

## **FRANCIS-ROLAND LAMBERT SM**

### **Thirteenth Provincial of Oceania - 1971-1977**

Frank Lambert was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, USA on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1921. After the normal schooling and high school, he entered Maryvale Seminary in Bedford Massachusetts in 1936, moving to the Society of Mary novitiate at Staten Island in 1938, and making his first profession on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1939 when he was almost 18 years old. He continued priestly studies at the Marist Seminary in Framingham, MA from 1939, but was delayed in priestly ordination in 1945 because of health problems. He was ordained priest on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1946 by Archbishop Richard Cushing. He worked in Boston briefly and then went to New Hebrides in 1948.

His first appointment was to Lamap, and from there he made regular visits to Ambrym, the Maskelynes and Toman. He opened a small base at Dixon, visited the Big Nambas plateau and started the mission at Mae, close to Norsup, among the last Tiraks of the region. In 1955, Bishop Julliard put him in charge of the Central School at Montmartre and then in 1959 appointed him to Melsisi. He had another taste of Vila during six years as Parish Priest, and even worked for a while in Tanna before becoming provincial of Oceania. This appointment took place at the time of the Provincial Chapter in Noumea in 1971 and left him a huge agenda of things to do which would change the province most significantly.

The General Chapter of that same year 1971 had asked "Marists in Oceania to redefine their roles so as to allow the local church to assume full responsibility and come into its own."<sup>1</sup> The Oceania Provincial Chapter of 1971 decided that the novitiate for the province would be established at Tutu (Taveuni, Fiji) and that Marist seminarians from Oceania would be trained at the seminaries in Oceania. Those students from Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands would study at Bomana (Port Moresby) and those students from the CEPAC<sup>2</sup> dioceses would go to the Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva. It was perceived that the flow of missionary vocations was on the wane and the way forward for Oceania was to build up vocations from within the Pacific. The Chapter was also influential in strengthening the powers of the regional superior and in building local and regional communities. A final and key decision was to move the provincial headquarters from Sydney to Fiji. Implementing these decisions was the task faced by Frank Lambert as he began his term as provincial.

The Marist seminarians<sup>3</sup> studying in New Zealand were brought back to help found Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva which opened in 1972. One new vocation<sup>4</sup> entered Pacific Regional Seminary in that first year. Holy Spirit Seminary in Port Moresby had been re-established in Bomana in 1968 and soon after that Marist College was opened. The transfer of the Brothers' formation into Tutu, Taveuni had begun in 1970, with the first novitiate

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<sup>1</sup> Edmond Duffy in "Our History" an article in the OMP Centenary Publication of 28<sup>th</sup> October 1998.

<sup>2</sup> CEPAC is the "Episcopal Conference of the Pacific."

<sup>3</sup> Kafoa Solomone, Makafalani Tatafu, Soane Lomu sm (all from Tonga and all already professed in the Society).

<sup>4</sup> Fred Kado sm entered PRS in that first year

running in 1971<sup>5</sup>. But it was not till 1971 that the provincial was able to move to Suva where he had Fr. Peter Carde (of the region of Fiji) appointed as his vicar. The first provincial house in Suva was leased from a Lady Barker. [The second house, on land at CT9208, situated at 7 Lavena Street, Samabula, was purchased and ownership was given after 31<sup>st</sup> August 1977. It is understood that the provincial administration – the new provincial Robin Leamy and Bursar, Roger Labrecque - moved into the new house soon afterwards. ]

One of the priorities of Frank Lambert's provincialate was formation within the province. The task of finding and training formators for the new houses of formation was priority for him. Fr Lui Raco sm was designated as the new novice master to take up his post in January 1974 – the first Oceanian Marist novice master. Lambert organised experience for Lui Raco in New Britain, assisting with the MSCs for a year. He used his contacts in the United States to find training opportunities there for Lui Raco. After that he sent a number of his men for training and renewal in California<sup>6</sup> usually as preparation for taking up posts in formation. His correspondence with Marists in the United States, contains a number of references to the staffing needs of Pacific Regional Seminary with requests conveyed to him by Soane Foliaki sm, the PRS rector. He was also diligent in visiting the more distant formation house, Marist College in Bomana and taking care of their needs. With the huge upswing in the number of vocations and the new responsibility for formation within the province of Oceania came two further consequences which had to be addressed at this time.

