NSW 1904 – 2004 allowed the friars the opportunity to Claim their early heritage in Australia.

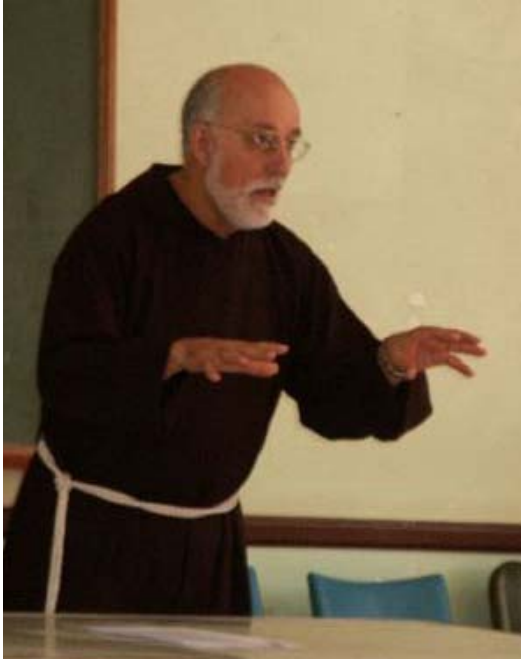


"It is not usual to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the death of a bishop" said the Most Rev Luc J Matthys DD the Eighth Bishop of Armidale NSW at the beginning his sermon on Wednesday evening 18 February 2004.

The special Mass was in thanksgiving for the life of the Capuchin Bishop Elzear Torreggiani, who was the Second Bishop of Armidale (1879 - 1904).

Torreggiani died on 28 January 1904 and to mark the 100 anniversary of his passing the Capuchin Franciscan Friars of Australia went to Armidale NSW for a conference given by their Minister General Br John Corriveau OFM Cap and to celebrate together with Bishop Luc J Matthys and the people of Armidale the life of this saintly Capuchin Bishop.

Together with Bishop Matthys and Bishop Joseph Oudeman OFM Cap, from Brisbane, who is the second Capuchin Bishop in Australia, there were also a number of important overseas guests. The Definitor General Br Joseph Nacua, in charge of South East Asia also came with the Minister General Br John Corriveau OFM Cap from Rome. The Minister Provincial of Great Britain, Br Anthony McDowell OFM Cap, where Torreggiani worked first in the missions of Wales led the prayers at the grave in the cemetery. Br Renato Lupi OFM Cap and Br Terzio Merli OFM Cap, came from the Province of the Marches of Ancona in Italy where Torreggiani was born and joined the Order. Also four Ursuline Sisters from Germany came to join in the celebrations as well as many archivists and the Historical Society of Armidale.



The friars gathered on Tuesday morning and afternoon to listen to Br John Corriveau OFM Cap, Minister General, bring them up to date with life in the Order all around the world. "There are over 11,000 Capuchin friars ministering to people in 95 different countries," he said. He told them that an emphasis on Gospel fraternity and harmony with all people respected as brothers and sisters and a sense of the integrity of creation, had made them welcome in so many places and given them, as part of the whole Franciscan family, representation even at the United Nations Assembly.

On Tuesday evening Br Patrick Colbourne OFM Cap from the Australian Province launched his book on the life of Bishop Torreggiani. He noted at the beginning of his presentation, to a crowded room, that he was requested by the previous Provincial Minister Br John Cooper OFM Cap to research the life of Fr Elzear Torreggiani with the words, "Stick to the facts and footnote carefully."



Since then he had spent five years of research here in Australia, Italy, Holland and Great Britain. Friars from the Belgian/Dutch Province as well as from Italy supported the Capuchin mission to Great Britain. Patrick also noted with gratitude the wonderful assistance he received from Archivists in Australia, who were very enthusiastic about the research of the life of this pioneer bishop.

The book, from which most of the following very brief life story comes is: Patrick Colbourne, O.F.M. Cap. Bishop Elzear Torreggiani: An Instrument of Peace. The Life and Times of a Capuchin Friar, The Second Bishop of Armidale, NSW. Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, Kensington Sydney. 2004.

A Brief Look

Bishop Torreggiani was born at Borgo di Porto di Recanati,¹ in the Province of the Marches on the central east coast of Italy 28 March 1830. He was the second of three sons of Vincent Anthony Torreggiani and Margarita Francesca Osimani and given the name "Aloysius" at his baptism. They were poor share farmers working in the newly introduced rice fields that were subject to malarial mosquitoes. He never forgot, that at the age of eight, walking bare foot towards the church to be confirmed, he had to stop at the door to put on his shoes.

He entered the Capuchin Order in the town of Camerino, where the Capuchin began as an Order, at the age of 16. He was ordained to the priesthood 23 May 1853 in Ancona. He asked to go to India, but was sent to the mission of the Capuchins in Great Britain.

In Wales he worked untiringly among the Irish miners for sixteen years rekindling their faith by preaching, teaching and building schools and chapels.

