

A MISSION TOO FAR ... PACIFIC COMMITMENT
Bonus Chapter 16 [MTF-XVI]
1843

A Visitor in New Zealand

INTRODUCTION¹

In the four years after the departure of the first group of missionaries for Oceania, 24 December 1837, Father Colin got mostly positive and encouraging news. Apart from the sad loss of Father Claude Bret on the Atlantic Ocean things had gone well. The Marists had settled on two Polynesian Islands, Wallis and Futuna, one priest and one Brother on each. The Bishop himself had found a place to stay in New Zealand with one priest and one Brother. They had been received reasonably well by the local people they met. There had been some angry letters from the Bishop but on the whole he got only positive news. Four more groups had gone. The last departure, of no less than fourteen men, was an encouraging event. Letters from Peter Dillon in early 1841 told of possible new openings in Tonga.

Thirty-five men in Oceania or on the way! It had been clear from the beginning that one day the vast Vicariate of West Oceania would have to be subdivided. Perhaps the time had come. Father Colin looked at his map and submitted a plan to Rome that got a favourable response. He began to assemble a group for the new mission and gave it a name: the Vicariate of Central Oceania. He selected one of his best men, Father Jean Forest, who had volunteered for Oceania several times, to lead the group. He wrote to the Directors of the Propagation of the Faith in Lyon, the lay organisation that gave financial support to foreign missions.

Then bad news began to darken the horizon. On 12 March 1841 Colin received letters from Father Servant and Petit, written in April 1840. They painted a dark picture of the mission in New Zealand. The rosy picture, so they wrote, was deceptive. It was what Bishop Pompallier wanted France to think and he exercised strict control on all mail going out. The missionaries in New Zealand were destitute, they went hungry. Some had been reduced to begging, even of Protestant ministers. Bishop Pompallier's financial management was a disaster and he treated the men harshly and rudely. Servant and Petit had profited from his absence to dodge the censorship and come out with the truth. They also pointed to the complete neglect of the island missions in Wallis and Futuna. One of their solutions, at least for the Polynesian islands, was subdividing the Vicariate. It also became clear that the Bishop was borrowing money at high interest rates. He also was issuing IOUs against the Marist mission procure in Lyon without telling the procurator.

Colin panicked. He wanted to resign and hand over to an experienced administrator. He knew very well that management of temporal affairs had never been his strong suit. He organised the election of a successor to take place during the retreat of September. His health went visibly down. Behind the scene of the retreat senior Marists held intensive deliberations that set out another course. They convinced Colin not to resign, scrap the election, take a long rest in Belley and send a

¹ The first paragraphs recall why Forest was sent as visitor to the Marist mission in New Zealand. It summarises Jan Snijders, *Mission Too Far...Pacific Commitment* [MTF] (Adelaide: Australasian Theological Forum, 2012) 316 f and Jan Snijders, MTF XI, 7 f (first bonus chapter to MTF, www.mariststudies.org).

visitor to New Zealand. We can be sure Jean Forest was present at these meetings and as a former friend of Pompallier with whom he had preached missions in the early days, he would have seen things less pessimistically. As Colin had already assigned him to head the next group of missionaries to the new Vicariate, the obvious thing for him was to go to New Zealand instead, as a visitor, and take the missionaries for the Central Pacific to New Zealand with him. It had, in any case, become clear that Rome was not in a hurry to establish the new Vicariate and wanted to consult Bishop Pompallier first.

On the way

Forest left soon after the retreat for London, his men followed soon: the Fathers Jérôme Grange and Euloge Reignier, the Brothers Luc Maçé and Déodat (Jean) Villemagne and the seminarian Jean Lampila. They embarked on the *London* and after a very rough passage through the English Channel and nearly three weeks delay in Falmouth for repairs they sailed 18 December 1841.

Strong winds and currents drove them far to the West (36° W) before they could turn east and pass the Cape of Good Hope at 45° S. The rest of their trip was uneventful except that - a thing very rare at that latitude - at 45°S and 106° E, they had to avoid several huge icebergs. [3] They passed Australia far to the south and on 1 April 1842 they came in view of New Zealand, all six of them in good shape. During the voyage Forest had worked on a letter for Colin and when in Cook Strait a ship on the way to Sydney passed close to the *London*, the mail of the *London* was passed to the other ship. Colin can have received Forest's first letter in August 1842.²

The men had passed the time with learning English and giving French lessons in return. Forest carefully listened to passengers familiar with New Zealand and gave Colin an interesting summary of what the country and its people were like. The priests could say Mass and the community could say the common prayers in their cabin. They wore the soutane on board which gained them more respect, Forest wrote, than would have been the case in France. They were able to do a little ministry among the Irish migrants on board. [4]

On 6 April they went ashore in Port Nicholson, later called Wellington. They were approached immediately by Catholics inviting them to stay. In the five days they stayed they heard confessions, blessed a marriage, did Sunday services and a number of baptisms. Forest was moved by the loyalty of the Irish Catholics of whom there were about two hundred in town. Bishop Pompallier had already started a building fund for a church and he had formally authorised a young Catholic doctor to conduct lay services in the parish community such as Sunday prayers, funerals and so on. This to the surprise of the Marists for whom such lay involvement was evidently new.³ [5]

On 11 April they took a ship to Auckland but it turned into a long and dangerous voyage when their ship ran into a nasty storm, narrowly avoided underwater rock formations and got lost in the fog. They reached Auckland on 28 April where they found a small wooden house for the priest who was expected in the near future. They did some ministry again but, after a few days, they found a ship to the Bay of Islands where they arrived one day later, 4 May, the day before Ascension Day.

² Charles Girard (ed), *Lettres reçues d'Océanie* [LRO], (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2009) volume 2, Doc 140. Numbers in brackets refer to the paragraphs in LRO, (f = and following pages).

³ LRO 2, Doc 166, 5.

