

ARMAND OLIER¹

Second Provincial of Oceania 1901 - 1904

Armand Olier was born at Marzials, in the Department of Aveyron, in the diocese of Rodez, on 6th May 1851. He made his studies at the college of Milhau, and later at the diocesan minor seminary of St. Pierre. His ecclesiastical studies were made at the Grand Seminary of Rodez. He had to interrupt his ecclesiastical studies because of persistent stomach troubles. Having heard of the recent death of Fr Colin (in the odour of sanctity) he decided to seek his assistance and so began a novena, promising that if his health were restored, he would immediately seek admission to the Marist novitiate and ask to be sent to Oceania. His prayers were answered, and he was professed as a Marist at the novitiate of Sainte-Foy-lès-Lyon, 8th December 1877.

He had the opportunity of meeting Mgr Lamaze, Vicar Apostolic of Central Oceania, at the College of St-Chamond when the Bishop visited Europe. The two men immediately became friends, but Olier was unable to go to Oceania at that time, as he had not yet completed his theological studies.

As a candidate for the foreign missions, he was sent to St Mary's College, Dundalk, Ireland, in 1879. This was a house of studies which the society had opened for students of English. During early 1880 he also studied at Catholic University School, Dublin, another Marist school. He was ordained to the priesthood in Dundalk on 8th August 1880. After ordination he was given the office of prefect and professor of French at the college of Dundalk. In the autumn of 1880 Fr Olier embarked for Central Oceania travelling with Lamaze and others and arriving to Sydney from London on *Cotopaxi* on 4th November 1880. He was 29 years old.

He arrived in Tonga on 21st January 1881. Appointed to Ma'ufanga, he was also made local Procurator for the Vicariate of Central Oceania, and after 3 years was named Pro-Vicar by Bishop Lamaze. The construction of the church at Ma'ufanga had already been begun and Fr Olier continued this work. His team of local builders were energized by his zeal. A new site had been given for the school in Ma'ufanga, and Father Olier was teacher as well as builder.

This was in the year 1881 and the new site was given the name "Api Fo'ou" which name it still bears to this day. The school was as yet a Day School with both Teacher, Fr Olier, and pupils making their way from Ma'ufanga daily.²

He founded the college of Villa Maria and elsewhere founded primary schools under the direction of the Sisters of the Third Order of Mary. These schools contributed greatly to the spread of the faith in Tonga. He worked with great zeal in Ma'ufanga for 20 years. In 1886 he is listed in the SM Index as the local superior of the mission on Tongatapu.

He was very musical both vocal and instrumental, and he saw this as a good way of evangelisation.. In 1883 he gained renown with the musical achievements of his pupils. Through this he became the friend of the Crown Prince, Wellington Ngu. Ngu bought instruments in London for his brass band, and Olier's students were the first bandsmen. The prince had intended to set up an academy of music and asked Olier to be the professor; but Ngu's early death put paid to this venture. But there were good relations between Olier and the prince. In 1883 the prince dispatched a party of officers to escort the Blessed Sacrament for the Corpus Christi Procession. Later when the prince travelled to the northern islands, Olier's musicians travelled with him. Thanks to the band Olier became acquainted with the Tongan aristocracy and succeeded in establishing friendly relationships with them.³

¹OMPA 16 diary 1899-1908 <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/249139>

²Api Fo'ou College, 1886-1961, 75th Jubilee. P. 29 (Government Printing Office, Nuku'alofa)

³David W. Mullins, *They Built a Church, Priest of Tonga RIP*. St.Bede's College Printery, 2004

One of his more remarkable adventures occurred in 1888. On 17th October he set off with a group of companions to transport building materials for two houses on the Niua's⁴. On the first day the ship sprung a leak which suggested they should return to port. But the sea was very calm, and Fr Olier decided to keep going. They plugged the leak and continued their journey, expecting to reach the Niua's 2 days later. But a storm blew up and it was only 15 days later that they found Niua.

But their troubles were not over. The captain missed the passage through the reef and, while trying to tack to the side to make the necessary correction, a strong gust of wind threw the ship right on to the reef. Luckily some canoes came to their rescue. The materials and passengers were safely landed. Work got under way and the priest's house was finished within a month.

When they were about to leave Niua the ship's carpenter, Br Charles, said the damage to the ship was irreparable. To which Fr Olier replied: "'Irreparable' is synonymous with 'impossible', and 'impossible' is not French!" Br Charles, in obedience to his superior, did what he could and managed to cover the damaged hull with planks and tar, hoping to finish the repairs at Wallis, only 100 miles away. As it happened they reached Wallis safely and were feted greatly by the people there.

On their return to the Niua's they spotted the island one evening, just two days after leaving Wallis. But the next morning the land had disappeared. The weather closed in and for the next four weeks they were lost, drifting around the ocean. Their food and drink ran out. They were very lucky to eventually spot Vatulele in the Fiji group. Even then they had more trouble from the sea and it took them another eight days to reach Suva, and safety.

