Coming to Completion

A History of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa 1865–2023

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Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions

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Contents

Foreword......6

Introduction......8

Chapter One Setting the Scene......14

Chapter Two The Three Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience......36

Chapter Three Formation......53

Chapter Four Mission Sisters and Their Changing Relationship with the Institutional Church......67

Chapter Five Mission and Ministry in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa......84

Chapter Six The Challenges of Ethnicity......98

Chapter Seven Living Together......116

Conclusion......132

Bibliography......137

Foreword

There have been many good histories of women's religious congregations written both in Aotearoa and beyond. However, *Coming to Completion: A History of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa 1865-2023* stands out. It is an engrossing story of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, an international congregation founded in France. *Coming to Completion* focuses on the province in Aotearoa which was established in 1865, in the lifetime of its founder, Euphrasie Barbier (1829-1893). From their beginnings in Aotearoa, the Sisters, commonly known as the Mission Sisters, taught in primary and secondary schools. Students may not have known too much about Euphrasie Barbier herself, but after seeing her photo daily on the classroom wall, even now many would be able to pick her out of a lineup of habited Sisters and find they have a lingering interest in "the missions". The Mission Sisters have made a significant contribution to the education and thought of the Catholic population of New Zealand and to society generally.

Until the later decades of last century, habited Sisters were a common sight in Catholic schools, parishes and towns. Nowadays, when Sisters blend into the lay landscape, we could be forgiven for thinking that they are no longer around. That's perhaps one of the discoveries of this book – Sisters are among us still and they continue to live the charism of their founding.

Susan Smith has been a Sister of Our Lady of the Missions for over sixty years so is well-placed to record and comment on the changes, even evolution, of her province and Congregation over that time. Like most Sisters who entered the Congregation before the 1970s, her first ministry was teaching. After exposure to the theological and scriptural developments following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), especially liberation theology and its implications for ministry, Susan left New Zealand to live and serve among people in poor regions overseas. She continued in that ministry when she returned to Aotearoa. Susan completed a doctorate in the 1990s and taught theology in the University of Auckland, in Australia, and in community courses in Aotearoa and overseas. Susan is a prolific writer. As well as articles in journals and magazines, she has published many books including, *Women in Mission: From the New Testament to Today* (2007); *Call to Mission: The Story of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa* (2010); and, *Zeal for Mission: The Story of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions 1861-2011* (2012).

Coming to Completion is a clever and engaging history. It has all the hallmarks of Susan's style – personal without nostalgia, realistic and critical with kindness, questioning and clear-eyed, witty, and comprehensive. As well as interpreting the past, Susan looks into the future of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa and discusses what completion might mean for them.

This story of the Mission Sisters will both absorb and surprise us and that is whether our last interaction with a Catholic Sister was in the distant past of primary school or has been more recent. This book is a Susan Smith gem.

Ann L. Gilroy RSJ
Editor
Tui Motu

Introduction

In late January 1959, I caught the ferry from Wellington along with my parents, brother, and sister, bound for Lyttelton. I was en route to taking my first steps to become a Sister of Our Lady of the Missions. A decade or so earlier, my brother and I had started off at a state school in Wainuiomata, but my parents, being good Catholics – faithful Sunday mass-goers, regularly going to confession, ensuring their children received a Catholic education – wanted us to go to a Catholic school, which happened when I was eight, due to start Standard Three, and my brother seven, and ready for Standard One. By then our parents considered we could manage what was then quite a long and uncomfortable bus trip over a winding, unsealed road to the local parish primary school in Lower Hutt then staffed by the Mission Sisters.

The parish school was considerably larger than Wainuiomata school, and both my brother and I preferred the greater opportunity that living in Wainuiomata meant for school friends being "weekend" and "after-school" friends as well. In my last year at primary school, our family relocated to Lower Hutt.

And so, to secondary school, Sacred Heart College, Lower Hutt, which again was staffed by Mission Sisters. In hindsight, I can now see how difficult life must have been for the Sisters who taught us as they coped with doing university units after school, minding boarders, teaching all day, preparing classes, and being responsible for PE lessons and management of sports teams. On top of all that, they were obliged to follow a monastic way of life when they were not in the classroom. I know how difficult it was because by 1965 I was doing the same.

In 1961, in Christchurch I made my three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience as a Mission Sister and began teaching in primary school, while doing two university units after school. In 1965 with one unit to go I began teaching at Sacred Heart College, Christchurch. However, 1965 was important for another reason. It was the year Vatican II concluded and change was in the air. Along with many other Sisters, I was exhilarated by the possibility of change.

In 1969, I was sent to Regina Mundi Institute in Rome to study theology for three years, and that presented me with a wonderful opportunity to become more aware of what Vatican II was asking of Catholics, lay, religious, and ordained. It was a good time to be young and to be Catholic. Vatican II required that the lives of Sisters change, and change they did.

Change was most obvious in the myriad ways Sisters moved from their traditional

work of teaching to other ministries. Over the next five decades, I have lived and worked in Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, Ruatoria, and Ethiopia, all steep learning curves and wonderfully enriching. I also worked on a more short-term basis teaching Mission Sisters in our Asian provinces, studying further at the Maryknoll Institute in New York, before returning to Aotearoa New Zealand to begin teaching at The University of Auckland's School of Theology where I also did my PhD on developments in Catholic Missiology since Vatican II.

I look back over a rich and fulfilling life with gratitude, but also with some sadness as it seems as though religious life is dying. In what follows I want to look at religious life as I have experienced it to understand its apparent decline in Aotearoa. Did the changes that Vatican II asked of us mean that we threw out the baby with the bathwater? What of the historical fact that congregations such as mine have a life expectancy of two hundred to three hundred years? We are now on the way to two hundred years so should we adapt T. S. Eliot's words, and concentrate on going out with a bang, not a whimper?[1] *Has religious life as we have known it been subverted personally and collectively because it has been co-opted by our consumer-oriented, individualistic society? In the narrative that follows, I will draw on my experiences as a Mission Sister, and then provide a critique of what I think is happening in our province here in Aotearoa New Zealand. My analysis of congregational documentation will help the reader appreciate the changes that have been part and parcel of the Mission Sisters' story from 1861 through to the present.*

My congregation, the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, is an international apostolic missionary congregation currently working in some twenty countries. Our province in Aotearoa is the second-oldest of some eighteen provinces. In the Western provinces – France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland, Australia, and Canada – the number of Sisters is declining while in Africa, Asia and Latin America, numbers are steady. World-wide there is a decline in numbers, as growth in other parts of the world cannot keep up with diminishing numbers in the West. Although this narrative concentrates primarily on what has happened in Aotearoa, the history of my province does not stand in isolation from the story of the wider congregation.

Throughout this story, I will use italics to narrate my own experiences and memories.

Older New Zealanders would remember seeing black-veiled and black-habited women in cities and rural towns where many of them were teaching in Catholic primary and secondary schools. These were the "nuns", or more correctly speaking Catholic Sisters, sometimes referred to as "women religious". Now sixty years later, no such sightings are possible. Where have all the Sisters gone? In 1961 there were close to seventeen hundred sisters, brothers and priests teaching in Catholic primary and secondary schools throughout Aotearoa. Today there are no sisters, brothers or priests teaching full-time in Catholic schools. By examining the story of my own religious congregation, the Mission Sisters, I hope to identify and examine some

of the more significant reasons for such a drastic development.

A preliminary comment. Before beginning this task, I want to highlight how the writing of history in the Catholic Church is changing. The master narrative was traditionally the history of popes, bishops, priests, and male founders of the great religious orders such as the Benedictines or Jesuits. Women's history could not be part of such a master narrative as the Church's patriarchal and hierarchical mindset often rendered women invisible. How much that has all changed since the 1970s. Social historians' analyses of class, gender and ethnicity now ensure a variety of perspectives that students of church history ignore at their peril. Today, the work or ministry of Catholic Sisters is no longer perceived as ancillary or subordinate to that of the ordained minister.

An example of what I mean by master narratives that exclude women can be seen in two histories authored by Catholic historian and priest of the Society of Mary (hereafter Marist priests), Michael O'Meeghan. His histories of the Catholic Dioceses of Wellington and Christchurch demonstrate how women have been overlooked. In 1865, four Mission Sisters arrived in Napier, then part of the Wellington Diocese, and one hundred years later, owned and taught in eight girls' secondary schools, which included boarding accommodation, as well as teaching in over forty parish-owned primary schools. O'Meeghan writes briefly of their arrival in Napier in 1865 in *Steadfast in Hope.* However, rather than providing information about the educational works which almost immediately involved the Sisters, he is more concerned with detailing the tension between our foundress Euphrasie Barbier, and the Marists over governance of her newly founded congregation.[2] Later, O'Meeghan refers to tension between the French diocesan parish priest of New Plymouth, Étienne Chastagnon and Barbier over the costs involved in building a convent for the Sisters.[3]

In the same publication, O'Meeghan then refers to the *Providence* (modelled on vocational training schools for French working class young women and girls in nineteenth century France), which later evolved into St Joseph's Māori Girls' College, established by Marist priest, Euloge Reignier, in 1867, and which from its beginning, was staffed by the Mission Sisters. After the 1877 Education Act which effectively dried up government funding for the school, Barbier met with Reignier and Bishop Patrick Moran, and in 1873 financing for the school was secured,[4] in an arrangement that did not suit Reignier.

In the Christchurch Diocese, the Mission Sisters owned and staffed two secondary schools, with boarding schools attached, and had taught or were teaching in twelve parish-owned primary schools. In *Held Firm by Faith* (1987), O'Meeghan chooses not to include the work of the Mission Sisters in Chapter Seven, entitled "Fellow Labourers in Christ". Instead, their arrival and subsequent educational works in the diocese are virtually overlooked, in favour of the author's

criticism of Barbier and the nickname which the Marists gave Sisters in the young congregation.[5]

Though American theologian, Carol Coburn is writing about American Catholic sisters, her insights about the writing of American sisters' history warrants consideration when it comes to the story of Sisters in Aotearoa:

> Fortunately, in recent decades scholars of American women have begun creating scholarship that not only uncovers and integrates information about women and their activities and influence but, more importantly, places women beyond the role of "objects" of the narrative into the role of subjects or actors in history – creators and shapers of American history and culture … However, what secular feminist scholarship has rarely done is include the lives and activities of Catholic women religious within the larger narrative of American women's history. With few exceptions, women religious have been rendered invisible there as well. My goal, and the goal of many others, is to build bridges, make connections, and integrate the history of women religious into the larger contexts of Catholic history, religious history, women's history, and American social history.[6]

Minimalist or negative interpretations of the contributions of Catholic Sisters are true of most historical studies prior to the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council which ran from 1962 through to 1965, (hereafter Vatican II), and which saw Catholic bishops meeting in Rome to discern what was required of a Church living in the post-modern world.

In the last four decades, women religious have written histories of their congregations,[7] and more recently, academically qualified lay women have undertaken critical accounts of congregations[8] or critical studies of their foundresses.[9] These authors provide comprehensive chronological narratives of the rise, and since Vatican II, fall of Catholic religious congregations in the Western world. Primary sources have included a particular congregation's own archives, diocesan archives where relevant, and the oral and written stories of the sisters themselves, stories, and reports as it were from the underside of history.

Though these histories offer fascinating and important narratives of selected religious congregations of Catholic Sisters, the mandates of the different authors often preclude any critical analysis as to why numbers have declined so rapidly since the late 1960s. Therefore, it seems important that more analytical studies which attempt to account for that decline are undertaken. For example, the Mission Sisters in New Zealand, numbered around two-hundred and fifty Sisters as Vatican II drew to a close in 1965. Today, there are fewer than seventy Sisters. A study that attempts to identify the reasons for such an extraordinary decline, a decline paralleled in other congregations, is timely.

The first chapter will begin by setting the scene which saw the foundation of

the Mission Sisters in nineteenth century France for the work of education above all in what were called "foreign missions". It will also provide a brief overview of religious life in Aotearoa since the arrival of the first Marist brothers and priests in 1838. This will be followed by the story of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa from 1865 to 2023. In the chapters that follow Chapter One, I will analyse what I see as key factors in explaining the rise and fall of religious life as the Mission Sisters transitioned from a culture of tradition to a culture of change. In these chapters, attention will focus on the vows, formation and training for religious life, ever-evolving relationships with the institutional Church, the challenge of ethnicity, the challenge of living together in community, governance and leadership, and the prayer life which has sustained the Sisters in their lives and ministries.

Hopefully, such an exercise will allow the reader to appreciate what is happening in a congregation such as the Mission Sisters, and what are the lessons that can be learnt from that history as apostolic women religious in Aotearoa, whether Mission, Dominican, Josephite or Mercy, move into an uncertain future.

This book would not have been possible without the support of friends, particularly those who remember their own pre-Vatican II formation experiences. I am most grateful to those who have been part of my journey as I researched and wrote this story of the Mission Sisters coming to completion in Aotearoa. Thanks are due to Tom Ryan SM, Paul Gifford, Barbara Cameron RNDM, Margaret Monaghan RNDM, Carmel Cole RNDM, Ruth Mather, Ann Gilroy RSJ, Steve Bevans SVD, our archivists in Rome and in Petone, Elizabeth Ardley for her careful proof-reading, members of the Auckland-based Theological Research Unit: Neil Darragh, John Dunn, Helen Bergin, Alice Sinnott, Kevin Wanden, Sara Hart, and above all to Mary Maitland with whom I live here in Whangarei. Mary made possible the peace and quiet that I needed to write and for that I am most grateful.
The title calls this work "A History". The inclusion of those words is intentional, as this interpretation of our history here in Aotearoa is my interpretation which may not resonate with interpretations of other Mission Sisters. But I hope that it joins up the dots for others interested in our history in this country.

Notes

1 See T. S. Eliot, "This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper", in *The Hollow Men*, https://www.shmoop.com/hollow-men/poem-text.html, accessed March 4 2019.
2 See Michael O'Meeghan, *Steadfast in Hope: The Story of the Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington 1850-2000* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press Ltd, 2003), 70.
3 Ibid., 143-144.
4 See Susan Smith, *Call to Mission: The Story of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa* (Auckland: David Ling, 2010), 182-185 for a more detailed account as to what happened.
5 See Michael O'Meeghan, *Held Firm by Faith: A History of the Catholic Diocese of Christchurch 1840-1987* (Christchurch: Catholic Diocese of Christchurch, 1987), 67-69.
6 Carol K. Coburn, "An Overview of the Historiography of Women Religious: A Twenty-Five-Year-retrospective", *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22, no. 1 (2004): 3.
7 See Pauline O'Regan, *A Changing Order* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, 1986); Marcienne D. Kirk, *Remembering Your Mercy: Mother Mary Cecilia Maher and the First Sisters of Mercy in New Zealand 1850-1880* (Auckland: Sisters of Mercy, 1998); Marcienne D. Kirk, Lyn Ryan, and Mary de Pazzi Hudner, eds., *Valley of Faith: Sisters of Mercy in Pawarenga 1927-1990* (Auckland: Sisters of Mercy Aotearoa New Zealand, 2014).
8 See Susannah Grant, *Windows on a Women's World: The Dominican Sisters of Aotearoa New Zealand* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2017); Diane Strevens, *MacKillop Women: The Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, Aotearoa New Zealand, 1883-2006* (Auckland: David Ling, 2008).
9 See Jessie Munro, *The Story of Suzanne Aubert* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, 1996).

Chapter One

Setting the Scene

The French Connection

Between 1969 and 2018, I was lucky enough to visit France on several occasions. Even though my knowledge of French is rudimentary, I have always felt at home in France, given the French origins of my own religious congregation, and the French origins of the Catholic Church in Aotearoa. I loved spending time in the Basilique Notre-Dame de Fourvière in Lyon, and seeing the long list of missionary congregations founded there, or visiting St Nizier, also in Lyon. Suzanne Aubert was baptised in St Nizier, and Pauline Jaricot, co-founder of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, is buried there. Architecturally, both churches are very different from St Mary's Church at Motuti in North Hokianga where Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pompallier is buried. But my visits to Hokianga have reminded me of the close links between the Catholic Church in Aotearoa and the Catholic Church in France. When I have visited France, I have felt at home in a country, in a Church that has so influenced my life, although for the first three decades, I was not so aware of that. The great Gothic cathedrals of France at Chartres, Lyon, and Paris have little common with the little wooden church at Motuti but the building of all was motivated by a Catholicism that aspired to be universal and there for everyone.

A brief examination of the nineteenth century Catholic Church in France indicates how influential its experiences, theologies, and spiritualities were for the Mission Sisters, whose story began in Lyon in 1861. By the 1860s, almost fifty years after the defeat of Napoleon, and the end of the revolutionary era, the French Church had emerged as vibrant and strong. On the eve of Vatican 1, (1869), eight years after the foundation of the Mission Sisters, there were close to

> 37.5 million Catholics in a total population of 38 million, [and] France was the strongest Catholic nation. By mid-century, it sent two-thirds of all missionaries leaving from Europe. Two decades later, it numbered one nun for every 350 inhabitants of the country. Although sharply divided ideologically, France led the Church in new Catholic initiatives which flowed from there to the rest of the Church.[1]

Two hundred years earlier, the French Church had been threatened on all sides. Seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophies were dismissive of faith in a transcendent God, and many rallied to Voltaire's battle cry, "'*Écrasons*

l›infâme'– let us destroy the villainous thing, the Church".[1]

As the French Revolution began affecting every aspect of French life, the Church soon experienced how the revolutionary values of liberty, equality, and fraternity were impacting its traditional teaching role and commitment to hierarchical structures. It was facing an imminent institutional collapse. As the eighteenth century ended, it became difficult for Catholics to think of the Revolution as anything other than "the work of the Devil".[2] Jo-Anne McNamara writes that the

> estimated numbers of nuns expelled from their communities range from 30,000 to 55,000. Only 6,700 former nuns still living in 1800 resumed their vows. Some 356 nuns and *conversae* [lay Sisters] are known to have married, mostly to priests, combining their poor pensions. Another 700 are known to have found secular employment or otherwise settled in the world as single people and asked to be relieved of their vows between 1800 and 1808.[3]

But the 1815 defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo signified the triumph of reactionary forces, including the Catholic Church, over the forces of change.

After the restoration of the monarchy, Gallicanism, which had downplayed the authority of the pope in favour of royal authority, was supplanted by Ultramontanism which promoted the papacy as a bulwark against Enlightenment rationalism and the forces of change. Ultramontanism culminated "in the definitions of papal primacy and infallibility of the First Vatican Council".[4] As French Dominican Yves Congar, wrote,

> no public morality or national character without religion;
> no religion in Europe without Christianity;
> no Christianity without Catholicism;
> no Catholicism without the pope;
> no pope without the supremacy that is his due.[5]

Furthermore, Catholic theology and spirituality in nineteenth century France reflected the influence of Jansenism, a seventeenth century theology which emphasised the pivotal place of original sin, human depravity, and the necessity of divine grace if one were to be saved. Though Jansenism was condemned prior to the French Revolution, its influence persisted, most obviously in the nineteenth century sin-laden, dualistic spiritualities and theologies that were carried by French and Irish missionaries to a colony such as Aotearoa where they informed the spiritual life and religious practices of Catholics.

One of the more extraordinary features of a revived French Church was its great enthusiasm for what were called "foreign missions". Since the beginning of

the nineteenth century, thousands of Catholic women in Europe, North America, Australia, and Aotearoa had entered apostolic congregations which were dedicated to different educational and social ministries either in their countries of origin, or on the "foreign missions". This work was often a labour of love, or if they were paid, the actual remuneration was insultingly minimal. Sisters' work was subordinate to that of the ordained minister and could be executed only with permission of the local bishop and/or parish priest.

Various reasons explain French Catholic enthusiasm for the "foreign missions". Missionary activity was seen as key in civilising as well as baptising pagans in distant colonies before the Protestants got there. The Lyon-based Association for the Propagation of the Faith, founded in 1822, asked: "Will not the sight of these incredible efforts on the part of the heretics (Protestants) to propagate their errors inspire Catholics to a generous emulation? Let us hope that the zeal of the children of light becomes as ardent as that of the children of darkness".[6]

Missionary activity was not neutral and its relationship to colonialism needs to be acknowledged. By the nineteenth century, European imperial powers ruled and dominated more than half of the land surface of the earth and over a third of the world's population. Catholic missionaries like their Protestant counterparts were "strongly shaped by the colonial, ethnocentric and national influences around them",[7] and believed that "civilisation" required socialising indigenous peoples into a western way of life.

These theological, political, and social developments influenced the Mission Sisters' understanding and practice of mission until at least Vatican II. Education, understood as school teaching was the most important missionary activity for many of them. Likewise, the numbers of orphaned children meant that Mission Sisters, whether in Aotearoa or in India saw the establishment of orphanages as important missionary tasks. As New Zealander, Sister Mary de Sales, working in Assam, India, wrote in 1928:

> This is a real mission in every sense of the word. Besides day schools, we have an orphanage and the young girls of the village are employed in making lace, stockings, cane mats, and weaving. We find this scheme of employment an excellent means of raising the morals of the young girls and women, who during the rainy season are unable to work in the fields.[8]

Euphrasie Barbier, Marie du Cœur de Jésus (1829-1893), foundress of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions

Euphrasie Barbier was born in Caen, Normandy, in 1829, and died in Sturry, England, in 1893. She prioritised foreign missions for her young congregation. In 1848, as a member of the newly founded French congregation of the Sisters

of Calvary, she was sent to London where she was trained as a teacher. This, she believed would be the prelude to going on the foreign missions. But Barbier was soon involved in teaching the children of the poorer classes in London, and, concerned about the Sisters of Calvary's loss of its original goal of working on the foreign missions, sought to transfer to the Marist Sisters in France. When this did not eventuate, she willingly accepted the invitation of the Marist priests to establish a new congregation which could assist the Marists in their missions in Oceania and Aotearoa.

In 1861, as Barbier set out to found a new congregation, a task in which she was generously supported by the Marists, she was determined to avoid what she perceived to be the excessive clerical control that she had experienced while a Sister of Calvary. She insisted on governance structures that would safeguard her Sisters from unwarranted interference by priests and bishops.

Barbier also insisted that her congregation be dedicated to the foreign missions. As she wrote in the *Constitutions*: "[The Sisters'] special end is to aid humbly and to the best of their ability to extend the Kingdom of God in souls by devoting themselves to the instruction and Christian education of children and women, above all in infidel and non-Catholic countries".[9] Barbier believed that a genuine missionary vocation needed to be grounded in contemplative prayer, and that this was best realised by her Sisters living a monastic and semi-cloistered way of life.

The birth of a new religious congregation, *Religieuses de Notre Dame des Missions*, (Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions)[10]

The first six decades of the congregation's story coincided with the reigns of three popes, Pius IX (1846-1879), Leo XIII (1878-1903), and Pius X (1903-1914), all of whom can be described as traditionalist, often reactionary. There is little doubt that the dominant conservative theologies and spiritualities of the time impacted the young congregation.

On August 15 1861, Barbier and a companion Sister, took up residence in Lyon under the auspices of the Marist Fathers, a development which would become fraught in the years to come. Barbier wanted to found a congregation with its own particular ethos and spirit, which could work with the Marist Fathers in Oceania and Aotearoa, whereas the Marist Fathers wanted a community of women who would be part of the Marist family missionary outreach, and whom they would direct.

The newly founded congregation grew rapidly, and in 1865, a house was opened in Napier, Aotearoa, while in 1870, Mission Sisters began living and working in Deal, England, and from 1871 onwards in Oceania in Tonga, Samoa, and Wallis. On-going tension with the Marists over the suitability of a cloistered life style in the three Pacific Islands could not be resolved and in 1878, the Sisters left Oceania although not Aotearoa. In 1883, Barbier's enthusiasm for foreign missions led her

and four Sisters to Chittagong, then an important port city of Britain's Indian Empire. In 1876, a house was opened in Armentières, France, where the Sisters taught young women apprentices who worked in the factories.

Barbier's dream is realised

After Barbier's death in 1893, Marie du Saint Rosaire (Françoise Eugénie Wicht, 1842-1925), was elected as second Superior General, and ensured that Mission Sisters continued to realise the foundress's vision for the young Congregation. In 1896, a house was opened in Fribourg, Switzerland, another was opened in Sittwe, Myanmar, in 1897, while in 1898, Mission Sisters from Aotearoa journeyed to Perth, Western Australia. In 1898, French Sisters arrived at Grande Clairière, Canada, to open the congregation's first house in that vast country. But there was a dark cloud on the horizon.

In 1902, anti-clerical legislation in France had led to Mission Sisters relocating to new foundations in Belgium and Switzerland, while others left France for England and Canada.

> When unjust and hostile laws against religious congregations were promulgated by the French government in 1901, Bishop Langevin, O.M.I., believed he could help along the merciful plans of Providence, which indeed knows how to get good out of evil. He immediately asked for the greatest number possible of Sisters, for whom these sectarian laws mean they would have to leave their own country, for his vast Archdiocese.[11]

In 1921, French Sisters returned to Lyon but the General Council, the Congregation's decision-making body, and the novitiate remained in England. By 1924, the French province was sending Mission Sisters to Indo-China. From Vatican I (1869-1870) through to Vatican II (1962-1965), the Mission Sisters' story is one of growth as Sisters from England, Ireland, France, Aotearoa, Australia, and Canada were sent to the foreign missions.