The first impressions

In the Bay of Islands they found that Bishop Pompallier had not yet returned from the Polynesian islands, afraid, so it was said, to be arrested on arrival because of debts he had left behind. He had put Father Épalle in charge as Pro-Vicar but Épalle was now preparing to leave for Europe. Father Garin, the Provincial, it was agreed, would take Épalle's place while Petitjean looked after the parish which meant mainly instructing catechumens from among the local Maoris and a few Europeans. They also found in the Bay Father Comte who had recently arrived from Akaroa where he had left Father Tripe by himself. The layman Yvert was also there with a few Brothers working to get the printery ready.

Forest immediately (circa 22 May 1842) started putting his first impressions on paper.⁴ 'The mission is in the most awful misery'. If its creditors were in any way nasty fellows they could bring it down at any moment'. [7] The priests are destitute and have been known to beg for biscuits from passing ships like the Maoris sometimes do. At the same time the Bishop spends a hundred Francs a day on his ship. Nobody seems to know exactly how much debt there is, but interest on debts here is 14% or 15%. The first reason given is the chaotic administration of the Bishop and the whole town knows it. As the English people here put it: 'The Catholic priests are good, spiritual men but children when it comes to temporal management'. [8] The second reason is again the Bishop in so far as often he is just too generous. When local people come to ask for things, clothing or blankets and so on, he never refuses to help even if it means borrowing money to do so. He thinks it attracts people to the Church. [9] The third reason is the ship that is estimated to cost the mission a hundred Francs a day. [10] Fourthly, there is the purchase of properties that often are not needed. Finally, he lends money when people ask him and they do not always pay back as promised.

The Bishop has had nasty rows with several priests and spoken very harshly to some. He threatened some to send them home and speaks scornfully of the Society of Mary which hurts the confreres. He has openly said priests are welcome to join the Diocese if they want to leave the Society. [12] The men expect that the Bishop will not tolerate Forest in the position of visitator and not give him any money to travel. However, he promises to make the best of it. While writing Forest fell ill but he got the letter ready for Épalle to take to France. Épalle left 23 May on the *Aube* for Valparaiso. Antoine Garin took his place as Provincial, Pro-Vicar and procurator. Father Colin got this letter, Forest's second one from New Zealand, the first days of January 1843, when Épalle reached Lyon.

Petitjean wrote a common letter to Colin in name of the three Marists stationed in the Bay: Garin, Petit and Petitjean.⁵ It gives a sobering description of their extreme poverty, and, in contrast to the boastful tales that the Bishop was used to send to Europe, it describes the meager success of their work. They do not see a great future for New Zealand and especially for the indigenous people because of the massive inflow of British settlers.

The time before Épalle's departure was used to plan for the future and Forest's influence is visible. As his first letter shows, he had been shaken by the pastoral neglect of Wellington and Auckland in contrast, as he now discovered, to the fact that most missionaries were working at isolated, thinly populated places. It led to the appointment of Father Borjon who would leave Maketu for Wellington with Brother

⁴ LRO 2, Doc 166.

⁵ LRO 2, Doc 167. MTF XI, 15 f.

Deodat. Petitjean would leave Whangaroa and take on Auckland but he would first go to Sydney to get a loan at lower rates than available in New Zealand. They all signed a letter authorising Petitjean to act on behalf of the Diocese. On his return he would open a station in Auckland with Brother Colomb. Rozet would go to Whangaroa and Baty, who was considered the best Maori speaker, was to come to headquarters to proofread the first book in Maori language that Yvert was getting ready to print.

A first attempt

The long voyage and the hectic time after arrival had exhausted Forest. It took him longer to recover than he had expected. Suddenly Louis Perret decided to take an opportunity that presented itself to return to France. His dream, inspired by Pompallier's invitation,⁶ had proved an illusion. He had come as an architect to build but the mission did not even have the money to feed the missionaries! Forest quickly wrote a third letter for Perret to take to Colin, in which he mostly repeated what he had already written in his second one.⁷

Only several weeks later, 2 July 1842, Forest felt able to travel.⁸ He took Brother Deodat Villemagne with him on a passing ship and went to Auckland, carrying some bread, flour, rice, two chickens and a piece of pork. Around the same time Father Borjon had left his station of Maketu and walked to Auckland. Garin had sent him thirty Pounds to pay his way to Port Nicholson with Brother Déodat but it had been stolen.⁹ When they found that the *Speculator* was going to Port Nicholson they were unable to pay the fare of eight Pounds per person. Forest still had five Pounds and with three Pounds that a Catholic lady gave him he could pay for Borjon. He begged the Captain to allow Déodat to travel on the promise that the parish of Port Nicholson would pay his fare on arrival. They sailed on 31 July leaving Forest by himself in Auckland. He intended to go and visit the mission stations but simply did not have the money to do so.

Surviving became difficult when Baty came in from Mahia on his way to the Bay. He had been given just enough money to reach Auckland but nothing to continue his way. He dared not take a ship on the promise of paying in Kororareka for fear Garin might not have enough money to do so. Then Rozet came in from Opotiki on his way to Whangaroa. He had been helped by Protestant ministers who took pity on him. Not much later Brother Colomb, who was to stay with Petitjean in Auckland, arrived from Hokianga. 'We are lucky to get a piece of bread and pork a day' [7] 'but I am happy that I can be like Jesus in Bethlehem' [13].

Fortunately, the Italian settler Dominique who lived near Whangaroa,¹⁰ happened to call in on his way north to see if he could be of help. Rozet got a comfortable and free trip to his new station and Baty was taken to Kororareka where he arrived two days before Bishop Pompallier returned home (25 August 1842) after his thirteen months absence. That left Forest stranded with Colomb in Auckland.

Garin wrote to Forest to tell him of the good news that the Bishop had brought: Wallis is converted, baptised and confirmed, many people go to confession and receive Holy Communion. The Fathers Bataillon and Viard stay there as parish

⁶ MTF, 282 f

⁷ 2 June 1842. LRO 2, Doc 174. Forest and others often did so because letters could get lost or would not arrive in the order they were sent.

⁸ Forest reported on this period by letter of 7 October (his fourth), LRO 2, Doc 205.

⁹ Garin to Colin, 9 August 1842, LRO 2, Doc 186, 6.

