Abbot Torres and the complex canonical status of New Norcia

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Chapter One: The Benedictine Foundation of the Australian Catholic Church

Before embarking on a narrative of the foundation of the Catholic Church in Australia, and especially Western Australia, it will prove useful to understand St Benedict’s monasticism, its development through the centuries and its subsequent involvement in the formation of the Australian Catholic Church.

The love of God and a life dedicated to Him is the main principle of monasticism; the one that makes the experience of it a truly spiritual experience. However, the notions of solitude, contemplation and fidelity needed for a life dedicated to God were not the conception of a single man;\(^\text{12}\) rather they were the principles of a contemplative life that developed over a long period of time starting with the desert monks or hermits of the east.

St Benedict was amongst the first to introduce a unified structure, stability and a solid direction to monastic life. This is reflected in his Rule, which contains not only the teachings found in the Holy Scriptures but also the teachings of monastic fathers of the east and the west as well as other religious and philosophical teachings.\(^\text{13}\)

The Rule of St Benedict surpassed earlier attempts to set down a system for monastic life because it was actually a true rule of life. It was, and still is, an ordered and practical code of laws regulating the working of the monastery.\(^\text{14}\) It provided simple and concise legislative measures. It has been described as ‘a monument of legislative art’, ‘remarkable alike for its completeness, its simplicity, and its adaptability’.\(^\text{15}\) This last sentence brings to light two of the most remarkable features of the text. Namely its completeness and its simplicity; its deals with the important aspects of governing a monastery. It introduces theological truths in a simple and easy manner. Its adaptability has allowed it to be the single most important rule for monastic life and the foundation of many other religious Orders. The use of it in monastic houses spread outside of Monte Cassino and into the neighbouring European Countries. In later centuries, the missionary Benedictines transplanted the creed of their order to other continents, for example Africa, Asia, America and Australia.


\(^{13}\) Ibid., pp. 28-29.

Comprehensive accounts of the development and importance of Benedictine Monasticism have been supplied by many scholars. A noteworthy work is that of Dom Cuthbert Butler’s *Benedictine Monachism*. Most pertinent here is his analysis of the duties of the abbot. Dom Butler outlines the several roles and duties of the abbot; first he is Christ’s vicegerent in the monastery, he should be obeyed and loved as if he were Christ himself. Secondly, the abbot is the monks’ spiritual father and guide; thus they should develop a loving relationship like that of offspring and parent. Thirdly, the abbot ought to be a good shepherd of God’s flock, being a shepherd implies the duties of guidance and care for his monks. Next, the abbot should be like a wise physician in the manner he disciplines and deals with faults within his community of monks. He ought to be a master in both senses of the word; connoting the role of ruler and teacher. He is the supreme authority in the monastery, he should be obeyed, respected and he should establish discipline and teach his disciples the virtues of Christian life. Lastly, the abbot ought to be a wise, prudent and just administrator of God’s community of monks.\(^{16}\)

Thus according to St. Benedict, the ideal qualities of an abbot should be wisdom, knowledge of divine law, chastity, sobriety, mercy, moderation, prudence, consideration, humility and serenity. The government of the monastery is his major concern, everything depends on his will and judgement; he possesses unrestricted powers in the internal affairs of the monastery.\(^{17}\)

St Benedict allowed external ecclesiastical authorities to assist in the running of a monastery. He encouraged the Episcopal visitation of a monastery; the visit of the local bishop represented the only means to supervise and ensure that the abbot and his monks adhered to a proper monastic life. Gradually, this bishop’s visit became a regular feature of monastic life and later monasteries were subjected to a double system of visitation - the original bishop’s visitation and the visit of a Benedictine appointed by the Holy See. This was a provision introduced by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The formation of a Congregational System of Benedictine Government, whose main concern was to ensure the uniform level of observance of monastic life according to the Rule, established that either the president of the congregation, or visitors delegated by the General Chapter were the ordinary visitors.


