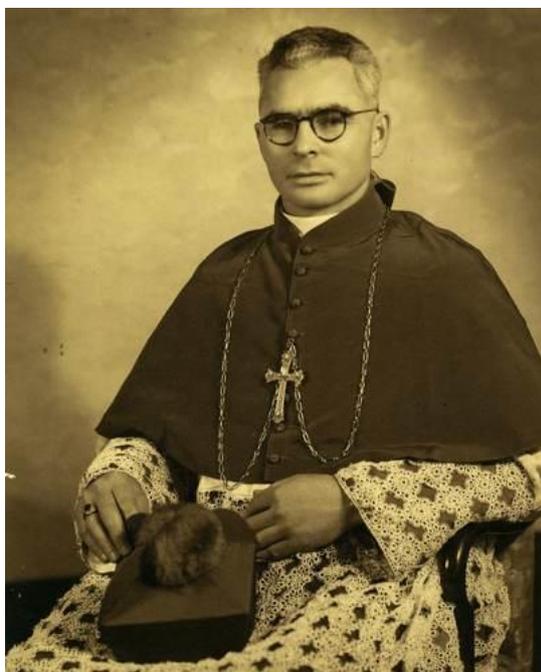


The 40th Anniversary of the Death of Thomas Absolom McCabe, First Bishop of Wollongong

Neil Dwyer
Archivist
September 2023



September 14 this year is the 40th anniversary of the death of the first bishop of Wollongong, Thomas Absolom McCabe. As the years roll by, fewer and fewer of us will recall him, meeting him or be able to say he was the bishop who Confirmed us. Indeed, there will be milestones in his life that may disappear from the pages of history. At 36 years of age, he was the youngest member of the clergy at the time appointed a bishop in Australia; he was a Council Father of Vatican II; he was Chaplain-General of the Australian Defence Forces; and he was the Diocese of Wollongong's first bishop. He also influenced the fate of the Catholic Church in post-World War II Japan.

Left: The new Bishop of Port Augusta, 1939

Born in Smithtown on 30 June 1902, Thomas McCabe was educated by the Good Samaritans before entering Springwood seminary before going to Manly to continue his studies for the priesthood. He then went to the Propaganda College in Rome where he gained his licentiate in Sacred Theology. At Propaganda he met and retained a lifelong friendship with Norman Gilroy and among their classmates was a United States seminarian, Francis Spellman (later Cardinal and Archbishop of New York), two seminarians from Japan: Paul Aijiro Yamaguchi and Peter Doi, and briefly one from French Indo-China (later Vietnam), Ngo Dinh Thuc, who arrived in 1925 and later became Archbishop of Hue.¹

At the age of 23 Thomas McCabe was ordained to the priesthood for the Lismore Diocese by Willem Marinus Cardinal van Rossum, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith on 20 December 1925. Exactly 13 years later to the month on 13 December 1938 the Vatican announced McCabe's appointment as Bishop of Port Augusta. Thomas McCabe was one of the first ten beneficiaries of the policy of Pope Benedict XV, who declared that

In this policy lies the greatest hope of the new churches. For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the Faith. Far better

¹ His brother was Ngo Dinh Diem, later the President of Vietnam. Thuc was in Rome at the Second Vatican Council on November 2, 1963, when his three brothers, Diem, Nhu and Can were assassinated in Vietnam as a result of a coup. Thereafter, Thuc lived in exile. He was excommunicated by St Paul VI for consecrating bishops without approval. He was later reconciled to the Church.

than anyone else he knows the kind of argument they will listen to, and as a result, he often has easy access to places where a foreign priest would not be tolerated.²

As far as the Vatican was concerned there should be Australian priests ministering to Australian Catholics and Australians filling the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

In November 1946 Norman, Cardinal Gilroy, now the Archbishop of Sydney, accompanied by Bishop McCabe of Port Augusta flew to Japan in an RAAF Liberator bomber to Japan in response to the appeal of Propaganda Fide to assess and respond to the need for missionaries there. The Cardinal also received invitations to visit Japan from Archbishop Peter Doi of Tokyo³ and Bishop Paul Yamaguchi of Nagasaki,⁴ fellow students with the Cardinal and Bishop McCabe at Propaganda. Pope Pius XI continued Pope Benedict's policy and this also had benefitted Japanese clergy. In 1927 Father Januarius Hayasaka was ordained by Pope Pius XI as the first Japanese bishop in the history of Japan and appointed him to the Diocese of Nagasaki. Illness, however, forced Bishop Hayasaka to resign in 1937 and Father Paul Aijiro Yamaguchi was consecrated Bishop of Nagasaki to replace him. On 13 February 1938 Father Peter Doi was appointed the Archbishop of Tokyo.

In Japan Cardinal Gilroy and Bishop McCabe had discussions with General Douglas MacArthur, effectively the 'ruler' of Japan from 1945 to 1951. Prior to Gilroy and McCabe's arrival in Japan the General had met with two visiting US Catholic bishops telling them a "great vacuum has been created by the defeat of the Japanese, a spiritual vacuum into which anything may rush." His experience in the Philippines had shown "that the Catholic Church held particular appeal to the Japanese because the tradition of seeking absolution "appeals to the Oriental." It was a message he repeated to Cardinal Gilroy and Bishop McCabe. In a later report to the Vatican the US bishops said,

"The General is fearful that if the Church does not quickly send an army of zealous Missionaries to Japan, Communist agents will obtain the converts who should be gained by the Church," they wrote. The Holy See shared this view. In a memorandum entitled "Missions in Japan" dated November 9, 1946, the Vatican Secretariat of State said that the situation favoured the Catholic Church. "The future of the Japanese cannot be left in the hands of the Protestants, who have already begun a widespread and varied work of propaganda, nor in the hands of the communists who will profit by the sad state of economic affairs to spread their pernicious theories."⁵