¹⁰ LRO 2, Doc 222, 5.

clergy. Futuna has also been converted and has a good Christian King now. Many people are baptised and confirmed. The Fathers Servant and Rouault are busy instructing the Futunans with the help of Brother Marie Nizier. Tonga is rapidly becoming converted through the presence of Father Chevron and Brother Attale.¹¹

Forest wrote two letters to Pompallier and the Bishop answered. He seemed happy enough to have Forest in the mission but warns him not to believe everything he hears about the administration. He is not so happy with the fact that Épalle has gone to France and fears that Épalle might tell things about the mission that are not to its advantage. He would have preferred to go to France himself. [10]

On the morning of 7 October Forest heard that a ship was leaving for London that evening. He quickly wrote to Colin.¹² He had bad news about Borjon and Brother Déodat. The *Speculator* had not arrived in Port Nicholson. He feared the worst.

People of Port Nicholson had written to Forest that they did not need a Marist priest any more. They were expecting an English speaking priest to arrive shortly and start a parish. Lord Petre the English Catholic Lord who promoted emigration to New Zealand, had succeeded in finding a priest for the new town. Given the enormous problems in New Zealand Forest wonders if the Marists should not leave New Zealand, hand the mission to English speaking priests and go to the tropical islands instead. [8]

In the course of September Father Petitjean returned to New Zealand with his cattle, sheep and bees and took them on foot to Whangaroa where Brother Élie was happy to build up his farm with them.¹³ When he was back in the Bay the Bishop confirmed his appointment to Auckland where his command of English would enable him to develop the parish for the rapidly growing European population. Pompallier appointed Father Grange to Tonga and Brother Augustin to Wallis.

On 4 October the *Sancta Maria* left the Bay of Islands, carrying Petitjean, Grange, Augustin and the Tongan chief who had come to New Zealand with the Bishop.¹⁴ After dropping Petitjean in Auckland the ship would take Grange and the Tongan chief to Tonga, then take Augustin to Wallis, pick up Brother Joseph Luzy and sail to Valparaiso. Joseph would stay with the Picpus Fathers and get treatment for his elephantiasis and wait for an occasion to come to New Zealand. The Captain, Michel, was to sell the ship in Valparaiso and find his way to France.

The mission ship will have reached Auckland on 5 October. It left for Tonga a few days later. Petitjean had handed all the money he got in Australia to the Bishop but then got nothing when leaving for Auckland!¹⁵ He carried a message from the Bishop for Forest to come to the Bay of Islands as soon as possible, but no money for the voyage. Forest felt grieved and humiliated but started looking around for a ship. When he found one he asked the Captain for a free passage. The Captain told him he did not go to Kororareka but Forest knew that was not true. He got a friend to ask for him and the Captain agreed but was angry when he saw it was Forest, the same man he already had refused. In the end, he let Forest stay on board. [9]

¹¹ Garin's letter is quoted in Forest's one to Colin of 7 October, LRO 2, Doc 205, 2 - 4.

¹² LRO 2, Doc 205

¹³ Cf MTF XIII, 11 f

¹⁴ MTF XIII, 7. there is an apparent contradiction in the dates. If the mission ship left the Bay on 4 October as seems sure, how is it possible that Forest does not mention it in his letter of 7 October? Most likely Forest had written the letter beforehand and added the date of mailing it when he discovered the ship leaving for London. That left him no time to add items such as the arrival of the *Sancta Maria*, which was probably on 5 October..

¹⁵ LRO 2, Doc 222, 7.

When they left there was only one other passenger, drunk, and a few dogs who had left their droppings here and there. The captain arrived with five other passengers, all drunk, who poisoned the air smoking their pipes. The Captain stopped several times each day to go ashore to hunt, staying away for several hours. At one stage, the ship had to shelter behind a little island for three days because of the weather. All by all, the trip that should not have taken more than two days at the most, took eight days. The only food on board was old bread and pieces of dirty pork of which everybody had to cut what he wanted with a filthy knife. At one point the pork was finished and one of the passengers collected a bit of money from the others to go and buy pork at the next stop, only Forest did not have even one coin to contribute. The awful behaviour on board became even worse when a young Maori woman came on board, carrying a dog and a piglet under her clothing and had to find a place in the already over-crowded ship. The ninth day the ship finally reached Kororareka and Forest could present himself to Bishop Pompallier in his ragged and stinking clothes.¹⁶

The visitor and the Bishop

Forest's story will have filled the first talk with Pompallier. He told Forest to spread the story in Europe. 'It will show them how poor we are.' A few days later, 9 November, Forest did just that. He wrote Épalle a long and light-hearted letter on how the New Zealand mission had fared since he had left and devoted the last six pages to an amusing account of his trip on the miserable little ship.¹⁷

Forest now experienced at first hand Pompallier's way of making light of the sufferings of his men without any awareness that it was his own uncaring administration that often was the cause. Still, the long discussions with the Bishop and his contacts with the missionaries made Forest a little less pessimistic. On 5 November he wrote a long letter to Father Colin.¹⁸ He shows a little more understanding for the Bishop's position. Some of the missionaries have made things worse by their open criticism and some French laypeople have joined in with false rumours that they passed to Captain Dumont D'Urville, as if the Bishop received a million Francs a year! Everybody should tone down and avoid things that do nothing but irritate the Bishop. [3]

Your letter, he writes to Colin, appointing me to visitor has added to the irritation.¹⁹ His task had been defined as follows: 'He will see the Bishop, the Religious Superior appointed by the Bishop, listen to their advice and in good understanding with them, bring the visit to a fruitful result for the general good of the mission.' And a bit further the letter speaks of 'the measures most apt to establish and further the Catholic Faith in New Zealand.' The Bishop, Forest writes, sees in these innocent words that you are going beyond your powers. The general good of the mission is the responsibility of the Bishop and of the Bishop alone. The Bishop and nobody else has been given this task from the Holy See and he is accountable only to the Holy See. The Superior General has no other responsibility than to further the interior life of the religious and see to it that they live according to their Rule. [4]

¹⁶ Forest to Épalle, 9 November 1842, LRO 2, Doc 222, 10 - 18.

