

Chapter 1

The Catholic Church in New Zealand – a Brief History

The industrial revolution centred in Europe, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is well documented. Societies were completely non-egalitarian. There was injustice in all countries and much variation in how governments identified social inequity and, more importantly, implemented policies to eliminate injustices. William Wilberforce's efforts to eliminate slavery, shown in the 2006 film *Amazing Grace*, is one such example of the difficulties of implementing policy for the common good at the expense of personal interests and party politics.

Churches were leaders in caring for those most disadvantaged within society. The Catholic Church was one who reached out to the most vulnerable in society. The Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP), made up of laypeople, began in 1833 as a direct response to the plight of the urban poor in Paris. The society spread rapidly and has operated in the British Isles since 1844, and in New Zealand since 1867.

The more modern religious orders were formed in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly in France and Ireland. These orders spread around the world and, for some, their apostolate or work included coming to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

When Christian settlers came to New Zealand in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there were no formal ministers of religion. Slowly various denominations attracted clergy. Bishop Jean Baptiste Pompallier, originally from Lyons, France, arrived in January 1838. He and other priests set about ministering to the new Catholic settlers, and attempting to evangelise the tangata whenua, the Māori people. The proportion of Catholics in the Auckland province was about twenty per cent in the 1840s, but much lower in the South Island which had been settled mainly by Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists. This changed when



Bishop Pompallier

reasonable numbers of Irish Catholics settled in the south, following Ireland's potato famine in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the discovery of gold in New Zealand. Other Catholics came from eastern and southern Europe.

In 1850, the church was split by Rome into two dioceses following a disagreement between Pompallier and Father Colin, Superior of the Marist Fathers. Pompallier became Bishop of the Auckland Diocese, and a Marist priest, Phillippe Viard, became Bishop of Wellington, a diocese that

included the lower half of the North Island and the whole of the South Island. Most Marist priests who had been working in Māori missions in the north shifted south to work with their Marist leader. The Diocese of Dunedin was formed in 1869, and the Diocese of Christchurch in 1887. By 1900 there was about 140,000 Catholics in New Zealand, comprising fourteen per cent of the population.

The Church did reach out to Māori. After 1850 there were few clergy working specifically with Māori in the north, but this changed when Mill Hill priests arrived in 1886. They learnt Te Reo proficiently and built many churches. They also helped with the economic development of small communities by building farms and starting credit unions and co-operative stores. In the southern half of the North Island, Marists flourished in growing and supporting Māori missions. The Mission Sisters and Josephite Sisters too were prominent, as was Suzanne Aubert, a Mercy Sister and the only person to found an order (Sisters of Compassion) within New Zealand.

There are worthwhile histories of the Catholic Church providing extensive background and information about the development, progress and difficulties of the Church in New Zealand. Such histories, include Simmonds (1978), King (1997), and Sweetman (2002).

Catholics have long valued having their own education system. Initially Catholic children of school age went to local schools; gradually Catholics started their own schools. It appears that there were about nine small schools operating in the Auckland area, before the first religious sisters arrived in 1850 (see chapter 2 and appendix 1).

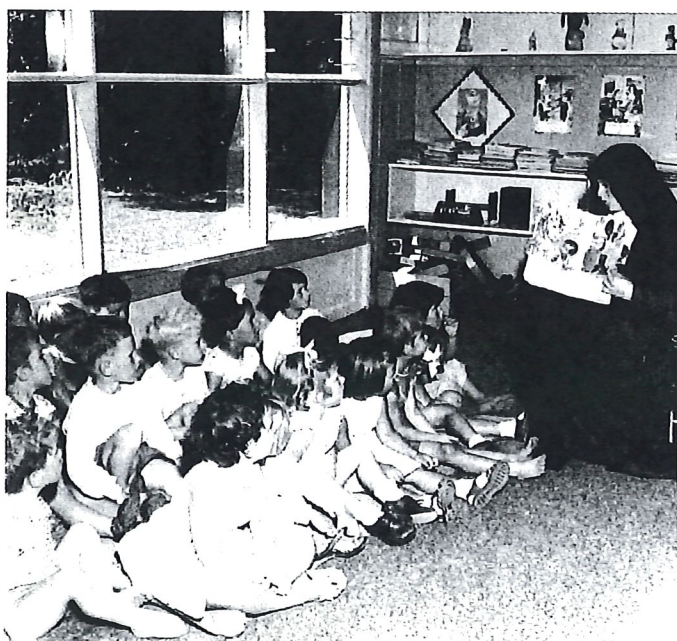
A significant event occurred with the arrival of Bishop Moran to lead the Dunedin Diocese in 1871. He made a tour of the Diocese and in a famous speech on Palm Sunday 1871 he denounced the local school system, and forbade Catholic families to send their children to these schools. Those who ignored this directive would be refused the Sacraments and Catholic burial. This was very controversial, newsworthy and led to the founding of many small convent schools in parishes. These were outside the national free, secular and compulsory education system, (Education Act 1877), and were funded by parents, parishes and local fund-raising ventures.

While some Catholics were relatively affluent, most Catholics with large families were struggling to make a living. The demands to build churches and schools, and support clergy and religious, placed additional burdens on these families, but it is my strong belief that this sacrifice was for the good of this country. The Church developed through adversity, with committed families and home-grown vocations to supplement the religious from overseas. It is striking to read about the poverty experienced by those choosing to bring the faith to New Zealanders. A common theme in the many histories of dioceses and religious orders is how frugal were the living conditions with a lack of furniture, transport and the paucity of nourishing food. Sadly, a consequence of this situation was poor health and early deaths of a number of early priests and religious.