It was in Wales on 1 January 1867 that Elzear met Very Rev Roger B. Vaughn, who was then Prior of the Benedictine Monastery. Later when Vaughn became Archbishop of Sydney in Australia he nominated Elzear for Bishop of Armidale NSW, because he had seen first hand the enormous effort Elzear had put in among the Irish mine workers. The Irish miners in Wales at first refused to be helped by Torreggiani, but by the time he left they knew him well enough to refuse to hand over a new suit they had bought him until he gave them the one he had on. They knew he would only sell it and use the money for his many projects.

After being consecrated Bishop of Armidale in the Capuchin Church at Peckham in London 25 March, 1879, Torregaini went to Rome where he met the Pope. Then he went on to Loreto to see his friends. He and five other friars, then left Brindisi in Italy, amidst a storm of thunder and lightning, on the sailing ship *Pera*, bound for Alexandria

Once they docked they passed the Suez Canal travelling overland at night to board the three masted steamship *Hindostan*, which was regarded by the English as one of the best ships of the day. They sailed to Galle in Sri Lanka where they changes to the *Assan*. Not long after the *Hindostan* was lost at sea with all on board. Bishop Torreggiani and the friars however had a remarkably smooth trip, so much so that it amazed the crew when their ship rounded King George Sound and had to pick up the Master and crew of a three-masted vessel that had been severely battered in a storm.

They stopped in Adelaide, which Torreggiani described as 'enchanted with a splendidly blue sky just like Italy' and arrived in Sydney 8 November 1879. There they were greeted by thunder and lightning just like at their departure from Brindisi. They travelled by train to Murrurundi² and perhaps on to Tamworth³ with Bishop Murray of Maitland Diocese and then on to Armidale⁴ arriving by stagecoach 25 November 1879. Torreggiani described the scenery on the way up from Newcastle to Armidale as: "mountains, bushland and forest of the first order, such as come from the work of nature untouched by human hand."

The energy of Bishop Torregaini was amazing. In his Report to Rome in 1882 he wrote:

Thus with God's help I was able to complete my first Pastoral Visit. It took about three years, because of the extent of the territory to be covered, (about 46,000 square miles) and the difficult geography. I had to cross high mountains, wide plains, dense forests, wide and long rivers, to undertake dangerous voyages on the open sea in small steamers, to reach some rivers. Indeed I was often in danger of being wrecked. While travelling in country without roads, skirting woods and forests (except near inhabited places), I often had to sleep on the bare earth, surviving on the crust of bread we bought with us, drinking the fresh water we found in the clear stream, that were of great comfort and delight.

Everyplace he went, he began the building of churches, schools, convents and accommodation for the priest. He brought the Ursuline sisters from Germany, that he had met in England, to work in the Diocese. The sisters had left Germany because of the iron rule of Bismarck and had gone to England.

He also brought the Presentation Sisters to Lismore and Grafton from Ireland and asked Blessed Mary McKillop for her sisters as well. He had learned early that education was a key to restoring the faith of pioneer families and a great social benefit to the society. Everywhere and to every door, the Capuchin lay brothers, Br Laurence and Br Francis, went begging money for the schools. It did not matter to them if people were Catholic or not and amazingly enough the non Catholics responded as well.

In 1888 when he held a Diocesan Synod⁵ in Armidale Bishop Torreggiani had seven Diocesan priests, eight Capuchin Priests and two Capuchin Lay brothers working in his diocese. Seven years later his 1895 Report printed in Sydney and sent to Rome says he had only three Capuchins in the diocese and one was a lay brother. Many Capuchins had died and others had come and gone. It was a tremendous commitment by the friars and a tribute to the extraordinary missionary spirit of the Order. In his 1895 Report Torreggiani listed the reasons why he never started the Capuchin Order in his diocese.

These friars do not live in community, they reside in their respective missions. They do not have friaries or houses belonging to the Order. They cannot live in a community, nor lead a communal life, they being alone and away from one another. They wear the habit of the Order when they are in church or in the house; but when they go out they dress like all the other priests. Since they can't live a community life, they do not accept locals to the religious habit.

The 1895 Report of the Bishop is veritable list of names and accomplishments in the New England District. The names roll down the page: Armidale, Uralla, Walcha, Bendemeer, Ben Lomond, Hill Grove, Guyra, Glen Inness, Emmerville, Deep Water, Tenterfield, Herding Yard, Drake or Fairfield, Mary Lands, Bundara, Tingha, Stannifer, Inverell, Cherry Tree Hill, Mount Russel, Bingera, Barraba, Warialda, Morse, Narrabri, Wee Waa, Walgett, Boggabri, Gunnedah, Coonanbeen, Keepit, Qurindi, Wallabadah, Nundle and Tamworth.

He includes also the section of the diocese that was split off in 1887 to make the Grafton/Lismore Diocese. Grafton, MacLean, Lismore, Kempsey, Smithtown, Bowraville, Macksville, Bellingen, Raleigh and Rawdon Island.

Bishop Torreggiani, greatly respected by everyone died 28 January 1904 surrounded by the priests of the diocese, who had come for a retreat. He was buried in the cemetery of Armidale where many of the friars who had come out to Australia with him, and worked in various parts of the New England district, were already laid to rest.



Br John Corriveau – Minister General OFM Cap kneels in prayer at the grave of Capuchin Bishop Torreggiani.