\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp. 184- 186.
of monasteries of the congregation. This general chapter was provincial in nature and its regularity allowed provincials of the congregation to oversee the affairs of the monasteries of the province.\textsuperscript{18}

Gradually, this provincial congregational system developed a set of constitutions and guidelines supplementary to the Rule; abbots had to follow these in the same manner they were expected to follow the Rule.\textsuperscript{19} This was indeed a legitimate and workable system; the only disadvantage for abbots was that it limited the scope of their powers. By placing them as superiors amongst several higher superiors, their importance became mitigated; those above them came to represent the real and supreme authority. In St Benedict’s idea of rightful administration of a monastery, the interference of higher superiors in the internal affairs of the community led to many difficulties; mainly because the relationship between abbot and his monks was broken.\textsuperscript{20} The extent to which this system developed will be discussed below.

The introduction of delegates to visit monasteries of the province signified that these were given the powers to judge the spiritual and temporal state of the monastery. In order to achieve this, the appointed visitor had to examine the religious life, observance and discipline of the community. Thus, he was given unlimited access to studies, administration, finances and state of property. He had the power to interview monks individually; the latter had to inform him of any area that may need correction, reformation and improvement. Ultimately, his function was to see that the law of God, the ecclesiastical laws, the Rule and all supplementary regulations and constitutions of the congregation were observed faithfully. Once his visit concluded, he could make enactments to address any particular area that he considered needy of improvement and reformation.\textsuperscript{21}

The supremacy of the abbot’s office became further restricted by the abolishment of its perpetuity in an attempt to quash the dominant and corruptive practice of commendatory\textsuperscript{22} abbots, especially in Italy. This Congregational system

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pp. 218-222.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., pp. 218-222.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., pp. 222-224.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., pp. 220-221.
\textsuperscript{22} Commentatory Abbots were appointed as temporary trustees of monasteries. Theirs duties were to administer the estates of an abbey during a vacancy; in most cases they managed to retain the office for life and claimed a portion of the revenues for their maintenance. This led to serious abuses because in many cases they had no vocation, no previous experience and they had not earned the right to be
established a norm in which every office of importance held in a monastery was to last for a year only.23

Two centuries went by before an attempt was made to bring together monasteries under the central and supreme authority of a single abbot. The first man to attempt this without much success was St Benedict of Aniane in 817; his vision was to include all monasteries scattered through the Carolingian empire.24 In the tenth century in England something similar took place, but there was no real creation of a scheme of centralised government.25 These attempts were followed by the more successful ones made by the Cluniac and Cistercian systems; although each differed in relevant areas, they were both hierarchical and centralised monastic systems.26

In the thirteenth century, a large scale movement took place to modify monastic observance in Germany and England. In general terms, the systems developed by the religious houses in each country only intended to create a system to ensure that all monasteries observed the principles of the Rule, practised uniformity of life and cooperation between all monasteries.27

The most important phase of this congregational movement in monastic life was its expression in the abbey of Justina of Padua in the year 1421. Several monastic houses joined to establish a congregation; they did this by meeting in a yearly general chapter composed of the superiors or delegates of each community. These elected a committee of eight or nine delegates; the committee then appointed the president, the visitors, the abbot for each monastery together with its officials. All were to hold office for a year only and they were to be mere deputies whose actions were largely dependent on the authority of the general superior. Lastly, monks did not belong to a single house, but to the congregation.28

This congregation later embraced most of the Benedictine houses in Italy and changed its name to the Cassinese Congregation. This system of monastic national government inspired monastic houses in France and Spain, where different national conditions and the desire to adhere faithfully to St Benedict’s ideal monastic

23 Ibid., pp. 243-244.
24 Ibid., p. 236.
25 Ibid., p. 237.
26 Ibid., pp. 238-239.
27 Ibid., pp. 239-243.
28 Ibid., pp. 243-247.
organization set their systems apart from the Italian system. In Spain, monks made their profession to a house; to the monastic family of that particular house. The abbots, although elected for a short time, were really the rulers of the house and the matters of the monastery remained truly independent of the congregation’s control.\footnote{Ibid.}

In 1872, there was a division within the congregation and part of it formed what is now known as the Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance. This was a fully organised order with a centralised government and, as its name denotes, it was an order whose main aim was to return to the keeping of the letter of the Rule. It became known as the Subiaco Congregation and it was divided in Provinces that spread over several countries in Europe: the Italian, French, Belgian, English and Spanish provinces. These managed to spread throughout the world; the Spanish province for example, founded monasteries in Australia and the Philippine Islands. The Belgian Province established monasteries in Holland and the Rhineland, the French in England, USA, Argentina and the Holy Land.