One positive outcome from the evolution of so many schools was the gradual shift of a population of poor Catholic labourers into the trades and services, and then further into the professions, so that now Catholics are well represented in all walks of life in this country. We see the similar upward mobility of newer immigrants to this

country, with the Catholic Church and school system playing a vital role in the progress of many families.

The eighty-eight registered Catholic schools in 1886 soon increased to one hundred and thirty-nine schools by 1903 (*NZ Handbook*). By the turn of the twentieth century Catholics were taking part in all areas of civic life, although there were pockets of discrimination. Vocations increased as schools and parishes were founded, or developed. Juniorates, novitiates and even scholasticatès



Typical classroom scene

began for the training of religious, as well as two seminaries for priests. Secondary schools began, or increased in size. Religious orders diversified into serving different areas of the community, including hospitals, prisons, counselling, working with abused women and children, the poor, the aged, homeless, refugees and immigrants.

New Zealand's proximity to the Pacific Islands meant it was natural for the Catholic Church to

spread to the Pacific. Marist Father Peter Chanel, an early missionary priest, worked briefly in Futuna before he was murdered in 1841. He was subsequently canonized as a saint of the Church, the first from the wide area that is Oceania. Many parishes and schools were started in different Pacific countries, some supported from Australia, but many from New Zealand. Consequently men and women joined the priesthood and religious life from the Pacific area and served in New Zealand or their own countries.

The post-war baby boom in New Zealand had significant implications for schools. In the ten years following 1945, the total number of children in Catholic schools doubled. Class sizes were often enormous; there were many examples of composite classes of

fifty or more students. A number of new schools were opened in newly formed suburbs in cities.

Marist priest Father Geaney, the Apostolic Visitor, made the following comment on the Sisters of Mercy in 1940, but this could have been said about any of the orders working faithfully in the country at the time:

I have been particularly struck by the loyalty of the Sisters to their institute, by the contented spirit in which they accept the poverty of their lives, by the unremitting labour in which they spend themselves for the love of God and for the Church.

(Flannagan, 2009, p.123)

Men and women continued to be attracted to religious life as is illustrated by this comment by a Josephite sister:

I remember a week-long vocation campaign in the mid 1950s. It was held in the Auckland Town Hall. The sisters of Saint Joseph had their own space along with all the other religious orders. We set up with pamphlets and any brochures we had at that time about our congregation, the ministries we were involved in and any information about Mary MacKillop. Relays of sisters from the city convents manned the space, day and evening, making themselves available to talk about our religious life.

(Strevens, 2008, p.138)

The 1960s was the period of maximum numbers of priests and religious. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) had a profound effect on Catholic practice. The wider society also was changing. A significant outcome of these changes was the withdrawal of many priests and religious from their vocations. The supply of young men and women willing to train for priesthood and religious life dwindled, and some orders have had no vocations over the last twenty years or so. Schools had to deal with the lack of trained religious as it influenced the spiritual development of their students, but also had to face the cost of paying lay teachers.

By the 1960s, the burden on parents and parishes to continue to support Catholic schools was becoming untenable. Parent Teacher Associations were outstanding in constantly fundraising for essential teaching resources, as well as capital projects. Despite this good work, the income from school fees was not sufficient for schools to continue. Schools were in financial crisis. Sweetman (2002) provides a comprehensive account of the State Aid movement, and the development of Integrated schools. Parliament passed the Private Schools Conditional Integration Act, in 1975. The Catholic Church was thus able to maintain its schools, with government providing teachers' salaries and operating expenses equivalent to other state schools. The 'Special Character' of each school was safeguarded. In general, schools could admit just five percent non-Catholics, in order to safeguard other state school rolls. The proprietors of the schools in turn undertook to bring the school properties up to standards equivalent to other state schools. Thus all Catholic schools were integrated into the state system. The development of Integration is a fascinating story, and is unique in the world – nowhere else has the government and Catholic Church been able to reach such an agreement. That it happened in this country is testimony to the skills and goodwill of members of the various groups involved in the complex negotiations.

Church practice and involvement in Church activities has declined over the last forty years or so. There are many factors contributing to this, including disillusionment of Catholics with Church leaders and Church teaching, general apathy, societal pressures on families and the decline in vocations. But despite these factors, the Catholic Church continues to have a slight increase in numbers as is shown in recent census data – the only so-called 'traditional' Christian denomination to do so. A key factor has been the numbers of immigrants coming to New Zealand seeking better opportunities including Catholic education for their children. Catholic schools have responded well to this need, often in the poorer suburbs of our cities. In 2006, Catholics made up 12.3 per cent of the population.

The influence and place of Catholic schools is critical to the ongoing life of the Church in this country, and this will be highlighted

in subsequent chapters. Currently there are 190 Catholic primary schools and 49 high schools and they educate 64,000 students, or 11 per cent of the New Zealand school population (figures from NZ Catholic Education Office, 2008). Between 1994 and 2010, the rolls in Catholic schools increased by almost 22 per cent.

Catholics now take prominent parts in all walks of civic life including the judiciary, politics, the professions, the arts, sports and media. There have been three Catholic prime ministers and, Sir Anand Satynand, the first Catholic chosen as governor general, was selected in 2006. However, it is in schools and in social services that Catholic groups and volunteers make the greatest contribution to the well being of this country.

This book highlights one important component of the work of the Catholic Church in this country – that of education. The book highlights just some of the key people and key charisms underpinning their lives. There is an equivalent story to be told of the considerable good work by many religious and lay people supporting and improving communities in need within the wider community.