Cardinal Gilroy and Bishop McCabe also had an audience with the Emperor of Japan, Hirohito, who said, "Your visit here is a great consolation to Japanese Catholics. Thank the Pope for his kindness to the Japanese people."⁶

Since the 16th century, Nagasaki has been a significant centre of Catholicism in Japan, still sometimes referred to as the "Catholic City of Japan", and when the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki it killed two-thirds of the city's Catholics. Cardinal Gilroy and Bishop McCabe

² Apostolic Letter, *Maximum Illud: On the Propagation of the Faith Throughout the World*, issued on November 30, 1919, paragraph 14

³ Peter Doi (22/12/1892-21/02/1970). Created cardinal in 1960, he was the first Japanese member of the College of Cardinals. Along with Gilroy, McCabe and Yamaguchi, he was a Council Father of Vatican II

⁴ Paul Yamaguchi (14/ 07/1894-25/09/1976). Created archbishop in 1959.

⁵ Pan Orient News, Tokyo, 20 July, 2011

⁶ The Bulletin of the Catholic Laymen's Association of Georgia, 21 December 1946, p. 26

both observed the resulting utter devastation to spiritual and civil life, the chaotic conditions, and the opportunities to spread the Faith. There was also the great fear of the spread of Communism in Asia. Bishop McCabe perceived that ‘The people are ready and willing to break with centuries-old traditions of Buddhism and Shintoism . . . asking for instruction and baptism . . . If the Church cannot act and act fast to fill the spiritual vacuum now evident in Japan, that vacuum will most certainly be filled by those hostile to the Church.’⁷ He was acutely aware from his time in Rome in the early 1920s that where there was chaos in society totalitarianism would breed and, as Mussolini did, take hold. There was an urgency for good to triumph over evil: for Faith to be restored to the spiritually destitute.



The Roman Catholic Church of Urakami (left and below) stands out in the razed city of Nagasaki, in 1945. The atomic bomb was dropped on an area that was a stronghold of Catholics who had kept the Faith in Japan, often under conditions of extreme persecution, since the 17th century.

As he travelled back to Australia, Bishop McCabe mulled over how best to respond to Bishop Yamaguchi’s request for religious Sisters to address the basic human needs of the people of Nagasaki. For McCabe, with four of his sisters members of the Good Samaritan Order, the choice of Australian religious sisters to be missionaries in Japan was obvious. Arriving in Sydney, he immediately went to Saint Scholastica’s Convent in Glebe to see the Mother General of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, Mother Oliverio, to explain his proposal for Good Samaritan nuns to undertake missionary work in Japan. In a way this was an audacious proposal: Japan had been the enemy and Christians had not fared well at the hands of Japanese troops during the war. After reflection by the Good



⁷ Bishop McCabe’s 1979 account of visit to Japan in Newsletter of the Good Samaritan, Vol.4, No.7 (October 1998), p.3 in Luttrell, J., *Norman Thomas Gilroy: An Obedient Life*, St Paul’s Publication, Strathfield, 2017, p.117

Samaritan's Council and a formal approach by Bishop Yamaguchi, 'the Sisters responded with overwhelming generosity. In the words of Mother Oliverio Murphy, Congregational Leader at the time: "We give out of our poverty not out of our plenty."⁸ Six members of the Good Samaritan were selected for Nagasaki while two priests of the Port Augusta Diocese were already part of the missionary effort.

The first group of six Good Samaritan nuns departed by the ship *Changte* from Australia on 15 October 1948. The Good Samaritan Sisters did not go to Nagasaki to convert communities to Christianity. Their work reflected the tasks of the original members of the Order in colonial Sydney: they set up a medical clinic for the survivors of the atomic bombing, established schools and helped repair a Faith community left in disarray after World War II.⁹ It was the beginning of a sustained contribution by the Order to the Church in Japan. After five years the sisters left Nagasaki, moving on to Sasebo and Nara to found a high school and a kindergarten. Today a small community of Japanese Good Samaritan Sisters remain in Nara.



On the Bridge of the ship "Changte" which took the six Sisters of the Good Samaritan to Japan with the captain: Back L-R: Sisters Canisius Whitton and Eustelle Gleeson, Captain Frame, Sisters Catherine Teresa Mercovich, Julian McKenna. Seated L-R: Sisters Mary Constable and Etheldreda Boyle.

Recalling Bishop McCabe's contribution to restoring the Church in Japan gives all of us, including parishioners who did not know him, something to reflect on concerning his life. Today, Bishop McCabe's involvement may be lost in the subsequent great work of Australian priests and nuns in post-war Japan, but it is important to account for how it all began.

Thomas McCabe outlived his classmates Doi, Yamaguchi, Gilroy, Spellman and Ngo. He died on 14 September in 1983, the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross. In this we should look no further for his likely motivation for bringing the Faith to others: as a military chaplain, as a bishop, as a council Father or in his contribution to restoring the Church in post-war Japan.

⁸ <https://www.goodsams.org.au/who-we-are/our-story-2/our-neighbours-in-the-asia-pacific/> Accessed 31/08/2023

⁹ The Empress Michiko, the wife of Emperor Akihito (the son and successor of Emperor Hirohito), was raised in a Catholic home and was educated at a Catholic school and university. When it came to her marriage to the future Emperor, it was arranged by the Anglican Grand Chamberlain Koizumi and the Catholic Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida. Japan has had eight Prime Ministers who have been Christians, three of whom have been Catholic: Hara Takashi, Shigeru Yoshida and Taro Aso. As of 2021, there are 431,100 Catholics in Japan or 0.34% of the population, while there are 600,000 non-Japanese Catholics in the country.