

**FATHER CON REIS AND THE MOVEMENT'S ATTEMPTED TAKEOVER OF
CATHOLIC IMMIGRATION MINISTRY:
A MELBOURNE AND A NATIONAL ISSUE, 1950-53**

Val Noone*

A Williamstown window on a wider world

On 3 March 1951, John Donovan, a Catholic layman, manager of the Migrant Workers' Hostel at the Old Racecourse, North Williamstown, wrote a confidential letter to Father Con Reis, director of the Catholic Immigration Office (CIO), about a problem with the Sunday Masses at the hostel.¹

The Williamstown hostel on the southwest fringe of the city of Melbourne housed about 1100 displaced persons (DPs) recently arrived from war-torn countries such as Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Hungary.² The largest group were the Poles. Later known as the Wiltona Hostel, Altona, it was closed in 1982.

In the saga of the post-war migration phenomenon, Donovan was writing to Reis about a small matter, but one that would turn out to have wider implications. "A few months ago," he wrote, "we had a Polish priest who was irregular in his attendance as were the times of Masses. Again, all hymns and sermons were in Polish irrespective of the fact that the congregation consisted of as many as ten nationalities." In those days, Mass was celebrated in Latin with a vernacular of choice for the hymns and sermon.

Donovan recorded complaints from other Catholics in the hostel about unfairness. The net result of this was the dropping away of all nationalities other than Polish, with congregations dwindling to as few as twenty persons, Donovan said.

While I have yet to learn details of the biography of John Donovan, I

1 John Donovan, Migrant Workers' Hostel, Old Racecourse, North Williamstown, 'Letter to Fr Rees [sic]', 3 March 1951. This letter and other papers of Father Conrad Reis cited in this article are in my possession. I intend to place them with the Melbourne Diocesan Historical Commission (MDHC). I wish to thank Mary Doyle for assistance with research and analysis; Rachel Naughton, archivist at MDHC, for research assistance; and members of the Victorian chapter of the Australian Catholic Historical Association for their comments on an earlier version.

2 Con Reis, [Notes on Skudzryk matter], n d [1950-52].

* Dr Val Noone is a fellow of the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. With Rachel Naughton he recently co-edited *Daniel Mannix: His Legacy*.

knew well Father Con Reis (1914-2007) to whom he wrote. This article is based on a set of papers which he entrusted to me. While our friendship influences my views, and thus I am not neutral, nonetheless, I aim to be objective, that is, I am willing to change my mind as demanded by the rules of evidence.

Conrad (Con) Reis was born in Albury in 1914, of German, Catalan and Irish ancestry, the second of three children of Charles Reis and Susan Parer. Educated at Catholic schools in Albury and then Xavier College, Kew, Reis studied for the priesthood at Corpus Christi College, Werribee, before being ordained for the archdiocese of Melbourne in 1939.

Two years later, at the age of 27, came a searing and life-changing appointment as a chaplain to the Fourth Brigade of the Australian Army. Reis had especially close links to the 29/46 Battalion, which included many men from Richmond, and the Fourth Field Ambulance. The men gave him the nickname, "The Little Digger". "Our unit", as he always called them, went into battle for the first time in September 1943 in New Guinea. Afterwards he said a Requiem Mass for the ones who had died. When they got back to Australia he did that for 52 years, on the first Friday in December, at whichever parish he was stationed. You will find a plaque at the back of St Columba's, Elwood, marking this link.

In later years, Reis would recall that at the end of propaganda or entertainment films shown to the troops during the war a photograph of King George VI (or was it prime minister Winston Churchill?) would be shown accompanied by photographs of US President Franklin Roosevelt and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. In the language of those days, they had fought in an alliance of democratic and socialist forces against Fascism and Japanese militarism. This is a relevant piece of background information towards understanding the rejection by Reis, and many others, of indiscriminating anti-communism.

In March 1951, when opening Donovan's letter about the problem of organising Mass for ten nationalities at Williamstown Hostel, Reis was 37 years old and in his eighth month in the job as director of the CIO, and residing at St Columba's, Elwood.

His office, which had been set up just two years earlier under Father John Pierce, was in a Nissen hut, shared with the Young Christian Workers, at the back of St Francis' Church in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne. From 1949 until 1970 Marie Toner was the only other worker in the CIO. Indeed, she had worked in that building since 1945 in an office for the rehabilitation of

war personnel under Pierce's direction; and for a time in 1953 she managed the CIO alone.³

The Catholic Church, like the rest of Australia, was striving to respond to the arrival of some half a million people in the first six years after the end of World War II. The Australian population in 1950 was around 8,000,000. Resources and attitudes were being stretched in unprecedented ways. The federal government had actively encouraged the Australian bishops to set up their Federal Catholic Immigration Committee.⁴

Foremost of the wider questions touched on by Donovan in his nuanced way was to what extent were the Government and people of Australia expecting migrants to assimilate; in what ways was the Catholic Church to adapt its liturgical and parish life for the migrants; and how to handle the range of linguistic, cultural and political histories among worshippers. These questions, which are as relevant today as they were then, were central concerns of Reis and the CIO, and also, from a different perspective, also of Mr Bartholomew Santamaria, director of the Australian National Secretariat of Catholic Action (ANSCA).

After the Polish priest had lost the support of the bulk of the hostel's Catholics, Donovan continued, a local Australian priest started coming regularly at 10.00 am on Sundays without fail, and things improved. All nationalities attended and, he noted, they "now regard themselves as Australian and are in favour of having an Australian priest".

Stepping outside his official role, but speaking as a Catholic, and asking that Father Reis "keep the text of this letter strictly confidential", Donovan concluded, "I have purposely refrained from pointing out that the Government frowns on any attempt to segregate New Australians into nationalities."

Donovan's homely, indeed heart-warming, intervention on this pastoral problem offers us a window on a local concern over the work of a particular priest, but also on wider matters of church and state.