The decades after Vatican I closed in 1870, and Vatican II opened in 1962, were times of extraordinary growth for the Congregation. However, the Church, whether in England, or Canada, India, or Vietnam, was committed to conservative Eurocentric theologies which encouraged hierarchical structures both within the Church and in religious life. German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner believes that Vatican II was the beginning of the Church's "discovery of an official realisation of itself as *world-church*".[12] In the half century that followed Vatican II, this was true too for the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions. The Congregation was evolving from being a Western congregation in which decision-making belonged to the Europeans, to one which is ethnically and culturally diverse, with growth most marked in its provinces in India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

Religious life in Aotearoa

When I was about twelve, two Josephite Sisters visited us as my sister, four years younger than I was, was then a pupil at Our Lady of the Rosary parish primary school at Waiwhetu. We had previously had two Mission Sisters visit, and to our amazement when my mother offered them a cup of tea, they accepted on condition that they ate and drank separately from us. When the two Josephite Sisters came, they were likewise offered a cup of tea and something to eat and they graciously accepted and we all enjoyed it together. I was not to learn about the reasons for such differences until much later. At that stage, I thought there were three groups of Sisters, the Mission Sisters, the Josephite Sisters, and the Mercy Sisters. I knew about Marist Priests as two of my father's brothers were Marists and I knew about Marist Brothers as my brother went to St Bernard's in Lower Hutt. Apart from that I was quite ignorant about these mysterious groups of women and men who went on to affect our lives in so many ways.

Vatican II mandated great changes for all Catholics, and therefore the language of "before Vatican II" and "after Vatican II" will figure quite prominently throughout this narrative. The Church's different councils were called to resolve particular problems or questions facing the Church. In 1870 Pope Pius IX summoned bishops to Rome so that the presumed dangers of living in the modern world could be addressed. Vatican II, called by Pope John XXIII in January 1959, was intended to address how the Church might respond positively to a rapidly changing world. The Council's response involved moving beyond seeing the world as a threat to eternal salvation, and understanding it, as the arena where God was at work, and where salvation would take place.

One personal and not so important example of the extraordinary changes around how we understood the world happened to me in 1964. I was still "a young Sister" as I had made my first profession in 1961 and was doing BA units at Canterbury University. We were still fully habited, and Vatican II had made no impact on our lives whatsoever. Our Provincial Council had got a special permission from our England-based General Council that allowed me to attend lectures unaccompanied by an older retired Sister. This was a huge advance on customary practice which required that Sisters always went out in twos.

One cold wet wintery morning, while I was waiting at the bus-stop garbed in a long black habit which offered little protection from the rain, the local priest drove past and stopped and asked if I would like a ride into university given the weather. I said "no thank you", so he drove off, but then stopped and came back, not once but twice and the third time I agreed and jumped into his car. I was so worried about this transgression and the possible scandal it meant that I heard nothing of the lecture. Instead, I was internally debating as to whether or not I should tell the superior what had happened when I returned home. I decided in favour of this course of action. No negative repercussions but I was told not to tell the other Sisters what had happened.

Jump forward to 2020 – no habit, have personal use of a car to get myself from here to there, no local superiors, and here in our community, we think nothing of inviting lay people, sisters, brothers, and priests to come and stay with us.

Catholics Sisters in Aotearoa

In the Catholic tradition, women have been regarded as less than men. Jesus might have to come to bring good news to all, but patriarchal and misogynistic views in the Catholic Church mean that women have were regarded as being led by their emotions, and as the source of sexual temptation. This in turn meant it was right that they be controlled by men, as was true throughout Western society at that time.

But despite such scapegoating of women as the source of all evil from the first century onwards, communities of women began to live apart from men and devote themselves to prayer and good works, often outside of patriarchal family structures. Some of these women emerged as good administrators of quite large properties which allowed them to care for their own material and spiritual needs and those of the poor among whom they often lived and worked. All were committed to a regular rhythm of prayer and work. By the fifth century, communities of nuns were flourishing throughout Celtic Ireland and from the sixth century onwards were alive and well in Western Europe. But their autonomy and their capacity to engage in good works outside of their monasteries and convents came to an end as in the tenth century, as Carolingian monarchs looked askance at autonomous communities of women. Monasteries of well-educated and able nuns not ruled by men were seen as threatening in a patriarchal society.

Nor did the situation change over the centuries leading up to, and following the Protestant and Catholic Reformations of the sixteenth century, despite growing numbers of women struggling, sometimes successfully, to be involved in ministries and missions outside of enclosed convents. But it was the nineteenth century that witnessed the most dramatic growth of congregations of women, some of whom came to Aotearoa to live and work. Not that founding a new congregation was problem-free in a patriarchal Church and society. Church teachings after Vatican I

> exposed women religious to even more claims of clerical authority, especially from priests and bishops, and they just became absorbed into the overall political goals of the institutional Church. Just at the time when women in general were becoming aware of their rights in education, politics, the family, and society, and when feminism was gaining ground, women religious were travelling in another direction.[13]

As we shall see, Sisters emerged as key players in the growth of the Catholic Church in Aotearoa, and by 1949, fifteen congregations of Catholic Sisters were involved primarily in education, as well as health and social work.

By the 1850s, Aotearoa's bishops had identified primary and secondary Catholic schools as critical in providing faith formation for the minority, predominantly Irish Catholic community, whom they feared could be led astray by the numerically larger Protestant community. The episcopal wish for more and more Sisters to

teach grew exponentially after the 1877 Education Act which legislated for free, secular, and compulsory education. This law effectively terminated government funding for Catholic schools, and so lay teachers could no longer be employed and paid by parishes. Catholic Sisters provided their services for very limited financial remuneration. In a male dominated Church, clerical decision-makers expected religious women to look after their own domestic needs and then to spend long hours in the classroom. Brothers and priests, however, were not expected to assume total responsibility for their domestic needs. For example, it was reported that at

> its 1929 annual general meeting, the Wellington Catholic Education Board decided to raise the annual payments to nuns teaching in its schools from £25 to £35 pounds but the Marist brothers received £100 each, as well as £50 [per community] to employ domestic help. Because of their vow of chastity – and in spite of their vow of poverty – the brothers needed extra money to hire a woman to perform domestic chores for them. Similarly, parish clergy (vowed to celibacy but not to poverty) employed women as housekeepers and cooks. Nuns were expected to do their own domestic work and where possible, supplement their meagre income by teaching music.[14]

But Catholic Sisters were also expected to engage in pastoral visiting, and at times, care of the sick, particularly before the establishment of a welfare state in Aotearoa. Communities of Catholic Sisters often had orphanages as an adjunct to their main work of education in parish-owned primary schools and their own secondary schools. The establishment of boarding schools, and the subsequent care of boarders, were likewise identified as an important part of secondary school education.

In the decades after the arrival of the first Catholic missionaries, Catholicism in the young colony flourished as parents wanted their children educated in Catholic schools, novitiate numbers were healthy, and family life often revolved around the schools as Catholic dads looked after fund-raising and maintenance, and Catholic mums helped fund-raising efforts through preparation of goods to sell at school fairs. Despite the unsuccessful efforts to get more government funding for schools, there was a sense that all was well.

The immediate post-World War II war years saw a significant spurt in population growth – not least among Catholics, and so it was not surprising that bishops invited other congregations to their diocese. These congregations, for example, the Holy Faith Sisters, Presentation Sisters, and Religious of Jesus and Mary were soon teaching in Catholic schools.

Vatican II, 1962-1965

The importance of Vatican II for religious life, particularly for Catholic Sisters, should never be under-estimated.

> The council took as axiomatic that Catholicism was adaptive even to 'the modern world.' This was a shift from the integralism that marked most Catholic thinking from the early 19th century well into the 20th century and saw almost everything stemming from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution as incompatible with the Church.[15]

This development was extraordinarily liberating for Mission Sisters who were teaching large classes, and studying after school to acquire the minimum educational qualifications required by government to teach in parish and congregation-owned schools. At the same they were obliged to live a semi-enclosed life and wear unhygienic, medieval type religious habits unsuited to their daily lives. Vatican II shifted perceptions around religious life in at least three ways. First, the Council insisted that all the baptized – married people, Catholics Sisters and brothers, priests – are missionary. The missionary work of lay people and Catholic Sisters was no longer to be subordinated to that of ordained priests.

Second, mission no longer pitted the Church against the world, or against peoples of other faiths and religious traditions, and so ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue were to be embraced. Prior to Vatican II, the "world" and God seemed to be in opposition, as the kingdom of God was understood as an other-worldly reality. Practical expression was given to such perceptions by strict rules for Mission Sisters around cloister, contact with lay people, or religious dress. However, as the Mission Sisters embraced the call to *aggiornomento* (updating/reform/renewal), such theological positions began to change. Semi-cloistered lifestyles faded away while dualistic theologies were replaced by those of a more holistic, liberationist character.

Third, the Council insisted that religious congregations review their way of life and work so that they could respond to contemporary missionary needs. Women's congregations had recognized the need for renewal prior to Vatican II. For example, the need for tertiary education and professional formation were acknowledged. Congregations which had followed a semi-cloistered lifestyle that owed more to monastic traditions than to apostolic, were asking if the cloister still constituted a privileged safeguard of contemplative spirituality. Congregations which had been founded specifically for work on the foreign missions were asking what that meant in a post-colonial age, and what fidelity to the original congregational charism of foreign missionary work required in the second half of the twentieth century. Socio-economic realities, particularly the growing secularization of society, and the awareness of the poverty in which millions lived, also alerted congregations to the need for reassessing mission priorities. These factors helped prepare the way for both attitudinal and structural changes around the lives of Sisters.

Vatican II taught that the renewal of religious life required a return to the sources of Christian life: the scriptures, particularly the gospels; Church teaching; and the reclamation of the foundress's vision for her community. Similarly, the

Council's theology of "the signs of the times" (cf. *GS* #4-10),[16] and the Church's social teachings found in papal encyclicals and episcopal letters indicated that the world was no longer to be avoided through a cloistered life-style. Rather, the world was the privileged arena where one met God. Sisters were to identify and respond to the new missionary needs that the economic, social, political, and religious imperatives of the day demanded,[17] and which were in harmony with the charism of a particular religious community. This allowed Sisters to turn from a "narrow ascetical-juridical understanding of religious life that had constrained religious life",[18] and to shift the locus of authority from the institutional Church to the decision-making processes of their general chapters or congregational meetings to determine mission priorities. The extraordinary proliferation of scripture and theology paperback publications and journal articles published after the Council were enthusiastically read by many Sisters, alerting them to possibilities never previously envisaged.

But as the twentieth century ended, the hopes for the future of religious life generated by Vatican II did not seem to have been realised, at least in Western nations as indicated in the changing demographic of religious congregations. The Mission Sisters numbered around two hundred and fifty members on the eve of Vatican II. Now there are fewer than seventy. Not only are there fewer Sisters, there are fewer young women interested in religious life, and median ages are steadily rising in all congregations in Aotearoa. Sisters are now less visible in Church and in society as few are wearing the distinctive religious habit characteristic of a pre-Vatican II Church. Is this good or not so good? The jury is still out on the question of religious dress, although some newcomers knocking on the doors of seminaries and novitiates want to return to formal religious dress. I suspect that the society in which they live leads them to search for strong sense of identity, as they are surrounded by a smorgasbord of choices and the dominance of individualism.

The decline in vocations to religious life coincided with a greater flow of government monies into the Catholic school system, which made it easier for dioceses and religious congregations to employ lay staff. The subsequent movement of Catholic Sisters out of institutional educational and health work and their involvement in adult faith formation programmes, tertiary theological education, pastoral ministry, chaplaincy work, spiritual direction, or counselling for example, was extraordinary.

The almost virtual collapse of institutional works in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and the apparent loss of a corporate identity, at least in so far as the wider Catholic community was concerned, has not been an easy experience for religious women but it is possible to identify at least two on-going constants – commitment to the poor, and wanting to be part of a pilgrim Church seeking to enter more deeply into the mystery of God through prayer, through study, and

through a prayerful discernment of the signs of the times.

In the aftermath of Vatican II

By the mid-1980s, Catholic schools were being integrated into the government school system. This helped to reduce costs, as governments were paying salaries, and meeting other operational expenses. Because Sisters could move out of the Catholic school system without significant financial challenges for diocesan and parish authorities, the diversification of ministries and works which they began undertaking intensified from the 1980s onwards.

Was such diversity to be welcomed? Was the baby being thrown out with the bath water? Where had the "good nuns" gone? Such questions were frequently asked not only by Sisters themselves but also by people within Church and society. The answers were as varied as the questions.

In the decades after Vatican II, it became apparent that the rich variety of different theological positions could be subsumed under two headings: there were those Catholics for whom Vatican II was a "welcome liberation", and those who perceived it as a "threatening disruption".[19] Generally speaking, Sisters saw Vatican II as a "welcome liberation" and were quick to embrace its call to *aggiornomento.*

What does the future hold? Little study has been done on this in Aotearoa but it seems as if religious life needs to be transformed in ways that will allow it to speak to contemporary society, while at the same time not losing sight of its all-important goal of searching for God. The more important of these ways include new ways of living in community in a world where community life is increasingly threatened by consumerism, poverty, individualism, war, and its corollary of millions of refugees, and ecological disasters.

In the nineteenth century, when so many congregations were founded, they responded to the emerging socio-economic needs of a rapidly industrialising Western Europe, to the needs of migrant communities scattered throughout different empires, and to the needs of indigenous peoples in distant colonies. In hindsight, there is much to criticise in the way in which pre-Vatican II religious congregations engaged in these different ministries, but they were all founded by charismatic women and men who discerned the signs of the times and responded with love, commitment, generosity, and courage. I now want to see how this was played out in Aotearoa and Samoa by the Mission Sisters.

An overview of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa, 1865-2023

I always think that if we do not know and understand our past, then planning for the future becomes almost impossible. I think that is why I loved history being a significant part of my BA degree there at Canterbury University many years ago. I loved it because

it gave me the chance to read, to think, to critique. I loved history, because at that time, history was primarily Western history which in turn meant much of it was Church history, usually from a non-Catholic perspective. The growth of monasticism in Western Europe fascinated me. Then in my second year we studied the Reformation which alerted me to another way of understanding Church.

For centuries, Catholic Church teaching was "objective, immutable and a-historical",[20] *which precluded the possibility of imagining new directions, but that was to change by the mid-twentieth century. To change meant knowing where we came from, and in the light of that knowledge, making informed decisions as to where we might want to go as a religious congregation. Knowledge of the past needed to be complemented by a judicious use of other disciplines – economics, psychology, sociology, and contemporary philosophies.*

I had thought at one time of the history of religious life as a linear reality. Now as I think more about the story of religious life from its earliest days through to our contemporary time, I am more struck by its cyclic character. The stories of religious orders and congregations are a story of birth, rapid expansion, steady growth, and institutionalisation, increasing financial well-being and security, decline, and disappearance. Now I want to explore what history teaches me about our story here in Aotearoa.

The story of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa began more than one hundred and sixty years ago in 1864, when four French Sisters left London on the SS *Walter Hood* for Napier, then a parish in the Wellington Diocese, under the authority of Bishop Philippe Viard, SM. Aotearoa had changed significantly since 1838 when the first Catholic missionaries arrived. Then Māori outnumbered by thousands the handful of settlers scattered around the country. By the 1860s that situation was reversed. By 1865, the settler population outnumbered Māori. Settlers governed the country and settler culture was the dominant culture, while wars and legislation ensured that Māori were losing their land to the settlers. Aotearoa was a self-governing colony, and most settlers were Protestant when the Mission Sisters arrived.

Barbier hoped that by sending Sisters to Aotearoa, the young congregation could devote itself to the foreign missions, that is, in the education of "pagans" who happened to be Māori. Although that did not happen to the extent Barbier had envisaged, the subsequent growth of the French congregation in a predominantly English Protestant colony was significant and between 1865 and 1900, there were twelve foundations made, stretching from Pukekohe to Ashburton.

Episcopal policy meant that Mission Sisters were primarily involved in work with the settler community, which had not been Barbier's original intention. Despite this change in direction, Mission Sisters still wanted to work with Māori. Marist priest, Euloge Reignier was stationed at Meeanee, not far from Napier, and aware "that the education of native and half-caste children of this province is much neglected",[21] had sought and gained a grant from the provincial government to assist in the establishment of a school for such children. The *Providence*, as it was

called then, began accepting pupils in October 1867.

The Sisters' commitment to Māori continued throughout the nineteenth century. Barbier was able to respond positively to the invitation from the Breton-born Rene Lannuzel, SM, to establish a foundation at Opotiki. Lannuzel was a zealous missionary who saw "the absolute need of Catholic Schools, and he collected the money for a convent and a select school, to which was also attached a parochial school".[22]

By 1890, the Sisters were involved in teaching Māori and settler children, and also in pastoral visitation of Māori families. The "Opotiki House Book" records that in 1895:

> On one side of the Waioeka lies the Māori Pah, as always on a hilltop. Our first visit there was to a Māori family who lived in a whare; there were fowls, dogs, and pigs searching for food in the open while the family also had their meal out in the sunshine unless there was heavy rain. It was hardly pleasing to our taste, but we could not deny our Catholic Māoris the pleasure of sharing their meal with us. We also visited a house Māori had built which was well known as a fine building – one of the finest in New Zealand built by Māoris and wonderfully carved wood inside and outside. It is well built and used as a Church by our Māori Catholics.[23]

By the end of the nineteenth century, Sisters were teaching in more than twenty primary and secondary schools. The latter often had boarding accommodation attached, while in some parishes, there was accommodation and education for orphans. This was an extraordinary achievement, as the first Sisters were French and so teaching in English-medium schools would not have been easy. However, after a novitiate was opened in Christchurch in 1873, English-speaking Sisters soon outnumbered the original French Sisters. The financial situation of the Sisters was often difficult as nineteenth century Catholic historian J. J. Wilson observed concerning the foundation at Nelson:

> As was usual in foundations of the early days, the Sisters' beginning here, was needless to say, very poor, and especially as they were obliged to leave France during the troubled time of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870; consequently, they were unable to obtain the necessary requirements for the furnishing of a little chapel, the want of which for many months was keenly felt.[24]

Financial hardship did not diminish the Sisters' sense of humour as the following story from the "Pukekohe House Book" indicates:

> Our furniture was without doubt hardly adequate. We were six [including Barbier and her companion, Marie Angèle de Jésus] and we had only two mattresses and three chairs. What seemed to us most necessary were some seats so that we

> could all sit down at the same time. Then in taking a walk in the garden we found some planks left behind by the carpenter, some old nails, and I don't know what we used for a hammer, but with all that we were able to make a bench on which three of us could sit, so with our three chairs we were rich.[25]

By the end of the nineteenth century, Aotearoa was receiving very few Sisters from France and the British Isles and instead was sending Sisters overseas.

Twentieth century Developments prior to 1965

The rapid growth of the Congregation in nineteenth century Aotearoa continued in the first six decades of the twentieth century, and there were another twenty-four foundations. By 1962, Mission Sisters were teaching in over fifty primary schools and nine secondary schools, with the latter also providing accommodation for boarders from the rural areas.

Mission to Māori

The Sisters' mission to young Māori women continued through their involvement with the *Providence* which in 1926 was renamed at St Joseph's Māori Girls' College. In 1943, the Marist priests, recognising the important role of the school for Māori, had generously donated land that would support the college. Vincent Geaney SM described the school as one which

> is the strongest influence we have among the Māoris for religion and culture. There are over eighty girls there, boarders, and there might be many more did resources permit; they come from all parts of New Zealand and after an excellent training for three or four years they return to their homes.[26]

The success of the College persuaded the Sisters to establish something similar at Waitara. In 1944, the "Waitara House Book" recorded that "[s]ome weeks ago, it was announced that a college for Māori girls was to be opened and that Waitara had been chosen as the most suitable spot" … [and] in February 1944, "the first boarders began to arrive, and by 1947, there were over eighty Māori boarders".[27]

But the financial costs of this growth could not be sustained. In 1961, the school was relocated to Opunake but in 1964 it too was closed as there was insufficient finance to maintain it. Māori regretted the closing of the school: "The local Catholic Māori people are sad to hear that they are going. They decided to put on a picnic 'Māori style' for them at the beach, so consequently one Saturday morning found the girls and two Sisters heading in the direction of the sea".[28] However, the Sisters were still involved with Māori through schools where the Māori population were significant in small towns such as Huntly, Ngaruawahia, Waitara, Opotiki, Kaiapoi, and Kaikoura.

In addition to long hours spent in the classroom, often teaching big classes, the Sisters were also involved in what were known as "catechism camps". These were catechetical classes that took place during the school holidays, sometimes in the local church, the school, on the marae, in the boarding schools attached to the Sisters' secondary schools, or in a local hall.

One interesting account is that of Mary St Blaise and Mary St Dominica who responded to Christchurch's Bishop Matthew Brodie's request that religious instruction be given to Catholic children living in the Chatham Islands. In the Christmas holidays, 1928-1929, the two Sisters spent six weeks on the Chatham Islands, some eight hundred kilometres from Christchurch, instructing the children and visiting both Catholic and Protestant families.

> At Owenga, the Sisters were warmly welcomed by the Prendeville family, who escorted them to their temporary home in the school house which Miss McLaughlin, an excellent Catholic teacher away on holiday in Waitangi, had given up for them. Instructions for the children began the following day and great credit is due to Miss McLaughlin's devotedness in having so well instructed the children in the mysteries of their holy Faith. There are four schools on the Islands, and it would be an immense advantage if Catholic teachers could be found for each of them. There are many such places where our Catholic girls could do excellent work.[29]

Professional formation of the Sisters

In the *Constitutions*, Barbier had written that "the Sisters of this Institute being destined principally for the word of instruction, should possess a sufficient and practical knowledge of the subjects they will have to teach".[30] In the twentieth century, that knowledge had to be complemented by appropriate professional qualifications that necessitated primary school teachers doing the various government correspondence courses that allowed them to teach. After World War I, through to 1945, a smaller number of Sisters attended university where they gained a first degree that would qualify them for secondary teaching, while an even smaller group of six completed their Masters' degrees and one, Mary Domitille (Mary Hickey) completed her doctorate in 1924. The latter Sister was also responsible for introducing the Montessori method of teaching into New Zealand after meeting Maria Montessori in London in 1925.

Foreign missions 1897-1962

Although bishops preferred Mission Sisters to teach in parish-owned Catholic primary schools, a number of Sisters left the province to work overseas in the years before Vatican II. Between 1893 and 1943, more than thirty-seven Sisters went to work in Australia, twenty-one to the Indian Empire, four to Canada, three

to Vietnam, and seven to England. Life overseas was demanding. Something of personal loss that working overseas entailed can be seen in the "Kaiapoi House Book": "On 21st July [1950], Rev Mother Mary St Irmine came to spend a short time with us. Mother Mary of Egypt met her sister at Lyttelton when she reached the shores of the South Island. What a meeting after forty years! We all are enjoying Mother's stay – she has such a spirit of devotedness and many are the interesting talks we hear of India".[31]

Sisters wrote back home from Vietnam:

> Two Sisters left last January for China [Indo-China]. One of them, who qualified for a Matron's Certificate at the Christchurch hospital, is now caring for more than a hundred indoor patients at a hospice for the poor in the Tonkin rice fields, as well as relieving at the dispensary for outdoor patients, miserable and afflicted creatures who sometimes number more than two hundred at a time. The other Sister is teaching little Chinese waifs, and in her turn, accompanies the Sister whose duty it is to supply with medicine and necessaries the leper station about three miles distant.[32]

Not only did the young province respond generously in terms of personnel to the needs of the wider congregation, it also sought in a variety of ways to support them financially. Past pupils were exhorted to contribute generously to the foreign missions. The Christchurch *Diamond Jubilee Magazine* states that:

> Letters and petitions from many ex-pupils of the Christchurch Convent who are devoting their lives to the spreading of the Gospel in the gigantic mission fields of Northern India, have the effect of bringing about a better realisation of the privations and difficulties that attend the conquest of souls in those teeming pagan lands ...Thanks to their efforts and to the very generous donation given in addition by His Lordship [Bishop Brodie], a year's supply of rice is now bought.[33]

The Mission Sisters and pastoral outreach 1900-1962

The *Constitutions* stated: "the Sisters, moreover undertake to visit and care for the sick, poor principally in missionary countries, observing on all occasions the rules of prudence".[34] In addition to such works of charity, the Morrinsville, Nelson, and Sumner communities often provided accommodation for the sick. Sumner, located close to the sea, served as a type of convalescent home. Despite Barbier's insistence that the Sisters follow a semi-enclosed, cloistered way of life, pastoral and missionary priorities meant that the Sisters took seriously the words of Jesus that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath (see Mark 2:27). This is demonstrated by their pastoral care of the sick and to those living in rural and isolated areas, their involvement in parish activities, and their pastoral visiting to

the homes of students. An entry in the "Opunake House Book" reads:

> On February 6th [1903], both priests being away, the Sisters were called upon to visit a very sick woman. On arriving at the place, they found two little babies four days old, whom the doctor said could not possibly live until the next day. Therefore, Sister Constantia baptised the infants and during the night one had the happiness of winging its flight to Heaven and on the following day the other little soul departed for Heaven.[35]

Later that same year we read that

> towards the end of May, the Sisters were called to visit a very poor woman who was living in a little hovel situated in a gully on the banks of a river. They found her in a very low state and apparently dying from neglect … the Sisters spent that and the following night with her. Then she seemed to rally a little. The Sisters continued to visit her daily for about a week, when they again thought it necessary to spend the night with her.[36]

Perhaps one of the more striking examples of their pastoral involvement was the generosity of the Sisters in caring for people during the influenza epidemic of 1918. Schools were closed from 1 November 1918 through to February 1919, but there is no indication that the Sisters sought to protect themselves from catching the dreaded flu:

> During the month of November, the influenza epidemic broke out and our dear Rev Mother Theophane fell victim to it. Hearing that a Catholic family named Garrett was in distress being all down with no one to attend to them, our dear Mother with her usual kind-hearted generosity offered her services, and for a whole week did all in her power to assist them ... After a week dear Mother passed to her reward [and] is the first nun to be buried in the Kaikoura cemetery. To show their appreciation of the deceased, the parishioners erected a cross and fenced in the grave at their own expense.[37]

Likewise, during the Depression of the 1930s, the Sisters were involved in ministering to those worst affected – as Bishop Patrick Lyons reminded the community at Addington in 1947:

> The senior Sisters may remember during the Depression when the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions gave food and clothing to the poor. Many children then, now grown men and women, grown-ups then, now old people, owe their salvation to the Sisters. You remember Our Lord said: 'Whatever you do to these, my least brethren you do to me'.[38]

Pastoral ministry including visiting the homes of the pupils in the school holidays

as the Addington House Book records: "May 4th the School was closed for the 1st term holidays. The two weeks were spent by the Sisters between study and sewing. In the second week, a number of families of pupils were visited".[39]

Mission Sisters after Vatican II

Vatican II ushered in a time of extraordinary change for the Mission Sisters. Structures appropriate to a monastic community were examined and found wanting. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience were re-assessed. Their traditional ascetical dimension was to be complemented by recognition that the vows were to encourage a radical following of Christ in the world, a perception that had important apostolic significance. To follow Jesus was an invitation to continue his ministry among the poor. This understanding of the vows acknowledged that new ways of understanding mission were required.

