

Bishop Francis Xavier Gsell MSC

Mission priest to the Northern Territory

A Catholic priest of the religious congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), Francis Xavier Gsell spent over 40 years in the Northern Territory. He served for many years as head of the Aboriginal mission on Bathurst Island, and later as Bishop of Darwin.

Born in the French province of Alsace in 1872, Gsell trained for the priesthood in France and Italy and was ordained in 1896. He arrived in Australia soon afterwards and following periods in Sydney and MSC missions in Papua he was appointed as apostolic administrator for the Catholic Church in Darwin in 1906.

He gained government approval for the establishment of a mission on Bathurst Island in 1911, and lived on the island as head of the mission from that time until 1938. Attempts to introduce Christianity to the Aboriginal residents of the island were only moderately successful, but Gsell did influence a modification to the local culture by intervening in the practice of young teenage girls being sold into marriages with the old men of the community. He did this by buying the girls himself and freeing them to receive schooling at the mission school, and, in time, become partners to men of their own ages. Gsell was also influential in the establishment of missions at Port Keats (1935) and Arltunga (1943).

In 1938 Gsell returned to the mainland to take up an appointment as Bishop of Darwin, a post he held until 1949. During the years 1942–45, when Darwin was under military administration, Gsell ran the diocese from Alice Springs. On retirement in 1949 he moved to the MSC monastery at Kensington, Sydney where he prepared his memoirs, published in 1956 under the title *The Bishop with One Hundred and Fifty Wives* (Angus and Robertson, London).

Francis Xavier Gsell became a naturalised Australian in 1909. He received the OBE in 1935 and the French Legion of Honour in 1951. He died in 1960. The Gsell Aboriginal Hostel in the Darwin suburb of Nightcliff is named after Bishop Gsell.

Records about Bishop Gsell in the National Archives

As both an individual and in the roles he fulfilled, Gsell had a number of dealings with the Australian government or the Northern Territory administration, and many records resulting from

these dealings are now held by the National Archives. These include the file relating to his naturalisation and files relating to the honours he received later in life, as well as records on the establishment and management of the Catholic missions at Bathurst Island, Port Keats and the Little Flower Mission at Arltunga. Many of these are listed below.

Records relating to Bishop Gsell

All records listed below are held in the Canberra office of the National Archives.

Naturalisation and honours

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Francis Xavier Gsell – Naturalisation</u>	1909–20	A1, 1920/21513
<u>Birthday Honours, 1935 – publication of</u>	1935	A2924, 1935/1
<u>Birthday Honours, 1935 – sounding recipients</u>	1935	A2924, 1935/5
<u>Honours bestowed on Australian citizens by foreign government – Chisholm, Professor; Gelle, Mr; Gsell, Bishop</u>	1951	A462, 829/1/7
<u>Monsignor Francis Xavier Gsell – Honours</u>	1951	A463, 60/3088
<u>Decorations – French awards – Chisholm, Professor; Gelle, Mr; Gsell, Bishop</u>	1951–52	A1838, 1535/5/4

Photographs

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Girls at Mission Station, Bathurst Island – Bishop Gsell, Father McGrath, Old Peter and Brother Carter in background</u>	1939	M10, 3/34
<u>Opening of Soldiers' Hall, Alice Springs – His Lordship, Bishop Gsell speaking</u>	1943	M10, 2/85
<u>Photographs of NT – Reverend F Flynn MSC and Bishop FX Gsell MSC (holding hat)</u>	1944	M119, 119
<u>Bishop with 150 wives – Francis Xavier Gsell (3 photographs)</u>	1949	A8139, Volume 7
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Missions in the Northern Territory

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>1. Bathurst Island to be reserved for Aboriginal purposes. 2. Asking permission to establish Roman Catholic Mission on the Island.</u>	1894–1910	A1640, 1910/570
<u>Bathurst Island – Reserve for Aborigines</u>	1904–39	A1, 1938/33126
<u>Bathurst Island Mission Reports – Northern Territory</u>	1910–52	A431, 1951/1294
<u>Report by TJ Beckett on visit made to Anson Bay District, Melville, Bathurst and Indian Island re Aborigines</u>	1916	A3, NT1916/2359
<u>FX Gsell – town lands lease No. 346</u>	1930	A1, 1930/7309

<u>JA Carrodus – report on Northern Territory</u>	1934	A1, 1934/10021
<u>Port Keats – Catholic Mission, Northern Territory</u>	1934–55	A452, 1955/98
<u>Cape Fourcroy, Bathurst Island, NT Landing Ground</u>	1935–36	A1, 1936/2800
<u>Little Flower Mission (Arltunga), NT</u>	1942–1952	A431, 1951/418
<u>Conference with Missionary Authorities, Darwin, August 1948</u>	1948–1949	A431, 1948/1670

Missions in New Guinea

Title or description of record	Date range	Series,item number
<u>Reverend FX Gsell, Ciria, Yule Island – Answers to questions re the sale of alcoholic liquor and the sale of land in British New Guinea</u>	1903	A45, 1/47

For more information

For information about records held by the National Archives on other personalities of the Northern Territory, see the following fact sheets:

- *Fact sheet 145 - Albert Namatjira*
- *Fact sheet 146 - Jessie Sinclair Litchfield*
- *Fact sheet 155 - Edward John Connellan and Connellan Airways*
- *Fact sheet 159 - Reverend John Flynn and the Australian Inland Mission*