3 Philippa Merchant, *The History, Evolution, Function and Contribution of the Catholic Immigration Office in Melbourne, 1949-1985*, North Fitzroy (Vic), Catholic Intercultural Resource Centre, n.d. [1986?], p. 2. Thanks to Brenda Hubber for directing my attention to this publication. In contrast to Reis' figure of 1100 displaced people at Williamstown hostel, Merchant said 760. This can be explained by change over time.

4 Frank Mecham, *The Church and Migrants, 1946-1987*, Haberfield (NSW), St Joan of Arc Press, 1991, pp. 23ff. The national body was known for a time as the Federal Catholic Migration Committee but, in recognition that their work was only with arrivals and not departures, soon became the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee. However, the word migration, then as now, was often used for immigration.

The priest was Father Stanislaus Skudzryk, Polish and a Jesuit, who had arrived about a year before and was based first at Richmond and then at Hawthorn. The *Advocate* said at first that during the war he had spent “several years in a concentration camp” but a later issue said that he had “worked in disguise among the persecuted refugees in the countries neighbouring Poland from 1939 to 1949”. He promoted a then new special devotion to the ‘Merciful Heart of Jesus’, also known as the devotion to ‘Jesus of Divine Mercy’.⁵

While Father Joseph Krasocki SDB (a Salesian) was the official diocesan Polish chaplain, Father Skudzryk visited migrant hostels at Broadmeadows and Somers as well as Williamstown, acting as a chaplain to Polish newcomers. Father Joseph Janus SJ then, and for decades, also ministered to Polish Australians.

In ways that are not clear, Father Skudzryk played a part in the conflict which is the topic of this paper, namely that between the CIO under Father Reis, and Mr Santamaria, director of ANSCA. As we shall see, this soon involved Monsignor George Crennan and the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee.

Some presuppositions

Remembering E H Carr’s advice that “the first concern” of one reading a work of history should not be the facts it contains but “the mind of the recorder”, I will name here five presuppositions which I bring to this study.⁶ Firstly, as noted, I am a friend of Father Con Reis.

Second, I believe that 1950s Australian Catholics have considerable achievements in welcoming immigrants, which are overlooked in some current writings.⁷ Within that framework, the phrase “New Australians”

5 *Advocate*, 28 September 1950, p 4; and 2 November 1950, p 7. In January 1951 Father Skudzryk was posted to the Jesuit Provincialate, Hawthorn. One website says that Skudzryk arranged the transport of the first picture of Jesus of Divine Mercy to Melbourne which was solemnly blessed by Archbishop Mannix on the Sunday of Divine Mercy, 20 April 1952.

6 E H Carr, *What is History?*, London, Macmillan, 1961, p 16.

7 Compare Mecham, *The Church and Migrants*; and, Michael Rafter and John Murphy, *Positive Aspects of the Australian Catholic Church Facing Migration 1969-81*, North Fitzroy (Vic), Catholic Intercultural Resource Centre, 1982. Less favourable views are in Frank Lewins, *The Myth of the Universal Church: Catholic Migrants in Australia*, Canberra, ANU, 1978; and Anthony Paganoni, *Valiant Struggles and Benign Neglect: Italians, Church and Religious Societies in Diaspora, the Australian Experience from 1950 to 2000*, New York, Center for Migration Studies, 2003.

which Reis, like the architect of the post-war scheme Arthur Calwell and others, used was at the time an attempt at constructive engagement with the newcomers, a positive step that stands despite any later pejorative use. For example, in August 1950, after a concert by newcomers at the Melbourne Town Hall, Archbishop Daniel Mannix began by introducing himself as “an old new Australian”.⁸

Third, I will use the colloquial name, The Movement, for the initially secret organisation of which Mr Bartholomew Augustine (B A) Santamaria was the best-known leader. The names of this organisation have included The Show, the Catholic Social Studies Movement, the Australian National Secretariat of Catholic Action and the National Catholic Rural Movement, and after 1956 the National Civic Council.

Fourth, while Santamaria and the Movement said that they were attacking Communists, in their day-to-day activities in church organisations, community groups and trade unions, they often concentrated their energies on opposing not Communists but social democrats, lay and clerical, whose views differed from theirs. This study offers further proof of this proposition, which is often ignored these days.

Fifth, after the Chifley Labor Party government used troops against the striking coal miners of 1948, a takeover of Australia by the Communist Party was not an imminent possibility. Those who spoke of such a danger were ignoring the available evidence, or else were distorting reality for other purposes.⁹

Santamaria's proposal to expand ANSCA

Before going deeper into the matter of Father Skudzryk and Masses at migrant hostels, let us look at two background factors which will show that this local matter was indeed more than a storm in a teacup.

Firstly, the proposal to bring the Catholic immigration ministry under

8 ‘Catholic Jubilee welcome to New Australians: delightful music and colour at Town Hall entertainment’, *Advocate*, 9 August 1950, p 3.

9 In a December 1952 letter to Archbishop Mannix, and in contrast to some of his public statements, Mr Santamaria said that the threat of revolutionary Communist takeover of Australia was past, claiming that the Movement's work in the trade unions was the determining factor: “The result of the activities of seven years is roughly that the Communist Party, at the present moment, cannot hope to seize control of Australia by revolutionary means.” See B A Santamaria to Archbishop Daniel Mannix, 11 December 1952, pp 73-79 in Patrick Morgan (ed.), *B A Santamaria, Your Most Obedient Servant: Selected Letters 1938-1996*, Melbourne, Miegunyah Press and State Library of Victoria, 2007, p 74.

ANSCA. At the beginning of August 1950, just a couple of weeks after Reis commenced his appointment as director of the CIO, Santamaria, 36, then director of the Australian National Secretariat of Catholic Action, called on him, also 36, to suggest that the Catholic church's work for migrants be made an arm of official Catholic Action under Santamaria's guidance.¹⁰ As we shall see, Reis declined the suggestion.

