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Abbot Torres and the complex canonical status of New Norcia

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Chapter Three: An Unsuccessful Resignation

In all, my satisfaction will be great the day I can see myself free from this obligation, because if the moral responsibility is big, the material one is not insignificant. Several millions constitute the value of this mission.- May the lord grant me success to continue with the work of the unforgettable Bishop Salvado.¹¹¹

(Abbot Fulgentius Torres, 1908)

That Abbot Fulgentius Torres was inclined to resign after five years of government of the BCNN can be partly justified by the many difficulties he encountered. On one side, there were the problems caused by the nominal union of New Norcia with the SPCCPO; a dependence that he and his community deemed problematic for the progress of the monastic life in New Norcia. Distance and conflicts with Spanish provincials were the major factors that made this union ineffective. He was the Abbot of New Norcia; a superior who, in theory, was on equal footing with the rest of the Provincial Superiors, but who in reality had no equal say on Provincial matters. On the other hand, back home in New Norcia he was the Abbot Nullius; he was responsible for the spiritual care and guidance of his community of monks, Aboriginal people and European settlers. It is the objective of this chapter to discuss the reasons for his attempted resignation and the reaction of Benedictine Officials to these. These will be discussed in relation and opposition to the relative success he was achieving simultaneously in securing the spiritual and physical growth of his diocese.

For the thirteen years that Torres governed New Norcia, the community saw many changes and new responsibilities were added. The most obvious and lasting of Torres' contributions to the growth and continuation of the community is embodied in the architectural monuments still extant in the town of New Norcia. The buildings of New Norcia stand erect as monuments of a period and of Torres' and his community's contribution to the social, religious and educational significance of the town.¹¹² The schools for white children, namely St Gertrude's and St Ildephonsus' colleges, opened in 1908 and 1913 respectively, became associated with prestigious and excellent education. St Joseph's and St Mary's orphanages dedicated to the education and upbringing of Aboriginal children represented one of the many ways in which the BCNN continued to carry out its original task of missionary work. New Norcia continued to be a center of missionary work and monasticism. Torres managed to

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp.7-8.

change the community from within itself; he modified certain aspects of it and restructured areas of its administration. He was deeply aware that this was necessary because the best instrument to achieve spiritual and material stability for his community depended on a virtuous and genuine group of monks.¹¹³ He is also most notable for his direct involvement in the exploration and surveying of territory in the north west of Western Australia in 1906; a venture that culminated in the foundation of a mission for Aboriginal people in 1908.

Taking the above into consideration, it is hard to see a man like Abbot Torres attempting to resign the position that he so willingly accepted in 1901 and that had earned him respect and admiration from his peers. However, there is an obvious relation between the problems that originated from the complex canonical union of New Norcia and Torres' desire to resign. As discussed previously, these problems placed a great deal of restraint in the way Abbot Torres was able to govern his monastic household. Initially, his resignation was handled by Mauro Serafini, Abbot General of the CCPO.¹¹⁴ It seems that it was upon Abbot Torres' persistence, that the matter was then discussed in the Spanish Provincial Chapter held in 1908; there all Provincial Superiors examined Torres' motives for a resignation and agreed that it was highly inconvenient and impossible to allow him to resign.¹¹⁵

It has only been possible to learn the motives of Abbot Torres' desire to resign through the letter from the Abbot General, Mauro Serafini, to Abbot Torres. Serafini started the letter by saying:

I communicated to Monsignore Archbishop the matter that you write to me about in your last letter and now I let you know briefly his and my observations regarding the proposed resignation.¹¹⁶

The Abbot General identified the special status of New Norcia and the terms under which Torres was entrusted with its government:

¹¹² Refer to chronology

¹¹³ 'Far off activities were greatly reduced, and a number of Priests was secured gradually to take over the office of the Choir from the aged Brothers, who up till then in their fervour had kept up the daily recitation of the Liturgical Prayer'. *New norcia: Historical Guide to all its institutions. The Local Decrees to the Benedictine Community of New Norcia*, Archive No. 01719 from 1901-1908, Abbot Torres introduced several minor, but significant changes to routine of prayer, festive days, meals, work and added restrictions regarding the liberty to talk to those outside the monastery.

¹¹⁴ Archive No. 01673, Abbot General Mauro Serafini, Rome 22nd October 1906, in Italian.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., Abbot General Antonio Ma. Marcet of the Spanish Province of the CCPO, Subiaco (Rome) Sta Scolastica 12th and 13th of November of 1908.

