

A Summary History of St Patrick's Church, Okato

In 1891 the Taranaki Herald published a special souvenir edition to mark the Golden Jubilee of New Plymouth's settlement by Europeans. Almost as an afterthought, near the end it mentioned Okato, about 18 miles to the south: "The little village consists of about a dozen houses, including tow stores, and a butcher's shop and a blacksmith's shop, post and telegraph office; and about a mile further on, at Stony River, is a hotel. The public buildings at Okato are limited to the schoolhouse and a neat Roman Catholic church. Around Okato there are a large number of dairy farms."

The small church, approximately 7 1/2 by 4 1/2 meters, plus a front porch and a small room attached at the back, was built in kauri with an iron roof, on an acre of land donated by Dennis Doyle, with the lowest tender being one hundred and twentyfive pounds. It was designed near the end of 1880 by Fr Etienne Chastagnon, a French diocesan priest from Auckland then on loan to Wellington Diocese as Rector of the New Plymouth Mission. It was formally opened and dedicated to St Patrick on Wednesday 4 May 1881, during a mission being preached in the district by Fr Theo LeMemant des Chesnais; he was a newly arrived French Marist with a good command of English after several years of preaching in New South Wales.

Fifteen years later, Archbishop Redwood spent most of march 1896 visiting Taranaki, preaching short missions in various places and confirming candidates the clergy had prepared for him. Okato responded well to a three-day mission which included a confirmation ceremony, and concluded on Sunday 29 march with the blessing and opening of a new and larger St Patrick's. It is still standing today. The original church became a meeting room.

Later the same year a presbytery was opened next to the church to house Marist priests. With the encouragement of the New Plymouth parish priest, Fr Tom McKenna, and the co-operation of Fr Andrew Mulvihill, Hawera parish priest, and the approval of the Archbishop, the Marists were to make Okato the base for a permanent mission the Taranaki Maori. The first Superior would be Fr Claude Cognet. He was already an excellent Maori linguist after seven

years at Jerusalem, and had recently returned to New Zealand from a year in France where he had supervised the printing in Maori of a catechism and a history of the Catholic Church. His assistant was Fr Celestin Lacroix, who was just beginning his apprenticeship on the Maori mission.

Up until that time Catholic missionaries had little enduring effect on Maori in the Province. In the 1840s the mission thrust from Bishop Pompallier's team of French marist in the Bay of Islands reached the fringe of Taranaki. With his base at Rangiaowhai (near Te Awamutu) Fr Jean Pezant ranged down the Mokau River, but did not penetrate further south. After Wellington Diocese had been organised in 1850 with the marists transferring to the south under Bishop Viard, Pezant made two lengthy visits from Wellington into Taranaki. These developed in 1852 to Pezant going to live in Wanganui town from where he made regular treks through Taranaki to New Plymouth.

At the same time fr Jean Lampila began a mission on the Wanganui River, slowly building up a flourishing Maori station at Kauaeroa, about 70km inland from the river mouth. He as well as his later companion Fr Eugene Pertuis, made occasional journeys cross-country into inland Taranaki. Pezant and Lampila were both competent Maori speakers, but little record remains of these apostolates. The ferment of the 1860s land Wars and the Pai Marire movement wrecked most of what they had accomplished.

The wars brought such a buildup of troops, including Catholics, in the garrison at New Plymouth, that in 1860 the Commandant requested a Catholic Chaplain. Bishop Viard responded by sending Maurice Tresallet, newly arrived from France. After three years he was followed by Pertuis and then by Jean-Baptiste Rolland. Pertuis was the only one of the three who had any opportunity to learn Maori, and their links with the army made it impossible to attempt any methodical apostolate among Maori people.

When Bishop Redwood arrived at the end of 1874 to replace Viard, New Zealand was in the middle of an immigration drive that would double the European population in that decade. Irish clergy, both Marists

and diocesan, were beginning to arrive to catch up with this almost instant transplanted Church. The Catholics were predominantly Irish with, in Taranaki, a good leavening of Polish. Hawera and New Plymouth were the two centres from which the European Church began to grow, and both towns evolved from being mission stations to parishes. Maori, diminishing in numbers, were largely alienated from European influence, and Redwood appealed to marist authorities in France for more priests to take up again the challenge of the Maori mission, which by then was quite separate from the Settler Church.