At the time Santamaria was accustomed to speak of a crisis in our society due to the danger of the Communist Party in conjunction with the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Republic of China taking over Australia. Moreover, like Prime Minister Robert Menzies, he spoke of the likelihood within a few years of World War III. In November 1951, 80,000 gathered at the Melbourne Cricket Ground to welcome the statue of Our Lady of Fatima in a form of Catholic devotional practice which was linked to preparing for the last days and an apocalyptic division of the world into good and evil.¹¹

In this framework, Santamaria, with the backing of the majority of the Australian Catholic Bishops, was trying to arrange not only that the CIO become part of ANSCA but also that the Young Christian Workers (YCW) and the National Catholic Girls Movement (NCGM), as well as the Newman Society of Victoria (NSV) do the same.

Indeed, in 1951, under the leadership of Father Frank Lombard, the YCW rejected an attempt by ANSCA and Santamaria to bring YCW under his umbrella, maintaining an opposition to control by Santamaria, which dated back to 1942.¹² The next year, Father Jerry Golden, Bill Ginnane, Vin Buckley, John Dormer, Jerry Fernando and others succeeded in preventing such a takeover of the NSV.¹³ In his autobiography Santamaria wrote:

Throughout 1952 and 1953 a well-organised Catholic opposition to the Movement established itself, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney. It

10 Letter from Father Con Reis to Monsignor George M Crennan, 13 Jan 1952.

11 Tim Morris, 'Into the Valley of Megiddon: Apocalypticism and Australian Catholicism 1945-1955', BA Hons thesis, Australian National University, History Department, 1973.

12 B A Santamaria, *Against the Tide*, Melbourne University Press, 1981, pp 155-162. Bruce Duncan, *Crusade or Conspiracy: Catholics and the Anti-communist struggle in Australia*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2001, pp 129 ff.

13 Val Noone et al (eds), *Golden Years, Grounds for Hope: Father Golden and the Newman Society of Victoria 1950-1966*, Melbourne, Golden Years Project, 2008, pp 11, 87. Paul Ormonde, *The Movement*, Melbourne, Nelson, 1972, pp 50-55, 135; James Ross, 'Politics of Catholics', *Overland*, Spring 1973, pp. 52-55; and Vincent Buckley, *Cutting Green Hay: Friendships, movements and cultural conflicts in Australia's great decades*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1983, pp 110-33, 242-3.

provided the atmosphere without which the eventual split in the ranks of the hierarchy would have been impossible to achieve.¹⁴

My impression is that at this time the opposition to the Movement was real but, contrary to his description, it was not well organised and lacked a public voice. As Bruce Duncan remarked, at this stage, most people in the pews and the general public were not aware of the internal Catholic opposition to the Movement.

The YCW, NCGM and NSV followed Joseph Cardijn in his insistence that “to be merely anti-communist or anti-socialist is doing nothing”.¹⁵ In this, the coadjutor archbishop of Melbourne, Justin Simonds, supported them.

At this time, a couple of years before Dr H V Evatt’s attack on the Santamaria Movement and on the eve of the Split in the Australian Labor Party, Santamaria, in a phase of hubris, had over-estimated his power. On 11 December 1952 he wrote to Archbishop Mannix that within a few years his Movement would have taken over the labour movement and there would be Movement members in state and federal parliaments. Thus, wrote Santamaria, for the first time in the Anglo-Saxon world since the Reformation, Australian governments would soon be implementing Catholic social programmes. These included state aid for Catholic schools and the settling of Catholic migrants on small farms.¹⁶ Contrary to this prediction, by 1955 Santamaria’s power within the ALP would be curtailed and his supporters would start a separate political party. Nonetheless, at this time, Santamaria was influential in both state and church. For instance, Gerard Henderson wrote:

What in effect happened was that Santamaria was accepted, albeit temporarily, as a kind of quasi-bishop who ran a political machine and reported directly to the bishops.¹⁷

However, in the years 1951-53, as if in a prelude to his loss of power in the ALP, Santamaria’s attempts to bring the YCW, the NCGM, the Newman

14 Santamaria, *Against the Tide*, p 156.

15 Joseph Cardijn, *The Hour of the Working Class*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1955, p. 61.

16 Morgan (ed.), B A Santamaria, *Your Most Obedient Servant: Selected Letters 1938-1996*, p 75. This letter had been cited years earlier in Gerard Henderson, *Mr Santamaria and the Bishops*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1982, pp 172-3; and commented on by Edmund Campion in *Australian Catholics: the Contribution of Catholics to the Development of Australian Society*, Melbourne, Viking, 1987, p 167.

17 Henderson, *Mr Santamaria and the Bishops*, p 76.

Society and the Immigration Office under his control were being thwarted.

In the meantime, Santamaria continued with his plans for re-organising Catholic immigration ministry. Sometime between August 1950 and December 1951, that is, after Reis declined the verbal suggestion that ANSCA take over the Catholic Immigration Office, Santamaria gave him a written proposal. He submitted a three-page 'Draft constitution of The International Federation of Catholic Associations', accompanied by an eleven-page briefing paper entitled 'The Work of Catholic Action among the European Migrants to Australia', which gave his assessment of political, cultural and religious affairs among the European migrants to Australia.¹⁸

The Santamaria proposal was that a federation of Catholic organisations of European migrants to Australia be created as an official movement of Catholic Action under the auspices of the bishops and ANSCA. Its stated aims were to be educational and social service. He gave it the name of International Federation of Catholic Associations (IFCA). He wrote within the framework of crisis and Communist threat mentioned above:

The migration program must be seen in the perspective of Australia's new and dangerous position vis-à-vis the new Pacific nation-states. That we will face a military challenge within twenty years is as certain as anything in the international field. ... [a] process of internal disintegration is already well advanced in Australia.

