

**PAYING TRIBUTE TO A FORGOTTEN PIONEER:
THE UNVEILING AND BLESSING OF DARIEN PULLEN'S SCULPTURE
OF PATRICK BONAVENTURE GEOGHEGAN OSF**

At last! On a sunny but cold Pentecost Sunday afternoon the long-awaited sculpture of pioneer Melbourne priest, the Irish Franciscan Patrick Bonaventure Geoghegan (1805-1864), was jointly unveiled at St Francis' by the Australian Franciscan Provincial, Philip Miscamble, and our own Graeme Duro. The statue was duly blessed by Bishop Peter Elliott, standing in for Archbishop Denis Hart, before prayers were led by the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, Philip Freier.

What a wonderful event! About a hundred people – including several Franciscans and a contingent from the Williamstown parish where Geoghegan served as parish priest (1853-1860) – gathered in the marquee erected just by the main Lonsdale St gates. Their spirits were raised by the stirring sound of an Irish piper before formalities got under way. Ken Boland welcomed everyone on Jo Dirks' behalf, then Melbourne-based Franciscan historian Matthew Beckmann gave an engaging address on his Irish confrere. The statue was swiftly unveiled and sculptor Darien Pullen spoke briefly about his work of art. The blessing rite followed, with some short scripture texts, the blessing proper, a set of intercessions, the Lord's Prayer and a final blessing. Then time for photos, accompanied by another round of piping.

Before going further, a little history. What were the origins of this great project? A seed of sorts was sown back in 2009 when the then community leader had a conversation with archivist Damien Cash about the need to upgrade the porches of the church and at the same time to consider some form of public recognition of the historic nature of the St Francis' site beyond the church itself. This prompted Damien to suggest that commemorating the neglected Fr Geoghegan would be highly desirable, but for one reason or another the idea ended up on the back burner.

It was a Twitter-length email from Neil Austin in 2014 that got things going again. On 4 October in that year he sent a greeting around the Province on the occasion of the 173rd anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone at St Francis'. In response Jo Dirks proposed installing a memorial plaque for the 175th anniversary, provoking Pat Negri in turn to put the case for a much more substantial form, like a statue.

The PLT endorsed his proposal and a committee consisting of Pat Negri, Damien Cash and Sr Rosemary Crumlin was formed to carry it forward. Damien Cash embarked on an extraordinary piece of research into Geoghegan's life and appearance. Much to his surprise, he discovered that all of the known illustrations and artistic portraits of Geoghegan appeared to be directly or indirectly derived from one authentic photograph of Geoghegan, which had possibly been taken in Europe in 1864, not long before he died. This solitary image, along with other historical records and advice from experts, formed the basis for the sculpture. On the recommendation of another well-known Melbourne sculptor, Darien Pullen was commissioned to create the figure, and the splendid fruit of his labour is now on display for all to see.

Back to some of the highlights of Sunday's event. The Feast of Pentecost Sunday on 4 June had a double significance. It was on that liturgical feast in 1839 that Fr Geoghegan celebrated the first public Mass in Melbourne and, as Ken Boland pointed out, it was in 1858 (on 4 June) that Mary MacKillop was confirmed at St Francis' by Bishop Goold. In welcoming everyone Ken conveyed apologies from the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, the Irish Ambassador in Canberra, and the Moderator of the Uniting Church in Victoria and

Tasmania. He also lamented the absence of Pat Negri whose untimely death last year prevented him from seeing his inspired idea take shape.

In his occasional address Matthew Beckmann OFM traced Fr Geoghegan's journey through life until his ministry in Melbourne. After a childhood that included years in a Protestant, then a Franciscan, orphanage, he left the grey chill of Ireland for the sunny climate of Portugal to study for the priesthood. Remarkably, in coming to Australia he succeeded in leaving behind the bitter sectarianism and anti-Irish bigotry of the United Kingdom. He eventually arrived in Melbourne breathing a free spirit of inclusion and respect for all. This was reflected not only in his building a "plain commodious" church suited to the early Melbourne community but in his establishing a school that was open to all and his involvement in a committee that led to the founding of Royal Melbourne Hospital.

Sculptor Darien Pullen paid tribute to Pat Negri for his wise guidance and to Damien Cash for his forensic research into Geoghegan's life. He explained that in sculpting Geoghegan he tried to capture his subject's character as an active, open, warm and generous man. He made Geoghegan's arms stretch out in welcome (not asking for money!), one foot stepping forward slightly, and his face showing a hint of a smile. He said he hoped that the sculpture would encourage people to find out more about Geoghegan in the spirit of Pat Negri's guided tours of Melbourne sculptures.

Personal connections with St Francis' were foremost for Bishop Peter Elliott. He spoke with affection for his Anglican aunt Louise who used to come to the church to rest and pray after cleaning offices in the city. One of her daughters became a Catholic after seeking confession (and once she had renounced membership of the Communist Party!). Coming here himself as a schoolboy and university student played a significant part in his own faith journey. It was a special joy for him to celebrate a Mass for Peace here just days after being ordained during the 1973 Eucharistic Congress.

For the record, here is the prayer of blessing that Bishop Elliott offered:

Holy God and Artist of the Universe,
at the dawn of time you called all things into being
and established creation in all its beauty and wonder.
In the fullness of time you gave us your beloved Son
that in his humanity he might reveal your face to us
and in his glory send your Spirit to renew the face of the earth.
We give you thanks today
for the life and service of Patrick Bonaventure Geoghegan,
pioneer priest and leading citizen of early Melbourne.

May this statue of your servant
which we now bless + in your name
inspire who pass it by to live with his spirit of tolerance,
his breadth of vision, and his generous faith.
And may this church which he founded
ever be a haven of peace and mercy
for all who find their way here from near and far
whatever their faith or philosophy of life.

We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen

But in the end it was the Anglican Archbishop Philip Freier who made an already historic event all the more memorable. He said how glad and grateful he was to be present at “a very reconciling moment” because the first Anglican bishop of Melbourne, Dr Charles Perry (1807-1891), had displayed a lack of charity and grace in refusing to receive the welcome of the friendly and open-minded Fr Geoghegan in January 1848. Archbishop Freier’s warmth and ease certainly righted that wrong.

Fr Geoghegan’s prayer at the end of his homily at the laying of the foundation stone in 1841 was that Haggai’s prophecy – “in this place I will give peace, saith the Lord of Hosts” – would begin to be fulfilled. It certainly was on Pentecost Sunday 2017.