

# *History of Coolangatta - Tugun Catholic Parish*

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A Timber Cutter, who in the 1840's penetrated the scrubs of the Nerang River seeking cedar and pine, named Coolangatta after a small vessel wrecked on this coast on the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1846. The place is well named if those are right who say that Coolangatta is the aboriginal word for "splendid view".

*When he came here to lay the foundation stone of St. Augustine's on Easter Monday, 1925, Archbishop Duhig said that as he looked around and saw "the beautiful combination of land and sea" he was convinced that "no better place than this could be picked for a church". Referring to the Saint who had been chosen as patron of the new church the Archbishop looked back more than 1500 years to the death of Augustine's mother at a house overlooking the sea at Ostia. It is Augustine himself who described it ever so vividly in his confessions. Monica fell into the faint which preceded her death just after she had shared with her son an experience which was to remain with him for the rest of his life.*

*"She and I stood alone leaning out a window, which looked inwards to the garden within the house where we were staying, at Ostia on the Tiber; for there we were away from everybody, resting for the sea voyage from the weariness of our long journey by land.*

*There we talked together, she and I alone, in deep joy; and forgetting the things that were behind and looking forward to those that were before, we were discussing in the presence of Truth - what the eternal life of the saints could be like. When we talked of these things the world with all its delights seemed cheap to us in comparison with what we talked of".*

The birth of the Catholic Parish of St. Augustine's Coolangatta was in 1924 with the appointment by Archbishop Duhig of Father Leo Carlton as first parish priest.

There was no Catholic Church in the town in those days and Father Carlton said his first Mass in the town at the surf pavilion at Greenmount on Rosary Sunday, October 6th, 1924. The altar and the vestments for the occasion were loaned by Mother M. Teresa, Superior of the Ursuline Nuns at Tweed Heads. Altar boy on this memorable occasion was James Josephson.

During the following week through the courtesy of the local council, permission was obtained to hold Mass in a hall attached to the Council Chambers. Mass was celebrated in this hall every Sunday until the Capitol Theatre was opened.

On the completion of the Capitol Theatre, the proprietor, Mr. J.M. Cahill, allowed Mass to be said in the theatre on Sundays and Holy Days for the two years while arrangements were being made for the building of the Church.

In the meantime Archbishop Duhig had purchased land fronting McLean, Tweed and Dutton Streets, at a cost of 3000 pounds. 500 pounds of this had been donated by Archbishop Duhig, and he was glad to say it was all free of debt. To Father Carlton fell the job of planning for a church and school on the site.

The plans had been prepared by J .P. Donoghue and the contract for these buildings went to Brisbane builder Henry Cheetham at a price of 9760 pounds, together with 310 pounds for furnishings, bringing a total price of 10,070 pounds. Henry Cheetham sent his foreman Charlie Birch to Coolangatta to oversee the project. Messrs. Barrett Brothers of Tweed Heads had carried out the seating and other interior furnishings. A firm friendship developed between Father Carlton and Charlie Birch, and Charlie's wife May became the organist in the new church.

The design was Italian Romanesque with a campanile rising to a height of 110 feet and seating for 800 people. On Easter Monday 1925, Archbishop James Duhig laid the foundation stone of St. Augustine's Church.

In the presence of a very large crowd and representative gathering of adherents and visitors, His Grace Archbishop Duhig performed the ceremony of the blessing and opening of St. Augustine's Catholic Church on Sunday afternoon December 26th, 1926.

The children of Mary headed the procession from the presbytery to the church, whilst about 100 members of the Hibernian Society formed a guard of honour.

Clergy present were Father Curran (Lismore, Doctor Roberts (Manly Theologian College), Father Con Hanly (Tweed Heads) and Fathers V. Roberts and L. Carlton (Coolangatta).

**'he gazed at the hill on which they were now standing and he was determined to get it.'**

In giving a statement of the finances of the church Father Carlton said "The Archbishop had conferred on the people of Coolangatta a long felt want of building a church. Father Carlton also thanked the people of Tallebudgera and Currumbin, also their non catholic friends and the Mayor and Aldermen of Coolangatta for their loyal support and assistance.

In the course of his remarks Archbishop Duhig said that the afternoon ceremony formed a fitting crown to the work of 1926. In all of his Episcopal experience he had rarely gazed upon a more beautiful scene. There met his eye a multitude of the faithful, a rapidly growing town and the blue Pacific Ocean.

He recalled the day when he first visited Coolangatta for the purpose of choosing a site. Whilst waiting at the railway station he gazed at the hill on which they were now standing and he was determined to get it.