Reis kept copies of both documents along with a similar one sent by ANSCA to Catholic Young Men's Society (CYMS) branches, and the roneoed outlines of similar presentations to an unnamed Catholic university group and also to the seminarians at Corpus Christi College, Werribee.

The briefing paper – all indications are that Santamaria was the author – begins with several pages of overview of the new migrants, British, Italian and Displaced Persons, and related government policies. He then argued for increased European migration on grounds of Christian charity, national defence, development of resources and "great advantage to the cause of Catholicism". He alleged that the Communist Party and leftists opposed an increase of European migration. In several pages on the situation of European migrants he emphasised an "unbridgeable gulf dividing the attitudes of the native born Australian and the newcomer".

The Santamaria paper made a number of points in sympathy with the

18 Anon [B A Santamaria], 'Draft constitution of The International Federation of Catholic Associations' [draft A in Reis papers], 3 pp, n d {1951}. Anon [B A Santamaria], 'The Work of Catholic Action among the European Migrants to Australia' [draft A in Reis papers], typescript, 11 pp, n d {1951}.

situation of the newcomers. He put the case for tolerance of second-language speakers and foreign-language newspapers. He opposed the two-year work contract and the concept of "assimilation at all cost". Nonetheless, the paper proposed the integration of newcomers into Australian society. Special concern was expressed for the professionals among the migrants, whose qualifications were not being recognised. In addition, Santamaria said that migrant intellectuals were in danger of becoming "that very intellectual proletariat which is the never-failing harbinger of social revolution".

He wanted as many as possible of the newcomers to join his political groups and take part in their campaigns within trade unions and the Australian Labor Party, to oppose industrial militants and support increased military spending. He concluded with a premature pronouncement that "the International Federation of Catholic Associations has been formed. The draft constitution is appended."

In the Santamaria papers at the State Library of Victoria, both documents are to be found in revised form, most likely dating to mid 1952 or later.¹⁹ Among a handful of editing changes the following section was deleted:

(c) There is great advantage to the cause of Catholicism in the migration. ... If those who come are properly handled, and carefully absorbed into the Australian community with their religious beliefs intact, Catholics would not be a minority in this country for more than half a century. The results of this transformation in every field – purely religious, social, economic, cultural, political – does not require any description.

These considerations are of sufficient importance to raise the problem of policy in relation to the newcomers to the highest level of priority. This problem ranks with the problem of communism and the trade unions, or rural and regional development, and of external threat from Asia in its claim on the attention of Australians.

Also edited out was an attack by name on Dr Evatt, Eddie Ward, Clive Turnbull and Arthur Calwell. A section was added claiming that increased migration was anti-inflationary, a much-needed argument in the years

¹⁹ Papers of B. A. Santamaria MS 13492, State Library of Victoria. Box 143-2, Migration: Catholic Policies and Organizations. c 1953-1958: Anon [B A Santamaria], 'The Work of Catholic Action among the European Migrants to Australia', [draft B in Santamaria papers], typescript, 13 pp, n d, [after Passion Sunday 1952], marked "after 1952". Anon [B A Santamaria], 'Draft constitution of The International Federation of Catholic Associations' [draft B in Santamaria papers], 3 pp, n d {1952 or later}. I wish to thank Patrick Morgan for advice on researching the Santamaria Papers.

when Robert Menzies who had been elected prime minister on a promise to “put value back into the pound” was presiding over inflation and economic recession.

The later draft of the constitution of Santamaria’s proposed ANSCA-affiliated migrant body tightened up the central control aspects of the proposed organisation, making room for ANSCA to appoint native Australians to positions within the federation. It also added a reference from 1 Corinthians 12:12-35 to harmony within the Mystical Body of Christ. A major addition to the later version of the Santamaria briefing paper is a two-page section on the experiences of Polish newcomers drawn from a Polish priest, most likely Father Skudzryk. I am not sure what to conclude from this increased focus on Polish matters. The central point was that official Catholic immigration work was to come under the direction of ANSCA and Santamaria.

Reis policy: ‘moderate cultural democracy’

A second important background factor is Reis’ advocacy of a policy on assimilation known as ‘moderate cultural democracy’. This was a national policy, expressing an Australian preference against ethnic parishes and Cahenslyism. During the early years of the massive post-war migration the Australian Catholic Church faced decisions about whether or not to have ethnic parishes as had been allowed in the United States of America. The bishops sent a delegation whose composition I do not recall to study the American experience. They reported against ethnic parishes and in favour of migrants joining existing English-speaking parishes but with roving national chaplains and with Confessions and Masses available in selected parish churches at certain times in their native languages. Reis and the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee supported that policy.

In his 1953 apostolic constitution, *Exsul Familia*, Pope Pius XII spoke in favour of national or ethnic parishes. This papal letter reflected increasing Vatican involvement in migration issues linked to the setting up in 1951 of the International Catholic Migration Committee. Indeed, the Australian bishops persisted with their policy of not forming national parishes. In his book on the Australian Catholic Church and migration, Frank Mecham commented that the Australian bishops “neither agreed to change their system nor did they confront the Roman system head on”.²⁰

As part of his work as director of the CIO, Father Reis delivered

²⁰ Mecham, *The Church and Migrants*, pp 83-8. The quotation is on p 86.

occasional sermons and addresses on migration policy. In the course of preparing this paper I re-read and was impressed by his talk on Catholic approaches to immigration to the De La Salle Old Boys and was surprised to find him speaking against Cahenslyism.²¹ I had to look it up. Around the 1890s, Peter Cahensly, a wealthy German Catholic parliamentarian, proposed that the Pope divide the American Catholic immigrants into ethnic groups each with their own bishop. Indeed, the American Catholic church did not go that far but some cities did have distinct ethnic parishes. (During discussion of this paper at the March 2015 meeting of the Victorian chapter of the Australian Catholic Historical Association, Father Larry Nemer and Dr Donna Merwick spoke of their experiences of living in ethnic parishes in USA, pointing out some of their positive achievements.) A comparison of post-1945 Australian Catholic immigration policy with American Catholic practices deserves attention on another day.

