

## Short Notices – Notices Brèves

### Auxiliaries of the Marist Missionaries–Women’s Perspectives

*Patricia Leamy SMSM*

This paper will attempt to describe the way the women who left France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to work in the missions confided to the Marist Fathers understood their role as “auxiliaries of the missionaries”. I will confine the discussion to the eleven women, called “pioneers” by the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM), and the time-frame to the years Marie Françoise Perroton, the forerunner of the pioneers, was alone until the end of the first decade that the eleven were all in Oceania, namely from 1846 - 1870.

Perroton’s response to a letter in the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* in 1842 was the catalyst of this movement. Written on behalf of their companions by two Wallisian women (Suzanne Pukega and Romaine Tui, and the letter countersigned by Fathers Viard and Bataillon) the letter asks not only for “other bishops and priests” to be sent to the Pacific, but also for “some devout women (some sisters) to teach the women of Ouvéa”<sup>1</sup>. On reading this appeal, Marie Françoise felt a response stirring within her. At the age of 49, she set out.

The call to mission was radical for Perroton and those who followed her. Leaving behind homeland, loved ones, and all they possessed, they set out in a spirit of self-sacrifice for what purpose? She wrote to Captain Marceau: “My firm wish is to serve on the mission fields for the rest of my life. ... I do not wish for anything else than [God’s] glory and the salvation of those good people of Oceania for whom I will willingly sacrifice myself if that is what God wants of me.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Christian Women of Ouvéa to the Faithful in Lyon, 10.11.1842, *Our Pioneer Sisters – from correspondence 1836-1885* (= OPS), Vol. 1, 8 General Administration, Rome, 1973, 1975/ Marie Cécile de Mijolla, *A Woman from Lyons – Marie Françoise Perroton (1796-1873) Missionary in Oceania* General Administration, Rome, Appendix No. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Perroton-Marceau, summer 1845, *Letters of Marie Françoise Perroton, Sister Marie du Mont Carmel, from 1845 to 1873* (MFP) *TOMMO Volume 1, Nos 1-16* (= MFP), General Administration, Rome, June 2001, Letter 1, paragraph 1/ OPS 1, 11.

### 1. Auxiliaries of the Marist Missionaries<sup>3</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, being a “missionary” was linked to ordination. So what term was used for the women working in the missions? “Auxiliaries of the missionaries”<sup>4</sup> is the one employed by Father Julien Favre, the Superior General of the Society of Mary. In a letter to Father Victor Poupinel he specified the role of the three women who were about to leave France in November 1857: “In this group for the Central Vicariate [of Oceania] there are three Ladies of Charity<sup>5</sup> for the care of the sick and the education of girls”<sup>6</sup>. He goes on to say that “nothing must be neglected to give them encouragement” as “they are making great sacrifices by leaving for these far-off islands in order to become the auxiliaries of the missionaries”<sup>7</sup>.

In this same letter, Favre asks that a Rule be written for them “in order to prevent abuses that might creep in if all was left to chance.”<sup>8</sup> Father Poupinel undertook this task – one way of encouraging his “highly esteemed and dear sisters in Mary, our gentle and common Mother”<sup>9</sup>, words that would have had a great significance for the pioneers, an assurance that they were members of the Society of Mary.

### 2. What was expected of these auxiliaries in their apostolic work?

<sup>3</sup> The term is used in all the Constitutions from 1931 onwards. Constitutions of 1931, Article 1: “This congregation whose origin may be traced to the first departures for Oceania of the valiant auxiliaries of the Marist missionaries in 1845 and 1857 established at Ste-Foy-les-Lyon in 1887 under the authority and jurisdiction of the Vicars Apostolic, represented by the Superior General of the Society of Mary”; Constitutions 1939 Article 1: “to be the auxiliaries of the Marist missionaries”; Constitutions 1951, Article 1: “to serve... as auxiliaries to the Marist Fathers”; Constitutions 1964, Article 1: “to serve... as auxiliaries to the Marist Fathers”; Constitutions 1984, first paragraph of the Decree “of the valiant auxiliaries of the Marist missionaries”; Constitutions 1984, article 2: “to be auxiliaries of the Marist missionaries”.

<sup>4</sup> Favre-Poupinel, 28.11.1857, OPS 1, 47.

<sup>5</sup> As the pioneers were then called.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *Rule for the Sisters of Charity of the Third Order of Mary in the Missions of Oceania*, 1858, introduction. OPS 5, document 4A (Poupinel).