¹⁷ LRO 2, Doc 222, 7 - 20.

¹⁸ LRO 2, 215.

¹⁹ Gaston Lessard (ed), « *Colin Sup* » [CS] (Rome: Marist Fathers, 2007) volume 1, Doc 301, 3. MTF, 493.

As to Colin's desire to see a Marist house in the Bay of Islands the Bishop has no objections provided he gets a letter from the Holy See authorising him to allow it. However, he does not think the time is ripe for it. [5]

As to his own position Forest says the Bishop has no objections if he keeps up regular correspondence with the confreres and visits them 'provided I do not touch upon anything administrative.' Administration is a sacred word here and if conversation gets near it, he reacts strongly. 'With God's grace I shall do my best to be faithful to the restrictions imposed on me and stay far from anything that might affect my good relations with him'. [6] The Bishop thinks it would cost 600 Pounds to visit all the confreres. The men agree but consider it all the same necessary that regular visits are made by someone representing the Society. The Bishop would like Forest to be the Provincial in the way he describes it. I have said I am prepared to act within the limits of my present charges until you, he says to Colin, make formal decisions to the contrary. Both Forest and the Bishop want Colin to take formal steps to clarify the situation. Not that Forest wants an official position, on the contrary, he fears the unavoidable complications. [7]

Some of the priests have said that the Bishop wants to detach them from the Society. He refers to some papers he says he received from Rome to the effect that, in the missions, religious belong only in spirit to their Institute but for their work they are under the authority of Rome through the Vicar Apostolic. It has made some of them cry. But, Forest adds, this is a misunderstanding. 'Our good Bishop does not always express himself clearly'. [8]

As to the letters from Rome mentioning the erection of a second Vicariate, the Bishop shrugged it off. 'They do not even properly support the one Vicariate', he had said. The complaint he comes back on every day is that the procure in Lyon holds on to the money it gets from the Propagation of the Faith and does not send it to the mission for which it is given. Nothing that Forest could say convinced Pompallier of the contrary and in a later letter he urges Colin to have a simple but clear and complete account made of all moneys received and spent in France.²⁰ Nothing else will get the Bishop to see how wrong he is. Forest's advice to Father Colin is: stop being the procure for the mission and find somebody else to receive the money from the Propagation and to forward it to the Bishop. [9]

Forest plans a little retreat for the Brothers and the Fathers at headquarters and at places nearby such as Whangaroa and Hokianga. Afterwards he will try again to go and see those further away to the south.

Another attempt²¹

Forest asked the Bishop four or five times for permission to go and visit the confreres to the south and give him some money for it. Finally, in December, the Bishop relented and Forest could take a ship and go to Auckland where he found Petitjean and Brother Colomb. In the three months since Forest had left Auckland Petitjean had done wonders. With the help of the poor Irish Catholics and a French Catholic lady married to a Protestant official of the High Court, he had built a little chapel for Sunday Masses, a school, a small house for the teacher and another one for himself and Colomb. Forest stayed a few days and did a little retreat with Petitjean and the Brother. [6]

²⁰ LRO 2, Doc 247, 4.

²¹ The full account of this visit is in Forest's seventh letter, LRO 2, Doc 247.

He was lucky enough to get a passage to Tauranga. After a voyage of three days he found Brother Euloge Chabany surrounded by a happy crowd of Maoris and a big school full of children. Father Pezant was away for the day and Father Séon had just left after a few days visit, back to Matamata, a day's walk. Euloge sent a messenger after him and the next day both Pezant and Séon came in. The missionaries were most interested to hear how the Society was doing in France. Forest led them in a retreat of eight days that they appreciated very much. He found Pezant a hard-working man, but inclined to neglect himself. There had been a few rows with the Bishop and it still hurt. Pezant was unsure if his vows were still valid and would have done them at the end of the retreat if Forest had been delegated to receive them.

Forest praised Antoine Séon as one of the best missionaries in the Vicariate, always full of zeal and even-tempered. The Bishop spoke of him with respect and affection. For a time, he had a young Frenchman living with him but the young man misbehaved and Séon had been obliged to send him away. He hoped to get a Brother as soon as one was available. [6 f]

After spending ten days in Tauranga, Forest was able to travel on a small ship to Opotiki. The trip took two days and he arrived in the dark. The ship ran aground and Forest had to wade ashore. He spent a few frightening hours wandering in the dark on what proved to be an uninhabited islet off the coast. At last people ashore heard him calling for help and came to his rescue. It was becoming light when he got to the station where he found the Fathers Comte and Reignier with Brother Justin Perret. The three were well organised, they had a well-tended garden, a goat and chickens, even flour to bake bread. Like most of them, they lived in a small and leaking native hut with four inches of mud as floor. Forest promised to ask the Bishop for small wooden houses just as most Europeans had. Justin was not happy. He had been promised to be a catechist, now he was a cook and felt cheated. Forest promised to get a change to some other place. The three had done a little retreat recently, so Forest limited himself to a few conferences. [12]

Forest had hoped for a small ship to return to Tauranga but when nothing turned up he walked back with Reignier. With their belongings on their backs, being, as Forest put it, their own mules. They lived on the old potatoes and pork they carried themselves and Forest helped himself along by dreaming of the chocolate that would be ideal in such circumstances. They had to be carried across some fast flowing rivers. The big Maori prepared to carry Forest expected to be paid in tobacco to be handed over in mid-river!

The first day they got to Wakatane where they found a good functioning Catholic community, served by the priests of Opotiki. The place they were given to sleep was so muddy that they decided to sleep outside in front of the house. Unfortunately that was the usual sleeping place for the dogs that turned up all through the night claiming their rights. Reignier led the village community for prayers and the two moved on to Maketu. [16 f]

It took a day's walk to get there. Maketu was where Borjon had lived with Justin and where he had been robbed. They passed the night in the most miserable of conditions and when Reignier tried to have a prayer meeting in the morning, nobody turned up. [25 f]

Another day's walk got them to Tauranga where they found the mission deserted and were told that all three missionaries were on tour and would be away for a fortnight. Reignier took a few days to rest before starting his long walk home. Forest stayed a week until a small ship sailed into the Tauranga anchorage, full of young

Maori women on the way to Auckland. He knew what that meant but decided to take it anyway.