Some ten months into the job at CIO, Reis delivered a major address advocating “moderate cultural democracy”, that is, freedom of cultures within adoption of English language. Talking to the Catholic Women’s Social Guild on Monday 14 May 1951, he examined five stages of American migration policy, indicated that Australia should learn from American mistakes, and urged that Australia seek “only such uniformities as are necessary for the maintenance of democratic society”. He echoed this policy in other speeches and in the actions he took.²²

Reis rejected the concept that assimilation meant “the complete loss of cultural identity on the part of the immigrant”. For him, “full freedom to various cultures [was possible] provided the laws of the land are kept” but should be “moderated by including a fairly rapid adoption of the English language”. Reis anticipated, with humour, some objections to his position. He said:

One can easily weary of the patronising foreigner or the superior Australian who tells us that we have no culture and that we are even a race of barbarians and Philistines. We are told that our Australian culture cannot rise above Comic Court or League football, and our deepest intellectual effort centres around the six o’clock closing

21 ‘Catholic Immigration’, outline of talk to De La Salle Old Boys, 18 May 1952.

22 Father C W Reis, director of Catholic Migration, Melbourne, ‘New Australians and cultural democracy: how are DPs to be assimilated?’ *Advocate*, 17 May 1951, p 11. And compare, in addition to the De La Salle talk already mentioned, ‘Opening of school year’, St Patrick’s Cathedral, 10 February 1951; [Address to and about YCW on migration], n d; ‘Talk to YWCA Interstate Conference’, 3 April 1952; ‘Catholic migration’, outline of a talk, n d, no place.

problem. ... The average Australian may not wake up in the morning singing a Gregorian motet, but he will not miss the Sunday Mass from which, perhaps, the motet was taken. ... We are a young nation; ... we have played a major part in two world wars and I, for one, am not ashamed of our origins or of our record.

In addition, he noted that in some cases the displaced persons may need to be “taught the elementary doctrines of the Church, that they keep the laws of the Church, especially with regard to marriage in the Catholic Church, and sending their children to Catholic schools”.

He suggested that Australians seeking to welcome the newcomers could find inspiration in the life and work of Caroline Chisholm, giving a succinct and telling summary of her work. (Five months later, with a volunteer lay group, Reis set up the Caroline Chisholm Guild which held fortnightly socials for all nationalities at Cathedral Hall in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, as well as conducting English classes.²³) He concluded:

By a practical – and I repeat – practical and Christian approach to the problem of assimilation, Australia hopes to achieve the ideal of one national family. As we have seen, the term “assimilation” is often used to suggest a complete loss of cultural identity on the part of the immigrant. A deeper appreciation of the values of our democratic way of life makes us realise that not standardisation and conformity, but cultural diversity within the Australian Catholic framework should be our goal. The development of Australia is only beginning. Given people, energy, wise government and Christian social institutions, there is no reason why Australia should not become really great in the not far distant future.

His overall point was that both old and new Australians need to make adjustments so that “this moderate cultural democracy will enrich the Australian way of life by adding to it new ideas as more people are added to the population”.

The publication of this speech by Reis drew positive written responses from, among others, both Archbishop Daniel Mannix and founding minister

²³ Merchant, *The History, Evolution etc*, p 6.

for immigration, Arthur Calwell.²⁴ Fox wrote to Reis: "The archbishop has asked me to tell you that the article in the *Advocate* last week was excellent." This positive response of May 1951 from Mannix contrasted with Mannix's public slight to Reis the previous August, just at the time when Reis had rejected Santamaria's verbal request to bring the migration office under ANSCA control. At the concert at Melbourne Town Hall by newcomers mentioned earlier, Archbishop Mannix thanked various people who had made the evening possible, except Father Reis, the director of the CIO, who was on the platform and a key person in the event.²⁵ Their response to Reis' *Advocate* article shows that, despite tensions over Father Skudzryk and the ANSCA attempt to control the CIO, Mannix and Fox maintained respect for Reis' insights and pastoral practices.

In this speech and other documents, as in his practice, Reis, like a good number of his cohort among the Australian Catholic clergy and lay leadership, took account of American experiments and sought to find an appropriate Australian solution. Mass schedules and formation of Movement cells were two examples of the specific challenges they faced.

Dispute over Mass schedules in context

How then was a dispute in Melbourne archdiocese about Mass schedules and the role of a Polish priest connected to the ANSCA takeover attempt and the policy of moderate cultural democracy? As activists in the trade union movement used to say, Everything is connected to everything else. Let us outline the Mass schedules issue while remembering that Reis had already said No to bringing the Catholic Immigration Office under the control of Santamaria and the Movement. Notes made by Reis at the time and my notes of later conversations with him provide the following partial account of a puzzling Movement intervention regarding Mass times and

24 Monsignor Arthur Fox, Letter to Father C Reis, 21 May 1951. Fox asked Reis to sort out about some people wanting to come to Australia and added the sentence quoted above. Reis also received encouraging and detailed comments from Arthur Calwell, former minister for immigration, Vera Russo actor and wife of journalist Peter Russo, and Paul Kersztes of Otter Street, Collingwood. Arthur Calwell, 'Letter to Father C W Reis', 22 May 1951. Vera Russo, 'Letter to Father Reis', 21 May 1951. Paul Kersztes, Letter to Father Reis', 21 May 1951.

25 See Val Noone, Notes of conversation with Father Reis, 10 September 1983. Kevin Reis, who was present and furious about what he perceived to be a public insult to his brother, was an important source of support and encouragement to Father Reis at this time.

attendances.²⁶

The difficulties and tensions outlined by John Donovan in the letter with which this article began lasted for at least twelve months with Father Skudzryk seemingly at the centre of the trouble. Problems arose not only at Williamstown but also at Somers and Broadmeadows, in each of which Father Skudzryk was involved.