A vote of thanks to His Grace was moved by Mr. B. W. Conaghan, and supported by Messrs. P.J. Pagan, J .M. Cahill and Mr. Justice Webb.

Archbishop Duhig acknowledged the vote of thanks and in so doing made fitting reference to the marvellous progress made in Coolangatta since his first visit.

He congratulated the Town Council for their efforts to make the town a thoroughly beautiful seaside resort.

The first Sunday Mass was celebrated the following week on Sunday 2nd January 1927. At the 7.00am Mass, the church was not large enough, and the crowds who could not gain admittance as well as the number of cars and buses parked in McLean Street were an inspiring testimony of the faith of the community.

At 11.00am a Solemn Mass was sung. Father V. Roberts was celebrant, with Fathers M. Jordan and R. Flynn as deacons, Father Leo Carlton delivered an important sermon. The music was from St. Cecilia's Mass. At the Offertory Miss Gumbleton rendered Ava Maria with violin accompaniment by Mrs. H. Erbacher. Both the High Mass and the 7.30pm Benediction service were broadcast by radio station 4QG.

Patricia Lilian Archer was baptised on the 2nd May 1925 by Father Leo Carlton. This is the first recorded baptism in the parish. The marriage register shows that the first marriage Father Carlton officiated at in the parish was held on 18th April, 1925. Their names were William Francis Higgins and Marguerite McDonough.

In 1926, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart from Kensington arrived in Coolangatta to establish their rest home and to open a primary school and boarding establishment for small boys. A few months previously, the Sisters purchased the property known as "Bymount" in McLean Street, Coolangatta, until recently the home of the Sullivan family. The property adjoined the site of the church and was admirably suited for educational purposes. Pupils were prepared for Scholarship, Teachers' and Commercial examination, piano, violin and Theoretical music and plain and fancy needlework.

Before the establishment of the parish school, the children of Coolangatta attended St. Joseph's Parish School, Tweed Heads. With the establishment of their own parish school they said goodbye to many of their friends from across the border. While regretting a drop in enrolments, the Ursuline sisters who taught at St. Joseph's were

happy to see more adequate provision being made for Coolangatta's growing needs.

The community of sisters numbered four. Sister Eucharia, Sister Mildred, Sister Edwardine (music teacher) and Sister Mary Fabian, McCall.

Local families who attended the school in 1926 were the Behm, Kean, Hennessy, Conaghan, Diamond, Markwell and Kerwick Families.

Sr. Mary Fabian McCall, one of the first nuns to teach there relates this story. "As the Feast of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, 31st May, was approaching, Father Carlton, unknown to them, asked the children to make some commemoration of it by a little gift to the Sisters. In due course Betty Behm arrived at the Convent with a cake, which her mother had baked. When she gave it to Sister Eucharia, Sister remarked: "Betty, your mother has more to do than to be making cakes for us", to which Betty promptly replied, "That's what Mum said"!

With the completion of St. Augustine's Church, Father Leo Carlton was joined in the parish by Father V. Roberts as his curate. Father Roberts officiated at his first baptism in the parish on 24th December 1926.

Gifts for the new church came from a wide section of the community. Original windows in the church were presented by Mr Dan Carlton (South Grafton); Chalice from the late Sir Neil O'Sullivan in memory of his Father, Patrick O'Sullivan and his brother Cyril (killed in WWI); Ciborium. Christian Brothers, O.B.A.; altar linens, Sisters of Mercy; sanctuary lamp, Mr. Basil Burgin; statue of the Sacred Heart, the Heckleman family; statue of Our Lady, Miss Ann Condon; statue of St. Joseph, Mr. J.E. Dolan; statue of the Little Flower, Miss Shehan. Other benefactors were Mr. & Mrs. McCafferty, church bell; Mr. Pat Maguire, first pulpit; Mr. Joe Cahill, Holy Water font; Mr. & Mrs. P. Fagan, Baptistory; Mr. & Mrs. W. Rohan, the Ajax and Pidcock families, Mrs. Drysdale, Mr. Bill Chapman, Norm Patch and Fred Coulter.

Fund raising to finance the infant parish were many and varied with Father Carlton setting the pace with an extended tour of many parts of Queensland giving lectures on the

Coolangatta area and showing of lantern slides.

Another novel way of raising funds was the sale of bricks for the new church at 1 pound per 100.