In this Rule, “compiled from the experiences of the Fathers”<sup>10</sup> he had consulted, Poupinel gives some information on the goals for these Sisters: They are “called to the honour of working to extend the Kingdom of Jesus Christ and to make Mary known to the ends of the earth” ... “to dedicate themselves to the glory of God” and “to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of souls redeemed at the price of our Lord Jesus Christ”<sup>11</sup>. He also describes what being “auxiliaries” would mean in practice:

“They will practise obedience, above all, in the tasks entrusted to them, and for which they have come so far, such as the education of girls and other persons of their sex, and the care of the sick. The goal that they will set for themselves will not be merely to teach reading, writing or sewing etc., or to heal a sore or cure a sickness; it will be to win the hearts of these people little by little, and by patience bring them to love the gentle and holy Christian virtues, the practice of which assures happiness in this life as well as in the next.”<sup>12</sup>

Win the hearts of these people... bring them to love the gentle and holy Christian virtues... Is not this method of teaching by example one of the most effective ways of evangelising?”

Four months after he arrived in Futuna where the group of three: S.M. de la Miséricorde (Marie Basset, 1830-1904), Pitié (Francois Bartet, 1820-1894) and Espérance (Jeanne Albert, 1831-1872) had joined Perroton, Poupinel wrote to Mother Saint-Ambroise of the Marist Sisters describing the work of these “auxiliaries”: already there were 80 girls in school started by Perroton. Sister M. de la Ste Espérance taught handwriting, Sister M. de la Miséricorde called young women together twice a week and Sister M. de la Pitié was in charge of the sick. “Everything going along satisfactorily and the parents were already experiencing pleasure resulting from their young daughters interest in the school.”<sup>13</sup>

The purpose for which they left France (and their understanding of their role as “auxiliaries”) was reaffirmed by the reaction of several of the pioneers to a proposal of Bishop Bataillon. As an administrator constantly on the look out for ways to make ends meet, Bataillon

<sup>10</sup> Poupinel-Mother Saint-Ambroise, 24.09.1858, OPS 1, 94.

<sup>11</sup> *Rule* 1858, chapter 1, § 4,5,6 OPS 5, document 4A (Poupinel).

<sup>12</sup> *Rule* 1858, chapter 4, 2, OPS 5, document 4A (Poupinel).

<sup>13</sup> Poupinel-Mother Saint-Ambroise, 24.09.1858, OPS 1, 94.

planned that the sisters in Wallis would transfer from Matautu where there was much life in the school and church to Lano where they would make his farm productive and the mission self-supporting.

According to Sister M. Rose, a later pioneer, (Jeanne-Marie Autin, 1839-1912), the bishop told them “that if we were able to do some teaching we could, but that our principal aim should be to sanctify ourselves by making our exercises of piety regularly, and to make the farm productive, that the school would come later, and even later on we could take care of the sick.”<sup>14</sup> Suspecting the Bishop might have the same idea for the sisters in Futuna, Perroton wrote to Father Poupinel. Speaking of herself in the third person and using her religious name she says: “But, as you may well imagine, the tough old Sister du Mont Carmel was far from weakening on the aims she proposed to herself when she left her country; poultry, cows or pigs never entered into her plans...”<sup>15</sup> It was to contribute to Christian education that she had come and, without refusing other services, her priority remained teaching and religious instruction.

The strong reaction of Poupinel, Favre and Yardin to the Bishop’s understanding of the sisters’ role as auxiliaries also corresponds to that of the sisters. Favre repeats what he had already stated clearly:<sup>16</sup>

“It is very evident... that they have not gone to the end of the earth to exercise a useless ministry, such as tilling the earth, taking care of cows, etc. They left for the purpose of exercising the apostolate with the natives of their sex as regards religion and civilization, that is to educate the native girls and to train them in the womanly household skills...”

### **3. As Auxiliaries, what were they expected to live?**

#### *Obedience*

We have already seen from the Rule of Father Poupinel that the obedience expected from them, like that of all daughters of the church at the time, was quite radical. The pioneers had been asked to take a vow of obedience to the Vicar Apostolic for the time they were in his mission. He was both their ecclesiastic and religious superior.

This obedience was also comprehensive, at least for Bataillon, including details far from acceptable today. When he thought the

---

<sup>14</sup> Rose-Poupinel, 8.08.1859, OPS 1, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Mont Carmel-Poupinel, 30.10.1859, MFP Letter 11, paragraph 8.

<sup>16</sup> Favre – Poupinel, 16.01.1860, OPS 1, 176.