Somers seems to have arisen first. Reis began his appointment on 15 July 1950 and within a fortnight Monsignor Arthur Fox, administrator of the Melbourne archdiocese on behalf of the 86-year-old Archbishop Daniel Mannix, asked him to arrange regular times for Masses at the Migrant Holding Centre at Somers.²⁷ Father Skudzryk went to the Somers Hostel on at least one occasion but when rostered there again refused to go. By the end of the year, Mr F G Wood, director of the Somers camp, notified Reis that the arrangements were not working, "We are often in doubt as to whether anyone is coming, if so what time they are arriving and time of Mass."²⁸

While the Somers difficulties continued, Father Harold Lalor SJ, a close collaborator of Santamaria, intervened to suggest that Father Skudzryk celebrate a regular Polish Mass at Williamstown. Lalor – famous for his passionate Movement recruiting speeches on the theme of "Five minutes to midnight" – had no official role in migrant matters. In support of his plan for Williamstown, Lalor claimed that Father Skudzryk had doubled the Mass attendance at Broadmeadows.

However, Reis found out from officials at Broadmeadows that Lalor and Skudzryk's claims were false. At one point Father Skudzryk claimed that 1000 people attended Mass at Broadmeadows but an officer of the St Vincent de Paul Society active at the Broadmeadows Migrant Hostel said that there was space for only 60. One of the officials there recorded that the Broadmeadows Chapel measured 7m x 16 m, containing 16 forms and 5 chairs. Sixty might have been an underestimate because, on another occasion, when the alleged attendance was 300 people the actual count was 150. However, 1000 seems impossible.

The question of Polish Masses at Williamstown kept coming to the fore and the language used became harsher, with not only clerical but also lay and secular voices both for and against Father Skudzryk. While Reis' notes

26 As cited elsewhere in this paper: Con Reis notes on Skudzryk matter; and Conversation with Father Con Reis, 10 September 1983.

27 Monsignor Arthur Fox, 'Letter to Rev C Reis', 26 July 1950.

28 F G Wood, Director, Migrant Holding Centre, Somers, Victoria, 'Letter to Father Reis', 18 December 1950.

do not record his surname, a certain Henry, a Polish layman, maintained the call for a Polish Mass at Williamstown, apparently “taunt[ing]” Marie Toner in the CIO about the issue. In March 1951, a public servant named Leo Quinn refused a request from Father Skudzryk for the use of facilities at Williamstown, for which Father Skudzryk called him a Nazi. Quinn’s ruling was backed by Mr Dunn, an inspector of migrant hostels, Mr Larkin, regional director of migration programs and Mr Guinane, group manager.

A certain Stanley, another Polish layman, said that Polish people wanted not Father Skudzryk but the return of Father Krasocki. According to Stanley, Father Skudzryk spoke to the people like peasants and named individuals from the pulpit in a way that was similar to what was done in the Polish National Church in the USA.

At this time, Poles were the largest Catholic national group among the displaced people in Melbourne. Of some 170,000 displaced persons who came to Australia through the International Refugee Organisation between 1948 and 1952, 60,000 were Polish.²⁹ Indeed, according to Frank Mecham, by 1958 17,000 Poles lived in Melbourne, nearly double the 9000 in Sydney, while 7000 settled in Adelaide and 6500 in Queensland.³⁰ Reis calculated that in February 1951 Poles made up 40 per cent of those in the hostels at Maribyrnong, Broadmeadows, Williamstown, Newport, Pascoe Vale, Fisherman’s Bend, Royal Park and Somers. Hostels at Holmesglen, Preston and Brooklyn were for British migrants. Nunawading was still under construction, he noted.

In February 1951, Monsignor Fox gave an instruction that a Polish Mass was to be held at Williamstown. The following month, as explained earlier, John Donovan wrote to Reis to say that Father Skudzryk’s Polish Mass at Williamstown had driven away Catholics of other nationalities.

However, on 4 March Monsignor Fox intervened again, this time saying that Archbishop Mannix was personally directing Reis to allow the Polish

29 Sev Ozdowski and Jan Lencznarowicz, ‘Post-war Polish refugees’, pp 623-5 in James Jupp, *Australia’s People: an Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

30 Mecham, *The Church and Migrants*, pp 65-68.

priests to make whatever arrangements suited them.³¹ That same weekend, Father Skudzryk refused to go to Somers for a Mass arranged by the CIO. And, in a confusing message, Monsignor Fox asked Reis to arrange a Polish Mass at Williamstown. Father Lalor intervened again. Reis noted that Lalor had made a trip to Queenscliff to talk with Archbishop Mannix about the Polish Masses.

Notes made by Reis at the time show that he was unable to follow Father Skudzryk's reasons for changing Mass times and insisting on Polish Masses where Mass for multiple nationalities was needed. At a meeting between Monsignor Fox, Fathers Reis, Skudzryk and Leo Ryan (a diocesan priest with pastoral involvement with migrant groups) to resolve some of the tensions, Fox said that Reis was accusing Skudzryk of lying, presumably about attendance numbers, outlined above. According to Reis, Father Ryan replied with another instance of a false claim by Skudzryk about attendances.³²

While this account comes from Reis' side only, it is reasonable to conclude that Father Lalor and Father Skudzryk had access to Archbishop Mannix and Monsignor Fox which gave them power to intervene in the affairs of the CIO at times over-riding the director, Father Reis.

At the same time, the second key context is the policy of the CIO. As far as I can tell, in regard to Mass schedules and choice of celebrants, and working with over a dozen migrant chaplains from various nationalities, Reis was consistent in applying the policy of moderate cultural democracy.

Catholic immigration ministry retains independence, but Reis loses position

By 1952, Santamaria's attempt to bring migration work under ANSCA and Movement control had become a national matter. He took his proposal to the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee.