Together with the lantern slide showings and the sale of bricks, house parties, euchre parties, ping pong tournaments, dances and concerts proved to be very rewarding.

The first house party was held at the home of Mr. Frank Day and the sum of 8 pound was raised. Greenmount, Mooresbank and Grosvenor House were the venues for numerous functions.

The young parish of St. Augustine's had very heavy financial commitments but this did not stop expansion of the parish.

Many Mass centres were established in the parish. Father Carlton established a parish at Burleigh Heads as part of the Coolangatta parish, and the foundation stone of Infant Saviour Church was laid on 8th January 1933.

Father Dudley Boland, who was ordained in 1932, became assistant priest to Father Carlton in 1932.

The first Corpus Christi Procession was held in 1937. A report of the 1939 procession stated that approximately 1000 people wended their way around the streets adjacent to the Church. During the progress of the march, liturgical hymns were sung, prayers were recited, while by means of loud speakers points of Catholic devotion were explained.

In 1940 Father Leo Carlton was asked to accept the position of Administrator at St. Stephen's Cathedral, Brisbane. Subsequently Father Dudley Boland replaced Father Carlton as parish priest of Coolangatta with Father F. Douglas being appointed assistant priest.

December of 1949 saw the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart withdraw from the parish school due to their missionary work overseas. They were replaced by the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. Sisters Majella, Therese, Veronica and Hyacinth formed the

community. The existing school at this stage was two houses joined together. It soon became apparent that a new school was urgently needed, as the old one, now outmoded and crowded had served its purpose. The present enrolment was 121 children. At a cost of 21,195 pounds a new two storied facebrick modern school was built.

At Burleigh Heads, with a view to establishing a school, Sisters M. Raymond and M. Hyacinth began teaching pupils on the church verandah. Up until 1956 St. Augustine's Parish included all of what is now Burleigh Heads Parish. In that year, and after Infant Saviour Church had been built and paid for, Father Graham was appointed Parish Priest of Burleigh Heads.

#### **“Well situated to meet the demands of the growing township and Tugun and Currumbin Valley”**

Until 1956 the principle place of worship was the imposing St. Augustine's Church. On Sunday 3rd May 1959 several hundred people assembled for the dedication of a new Church dedicated to St. Augustine's mother St. Monica that was built at Tugun.

The Church, built to accommodate 150 people was of chaste design and was fully furnished by the generosity of parishioners. It stood on an acre of land, well situated to meet the demands of the growing township of Tugun and Currumbin Valley. A full statement of the movement, and expenditure amounting to 9,000 pounds was made by Parish Priest Father Dudley Boland.

Besides the priests from the Archdiocese, Father Con Hanley and a number of other priests from over the N.S.W. border were present as well as the local Mayor and Aldermen. The handsome church was designed by Mr F. Cullen, and erected by Messrs. K.D. Morris and Sons.

The first Mass at St. Monica's was offered on Monday 4th May 1959, when a large number of people attended.

December 22nd 1963 saw His Grace Archbishop Duhig bless and open the

extensions to St. Augustine's Church. The extensions included a magnificent Sanctuary and Transepts. Among clergy present was Monsignor Leo Carlton, first parish priest of Coolangatta. Father Boland said it was fitting that Monsignor Carlton should be present, "because his courage and trust in God, as well as his confidence in the future of Coolangatta, have paved the way for today's ceremony."

The latest additions had cost well over 30,000 pounds with the altar being donated by the Conaghan Family.

In 1968 Father Dudley Boland was replaced by Father Patrick Martin Brady as Parish Priest. Father Brady remained as Parish Priest until his retirement in 1993. In 1970 he enlarged St. Monica's Church by half and then by half again in 1992 as well as reorienting it on its site.

Sunday, October 13th 1974 marked the Golden Jubilee of the first Mass celebrated in Coolangatta. Hundreds of local parishioners, former residents, Government leaders, Religious and visitors attended the service that had as chief celebrant His Grace Archbishop Francis Rush. Monsignor Carlton, Father Boland and Father Brady assisted at the concelebrated Mass. Father Peter Kerwick and Father Frank Gordon "old boys" of the parish also assisted in the Jubilee Mass.

A very active parish committee, under the chairmanship of Adrian Maher had been busy for some time making final preparations for the Jubilee. A Parish Jubilee Dinner was arranged by the ladies of the parish and was served in a large marquee in the Convent School grounds on conclusion of Mass.

The final stages to the completion of St. Augustine's Church, according to original specifications was completed by Father Brady in the late 1980's. They included a new sacristy and toilets as well as a beautiful chapel erected by the Maher family in honour of Adrian Maher's late wife Norma Jean.