Three days later, 9 Februari, he reached Auckland [30] where the seventh group of missionaries, Jean-Simon Bernard, Auguste Chouvet and Delphin Moreau had just arrived from Sydney on the *City of Aberdeen*.²² They expressed their surprise at the poverty in which they saw Petitjean living. After what he had seen in Tauranga, Opotiki and Maketu, Forest will have smiled. One of the things he learned from the newcomers were the plans for a mission to New Caledonia that Colin had openly spoken off on various occasions in 1842. Forest felt that mentioning the project would upset Bishop Pompallier and they agreed not to bring it up.²³

The only occasion available to get to the Bay of Islands was the same little boat he had taken earlier, but they took it anyhow. The next morning they discovered the miserable craft was leaking all over and they spent the next days pumping to help the thing keep afloat and they reached the Bay of Islands on 18 February after dark. People at the mission house must have seen somehow that there were missionaries on board. The Bishop came out in a dinghy with two Brothers and four Maoris to help them ashore. [31]

A retreat was held for eight days in complete silence at which the Bishop, Garin and Forest each gave one conference a day. The three new missionaries took part as well as Rozet from Whangaroa, Tripe and four Brothers, Pierre Marie, Florentin, Emery and Basile. During the meals, they read the letters of Saint Francis Xavier and were amused at the likeness with their own life and work. 'if this keeps on, Forest wrote to Colin, I shall soon be a famous preacher of priests' retreats'. [32]

The role of the 'Provincial'

In the following weeks Pompallier continued to make remarks on the appointment of a visitator and urging Forest to become Provincial. On 18 March 1843 Forest made an attempt to clarify his situation and asked the Bishop in writing to give him - also in writing - what his position was both at the station in Kororareka and in relation to the rest of the mission. The Bishop answered the following day.²⁴ The Bishop himself, he wrote, is the only one authorised to do the visitation of the mission and if the Superior General wants to send another visitator he should ask Rome first. [4]

The provincial follows the perfection of the religious and looks to it that they live according to the Rule and the religious spirit while applying themselves to the apostolate. [...] In name of the Superior General whom he represents, the Provincial will be in close contact by letter and through visits, with all the religious. In his spiritual direction he will see to it that they live in the spirit of poverty, chastity, obedience and docility towards the ecclesiastical superior'. [3]

²² MTF XIV, 20

²³ LRO 2, Doc 247,56. In February/March Colin mentioned it in correspondence with the Directors of the Propagation of the Faith (cf CS 1, Docs 322, 4; 323, 9; 324, 10 329,1) which will have become known. He spoke about it in the community of Puylata on 1 April 1842 (CS 1, Doc 332, 1. LRO 2, p 598, n.45). Colin left for Rome on 30 May and did not return until 3 September by which time the three missionaries had left. News about the division of the Vicariate and the new bishops came only when Colin returned from Rome. In fact nobody in New Zealand knew until January 1844.

²⁴ LRO 2, Doc 245.

The Provincial has no direct apostolic task but can be asked by the priest in charge of a mission station for an occasional assistance. [4] He cannot change a religious to another place and should not become involved in the running of the mission. [5] He lives close to the Bishop and can give advice when asked, both with regard to the Marists in New Zealand and in the tropical islands. In Kororareka he is the senior curate under the Bishop and the local parish priest who is Father Garin. For the rest Forest is like any other missionary. As if the matter of his appointment was already settled, Pompallier further defines Forest's position by writing he is not a Pro-Vicar and has no pastoral task in the diocese. He should see the Marists as parish priests and not as religious. Forest answered in writing that, as the visitor appointed by the Superior General, he is not available for another assignment.

Forest sent the Bishop's response immediately to Father Colin with a long covering letter (26 March 1843).²⁵ He mailed them, postage paid, care of Cooper with a ship that happened to be in the Bay and was on the point of leaving directly for London.

Hokianga

No sooner had Forest got his mail away than he left to continue his work of visiting and giving retreats, now in Hokianga where he had not been yet. Garin and Luke had not taken part in the retreat at Kororareka so they joined Forest. Two days walking got the little party to the west coast where Maxime Petit was the parish priest. With him were Jean Lampila still preparing for the priesthood and Brother Claude-Marie. After the eight days of retreat Garin and Luke returned home straight away, Forest stayed a week to rest. He then attended in Hokianga the ceremonies of Holy Week and Easter so that he was there for about twenty days.

Forest was edified to see a good number of people being baptised and thirty-two do their first Holy Communion. Some had come by canoe from as far as 100 km with children, pigs, dogs and food for their stay. They lived in huts around the priests' house and spend their time being instructed in the Faith and learning church hymns. He recalled that Hokianga was where the Bishop and Servant had started in January 1838 and that at first large numbers used to flock in. After five years numbers were much lower. The first wave had not been followed up properly. His comment: 'We just did not have the manpower. We bit off more than we could swallow'.²⁶ Still, now it is the best mission station we have in New Zealand.

Back in Kororareka after the retreat Forest reported on his last trip and summarised his observations and conclusions.²⁷ By now he had seen all the confreres and visited every station in the North Island. His main conclusion remains that the Marists in New Zealand need a proper Provincial, appointed by the Superior General. He needs a house of his own where he can receive new missionaries and confreres in need of a rest. For many reasons it is not good that the present bishop's house is the only place religious can fall back on. [9] The Bishop himself too would be better off if he were seen not from too close but from far off. [10] Financially as well, the Provincial has to be independent of the Bishop with a budget of his own to allow him to travel and visit.

²⁵ His seventh, LRO 2, Doc 247. Forest mentions a sixth letter sent in December. It has not been found.

²⁶ *Qui trop embrasse mal étreint*'. [11]

²⁷ LRO 2, Doc 254. His eighth.