On 9 January 1952, Monsignor George M Crennan, Sydney-based secretary of Federal committee by appointment of the hierarchy of Australia,

31 Archbishop Mannix to Monsignor Fox, before 4 March 1951. This letter was held by Fox but copied by Reis with Fox's permission. Mannix wrote: "I understand the Polish priests have some difficulty with Fr Reis about the arrangement of their Masses. I am surprised because I arranged some time ago that these priests were to make their own arrangements as they should know best what could and should be done for the Poles. Let Fr Reis know that that decision stands and that on March 4th and following Sundays it is not to be departed from. Of course Fr Reis is quite free to make representation to me if he finds there is need for any change of policy."

32 Conversation with Father Con Reis, 10 September 1983.

wrote to Reis about the ANSCA proposal, seeking his comments ahead of a meeting of the committee on 22 January.³³ Crennan, born in 1900 in Mount Gambier, held the position of national director of Catholic migration from 1949 to 1995, and is famous for living to the age of 101.

Writing to Reis, Crennan began diplomatically by saying that he had heard that ANSCA have done some good work for the newcomers by representing them to government bodies and so on. However, Crennan thought that the ANSCA proposal would duplicate work already done or about to be done by Federal and diocesan Immigration offices, and he opposed ANSCA's request for control and for funding. He stressed to Reis the need for confidentiality in his reply.

Four days later Reis wrote to Crennan with his analysis of the Santamaria/ANSCA proposal. He stressed the personal and confidential nature of his reply – “I am not speaking for the diocese.”³⁴ Reis wrote that much of the ANSCA document entitled “The work of Catholic Action amongst European Migrants to Australia” comes from “a coterie of apparently disgruntled intellectuals advising the Secretariat”. However, he wrote as if there was one author, though not named, that is, Santamaria. Among other things Reis wrote:

[This document] is a classic of presumption, ignorance or lack of information and destructive criticism. Not one constructive idea contained in the whole document unless the IFCA draft constitution could be considered constructive – rather I think, it is the height of presumption.

... The two-year contract, rather than being described as industrial conscription, should be seen as a guarantee of good work to migrants, the vast majority of whom are quite satisfied (hard cases are adjusted by local Commonwealth Employment offices) and most of whom are staying in their allotted jobs as their contract runs out. Would our advisers have preferred to let newcomers either set up quick-paying luxury industries or drift about, ignorant of language, laws and customs, to be picked up by unscrupulous employers? No human organisation is perfect and the critical tone of the “statement” must do immense harm to Catholic prestige in Government Department circles which I have found most helpful in the past.

33 Letter from Monsignor George M Crennan to Father Con Reis, 9 January 1952. As yet I have not consulted the Crennan papers.

34 Letter from Father Con Reis to Monsignor George M Crennan, 13 January 1952.

Where did the author get his information? Obviously he has not consulted official policy statements or the aims and ideals of the Citizenship Convention held annually at Canberra. Possibly he is labouring under the delusion that no other body, Catholic or secular, has thought of these things before or that they have not done much to help the plight of migrants.

Reis engaged with what he saw as an over-simplification in the ANSCA document:

... In the statement we read: "The only remedy is, of course, to bury the whole stupid idea of assimilation". Such a statement clearly marks the writer as completely incompetent to speak on migration. Gradual understanding and two-way assimilation is the heart and soul of any successful immigration scheme.

Here Reis was re-stating his position on assimilation, outlined above, namely not "assimilation at all costs" but a mutual process.

Reis explained further why he rejected the Santamaria proposal: it involved needless duplication, it reflected a lack of involvement by ANSCA, particularly its rural arm, in pastoral work with immigrants, and it was based on ignorance about the concrete practical work already undertaken by existing Catholic groups:

... In August 1950, Mr Santamaria of the Catholic Action Secretariat approached me about the formation of something similar to the proposed IFCA, complete with blue print and all, to be a "front" behind which Anti-Communist work would be carried out. This latter purpose was given to me only verbally. As his proposed scheme took in the title of this office and as he approached me on a diocesan level, I would have nothing to do with it, pointing out that they already have a movement for this purpose, rather than repeat *entia sine ratione*.

I suggested he undertake the less spectacular work of incorporating people from national groups into this worthy movement. When it comes to robbing coaches I believe in one man per coach and I still fail to see what is to be gained by the duplication of migration work unless, of course, the bishops of Australia wish our offices to fold up and the ANSCA take over these duties.

If, on the other hand, they are genuinely interested in Catholic Action, it might be good to remind them that the Young Christian Workers

and National Catholic Rural Movement (NCRM) are represented at the Citizenship Convention at Canberra and that the Young Christian Students to my knowledge are doing splendid Catholic Action work among newcomers to Australia. I believe there is a whole field of work as yet not sufficiently exploited for the NCRM in helping migrants on the land and assisting Australia back to its fundamental mission of being a primary-producing country.

Reis firmed up his case and, with humour, finished his comments to Crennan as if they were working together on a campaign:

The more I think about this proposed Federation the more I am likely to lapse into incoherence or bad language, and that would never do in writing to a Monsignor. ... With best wishes for a successful campaign.

In a short time, the ANSCA proposal was dropped. Reis and Crennan, presumably with the support of Cardinal Norman Gilroy and some other members of the hierarchy such as Archbishop Simonds, had blocked the second and national stage of the Movement attempt to take over Catholic immigration affairs.

