

From the Diary of Bishop John Francis Norton – 1925

Inscription....

*Diary kept for my dearest Mother
on the P. & O Steamer "Mongolia"
by John F. Norton
With the Australian National
Pilgrimage to Rome & Lourdes 1925.*

30th April

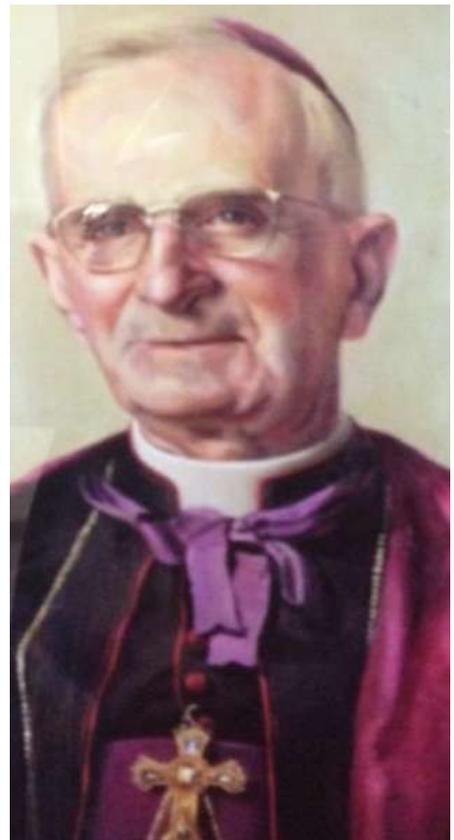
You can imagine how very grateful I was when across the calm waters of the harbour came the rich, deep notes of the Angelus bell ringing from St Lucy's Cathedral, whose graceful dome could be dimly seen rising above the palm trees on a height above the still silent city. What a wonderful thing is our faith. Here were the dark Cingalese ushering in the day with the same prayer bell as will be ringing over the silent streets of dear old Bathurst, and in every town and city where the faith has a footing. I think I said my Angelus with greater fervour than usual in response to that Cingalese bell, for it seemed sweet as the songs of one's childhood heard in a strange land.

I then said Mass and later on I went on shore to send some cables back to Australia with the bad news, I then took a rickshaw to St Joseph's College to which all the pilgrim clergy had been invited for breakfast at noon. My driver seemed very pleasant when I gave him a rupee (1/4) twice his legal fare. This rickshaw driving seems an inhuman thing and one feels cruel for allowing a human being to become a beast of burden. Then on the other hand if they are not used the poor fellows are deprived of their livelihood. So I satisfied my conscience by giving him a generous fare.

The Fathers of the College were most hospitable. The Superior and some of the priests are French, two are Irish, more are natives. The breakfast was quite an Eastern affair, with all kinds of tropical dishes. The hot curries did not appeal much to me, but I did well with the fruits, of which there was a great variety. Then we went out to the rear of the College facing a lake where it was shady and cool. There we had a little impromptu concert. The Rector sang a rousing song about his dear native Brittany, and then to our amazement one of the Cingalese priests gave us the "Croppy Boy" with as much feeling as if he had been born in sight of Vinegar Hill.

The College is a fine group of buildings, with 1300 students – a thousand of them non catholic. The majority of them are day pupils. It seems they are great devotees of football and cricket, and hold the championship of Colombo in these games for some years past.

When we left St Joseph's, we motored to St Brigid's Convent of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. All the Sisters are Irish. They have a beautiful place, built so as give them all the air and coolness possible. Poor creatures in such a climate, they would want some little comfort. We then went to another of their Convents which is beside the Cathedral. In both places I was promised prayers for the Bishop. Here I was introduced to a nun from Dublin, Nata McAuley. We then visited the Cathedral nearby. It is a beautiful building. People were going to Confession for the First Friday, the women and girls wearing white veils over their heads. The priests told me that the Natives



are very devout Catholics, and we could here see evidence of it. I noticed one woman's face. She seemed to be in a rapture - such a beautiful expression she had.

In grounds adjoining the Cathedral is a Christian Brother's College. The Boys were engaged in a very vigorous game of football. How they did it I don't know, for we were sweltering but "a boy's will is the winds will". These Catholic Colleges are doing great work, for from them come youths who are filling the leading positions in the Island, such as the Chief Justice, the Judges, etc. One thing that puzzles me is that all the class subjects must be taught in English. Neither teacher nor pupil must use a word of Cingalese. It is like the old system in Ireland - robbing them of their language. Strange to say the priests told me when I questioned them, that there is no protest against this treatment and no form of national movement.

We then returned to the "Mongolia" and about 7pm she steamed away, just as we sat down to dinner. By the time the Rosary was over the lights of the city were far away to the rear. The impression I formed of Colombo when I was there nearly ten years ago, was that it contained a very happy, loveable people, spoiled perhaps some of them, with contact with the West. This view is strengthened by my second visit. But I was not in much form for making impressions. The shadow of the Bishop's illness hung over everything. Fortunately there were several trained nurses on board and I was able to obtain the services of two - one for day and the other for night. They looked after him well and everything that is humanly possible is done for his relief.