

## CATHOLIC HERITAGE

# Through a Spanish portal

## St Thomas Aquinas, South Yarra

[ Christopher Akehurst ]

How do you get to Mass on Sunday? Probably by car. Only a small proportion of parishioners these days live in walking distance of a church. That's not the case in most European cities, which are more compact, with most people living in apartment blocks. There, you might have a church next door and two or three others in surrounding streets. But Melbourne is a metropolis of urban sprawl; and even in the late 19th and early part of the 20th century and again after the Second World War, when the suburbs were being pushed out ever farther into the market gardens and paddocks on the outer fringes of Melbourne, the low density of population—with five people or so to a house on a quarter-acre block—meant that parishes had to cover wide areas and the church in the middle of the parish was some distance from most of its parishioners.

In those earlier days many people walked to Mass, sometimes travelling distances that nowadays few would dream of tackling except by car, or perhaps public transport. The half-century up to the 1930s was a time of enormous expansion of the Catholic population of Melbourne and new churches were constantly needed. The usual pattern was first to build a school with provision in the classrooms for Mass to be offered on Sunday. Then, when funds became available a start was made on a church; but that could take a long time, with not only the Depression at the end of the 1920s but a limit to the parishioners' capacity to donate, given the low salaries earned by the many Catholics in lesser-skilled jobs with large families to support. Some churches were only part-built before the funds ran out: it is not uncommon to see a large Catholic church lacking its apse (Balaclava, Carlton, Oakleigh) or spire (West Melbourne, North Brighton).

One solution to the difficulty of getting to church in a geographically large parish was to build a smaller church in a different part of the parish. These were not parish churches but chapels, or to give them their full

name which also describes their purpose, chapels-of-ease—chapels to make it easier for people to hear Mass in a large parish where the principal church was some distance away. (They made more work for the priest, of course, who unless he had an assistant had two churches to say Masses in and look after.) There were not many such chapels built in Melbourne, but several survive. St Carthage's, Parkville, was a chapel-of-ease in the parish of St Mary's, West Melbourne (it became a parish in its own right in 1956). St Joseph's, Hawthorn, remains a chapel-of-ease to the Immaculate Conception, Hawthorn; and in the parish of St Joseph's, South Yarra, the charming little chapel-of-ease of St Thomas Aquinas is still there and in daily use.

St Thomas's is a textbook example of why chapels-of-ease were needed. The parish of South Yarra stretches from Chapel Street in the east to St Kilda Road in the west. The parish church, St Joseph's, is just off Chapel Street. St Thomas's is just around the corner from St Kilda Road, at the other end of the parish, opposite Melbourne Grammar School. It is said to have been colloquially known as 'the servants' church', with many (mainly Irish) domestic servants from the large houses of St Kilda and South Yarra in its congregation.

At the opening ceremony on 21 February 1915, when Archbishop Carr laid a memorial stone and solemnly blessed the new chapel, the rationale of chapels-of-ease was eloquently expounded by the South Yarra parish priest Fr Benson. Up to that time, he said, it had been necessary for parishioners living in that part of the parish to go a long distance to hear Mass in St Joseph's Church. 'They would now be able to hear Mass with convenience every Sunday in that devotional chapel-of-ease,' said Fr Benson. 'It would be a great boon to the people living near St Kilda Road, and they would give practical proof of their appreciation of this great blessing' by attending.

*Continued overleaf ...*

