

Our diocese turns 150

In March next year, our Diocese of Ballarat will turn 150. It was on March 30, 1874, that Pope Pius the Ninth issued a decree that marked the beginning of the Ballarat Diocese. So, on March 30, 2024, we will be able to celebrate our 150th birthday!

As we look back on 150 years as a diocesan community, we recognise that there were communities living in our part of the world for many years before that. There were Aboriginal communities along the coast and in the mountains and valleys and plains of Victoria for tens of thousands of years. European settlement began in the 1830s. As we celebrate 150 years as a diocese, it is right that we acknowledge the First Nations communities who lived here for those many years before our diocese began. It is also right that we acknowledge those who came from overseas to settle here from the 1830s onwards. However, the 150th anniversary will put a focus on the century and a half in which we have been the community of the Diocese of Ballarat.

From the 1850s, the population of Ballarat and other parts of Victoria grew dramatically following the discovery of gold and it was because of the growth of population that the Diocese of Ballarat was established.

The official description of a diocese focuses on the people who make up the diocesan community. The Code of Canon Law describes a diocese as “a portion of the people of God, which is entrusted to the care of a bishop” (Canon 369). So, when the number of people increases, there comes a time when a new bishop is appointed to care for that community. This is what happened in 1874 with the start of the Diocese of Ballarat. The population in the Colony of Victoria had grown so much that there were too many people for the Bishop of Melbourne to care for, so the Pope appointed two new bishops, one in Ballarat and one in Sandhurst (Bendigo), with responsibility to care for the communities of those regions.

The Pope’s decree was in the formal language of the time but the key message was simple, that new dioceses were established to better care for the growing population. Pope Pius the Ninth wrote as “the successor of Saint Peter to whom the Eternal Pastor gave the care of his flock”. This is how he explained the setting up of the new dioceses.

“Lest spiritual helps become lacking to the flock of believers, we are accustomed to increase the number of bishops for their assistance and convenience when we learn that the number of the flock has increased. Since by now the size of the territory of the Church of Melbourne in the Australian Colony of Victoria and the number of the faithful living there are such that, in the opinion of the bishops of Australia and especially of the Bishop of Melbourne himself, it is too difficult for one bishop to exercise care for that part of the Lord’s flock, it seems to us that for the spiritual good and convenience of the faithful we should erect two new dioceses in the aforesaid territory.

“Wherefore, after we have considered maturely all the circumstances of this matter, and after we have heard the advice of our beloved brothers in the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, we, by our apostolic authority and by the force of these letters, erect and constitute in the territory of the Church of Melbourne in the Australian Colony of Victoria two new dioceses, one in the city of Sandhurst and one in the city of Ballarat.”

The Pope's decree described the boundaries of the new dioceses. The Diocese of Ballarat would include the western region of Victoria. "For the Diocese of Ballarat, we define as the boundaries the 144th degree of longitude as far as the sea and the Murray River, and that boundary which separates Victoria from the Diocese of Adelaide, or from the Colony of South Australia, in such a way that the same Murray River will be the northern boundary and the sea will be the southern boundary." Nearly 150 years later, we continue to echo the Pope's words in describing our diocese today. Our diocesan vision statement begins with the words, "We are a community of communities from the Murray to the sea."

The 150th anniversary will occur on March 30, which in 2024 happens to be Holy Saturday. This means that we will be able to mark the anniversary as we celebrate the Easter Vigil. Each time we light our tapers from the Easter candle, we give thanks that Jesus is risen and is with us as we gather in his name. When we celebrate the Easter Vigil next year, we might well remember that the risen Jesus has been with us as a diocesan community for the past 150 years. He has been with us through the joys and struggles of these years and he promises to remain with us always.

While we will be able to mark the 150th anniversary at Easter, we could celebrate the whole of 2024 as an anniversary year. I suggest that we have some more extensive celebrations after Easter, once students have returned to school for the second term. I invite parishes to mark the 150th anniversary at Masses on the weekend of April 27-28, with some special prayers and some reflections on the history of our diocese. I invite schools to mark the anniversary during the week of April 29 to May 3. I would encourage each parish and each school to celebrate their own history in the context of the 150 years of the history of the diocese. Our diocesan office will provide some suggestions for celebrations. I'm sure local communities will also be able to come up with creative ways of telling their local story as part of the story of the diocese.

I hope to mark the anniversary year with a personal visit to each parish. Our diocese began when the Pope appointed a bishop to look after the people of Western Victoria in 1874. I would love to celebrate the 150th anniversary year as bishop by visiting people throughout the diocese in the course of 2024. I look forward to celebrating with as many local communities as possible.

Our 150th anniversary will be an opportunity for each community throughout our diocese to remember those who have gone before us, those who have laid the foundations of our parish and school communities and the social services and health care that are provided in our diocese today. The anniversary will be an opportunity to review our history, acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses, celebrating the achievements and recognising the failures to live our Christian faith to the full. It will be a chance to take stock of where we are now and look ahead to how we can live as a truly Christian community, sharing the good news of Christ, in the years to come. I look forward to celebrating the anniversary with you.

Bishop Paul Bird CSSR