In August 1843 Pompallier appointed Father Garin to found and lead a mission station in Kaipara, on the west coast. There had been Catholics in Kaipara for some time but no priest on the spot. They had been served pastorally by the priest in Hokianga, some hundred kilometers to the north. Forest slid quietly into the vacancies created by the departure of Garin. Just as the Bishop wanted, he took over the work of procurator and provincial, without any formal appointment as he had foreseen. The only thing he achieved was to refuse the title of Provincial.²⁸

The ambitious project of saving the mission of New Zealand by sending a visitator petered out silently. In November 1843 we meet the 'visitator' sending out a long order of items for Poupinel, the procurator in Lyon: two three-cornered hats for each priest each year, two cassocks for each priest each year, two pairs of trousers, one woolen and one velvet, for each priest, etc (three pages print in LRO).²⁹ For the printer there was a special order: 500 letters 'a', 1900 letters 'e' etc (two and a half pages).³⁰

In early November, the Naval vessel *Rhin* called in the Bay of Islands on its way from Akaroa to Sydney. Captain Bérard finally gave the Bishop the eight hundred Francs he had kept back from the three missionaries who had travelled on his ship from Toulon to Hobart.³¹ Pompallier got Bérard to take Father Tripe on board as far as Sydney where, it was hoped, he would somehow find passage to Europe. Forest used the opportunity to write to Colin.³²

On the departure of Tripe Forest commented that Tripe had never really taken to missionary life or to religious life. He had never recovered from the painful rows with the Bishop in the beginning of his stay in New Zealand. Later on, the Bishop had been quite kind to him but the hurt had not healed. Anyway, 'a good priest but no missionary'. [1]

For the first time Forest writes of the moral dangers of missionary life in New Zealand. [6] Two of the Brothers have been a source of concern in so far as they are found to embrace or fondle little girls in the school. One of them, Claude Marie has been transferred to Kororaraka where he will never be alone. The second one is Brother Colomb Perret. The rumours about his stay in Auckland with Petitjean may be exaggerated, said Forest, but they also refer to improper contacts with adult women. Brother Colomb has been transferred to Tauranga where he is with Father Pezant.

There have been no complaints about the priests but Father Comte had told Forest that when he once visited a pagan village, the chief offered him a girl for the night as they seem to do as a matter of courtesy for their guests. The chief was surprised when Comte did not accept the offer and listened with amazement to the reasons the priest gave. Forest assured Colin: as they get to know the priests better, they stop doing it. There can be dangers too for the priests as well as the Brothers when they spend the night in Maori huts where men and women often sleep any old how together on the floor. It can happen that a woman turning in her sleep lies against a priest. They do not do it with evil intentions, he assured Colin, but it can still be an opportunity for the devil to try a temptation. [6]

²⁸ LRO 2, Doc 254 [8].

²⁹ LRO 2, Doc 284.

³⁰ LRO 2, Docs 283 & 284.

³¹ MTF XIV, 20

³² His ninth. LRO 2, Doc 281.

CONCLUSIONS

A failure

In the Marist retreat in Belley in September 1841 it looked a good idea: send a visitor to the mission without formal authority. No threat to anyone. As the *alter ego* of the Superior General he would have the moral authority that Father Colin undoubtedly had. He would visit all the Marists. He would listen to everything they had to say about their life, their work, their problems and the way they saw things. He would act in good understanding with the Bishop and the Superior appointed by the Bishop so that the result of the visitation would be for the general good of the mission. He would report in detail to Father Colin who would take the results of the visitation to Rome and ask Propaganda to do what could be done to solve the problems of the New Zealand mission. Colin happily agreed.³³

No sooner had Forest listened to the Marists he met in Kororareka after his arrival on 4 May 1842 than he knew the project had no chance of succeeding. What he heard was that Bishop Pompallier (who had not yet returned from the islands) would never allow him to travel and visit the confreres and as Forest wrote, 'he can enforce his will by simply not giving me the money that I need to travel.' The Bishop is deeply convinced that he, and he alone, is responsible for the running of the mission and he will not allow anybody to even speak on the subject.³⁴

When the Bishop got back and heard that Forest was in Auckland he told him to come to Kororareka but he did not send him any money to travel which he could have done by giving it to Petitjean who brought the message. In the end Forest had to find his way north on an empty pocket.³⁵ When he met with the Bishop, Forest saw the men had been right. Just a shrug at the mention of a visitor. The Bishop simply stated he was the only one with the right to do a visitation in his Diocese. If Colin wanted another visitor he would have to get Roman approval first.

At the end of 1843 we find the visitor living in the Bishop's house in the role of procurator and Provincial on terms laid down unilaterally by the Bishop. There had been no open and wide consultation on the general good of the Diocese as planned in Lyon and there were no proposals that the Superior General could take to Rome. Putting it simply: the project had not worked.

Colin

Although Forest knew from the day he got there that there would not be a set of proposals from the visitation, he made sure the Superior General got full and in-depth information on everything his representative saw and heard. From the regular mention of dates and places, even of hours that he left or arrived somewhere, we can conclude he made notes or kept a diary during his visits. From his first letter on board ship in Cook Strait on 3 April 1842 to his letter of 14 February 1844, the last one on the visitation, Forest sent eleven letters to Colin of together a good hundred pages in

³³ MTF 329f. CS 1, Doc 301. There are good reasons to think the idea did not come from Fr. Colin himself but rather from Forest and supported by Maitrepierre and others. First there is the fact that Father Colin barely referred to it later on; secondly its impossibility was one of Forest's points when writing his first letters after meeting with the Marists in the Bay of Islands.

³⁴ 27 May 1842. LRO 2, Doc 166, 13.

³⁵ LRO 2, Doc 215, 4.

print.³⁶ Forest had carefully given each letter a number. The first one will have reached Colin in July or August 1842. The last one in the summer of 1844.

From the day Forest left Lyon, 5 October 1841 Colin did not write to him until 18 October 1844, when he should have received Forest's last one.³⁷ One letter in three years to the man who represented him in New Zealand!³⁸ In this one letter he admitted that it was the first and only one. [1] His excuse was the confidential nature of the subject matter. However valid his excuse - and Forest will have agreed - one can understand that he wondered if Father Colin did get his letters at all! Twice he urges Colin to let him know if his letters had arrived, and if so, which ones.³⁹

In fact, Colin appears not to be sure himself: 'I think that I have received most of the letters you have sent me.' [1] Keeping letters on file was evidently not yet part of established procedure at Puylata.