Province Chapter delegates urged that "more Sisters be sent on the Foreign Missions – that a house be opened in the Pacific Islands, and that these Sisters be changed regularly with others in the Province. That when possible, the Sisters take a more active part in parish affairs. That the Sisters be permitted to take a normal part in meetings (committees, etc.)".[40] The Chapter recommended that work with Māori should be further encouraged.[41]

Mission Sisters began embracing extensive experimentation, which "launched the experience-based renewal of religious life".[42] New governmental structures began to be hesitantly embraced when the 1969 Special Provincial Chapter permitted the attendance of observers or non-elected members, who represented a younger age group at the Chapter. The most obvious external changes were those affecting the Sisters' apostolic works.

Foreign missions

Barbier understood "foreign missions" as the defining mark of her congregation, but in Aotearoa, most Sisters had been involved in the Catholic school system. Vatican II had prompted a reassessment of mission priorities, which led to the establishment of new missions overseas. It was the emphasis on foreign missions that lay behind the province's decision in 1969 to return to Samoa.[43] From 1970 onwards, a significant number of Sisters left Aotearoa to work in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in a variety of ministries which included school teaching, working with refugees, catechetical formation, pastoral ministry, chaplaincy ministry, relief, and development work.

In the early 1990s, Mission Sisters began working overseas with non-governmental organisations. Three Sisters, Cherry Leonard, Brigid Anne McGrath, and Susan Smith, joined the Jesuit Refugee Service in Ethiopia, while another two, Anne Bulman and Sheila O'Toole, worked with the New Zealand Government's

Volunteer Service Abroad in Tanzania and Vietnam respectively. Dorothy Dickson was involved with the French NGO, *Action Contre la Faim*, outreach in war-ravaged first in Liberia, and later in Sudan. Gael Henry joined the Christian Brothers' Ministry, *Comunidade Edmund Rice*, in East Timor where she worked with women in the countryside of this war-ravaged nation from 2003 to 2008.

In addition to a significant number of Sisters leaving Aotearoa to work overseas, a smaller number came to Aotearoa to work. These Sisters were primarily from the United Kingdom and Ireland province, but in 1987, Marie Benoît (Pham Ngoc Kim) from Vietnam began working with the Vietnamese community in Auckland while in 2005, her compatriot, Celine Do Thi My began a similar ministry in Christchurch.

One of the most significant changes that occurred from the 1960s onwards was the effort to ensure that Sisters were better qualified for new apostolic works. Teaching Sisters attended numerous courses: government-run, diocesan-run and congregation-run, to enhance their teaching and catechetical skills. That such courses were appreciated is apparent from the Sisters' comments in the different House Books, for example: "On 27 and 28 January, Rev. Felix Donnelly from Auckland conducted a Seminar on the *Living Light* series at Te Rangimarie Māori Centre [Christchurch]. Rev Fr Cunneen and Rev Fr Horgan also helped. Mass was offered at mid-day each day. Workshops and discussions plus lectures filled up the days. It was a great success".[44] Educational apostolates were no longer restricted to the classroom and more Sisters became involved in education at diocesan, parish and tertiary level.

The growing number of Pasifika people emigrating to Aotearoa, particularly to the main urban centres, Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch, prompted some Sisters to engage in ministry with Pasifika communities, often the victims of racist discrimination.

A more recent educational initiative in the third millennium, has been the arrival in Aotearoa of younger Sisters from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Vietnam who wished to upgrade their English language and professional skills. These Sisters live in Mission Sisters' communities in those cities and towns where there is easy access to the local polytechnical colleges, and where there are Sisters in the community who can provide extra English language support. Just as important as the support offered to these Sisters by the province is the contribution made by the students to the life of the province. Their visits to other Mission Sisters' houses, their mission-awareness-raising activities in schools and parishes, and their youthfulness mean their presence is appreciated by all.

Although the 2008 General Chapter identified care of creation as a congregation priority, it had emerged earlier on as important in the Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa province. Its importance was given practical expression in 1996

when the newly established community at Whangarei committed itself to care of creation and attempted to articulate the shape of a contextual eco-spirituality and eco-theology.

The involvement of the Sisters in such a rich variety of apostolic works is impressive to say the least. It is apparent that those who had been trained as school teachers could readily enough use the skills and insights they already had to continue in other educational ministries, particularly if there had been provision for them to acquire further professional qualifications.

However, while the road to renewal was a road of not only high hopes and visions it was also a road of potholes into which an unsuspecting Sister could easily fall. It is more difficult today, almost sixty years later, to capture something of the euphoria experienced by many Mission Sisters after Vatican II as hierarchical decision-making processes were tempered by more emphasis on participatory decision-making, as uniformity gave way to a greater emphasis on personal choice, and as a monastic prayer life and spirituality were replaced by one that was better suited to apostolic communities.

Vatican II ushered in profound changes for the Mission Sisters. In many respects their semi-cloistered lifestyle, the difficulty they experienced in gaining a theological education, the patriarchal nature of the Church in which they lived and through which they exercised their apostolates ensured a receptivity to the Council's call for *aggiornamento*, to updating themselves so that they became women of the twentieth century. Yet in some ways the promise of those first hope-filled years after Vatican II does not seem to have been realised. It is now time to look at various facets of the life of the Mission Sisters to see how and what all the change entailed and meant.

Notes

1 John W. O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2018), 24.
2 Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Bob Scribner, Christianity and Society in the Modern World Series (London: Routledge, 1989), 177.
3 Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 566.
4 Brian Flanagan, "'New Ultramontanists': Why do some Catholics fear Change?", *National Catholic Reporter*, August 13 2018, https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/new-ultramontanists-why-do-some-catholics-fear-change, accessed March 4 2019.
5 Yves Congar, *L'Église de Saint Augustin à l'Époque Moderne* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1970), 181.
6 Jean Comby, *How to Understand the History of Christian Mission*, trans., John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1996), 118, quoting from Annals of the Propagation of the Faith III/13, 1828.
7 Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 227.
8 Estelle Clarkson, "Letters of Thanks to the Ex-Pupils of the Convent, Who Each Year Collect Funds for the Indian Mission", in *Diamond Jubilee Magazine in Commemoration of the Foundation of the Convent of Notre Dame des Missions, Christchurch, New Zealand 1868-1928* (Christchurch: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1928), 82.
9 Euphrasie Barbier, *Constitutions of the Daughters of Notre Dame des Missions* (Hastings: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1936), #2.
10 Sisters today write their names followed by the initials RNDM (Religieuse de Notre Dame des Missions). In Aotearoa, they are more commonly known as the Mission Sisters.
11 Francine Goutelle (Marie de la Sainte Trinité), *Petit Historique de Nos Premiers Missions au Canada 1898-1923* (Lyon: Maison de Recruitment pour les Missions, 1926), 26.
12 Karl Rahner, "A Basic Theological Interpretation for the Second Vatican Council", in *Theological Investigations*, 20 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1981), 78.
13 Phil Kilroy, "Coming to an Edge in History: Writing the History of Women Religious and the Critique of Feminism", in *Education, Identity and Women Religious, 1800-1950: Convents, Classrooms and Colleges*, ed. Deidre Raftery and Elizabeth M. Smythe (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2016), 21.
14 Christopher van der Krogt, "Imitating the Holy Family: Catholic Ideals and the Cult of Domesticity in Interwar New Zealand", *History Now* 4, no. 1 (1998): 13-19.
15 John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" *Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (2006), 14. "Integralism" required that the Catholic faith should inform public law in those societies where Catholics were the significant majority, e.g., in nineteenth century France.
16 *Gaudium et Spes* #4-10 identifies some of the more significant "signs of the times": scientific and technological developments and their impact on culture; improved communication structures; the abandonment of religious practices; economic inequalities; lack of hope; and a questioning about the deeper meaning of life. See Austin Flannery, ed. "*Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations: A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (New York/Dublin: Costello Publishing Company/Dominican Publications, 1996). Unless otherwise indicated, citations from Vatican II documents are from this publication.
17 See Sandra M. Schneiders, "Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*)", in *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, edited by Adrian Hastings (London: SPCK, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 157-161.
18 Ibid., 158.
19 See Mary Lou Nolan, "Concentration of Connections will keep Religious Life Alive", in *Global Sisters' Report*, September 23 2014, globalSistersreport.org/news/trends/concentration-connections-will-keep-religious-life-alive-9871, accessed November 27 2015.
20 Michael Attridge, "From Objectivity to Subjectivity: Changes in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries and Their Impact on Post-Vatican II Theological Education", in *Catholic Education in the Wake of Vatican II*, ed. Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Jon Igelmo Zaldívar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 24.
21 Maria Van der Linden, *St Joseph's Maori Girls' College, 1867-1990 Nga Korero Mo Te Kura Maori O Hāto Hōhepa* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1990), 16.
22 "Father Lannuzel", *New Zealand Tablet* XXVI, no. 23, October 13 1898, (New Zealand Tablet Printing and Published Co, Dunedin: 1989). "Select school" refers to fee-paying schools for girls. Such schools were

important as they provided a minimal income for the Sisters.

23 "Opotiki House Book, 1890-1925" (RNDM Archives, Petone). Unless otherwise indicated, all House Books are located in the Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa Archives, Petone.

24 J. J. Wilson, *The Church in Aotearoa: Memoirs of the Early Days* (Dunedin: The New Zealand Tablet Printing and Publishing Company Ltd, 1910), 177.

25 "Pukekohe House Book, 1938-1972".

26 Letter of Vincent Geaney SM, to the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Giovanni Panico, 15 March 1943 (RNDM Archives, Petone).

27 "Waitara House Book 1912-1958".

28 Ibid.

29 "Missionary Work in the Chatham Islands", in *Diamond Jubilee Magazine in Commemoration of the Foundation of the Convent de Notre Dame des Missions, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1868-1928* (Christchurch: Institute de Notre Dames des Missions, 1929).

30 *Constitutions*, #14.

31 "Kaiapoi House Book 1926-1954".

32 "Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, Convent of the Sacred Heart, Christchurch", in *Diamond Jubilee Magazine in Commemoration of the Foundation of the Convent of Notre Dames des Missions, Christchurch, New Zealand 1868-1928* (Christchurch: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1928), 117.

33 "Ex-Pupils' Annual Ball in Aid of Indian Orphanage Fund", in *Diamond Jubilee Magazine in Commemoration of the Foundation of the Convent of Notre Dame des Mission, Christchurch, New Zealand 1868-1928* (Christchurch: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions 1928), 127.

34 Barbier, *Constitutions*, #3.

35 "Opunake House Book, 1901-1943".

36 "Opunake House Book".

37 "Kaikoura House Book, 1900-1931".

38 Bishop Lyons' Canonical Address to the Sisters, September 1947, in "Addington House Book, 1920-1960".

39 "Addington House Book."

40 "South Provincial Chapter, 1966" (RNDM Archives, Petone).

41 The South Provincial Chapter report stated that "each year some free places may be offered to Māori pupils in our secondary schools. Communities should visit and take a special interest in some Māori families. Arrangements to be made at local level", "South Provincial Chapter, 1966", 2.

42 Sandra M. Schneiders, "Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*)," in *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, ed. Adrian Hastings (London/New York: SPCK/Oxford University Press, 1991), 158.

43 In 1870, after the conclusion of Vatican I, six Mission Sisters had left France with Bishop Louis Elloy SM, for Oceania.

44 "New Brighton House Book, 1962-1978".

Chapter Two

The Three Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience

When I was seven years old, we lived at Wainui-o-mata, where there was no Catholic Church and where we attended the local state school. On Saturdays, two Mission Sisters used to be driven over by the parish priest at Waiwhetu, our nearest parish, so that we could be suitably instructed for our first confession and first holy communion. The Sisters wore crucifixes, on the back of which were inscribed the words, pauvreté, chasteté, obéissance (poverty, chastity, obedience). These words meant nothing to me, in French or in English, but once I became a novice, I soon became aware of the renunciatory character of the vows I was hoping to make.

As novices, we were given a small book, about 10cmc x 20cms, that was commonly referred to as the "little black catechism of the vows". I have not been able to locate this as it was rightly dispensed with after Vatican II. We were obliged to memorise its contents prior to making our first profession of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and I still remember certain phrases, for example, permission from superiors could be either "tacit" or "explicit". It was much safer getting "explicit" permissions. I remember too that "worldly and profane songs were much more reprehensible from the lips of one consecrated to God", and that "holding hands and other signs of sensual affection were always seriously sinful". I learnt that through a vow of poverty one gave up the right of "use and usufruct of property". All such knowledge was essential if one were to make one's profession as a Mission Sister.

Prior to the changes initiated by Vatican II, a Mission Sister, after a probationary period of not more than three years, publicly promised to make temporary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. These temporary vows were made annually for three years, and then once for another three years, after which a Sister made perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. A Sister's profession of the vows publicly committed her to a life of perfection, structured around a faithful observance of poverty, chastity, and obedience. What this entailed was spelt out in the constitutions of a particular congregation.

Why vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience? A pre-Vatican II Church understood religious life as a life of perfection, whereby intending members would "have as their general end the greater glory of God and to labour more perfectly from their own sanctification by the faithful observance of three simple vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience".[1] What emerged as key was the idea of

renunciation – renunciation of wealth and possessions, renunciation of sexual love, and, renunciation of one's own will. As Irish-born Catholic theologian Diarmuid O'Murchu writes:

> [T]he human sciences also arrive at this triad when they indicate the *three libidos* that constitute the human being in its depths: the libido *amandi* (the desire to love and be loved), the libido *possidendi* (access to the resources to live with dignity), and the libido *dominandi* (a sense of usefulness in our engagement with the world).[2]

As O'Murchú indicates, these basic human drives towards possession of goods, a loving relationship with the other, and love of personal freedom, can deflect one from seeking God alone. The negative theology behind such a position is summed up in two expressions associated with monastic life: first, *contemptus mundi*, "contempt of the world"; and, second, *fuga mundi*, "flight from the world". A Mission Sister might be teaching all day in school, but she was to flee that world of possible temptation and return to her semi-cloistered convent as soon as possible.

What do the gospels say about poverty, chastity, and obedience?

The gospels show that Jesus directed much of his ministry to the poor. At the same time, he preached against the danger that riches could mean, as their acquisition of, and attachment to, could all too easily distract people from doing as God wanted. Making a vow of poverty therefore made sense to those who were striving to be followers of Jesus, and live according to gospel values.

There is little in the gospels to suggest that Jesus preached extensively about celibacy and chastity as such. Despite the claims of some creative contemporary fiction writers, there is no scriptural evidence that Jesus was involved in sexual relationships with women, nor is there convincing evidence that the male authority figures in the early Christian communities were not allowed to marry. Doing the will of God the Father figured prominently in Jesus' life, and therefore it is unsurprising that a vow of obedience became integral to religious life. The vowed life was about a life of denial and renunciation in order to draw close to God. Creation, in both its wonders and disappointments, should not distract one from the Creator.

The four canonical gospels direct attention to men and women disciples (see Mark 1:16-20; Matt 4:18-22; Luke 8:1-3; John 4),[3] and after the death and resurrection of Jesus, by the second century, a few Christian women interpreted discipleship as living a celibate life either alone or with other like-minded women. For these women to embrace celibate living for the sake of the reign of God constituted a break with both Jewish and Greco-Roman patriarchal cultures. However, male church leaders were inherently suspicious of women who "sought a religious identity that did not depend on their relationship to men as mothers, wives or daughters".[4] Initially, such an option for virginity and celibacy was limited

to urban women but when the Emperor Constantine (c.272-337) began the process of transforming Christianity into the religion of the Empire, the subsequent respectability, status, and acceptance enjoyed by the Church meant some women and men sought to live a more radical life of discipleship, retreating to the margins of the great imperial cities, or to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. These women believed that marriage limited their ability to identify and embrace new ways of Christian discipleship. Their celibate lifestyles, renunciation of wealth, enthusiasm for a more egalitarian way of life, and ministry to the poor marked an important development in women's involvement in missionary activity.[5] Such developments were organic rather than structured and planned, a situation that was soon to be addressed.

Italian-born Benedict of Nursia (480-547), acclaimed as the father of Western monasticism, wrote a Rule for men who wished to live a life based on gospel values in a more radical manner. Benedictine monks were to live in community under the authority of an abbot. These monks made only one vow, a vow of stability, and their daily timetable or *horarium* stipulated regular hours for prayer, work, sleep, sacred reading, and works of charity, particularly hospitality. This understanding of religious life, soon adopted by monasteries of women and men in Western Europe, was dominant until the thirteenth century when Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), founder of the Franciscan Friars, and Dominic de Guzmán (1170-1220), founder of the Dominican Order of Preachers, recognised that new ways of discipleship involving mobility rather than stability were needed. To move from city to city preaching the good news in word and deed, meant vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience were in, and a vow of stability was out, a practice followed by subsequent newly founded orders and congregations.

Today, there is again much discussion around the vows as pre-Vatican II understandings about their renunciatory character were radically re-visioned after Vatican II. What does the vowed life mean for Sisters in the Western world in the twenty-first century? Almost twenty-five years ago, Irish Jesuit Noel Barber wrote:

> The Jesuit notion of poverty is that Jesuits are expected to put up with poverty when it was necessary for the ministry. Ignatius of Loyola saw poverty as the `strong wall of religion' by which he meant that his men should be detached from possessions using them in so far as they were necessary for their ministry and leaving them aside in so far as they did not help. Chastity, the permanent core of the religious life, demands some sacrifice and involves a trade-off: one forgoes the pleasure and delights of sexual relations, the companionship of a wife and the joys of children but avoids the demands of matrimonial obligations. Obedience is necessary to maintain unity and direction in all institutions … However excellent that might sound, it was criticised as being a renunciation of responsibility and a glorification of authority which its exercise did not always

> merit … The seeking of God's will by Superior and subject together has replaced the notion of blind obedience.[6]

Or more recently as American Loreto Sister Maureen Fiedler expressed it:

> Suppose someone wants to live a life committed to the Gospel but does not want to live the three traditional vows – poverty, chastity, and obedience – as they have usually been interpreted. Or maybe only one or two of those vows make sense to that person. Maybe someone wants to pronounce a new vow that speaks to the heart of his or her identity and call. Or maybe she or he wants to develop a new form of committed life without vows. All of these possibilities are already happening and evolving.[7]

Historically, the renunciatory character of the vows has dominated their understanding, summed up, not altogether facetiously in the words, "no possessions, no sex, no voice". Creation was not a sign of God's love at work, but a distraction from the Creator. As one of the first Mission Sisters in Napier wrote: "From our terrace we can see the ships going and coming. Far away on the plains of Ahuriri, we can distinguish herds of oxen, cows, and sheep. Indeed, we can see a great deal from our terrace *if we care to look, but we are too mortified for that* (italics mine)".[8] Such a comment points to the influence of nineteenth century dualistic theologies that distinguished between the spiritual and the material, between the Creator and creation. What was material and created could be a distraction, a temptation that focussed on what was created, rather than on the Creator.

Australian academic Anne O'Brien comments that such a "spirituality of sacrifice was well suited to the conditions under which Sisters taught. In addition to large classes, poor buildings and high-spirited children, the Sisters faced regular moves to different schools. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience ensured a flexible, dedicated, organised and inexpensive labour force".[9]

The remainder of this chapter will look at the Mission Sisters' documentation around the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the implications for them in their daily lives, before concluding with some possibilities around the significance and place of these vows in the future. The documentation will include the four *Constitutions* of the Congregation, the first written by Barbier and which were in force until the publication of the 1969 *Interim Constitutions and Directives*, the 1979 *Constitutions*, and the 2014 *Constitutions*, and other relevant congregational documentation. The 1969, 1979 and 2014 *Constitution*s were not the work of one Sister, but rather were mandated by the 1969, 1978, and 2008 General Chapters respectively. Involvement of the Sisters was sought in a variety of ways as the Congregation moved from hierarchical decision-making processes to those which were informed by Vatican II's insistence on values such as subsidiarity and collegiality.

The Vow of Poverty in the *Constitutions* of the Mission Sisters[10]

Poverty, in the pre-Vatican world of Mission Sisters, was very much about asking permissions. Permissions were required if one needed soap, toothpaste, or new clothes. We had to ask for permission to mend our clothes, which normally meant darning our black lisle (in the summer) and woollen (in the winter) stockings. It was also about not breaking anything, e.g., a cup, or glass or broom, or whatever. Such breakages had to be reported to the novice mistress and to the local superior of the community and then publicly confessed by the offender. We were well looked after as far as physical and material needs were concerned, but the novitiate emphasis on the need for permissions certainly encouraged a sense of dependency. In the immediate aftermath of Vatican II, changes began, albeit slowly. For example, there was a cupboard with toiletry supplies so that it was possible to choose one of the two or three varieties of shampoo, soap, or toothpaste provided, we were allowed $5.00 per month to cover other expenses such as stationery, clothing items etc. Incremental changes happened over the years, and so today Sisters are asked to submit a personal budget each year. When approved, the required money is put into her community bank account, and she can access this money with her VISA card.

The vow of poverty made by contemporary religious has little in common with the poverty and destitution experienced by millions today. However, the stories gleaned from the House Books of the nineteenth century, and the first decades of the twentieth century, are narratives of real hardship as Mission Sisters struggled to finance the building of accommodation for themselves while the parish communities in which they lived and worked struggled to build parish primary schools in which the Sisters could teach. Congregation-owned secondary schools, a few fee-paying primary schools, and private music teaching, became important sources of income for the Mission Sisters, particularly after the 1877 Education Act stopped all payments to church schools, a situation which took more than a hundred years to redress.

Today at the institutional level, that on-going frugal life-styles of all Sisters and careful financial administration has allowed and still allows for the Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa Province (hereafter ANZS) to provide financial support for development projects in those provinces of the congregation not as materially well-resourced as here. This means that at an institutional level, the Mission Sisters can and do reach out in solidarity to those less fortunate, while at a personal level, Sisters are expected to live not a life of great poverty, but certainly a life of simplicity and frugality.