Many years later, in an obituary, his sailing days were recorded in a rather fulsome way.⁵

Before failing strength began to tell upon him, Bishop Olier was the antithesis of the pale, wilted, whites that dwell in the lazy isles of the Pacific. He was robust, his cheeks aglow with the kiss of sun and spray, his eyes alight with the spirit of the most magical of all the oceans. A hearty sailor type was Bishop Olier who in the administration of the affairs of his vast diocese, with its hundreds of islands spent nearly as much of his time afloat as on the land, and there was something of the breezy ocean in his frankness and geniality. A life of danger and devotion among strange peoples enriched him with a ready sympathy and a keen appreciation of character that turned acquaintance into friendship. So it was not surprising that, in the heart of Sydney he held an honoured place and few have been more affectionately regarded than he who breathed his last in Tonga a couple of weeks ago."

After King George died⁶, his successor, who held Fr Olier in great esteem, gave permission for the founding of a parish, school and convent at Nuku'alofa, something which had been long forbidden. A few years later Fr Olier is recorded as arriving in Auckland, from Tonga, with Fr Augustine Aubry. It was noted that from mid-October 1896, "they visited confreres⁷ before attending Bishop Lenihan's consecration⁸ on 14 November 1896."

Fr Olier represented Oceania at the General Chapter in 1900. He was then appointed Provincial of Oceania and would be based in Sydney. He arrived there in February 1901. He was not impressed by the state of affairs either in the parish or in the community of Villa Maria. Fr Muraire was getting a bit old; he also tended to do everything himself and to be authoritarian. Olier wrote to the General

⁴ Niua's is a common way of describing the two islands close to one another Niuafo'ou and Niuatoputapu.

⁵ Obituary in Catholic Press (Sydney, NSW: 1895-1942) Thursday 28th September 1911, Pg. 21

⁶ King George died on 18th February 1893

⁷ Marist archives in Wellington has a photo of the two priests at Otaki.

⁸ <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/periodicals/NZT18961120.2.2> Olier is named as Ohalassen in this report, and in some other reports he was called Ohalsen

Administration that "The parish priest of Villa Maria needs to be smartened up, and this will only happen with a new Parish Priest."

Muraire on his part was complaining to the General Administration about Fr Olier's lax ways: "He has brought with him to Villa Maria the ways they have of behaving in the islands." Olier apparently liked late-night kava parties. The monthly retreat was no longer observed and there was too much talking at meals. A reprimand was issued from the General Administration: late night parties were to be reduced, and Muraire was to be replaced as Superior of Villa Maria.

On 2nd February 1901, the day before Olier landed in Sydney to take up his duties as Provincial, the Marists took on Gladstone parish in Queensland. Olier made several other attempts to establish the Marists outside of Sydney but with little success. A year after arriving in Australia he had to find a Procure to replace Fr Guillemin who had resigned his post out of disappointment at not being a member of the Provincial Chapter. Around the same time he raised the question of opening a minor seminary to receive Australian applicants to the Society of Mary but his councillors did not support it because of a dearth of manpower to staff it. While in Australia, Armand Matthieu Olier was naturalised as a British subject.⁹

In 1903, on the Feast of the Assumption, the Superior General of the Marists wrote to the Holy See recommending Fr Olier as Coadjutor Vicar Apostolic to Bishop Lamaze of Tonga. He was appointed as Coadjutor on 22nd December 1903. On hearing the news Fr Olier mused that he might be too old for the job: "I am no longer young and the snow which covers my head proves that there is only ice in my veins."

However, he agreed and was ordained Coadjutor Bishop to Bishop Lamaze. He was 53 years old. His titular diocese was that of Tipasa. The consecration took place in St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, on 17th April 1904. The consecrating prelate was Patrick Cardinal Moran. The co-consecrators were Bishops John Gallagher of Goulburn, N.S.W. and Julien Vidal S.M., Vicar Apostolic of the Fiji Islands. Bishop Olier became Vicar Apostolic of Central Oceania (Tonga-Wallis-Futuna) on the death of Bishop Lamaze on 9th September 1906. During his episcopacy Olier continued his work of travel and administration with his usual unflagging zeal. He undertook a general reconstruction programme made necessary by the disaster of 1907, and he inspired the re-building of the seminary of Lano, Wallis Island, in 1910.

A cruel blow for him in his later years was the gradual loss of his sight due to cataracts. The medical experts in Sydney judged it impractical to operate. They also reckoned his health was not sufficient to return to the islands. Bishop Olier's response was simply to take the first boat back to Tonga and from there to ask Rome for a coadjutor. (He was dead before the negotiations were complete.) However, despite the rapid progress of diabetes, bilious stomach and heart problems he did not rest idle. He studied the project of a new evangelistic foray to Niue which was still completely protestant. But alas, he was soon confined to his room. Although he was suffering greatly, he continued to welcome his people who came to visit him. He died at Ma'ufanga, aged 60, almost five years to the day after Mgr Lamaze, on 17th September 1911.

⁹ https://search.records.nsw.gov.au/permalink/f/1ebnd1/ADLIB_RNSW115573318 NRS-13660-6-638-Series 4_55812