Possibly in reaction to Forest's paragraphs in his ninth letter⁴⁰ on the moral dangers of mission life in New Zealand, Colin recalls what has been his main concern from the beginning. Priests should never be put alone but must always be two or three together on one station. And he adds, Brothers should not be allowed to move alone in and out of the Maori villages.⁴¹

Colin directs his attention especially on the Marist house that was indicated in the original letter of appointment. The money for it was allocated, he now writes, but Bishop Pompallier had written letters, says Colin, to various people in Europe opposing the idea which makes Colin conclude that the plan was not God's will. He announces the foundation of the procure in Sydney and urges Forest to ask Pompallier's agreement for a similar foundation in New Zealand. [9] It had evidently slipped Colin's mind that Forest had done so already and that he had reported the result nearly two years earlier. At the time the Bishop had agreed on condition that Rome approved. It was Colin himself who at that time had not followed it up!⁴²

While Forest was on visitation lots of things had happened. The Vicariate of Western Oceania was split up, two Bishops were appointed and fifteen missionaries were sent out. Épalle had obtained a special grant on particular conditions to pay off the debts of the Vicariate and spent several months in Rome discussing its problems at Propaganda. Even a weightier change: as from February 1843 Colin had given up dealing with Bishop Pompallier directly and would not write to him any more. Nothing of this was communicated to the visitor.

Equally difficult to understand is that Colin did not act on requests or suggestions of Forest that could have improved substantially on the situation of the missionaries without endangering the confidentiality of the correspondence. Forest repeatedly mentioned the desire of the Marists in New Zealand for an officially appointed representative of the Society in New Zealand or, as they put it, a 'proper provincial'.⁴³ As much as they respected and liked Épalle and Garin, both were really sham provincials, appointed by the Bishop on his own initiative and willingly or unwillingly representing his point of view.

³⁶ LRO 3, Doc 318. Forest counts this letter the eleventh, the last one of his reporting.

³⁷ CS 2, Doc 212.

³⁸ Except, possibly, the one Forest gave to Tripe, who got stuck in Sydney.

³⁹ LRO 2, Doc 254, 2. Also LRO 3, Doc 325, 6.

⁴⁰ LRO 2, Doc 281 of 4 November 1843.

⁴¹ As Forest tells it, their problems were not connected with roaming in the villages, but with working in the schools. Cf above p 11.

⁴² LRO 2, Doc 215, 5. Cf above, p 6

⁴³ LRO 2, Doc 254, 9.

There is a curious contrast between the assistant Maître-pierre reproaching Bishop Pompallier for taking it upon himself to appoint a ‘Provincial’ and Colin regularly referring to the ‘Superior appointed by the Bishop’, thereby implicitly acknowledging his legitimacy.⁴⁴

Forest saw no realistic solution for the financial mismanagement. It will not improve as long as the Bishop keeps everything in his own hands. But where it really hurt were the living costs of the missionaries. While the Propagation of the Faith calculated its allocations partly on the number of missionaries, these very same missionaries often went hungry because the Bishop used the money for the general running of the Diocese or his projects. A solution would be to set aside in Lyon the allocation for the support of the missionaries. If that was entrusted to a ‘proper provincial’ he could pass it on to the missionaries for whom it was given. Only what was destined for the Diocese would then go to the Bishop. The idea lived among the Marists and Épalle brought it up in Rome where officials at Propaganda supported it warmly.⁴⁵ Forest mentioned it in his letters but Colin did nothing with it.

At the roots of Pompallier’s frustrations, Forest wrote, is his conviction that Lyon is not giving him all the money he gets from the Propagation of the Faith for his mission. The Society was holding on to his money! Colin had umpteen times argued that outfitting and sending the missionaries took a lot of money⁴⁶ but nothing would ever convince Pompallier unless the Society presented detailed and complete accounts of moneys received and spent. Forest wrote: ‘I wish you could draw him out of this illusion by presenting him with complete and clear accounts.’⁴⁷

When Forest visited Tauranga the priest in charge, Pezant, was not sure of his vows. Were they valid? The question had come up with other missionaries as well due to the fact that Colin sometimes admitted men to profession without a full year of novitiate, mostly in connection with departures for Oceania.⁴⁸ It seems that some saw such professions as admittance to the Society with the understanding they would make proper vows only after they had done a full year of novitiate, during or after the voyage to Oceania. But in Oceania nobody was formally authorised to admit to vows or receive them. Bishop Pompallier once or twice had done so on his own accord! Colin may have considered that the vows before departure were complete and valid. He could still have authorised somebody, for instance the visitator, to receive vows, or tell people their vows were complete and valid. Épalle had noticed the anomaly and Colin had told him to make his vows in private. He never seems to have answered the question publicly and left people in their unclear situation.

Even when he sent a special visitator to the mission Colin did not change his hands-off style of management. He did not really take things in hand. He seems not to have realised the full implications of sending over thirty Marists to Oceania. What he did amounted to establishing a permanent presence of the Society of Mary. The Marist missionaries thought so and Forest thought so too. Colin acted as if he was only supplying a Bishop with personnel. Exactly what Pompallier wanted and Colin himself denied!

⁴⁴ CS 1, Doc 301, [3] versus CS 1, Doc 302, 2 (6^o). Both documents are projects, What was actually sent we do not know, but it shows a curious contrast all the same.

⁴⁵ CS 2, Doc 92, 7, 2^o. MTF XV, 23.

⁴⁶ In Colin’s letters to Pompallier he often based his defence on large and rounded off figures.

⁴⁷ LRO 2, Doc 247, 4.