The Vow of Poverty in the Constitutions of the Mission Sisters

1890 Barbier *Constitution*s	1969 *Interim Constitutions*	1979 *Constitutions*	2014 *Constitutions*
174. By the simple vow of poverty, the Religious renounces her right to dispose freely of anything temporal estimable at a price without the permission of the legitimate superior. 175. Before her first profession, the Novice must cede the administration of her property to whomsoever she pleases for the whole period during which she will be bound by simple vows, and dispose freely of the use and usufruct of her property.	14. We embrace voluntary poverty for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, so that we may share in the total detachment of Christ who became poor for our sake when before he had been rich. Our poverty is an expression of our trust in our heavenly Father and our dependence on him. 15. By our vow of poverty we give up the right to dispose of material goods without the permission of the lawful superior. Each Sister retains the ownership of her property and the right to acquire more by any title of inheritance.	23. Our vow of chastity which consecrates us to Christ as spouse and joins us with him in his saving mission is a call to share also in the poverty of the Incarnate Word who became poor that men [sic] might be enriched. 24. It is contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation of the kenosis of Christ from the poverty and simplicity of his birth to his abandonment of his death on the Cross that we will come to understand the meaning of poverty as we are called to live it in our congregation.	19. By our vow of consecrated poverty, we identify with Christ in his incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection through our daily self-emptying, dying, and rising with him. 20. Euphrasie Barbier invites us to rely on Divine Providence as the "sole treasury of the congregation" ("Minutes of First General Chapter", 8 September 1867). 21. We commit ourselves to living frugally, sharing our material, spiritual and intellectual gifts. We take reasonable care of our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Even a cursory reading of the different *Constitutions* demonstrates developments in how the vows were understood and lived. The legalistic character of Barbier's *Constitutions* is best explained by the proliferation of congregations in the nineteenth century Catholic Church. In France alone, more than four hundred congregations of women were founded between 1800 and 1880 to address educational, health, and social needs, and the number of religious sisters grew from 13,000 to 130,000. In its wisdom, the Vatican Office then responsible for religious life, the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, required that a standardized form of legal writing, bereft of any theological or spiritual understanding be followed.[11] It is possible, however, to glean from other sources how Barbier understood the vow of poverty. She did not understand poverty as destitution or deprivation:

> I do not mean that our dear Sisters are to be deprived of the necessities of life, but there are many occasions when we can economise and practise poverty, so let us do so! Throughout New Zealand, we are making our own shoes and do not buy anything. With our dear Sisters, we have made tables and beds for the new foundations, and we do without many things.[12]

Again, when Barbier was involved in a court case over financial support for the building of a convent in New Plymouth, she encouraged her General Council to stand firm: "[God] wants us, however, to practise holy poverty, not as we understand

it, a nice, comfortable poverty that wants for nothing, but rather the true and holy poverty of the Cross with its humiliations".[13]

In *The Directory of the Daughters de Notre Dame des Missions*, which Barbier intended as a practical application of the *Constitutions*, the Superior General or her delegated representative, the Visitratrix, "will see if any of the Religious possess, or keep, or dispose of anything unknown to the Superior, or if what is given to the Sisters is used in common, according to the Rule, and whether clothing and furniture are according to religious simplicity".[14]

Even these brief excerpts from Barbier's writing identify some important points about her understanding of the vow of poverty, namely the importance of frugality, and a recognition that some form of material deprivation could allow a Sister to more closely imitate Jesus, who was born in a stable and who died naked on a cross.

In October, 1965, Vatican II brought to a conclusion its work of identifying how the Church should live in the post-colonial, post-modern, and increasingly secularised world. Everywhere, religious congregations began the task of responding to Vatican II's mandate to renew. The Mission Sisters met in Hastings, England, and their efforts resulted in the *Interim Constitutions and Directives*, which as the title suggests, were not intended to be long-term. Some delegates enthusiastically embraced the possibility of radical change, others tried to delay the process, but change the Mission Sisters did as a result of the *Interim Constitutions*.

All *Constitutions* of the Mission Sisters emphasise that the vow of poverty is a privileged way of imitating the detachment of Jesus who trusted in his heavenly Father. It is important to point out that the vow of poverty undertaken by a Mission Sister does not mean she has no material possessions of her own as she is allowed to maintain possession of any property she has. This may be inherited property or it may be property that she had acquired before she made her first profession. Her vow requires her to relinquish her right to dispose of any property without the express permission of a higher superior. One marked difference is that although an emphasis on the need for a common life and common purse is reiterated in all congregational documentation, there has been a movement from a childish dependency on superiors for material goods, to a greater appreciation of personal responsibility.

The 1969, 1979, and 2014 *Constitutions* emphasise the need for frugality, and for sharing all things in common. The 2014 *Constitutions* detail more precisely what is meant by sharing all things in common, with #24 referring more explicitly to "the common purse", a term which will be discussed at greater length in the chapter on leadership and governance. All provinces are expected to contribute to a common fund which ensures the viability of non-income generating ministries with the poor, congregational formation programmes, and which cover the running and living costs incurred by the Rome-based congregational administration.

One important development in the 2014 *Constitutions*, is the statement that "evangelical poverty calls us to accept moral responsibility for the conscious use of earth's resources… [We] join in partnership with prophetic voices to preserve the sustainability and beauty of creation" (#24). This requires that through their vow of poverty, Sisters identify ways of taking a stand against the rampant consumerism of our times. At the 2008 General Chapter, Mission Sisters were asked to be "attentive to the movements and rhythms of earth, concerned for the wellbeing of all members [and] vigilant as they steward the abundance and fewness of our resources".[15] Such language is aspirational rather than prescriptive, and it can be challenging to discern what it might entail in the collective life of Mission Sisters today.

The Vow of Chastity in the *Constitutions* of the Mission Sisters

I do not recall very much explicit teaching as to what the vow of chastity required of us during my novitiate years. Matters pertaining to this vow were hinted at rather than explained. In hindsight, I can see that as young women, we were probably meant to fear our bodies as sources of sexual temptations to ourselves or to others. I recall being told how we should put on our aprons. These were long white cotton affairs that were tied around the neck and the waist over voluminous and non-seductive black habits. Aprons were to be tied around the neck first and then let hang and tied loosely around the waist so that they hung straight, and no feminine shape could be inadvertently revealed.

Three words – virginity, celibacy, chastity – tend to be used interchangeably in congregational documentation. "Celibacy" means abstention from sexual intercourse, especially by a resolve, or as an obligation, while "chastity" is the state or quality of being chaste, virginal, or celibate. "Virginity" or being a "virgin" is commonly understood as referring to a young woman who has never had sexual intercourse. Although the words "virgin", "virginity", and "virginal" are there in Barbier's *Constitutions*, as well as in the 1969 *Interim Constitutions*, and in the 1979 *Constitutions*, such language around the physical characteristics of a celibate life is not found in the 2014 *Constitutions.* Perhaps such an omission acknowledges that today candidates to religious life can be well beyond their adolescent years, and so the likelihood of members having had more intimate relationships with others prior to entry is possible. It also recognizes the changing patterns of behaviour around human sexuality, particularly in the Western world.

Little data has been collected in Aotearoa on the sexual orientation of women wishing to join a particular religious congregation, and while it has been suggested that perhaps forty percent of all male students in Catholic seminaries in the United States are gay, there have been no surveys as far as I am aware regarding sexual orientation of candidates for religious life or seminaries in Aotearoa. But there

1890 Barbier *Constitutions*	1969 *Interim Constitutions*	1979 *Constitutions*	2014 *Constitutions*
190. By the vow of chastity, the Sisters engage to observe celibacy, and further, with a new obligation, to avoid every act opposed to chastity. 191. They must evince the greatest esteem and love for this holy virtue, avoiding all that might tarnish the purity of their bodies, praying and watching attentively, so as to banish from their minds and their hearts every thought and affection that might, even slightly, wound the eyes of Him to Whom they have given themselves. 192. The more they are exposed by the exterior duties of their vocation the more careful they must be to shield their chastity from all peril, and not only from every stain, but even from the breath of suspicion. Therefore, they will avoid showing themselves uselessly outside, and keeping up frivolous and worldly connections; the life of a religious ought to be similar to that of Mary profoundly hidden with Jesus Christ in God.	9. The vow of religious chastity is our response to the call of God's infinite and personal love for us. By this free response we are consecrated to him as virgins for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. 11. Chastity consecrated to God is a surpassing gift of grace. It is the source of a Sister's freedom and fulfilment as a person and a woman, for it frees her for an all-inclusive love, enabling her to share in Christ's universal love which is the inspiration of her apostolic zeal. Living here and now by a love, the fulness of which belongs to the next world, we give witness to all Christ's faithful of the wonderful marriage between Christ and his Church. 13. Mary, virgin and mother, is the model and guardian of our consecrated love. In her own life, she was a living example of that love which should animate all those who join in the Church's apostolic mission for the rebirth of mankind (sic).	14. Chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven is a precious gift inherent in God's call. It frees our hearts in a unique way to follow Christ poor and obedient to the Father's will. 15. Our vow of chastity entails a free choice of celibacy and its demands for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Leaving all things in response to Christ's call, we undertake to forego marriage, and, by a new obligation to live in perfect chastity, the more easily to devote ourselves to God alone with an undivided heart. 17. The gift of consecrated celibacy is able to transform our lives so that we live already in this present world by a love, the fullness of which belongs to the world to come and thereby symbolises in an absolute way the eternal marriage of God with his people and bear prophetic witness to the joys of the Resurrection.	14. Through the vow of chastity we freely respond to the mystery of God's unconditional love in deep faith, inner freedom, and radical availability for the reign of God. Captivated by the love of Jesus and led by the Holy Spirit, we joyfully offer our lives and our creative energy to be in communion with God, with one another and the whole of creation. 15. By our vow of chastity we commit ourselves to celibacy and to a life of chastity without compromise. By this obligation we freely commit ourselves to a chaste love, which is both profoundly human and deeply spiritual. 16. Consecrated chastity, a gift offered on the day of our first profession, can only be lived in daily conversion to Christ. Fidelity to prayer, the experience of solitude, personal asceticism, and self-discipline are essential to live this commitment.

surely will be a minority of women religious who identify as lesbian. The possibility of lesbian relationships in religious life was responsible for the emphasis prior to Vatican II on the dangers of what were called "particular friendships", that is a friendship between two Sisters that was presumed by superiors to be too close, and possibly homosexual. It was also recognised that these exclusive friendships were problematic for good community life, and could lead to factionalism.

The traditional concern about the presumed danger of "particular friendships" was addressed by Australian Superior General, Mary Gertrude (Kathleen O'Dwyer), at the 1969 Special General Chapter:

> In the past, the Sisters had emphasized the negative side of chastity, the notion of sacrifice; now the superior was calling attention to the positive side, to chastity as giving a greater capacity for love. She quoted a Jesuit, Father William Bier: "A woman has greater emotional needs and greater yearning, because of her womanly

> sensibility, to love and to be loved. She also needs support in her strivings, even when these consist in life-long dedication to Christ". The superior acknowledged that the congregation had been too fearful of particular friendships, moving the religious to experience lonely lives.[16]

Understandings of the vow of chastity have changed significantly in the six or so decades since Vatican II, and close friendships are now recognised as an integral part of human development. Australian scholar Anne O'Brien notes that younger women "now saw the vow of chastity in positive terms, as a 'freedom to relate to others'; older women who had spent their lives absorbed in hard work, said chastity had never been an issue".[17] Another Australian, Maryanne Confoy writes that "[t]his relational understanding is in contrast to the more static articulation of pre-Vatican II treatments of celibacy, which were, in terms of an unqualified and unexplained exhortation to religious to embrace 'the chastity of angels', an approach that failed to take human reality into account".[18] Attention to the relational aspect of celibacy was increasingly identified as key to ensuring a more holistic understanding as to what a vow of chastity required of contemporary women religious.

However, magisterial teaching about women religious and the vow of chastity has also tended to explain the vow as a new and privileged way of enhancing feminine sexuality as fruitfulness, and understanding that motherhood could progress in ways other than biological:

> Consecrated life does not seek praise and human appreciation; it is repaid by the joy of continuing to work untiringly for the kingdom of God, to be a seed of life which grows in secret, without expecting any reward other than that which the Lord will give in the end. It finds its identity in the call of the Lord, in following him, in unconditional love and service, which are capable of filling a life to the brim and giving it fullness of meaning (#13).[19]

Although the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (hereafter CICLSAL) document, *Starting Afresh from Christ,* is written for women and men religious, its language possibly speaks more to women's sexual reality than that of men. That such documents are written by Vatican male officials is clear, based on the tradition of referring to religious, particularly women religious as "spouses of Christ". Elizabeth Rapley writes that from early on, Sisters had "been seen as "spouses of Christ," whose chief attribute was the purity of their bodies … [B}y their own intention, perhaps, but also by the walls and locked doors that surrounded them, chastity was what gave meaning to the life of nuns".[20] Undoubtedly, an earlier age revealed enthusiasm for language that today does not sit comfortably with women religious today. Thus, Barbier could write:

> Does she [the Sister] remember that by the Vow of Chastity, she consecrates to

> God alone, her heart, mind, and body, in order to become in a special manner, the Spouse of Jesus Christ, daughter of Mary, Sister of the angels, and to secure for herself on the day of her eternal nuptials, pure and ineffable delights?[21]

This so-called spousal nature of a Sister's relationship with Jesus that the vow of chastity suggested, has lost much of its former significance since Vatican II. Moreover, it is important to note that a Catholic understanding of a Sister as "a bride of Christ" has no biblical basis. There are several New Testament references to Jesus as the bridegroom (see John 3:29; Mark 2:19; Matt 25:1-13; Rev 21:2), while Ephesians 5:31 and 2 Cor 11:2-4 image the church as the bride. How the bridal imagery was transferred to Sisters is not easily discernible, but such language was surely one of the things that suggested the superiority of religious life over married life. American historian, Margaret Thompson, notes that as recently as 1964,

> Suzanne Cita-Malard confidently asserted: "The religious life is so splendid a thing that, if a postulant should die even after having spent a very few days in religion, her union with divine charity in Eternity will be much greater than it would have been had she remained in the world." Cita-Malard then asserts that celibacy is "that feature of the religious life which should be its most attractive one, namely, *the essential superiority of a life of virginity over the married state*" (her italics).[22]

For many Catholics before Vatican II, Catholic Sisters were not regarded as lay women but instead occupied some indeterminate but higher state between priesthood and the laity. The Council meant Catholic Sisters were able to reclaim their identity as lay women.

The Vow of Obedience in the *Constitutions* of the Mission Sisters

The pre-eminent way of ensuring control over Sisters was through the vow of obedience. When the superior spoke, God spoke. Neal maintains that such an interpretation of the superior and subject relies heavily of a literal interpretation of Canon Law 601 which writes of obedience to "legitimate superiors". "Legitimate superiors" refers to the Superior General and her Council, a far cry from local superior, bishop and even parish priest, all of whom could, when required, become the 'voice of God' in a Sister's life.[23] Such a hierarchical model of decision-making implied two classes in a religious community, superior and subject (or possibly "inferior?"). It encouraged a life that did not tolerate dialogue or any questioning. In a pre-Vatican II novitiate, most novices arrived soon after leaving a Catholic secondary school. My memory of Catholic schooling was of an education that did not encourage critical thinking, so doing as we were told in the novitiate was readily accepted. It was when I began my BA not long after my first profession that I realised the need for critical thinking. It was quite mind-blowing.

1890 Barbier *Constitution*s	1969 *Interim Constitutions*	1979 *Constitutions*	2014 *Constitutions*
196 By the Vow of Obedience, the Sister contracts the obligation of obeying the commands of legitimate Superiors in those things which directly or indirectly concern the life of the Institute, that is to say, the observance of the vows and the Constitutions. 198 In order to tend to the true perfection of obedience, the Sisters must bear in mind that it should be always supernatural in its principle and its end, extending to all times, to all places, to all things, even such as are mortifying to nature. To encourage themselves then, they must ever remember Our Lord in the Garden of Olives; with this Divine Model before their eyes, they must have a great affection for Holy Obedience, preferring it to all things, as being the most sure path to arrive at perfection, and the most efficacious means of tasting the consolation of religious life, of ensuring the success of their labours, and the prosperity of the Institute. 201 They must endeavour to ground themselves in a holy indifference for the offices that Obedience may entrust to them, and the places to which they may be sent, taking for their rule the maxim of St Francis de Sales, "ask nothing and refuse nothing"; for their motto, the words of their Most Holy Mother, "Behold the Handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to Thy Word," and for their model Our Lord Jesus Christ, whose food it was to do the Will of his Father.	23 In order to follow Christ who came not to do his own will but the will of the Father and who learned obedience through what he suffered we seek to do the will of God so as to cooperate in his plan of salvation. God reveals his will in different ways: by the inspirations of grace, daily events, and decisions of superiors. With faith and in a spirit of obedience we all obey these signs of the will of God. 25 Both Superiors and Sisters accept the mutual bonds of authority and obedience in a spirit of faith and love. Together they strive to discover the will of God, and help one another to fulfil it. Thus, they find evangelical freedom and proclaim to the world that, in the kingdom of God, true greatness is found in service. 26 A closely united group, the Sisters see in their superior a sign of their unity in Christ. Docile to God's will and in a spirit of service, the superior endeavours to lead and animate the community, creating an atmosphere of charity in which each one can give of her best. Because all share in the welfare of the community and have a responsibility for it, the superior discusses matters with the Sisters and asks their advice, although the final decision rests with her.	35 Christ's obedience is his communion of will with the Father in the intimacy of his prayer and in the circumstances of his life and mission; it is his unremitting search for the Father's will so as to accomplish it. 37 The congregation as a whole as well as each community and each Sister is offered the grace of obedience to the Divine Missions so that we may live like Mary in a disposition of lowliness before the Father and welcome his Word, and to cooperate with the designs of the Spirit for the congregation in the Church. 40 Obedience motivated by love and grounded in faith is not a loss of freedom but a strengthening of liberty in the Spirit. Our rule reminds us of this when it invites us to obey not as servants under the yoke of the law but as persons living in freedom under the dominion of grace. 44 The superior leads the community to create for itself a milieu where each Sister can be faithful to the Divine Missions in sharing, mutual assistance and co-responsibility in evangelical freedom and respect for persons. 45 For each Sister the superior is concerned to help her to live in loving fidelity to the demands of her personal vocation and the common good.	26 Consecrated obedience is our free response to the infinite love of God. We publicly consecrate ourselves to follow Jesus, who in all circumstances of his life and mission searched in faithful love to know and do what pleased the Father. 27 Our religious obedience commits us to listen attentively to God's call as individuals and as members of the congregation. A particular understanding of obedience for us is our readiness to be sent. It challenges us to be open and responsive to the many ways God calls us throughout our lives. Euphrasie Barbier encourages us to be ever attentive to the whisperings of grace. Our whole hearted response to the Divine Missions is possible only through the power of the Spirit. 29 We are called to live in relationships of responsibility, trust, and collaboration for the common good and availability for mission. We enter into dialogue and discernment with our leaders to enable us to share in the mission of the congregation to bring about the reign of God. 30 By our vow of obedience we obey the lawful commands of leaders in accordance with the constitutions. We obey the Pope, the leader of the Church.

Barbier's *Constitutions* emphasise the command structure of religious obedience as it was understood in the nineteenth century church – doing all that lawful superiors commanded. It was a way of living that worked well in so far as it meant

most Sisters did not demur when asked to undertake tasks for which they often felt they had neither the qualifications nor suitable experience. But while such obedience may have helped in reaching institutional or diocesan goals around the needs of parish primary schools, it did not always mean personal growth for the Sisters. Instead, it could mean personal unease and concern and in some isolated instances, physical and mental breakdowns.

But subsequent *Constitutions* have de-emphasised the role of the local superior as the privileged voice of God. As the *Interim Constitutions* note: "God reveals his will in different ways: by the inspirations of grace [the Holy Spirit], daily events, and decisions of superiors" (#23). The language of dialogue, discernment, and listening became a constitutive element in the lives of Sisters. In a province of the Congregation such as Aotearoa, the de-institutionalisation of traditional work of school teaching has been more rapid, intentional, and significant than in Asian provinces such as Bangladesh where a significant number of Sisters are still teaching in congregation and diocese-owned schools. In the latter province, communities are much larger and so there is a greater need for a local superior, not to run the show so to speak, but to coordinate community life. In the late 1980s as numbers in the different Aotearoa communities began to drop quite rapidly, it was agreed that changing situations made the role of a local superior more problematic and that Sisters sharing responsibility for community life should become the norm. But that situation is changing too as the ever-diminishing number of communities with more than two Sisters living in them has meant a shift from shared responsibility to personal responsibility.

The future of the vowed life for Mission Sisters in Aotearoa

It is a challenge to imagine a possible scenario for the future. In 1885, Barbier warned against "a nice, comfortable poverty that wants for nothing".[24] But more than one hundred and fifty years later that seems to be what a vowed life of poverty has become. It is hard to imagine the province being able to reverse this situation. A dramatic shift would more likely result from external realities such as the socio-economic impact of climate change reflected in impossible-to-meet insurance costs, material threats to property, changing government legislation around the 2005 *Charities Act*, changes to the existing government superannuation policy, or changes to the health system that could result in more costly charges. Any or all of these would impact significantly on the province's income and therefore on province expenditure.

The vow of chastity is the vow that most radically separates women and men religious from their lay sisters and brothers. In an increasingly sexualised culture such as that of Aotearoa, choosing to live a celibate life is counter-cultural in a way that is perhaps no longer true of the contemporary living of the vow of poverty.

But as women religious no longer wear a defining religious habit, their witness to something that is counter-cultural is very much a hidden witness.

Obedience as observed in pre-Vatican II communities of Mission Sisters in Aotearoa has developed in ways that were probably never envisaged by Barbier when she wrote the first Constitutions. Then patriarchal and hierarchical models of exercising authority reigned supreme and were rightly rejected by women religious in the exciting years following Vatican II. The disappearance of institutional works, the disappearance of large communities with local superiors in favour of communities of two or living alone have brought about significant shifts in understanding this vow at the personal and community level.

The 2008 Mission Sisters' General Chapter summarised its policies and strategies for the future in a document that had the potential to be ground-breaking if it had been widely actioned at personal, community, province, and congregation levels. "RNDM Earth Community: We are One, We are Love",[25] was an invitation to reshape the way in which Mission Sisters were to respond to twenty-first century realities, particularly environmental concerns. As the introductory letter from the Congregation Leadership Team wrote: "Sharing in the abundance and fragility of the Earth, we are invited to a more holistic way of seeing our life as RNDMs [Mission Sisters], as inhabitants of the Earth, in contemplation with God, in communion with one another, in mission as befriending others and caring for the Earth".[26]

How would such words impact traditional understandings of the vowed life? The importance of a new relationship between creation and the Mission Sisters has been captured in a minimal way in the 2014 Constitutions. Thus, in the articles on chastity, the Sisters are reminded that "we joyfully offer our lives and our creative energy to be in communion with God, with one another, and with the whole of creation" #15. "Evangelical poverty calls us to accept moral responsibility for the conscious use of Earth's resources", (#25), but there are no articles with explicit reference to reshaping relationships with creation in the section on religious obedience. "RNDM Earth Community" reminds Mission Sisters that they are to hear "the cry of the Earth and her people".[27] It is such thinking that today persuades growing numbers of Catholic Sisters that their vowed lives need further revisioning and reshaping.

Given the importance of the 2008 general chapter document, "RNDM Earth Community", Mission Sisters have a responsibility to see how their vowed life can enable them to live and work in a way that demonstrates an awareness of, and contributes to resolving the ecological crises facing our planet. For example, the vow of poverty has traditionally required that all goods be shared in common in the community. What if the meaning of community were to be extended to include all of Planet Earth's life-sustaining resources? What if hearing 'the cry of the poor'

were to include hearing 'the cry of the Earth'? What if chastity were to encourage relationships of mutuality with all creation so that our time is a time remembered "for awakening a new respect for our Earth, for one another, for ourselves and for our common destiny"?[28] Traditionally, obedience meant submission to the voice of the superior. Today it means listening to numerous voices, which must include the scientific community, eco-theologians, Western Europe's medieval monastic traditions, church teaching such as Francis' *Laudate Si'*, the various United Nations statements concerning climate change and its impact so that Mission Sisters personally and collectively can see how to respond the great challenges of our time. Religious foundresses were those people who discerned the "sign of the times",[29] and responded accordingly. Perhaps the best way forward for the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa, given the province's rising median age and diminishing numbers is collaboration, including financial support, with organisations committed to practical care of the environment, and/or solidarity with the poor.