In 1883, at the invitation of a Maori tribe, Redwood re-established a Catholic mission on the Wanganui River, this time at Jerusalem, roughly the same distance inland but on the other side of the river from the destroyed Kauaeroa. In time the missionaries based there extended their outreach into Taranaki, trying to locate lost remnants of converts of earlier years. The end result was the establishment in 1896, of the Maori Mission House at Okato. At the time it was an enclave within the New Plymouth parish district. While the Marists were to have care of the settlers in the vicinity of Okato, they were to have a roving mission for Maori through the whole of the province.

The situation changed in 1899 when Redwood established a coastline parish separating Opunake, Pungarehu and Okato from Hawera and New Plymouth, with Cognet appointed as parish priest. For over 10 years the official Australasian Catholic directories of the day continued to name Okato as the centre where the parish priest lived. The reality was that by 1903 Cognet had moved his residence to Opunake, becoming more and more involved with settler's needs, while leaving his younger assistant at Okato, Julien Maillard, to cope with the bulk of the travelling around Maori. To reclaim Cognet's talents for the service of Maori, in 1909 superiors transferred him to Otaki where the Maori mission was flourishing. He was replaced by Fr Louis Menard who likewise lived at Opunake.

In 1904 Christophe Soulas, by then touching 60, had been transferred to Okato. After 20 years in the pioneering isolation of Jerusalem he had grown rather eccentric and cranky, and was interfering unduly with the work of the Sisters of Compassion which had begun there. His fierce dedication to a Maori mission was unchanged. For his first few years at Okato he had the assistance in turn of several young Marists, Frs Maillard, Jean Barra, Wilhelm Schaefer, and Br

Martin Mader, but by about 1910 was on his own. He continued his apostolate among the Maori of Taranaki until a serious breakdown in health occasioned his removal in 1920. He was replaced at Okato by Menard.

Since its inception the coastline parish had been a Marist preserve, and there had been a fairly easy exchange of duties between its three centres. In 1914 a diocesan priest replaced Menard at Opunake and this change brought some tensions. The new priest insisted on visiting rights to the settlers around Okato, and in retaliation Soulas refused him grazing rights on the church horse paddock.

When Menard returned to Okato in 1920 he was using a motorbike for his pastoral work so the horse paddock became redundant.

He renovated the Mission House which Soulas had let deteriorate, and for six years from this base he travelled Taranaki from Urenui to Normanby keeping in touch with about 150 scattered Catholic Maori. During these six years Okato came the closest ever to being a self-contained parish in its own right. Archbishop O'Shea had a map outlined to show the area around Okato within which Menard had equivalent full rights as a parish priest and which the Opunake priest would not visit. The name of Okato appeared in the Directory as having equal status with Opunake! At the same time the Maori of the area were charged with the attending the normal Sunday Mass, instead of expecting their own mass at a nearby house or marae.

A change in Maori Mission policy came in 1927. This closed the Okato Mission House. In spite of a petition from the Okato Europeans, Archbishop O'Shea removed Menard. Henceforth Fr Jean-Marie Vibaud at Wanganui would care for the Taranaki Maori Mission from there, with a car replacing the motorbike. Vibaud sometimes stayed over at Okato, but for the most part its Mission House was unused. But this effort from Wanganui lapsed after a few years, and sporadic visiting began again from Jerusalem. Further European development along the coast resulted in Pungarehu being established in 1932 as a separate parish that included Okato.

By the end of the 1930s there were no French Marists active in the Maori Mission in Wellington Archdiocese, and a group of New Zealand-born Marists initiated a new thrust. One of the first moves was to re-establish the base at Okato, with Frs Jim Durning and

Frank Wall residing there by early 1940. Outreach from there into southern Taranaki was so encouraging that a second Marist Mission House was established at Normanby in 1945. It was there that a young Fr Gordon Kerins was introduced to the apostolate among Maori. Two years later a fire completely destroyed the Okato house, and the northern Maori Mission found a temporary base at Pungarehu.

The year of the fire saw an ailing Archbishop O'Shea replaced by Bishop Peter McKeefry. The shift in local Maori population convinced the new bishop that the replacement Maori mission centre should be sited at Waitara, with Okato included in its circuit of visiting, while Okato's Europeans were cared for from Pungarehu.

In 1980 the creation of Palmerston North Diocese from the northern sector of the Archdiocese of Wellington gave Okato a new bishop, Peter Cullinane. Initially he did not find any need to alter Okato's existing status. However, in 1996 changes in Taranaki's population spread and a shortage of priests led him to close Pungarehu parish. New boundaries were drawn on the map. Pungarehu was absorbed in Opunake parish, while Okato became part of New Plymouth - back where it began.

Marist Archives, Wellington.

St Patrick's
Church
May 1971



St Patrick's
Church
July 1971