Sisters' dress was too religious for those not yet recognized canonically as religious, he ordered them to take off the veils and wear hats. Then perhaps to quell any dissent, he added: "You must obey me" (account of Sister M. Rose).<sup>17</sup>

### *Mobility*

The planning of the superiors of the mission demanded great mobility on the part of the pioneers. Changes were frequent and could mean adaptation to a new culture and a different language. Barely three months [May 30 – August 29] after Sister M. de la Miséricorde and M. de la Sainte Espérance arrived in Futuna, they were asked to leave Sister M. du Mont Carmel (Perroton) and M. de la Pitié for Matautu in Wallis. There they began giving classes – only to be asked to move again after ten months to Lano, the mission farm.<sup>18</sup> Each time their faith-filled response is remarkable.

### *Availability*

Availability for a variety of tasks was also asked of them. One example is Sister M. de Bon Secours (Clotilde Viannay, 1818-1895), who was an experienced nurse when she left for New Caledonia. I let her speak for herself: "... it seems that I had been especially sent to look after the poor sick people, and now the good Lord wants to take away from me this very consolation I had hoped to find in this mission and to which it seems I had every right to aspire. Moreover, you know that I told you in confidence I didn't like teaching! ... This is just what has fallen to my lot for the past 10 months!"<sup>19</sup> During the months she refers to she had "zealously"<sup>20</sup> taught seventy young people to read, write, and sing French hymns. In Ile des Pins, she taught "44 young men who are going to be sent... to serve as catechists"; this filled her "with joy and happiness".<sup>21</sup> Before she left France, she had been told by her cousin,

---

<sup>17</sup> Rose-Poupinel, 08.08.1859, OPS 1, 146.

<sup>18</sup> Miséricorde-Guillot, 04.11.1859, Letter 13, paragraph 4, OPS 1, 163, and also Poupinel-Mother Saint-Ambroise, 24.09.1858, OPS 1, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Bon Secours – Yardin, 28.03.1860, OPS 1, 186/ Bon Secours – Poupinel, 28.03.1860, Letter 16, paragraph 5, OPS 1, 186.

<sup>20</sup> Rougeyron – Favre July-August 1860, OPS 1, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Bon Secours-Yardin, 28.03.1860, Letter 15, paragraph 5, OPS 1, 186.

the Curé of Ars, that she would suffer in the mission but that she would do much good<sup>22</sup>.

### *Marist Spirit*

The Sisters were also expected to live the Marist spirit, Mary's spirit. They realized this and embraced it wholeheartedly. It was a source of joy for them. If they were not already members of the Third Order of Mary (TOM), they were admitted into it. They were then accepted as auxiliaries of the Marist missionaries, and sent out to Oceania under the auspices of the Society of Mary. The Rule given them was Marist, they observed Marist customs. The medal, the cincture and the *Manual* they received were TOM symbols. They felt a strong bond between them and the Society of Mary. The requests of the Fathers to their superior general for sisters to work with the women in their mission show that they expected sisters belonging to the same religious family<sup>23</sup>. They certainly considered the pioneers already in the Islands as Marists.<sup>24</sup>

In his Rule, given at the time of their departure with Marist Fathers and Brothers, Father Favre had assured the first group of pioneers that they were "members of the one Society, having the same vocation and the same aims"<sup>25</sup> He continued to recognize them as such.

### *Missionary spirit*

Truly worthy of note is the universal or catholic spirit we see in the pioneers. They were concerned not only to "spread the kingdom of God" among the people they served, but also to interest the women and children in the work of the Propagation of the Faith.

In the Ile des Pins, a young woman, Hortense was proud to write: "The work of the Propagation of the Faith has been established here since Sunday. We will now be united in great happiness to the faithful and Christians by the bonds of prayer and charity".<sup>26</sup> The year? 1862.

### *Nurturing apostles*

Quickly the pioneers encouraged others to help them in their work for the mission. When Perroton left Wallis after 8 years there, the young

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Bon Secours – Poupinel, 01.07.1877, Letter 58, paragraph 3, OPS 4, 688.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rougeyron-Favre, 30.05.1862, OPS 2, 276.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Sage-Lagniet, 02.02.1865, unpublished.

<sup>25</sup> *Rule for the Voyage*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Hortense-Poupinel, 12.09.1862, OPS 2, 291.

Wallisian women she had trained continued the work of education she had begun. Other pioneers also trained some of their pupils as assistants, empowering them to serve the mission as teachers, health workers, catechists... Some of these pupils expressed the desire to live with them, and, in their turn, to give their life to God for mission. When Perroton left Wallis and travelled to Futuna, she was accompanied by Nominata, a Rotuman, and Eulalia, a Tokelauan.

Once when Sister M. de la Croix was ill and unable to teach, both house and school ran as usual because “all the lessons the big girls could give to the little ones they gave them”<sup>27</sup>. Although this particular quotation is slightly outside our timeframe, it gives an example of her way of educating.