The Spanish Province comprised initially the Monastery of Montserrat; the only monastery left from the Congregation of Valladolid which was destroyed by the revolution of 1831. The Subiaco Congregation was governed by the Abbot General; He was assisted by a consultor from each province and the government of each was carried out by abbot-visiters. All these remained in office for twelve years. The monasteries were governed by an abbot and his term lasted for three years and he was elected in a General Chapter.\footnote{Cardinal Domenico Serafini, \textit{Historical Sketch of the Subiaco Congregation} (Cassinese of the Primitive Observance) 1922. No other publication details available, the translator’s name remains unknown. Copy of translation provided by Benedictine Archives of New Norcia, p. 12.} Finally in 1899, Pope Leo XIII managed to introduce the abbatial system; which meant that the abbot was elected by his monks by universal suffrage, half the council was elected by the community, the important affairs of the monastery were submitted to General chapters where they were discussed and decided upon by all. A body of representatives was chosen by the community to be present at the general chapter composed of two from each monastery and the elected delegate and only four co-opted members. The president was not superior of superiors but merely the president, the monks were entirely the subjects of their abbot.\footnote{Ibid., p. 246.}
Abbot General of CCPO

Abbot Visitor of a Province
(Spanish, English, Belgian or French)

Abbot Ordinary of a monastery within the Province

Monk.

Relevant to the development of this thesis is the missionary and monastic work that the Benedictines carried out in Australia. The Benedictines arrived in Australia when it was still known as New Holland and Van Diemen’s Land; back in the first half of the nineteenth century. Initially, the Vicar-Apostolic of the London District administered affairs of the Catholic Church in the new colony. In 1819 the Mission of the Cape of Good Hope - inclusive of Mauritius, New Holland and the islands in the Pacific Territory - was established with its Bishop’s quarters in Mauritius.

It was not until the appointment of John Bede Polding, a Benedictine from the monastery of Downside, England as the Vicar-Apostolic and Bishop of Hiero-Caesarea (New Holland and Van Diemen’s Land) that solid foundations were established for the development of the Catholic Church in Australia. The subsequent development of the Catholic Church in Australia is a remarkable story; one dominated by conflicts of interest and authority, the roots of these were found in religion, politics and economics. Bishop Bede Polding set his hopes high on the development of a Benedictine Australian Catholic Church. His personal plea to the SCPF in 1840 revealed the direction he wanted to lead and the difficulties that made his pastoral and missionary tasks the more difficult:34

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32 From young age he desired to go to Botany Bay, when he was 17 years old he entered the Benedictine Order in 1811 and took his vows the following year. He was a monk at the Monastery of Downside, Somerset in England. He was Novice Master from 1824 to 1834 and Subprior from 1836, O’Donoghue, Frances, The Bishop Of botany Bay: The Life of Jonh Bede Polding, Australia’s First Catholic Archbishop. (Angus & Robertson Publishers; London, Sydney, 1982) pp. 2-4.
In Australia, our Ecclesiastical Establishments are in their infancy—Church Revenues we have none—whilst the necessity of providing a Seminary without delay, presses upon us with greater force from the very circumstances in which we are placed.\[35\]

This Seminary had a crucial role to play:

Our Seminary is intended to supply Missionaries to a country immense in extent, wherein are thousands of uninstructed Natives in the lowest state of barbarism; thousands of Catholics without the sacramental means of salvation; numbers of well-intentioned individuals prepared to embrace the truth. In our Archdiocese we have only 25 priests, in an extent of country of 1500 miles in length, and many hundreds in breadth, having throughout a scattered population. Double that number would not suffice.

