THE CHURCH GOES..

"As far as we know," the parish priest wrote, "there is no other church like ours in the world. That is because there is no other place like Coober Pedy"

Do also the Japanese who stayed at Lugano when we were there?

JAPANESE opal buyer Mitsuya Ito is a Shintoist, but painted the door and attended the first Mass. BELOW: Parish priest Fr. Francis Crosp, at his caravan, chats with opal miner Aurelio Kenoc.

IN the South Australian opal - mining town of Coober Pedy there is only one tree.

It is a wind-blown, sand-blasted mulga and it leans a little unsteadily near the crest of a hillock.

The ground is grown on is the roof of a church — one of the strangest in the world. And this is not only because it has a tree instead of a spire sprouting from its ridge.

For one thing, you can't see the church.

You step down through rubble and yellow bulldust off Coober Pedy's main street and are confronted with a neat wooden door painted the paint green, with a plain cross embossed on it.

A very few yards round the hillock is another door; but this, like as not, leads to a private dwelling of several rooms with all mod cons.

The local people call these dwellings burrowed into the hill "dugouts," but I think the word is too mean and ungracious, and in some sense, for the Church of Saints Peter and Paul you could stretch the word to "catacomb."

I was one of the lucky ones who flew to Coober Pedy for the blessing and official opening of the church by Bishop Bryan Gallagher, whose Roman Catholic diocese of Port Pirie covers thousands of miles, many of them in almost inaccessible places.

Some of the people who set off in cars from various places did not get there.

When you travel the Coober Pedy vision, you have to be philosophical about minor or major accidents to your vehicle. But when the accidents happen — sometimes, of course, almost — and you are in the perhaps hundreds of miles through desolate country to the nearest town.

I found the church a delight.

Once through the doorway there wasn't much of what I can only think of as a church — in appearance. The white walls are splotched with the rose color of iron oxide, and glinty of metal give a silvery sparkle.

The air is clear and fresh, and sound is not muffled.

Christians and non-Christians in Coober Pedy were delighted when they heard that the Catholic Church had brought a little hole in the hillside for $280 a year or so ago.

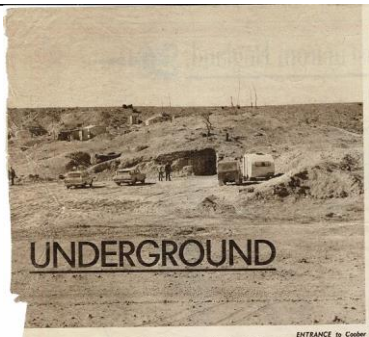
It belonged to an opal miner and in those days would just hold a bed.

The priest assigned to the parish, the Rev. Father Francis Crosp, set up his predatory — or little caravan — by the $280 hole, and volunteers started digging it out to a size to hold a congregation of hundreds.

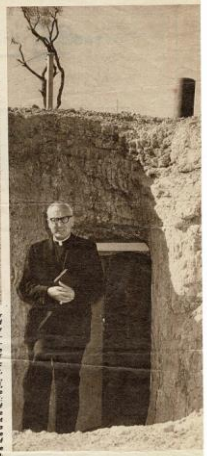
Now, a few hours before the opening of the church, I was watching preparations for the inaugural Mass.

Mr. Frank Tierradge, an opal buyer who has been in Coober Pedy for 15 years, was polishing up a borrowed, obsolete, water - cooled, kerosene-operated engine a few yards from the church doorway.

This generated the light for the church and power for the electronic organ lent by the local Lutheran minister, Mr. A. Grieger.



UNDERGROUND



ENTRANCE to Coober Pedy's underground Church of Saints Peter and Paul can be distinguished in the picture above, under the small, solitary tree. AT RIGHT: Roman Catholic Bishop Bryan Gallagher, of Port Pirie, S.A., breviary in hand, emerges shortly before the first Mass. BELOW: Dr. Francis Walsh, of Renmark, one of the priests who assisted at the Mass, shows a crowd of tourists the altar made of pieces of local colored stone. The church is 70ft. long.

The organist, pretty Mrs. Jill Day, wife of Robin Day, headmaster of the Coober Pedy school, is a Methodist.

But that was all right. The members of the children's choir were not all Catholics, anyway.

Bishop Gallagher, breviary in hand, walked down from the motel, hoping to use his office in peace . . .

But handsome young Minoya Ito, a Japanese opal buyer, was standing by the door of the church. Although a Christian — Shinto — he had painted that door the day before until it shone like pale green glass.

Minoya and the Bishop had a word together, then the Bishop went inside.

By MARGARET KERR

He faced a 700-long, 1500 sq. ft. church with an altar at the far end made of local stone by Ornate Cosa — a young man who had gone off to be best man at a wedding and happened there to see the Bishop and three of his priests concelebrate Mass on it.

Actually, that altar should not have been there.

Bishop Gallagher's idea was to have the natural stone rising from the floor, like a broad mahogany, for the altar.

But the volunteers working on the church got a bit overenthusiastic in the enterprise and the "mahogany" altar became just one of the Bishop's dreams.

Even so, Ornate Costa made a magnificent job of matching up geometric chunks of colored stone.

The Bishop did not get far with saying his office. A priest from several hundred miles away, the Rev. Dr. Francis Walsh, of Renmark, was showing a group of tourists how the voluntary workers had smoothed off the walls of the church with jackhammers.

Somebody was straightening the altar.

The Bishop had a word with this person and that and retired to the motel with his breviary.

Yellow bulldust surged into the air every time anybody moved toward the doorway. It followed up when one arrived. It choked when one stopped. It choked when Warrant-Officer Otto Fabry's station sedan arrived from Woomera Rocket Range.

"Only did in one shockabucker this time," he said with great satisfaction. "Last time it was four tyres."

His wife and the eight oldest of their 11 children piled out of the car to have their first look at Coober Pedy and the little tiny house of worship.

"Been here before anyself," Otto remarked. "Rounded up a few chaps from Woomera to come and lay the cement floor in the church."

The town's hairdresser, Austrian Freda Hodl, wife of opal miner Werner Hodl, had been very busy the day before setting clients' hair for the occasion, Mrs. Nancy Tilbrooke said as she adjusted her veil and gave the finishing touches to the "make-over" at the end behind the altar.

"The curtain is only temporary. We hope to have a stained-glass window in there by Christmas," she told me.

She spoke about the success of the dinner dance at the motel the night before, a curtain-raiser to the church's opening.

The official luncheon was over. The street, with its sprinkling of shops, was nearly deserted.

Men, women, and children — of all denominations — had come to the church for Mass, and overflowed hundreds who could not get in stood in the rubble and listened from outside.

About 1000 were there in all — the town's whole population plus.

Rocketing back to the airstrip over the thirty kilometres of dirt road, the bulldust flying behind, after the Aborigines had made a little settlement of their own, past the deserted opal mines, I remembered the words of the parish priest written in the local news-sheet a few weeks ago.

"Fancy trying to dig a hole big enough to bury a Sunday morning congregation — alive," he had said. "This is just what we are doing in Coober Pedy.

"As far as we know, there is no other church like ours in the world. That is because there is no other place like Coober Pedy."

He said the thing that made it unique was that nearly all the people worked and lived underground, because of the climate.

Coober Pedy, he pointed out, is on the way to Alice Springs, Ayers Rock, and Darwin.

The Church of Saints Peter and Paul is the only Catholic Church on the main road between Port Augusta and Alice Springs and will be for the use of tourists as well as local residents.