

# Early Catholic leaders failed Aborigines

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Australia's early Catholic bishops failed Aborigines by paying lip service to their plight and not providing enough resources to help them, according to a new historical study.

The study, by UQ PhD recipient Stefano Girola, from the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, examined the policies and attitudes of the Catholic hierarchy to Indigenous people from 1885 until 1967.

“I stress the Catholic hierarchy because there were always nuns and missionaries who really were concerned with the plight of Aborigines and also tried to lobby politicians to do something about it,” Dr Girola said.

Dr Girola said the early Catholic hierarchy, with some exceptions such as Perth Bishop Matthew Gibney and Melbourne Archbishop Daniel Mannix, failed in its lack of social policy and in its prophetic role to work against social injustice.

Instead of challenging them, most early bishops mirrored the then widespread, community attitudes to Aboriginal issues.

Dr Girola said the Catholic hierarchy (between 25-30 bishops) were full of public rhetoric and support for Aborigines since 1885 but there was “no real interest” in Aborigines until the 1960s.

His research found that the Church's Home Mission Fund, created in the

1920s to support Aboriginal missions, was often redirected.

“Money from this fund was often used for other purposes that didn't have any thing to do with Aboriginal evangelisation or Aboriginal welfare.”

He said the Catholic hierarchy was more interested in keeping the faith of the mainly Irish “flock” and building churches and the Catholic education system.

Between the 1930s-1950s, Catholic leaders were more worried about containing communism than the plight of Aboriginal people.

For his research, Dr Girola searched through Catholic archives, private collections and letters between bishops and the Vatican, bishops' diaries and personal interviews with bishops, priests and Indigenous people.

He said outreach to Aborigines was a “very low” Church priority, based on the minutes of bishops' meetings between the 1920s and 1960s.

He also translated new historical documents in the Vatican about the Catholic Church's work among Aboriginal people around Sydney and in North Queensland.

They were written by a Franciscan friar and a northern Italian missionary.

Dr Girola grew up a Catholic in Milan, but is no longer practising.

The Chapel Hill academic studied at UQ on an International Postgraduate Research Scholarship after studying the history of Christianity at the University of Milan.

He has written two books, one on Italian migrants and religious festivals in North Queensland and a book interview with a Catholic missionary in Africa.

Source: University of Queensland

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