Your are invited to assist in giving permanent existence to the Church of Australia. This can only be effected by the institution of a Seminary. And it would appear to be in the sweet designs of Providence, that just at the time when the ruins (sad emblem!) of the first Monastery of SS. Peter and Paul of the Holy Order of S Benedict, erected at Canterbury by the Blessed Augustine and the Monks who accompanied him to labour in the conversion of our Pagan Ancestors..... it would appear, I say, that we should endeavour to transplant that same Holy Order, in which We have been nurtured, to the far distant climes of Australia.\[36\]

J. Molony in *The Australian Hierarchy and the Holy See, 1840-1880* outlined the factors that made Bishop Polding’s dream, only a dream. Actually, he called this vision a myth and its failure was due to the lack of Benedictines; the English Congregation could not afford to supply the men and obtaining Benedictines priests from other congregations proved ineffective. There was also the secular nature of the clergy, mainly Irish, then present in Australia and the prominence of the English Protestants.\[37\] Finally, Molony wrote:

It was already an anachronism even in the mid-nineteenth century to try to build a church on the framework of Benedictine Monasticism. In 1852 Rome flatly refused Polding’s request that the archbishops for the see of Sydney would always be chosen from the Black Monks. It was clear recognition of an historical fact. The great days of Benedictine monasticism would never be repeated even in Australia.\[38\]

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\[35\] Ibid., p. 125.
\[36\] Ibid., pp. 126-127.
\[38\] Ibid., p. 178.
One major concern of the Bishop Polding was the growing demand for Catholic priests in the Swan River Colony in Western Australia. To cater for the spiritual needs of the Catholic settlers in such desolate part of Australia, he requested help and reinforcements. Only then could he afford to dispatch priests to different parts of the country. Western Australia saw the Irish Reverend John Brady, who had arrived in Sydney on 1838, appointed as its Vicar General. He set foot in Fremantle on 8th December 1843.

Soon after his arrival, Brady sailed to Rome in order to make a direct request for missionaries and financial assistance. While there, he was consecrated Bishop of his Diocese and consequently he was introduced to several religious men and women who had previously professed profound interest in missionary work. Amongst these were the two Spaniards who would, within a short period of time, prove to be chief contributors to the growth and consolidation of both missionary and religious work in the state.

The subsequent development of the Australian Catholic Hierarchy is essential for an understanding of the future role of New Norcia. The Perth diocese included all of Western Australia. It was a “suffragan” of the Archdiocese of Sydney. The whole of Australia was one ecclesiastical province with one Archbishop in Sydney until Melbourne became an Archdiocese in 1874. Melbourne had four suffragans: Ballarat, Sandhurst, Adelaide and Perth. In 1887, Adelaide became an archbishopric and its suffragans included the dioceses of Perth and Port Augusta. This ecclesiastical arrangement lasted until 1913 when Bishop Clune of Perth became the Archbishop of Perth; the diocese’s suffragan circumscriptions were Geraldton, the Abbey Nullius of New Norcia and the Prefecture Apostolic of the Kimberley. In 1971, a major part of the territory of the abbey nullius of New Norcia was returned to the Archdiocese of

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40 Ibid., p. 67.
41 D. F. Bourke, The History of the Catholic Church in Western Australia (Vanguard Service Print; Perth, 1979) pp. 9-10.
42 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
44 This information was taken from section entitled: ‘Ecclesiastical Status of Western Australia in Martin Griver’s Time’ in L. J. Goody. Martin Griver: Second Catholic Bishop of Perth (1814-1886). An Appreciation to Commemorate the Centenary of his Death. (Catholic Archdiocese of Perth: Perth, 1986) p. 44.
Perth, in 1982 the rest of the territory was incorporated into the Archdiocese and the New Norcia was no longer independent of its Diocese.

New Norcia’s special status of Abbey Nullius connoted a privileged position. Abbey is another term used to refer to a monastery. Nullius comes from the Latin and means ‘of no diocese’. Thus, an abbey nullius is an abbey that has territory exempt from the jurisdiction of the local bishop. Its standing is equivalent to that of a diocese. The Abbot Nullius fulfils the responsibilities of a bishop, even if he is not consecrated a bishop by Roman officials. He is a religious prelate assigned to govern his abbey, and also the clergy and laity of a territory that is separate from any diocese.\(^{45}\)