We do not have time here to develop their story, but two young women from Futuna, Sara Fuasea<sup>28</sup> and Silenia Tipai, lived with Perroton and Sister M. de la Merci, and eventually became professed members of the Third Order Regular of Mary. As *TORM*, they, in their turn, left behind homeland and loved ones and set out to be “auxiliaries of the missionaries” in Samoa and Tonga.

#### **4. What were some of the influences from their homeland affecting their life and work in Oceania?**

##### *Socio-cultural background*

These pioneers were women of their time, and carried the experiences, values and attitudes of 19<sup>th</sup> century France which was recovering from the turmoil begun with the 1789 Revolution. Gradually France was trying to implement its ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. The spirit of nationalism was strong, and the French remembered how nations of Europe had united against Napoleon.

In the city of Lyon, “land” of the pioneers, the silk industry employed 25% of the population at the turn of the nineteenth century.

---

<sup>27</sup> Croix – Poupinel, 11.11.1873, Letter 158, paragraph 4, OPS 3, 625.

<sup>28</sup> In Futuna Sara Fuasea (1843-1930) attended Perroton’s school, then came to stay with her. Aged 17, she asked to go with Sister M. de la Merci when she opened a school in another district of Futuna, then followed Merci to Apia in 1864. The following year she wrote from back in Futuna asking to be a religious. This was the time when the RNDM had been founded and the pioneers and others had been invited to join. Together with Silenia Tipai (1848-1902), Sara went to Villa Maria in Sydney to prepare to enter religious life.

Seeing that central government in Paris was not concerned with their problems, the workers tried to organize to improve their lot. Poverty resulting from unemployment and rebellions was exacerbated by a disastrous flood in 1840.

*Period of Missionary fervour*

Not only did the pioneers live through the period of national unrest and local workers' movements but they were also from a deeply Christian city. Lyon had a remarkably missionary spirit, nurtured in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the visits of missionary bishops including some from the Pacific, and intensified by the movement for the Propagation of the Faith begun by Pauline Jaricot, and publications such as the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*, *Annals of the Missions of Oceania* (of the Marist Fathers).

*Era of Marian piety*

The pioneers lived in an era when there was a depth of Marian piety, the century when the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed, pilgrimages were popular, as were medals, pictures, scapulars and the like.

Lyon was a deeply Marian city, and once the years of turmoil quietened, processions again wound up the hill to Fourvière and to the Chapel of the Black Madonna. The fact that their names had been written on a ribbon placed in the heart that hung on the statue of the Madonna was always a source of encouragement for the pioneers. They loved Mary as their “mother, queen and model”<sup>29</sup> and shared this devotion with others.

*Desire to share the benefits of French civilisation with those less fortunate*

The pioneers worked out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century model of being missionary. They struggled to understand the culture of the people they were with, and because they valued their French culture they saw themselves as bringing the benefits of western civilisation to those seen to be deprived of it. They taught the girls cooking, reading and writing, music - especially liturgical hymns, how to sew and embroider clothing, but also of vestments and banners needed for Church celebrations.

---

<sup>29</sup> Cf *Rule* 1858, chapter 1 [1] OPS 5, document 4A (Poupinel).



This sense of superiority regarding their own culture is coupled with their inability to understand local customs. When someone was ill, Wallisians would cram the house of the sick person to express their concern and make “kava so as to cheer up the patient and his family”<sup>30</sup>... Perroton saw care of the sick in a different way.

Perroton’s aim was to train the girls “to work and to form them to become neat and active women”<sup>31</sup>, so she tried to curb the girls’ habit of lying down to sleep anywhere at any time. She felt the women had no “concern for their husband or children and ... do not worry if their behaviour is good or bad ...”<sup>32</sup> After seven years in Oceania, this is her assessment: “according to my poor insights, I believe it will take a long time before these people make any progress...”<sup>33</sup>

The use of western values as a touchstone is also seen in the missionaries’ attitudes. After three years of the sisters’ presence in Futuna, Father Dezest comments: “Today women dress with a greater sense of decency, they are more reserved in their actions, in their work, and in their thoughts even. Their piety has become at once more ardent and more rational.”<sup>34</sup>

## 5. The Pacific Scene in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

### *Colonization, the coming of Protestant missionaries*

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a period of great colonization by European nations, and the vast Pacific became a target for territory-grabbing. Colonising Christians of Western Europe saw the need to evangelize the peoples of the Pacific.