Notes

1 Euphrasie Barbier, *Constitutions of the Daughters of Notre Dame des Missions* (Hastings: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1936), #175.
2 Diarmuid O'Murchú, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 144, citing Enzo Bianchi, *Si tu savais le don de Dieu* (Brussells: Lessius, 2001), 74.
3 Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations will be from this source.
4 Susan E. Smith, *Women in Mission: From the New Testament to Today*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 75.
5 Ibid., 78-82.
6 Noel Barber, "The Religious Orders – the End", *Irish Quarterly Review* 85, no. 339 (1996), 247-248.
7 Maureen Fiedler, "Traditional Vows Redefined for the 21st Century", *National Catholic Reporter*, June 13 2013, https://www.ncronline.org/news/global-sisters-report/traditional-vows-redefined-21st-century, accessed April 24 2019.
8 Letter of Marie Ste Anne, RNDM. No further information provided.
9 Anne O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales, 2005), 198.
10 Since its foundation in 1861, the Congregation has had four different Constitutions, each responding to the different situations in which Mission Sisters found themselves living and working. Because of their importance for the lives of the Sisters' lives, different articles from the *Constitutions* will be examined to understand their impact on the Sisters. See Euphrasie Barbier, *Constitutions of the Daughters of Notre Dame Des Missions* (Hastings: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions: 1936). Barbier's *Constitutions* were finally approved by Pope Leo XIII in 1890. Nineteeth General Chapter of Renewal, ed. *Interim Constitutions and Directives, December 8, 1969* (Hastings: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1969); *Constitutions - Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions* (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1979); *Constitutions - Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions* (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2014).
11 See Francis J. Callahan, *The Centralization of Government in Pontifical Institutes of Women with Simple Vows* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1948), 45, citing Guiseppe Andrea Bizzarri, *Methodus quae a Sacra Congregatione Episcoporum et Regularium servature in approbandis novis institute votorum simplicium* included in Collectanae in Usum Secretariae SCEp et Reg. Romae, 1885, 45.
12 Letter of Euphrasie Barbier to Marie de la Rédemption, February 23 1884.Unless otherwise indicated, all letters from Euphrasie Barbier are in the RNDM Archives, Petone.
13 Letter of Euphrasie Barbier to Marie St Jude and members of the General Council, October 10 1885.
14 Euphrasie Barbier, *Directory of the Daughters of Notre Dame des Missions, Part I, a Souvenir of the Diamond Jubilee of the Institute, 1861-1921*, ed. General Council of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions (Mechlin: H. Dessain, 1921), 65.
15 "RNDM Earth Community: We are One, We are Love" (Pattaya: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2008), 11.
16 Address of Reverend Mother Mary Gertrude, Superior General, to the Delegates to the Special General Chapter, 19 July 1969, CPSHSB, RNDM documents, box 14, file 22, quoting from William Bier, "Womanly Fulfilment," *Donum Dei*, 5, (Montreal: Canadian Religious Conference, 1962), cited in Rosa Bruno-Jofré, *The Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions* (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 176.
17 O'Brien, 254, referring to Naomi Turner, *Which Seeds Will Grow: Men and Women in Religious Life* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1988).
18 Mary-Anne Confoy, "Religious Life in the Vatican II Era: 'State of Perfection' or 'Living Charism'", *Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (2013): 328.
19 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (Sydney: St Pauls Publications, 2002), #13.
20 Elizabeth Rapley, *The Lord as Their Portion: The Story of Religious Orders and How They Shaped Our World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 39.
21 Barbier, *Directory of the Daughters of Notre Dame des Missions*, 38.
22 Margaret Susan Thompson, "The More They Change, the More Things Change; the More They Stay the Same: Historical Contexts for Current Tensions in U.S. Women's Religious Life", *Magistra* 19, no. 2 (2013):

24, quoting Suzanne Cita-Malard, "Religious Orders of Women", in *Twentieth Century History of Catholicism* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964) 93, 108.

23 See Marie Augusta Neal, *From Nuns to Sisters: An Expanding Vocation* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990); Kathleen Rooney, *Sisters: An Inside Look* (Winona, Minn., St Mary's Press, 2001), 36.

24 Letter of Euphrasie Barbier to Marie St Jude and members of the General Council, October 10 1885.

25 See "RNDM Earth Community".

26 Ibid., 1.

27 Ibid., 8.

28 Ibid., 8.

29 See "*Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World", ed. Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations: A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (New York/Dublin: Costello Publishing Company/Dominican Publications, 1996), #4.

Chapter Three

Formation

As a young Sister, I attended our 1969 Special General Chapter as a secretary, where an older New Zealand Sister who was then living and working in Vietnam, suggested that the Mission Sisters' novitiate in Christchurch was something like a factory turning out teachers for a Catholic school system, a system with an insatiable appetite. There was some truth in her statement. At the beginning of 1959, I was preparing to be gobbled up. I look back now on my postulancy and novitiate time with some amazement, as both were a type of emotional and spiritual bootcamp experience. At the same time, both encouraged a strong sense of congregational identity, even if at the expense of personal identity, and led to strong and lasting friendships with novitiate companions. Our shared history often crops up in conversations when I meet with former novitiate companions.

When I became a postulant in February 1959, there was a total of thirty-three postulants and novices with one novice mistress. This was a very different situation from that of the last four decades when novices could be counted on one hand. These more recent novices participated in a formation programme very different from that of young pre-Vatican II women, as personal development rather than physical work and an unthinking acceptance of a demanding life was seen as a privileged way to holiness. This increased emphasis on personal development was unimaginable in the 1950s and 1960s. Since 2000, there have been no novices nor has there been any significant effort to attract young women to the congregation in Aotearoa.

In 1959, after completing our seven-month postulancy, we began our two-year novitiate programme, which commenced with our being dressed in white bridal regalia to indicate that we were now on our way to becoming "brides of Christ". Much of our novitiate was spent in domestic work, perhaps because it was believed that the "the devil makes work for idle hands". The novitiate also saw us spending a lot of time in the chapel with a daily prayer schedule that began at 5.30 when we gathered in the chapel for morning prayer, the Office,[1] *half an hour's silent meditation, and then Mass. During the day, there were various mandatory spiritual practices such as examination of conscience at midday to check out our spiritual progress, the Angelus three times daily, spiritual reading in common, half an hour's personal prayer in the chapel which involved saying the Rosary, followed by time for personal prayer, and prior to our evening meal, another rosary in common, Benediction, evening Office and, later at night, night Office and prayer, all in common.*

Likewise, we were encouraged to say short mantra-like prayers throughout the day,

while walking from one place to another, or in while engaged in repetitive humdrum tasks such as preparing vegetables for sixty Sisters and fifty boarders. Such times were opportunities for one-line prayers such as "Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us". All of this was intended to ensure that we were constantly "living in the presence of God". Today as I drive to Auckland, as I walk around our local roads winding through the bush, or down on the beach, I am aware of God's presence in creation, and grateful that I live in a country as beautiful as Aotearoa. But my prayer is not to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour to pray for me or to the Sacred Heart of Jesus to have mercy on me. Words do not have the same importance for me now.

Although considerable time was spent saying or chanting prayers in the novitiate, little time was actually devoted to teaching us how to pray. Jesus' words to his disciples: "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words" (Matt 6:7), was not a gospel injunction that was taken too seriously. There are historical reasons for this emphasis on vocal and devotional prayer. From the sixteenth century onwards, Catholic authorities were fearful of mystics and contemplatives for whom "knowledge and experience of God were not primarily mediated through ecclesial authorities but through the personal promptings of the Holy Spirit".[2] A patriarchal and hierarchical church resisted such alternative sources of experience and insights into the mystery of God, hence the emphasis on devotional prayers rather than on personal, contemplative prayer.

Once a week, a Jesuit priest, neither inspirational nor forward-thinking, came in and read to us from a high school catechetical text, which likewise was neither inspirational nor forward-thinking.[3] We also had half an hour's instruction three days a week, usually on virtues such as simplicity or humility or the need for blind obedience. Biblical studies were limited to memorising two gospel verses each day, and I do not recall bibles being used for anything other than the memorisation of the said gospel text. I do remember finding on a bottom book shelf in our novitiate community room, some Old Testament texts, among them, "The Song of Songs", that wonderful celebration of human love, later interpreted by Cistercian monk, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1154), as the love between God and the human soul. I was totally amazed at the erotic nature of the text, and could see why we were not encouraged to read such biblical books. There is no doubt that such a paucity of religious and theological formation was key in ensuring receptivity to the message of Vatican II, with its requirement of better theological formation for candidates to religious life.

Who were my novitiate companions? Most had come into the novitiate straight from school, or within a few years of leaving school, schools in which Mission Sisters had taught at a time when lay staff were virtually non-existent. Considering that young girls had such sustained exposure to a particular group of women throughout their education. it should not be surprising that there would be some who saw themselves as being part of such a group in the future. As one Australian commentator notes, "[A] number of religious

remember being drawn into the Society through what they considered the serene and happy disposition of the religious".[4] Certainly, a convent education with its routinized way of life characterised by frequent prayer prepared Catholic girls for convent life.

Mission Sisters also had what were known as "juniorates". These were something of a cross between a boarding school and convent life as girls went there from primary school, and from the juniorate usually to the novitiate, in some ways already prepared for religious life. Changed perceptions about developmental psychology meant that juniorates disappeared from Aotearoa just prior to Vatican II.

I had thought that my formation would finish once I had made my first profession. There would still be annual eight-day retreats as required by the Constitutions, but apart from that, formation was something back there for aspiring members rather than professed members. Now I would be focussed on the acquisition of a professional teaching qualification. I started my B.A. at Canterbury University part-time as I was teaching all day at a parish primary school. Four years after finishing my B.A., my total lack of any theological study was about to be redressed in exciting and exhilarating ways thanks to Vatican II, and the efforts of superiors to ensure a generous response to the Council's call for aggiornomento.

In 1969, I was lucky enough to be sent to Regina Mundi in Rome to study theology, and my three years there exposed me to the wider congregation as we lived in an international community with Mission Sisters from our Indian, Bangladeshi, Vietnamese, Australian, Canadian and United Kingdom and Ireland Isles provinces. This experience was both enriching and challenging for someone coming from such a mono-cultural society as Aotearoa. The study was great. We were fortunate to have most classes with priests who had bought into the message of Vatican II, apart from two older priests who thought that nothing could surpass the importance of neo-scholastic philosophy and theology.

These three years opened up new ways of understanding what being a Mission Sister, and what being Catholic, meant. Living in Rome also meant that during the long summer breaks, there were wonderful opportunities for us, for example, moving out of Rome and staying with our Sisters in France and England, or teaching catechism to children on an American army base at Hanau, some twenty-five kilometres east of Frankfurt, Germany, or working with other Mission Sisters and a priest from the English College with the expatriate English-speaking community in Milan. In 1969, I was asked if I could help out with secretarial work at the congregation's special general chapter in Hastings, England. This was an eye-opening experience for me given the differing positions to which the delegates were committed, and given the influence, still obvious in 1969, of the colonial mentality of some Western Sisters working in the congregation's Asian provinces.

A great opportunity for renewal occurred in 1987 when I spent almost six months at two Catholic ashrams in India – Jeevan Dhara Ashram, and Saccidananda/Shantivanam Ashram. Both these experiences touched me deeply as my understanding of prayer, of contemplation, and the important place of silence in my life expanded and took me to places,

not every day, that I had hitherto not experienced. I was fortunate enough to have further opportunities for ongoing academic study, and in 1993 I spent a year at the Maryknoll School of Theology in New York, where I graduated with a Masters in Theology, which in turn led to a teaching appointment with the Catholic Institute of Theology upon my return to Auckland. This move into the world of academia required that I begin doctoral studies at the University of Auckland. That was a wonderful experience, as not only did I discover that I loved researching and reading, but even more important was the peer group interaction that proved so enriching for me, and the opportunity to engage with the wider academic community beyond Aotearoa. Such study and conversations with others also allowed me to appreciate more deeply the richness of our Catholic tradition.

Being Formed as a Mission Sister

Prior to Vatican II, after her postulancy, and before making temporary vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for six years, a candidate spent two years as a novice. Before her final profession, if school timetables and holidays permitted it, a young Sister might spend a month or so preparing for her final profession. Today, this nine-year period from postulancy to final profession is referred to as initial formation.

Postulant and novice mistresses, as they were called before Vatican II, were key in the initial formation of young women, but despite the importance of their work, as far as I can ascertain, none received significant prior training before their appointments. Barbier stressed that

> the Novice Mistress must possess sufficient instruction and intelligence for properly training the Novices, teaching them the doctrine of our Holy Religion, the rules of the present *Constitutions*, the nature and force of the obligations arising from them, especially concerning the vows, offices, customs and ceremonies of the choir, spiritual exercises, and practices. But above all, it ought to be borne in mind that the Mistress of Novices must be an exemplary religious, one whose conduct must at all times preach by the example she sets of religious virtues, and be a living teaching of the manners and spirit of the Institute.[5]

As Vatican II drew to a close, it became apparent that more than exemplary virtue was required in novice mistresses, and so in 1966, two Sisters from Aotearoa were sent to Rome to study theology, scripture, human development, and spirituality at Regina Mundi Institute. Sisters named for formation work were now to receive professional training. The 1969 *Interim Directives* required that "[m]istresses of formation should be suitably trained and qualified and should have made a study of the sacred sciences and psychology"[6].

Because of the importance of the novitiate for candidates, the first part of this chapter will be devoted to a consideration of novitiate life and practices before

and after Vatican II. This will be followed by an examination of what on-going formation, that is formation after Sisters made final vows, entailed.

Novitiate

1890 Barbier *Constitutions*	1969 *Interim Constitutions*	1979 *Constitutions*	2014 *Constitutions*
137. The Novitiate period, under the guidance of the Novice Mistress, has for its object the forming of the mind of the Novice by means of the study of the Rule and Constitutions, by pious meditations, and assiduous prayer, by instruction on those matters which pertain to the vows and virtues, by exercises calculated to destroy the germs of vice, to regulate the motions of the soul, and to help in the acquisition of virtue. 149. She [Novice Mistress] will train them above all to mortification of their judgment, of their will, and of self-love . . . She will exercise them, with prudence, gentleness, and firmness, to put these lessons in practice, with a great spirit of humility, fervour, and interior joy. 151. She must teach them to overcome the many temptations by which the Evil Spirit usually seeks to deceive and discourage those who aspire to religious perfection. She must, above all, insist on the necessity of prayer, and of humble resignation, also on the immense advantages of self-accusation for exterior faults, and of perfect and entire submission.	64. The novitiate is a direct preparation for religious consecration. Its purpose is to enable the novice to respond to the call of Christ, to seek to know him more intimately and through the deeper knowledge thus acquired to encounter him in a loving familiarity. The novice studies the demands of the religious apostolic vocation as well as the profound meaning of the vows by which she hopes to give herself to Christ in a positive gesture of self-surrender. 65 . . . This formation aims at developing in her a genuine respect for all persons and for the action of the Holy Spirit in them. She learns the various ways of being present to others within the community through an active participation in the apostolate, in her work and in her study. 67. [The programme] therefore stresses scripture, doctrine, theology of religious life and missiology . . . [it] affords opportunity for the study of the spirit and history of the congregation and of our constitutions.	103. Religious life begins with the novitiate. During this period of probation, the novice is initiated gradually into the demands of the religious missionary vocation lived in community and the practice of the evangelical counsels according to our Rule and Constitutions. The novitiate is made under the immediate direction of the mistress of novices in the house designated by the Superior General. 104. To achieve the purpose of the novitiate, that is to say, readiness to make a total gift of oneself to God by a life of chastity, evangelical poverty and obedience, the novice must have the opportunity for prolonged prayer and reflection, the experience of silence and solitude, direction in apostolic contemplative prayer and formative apostolic activity. 110. The immediate preparation for profession lasts for at least two months during which time the sister is withdrawn from her usual work so that in prayer and reflection she may meditate on this unique act by which she is consecrated to God forever, as an instrument of the Divine Missions.	69. Life in the congregation begins with the novitiate, which is preceded by a period of postulancy. The postulant makes a formal request, and if she is judged suitable in terms of health, character, and maturity, and is free from canonical impediments, she is admitted to the novitiate by the province leader with the consent of her council. The congregation leader, in dialogue with the council, province leader and formator, makes decisions about the most suitable novitiate for individual novices. 70. The purpose of the novitiate is to enable the novice and the congregation to discern whether she has a vocation to the congregation. It is a time for the novice to grown in personal relationship with Christ through silence, solitude, contemplation, and reflection on the scriptures. She develops an understanding of what it is to live a vowed life through the practice of the evangelical counsels. She grows into a deeper understanding of our way of life in the experience of intercultural community living, missionary activity, and the study of our spirituality.

The key role of novitiates in any congregation receives detailed attention in all *Constitutions*. Barbier's *Constitutions*, as is true of Mission Sisters' more recent *Constitutions*, are no exception and so the above selected extracts demonstrate

some of the more significant characteristics of the Congregation's hopes for young women who wished to become Mission Sisters. Barbier provided detailed guidelines around "the choice and admission of subjects",[7] which included listing Canon Law requirements as to who could not be admitted, for example, those who had not completed their fifteenth year, or those were married as long as the marriage bonds still lasted, or those liable to punishment for grave crimes could not be admitted.[8]

When Barbier wrote her *Constitutions*, preparation for acceptance into the novitiate required that at least six months be spent as a postulant during which time "the Superiors must especially acquaint themselves with the characters and abilities of the Postulants, and do all in their power to assure themselves that they enter the Institute from supernatural motives alone, and solely to correspond to a true vocation".[9] Prerequisites required today such as prior evidence of spiritual direction or some professional qualification were absent. On the other hand, most young applicants presented soon after leaving school, and so they and their families were already known to the Sisters.

"If during their Postulate, the Postulants have given satisfaction by their conduct and aptitude",[10] they will be admitted to the Novitiate. American Catholic sister and sociologist, Patricia Wittberg, offers a perceptive analysis as to what a pre-Vatican II novitiate hoped to achieve:

> The dual mechanisms of common activity and boundary maintenance serve directly to protect the members' ideological commitment. Constant interaction with like-minded associates makes the group's world view seem more plausible; separation from others who might believe differently prevents the ideological contamination. But these mechanisms also reinforce the members' commitment indirectly – by assuring that their primary ties will be to each other. After several years of isolation from their former associates, the original members may have no remaining friends outside of the community … The cathetic bonds fostered by common activity and boundary maintenance may tie members to the community even after their belief in its ideology dims.[11]

A language very different from that of Wittberg was used by Barbier to explain the semi-cloistered way of life she wished her Sisters to embrace. She believed that embracing such a life would provide an environment more likely to support Sisters in their vocation of labouring "more perfectly for their own sanctification".[12] Fidelity to this task required high walls around convent property, a grille in the parlour, limited communication with family, non-attendance at family occasions such as funerals of parents, or weddings of siblings, while contact with friends and more distant relatives was virtually prohibited. Novices could not listen to the radio, could not access daily newspapers, or even reputable Catholic magazines. By the time a novice was professed she had very few friends "in the world". These practices were

meant to ensure a strong congregation identity which took precedence over other identities and to instil in novices a fear of the world, with all its blandishments. McFarland-Taylor, citing Patricia Curran, writes: "

> Religious congregations, in particular, held the idea that sensations of pleasures were suspect, that satisfaction and delight of eating distracted the member from being concerned with God alone, and opened the gates to sexual disorder.[13]

Certainly, fears around sexuality seemed to have driven many formation processes, although sexuality was never overtly referred to in classes around preparation for religious life. A look at nineteenth French Catholicism helps explain how this happened. By the 1830s, the French church was re-emerging as a powerful institution which looked to the papacy for direction, and which only allowed hierarchical decision-making, dominated by a clerical mind-set. This model of governance also served as a blueprint as to how newly-founded congregations were to govern themselves. Obedience to pope and bishops was essential, and so nineteenth century women's congregations faithfully and uncritically followed the same model of hierarchical decision-making. Furthermore, the foundation of the Mission Sisters in 1861 coincided with the reign of Pope Pius IX, whose reign lasted from 1846 until 1878, the longest ever pontifical reign, and one that promoted missionary activity understood as expansion of the institutional church.[14] His election in 1846 initially suggested that a more moderate and liberal papal rule would ensue but that hope was transformed by the 1848 revolutions that swept through much of Western Europe. A supposedly liberal pope had become a very reactionary pope by 1861 when the Mission Sisters were founded in Lyon.[15] It is not difficult to see how such hierarchical models of authority were followed in newly-established religious congregations as the latter were basically microcosms of the institutional Church – hierarchical, ultramontanist, and accepting of patriarchal structures in church, congregation, and society.

All this informed Barbier's insistence that the novice mistress train novices "above all to mortification of their judgement, of their will, and of self-love".[16] There were certainly many opportunities for what was called practising mortification, which could be voluntary and involuntary, private, and public. Voluntary mortification might include small acts of deprivation around food, not complaining about the weather, praying for someone who was not really a favourite workplace companion, while involuntary mortification was imposed on a novice by the Novice Mistress or another superior, usually as a penance for some transgression, such as talking at times when silence should be observed, or breaking a plate. According to Wittberg:

> "Mortification" is an exceptionally potent commitment mechanism. By this process, a person's old identity is stripped away and a new, pure identity is

> conferred that depends solely upon commitment to the norms of the group. Rituals of confession and mutual criticism, for instance, were common in many nineteenth and twentieth century religious communities. Various de-individualizing mechanisms such as uniform dress and a lack of personal privacy may also be used by many groups to break down the individual's ego. The use of mortification techniques such as confession strongly correlate with a commune's survival.[17]

Wittberg's observation that the novitiate was a time in which novices were "de-individualised" would resonate with many pre-Vatican II novices, as the uniform dress and lack of personal privacy demonstrated. But what is fascinating about pre-Vatican II novitiates, if success is to be judged by numbers, is that this de-individualisation and subsequent emphasis on collective identity seem to have worked. The more recent emphasis on personal development within a particular congregational context has not enjoyed the same success as falling numbers indicate.

Post-Vatican II developments did not lead to a great influx of women seeking to come to the novitiate in a province such as Aotearoa. Some of the reasons for such a decline include:

1. Most nineteenth century apostolic congregations were founded to respond to specific socio-economic situations such as the poverty of so many people living in an increasingly urbanised Western Europe or North America, or to help meet the needs of significant Catholic diaspora communities such as Irish Catholics in Aotearoa, or to bring the gospel message to millions of "pagans" who lived in darkness in the far-flung colonies of the different European empires. However, by the mid-twentieth century, basic health and education services were becoming the responsibility of governments in Western countries, and therefore, the rationale that had seen newly-founded religious congregations involved in educational and social works was disappearing.
2. As many young women's first exposure to religious life was with the Sisters who taught them in primary and/or secondary school, it is probable that such sustained contact would encourage students to consciously and unconsciously think about religious life as a good life choice. But post-Vatican II, the movement by Sisters out of schools into a variety of ministries, meant reduced contact with young women and undoubtedly contributed to the decline in interest in religious life.
3. The growing awareness that baptism, rather than ordination or religious profession, is the sacrament that calls Catholics to mission and ministry meant that alternatives other than religious life were there for lay women who wished to involve themselves in missionary activity.
4. The increasingly secularised nature of society in Aotearoa, and the subsequent decline in enthusiasm for institutionalised religion also contributed to the

decline in young women seeking entry into religious life, or indeed being overtly interested in anything religious.

There are well researched arguments from American scholars that suggest the post-Vatican II accommodation toward the dominant culture, in the case of Aotearoa to Pākehā culture with its growing emphasis on individualism and consumerism, demanded less of intending women religious. Again Mc-Farland Taylor offers a thought-provoking critique, one that is corroborated by Finke and Stark, when she writes:

> It may seem paradoxical but "the rewards of costly faith" make members value religious life more. Sociologists of religion Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argue that opening-up religious traditions to allow the interjection of broader cultural influences and liberalisation of doctrines generates institutional defections and decline. As their case in point, Finke and Stark point to Vatican II and its loosening of demands on Roman Catholic religious and laity that effectively eliminated distinctive sacrifices and stigmas (without replacing them) as the cause for the defection from and drop in religious vocations within the Church.[18]

Finke argues elsewhere that "an apparent solution for slowing this free-fall of membership is to decrease the cost of membership by increasing individual freedoms and reducing communal demands. Yet this is the very solution that seems to have failed following Vatican II".[19] Do Finke's comments about the decreasing cost of membership have anything to say to what has happened to the Mission Sisters' formation programmes since the Congregation's 1969 Special General Chapter?

Even a cursory reading of the 1969 *Interim Constitutions* points to significant differences around how formation was understood. No longer are there references to "exercises determined to destroy the germs of vice" (#137), "to mortification of judgement, of their will, and of self-love" (#149), or to overcoming "the many temptations by which the Evil Spirit usually seeks to deceive and discourage those who aspire to religious perfection" (#150).[20] Instead the novice "hopes to give herself to Christ in a positive gesture of self-surrender" (#164), she will learn "the various ways of being present to others both within the community through an active participation in the apostolate, in her work and her life" (#65), while the novitiate programme will stress "scripture, doctrine, theology of religious life and missiology … study of the spirit and history of the congregation, and of our constitutions" (#67).[21] Earlier ascetical and renunciatory customs, and the emphasis on not succumbing to sinful tendencies was downplayed in favour of a more focussed emphasis on the novitiate as a time for preparing for apostolic activity that would be grounded in contemplative prayer.

Apostolic work under suitable supervision was seen as essential. An emphasis on theology, scripture, and missiology represented a welcome departure from

listening to a Jesuit read from a high school catechism text, and was welcomed by formation personnel, and those in formation. Ten years after the Council closed, postulants with the necessary prerequisites were doing university papers, and a few years later novices were doing theology papers for university degrees. In 1994 a novice in her second year was sent to Bangladesh, where as a qualified nurse and midwife, she was welcomed with open arms in a village dispensary. No longer was "the world" a place of temptation for those aspiring to commit themselves to God, rather the world was where God was to be found.

In the 2014 *Constitutions,* the articles on formation are relatively few in number, possibly because there have been frequent meetings at a congregational level of formation personnel, and such meetings resulted in a lengthy document (twenty-five thousands words) to ensure that good formation practices were being followed throughout the congregation.[22] But in 2017, such documents warranted little attention in the Aotearoa province as the novitiate had virtually ceased to function after 2001.