The SCPF is another organisation within the Roman Catholic Church which has had a direct function in the development of the Australian Catholic Church. It is the Department of the Roman Curia concerned with the direction and administration of the missionary activity of the Church. A commission of cardinals established by Pope Pius V in 1568 and Gregory XIII in 1573 for the Orient and later expanded to include the evangelization of Protestants in Europe. Pope Clement VIII in 1599 named the commission Propaganda Fide and enlarged the importance of this commission of cardinals. In 1622, Pope Gregory XV created the Congregation of Propaganda Fide by the bull ‘Inscrutabili Divinae’. In the beginning its competence was very broad, it embraced all matters relating to missionary activity, the only limitation for the commission being that particular serious affairs had to be referred to the Pope. In 1908 its powers were modified by Pope Pius X; he restricted its competence in regard to extent of territory, matters of faith, matrimonial cases, the disciplines of the sacred sites and religious missionaries. Pope Paul VI gave it the present name when he reorganized the Roman Curia in 1967. Its responsibilities include the direction and coordination of evangelization of all peoples and missionary cooperation throughout the world. It fosters missionary vocations, cares for the education of catechists and clergy, it supervises the establishment of churches as well as the delineation of territorial boundaries for future dioceses and organizes distribution of subsidies for missionary work.\(^{46}\)


Being a Benedictine Missionary and later a Monastic institution meant that New Norcia had a dual role; namely that of observing the principles of monastic life in accordance with the Rule of St. Benedict and fostering its growth. Its missionary role included pastoral care and the evangelization of Aboriginal peoples in Western Australia. This function was supervised and dictated by the constitution of the SCPF. In addition to these roles, its canonical status of Abbey Nullius implied that it was immediately subject to the Holy See; however its canonical union with the SPCCPO in 1900 meant that New Norcia’s abbot had limited powers to exercise his office, for he was immediately subject to the Abbot Visitor of the Spanish Province and to the Abbot General of the CCPO. The above will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.

Had Dom Rosendo Salvado given up his desire to enter the priesthood, when the liberal Government of Spain in 1835 decreed the suppression of all religious orders, and had he not followed his calling by becoming a monk in the Monastery of La Cava, New Norcia would have a different history if any at all. He met his friend Dom Joseph Serra in those turbulent years and together they went to offer their services to the SCPF; together they sailed to their destination, what was then called the Swan River Colony in Western Australia.\(^\text{47}\)

Their arrival in Fremantle and their stay in Perth for a few weeks allowed them to witness the abiding attitudes towards and the treatment of the Aboriginal peoples by authorities and European settlers. The Spaniards’ experience of such injustice increased their anxiety and desire to initiate their labour with the Aboriginal peoples. They thought it best to withdraw from town life and work with the untouched tribes of the uninhabited inland areas of the colony.\(^\text{48}\) After many trials and instability they found a suitable place by the Moore River called Maura. They called it New Norcia in memory of the birthplace of St Benedict.\(^\text{49}\)

Amongst the difficulties they encountered there were several that could have discouraged them to continue. The difficulties were the lack of considerable material resources to meet their missionary needs; the language barrier between them and the

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\(^{47}\) Birt, p. 469. Salvado and Serra were members of the monastic community of St Martin at St James of Compostela, escaping persecution and following their calling they took refuge in the Italian Cassinese Abbey of La Cava, near Naples.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., pp. 470-471.

\(^{49}\) Birt, p. 478.
aboriginal people they intended to civilize. They had no safe residence or the means
to build adequate housing. They had no means of fast or reliable communication, no
means of transport, Perth was 82 km away and there was no road in between. They
had limited human resources and a limited knowledge of the land and its inhabitants.
Regardless, they continued and their will and perseverance enabled them to overcome
each one of these obstacles to the best of their capabilities.

Salvado’s long term vision has been comprehensively summarised by
McMahon in the following points. Salvado required land in which he could grow the
crops and take care of the livestock needed to supply enough food to feed the
Aboriginal people he wanted to attract for his mission. This he achieved to an extent,
for he acquired the land and saw many successful harvesting years, but the Aboriginal
people were not entirely persuaded to settle in the mission or its surrounding areas. He
envisioned orphanages in which he could inculcate the Christian faith and educate the
young. He hoped to achieve a Christian native farming settlement, New Norcia would
act as the administrative centre by providing support to the Aboriginal farmers. He
wanted to make reliable labourers out of the Aboriginal people, he would pay them
for their work and provide support. Lastly, Salvado wanted to see the growth of the
religious community by establishing a native priesthood, thus enabling Aboriginal
priests to preach and spread the gospel of God to their own people. It is not
surprising then, to see Father E. J. Stormon describe Salvado’s as ‘first and foremost
the apostle to the aborigines’.