By the time the Marists arrived in Central Oceania in 1836, Protestants had already established footholds in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and the Loyalty Islands northeast of New Caledonia. When Bishop Pompallier arrived in Tonga in 1837, local rulers, influenced by the Methodist missionaries, resisted. To what extent did the backing of a French warship aid the Catholic missionaries on their

---

<sup>30</sup> Perroton – [Eymard] 04.07.1848, Letter 5, paragraph 8, OPS 1, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Perroton – Eymard, 06.10.1847, Letter 4, paragraph 7.

<sup>32</sup> Perroton- Eymard & Poupinel, 13.07.1853, Letter 8, paragraph 2.

<sup>33</sup> Perroton – Eymard & Poupinel, 13.07.1853, Letter 8, paragraph 2.

<sup>34</sup> Dezest – Yardin, 24.06.1861, OPS 2, 236.

return to Tonga 5 years later?<sup>35</sup> Catholics were the first missionaries on the large island of New Caledonia. There, French Marists preceded their government who took control of the island in 1853.

Remote from regular shipping routes, the islands of Wallis and Futuna had been generally ignored by Protestant missionaries. Here the Marist Bishop Pierre Bataillon determined that Catholicism should flourish. Garrett notes that these two remote islands “were exclusively Catholic islands where missionaries, and later nuns, could greet visiting French warships in confidence that theirs was at least one exclusively French Catholic haven in Oceania unblemished by Anglo-Saxon or German Protestantism.”<sup>36</sup>

*Theological understanding of mission and ecumenical attitudes of the times*

According to the theology of their time, explicit conversion was needed in order to be saved. Their aim was to “save souls”. Sister M. de la Ste Espérance, in Sydney for health reasons after four years in the tropics, writes to Father Poupinel of her “lovely surprise... when... I heard Mme de Millot, a staunch Protestant, ask me if I would teach catechism to young Emélie”.<sup>37</sup>

Daily the pioneers prayed for “the perseverance of the just” (the Catholics), and for “the conversion of sinners”<sup>38</sup> (the Protestants and those of other faiths). But there was more. In their care of the sick or in their teaching, the pioneers wished to bring the compassion of Christ, and they offered service to anyone in need, Catholic or otherwise.

In her ship’s journal (1857-1858), Sister M. de la Miséricorde regretted not having permission for the midnight Masses because “surrounded as we are by Protestants, it was more prudent to go back to our cabins as usual.”<sup>39</sup> And, after recounting the death of a young doctor on board, after a ceremony that lasted about ten minutes, she

<sup>35</sup> Charles W. Forman, *The Island Churches of the South Pacific, Emergence in the Twentieth Century* Maryknoll, New York (American Society of Missiology Series, No. 5), 1982, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> John Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea: Christianity in Oceania to World War II, Suva / Geneva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific / World Council of Churches, 1992, p. 222.*

<sup>37</sup> Espérance-Poupinel, 19.07.1862, Letter 18, paragraph 5, OPS 2, 284.

<sup>38</sup> *Rule 1858*, chapter 2, 1, 12 OPS 5, document 4A (Poupinel).

<sup>39</sup> Miséricorde, Account of the voyage – her family [March 1858] paragraph 20.

comments: “for the Protestant to cry is weakness, cowardice, and they reproach Catholics for all that. Ah! No matter how much they will condemn us, I let it be, but they will not prevent me saying: long live the Catholic religion where there is heart and feeling, where there is compassion in suffering...”<sup>40</sup>

### **Conclusion**

We have come to realize how much the role of “auxiliaries of the missionaries” in 19<sup>th</sup> century Oceania included: what the pioneer sisters were expected to live and what they were expected to do.

We have seen their total gift of self, and their struggle to live out their missionary commitment. These were women who answered an interior call, and who, without the benefits of formation for either missionary or religious life, believed that part of the gift they were bringing was their total availability for the central work of mission, and the sharing of this missionary vocation with local women.

And this sharing is one dimension of our role as Marist missionaries that we are still called to live. We have initiated and directed particular works or programmes. Once they are established, we hand over the running of them to others and we take on a secondary, supportive, role until such time as we can withdraw completely. Empowering the laity has been characteristic from the beginning and is totally in line with Father Colin’s vision for a Marian church.

The Decree of Approbation of the 1931 Constitutions states: “From the earliest days (1845-1857) of the evangelization of Oceania by the Fathers of the Society of Mary, commonly called Marists, the ‘Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary’ have unceasingly collaborated with them in this work...” While the nature of the collaboration between the sisters and missionaries has changed, the gift of self for God’s mission is still the ideal that the SMSM seek to live wherever we are.

Truly the pioneers were auxiliaries in the fullest sense of being collaborators in building the Kingdom, and the story of the Oceania Marist missions would be very different without them.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. paragraph 38.