Then came what seems at first sight to have been a setback for Reis. On 19 January 1953 Archbishop Mannix appointed him founding parish priest of Sacred Heart, St Albans. In her 1986 outline history of the Catholic Immigration Office, Philippa Merchant wrote:

Both in 1952 and 1953 the intake of migrants was severely curtailed, resulting in a decline in work for the CIO. Thus, in 1952, Father Reis applied to be transferred to a parish, and for a brief period, he combined CIO duties with that of establishing a new parish.³⁵

I had not read Merchant's account until this year and thus did not have a chance to question Reis about it. I have no record or memory of his citing the reduction in numbers of immigrants as a reason for his move to St Albans. Moreover, 80,000 people was the intake for that year, which meant a continuing need for the work of the CIO. On the other hand, my memory is that he spoke of being pushed out of his post as director of the CIO because of his clash with Santamaria and ANSCA.

As with clergy and other personnel placements, a given decision about an appointment may have several components. Furthermore, an obedient priest who was told he should apply for a certain appointment may well have done so even though he knew that the shift was due, at least in part,

³⁵ Merchant, *The History, Evolution etc*, p 6.

to other factors. Thus, Merchant may be correct about the formal record of appointment. In a recent conversation, she explained that her account was based on interviews with the then CIO director Father John Murphy, and also with Rafter, Reis and Toner. She was unaware of the background issue concerning Santamaria and her interviewees had not spoken of it.³⁶ With organisational histories, many people prefer to leave out accounts of conflicts: this may have been the case with Merchant's interviewees. Then again, at the time, Reis may have decided to leave the issue for another day. At a minimum, I wish to record that Reis told me that, in his view, Santamaria and the Movement influenced Mannix to move him from the CIO to St Albans. Moreover, he went to some trouble to leave to posterity documents about his clash with Santamaria and ANSCA.

In an intriguing and as yet unexplained twist, in 1953, as Reis moved to the western suburbs, Father Skudzryk left Melbourne, seemingly never to return.

The precise details of the events outlined above may never be known. Throughout this time Coadjutor Archbishop Simonds backed Reis. Reis also had support from Arthur Calwell. According to Reis, both he and Simonds saw Santamaria, Mannix and the Jesuits as their opponents. Yes, they had Jesuit friends but the leaders of the Australian province of the Jesuits as well as individuals such as Harold Lalor, Vic Turner, Bill Smith and Stanislaus Skudzryk were committed participants in the Santamaria Movement. In passing, it is worth recording that throughout this and later stages, Reis maintained respect for Monsignor Arthur Fox as a "kind" person.

Summary of Movement role and opposition to it

On balance, it is likely that in regard to Mass schedules and Father Skudzryk's pastoral work, as well as in regard to the proposed incorporation of the CIO into the Movement, an interlocking network of the Santamaria Movement had opposed Reis. In summary:

- At the beginning of his two and half years as director of the CIO, Reis said No to a verbal proposal from Mr Santamaria to incorporate the office into ANSCA and the Movement.
- Over the ensuing year Reis and hostel officers found that otherwise manageable pastoral problems with Father Skudzryk over Mass schedules at migrant hostels escalated out of proportion.
- Father Skudzryk had support from Father Lalor, a close associate of Mr

³⁶ Conversation with Philippa Merchant, 15 April 2015.

Santamaria.

- Father Lalor and Father Skudzryk gained the intervention of Archbishop Mannix and his administrator, Monsignor Fox – for a time – to over-rule the day-to-day authority of Reis as director of pastoral work at migrant hostels.
- Public servants and lay Catholic volunteers advised and supported Father Reis in the pastoral work of the CIO, including his handling of disputes over schedules for Masses.
- In 1952 Father Reis assisted Monsignor George Crennan of the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee, with support from Archbishop Simonds and probably Cardinal Gilroy, to resist a formal attempt by Santamaria to incorporate national Catholic migration work into ANSCA and the Movement.
- In January 1953, Archbishop Mannix appointed Reis as parish priest of St Albans.
- In the opinion of Reis these events were of a one. He experienced the problems with Skudzryk and his move from his post as director of the Melbourne CIO as resulting from his part in preventing Santamaria, ANSCA and The Movement from taking over Catholic immigration ministry. On available evidence it is reasonable to say that he was correct.
- Without going into detailed analysis here, we can deduce that Reis, Crennan and others who opposed the incorporation of Catholic migration ministry into ANSCA and The Movement acted on the basis of their pastoral expertise combined with their understanding of democratic procedures.

Epilogue: 1953-1973, a pioneering pastoral career with migrants

Father Con Reis was the founding parish priest of an 85-per-cent migrant community at Sacred Heart, St Albans, in Melbourne's west, a post he filled for twenty years with extraordinary skill and success. Starting in January 1953 with an empty paddock, the parishioners and Reis constructed fine buildings, often with voluntary labour, and a remarkable multicultural spiritual family, where people of dozens of nationalities, some former enemies in World War II, worshipped side by side, and their children went to school together. In October 1954, Archbishop Mannix, then 90, made a trip to St Albans to bless and open the church. He praised and supported the new parish and its parish priest.

Bearing in mind the Polish factor in our discussion, it is noteworthy that during the late 1950s and early 1960s, under the leadership of Reis, Sacred Heart parish and its hall were home to one of Australia's most thriving Polish religious, cultural and sporting communities. Moreover, Father Joseph Krasocki celebrated Mass there every Sunday and remained a lifelong friend of Reis.

For the six main Masses on Sunday, sermons were in English but priests of a dozen nationalities came on a rotating roster to celebrate an additional Sunday Mass, to hear Confessions and preach in their own tongue, every month or so. In his parish Reis implemented the plan which he had earlier sought to make a diocesan one.

Reis' seeming defeat as director of the Catholic Immigration Office led to a victory for pastoral care of Australia's immigrants, both by defeating the Movement takeover of migration ministry and by bringing him to St Albans. I write the latter assessment as an eyewitness – in the 1960s I was fortunate to be appointed as one of his assistant priests and learned much by working with him and the parishioners. Half a dozen other curates and a thousand parishioners will give the same report. Father Con Reis deserves to be remembered, as do others of his cohort who laboured mightily in the aftermath of World War II to make Australia a democratic and multicultural nation.