¹¹⁶ Abbot Mauro Serafini, p. 1

It is a regular abbey, a prelature Nullius, a mission; it was entrusted to you for only five years or so, in the prime of youth. The deceased Bishop Salvado placed his trust upon you,...¹¹⁷

Further he informed Abbot Torres that in order for his resignation to be granted, his motives should be necessary and persuasive. The two main reasons behind his resignation were his health and the state of antagonism between Torres and the superiors of the Spanish Province. The Abbot General's response to these motives was that they were not persuasive or serious enough to make his resignation valid.¹¹⁸ He offered some alternatives for Torres in case his health deteriorated; he also attempted to make him realise that a life of hardship:

'is an inherent aspect of the life of sacrifice that you willingly embraced, and it would be childish to believe that your lordship is now afraid of giving it up for God and for your neighbour the life to which you consecrated yourself, when you gave yourself to the missionary life'.¹¹⁹

Thus, this health reason does not seem to me to justify your demand- by the rest I do not intend to say that you should end your life so fast for the position, neither your superiors nor the Holy See will deny you the opportunity to take some repose- this is the response that is usually given to similar demand.¹²⁰

Regarding the difficulties he had with the Superiors of the Spanish Province, Abbot Serafini judged this motive to be even less persuasive. He made it clear that Abbot Torres had no motive to complain about the way in which his demands were met in the Provincial Chapter because they were doing whatever they could. Moreover, Serafini affirmed that there were no obstacles that could prevent him from carrying out his work in New Norcia.¹²¹ The Abbot General was dismissive of Abbot Torres' proposed resignation. However, he was still sympathetic and understanding, for he encouraged Torres to continue by saying that 'in difficulty one needs to show virtue and the strength of the soul'.¹²² Further, he suggested that it would be better to discuss the matter in person in 1908, when the Spanish Provincial Chapter was due to take place.¹²³ Serafini warned him of how proceeding with a petition of this nature could affect his reputation and that of the congregation. It was not only an untimely demand,

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.2.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

¹²¹ Ibid., pp.3-4.

¹²² Ibid., p. 4.

but one that had to obtain the vote of the Spanish Provincials so that it could then be submitted to the Holy See.¹²⁴ Finally, the Abbot General had this to say:

As a matter of fact, I reassure you that in Rome and particularly the Pope is very much against resignations of no evident utility. So that you would probably find the risk of getting a negative answer, and instead your reputation of commitment to a life of sacrifice will be damaged.¹²⁵

In 1908 he met the same reply from the Superiors gathered at the Provincial Chapter of the Congregation held in the Monastery of St. Scolastica in Subiaco. The Abbot General of the Spanish Province, Abbot Antonio Marcet, wrote to Torres and informed him that 'the matter was studied with true interest and without doubt everyone wished to be able to please you, but they also realised, and it was a unanimous decision, that it was not only inconvenient but also impossible at least for now'.¹²⁶ They realised that in order for it to be finalised it had to be submitted to the Holy See, but it could not be submitted to the Pope because it was not persuasive enough to be considered valid. They recalled other cases in which the circumstances were far more serious and the Holy See denied the resignation. They took into consideration the effect the resignation would have on the enterprises then recently undertaken by Torres, namely the Drysdale River Mission, and they felt that it would create a bad impression in Australia.¹²⁷

Just like the Abbot General in 1906, the Provincial Superiors showed the same sympathetic approach to the issue of his health. They agreed that he could go to Europe and take a long break from the affairs of the monastery to recuperate and regain his strengths in case it became necessary.¹²⁸ Abbot Marcet, as the spokesman of the Provincial Chapter, reassured him that he had their support, help and best of wishes in any matter.

There is now no way of knowing with certainty how bad Abbot Torres' health was or of knowing how it deteriorated with the passing of his time in New Norcia. In a letter to Abbot Deas of December 1907, he informs him of the many tasks and happenings in New Norcia and towards the end of the letter he added that 'thanks to God I find myself in sufficient health to attend the places where the obligations of the

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

¹²⁶ Abbot Antonio Marcet, p. 3.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

Nullius call me'.¹²⁹ However, there is another minor indication of how often he got sick in the article written by Dom Roberto Bas in 1915 after Abbot Torres' death. Dom Bas wrote that 'on the 26th of September, after leaving the refectory at night, he [Abbot Torres] felt sick and he suffered from serious pains and terrible vomiting until the next morning. And because he had found himself in similar situations before, he did not pay much attention to it, and he thought that it would go away by taking some home remedies'.¹³⁰

It is almost impossible to know now the extent to which his health interfered with his work and the extent to which, in Torres' mind, it was a valid motive for a resignation. However, from his achievements and success in administering the BCNN, it can be argued that he put his health to one side and he set his energy and ambitions in making it a great centre of missionary, educational and religious life. His scope of success extended well beyond New Norcia and into neighbouring towns and into the North West. Either way one may look at his motives for a resignation, it is obvious that he was a good abbot and apostolic administrator, for in his government he targeted those areas that needed improvement (monastic practice, pastoral and missionary care in the diocese). In the area of education alone, he deserves great recognition

¹²⁹ Letter, No. 2, dated 31 st December 1907, pp. 3-4.

¹³⁰ *Revista Montserratina*, p. 41.