⁴⁸ Pezant enters novitiate 26.07.1839. Professed 07.01.1840. Departure 10.02.1840. LRO 2, Doc 194, 5. Épalle: novitiate September 1837. Professed 16.07.1838. Departure 08.09.1838. MTF, 139. Chevron: novitiate 15.05.1839. Left as novice 14.06.1839, Professed 11.07.1842, LRO 2, Doc 172, 4. Reignier: novitiate 16.01.1841. Professed 25.09.1841. Departure 16.11.1841. LRO 2, Doc 173, 3.

Colin's letters a grace for the mission

Even if the Bishop shrugged it off, the presence of Forest as an official visitor was a major boost for the Marists in New Zealand. Up to then the men felt abandoned, struggling to survive in extreme destitution, often hungry, living in awful conditions. They tried to cope, each one for himself, with a stressful relation to their Bishop. That they survived at all and kept working hard at the missionary task allotted to them is a testimony to their resilience and the strength of the spiritual formation they had received in the Society and from Father Colin. As Forest wrote: the priests have all the necessary contacts with the Bishop but contacts are formal. There is no trust, no affection. The Bishop has always yearned for the sort of warm personal friendship of his priests and blamed them if they did not give it, which is the case with nearly all of them and it paralyses the mission.⁴⁹ He never saw that it was his own style of authority that stood in the way.⁵⁰

When Forest came on the scene and went to visit each of them, showing close attention to them and with plenty of time to listen, the Society came alive again. He brought them together for retreats and using the letters of Colin⁵¹ he rekindled their fervour and commitment and their sense of belonging to a religious Society.

On 28 April 1843 Antoine Séon wrote for the first time since his arrival in New Zealand (June 1841) to Colin: 'My first words to you, Reverend Father, are to thank you for the visit of Father Forest. It has been very pleasant and useful. On 8 January Father Pezant and myself started an eight days retreat that I needed very much. After sixteen months on the road one needs to be immersed again in what our life is about. I am happy now, back on my post'.⁵²

The Marists in NZ were very attached to the Society and were hurt when Pompallier talked against it. He hurt them by belittling the Society and telling them they could join the Diocese any time.⁵³ All their letters show it. The Marists had a high esteem for Father Colin, they loved him and never blamed him for the hardships they endured. His letters to the missionaries were precious and read during the retreats. 'They were a source of grace.'⁵⁴

Bishop Pompallier

As one would expect the Bishop felt at first, threatened by the visitor. He saw him as a sign of the distrust of the Society of Mary, a sign of what he saw as the rumours and false accusations being spread about him in France. His first action was a show of authority; knowing how difficult it would be he told Forest to come to the Bay of Islands without giving him any money for it. On arrival he let Forest have the full weight of his frustrations with the Society of Mary. Forest knew from the beginning he would never be able to convince Pompallier of the unfairness of his anger and of the hostility that had been built up in him. But Forest kept his feelings to himself and was so patient and sympathetic a listener that after two months the Bishop agreed not only to him visiting the Marists in Auckland and the other stations. He also gave him money to travel.

⁴⁹ Cf MTF, 311. LRO 1, Doc 91, 34.

⁵⁰ LRO 2, Doc 247, 14.

⁵¹ LRO 2, Doc 247, 13

⁵² LRO 2, Doc 253, 1

⁵³ Forest thinks he never said it. He calls it a misunderstanding. LRO 2, Doc 215,8.

⁵⁴ LRO 2, Doc 247, 52.

When Forest wanted to give a retreat to the men in the Bay the Bishop took part in the retreat which involved listening to Forest. To Forest's surprise he had the humility of asking Forest to help him prepare the conferences he was invited to give.

The relationship between the Bishop and Forest matured to the point that Forest could speak more openly and firmly of the way Pompallier treated the priests and to his credit he noticed that the Bishop changed for the better. He became less harsh when speaking to them, and friendlier. Perhaps, Forest added, he is afraid of what I might write to France.⁵⁵

After a few months, Forest could afford to speak even on administrative matters. He took up the cause of Brother Justin and Pompallier moved him to Kororareka. He objected to the houses the missionaries had to live in. And no sooner did the Bishop receive the money that Épalle had obtained to pay off the debts of the mission⁵⁶ than he made up a budget for all the stations. For the first time he gave them substantial allocations to improve their housing and living conditions.⁵⁷

Jean Forest

In his eighth letter, in May 1843, Forest gives a general diagnosis of what he thinks is wrong with the mission. He calls it jaundice, an aberration by which people give a negative interpretation to everything they run into. It is passed on to the newcomers. Jaundice had become a general thing, so much so that Forest had to watch himself not to walk into the trap himself!⁵⁸

Forest sometimes feels lonely.⁵⁹ He cannot fully disclose to anyone how he is trying to cope with his exceptional position. One of his most painful crosses, he wrote, was the inner contradiction he had to live with. On the one hand he thoroughly disagreed with the way the Bishop managed the mission and especially his treatment of the missionaries. At the same time, in order to achieve anything at all, he had to keep the Bishop's friendship and trust. And all of that while living in the Bishop's house, listened to his critical remarks on the missionaries, his perpetual complaining about Father Colin and the Marist administration and the boastful accounts of his own achievements that Forest knew were not true. He hoped Colin would understand:

Do not be angry if I tell you that I have often been unhappy with the task you have given me. It is difficult and tricky. There is little consolation in it. I have to listen to complaints on all sides. The Marists complain about the Bishop and the Bishop complains of the Marists. Still, since I have visited them the Bishop has received letters that have pleased him. He told me only yesterday that he noticed a change in the mentality of the men and that he is very pleased with it. The Marists also admitted a change for the better in him and in their own mentality. A little consolation for me!⁶⁰

⁵⁵ LRO 2, Doc 281, 5.

⁵⁶ MTF XIV, 15f. Getting it out of the bank proved complicated. LRO 3, Doc 314, 5.

⁵⁷ The biggest grant went to Hokianga: 155 Pounds. The lowest: 70 Pounds to Wellington where Father Comte was installed then, Matamata and Rotorua. In all he distributed 1,030 Pounds.

⁵⁸ LRO 2, Doc 254, 6.

⁵⁹ LRO 3, Doc 325, 17.

⁶⁰ LRO 2, Doc 247, 51