The selection and training of candidates, as well as formators, and the direction of formation programs posed new questions to the provincial and administration. Marists in Oceania were facing a rather large cultural change and they reacted. The formation programs were quite different from what the older Marists had experienced and were now expected to be adapted to the needs of the students from, and for Oceania. Many older Marists disagreed with the new programs. For the first time, regions in Oceania had to look beyond themselves to the other regions and countries in the province to which they had to send their candidates and to which they had to contribute some of their best younger missionaries as formators. There were rumbles around the province, not least of all in Fiji, where the provincial was living, and Frank Lambert had to handle a lot of dissension and criticism in various parts of the province. The cultural change was huge both for Marists and for their leadership. Before this time, Oceania province was more of a loose collection of eight dioceses, mostly under Marist bishops, to which Marists had made the commitment of their priestly lives; now Marists and their leadership had to commit to a Marist province, its works, priorities, and finances and planning. There was a lot of pain and suffering in going through this transformation.

The second consequence that the new provincial had to deal with was the new financial burden placed on the province by the emerging formation programs. Formators had to be trained – a totally new and large cost to the province. But even more expensive was the task of providing training for the larger number of students who were entering the formation

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<sup>5</sup> Br Mika Cilicewa sm made his first profession on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Lui Raco, Michael Cruickshank, Denis Mahony, Michael McVerry went to the Institute of Spirituality and Worship at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkely, California.

houses and the novitiate. In February 1972, Lambert told his counterpart in Boston about the problems in sorting out the finances in Sydney:

"I hope we will be able to clarify the whole business so that I may know where I stand. At present I am navigating a bit in the dark and my radar system is not always very accurate. Everyone is yelling for money and I am most willing to hand over but I must be sure there is something to hand over."<sup>7</sup>

But there was not only financial problems, but practical and communication difficulties to be handled. Writing in May 1973, about the novitiate due to start seven months later in January 1974 but without any buildings, Frank Lambert explains<sup>8</sup>:

"Rome has not yet given us the green light to go ahead and build something for the nineteen novices (clerical and brothers) that we are expecting for our next novitiate. Not much time left now before January and the problem of transportation of building materials is a big one here and the costs are forever going up."

While there were many problems amongst all the changes, it appears the provincial had good support from the rest of the Society. Thus in February 1972 there were visits from Michael McMahon and Jan Snijders from the General Administration; the provincial of Boston, and close friend, Omer St Onge and Mission Procurator Paul Chaisson came to offer support. But at the same time, his newly chosen Vicar provincial and econome (Fr Jean Huteau) suffered a serious heart attack and had to be replaced; and he was very worried that his choice of novice master was about to be nominated as a bishop.

Joseph Buckley had written to Fr Lambert soon after his appointment as provincial to say:

All of us who know you think your province has made an excellent choice. We are confident that you will administer the mission province wisely in these difficult time.<sup>9</sup>

This prediction may well apply to Frank Lambert's next appointment as well. For, on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1976, the last day of his appointment as provincial, Frank Lambert was appointed Bishop of Port Vila. After returning to Vanuatu (New Hebrides as it was at that time) he was ordained bishop of Port Vila on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1977, by his predecessor Bishop Julliard.

Bishop Lambert arrived back to a country moving steadily towards Independence. It was at a difficult moment politically, with grave tensions between the English speakers (fruits of Britain's role in the Condominium) and French speakers (fruits of France's role in the Condominium). The Catholic Church was perceived as aligned with the Francophone group, since most of its education and liturgy were done in French. The Catholic schools had been helped greatly by the French government; and we presume that the English supported the other schools, including those of the Presbyterian community. Bishop Lambert had the foresight to see that the future must not be marked by differences in language and he set about a policy of building up English speakers in the Catholic Church. The new missionaries, male and female religious, teachers, helpers, were, as far as possible, English speakers. He worked extremely hard to have a Catholic church which was bi-lingual. In all he did he showed great care to promote ecumenism and justice for all, especially the most neglected.