One important addition worth noting in the 2014 *Constitutions* was that novices were to grow into "a deeper understanding of our way of life [through] the experience of intercultural community living" (#70). In the early 1980s the French Superior General, Marie Bénédicte Ollivier, invited the Congregation to embrace what she called "internationality", which began the process of de-linking Western provinces for responsibility for the foundations they had established after Vatican II – the United Kingdom and Ireland in Kenya, France in Senegal, Australia in Papua New Guinea, Aotearoa in Samoa, and Canada in Peru. By 1980, it was apparent that these founding provinces were finding it more difficult to staff these missions, and so "internationality" was introduced. This meant that Asian provinces were to be involved in international missionary activity. Asian provinces might not have been as well-resourced financially as the Western provinces but they were personnel-rich. However, the inter-cultural living this entailed was often challenging, and so the sooner novices and Sisters in temporary vows could experience it, the easier it would be on the part of formation personnel to discern someone's suitability for religious life as a Mission Sister.

On-going formation

The possibility of "on-going formation" was not envisaged by Barbier, but it is included as a key element in post-Vatican II *Constitutions* of the Mission Sisters. The need for renewal, updating, and the acquisition of higher professional qualifications for Catholic Sisters ushered in a raft of changes. First and foremost, Sisters were to dialogue with superiors as to what would be most appropriate for them. While Barbier had required that novice mistresses would train novices to mortification of their judgement, their will, and of self-love, (see #149), in 2014, it

1969 *Interim Constitutions*	1979 *Constitutions*	2014 *Constitutions*
74 If on account of the conditions and needs of the contemporary world it is indispensable that the sister who is being initiated into religious life be given a comprehensive formation, it is no less important that after final [profession] is made, formation be continued to meet the demands of rapidly changing times. . . . She also continues her academic and professional training in order to be more effective in the apostolate.	111 Formation conceived as integral personal growth requires that at every stage of their lives, sisters have sufficient opportunity for continuing their formation spiritual, doctrinal, and professional in ways suited to their personal and apostolic needs. The formative milieu of community continues to be important at every stage. 113 Formation includes preparation for a sister's eventual retirement from active apostolate and for entry into a new stage of her missionary vocation to be lived in ever closer communion with Christ in his Paschal Mystery.	87 The relationship between personal call and response continues throughout life. Ongoing formation is the responsibility of the sister who avails herself of opportunities for her personal growth. The province leadership team is responsible for planning ongoing formation to enable each sister to live her life to the full and to carry out the mission of the congregation. 88 Formation includes preparation for significant transition moments in a sister's life when she enters into new stages of her missionary journey.

was agreed that "[o]ngoing formation is the responsibility of the sister who avails herself of opportunities for her personal growth" (#87). This language points to a seismic shift in the way in which Mission Sisters understood how decisions about their lives should be made. Superiors no longer had a 'hotline' to God, and by 2014, the type of personal renewal required by a particularly Sister involved dialogue for both her and her province and/or congregation leader.

In the aftermath of Vatican II, provincial councils and later province leadership teams organised Aotearoa-based courses, seminars, and workshops designed to help Sisters understand and embrace change. Courses included programmes aimed at helping one's personal development, for example, seminars on the Enneagram, or the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator programmes, both of which generated discussion among participants who seemed to relish the chance to share about their personal reality, their hopes and concerns, something pre-Vatican II formation certainly did not permit. Sisters were also sent overseas for catechetical and tertiary theological formation, initially to Rome, but then to Australia, North America, the Philippines, the USA, and the United Kingdom and Ireland. These opportunities for overseas study and renewal contributed significantly to the theological richness and vitality of the province, and enabled Sisters to participate more easily as equals with ordained ministers in the life of the Church.

Such developments were often instrumental in enabling Sisters to make the transition from inhabiting a culture of tradition to a willing acceptance of embracing a culture of change. The de-personalised nature of a pre-Vatican II formation was being addressed in ways that encouraged healthy community living and personal development.

These changes were grounded in evolving perceptions of the world as a place from which to flee, to the world in which a liberating God was at work, particularly

among the poor and oppressed. Followers of Jesus who might earlier have learned that they were not to love the world, now learnt that God so loved the world that he sent his only son (see John 3:16). Vatican II confirmed this understanding when it taught that:

> The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor and afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts …That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.[23]

This way of thinking about the world represented a subversion of an older Christian understanding of the world in which the supernatural was what counted, not the natural world. An earlier theological mindset understood the created world as a transitional place which Christians inhabited for a short space of time before making their way to their true and eternal home in heaven. Human beings depended on God, Mary, the mother of God, guardian angels and saints to save them, and if they prayed enough and mortified themselves sufficiently, salvation was assured. Intercessory prayer was key in Christian spirituality as the hoped for result of such intercession to Jesus, to Mary, to saints, and to guardian angels, was salvation.

However, by the 1970s that was changing in a country like Aotearoa, and there was a general sense of optimism about the future of religious life, of the Church, and of a collective ability to bring about change for the world's dispossessed and disempowered. Humankind had the capacity to effect change that would benefit all thanks to scientific knowledge and technological change.

There was much about the pre-Vatican II formation that needed changing. The emphasis on mindless obedience, uniformity, the prioritising of congregational identity over personal identity, and the stress on the renunciatory character of the vows were past their use-by-date. In hindsight, can we argue that subsequent changes reflected in incremental ways at least a partial co-option by a culture in which secularism, individualism, and consumerism were becoming its dominant characteristics? For centuries, Western culture – and Pākehā society, which despite its antipodean location, was a child of that culture – was linked to Christian traditions and practices. Gifford believes that "in contemporary Western societies, this symbiotic union can no longer be presumed",[24] and that the rise of scientific consciousness "has peripheralized religion in the West".[25] This reliance on scientific knowledge undoubtedly affected formation programmes in religious life. The over-emphasised theologies of redemption always directing attention to human frailty, and therefore the subsequent need for communal and personal discipline if one were to be saved, were slowly but inexorably being replaced by those that favoured holistic over dualistic theologies, and liberation and development over saving souls,

theologies which were deeply shaped too by an awareness of human rights which in the western world meant individual rights.

Is inviting young women to religious life a good option for the Aotearoa province today? Do Mission Sisters in Aotearoa have a community in which a new member could live? This is crucial given that over half of the Sisters are now living singly while the minority live in communities of two. What sort of formation is required given the diverse character of women who today present as possible candidates? Gone are the days when most young women came to the novitiate within a few years of leaving a Mission Sisters-owned secondary school. As American Catholic Sister, Amy Hereford notes those "joining religious institutes today come from several age cohorts, with a rich diversity of life experience and professional credentials ... These factors highlight both the richness of new members and the challenges of bringing them into membership".[26] Hereford's scenario for tomorrow's novitiate includes the possibility of younger religious forming small local communities that "are networked for mutual support rather than being established in a predetermined structure".[27] She believes that that religious congregations have much to learn from the example of the Catholic Worker movement, *L'Arche*, Taize, or the various examples of what have come to be called "New Monasticism". These newer communities offer different ways of communally living a contemplative life, and demonstrate more decentralised models of organisations that bring like-minded people together. I am not aware of anything along such lines emerging in Aotearoa and perhaps the huge difference in Catholic populations between the USA (72,000,000) and Aotearoa (450,000) would make it more difficult to get such attempts off the ground in the latter country.

There has been no sustained effort among the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa to envisage what shape a formation programme for today and tomorrow might take. A median age of eighty-two could suggest that starting up a formation programme for candidates is an unrealistic choice for the province today. Rather, Mission Sisters could concentrate more on participating in formation programmes in those parts of the Congregation that are still enjoying moderate growth. The important contribution they can make in this area has been well-proven, and should not be under-estimated.

Notes

1 "Office" is the name given to the psalms, other Old Testament and New Testament texts that were prayed communally in Latin by religious women and men. After Vatican II, these were prayed in the vernacular.
2 Susan E. Smith, *Women in Mission: From the New Testament to Today*, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 99. Teresa of Avila was regarded with great suspicion by Catholic Inquisition authorities because of her mystical experiences of God. God spoke to people through popes and bishops, not through mystical experiences.
3 See Fergal McGrath, *Life in Christ: Religious Doctrine for Secondary Schools* (Dublin: Gill, 1957).
4 Christine Trimingham Jack, *Growing Good Catholic Girls: Education and Convent Life in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 23.
5 Euphrasie Barbier, *Constitutions of the Daughters of Notre Dame des Missions* (Hastings: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1936), #146.
6 *Nineteenth General Chapter of Renewal, Interim Constitutions and Directives, December 8, 1969* (Hastings: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1969), #59e.
7 Ibid., #94.
8 Ibid., #98.
9 Ibid., #116.
10 Ibid., #117.
11 Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective*, ed. Wade Clark Roof, Suny Series in Religion, Culture and Society (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 29.
12 Barbier, #1.
13 Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 174, citing Patricia Curran, *Grace before Meals: Food Ritual and Body Discipline in Convent Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois,1989), 108.
14 The task of winning hearts and minds through the provision of education, health, and other social works was entrusted by imperial powers to missionary organisations, Catholic and Protestant.
15 Pius IX was responsible for such papal teaching as the 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* which condemned liberalism, modernism, moral relativism, secularization, and separation of church and state, but his significant contribution to the Catholic Church was the dogma of papal infallibility, the most important outcome of Vatican I (1869-1870).
16 Barbier, #149.
17 Wittberg, 30.
18 Taylor, 110, citing Roger Finke and Roger and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 257-263.
19 Roger Finke, "An Orderly Return to Tradition: Explaining the Recruitment of Members into Catholic Religious Orders", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 2 (1997): 218.
20 Barbier, Constitutions, #137, #149, #150.
21 See Barbier, Constitutions #137, 149, 151; and *Nineteeth General Chapter of Renewal, Interim Constitutions and Directives, December 8, 1969* (Hastings: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1969), #64, 65, 67.
22 See Congregation Leadership Team, "Handbook on Initial and Ongoing Formation", (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2017).
23 "*Gaudium et Spes*, #1.
24 Paul Gifford, *The Plight of Western Religion: The Eclipse of the Other-Worldly* (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), 17.
25 Ibid., 37.
26 Amy Hereford, *Religious Life at the Crossroads: A School for Mystics and Prophets* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 182-183.
27 Ibid., 174.

Chapter Four

Mission Sisters and Their Changing Relationship with the Institutional Church

When I began to think about important experiences that have shaped, and continue to shape my understanding of church, I was amazed to see what key players priests have been in both positive and negative ways. This points to the traditional centrality of the priest in the lives of Catholics. My first memories of church are of the parish priest coming monthly to celebrate Mass in the little public hall in the rural settlement where we lived. The congregation never totalled more than twenty people. My father was altar boy par excellence and after Mass Father came home with us where my mother cooked bacon and eggs – so my first memories of church were positive – the priest was appreciated and respected by all, and bacon and eggs for breakfast were appreciated by all. I have no early memories of being separated from the priest at Mass by altar rails and such like. Mass was a much more homely affair. Confessions were not about disappearing into a black box with the priest mysteriously hiding behind a veil. We made the monthly journey into the cloak room in the hall before Mass.

When we moved to Lower Hutt, not only was Sunday Mass a weekly ritual, but so too were the nine first Fridays of nine consecutive months when going to Mass ensured we would avoid hell and make our way safely to heaven. If a Friday were missed out, we had to start again. Apparently when Jesus appeared to Margaret Mary Alocoque, he told her:

"In the excess of the mercy of my Heart, I promise you that my all powerful love will grant to all those who will receive Communion on the First Fridays, for nine consecutive months, the grace of final repentance: they will not die in my displeasure, nor without receiving the sacraments; and my Heart will be their secure refuge in that last hour".[1]

Dying and going to hell were something that could happen quite easily so ensuring this did not eventuate was important. We also biked to weekday Mass during Lent, and went to Saturday night novenas to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour – so church activities figured prominently in our lives. We played tennis in the Catholic tennis club, hopefully ensuring we would find good Catholic partners to marry.

In our novitiate there was even greater exposure to priests – daily Mass, weekly confessions, daily benediction, and three-day and eight-day annual retreats which usually meant three lectures each day from priests, and confession where we were exhorted to make a general confession, dredging up all the sins of our past lives. Looking back, I

cannot recall any priests who made great impressions on me, but after Vatican II, there was a little more freedom about where we made our retreats and therefore more choice about priest retreat directors. Priests, for reasons that now elude me, were presumed to be the experts in religious life and able to direct the rest of us lesser mortals as to how we should live our lives. That was to slowly change when Catholic Sisters acquired theological qualifications and began to train as spiritual directors.

My three years as a student at Regina Mundi in Rome (1969-1972) were an important time in my understanding of church for both good and not so good reasons. Study of the bible became important for me, and the then exciting historical-critical methodologies opened my eyes to the riches of the biblical word. Since the Protestant Reformation, the bible had been a closed book for the Catholic laity – after all look what had happened some four hundred years ago when people began reading the bible in the vernacular. It was a truly liberating moment being able to reverse decades of negative Catholic perceptions around the Word of God. As Gerald Rummery points out, the 1874 "A Dogmatic Catechism" had taught:

> *"Would it not be well to make translations of the bible into the vulgar tongue so that it might be put in the hands of all, even of the laity?" It supplies an answer that is extraordinary to a twentieth century reader: "The Church forbids that the Bible, literally translated into the vulgar tongue should be given to be read by all persons indifferently. She even forbids absolution of sins to be given to those who choose to read it, or retain possession of it without permission. The proof that it cannot be a good thing to put the Bible into the hands of all persons is, that being full of mysteries it would injure rather than profit the ignorant; and this is manifest from the zeal with which Protestants scatter abroad, everywhere and at great expense, an incredible number of vernacular translations of the Bible.* [2]

We were blessed too with a systematic theologian who had moved beyond an uncritical acceptance of neo-scholasticism, and moral theologians who had forsaken a manual approach, and replaced it with an enthusiasm for Bernard Häring's theology with its emphasis on Christian love rather than a cataloguing of sins. It was a joy to listen to such men, and it meant old certainties began to crumble.

Rome, too, was my first and last experience of sexual abuse by a religious priest, an American missionary priest, who had presented himself as a counsellor and spiritual director, and so inveigled himself into renewal programmes organised for Sisters from the different Mission Sisters' provinces. This allowed him to capitalise on opportunities of private interviews to satisfy his needs for inappropriate intimacy. After one such experience which I angrily rebuffed, I spoke to the Superior General about my experience which was at the lower end of offending but no appropriate follow-up ensured. Many years later when I was in Papua New Guinea, and working with young national Sisters, the same priest tried to persuade me to let him work with such sisters. It was indeed an

eye-opening experience for me.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, liberationist theologies were well and truly important for me, and again my first exposure to them came from conversations, informal and formal, with priests. Liberation theology understood in socio-economic categories initially had the most importance, but it was soon to be complemented by a commitment to feminist theologies and by the 1990s to eco-theologies. Increasingly too, I found myself reading theology authored by women academics.

A blessing for me has been my involvement as a leader in Sunday liturgies without a priest. For more than three decades, thanks to the enlightened leadership of the priests ministering in Whangarei parish, lay women and men have been leading liturgies in the parish's geographically scattered communities one or two Sundays a month. At the same time, these communities love the priests coming out at least once a month for Mass. While clerics may presume that lay-lead liturgies somehow diminish the centrality of the priest in the life of the community, this is simply not true. Our community is happy with lay leadership, and loves those Sundays when the priest comes. I have only known of two priests who tried to subvert lay-led Sunday liturgies.

Our Whangarei-based priests recognise and affirm the importance of such ministries in the Church, and often comment on the strong community spirit in these outposts. I believe such initiatives model new ways of being Church. Like most Mission Sisters, I do not favour the ordination of women priests, as the clericalism associated with ordained ministers is proving so problematic for the Church. At the 2019 Chrism Mass in Rome, when clergy re-dedicate themselves to priestly ministry, Pope Francis pointed out how the disciples suggested to Jesus he turn the crowds away so they could get something to eat. "Here, I believe, was the beginning of clericalism: in this desire to be assured of a meal and personal comfort without any concern for the people", the Pope told a packed basilica of hundreds of priests, bishops, and cardinals. "The Lord cut short that temptation: 'You, give them something to eat!' was Jesus' response. 'Take care of the people!'"[3]

I do not believe that the future of the Church lies in ordination of male deacons and women priests per se, but in greater collaboration between ordained ministers and lay people, including Sisters, working in a spirit of collaboration, mutuality and inclusivity in ways that hasten the coming of the reign of God. For too long in the Catholic tradition, ordination was the important sacrament, the sacrament that conferred decision-making power, control, and authority on certain men. That is changing albeit slowly, as it is more widely accepted that baptism is the sacrament that means all are called to be missionary. Institutional church growth, for too long the focus of priestly ministry, is slowly and inevitably being subverted by Pope Francis' invitation to think of mission in much broader categories where Catholic Sisters and lay people no longer are restricted to roles subordinate to that of the priest.

"Church" is an ambivalent word for people today, believers and non-believers, as it evokes so many different ideas – a hierarchical, patriarchal, sexist organisation,

a Eurocentric institution, a force for liberation of the poor, an organisation that shelters paedophiles and abusers, or a persuasive political voice. To explain why the attitudes of Mission Sisters towards the Church are changing, I will provide a brief historical overview of the Catholic Church in Aotearoa, demonstrating how the Church has transitioned from French mission to Irish settler Church to local Church. Finally, relevant congregational documentation will be critiqued.

French missionary Church to Irish settler Church

In January 1838, three French missionaries led by Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pompallier (1802-1871) sailed into Hokianga Harbour, some twenty-four years after the arrival of Anglican missionary, Samuel Marsden, and fourteen years after the arrival of the Wesleyan missionaries. It was to French Catholics that the Church can trace its origins, and the influence of French Catholicism was apparent in myriad ways such as the somewhat Jansenist character of Catholic spiritual life, extraordinary devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, particularly important for French Catholics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had been officially approved by French bishops in 1856, and in 1889, Pius IX declared the celebration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to be a double first-class feast. Given their French origins, it was not surprising that the Mission Sisters' secondary schools for girls in Pukekohe, Hamilton, New Plymouth, Napier, Lower Hutt, Nelson, Christchurch, and Ashburton were all placed under the patronage of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Although the first missionaries to Aotearoa New Zealand were French, Catholic migrants were predominantly Irish and from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Irish missionaries, women and men, soon outnumbered French. Irish Mercy Sisters had sailed into Auckland in 1850, some fifteen years before the arrival of Mission Sisters from France. As Irish historian Rory Sweetman writes:

> The British Empire was to Irish Catholics what the Roman Empire had been to Jews and Christians; the alien organism by which a faith was carried to the four corners of the earth. Irish bishops and clergy, together with a host of religious orders, fostered a distinctively Irish expatriate culture among the sea-divided Gael.[4]

The 1829 [Irish] Emancipation Act had ushered in significant changes for Irish Catholics, and as educational opportunities improved, Irish Catholicism became more Romanised, and there was an increase in vocations to the priesthood and sisterhood. Parish priests emerged not only as church leaders but often as socio-political leaders both in Ireland and in the migrant communities in which they ministered. As French priest, Theophile Le Menant des Chesnais SM, pointed out, when introducing the English-born bishop, Joseph Grimes SM, to the people of

the Christchurch diocese: "[T]he devotedness of the Irish race to their pastors is proverbial all over the world".[5]

Irish immigration to New Zealand was key in the growth of the Catholic Church, and the growing number of settlers was one of the reasons behind the bishops' decision to concentrate pastoral and educational energies on the settler Church at the expense of mission to Māori. By 1864, almost twelve percent of New Zealand's population, over twenty thousand people, had been born in Ireland. By far the largest number of immigrants arrived between 1871-1890 when immigration costs were subsidised by the government.[6] As many of these immigrants were Catholic and unskilled, the governments of the day were not overly "keen on them. In part this was because in all probability most Irish immigrants would be Roman Catholics".[7] These Irish settlers remembered only too well the ongoing persecution they and their ancestors experienced under British rule. As one priest pointed out in 1928 at the sixtieth celebration of the arrival of the Mission Sisters in Christchurch,

> The ruthless [English] persecution was chiefly directed against the religion and culture of the [Irish]people. They were robbed of the means of preserving the knowledge and culture to which they were traditionally attached, and every monument of both learning and piety were obliterated. Ignorance was forced upon them so that they might less effectively free themselves from their bonds.[8]

Some ten years later, at the 1938 centennial celebration of the Catholic missionaries' arrival in Aotearoa, Archbishop Daniel Mannix (1864-1963) of Melbourne reported that:

> There is indeed some doubt as to whether we owe the Church in New Zealand to Rome or to France, but if I might presume to constitute myself a judge of appeal, I would be inclined to say that the Church in New Zealand received its faith from Rome, through France, but that its practice came from Ireland.[9]

The Catholic Church was indeed the farthest outpost of Irish Catholicism.[10] Many family names of the Mission Sisters clearly demonstrate this shift. By the end of nineteenth century, French family names had almost vanished, and were replaced by those that pointed to the Irish birth or ancestry of most Mission Sisters. As Laracy notes, although the New Zealand Church "was conceived as a missionary Church, [it] developed as a settler one. Second, it was pioneered as a French enterprise but took root as an Irish one".[11]

By 1872, English-speaking bishops had replaced French-speaking bishops, and the Irish character of the young Church assumed more significance. Church celebrations important in Ireland were accorded a similar status in New Zealand. Saint Patrick's Day, March 17, was until Vatican II, celebrated as a major liturgical feast, and an occasion for great social festivity. This was particularly the case in

Catholic schools where it was celebrated by concerts, picnics, school sports, always preceded by a high Latin Mass. Thus, at Kaikoura where Mission Sisters began living and teaching in 1900, we learn that

> On the 17th of March, [1918] the Feast of St Patrick, a concert was given in the Town Hall and the school children and music pupils were called upon to contribute some items which they did very credibly. There were Pianoforte Duets and Trios, a chorus and a dialogue entitled 'The Policeman' which was much appreciated by the audience. We were much pleased when Rev Father Kelly presented dear Rev Mother Prioress with the takings, £30, to go toward the convent debt.[12]

This tradition was replicated throughout the country's Catholic schools, and a strong affirmation of 'Irishness' was an essential part of being Catholic. Many girls in Mission Sisters' secondary schools prior to Vatican II recall Sisters alerting them to the injustices Irish Catholics had suffered at the hands of perfidious Albion. Dorothy Maplesden, a teacher at Sacred Heart College, Nelson, recalled her memories of Mary Thomas of Villanova (Elizabeth Gill 1897-1970) in the 1971 Centenary publication:

> Many of our memories of Sister are of the fun we had. Sister Thomas was a dedicated history teacher, but like all historians she had her prejudices. The name 'Disraeli' was a red rag to a bull – the immediate reaction was a spirited attack against Tory imperialism, an attack which quickly developed into a recital of the injustices suffered by Ireland from the hands of the British Conservatives.[13]

The Irish Catholic self-understanding as victims of Protestant bigotry and prejudice was reinforced by the long struggle undertaken by Catholics to obtain government funding for their schools, a struggle that began in 1877, and was not concluded until the 1980s when Catholic schools were gradually integrated into the state system.

An Irish settler Church becomes a local Church

As has been already noted, Gallicanism, that ideology that asserted the power of the national church over the authority of the pope did not survive the French revolutionary era, and instead Ultramontanism or deference and obedience to the papacy became the norm not only for the French Church but also for the Irish diaspora Church. As the 1960s ended, this was changing. A number of reasons lay behind this change. Former colonies had gained their political independence which allowed them to restore to places of honour their cultures and languages, which in turn paved the way for the use of vernacular languages in prayer and liturgical life. Vatican II "made it clear that 'among all the nations of the earth there is but one people of God, which takes its citizens from race, making them citizens of a

kingdom which is heavenly and not an earthly nature (*LG* 13), this one people of God is made up of 'local churches' (*LG* 21) and 'particular churches'" (*LG* 13).[14] Ultramontanist theologies were to be replaced by theologies of local church.

Economic forces were also at play. By the mid-1970s when England, for long the major market for New Zealand primary goods, moved closer to the European Economic Community, New Zealanders recognised that thinking of themselves as God's outpost of Irish Catholicism, or as the most distant imperial outpost, thousands of miles deep in the Pacific Ocean, no longer made so much sense.

Generally speaking, New Zealand Catholics, including the Mission Sisters welcomed Vatican II's theology of local church. Most responded whole-heartedly to using English, their vernacular language, for liturgical prayer. They appreciated Vatican II's mandate that collegiality and subsidiarity should inform decision-making processes in the local church, and by extension in religious life. The increasing opportunities for better theological and professional education both in New Zealand and overseas were widening horizons, and encouraging an acceptance of Vatican II's theological developments.

But as the second millennium drew to a close, that initial enthusiasm which so many had experienced in the decades after Vatican II, was fragmenting. On the one hand, particularly during the latter years of the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, a creeping restorationism and traditionalism were obvious, though not so much among Catholic sisters. At the other end of the ecclesial spectrum were those who favour more radical developments that could lead to alienation from church authorities. In Aotearoa today, the middle ground is occupied by an ageing and diminishing Pākehā/European population, rapidly growing Asian and Pasifika communities and to a lesser extent, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American communities. The ethnic, theological, and generational differences characteristic of the Church in Aotearoa and characteristic of the different provinces in which Mission Sisters live and work today, hold many challenges not only for the province in Aotearoa, but also for the wider congregation. As the 1996 General Chapter indicated:

> We desire open dialogue, to foster and be part of an inclusive church at parish, diocesan, and national levels where all take an active role in the life of the church. We recognise the struggle and hold the pain of those oppressed by the institutional church, and like Euphrasie, we know that we too may find ourselves in situations of tension with hierarchies. We celebrate various ways of being church and living inculturation. We continue to be attentive to opportunities to respond to the hunger for spirituality in our world today.[15]

This statement merits unpacking as Mission Sisters were beginning to move beyond an uncritical acceptance of the institutional Church. There is little doubt that vastly

improved theological and spiritual formation for Mission Sisters was subverting a former "devotedness of the Irish race to their pastors",[16] and a movement beyond understanding of priests as theological lighthouses guiding the rest of the church. Women religious, like their lay sisters, understood that women's ministries were no longer to be restricted to the domestic sphere. They were awakening to the fact their role in the church need not, indeed could not be, subordinate to that of ordained men.

