

Bishop James Corbett: Freeman of Limerick

James Francis Corbett, (1834? 1912), Catholic Bishop, was born at Limerick, eldest child of James

Corbett and his second wife, Catherine, née Reeves. After secondary education in France at Cambrai, he studied for



Father (later Bishop) Corbett, parish priest of St. Mary's (East), St. Kilda, 1873.

the priesthood at Bruges in Belgium and Le Mans in France. He was ordained 'for Limerick' on 29 May, 1858. For the next five years he worked in his native diocese, earning golden opinions from his bishop who was reluctant to release him to answer Archbishop Goold's appeal for priests in Victoria.

On arrival in Melbourne on 29 August, 1863, in the *Lightening*, Corbett was appointed to the St. Kilda mission and soon became Goold's right-hand man and private secretary. His parish extended over the municipalities of St. Kilda, Prahran, Caulfield and Gardiner, and under his vigorous administration developed into one of the richest in Australia. In 1876 he was appointed chancellor of the archdiocese and vicar forane.

In 1887 Corbett was chosen as bishop of the newly created diocese of Sale; he was consecrated at St Mary's Church, St. Kilda, on 25, August. Although no longer young, and not a born horseman, he applied himself to his rugged charge with undiminished vigour. He was handicapped by an acute shortage of priests. However, he established new parishes, built churches, presbyteries, convents, and schools, introduced nuns, recruited priests, and organized Catholic education in Gippsland. Honours, clerical and secular, came to him: the Papal Order of the Holy Sepulchre, the Pilgrim's Cross of Jerusalem and, in 1889, the Freedom of the City of Limerick. After 1907 he was the senior priest in Victoria, and, in 1911, Pope Pius X appointed him assistant bishop at the papal throne.

Corbett's foreign education was reflected in his appearance. Bearded, with immense dignity and a courtly manner when offering his snuff box, he impressed more as a polished man of the world than a missionary. He was, however, of ascetic habits, adding the discipline of a Tertiary of St Francis to that of a priest. He was a fine scholar with a nice appreciation of art and letters, a passion for clocks and a love of dogs. His knowledge of the rubrics was legendary and he was a recognized authority on ecclesiastical law.

The bishop was a very effective if not a great preacher, and an outspoken critic whenever he believed censure was deserved. In the debates on the Education Act, 1872, Corbett was an eloquent champion of the Catholic Church's stand against secularization of education in government-funded schools. His major contribution to the system of Catholic education, evolved in opposition to the 1872 Act, was the introduction to St Kilda of the Presentation Nuns (1873) and the Christian Brothers (1878), and to Sale of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion (1890). He was a



Father Corbett and the Windsor Presentation Sisters community in 1875.

disciplinarian, but was beloved by his priests for the support and understanding he gave them in their difficulties.

Corbett died at Sale, aged 79, on 29 May, 1912, after a hernia operation, and was buried in St Mary's Cathedral, which he had planned to consecrate to celebrate his silver jubilee as a bishop.

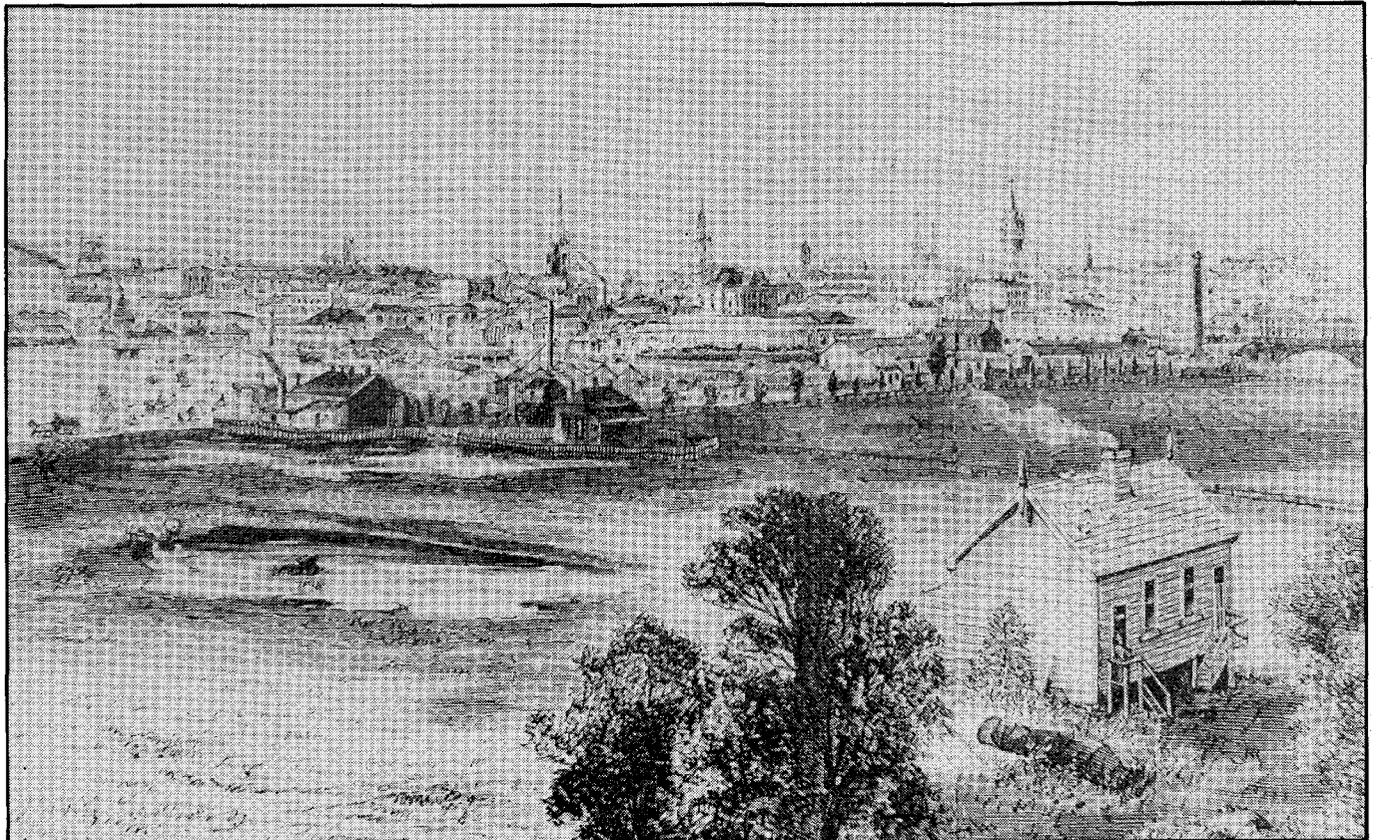
Sources

Austral Light, July, 1912; *Footprints*, July, 1976; *Advocate* (Melb), 26 Aug, 1876; 20 Sept, 1879, 18 June, 1887, 14 Sept, 1889; *Gippsland Times* 30 May, 1912; P.M. O'Donnell, 'History of the Catholic Church in the diocese of Sale'

(Bishop's house, Sale); information from Mgr. J. Daley, Warragul, and Presentation Sisters, Windsor, Vic.

Monica Starke

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Melbourne: city of churches.