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<sup>7</sup> Lambert to Omer St Onge, February 5<sup>th</sup> 1972

<sup>8</sup> Lambert to Omer St Onge, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1973

<sup>9</sup> Buckley to Lambert, October 6<sup>th</sup> 1971

His successor, Bishop Michel Visi, described this dimension in his testimony on the life of Bishop Lambert:

Bishop Lambert was a well-known figure in Vanuatu. For the Protestant churches he was a man of ecumenism and unity throughout his ministry as a priest and as Bishop of Port Vila. For all the citizens of Vanuatu he was a man who stood for a just economic development of the islanders especially those living in the isolated islands of Vanuatu. He has been a pastor who fulfilled his episcopal ministry with great care for everyone.<sup>10</sup>

Bishop Lambert already had thorough knowledge of the diocese from his 22 years of mission work in New Hebrides, before he had been appointed provincial. Moreover, being neither English nor French but speaking both languages perfectly, he seemed ideally suited to bring together in harmony the disparate elements of the soon-to-disappear Condominium (whose divisions would survive stronger than ever in the political parties of the new nation). While the appointment appeared very wise from the point of view of the external observer, it was not well received by a certain group in the diocese who expected that another Frenchman would be appointed. The Bishop found that this tension with a small group of French speakers would be a heavy cross for him throughout his episcopacy. The group was not only critical of him, but critical of others. Some were involved in the rebellion in Santo and imprisonment of priests was not unknown. The diocesan priests were fully supportive of the Bishop, but others were divided. It was alleviated slightly at a full meeting of the clergy in 1988 moderated by Rev. F. Kerdraon sm (of New Caledonia). But this split in his clergy was a big cross for a man who much valued unity and good human relations.

During his time as provincial in Suva, Frank had perceived most clearly that the future of the church in the Pacific depended on local vocations. From early on in his missionary career he had given priority to fostering vocations but as Bishop he felt this was perhaps his most important task. He gave his time to young people and was reputed to have interviewed every secondary student (more than 200) in Catholic schools at one stage. He did have a vast knowledge of the Catholic families in Vanuatu and he personally encouraged vocations. Many of the priests felt he spent too much (both in personnel and in finances) on training for vocations. Criticism was louder as some vocations dropped out and were considered by some as a waste of money; but Bishop Frank believed that they would probably assist the church in other roles as leading lay people.

Added to all this was the Bishop's approachability and willingness to see people whenever they wanted to see him. He was always available to visitors and gave priority to the encouragement and support of his church personnel. Bishop Frank was interested in people, but he was also very well respected. One observer of his time as bishop stated that he had never heard any lay person speak ill of Bishop Lambert; nor did the religious, sisters and brothers ever have any complaints.

At the age of 72, Bishop Frank asked John Paul II to retire claiming: "Vanuatu needs a younger man." The Holy Father responded in words, which Bishop Lambert often used to quote afterwards: "Bishop Lambert you are 72 years old; I am 72 years old. You go to Port

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<sup>10</sup> Reported in the Marist Missions newsletter(USA), Volume 25, Number 1, Winter 1998

Vila; I go to Rome.” Bishop Frank was happy with this reply. But at 75 years of age he did offer his resignation and it was accepted within 8 months at the same time as the time of the appointment of his ni-Vanuatu successor, Bishop Michel Visi. With the ordination of Bishop Visi completed on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1997, Bishop Frank set off home to retire in Florida, USA with his brother Br Chanel and other siblings.

His retirement was very short, since within five months, he suffered a massive stroke and died on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1997. After a concelebrated mass in Tampa, Florida his body was taken north to Lawrence in Massachusetts. At the funeral mass there, Cardinal Law was the main celebrant, assisted by Archbishop George Pearce sm and 35 other priests. He was buried in the Marist plot at Sacred Heart Cemetery on November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1997.

MAY STILL BE INCLUDED SOME WHERE!

To quote from his obituary<sup>11</sup>:

“He considered one of his greatest challenges teaching local people about a God who loved them. They considered their chief their god, whom they respected and feared. Over the years he and other missionaries not only taught the people about God, but helped them build roads, schools, infirmaries and water systems.”

During his tenure as bishop he participated in the transition of the island from French-English condominium to an independent nation. He was a tireless worker for local vocations in the church and believed that the success of the church in Vanuatu depended on the fostering of local priests, deacons, religious and laity.

The country of Vanuatu had a population of some 160,000, of which 25,000 were Catholics who speak French, English and Bislama.

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<sup>11</sup> Source unknown and not shown in obituary.