Moving from the church as "It" to the Church as "Pilgrim Church", "People of God", and "Local Church"

Some Mission Sisters began to be influenced by emerging post Vatican II theologies of church. Ivan Illich (1926-2002), Austro-Croatian philosopher, Catholic priest, and critic of institutions of Western culture, proposed two models of church, 'It" and "She."[17] "It" understands the church as a self-serving institution, which prioritized hierarchical structures, unthinkingly embraced patriarchal culture, and institutional control, the sort of church that some Mission Sisters recognised had passed its used-by-date.

"She" on the other hand, understands the Church as "the repository of tradition, and the living embodiment of the Christian community, the mystery, the kingdom of God among us".[18] American theologian Richard McBrien describes the Church as a "hierarchically structured, visible society which mediates salvation to its individual members through preaching and teaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments".[19] The institutional Church offers an obvious and visible sense of ecclesial identity, in that it is a well-resourced, often wealthy organisation in which members know their different roles and places, whether as lay women and men, religious women and men, or ordained ministers from pope to deacon. The Church as institution has clearly defined teaching, legislative and executive roles and it is not a great idea for those lower down the Church's ladder to try and usurp these roles in any way.

McBrien points out that the institutional model "exaggerated the role and identity of the ordained, particularly of the bishops, at the expense of the missionary responsibility of the entire community of the baptised. Thus the model of decision-making was monarchical and/or oligarchical rather than collegial or democratic".[20] The centrality of priests and their sacramental ministry frequently meant an emphasis on the numerical growth of the church – how many were baptised, now many children made their first communion, were confirmed, attended Catholic schools, were married and so on. Quantitative growth was prioritised over qualitative. This emphasis meant that the Church's political, socio-economic, and moral responsibilities in society were less important than the goal of quantitative church growth.

Today a significant number of Mission Sisters have difficulty in subscribing to such an understanding of church, and prefer other metaphors. The idea of "pilgrim church," that is, a church that will attain perfection only at the end of time, assumes more importance for them. Some Mission Sisters would agree with the

> bold, even audacious, assertion by then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio [Pope Francis] in an intervention to fellow cardinals during the week preceding the conclave that elected him pope: the critique of a self-referential church that courts illness, a kind of theological narcissism, and, worse, spiritual worldliness. The antidote, he argued, was to go beyond confines of the church structure and travel to the peripheries, both the geographic and existential, to be with those on the margins in every sense of that phrase. It was a call for a renewed engagement in the world, not on the basis of suspicion and an endless, numbing critique of cultures, as had been the case so often in the preceding thirty-five years, but on the basis of love and an evangelical zeal that required contact with humans in real time and in all circumstances.[21]

The publicity around the revelation of twentieth and twenty-first century clerical financial and sexual abuse scandals means many Mission Sisters know that the Church as institution has a need to reform itself – *ecclesia semper reformanda est* (the church must always be reformed). They want to move towards understanding the Church as a Spirit-filled community, one which moves towards exercising mission identified as a reignocentric activity. Mission understood in this way is not about quantitative outcomes so beloved by the institution.

Key for some Sisters in realising these ecclesial understandings, have been contemporary developments in pneumatology. Prior to Vatican II, the particularity of the Spirit's presence in pope, bishops, priests, and religious superiors was prioritised over all other presences of the Spirit, so that those in authority were understood to have a hot-line to God. Fortunately, conciliar teachings and on-going theological conversations mean the universality of the Spirit's presence in human history, in creation, and in all peoples, redressed the previous emphasis that encouraged belief in hierarchical structures with their corollary, superior-subject ideologies.

American theologian Gaillardetz offers a helpful way of understanding the Holy Spirit. He argues that the Church is a work in progress, and that believers need to reclaim the more dynamic and historical belief that the Church is not static, but always growing and evolving. In this task of growing and evolving, the Spirit blows where she wills (see John 3:8).[22] Many resonate with *Lumen Gentium's* teaching that the Spirit is gifted to all who together work to build up a church that has as its focus, the reign of God.

Many Catholic Sisters today in the Western world are aware of their

1890, Barbier's *Constitutions*	1969 *Interim Constitutions*	1979 *Constitutions*	2014 *Constitutions*
4. It is forbidden to change, without the permission of the Holy See, the special end of the Congregation or to add to it in a permanent or general way any other works which are not included in the same end. 108. The Ordinary [bishop] of the place has the right of watching carefully over the administration of the dowry of religious and to ask for accounts on this matter particularly at his visit. 345. The election of the Superior-General will be presided over by the Bishop of the place where the election is held, or by a priest delegated by him. For this reason, he should be notified of the date on which it will be held.	7 . . . The principal work of the congregation is education. Other apostolic words are undertaken according to the needs of the Church and the possibilities of the congregation. 21. Our mission in the Church demands that each community and the congregation as a whole give witness to the poverty of Christ by a simple manner of living and a preference for an apostolate among the poor. 31. Aware of our weakness and sinfulness, and prepared by daily examination of conscience, we frequently renew ourselves in Christ by the sacrament of penance, and reaffirm our consecrated love. 32. Through the Church, we give continual praise to God by reciting in common parts of the divine office. 46. . . .The Church, missionary by her very nature, recognises us as a missionary congregation which has received a special charism through the call of our Foundress. Therefore, as Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, we joyfully enter into the service of the Church, obedient to her mandate and guided by the signs of the times. 55. Through the sister who responds to the Spirit and to the guidance and education offered her in formation, the Congregation is better able to give praise to God and to fulfil the mandate given it by the Church to bring Christ to the world. God is the source of all authority. He committed all power in heaven and on earth to Jesus Christ, who communicated it to the Church. The bond which unites the Christian to God through authority is a bond of faith: faith in the divine origin and mission of the Church.	1.The Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions owes its origin to the grace given to our Foundress to understand that the Trinity itself is the source of all missionary activity. It was this insight that led her under the impulse of the Holy Spirit to found a religious missionary congregation whose members would live in communion with one another the grace of consecration for mission by a profound union of contemplation and apostolic activity. 39. By our vow of obedience, we undertake in faith the formal commands of our legitimate superiors in all matters concerning our Rule and Constitutions. Likewise, our vow obliges us to obey the Pope as our first superior. 50. Our mission is always undertaken under the mandate of the Church, for missionary activity is not an individual activity, but essentially ecclesial. Undertaken in this spirit, every work of zeal becomes a communion with the missionary activity of the whole church. 127. Christ having received all power from the Father gives to the Church the authority to teach sanctify and govern his people. By recognising the charism of our Foundress and by approving the Constitutions, the Church, confers on the congregation ecclesial existence and gives to it legitimate superiors, the authority necessary to lead and govern it in fidelity to the mission confided to it. 130. . . In fidelity to the Spirit and in submission to the Church, the congregation governs itself under [the Church's] authority.	1.Euphrasie Barbier received a particular gift to understand that the Trinity is the source of all missionary activity. Her profound experience of God led her, under the impulse of the Spirit, to found in the Church a religious missionary congregation whose members would live the grace of consecration for the Divine Missions through contemplation, communion, and mission. 2.The Church affirms the unique gift received by our Foundress and recognized the congregation by approving the constitutions, giving the congregation the right to live in the Church with its own religious missionary identity. 30. By our vow of obedience we obey in faith the lawful commands of our leaders in accordance with the constitutions. We obey the Pope, the leader of the Church. 97. They promote the apostolic and spiritual development of the members and the response of the congregation to the needs of the Church and the world. 139. A new foundation is a developing mission area in the congregation. It has the possibility of being responsible for planning with the local church and developing into a region.

complicated relationship with the institutional Church, and in the years since Vatican II, Mission Sisters, like others, have sought to unravel this complicated relationship. To ascertain how this happened, we will examine the changing perceptions around the church through a consideration of the different *Constitutions.*

When Barbier wrote the Congregation's first *Constitutions,* a characteristic of the French Church was its enthusiasm for ultramontanism, the thinking that prioritised the power and prerogatives of the papacy. As Misner writes:

> Rebounding from the shock of the French Revolution, Catholicism rebounded in successive phases, each of which was more marked ultramontanist ecclesiology (or view of the church pivoting on papal authority) than any pan-church movement since the Gregorian Reform in the eleventh century.[23]

Two key moments in the story of ultramontanism occurred as Barbier was working on her *Constitutions.* First, in 1864, three years after the foundation of the congregation, Pius IX's *Syllabus Errorum* meant all expressions of liberalism were condemned – freedom of conscience, tolerance, democracy, freedom of the press, or equality before the law (no wonder we were forbidden to read newspapers). Then in 1870, the same pope promulgated his encyclical on papal infallibility, *Pastor Aeternus.* It can be safely assumed that Barbier had no trouble in accepting such church teaching whereas when Mission Sisters met at General Chapters in 1979 and 2014, such positions were less enthusiastically embraced particularly in those provincces were English first language Sisters were the majority. To counter such differing perceptions about the relationship of Mission Sisters to the institutional Church, obedience to the pope as the highest authority is included in the 1979 and 2014 *Constitutions:* "Likewise our vow obliges us to obey the Pope as our first superior" #39, 1979 *Constitutions*; "We obey the Pope, the leader of the Church" #2, 2014 *Constitutions*. Two other explanations perhaps lie behind such inclusions. First, they were necessary to ensure that the Vatican's CICLSAL would approve of the Constitutions submitted after the 1979 and 2014 chapters, and second, Sisters in provinces that did not have English as their first language, had fewer challenges accepting the pope as their highest and legitimate superior.

The different responses between Sisters from the Australian, Canadian and New Zealand provinces, on the one hand, and other provinces on the other, were apparent in the reports they sent to the Congregational Leadership Team in Rome, prior to the writing of the 2014 *Constitutions*. Australian Sisters believed that it was "a challenge in the present climate to offer obedience to the Pope, to the Church, a male-dominated organization", while Canadian Sisters considered that references to the church and the pope focussed attention on the hierarchical Church which is not life-giving. New Zealand Sisters sometimes used the synonym "Rome" when reporting on the Church, and often associated the Church with legalistic authority.

These three provinces express their concern about the patriarchal and hierarchical character of the institutional Church.[24] Such thinking contrasts, for example, with the feedback from the international formation team based in Davao, Philippines (African and Asian personnel appointed by the CLT) who were concerned that any critique of the centrality of priestly and episcopal roles could diminish enthusiasm for daily Mass.[25]

Mission Sisters all recognise the significance of their relationship to the Church. Some see themselves as faithful, non-critical, and obedient daughters of the institution while others see their role as that of a loyal opposition. Generally, Sisters from the English-speaking provinces and from the Philippines where Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand Sisters had also been living, offered, prior to the writing of the 2014 *Constitutions,* more liberal interpretations of "church" than Sisters from other provinces. Often enough the word "church" was used interchangeably with "Rome," "the Vatican", "the Holy See", "the Magisterium", "Canon Law", "patriarchy", or "hierarchy". Perhaps such language suggested that Sisters in the Australian, Canadian and Aotearoa provinces had experienced greater exposure to, and acceptance of Christian feminism than those in other provinces of the Congregation. They also had lived and worked in provinces that do not experience external political oppression as was happening in some Asian provinces, where political realities meant that a strong, visible, and united witness on the part of the Church, was perhaps important.

The constitutions of all religious congregations must be approved by CICLSAL, as such approval confers an ecclesial existence or official status on a congregation. This official acceptance has also been important for women's congregations in their different disagreements and conflicts with bishops and parish priests. Interestingly, one of the factors that drove Barbier to seek official approbation of her young congregation's first *Constitutions* was her belief that this would protect it from interference from bishops, a move which was not appreciated by Francis Redwood SM (1839-1935), Archbishop of Wellington, who wrote to the Vatican complaining:

> I have serious reasons to believe, that she [Barbier] is entirely autocratic in her authority and confident in her own judgement, to the point of taking little account of the observations, even of Bishops and that, even if she does not intend to do so, at least in practice, she eludes the authority of the priest, by appealing to the bishop and of that [authority] of the bishop, by appealing to the Pope and the Holy Canons, which she is constantly quoting.[26]

Until recently, the different apostolic activities of the Sisters were carried out under the authority of the bishops of the different dioceses in which they lived and worked. The de-institutionalisation of ministries that occurred in Aotearoa from the mid-

1970s onwards changed that. The Sisters' gradual withdrawal from schools, and relocation to suburban accommodation more geographically distant from parish churches hastened the diminishment of institutional links with the local Church as did the influence of Christian feminism, and more recently the institutional Church's often tardy and minimalist response to the world-wide sexual abuse crisis.

The Church as institution to which the Sisters owe uncritical loyalty is perhaps over in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is not to suggest that Sisters wish to sever their relationships with the institution, and most understand only too well that the grass on the other side is no greener. A significant number of Sisters have a great love for the Church, but do not see themselves as unthinking, uncritical supporters of an institution that has often concentrated on its own aggrandisement at the cost of a faithful following of the poor man of Nazareth. Because ordained ministers no longer have a monopoly on theological education, an increasingly well-educated laity, including Catholic Sisters, now want collaborative, not subordinate relationships with priests and bishops. They want to be members of a church where those who for so long have been privileged over others can learn to work collaboratively with their sisters and brothers. Language located in Paul's letters about "co-workers", (see Phil 4:3), "workers in the Lord", (Rom 16:12), and about equality, "… [T]there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ" (Gal 3:28), requires that the days of the Church understood as "It," is no longer prioritised over Church understood as a "pilgrim people", as "the people of God".

Notes

1 "First Friday Devotion," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Friday_Devotion, accessed August 3 2019.
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Changing habits

Novices, young Professed Sisters, and Novice Mistress, Christchurch 1962.

Young Professed Sisters, Christchurch, 1967.

Eco-retreat, Kaweka Forest Park, 2009.

Cultural diversity

Sisters and students, St Joseph's Māori Girls' College, 1939.

Mission Sisters return to Samoa in 1970.

Suchitra Rozario, Bangladesh, Merle Hiscock, and Himani Rozario, Bangladesh, Petone 2008.

Institutional living to de-institutionalised living

Institutional Living at Convent, Ferry Road, Christchurch, 1878.

De-institutionalised living at Ellerslie, 2009, individual units with their car parks and letterboxes.

Chapter Five

Mission and Ministry in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa

When I was professed in 1961, a year before Vatican II, I thought that until I became old or unwell, I would teach in parish schools, or in congregation-owned secondary schools in Aotearoa. Although Barbier had founded her Congregation primarily for the foreign missions, almost invariably colonies of European imperial powers, the enthusiasm of the institutional Church and of Irish parents for Catholic education for their children in a colony like New Zealand, coupled with the lack of any government support for a Catholic school system after 1877, meant Catholic Sisters were too often seen as a cheap labour force by bishops. Even among the Mission Sisters, it was generally assumed that only very special Sisters would be sent overseas to work. It was presumptuous to think otherwise.

But after Vatican II, that began to change. Vatican II certainly changed my life in significant ways. But let me clarify what I mean by 'mission' in this chapter. In her Constitutions, Barbier never uses the word 'mission' for the activities the Sisters undertook. Instead, she used the expressions "charitable works" or simply "works".[1] 'Mission' was something that belonged to God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sisters could participate in that mission, but it was not their mission. Another expression used to cover the tasks that the Sisters performed was their 'apostolate' or 'apostolic works.' After Vatican II, the word 'ministry' was increasingly used to describe the work that Sisters undertook.

But 'ministry' was another fraught word. I was at a gathering many moons ago in Christchurch where one of the priests was most indignant about Sisters using the word 'ministry' to describe the works they undertook. Ministry was something that belonged to ordained ministers, the priest, the one who knew he was ontologically different from lay people in the church. Therefore, it was inappropriate for Sisters to use the word 'ministry'.

In this chapter I will use 'ministry' when talking of the different works in which I have been engaged since 1961 when I made my first profession. Most Mission Sisters who opted for the Sisterhood prior to Vatican II began primary school teaching after making their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, while at the same time, some attended university after school, or began their Teachers' "C" training. The latter was a correspondence course as Sisters were not allowed to attend Teachers' Training Colleges. Prior to this, potential teachers spent time in the classrooms of those who were considered good teachers – a type of informal apprenticeship.

The life of an aspiring young teacher was indeed a busy life. The bell to summon us from sleep went loud and long at 5.00 a.m. when we leapt out bed and were in Chapel

for morning prayer at 5.30, followed by meditation or silent prayer until 6.30, followed by daily Mass. Then breakfast usually in silence, rushing off to school, in some instances by bus to an outlying parish school. After school, the Sisters had to supervise all cleaning of classrooms and toilets – there were no paid caretakers or school cleaners, before heading back to the convent for community spiritual reading, before again going to chapel to pray the rosary communally and then to chant the Office. Then dinner and recreation together until 7.00 p.m., after which we corrected pupils' work and prepared classes before night Office and night prayer. Then around 9.30 it was time to collapse into our beds, totally exhausted.

Nor did exhaustion disappear when I was "promoted" to secondary school teaching, for which I had received virtually no professional formation. As well as doing two units after school at university, secondary school teachers often were required to be boarders' mistresses in the boarding accommodation attached to most of the province-owned secondary schools. Supervising sports teams on Saturdays was another requirement.

Having said that, I enjoyed teaching at both primary and secondary levels, but in 1969, I was sent to Rome to study at Regina Mundi Institute for the equivalent of what was a BA in theology. A few of the Rome-based priest lecturers were great, most were good and we had one elderly Spanish Dominican for whom scholastic philosophy was all that counted. He was not good. My three years of study in Rome meant I questioned my earlier enthusiasm for school teaching in New Zealand. What did school teaching have to do with liberation theology, or mission to the poor and oppressed? Hadn't Barbier demonstrated in word and deed that Mission Sisters were to see foreign missions as the primary work of the congregation? After all, foreign countries, now referred to as third-world countries, were where the poor were found.

So, in 1973, I went to live and work in the newly-founded nation state of Bangladesh, which was in the process of recovering from a vicious civil war with its former colonial master – West Pakistan. The first Mission Sisters had gone to Chittagong in 1883, then a major port city in Britain's Indian Empire, and by 1973, more than ninety percent of the Sisters were Bangladeshi. My time in Bangladesh was an enlightening though somewhat traumatic experience. I was not aware of the challenges that living in another culture would mean for me, and these along with the poverty of the country were deeply disturbing for someone who had grown up in what was then acclaimed as one of the best countries in the world in which to live.

Upon my return to Aotearoa in 1975, I was asked to work with the Christchurch Catholic Diocese's Justice, Peace and Development Commission which had two main foci – the first and by far the more difficult, was trying to create social awareness among Catholics about injustice at home and overseas. Second, fund-raising was critical, with some of the money collected targeted at overseas groups resisting oppressive social, political, and economic structures. Thus, support for anti-apartheid organisations in South Africa, liberation struggles in El Salvador and the Philippines, and independence struggles in

what was then the New Hebrides, now Vanuatu, was identified as key. While the majority of Catholics had little problem with making generous donations to programmes such as those provided by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in India, funding supposed "terrorists" in South Africa or the New Hebrides was not something enthusiastically embraced. I became aware of my increasingly liminal position in the institutional Church when advocating for those seeking to overthrow oppressive structures.

In 1983, I headed off for Papua New Guinea to join Mission Sisters in the Southern Highlands where we worked with American Franciscan Capuchins to establish the church. Plantatio ecclesiae or "planting the Church" was the name of the game for sure. I was then lucky enough to briefly join New Zealand SVD priest, Phil Gibbs, in the Enga province where a training programme for catechists had just been set up. This was a great chance to work more with local people, and smarten up my Pidgin English. As Phil was also an anthropologist, working with him provided a wonderful opportunity to learn about a country and its peoples who were managing the difficult transition from a subsistence to a capitalist economy. Time in the Highlands was followed by two years in Port Moresby, at Xavier Institute, established by the major superiors of the various women's congregation to provide on-going formation opportunities for national Sisters. This was an important learning time for me given the very different cultural backgrounds from which the Sisters came.

Upon my return to Aotearoa, I was assigned to Ruatoria. Ruatoria is home to Ngati Porou, the second largest tribe in Aotearoa with over 71,000 people, of whom approximately two thousand were living in Ruatoria along with perhaps forty Pākehā. The Catholic community was small, about thirty people on a good day at a Sunday liturgy or mass, but quite vital and strong. I had no fixed agenda to follow – no schools to set up, no catechetical programmes to start up. Instead, I waited to see what might happen.

First of all, I was asked to coach a netball team. I don't think I was a particularly talented coach but coaching was a great entry point into understanding a little about how Ngati Porou related to one another. Particular teams were associated with particular marae. On Saturday mornings in winter, netball was all go, with male and female supporters showing up to support their team. In the afternoon, the reverse happened – men played rugby and we watched and cheered enthusiastically from the sideline. Often the rugby game was followed by a great boil-up meal. I played tennis too and once tried touch rugby but my age meant I did not shine in this fairly vigorous sport. Because there were many in the community much better at coaching, at tennis, and certainly at touch rugby, I was not operating from a position of any superiority. But I got to know people and before long was asked to be a literacy and numeracy tutor to different adult groups, and to be a special needs teacher at Ngata College. It was a great experience as these jobs coincided with Ruth Richardson's attempt to ensure that laissez-faire economics became the name of the game in Aotearoa. Literacy and numeracy programmes meant exciting discussions around Richardson's 1991 "mother of all budgets" and its implications for

a politically and economically disenfranchised people. I loved it all, and was sad when ongoing challenges around housing meant that I left Ruatoria, enriched by my time with a loving and generous community.

Ruatoria was followed by a year with the Jesuit Refugee Service in Tigray Region, in northern Ethiopia. It was an eye-opening experience to be part of the Catholic Coptic church in Tigray, but the Church's patriarchal, hierarchical, and conservative culture was challenging to say the least, and at times I could not believe I had ever complained about Aotearoa's hierarchically and patriarchally structured church. The poverty was unbelievable and deeply distressing. It was little wonder that the Church and the different religious congregations there were so often involved in meeting immediate health and social needs. Vast sums of money flowed into the country but many of the region's problems seemed intractable. Historically, the autocratic rule of Ethiopia's different emperors had done little for the people, as was true of Italy's brief attempts to be an imperial power, of the communist dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, and of his replacement, Tigrayan-born, Meles Zenawi, whose Tigray Liberation People's Front had won a vicious civil war in 1991, and went on to impose its version of a Marxist government. There are around 1,000,000 Coptic and Latin rite Catholics in Ethiopia, not so many given the population is over 120,000,000, but the impact of the institutional Church and religious congregations is significant, thanks to their access to foreign funding. Like Papua New Guinea, Ethiopia meant more questions than answers as to what mission involves for the contemporary Catholic Sister.

In 1994, I began teaching at the Catholic Institute of Theology (CIT) which in its early years was the Auckland-based provider of degrees in theology for the Melbourne College of Divinity, and later for The University of Auckland. Working at CIT meant not only involvement in degree teaching but also offering programmes to Catholic parishes and to teachers in Catholic schools. I enjoyed teaching, I enjoyed the interaction and support from other faculty members, and the interaction with students. In my early years at CIT, many of the students were older lay Catholics who had never had the chance of any theological education, which historically was reserved for intending priests. It was wonderful interacting with these smart people so eager to understand more of the message of Vatican II. I was also later involved in providing a module for Duquesne University's Masters in Leadership for Asian and African women religious, and in providing modules for Broken Bay Institute, Sydney, which in turn was a provider of theology degrees for the University of Newcastle. It was all go, and I enjoyed all aspects of academic life, interaction with lecturers and students, and the research that was required.

And now in my eighth decade and living in a rural location on the outskirts of Whangarei, I have time to look back gratefully over a busy, challenging and hopefully worthwhile life. The psalmist tells us that seventy is the sum of our years if we are strong, so I guess in many ways each day is a blessing but also a day closer to the end of my life. As I think about ministry and mission, I find myself reflecting on my social location as

a well-educated, middle-class, white woman, and how that has been key in so many relationships over the years. But this was something never consciously averted to within my religious family, the Mission Sisters.

'Mission' is a fraught word. In a post-colonial age, its relationship with nineteenth century imperialism is seldom disputed. Nor can we ignore the innate cultural superiority of so many who travelled to the ends of the earth to bring the Christian faith, as well as the presumed advantages of European civilisation, to those supposedly living in darkness, that is, pagans. But although a Catholic missionary Sister may have thought the culture of her country of origin was superior to that of the people among whom she lived and worked, a hierarchical and patriarchal church believed that a Sister's ministry was ancillary or subordinate to that of the ordained minister. Her educational, health, or social work was the prelude as it were to the important sacramental ministry of the priest – to get as many 'pagans' baptised as possible, and to have as many as possible coming to Mass.