Most historical works on Salvado’s New Norcia have concentrated on a
glorifying study of his life’s work. In a publication by the BCNN in 1936 entitled New
Norcia: Historical Guide to all its Institutions, Salvado’s period (1846-1900) is
referred to as pre-eminently the “missionary stage which corresponds to the
foundation and consolidation of New Norcia as a Mission for the Australian
Aborigines”. Salvado is described as “the man who was its soul and driving
power”. The community’s life is described in the following paragraph:

Under the circumstances these intrepid labourers could not for many years bind
themselves down to strict monastic routine. Theirs was rather a patriarchal kind of
life. They followed to the letter the Rule of the holy Patriarch St. Benedict, as

Press LTD; Perth, 1943) pp. 5-7.
51 New Norcia: Historical Guide to all Its Institutions. Compiled and Illustrated by Monachus. (The
Benedictine Abbey, New Norcia; Western Australia, 1936) No page numbers.
52 Ibid.
embodied in and interpreted by their father and leader, whom they revered and loved. Most of their time was spent in the open air; yet a monastery had to be provided for them.\textsuperscript{53}

New Norcia was an impressive flourishing settlement as early as 1855 and this statement can be illustrated by a report of a magistrate of Toodyay.

Extensive improvements have been carried out in this neighbourhood (or New Norcia), and several substantial buildings erected since my last visit. An excellent mill, likely to be of great service to the district, a barn, stock, yards, perfect fences of immense strength, also a large chapel with a large bell frequently heard at a distance of 15 and 16 miles. The establishment consists of 40 men, blacksmiths, carpenters, ploughmen, etc. The father got about 150 acres under crop. Their ploughs, each worked by two bullocks, are about 150 lbs, and if I may judge from the appearance of the crops, I should say they are most efficient.\textsuperscript{54}

During this period he managed to obtain a post office, housing for the few Aboriginal people living in the mission, he established the two orphanages for Aboriginal children.\textsuperscript{55} His achievements for the improvement and continuation of monastic life included first his success in persuading the Cassinese Congregation of his Order to reserve six places each year in their novitiate at Subiaco for young Benedictines destined for New Norcia. He was instrumental in the passing of the decree in 1867 that enabled New Norcia to become a Prefecture Apostolic and Abbey Nullius independent of Perth. This meant that all future Benedictine establishments in Western Australia were to come under his leadership for he was made Abbot of New Norcia for life. Lastly in 1899 he brought about the Canonical Union of New Norcia with the CCPO under the division of the Spanish Province.\textsuperscript{56}

The history of New Norcia is long and rich and understanding the community's significance at all levels requires an understanding of its long standing history. It is a religious community that was founded in the nineteenth century in Colonial Western Australia based on the a mode of life that had its origins in Medieval Europe. Without an understanding of the significance of St Benedict and his Rule for monastic life, one could not understand what the founder of New Norcia and his successors set out to do in New Norcia. This chapter has looked at the

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Eugene Perez. *Dom Salvado's New Norcia: An Account of His Mission in Western Australia 1846-1900*. (Published in 1970, no other publication details given) p. 108.
\textsuperscript{55} New Norcia, Monachus.
development of Benedictine Monasticism, the role of the Abbot, the Abbot Visitor and the development of a Congregational system of monastic government. All in an attempt to understand the history of the BCNN in Western Australia and its development. It is expected that an understanding of these aspects will facilitate an understanding of the topic of this thesis.

**Status of New Norcia in 1851 as established by SCPF and the CC**

![Diagram of Status of New Norcia in 1851]

**New Norcia in 1859 by decree of CC**

![Diagram of New Norcia in 1859]

New Norcia- Salvado appointed Apostolic Administrator of New Norcia Mission and declared a Benedictine Monastery
New Norcia in 1864

Holy See

CC

Abbot Visitor of CC

Perth Diocese

New Norcia
Mission and Monastic House

New Norcia in 1867

Holy See

CC

Abbot Visitor

New Norcia becomes an Abbey Nullius
(a Diocese in its own right, completely independent of Perth Diocese)