Soon after his arrival, Father Brady realised that the parish school would soon be outgrown. The parish school had grown from a small beginning to a school of more than 150 students. Only 10% of the students came from Coolangatta. Most came from Burleigh

Heads, Currumbin, Tugun, Palm Beach and nearby areas. With the population drift, the parish and school hierarchy realised that a change of school site was imperative.

In 1982 the Missionary Franciscan Sisters withdrew from the Principalship of St. Augustine's School. Mr. Thomas Matthews was appointed as the first lay Principal in 1983. Sadly Mr. Matthews died suddenly in 1985.

Father Brady, with his committee of parishioners, including fathers of old school pupils, began searching for a site that would be suitable to build their new school. In July 1985, the site in Currumbin Waters was found to be the most suitable and with the help of the Very Rev. Father John Lennon from the Brisbane Diocese Development and Planning Committee, the contract was signed the very day the site was found. The land was really out in 'the bush' fronted by an incomplete dirt road and guarded at the rear by Currumbin Creek.

Architect Gregory Barnes, who at that time was the St. Augustine's Parents & Friends Association president, drew up plans for the new primary school. The cost of the new school was estimated at \$750,000. It would accommodate students from grades one to seven. The maximum enrolment in the first stage would be 200 - slightly more than the number of pupils at the present site.

The school building was completed in August 1987. The big move took place in the first weekend of September 1987 in a near military style operation of precision and efficiency due to the generous support of many parents and parishioners. The grand opening was held on Sunday 18th October 1987 and His Grace Archbishop Francis Rush carried out the Solemn Blessing and Dedication. This action brought to fruition Father Brady's long held dream. In 1987 there were 147 students and now in 1999 there are 430 students enrolled.

Over the next few years Stages II, III and IIII were completed. The parish and parents had spent in excess of \$1.8M to provide what can only be described as superb educational facilities.

**'25 years as Parish Priest of Coolangatta, Father Martin Brady was going fishing'**

After 43 years of priestly service to the Brisbane Archdiocese and 25 years as Parish Priest of Coolangatta, Father Martin Brady was going fishing. He retired on 1st March 1993.

March 1993 saw the appointment of Father Leo Wright as Parish Priest. Father Leo continued this position until September 1993 when present Pastor, Father Kevin Smith was appointed to succeed him. Father Kevin, born in Ipswich, was ordained in 1986 and has had ministries at Stafford, Goodna and Redcliffe. He has been ministering to the faith community of Coolangatta -Tugun for over six years and has accomplished much in the parish during this time. A Parish Pastoral Council was formed in 1994 under the guidance of Father Kevin. The Parish vision was "To build and sustain a Catholic Christian Community for the purpose of promoting the Kingdom of God in our Society".

Looking to the future, it was decided in 1995, after consultation with the Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Finance Council to purchase property next to St. Monica's Church. Father Kevin had been approached by Catholic Social Response (now known as Centacare), a welfare and community service arm of the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, seeking a property for rent which would become a base for respite care and skills development for people with a disability. As well, it would provide holiday accommodation for those who care for the disabled. The house, now known as 'St. Monica's Samaritan Centre' was purchased for this purpose. The opening of St. Monica's Samaritan Centre by Her Excellency, Ms. Leneen Forde, Governor of Queensland marked the beginning of a new outreach of St. Augustine's Parish. The opening took place on Wednesday 2nd July 1997. Bishop John Gerry, Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Brisbane blessed the project.

At present the parish and school community has undertaken to build a pre-school, chapel and new staffroom on land situated at the present school site. The Pre-School will be completed in time to begin the new school year in 2000. Further projects are planned for the school including a multi-purpose area that will accommodate all children undercover, whether for a school Mass or assembly.

In the parish's 75th year with groups concerned with adult education, care, sacramental preparation, -' religious education in State schools. The Parish Pastoral - Council is initiating the employment of a Pastoral Associate. This was seen as a priority by parishioners in our pastoral plan of 1996. The Pastoral Associate, due to begin in 2001 will assist in the role of support education and encouragement to the many lay women and men who have roles of leadership and co-ordination in Parish Ministry.

Changing demographics, challenges of anew millennium, a sometimes indifferent society to the significance of faith, as well as the continuing needs of the marginalised, all demand a constant reflection of the parish's direction in the light of the Gospel. The foundation remains what it has always been, namely the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the generous response of so many.

(Compiled in 1999)