I recall when I went to Tigray in northern Ethiopia, the bishop, a Tigrayan Catholic Coptic priest, telling me that he liked Sisters to come into his diocese as they could open and run dispensaries, an important ministry for a war-ravaged people. Second, once the people could see what good work Sisters were doing in dispensaries, then more Sisters could come and open a kindergarten and perhaps follow that up with a primary school. All good responses to the felt needs of the people. But now the catch – priests would have to come if the Sisters were to stay because the Sisters "needed" daily Mass. The coming of priests had much more to do with the priorities of the institutional Church, its need to be planted in new places so that institutional growth could occur. Presbyteries, much bigger than convents, needed to be built, plus churches. The work of Sisters was identified by the bishop as a means to an end – the growth of the institutional Church.

But prior to Vatican II, many were passionate about such a goal as the extraordinary number of Catholic women and men, nearly always professed religious and priests, prepared to commit themselves to missionary activity in the nineteenth century demonstrates. This is well captured by American theologian Robert Schreiter:

> The religious institutes of men and women in the Catholic Church have often emerged at times of upheaval or profound social change … The apostolic orders of the early modern period, and then again at the time of the Industrial Revolution and the expansionist policies of imperial Europe in the nineteenth century, addressed social needs that had been exacerbated by urbanization, industrialization, and colonialism.[2]

Mission Sisters, part of that extraordinary drive, were sent off to distant colonies where the climate, culture, and food were very different. They would have experienced demands they would never have anticipated. What often drove such

women was their belief that without baptism in the Catholic Church, souls would be lost. Key to not being lost for all eternity was education, which engaged so many Catholic Sisters. From the start, education was the special aim of the newly formed congregation. As Barbier wrote in 1870,

> After the personal sanctification of its members, the special aim of the Congregation is the Christian education of women and young girls in non-Christian and heretical missions. The Sisters may accept with the consent of the General Council, other works of charity.[3]

But as I hope to demonstrate by a careful examination of representative texts from the different *Constitutions* which have determined the way in which Mission Sisters have lived and worked, understandings of mission have changed significantly since Barbier sent four Sisters to Napier in October 1864. Attention will focus on changes around how Mission Sisters understood their relationship to the bishops and priests who wanted Sisters in their dioceses and parishes, to culture, and to their important missionary goals.

These sections of the different *Constitutions* which have governed the ministries and mission of the Sisters suggest key areas of change that emerge as important for me.

Church

As we saw in Chapter Four, on the Sisters' changing relationship with the institutional Church, Barbier's writings demonstrate her devotion and loyalty to the Church as she knew it in nineteenth century France. Her Church was one that was hierarchically structured, patriarchal, and committed to institutional growth at home, and on the foreign missions. It was a Church that had little need for any significant knowledge of cultures other than Western, and in the case of the Mission Sisters, French culture. It was a Church that recognised the need for self-sacrifice and reparation for sin, and it was a Church that prioritised devotional over biblical and liturgical spirituality. It was a Church that many Mission Sisters in Aotearoa have now moved beyond. We see this perhaps most obviously in the relationship of the Sisters to episcopal authority. Barbier had written:

> They accept likewise, but with the consent of the General Council, other works of charity such as work-rooms, orphanages, refuges, etc., under the direction of their Lordships the Bishops or Vicars-Apostolic in order to assist them in their apostleship, and to provide according to the best of their power, for the spiritual and corporal needs of the persons entrusted to their care.[4]

Barbier's understanding of church as a hierarchically structured institution is apparent when she stipulates that works are to be accepted and fulfilled "under the

Mission in the Constitutions of the Mission Sisters

1890 *Barbier Constitutions*	1969 *Interim Constitutions*	*1979 Constitutions*	2014 *Constitutions*
2. Their special end is to aid humbly and to the best of their ability to extend the Kingdom of God in souls by devoting themselves to the instruction of Christian education of children and women, above all in infidel and non-Catholic countries. 3. They accept likewise, but with the consent of the General Council, other works of charity such as work-rooms, orphanages, refuges, etc., under the direction of their Lordships the Bishops or Vicars-Apostolic in order to assist them in their apostleship, and to provide according to the best of their power, for the spiritual and corporal needs of the persons entrusted to their care. 12. In order to correspond worthily to their holy vocation, by which they participate in the happiness of working for the glory of God, the Sisters must have a profound esteem for this choice grace, and neglect no means to surely attain this end. The most necessary are: meditation, the spirit of prayer, study, work of the hands, zeal and devotedness.	1. By their total dedication to God formally expressed by the vows in an institute recognised by the Church they are more fully committed to her [the Church's] mission implanting, strengthening, and extending the Kingdom of Christ. 49. The congregation makes its own the missionary concern of the Church. In a spirit of apostolic freedom and courage, it undertakes new works and foundations where there is a priority of need, and discontinues others which because of changing conditions are no longer necessary. 50. With special love we undertake work in areas where the faith has not yet been planted, taking care to bring to the people the message of Christ in terms of their own culture. Where the gospel cannot be fully proclaimed, we are by our love and service a witness to its reality. 54. Periodically, we review our field of labour, revising, adapting and improving our means. With equal earnestness, we renew our spiritual resources so that our zeal, fellowship and service will mark us out as followers of him who came to gather all men into the Father's love.	5. Called to work to extend the Kingdom of God by priority where Christ has not yet been preached, where the Church has not been fully established and in de-Christianised areas, a Sister of Our Lady of the Missions is missionary wherever she may be. 6. The final goal of the congregation's missionary activity is the glory of the Father from whom the Son receives all, to whom he gives all back in praise carrying with him to the bosom of the Trinity, the whole of creation redeemed in him. 54. After the example of Christ's incarnation, we seek a true missionary insertion in the countries and among the human groups where we are sent. This means that poor ourselves yet enriching many because of what we have received we go in an attitude of humility, reverence and dialogue to speak of a God who is Father of all men, known to some, unknown to others. 55. Sensitive to the universal action of the Spirit, yet compelled to offer the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, we have as our chief concern in our missionary activity, the proclamation of the message of salvation of which the church is to be a sign lifted up before the nations.	32. As a religious missionary congregation we are called to live the gift of consecration for mission. We participate in the Divine Missions, God's universal gift of love manifested in creation, in the life, death and resurrection of the Incarnate Word, and in the mission of the Holy Spirit outpoured at Pentecost. 34. Filled with zeal, we witness and proclaim the gospel message of love, unity, peace, and justice. With, free, joyful and generous hearts, as disciples of Jesus we go wherever we are sent, in our own country and beyond. 36. In collaboration with the local Church, with humility and generosity, we reach out in loving service to bring about the reign of God. Our missionary presence and activity will vary according to the political, social and economic situations, and the religious experience of the people. 38. As members of an international missionary congregation, we are challenged to live with mutual respect, reverence, and cultural sensitivity. Knowing that the Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of all peoples and cultures, we celebrate our unity in diversity and embrace the grace of difference with simplicity and joy. 39. We witness to the universal love of the Trinity revealed through the sacred in creation, in all peoples and religious traditions. We collaborate with people of good will to bring unity and peace to our world.

direction of their Lordships the Bishops or Vicars' Apostolic". Furthermore, the role of the Sisters is to "assist them in their apostleship". Whether today's Mission Sisters would resonate with such language is debatable, but they would agree on the need to provide for people to "the best of their power".

The 1969 *Interim Constitutions* reflect the influence of changes in Western society where hierarchical structures were being questioned and challenged, often in quite radical ways, as the student revolts of 1968 demonstrated. Western democratic ideals were likewise affecting Catholic thinking around hierarchical structures. The ministries of the Sisters still included the well-being of the institutional Church but extending the reign of Christ was more and more prioritised over institutional growth. Somewhat surprisingly, the Sisters are exhorted to "undertake work in areas where the faith has not yet been planted," language that harks back to the nineteenth century favoured missionary objective of *plantatio ecclesiae*, (planting the institutional Church). The authors of the *Interim Constitutions* do not appear to been influenced by the evolving feminist desire to use inclusive language, or by government policies in newly independent nations such as India or Burma that were less than enthusiastic about conversion of pagans.

By 1969, Mission Sisters recognised that that certain works seen as essential prior to Vatican II could be discontinued. Over the next decade, Sisters began to embrace other ministries – chaplaincy work in hospitals and prisons, adult education at both parish and diocesan level, pastoral work in parishes, and with ethnic communities, such as the Tokelauan community in Petone, and the Samoan community in Christchurch. An important result of these changes was that they were often accompanied by a movement from institutional living in large convents to Sisters living in groups of four, three, and two in suburban homes. The de-institutionalisation of the teaching ministries of sisters meant the de-institutionalisation of convent life. This was quite a protracted process but one that did not distress to most Sisters.

What the de-institutionalisation of ministry and accommodation meant was a certain geographical de-linking from the parish church, and as Christian feminism began to impact the thinking of more Sisters, a certain theological and ideological de-linking could also occur. As the 1996 General Chapter of the Mission Sisters put it:

> We desire open dialogue, to foster and be part of an inclusive church in parish, diocesan and national levels where all take an active role in the life of the Church. We recognise [that] … as Sisters of Euphrasie [Barbier], we know that we too may find ourselves in situations of tension with hierarchies.[5]

Barbier's *Constitutions* certainly understood the relationship of the Sisters to the Church as one that was subordinate and obedient. This is no longer true in a country

like Aotearoa where increasingly Sisters understand that their life and work should hasten the coming of the reign of God, through ministries that may or may not be mandated by the episcopal and parish authorities.

The 1979 *Constitutions* likewise demonstrated the enduring influence of nineteenth century missionary activity as *plantatio ecclesiae*, when it stated that mission is about extending the Kingdom of God where "the church has not yet been fully established". Such language fails to acknowledge that in India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Vietnam, governments actively opposed evangelisation understood as conversion by missionaries. The reference to "de-Christianised areas" recognises the increasingly secularised character of life in a country like Aotearoa. The four articles from the 1979 *Constitutions* reinforce the idea that a strong relationship between the institutional Church and the Congregation is required because it is through the Sisters' proclamation of the message of salvation that the church will be "a sign lifted up before the nations".

But the 2014 *Constitutions* suggest that conversations and thinking around the relationship of the Sisters to the institutional church were changing. Gone is the language of following "the direction of their Lordships", and instead "[i]n collaboration with the local church, with humility and generosity we reach out in loving service to bring about the reign of God". Such language represents quite a significant shift with the 2014 *Constitutions* being more informed by values such as equality, inclusivity, and mutuality rather than subordination and submission. This suggests the growing influence of Christian feminist theology and the recognition by more Sisters that hierarchical and patriarchal structures no longer honoured the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

Culture

It is almost a truism to say that prior to the end of World War II, the majority of Western missionaries whether Catholic or Protestant, had little understanding of how much cultural superiority baggage they carried with them to distant places. So Scottish-born Evangelical, Charles Grant (1746-1823), a director of the East India Company, could write:

> It is not necessary to conclude that our Asiatic territories were given to us, not merely that we might draw an annual profit from them, but that we might diffuse among their inhabitants, long sunk in darkness, vice and misery, the light and benign influence of Truth.[6]

Grant, as an official of the rapacious East India Company, demonstrates an awareness not only of the enormous profits to be made by the Company, but also

of the Evangelical missionary imperative to bring people out of "darkness" into the "light" of Western culture and civilization.

While New Zealand-born Mission Sisters who went to India or Vietnam did not see themselves as making money from exploitation of the people to whom they ministered, they perhaps exhibited in their writings back home; a similarly ingrained sense of cultural superiority as the following extracts indicate:

> The greatest work can be done with the little orphans and with the numerous bands of children whom their heartless parents abandon or sell to the Sisters for a few shillings. It must be confessed that the minds of these poor people are very fickle and that a great deal of patient labour must be spent on their behalf if there is any hope of making them good Christians.[7]

Something similar emerges in a letter from Gwen-Mary McCarthy (Sister Marie Floride) who lived and worked for many years in Vietnam:

> It is when I have been to visit the sick in their homes that I have most fully realised the pitiable state of these poor people. Their existence is hardly better than that of the animals, perhaps even worse, since their perception of misery is surely keener, and so many of them have nothing to hope for in eternity.[8]

Both Clarkson and McCarthy went to India and Vietnam in 1918 and 1928 respectively. Such Sisters left their home country, knowing that it was highly unlikely they would ever see the land of their birth again, and knowing that they were going to countries very different from Aotearoa to a people very different from those they left behind. Therefore, the importance of Barbier's emphasis on the need for lives of self-sacrifice and asceticism was very real for these women.

After Vatican II, throughout the Church, it was recognised that understanding one's own culture, and the culture of those among whom one might be living and working was important. The *Interim Constitutions* state that the Sisters take "care to bring to the people the message of Christ in terms of their culture". The 1979 *Constitutions* reminded Sisters that they must always go to the other "in an attitude of humility, reverence, and dialogue to speak of a God who is Father of all men (sic)". Finally, in 2014, the Sisters are to live "with mutual respect [for the other] reverence and cultural sensitivity. Knowing that the Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of all peoples and cultures, we celebrate our unity in diversity and embrace the grace of difference with simplicity and joy"(#38). It is apparent that attitudinal change is required of all those asked to work with people of different cultures. What in practice did such aspirational language mean for Mission Sisters in Aotearoa?

The story of the Mission Sisters and St Joseph's Māori Girls' College is informative. Although Bishop Philippe Viard, Bishop of Wellington, saw the Sisters' primary role as education of settler children when the Sisters arrived in Napier in

1865, two years after their arrival they began teaching young Māori women and girls in the *Providence* (a vocational training school, renamed as St Joseph's Māori Girls' College in 1926), which sought to socialise their students into transitioning to a more Western style of life, which also happened to be patriarchal and hierarchical.

Though Māori culture and Te Reo were not ignored prior to Vatican II, their importance in the life of the College became more marked in the years that followed the Council. Remembering her school days there in the 1970s, Moana Maniapoto-Jackson, recalling how the principal invited Nga Tamatoa (a 1970s Māori activist group) to talk to the girls, was amazed when she was told: "Even the nuns are racist!"[9] She continues:

> "What? Our nuns?" And of course we didn't like them [Nga Tamatoa] because this was the first exposure we'd ever had to any kind of analysis or questioning of things, and to the whole issue of racism. I think the nuns didn't know what kind of group it was when they gave them the opportunity to speak. We never talked about any of those things again, either. I felt we'd missed a major chunk of what was happening in Māoridom.[10]

Maniapoto-Jackson's succinctly summarises the mindset of many Sisters – an awareness that the descendants of the settler population needed to seek a new relationship with Māori. Compromising this good intention was the reality that Sisters had engaged in little historical or contemporary analysis of the relationship of Māori to Pākehā, and how the latter, through war and legislation, had rapidly became the dominant group in Aotearoa.

A growing awareness of the impact of colonisation on Māori persuaded the province leadership team to ensure that Mission Sisters would step back from appointing a Sister as principal at St Joseph's Māori Girls' College. In 1987, Georgina Kingi (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Pūkeko), former pupil and then teacher at the College was appointed as principal. This move represented a recognition on the part of the Sisters that a new relationship with Maori was necessary. In the 1980s bi-culturalism was identified as the pathway to a new and more respectful relationship. Understanding and acknowledging the Māori call for Tino Rangatiratanga or the current call for 'co-governance' is still a work in progress for Mission Sisters.

To whom are we missioned, with whom do we exercise our ministry?

Barbier identified "the instruction of Christian education of children and women",[11] as the primary work of her Sisters. This work was faithfully undertaken in Aotearoa and by 1965, a hundred years after their arrival Mission Sisters were teaching in around sixty primary and secondary schools.

However, the impact of Vatican II, of liberation theology with its mandate that the primary mission of the church should be directed to the poor, the decline

of young women wishing to be Sisters and finally, increasing government aid to Catholic schools meant a steady trickle of Sisters from both parish and secondary schools to other ministries. Such changes in ministries were often preceded by the opportunity of professional training to better prepare a Sister for a new ministry.

In the years after Vatican II, almost a hundred Sisters were missioned overseas, usually to "third-world countries", while a minority undertook work with indigenous peoples or people who suffered serious socio-economic and political disenfranchisement in "first-world" countries. A small minority were appointed to positions of responsibility in Rome, where the central government of the Congregation was located.

As the third millennium began, very few Sisters were still engaged in a full-time capacity in parish primary or congregation-owned secondary schools. A small number of Sisters were involved at the Board of Trustees level while the province leadership team appointed a Sister to visit schools in which Sisters had formerly taught, to work with staff and pupils to enhance their understanding of the congregational story.

What was most interesting about such developments was the ever-growing scope and involvement of Sisters in a variety of ministries. Education was still recognised as important whether it meant that Sisters were involved in reading recovery programmes in primary schools, adult faith formation programmes, or tertiary teaching. Sisters were also involved in both hospital and prison chaplaincy work, pastoral ministry in parishes, pastoral ministry with elderly, pastoral ministry with Pasifika communities, counselling and spiritual direction, and advocacy work with refugees. De-institutionalisation of ministry was certainly the name of the game as Sisters identified as important ministries for which they felt they had the necessary personal talents and education.

It is important to remember that most religious congregations such as mine were founded to respond to particular needs: poverty in Europe's nineteenth century cities; nineteenth century imperial agendas which involved education and social work among "pagans"; or, work with migrant communities such as the Irish in British colonies. The work of Catholic sisters, brothers, and priests in responding to these needs should not be under-estimated and even though it is possible to agree with Māori academic Ranginui Walker's claim that that "the missionaries were the advance party of cultural invasion",[12] former mission schools throughout former colonies, whether in Aotearoa, in Africa, or Asia acknowledge the good education such schools offered to indigenous/colonised peoples.

As the second millennium drew to a close, there was more recognition of another need that demanded addressing, and that was the growing awareness around environmental concerns. In 1996, the province leadership team took the courageous step of opening a house in Whangarei where the community would undertake,

among other things, to see what shape an eco-theology and eco-spirituality might take in Aotearoa.

In 2008, the General Chapter produced a document "RNDM Earth Community: We are One, We are Love" specifically challenging all Mission Sisters to respond to the growing negative impact of climate change on the world.[13] The aspirational language of the document certainly encouraged Mission Sisters in Aotearoa to grow in their awareness of the impact of climate change on creation, and to recognise their oneness with all creation, and their interdependence with all creatures. This represented a welcome move beyond the dualistic mindset characteristic of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. While all Sisters have been motivated to grow in their awareness of the environmental challenges facing society today, and have been conscientious about recycling and reducing their use of plastic, less has been done at an institutional level. There have been requests about a more collective response, e.g., more action around transport or solar panels but to date little has happened. The fact that financial returns from any such undertakings would be long-term indeed, perhaps explains why such proposals have not yet been followed up.

What emerges in this brief consideration of the Mission Sisters' ministry and work in Aotearoa is movement beyond an expectation that all Sisters would be involved in school teaching, or in domestic service that would support the Sisters so engaged. This exploration of the activity of the Mission Sisters from their arrival in 1865 through to the present day demonstrates some significant developments which are important to appreciate before moving on to examine the challenge that ethnicity posed for the Sisters. First, the ministry of the Congregation in Aotearoa was de-institutionalised. Prior to the changes initiated by Vatican II, most Sisters saw themselves engaged in school teaching until they retired. In 1962 as the Council opened in Rome, it is doubtful that anybody would have envisaged the varied ministries in which the Sisters would involve themselves, and the impact that the disappearance of a common ministry would have on their religious life. Second, and equally important, was the changing attitude of Mission Sisters towards those of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Culture became an important consideration when embarking on a different ministry. Third, the on-going education, and professional and spiritual formation of all Sisters was recognised as a priority. Such educational and formation opportunities encouraged movement beyond dualistic to holistic theologies which understood the world, not as something from which the Sisters should try to remove themselves as far as possible but rather as the arena in which God lived and moved, inviting them to reach out to all creation.

Notes

1 See Euphrasie Barbier, *Constitutions of the Daughters of Notre Dame Des Missions* (Hastings: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1936), #2, 3.
2 Robert Schreiter, "Reimagining Consecrated Life in a Changing World", *New Theology Review* 28, no. 1 (2015), 33.
3 Mary of the Heart of Jesus, Superior General of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, "Notes on the Beginning of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, Rome, 31 March 1869", in *Translation of the Writings of Mother Mary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (Sturry: RNDM Archives).
4 Barbier, Constitutions, #3.
5 Twenty-fourth General Chapter, "RNDM Women: Heart for the World" (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1996), 8.
6 A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London: Hutchinson, 2002), 202.
7 Estelle Clarkson, "Letters of Thanks to the Ex-Pupils of the Convent, Who Each Year Collect Funds for the Indian Mission", in *Diamond Jubilee Magazine in Commemoration of the Foundation of the Convent of Notre Dame des Missions, Christchurch, New Zealand 1868-1928* (Christchurch: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1928): 82-83.
8 Gwen-Mary McCarthy, "Lang-Son Mission Station on the Hills", in *Diamond Jubilee Magazine in Commemoration of the Foundation of the Convent of Notre Dame des Missions, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1868-1928* (Christchurch: Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, 1928): 81-82.
9 Moana Maniapoto-Jackson, "Moana Maniapoto-Jackson", in *Convent Girls: New Zealand Women Talk to Jane Tolerton*, ed. Jane Tolerton (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1994), 207.
10 Ibid., 207.
11 Barbier, *Constitutions*, #2.
12 Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle without End* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990), 85.
13 See Twenty-sixth General Chapter, "RNDM Earth Community: We are One, We are Love" (Pattaya: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2008).

Chapter Six

The Challenges of Ethnicity

I can identify a number of experiences that demonstrate how my understanding of culture has evolved over the years, starting with primary and secondary school memories. At the parish primary school, we all had to eat our school lunches prepared by our mothers, and strictly monitored by the head teacher who eagle-eyed us all to see if any crusts were dropped, intentionally or unintentionally. Whatever the case, they were to be picked up and consumed, and we were told that starving black children in India would love them. At secondary school, Sacred Heart College, we were encouraged to buy "black babies" which meant our coin contributions were totalled up until we had reached some pre-ordained amount – it might have been two shillings and sixpence – when we could "buy" a black baby, who would then be baptised and we could provide a name for her/him. The highlight of this exercise was seeing who could think up the most outlandish name. How formative such experiences were on my understandings around culture, I shudder to think.

I recall as a young Sister in Christchurch, there was a death in our community, and as was then the practice, the Sister's body was brought to chapel until her requiem Mass. Although the chapel had Sisters present from 5.30 a.m. through to 9.00 p.m., after night prayer, the chapel was then locked. The Māori Sister with whom I lived was shocked that no one stayed there throughout the night. I realised much later when I was more familiar with the tikanga of tangihanga (funeral rites for Māori) how horrifying this would have been for her. Again, I well remember the frustration of Sister Mary Katarina Mariu (Tuwharetoa) when we said "Piekok" or "Paraparam", and our collective inability to appreciate what she had done in establishing the first South Island Kohanga Reo at Te Rangimarie (Catholic Māori Centre, Christchurch) in 1982.

Living and working in Papua New Guinea also alerted me to how local people understood missionaries, and how missionaries sometimes understood local people. When I was out walking with a national Sister one day to a distant catechist's house, we met a family and so stopped to say "hello". They asked if we would take a photo of them, but sadly I did not have a camera either with me, or even at home. They were shocked – "all missionaries had cameras". Again, the distances involved in travelling from one mission station to another in the Highlands meant that all foreign missionaries usually drove a Toyota four-wheel drive for their work. Unsurprisingly, people perceived us foreign missionaries as wealthy

I remember too, when I was facilitating a course for our Sisters in Bengaluru, India, we went to visit an old Indian Sister who for many years had been an auxiliary lay

Sister. I was not wearing a religious habit or veil, yet she constantly called me "Mother", a throwback to a former era when virtually all European Sisters were "Mothers". Choir Sisters, unlike their Indian counterparts, who were usually auxiliary or lay Sisters responsible for domestic work in large institutional convents, were "Mothers" to these Sisters.

In 2015, New Zealand-born Maureen McBride (1953-2016), Congregation Leader from 2002-2014, began researching the Sisters' involvement in the process of rewriting their Constitutions. She wanted to see what would her research would reveal about the Congregation's changing demographics and ethnicities. Not that ethnic diversity was a new reality for the Mission Sisters. By 1886, twenty-five years after its foundation in Lyon, the Congregation had established novitiates in France, New Zealand, and Bangladesh (then part of the Indian Empire), and ethnic diversity was characteristic of all three provinces. Barbier encouraged the Sisters to understand and appreciate cultural differences:

> Be very attentive to this, for not being of the same disposition as your Prioress and not being familiar with English customs, but with those of your own country, it is inevitable that one thing or another will not be to your taste. I am not referring to food, but to other things as well.[1]

What did "one thing or another will not be your taste" mean in the decades that followed for Mission Sisters? This chapter will begin with a brief overview of congregational documentation around ethnicity and culture, identifying how various issues were addressed, or not addressed, prior to Vatican II. This will not be a time-consuming process as virtually nothing official was written on such matters until the 1980s when the Asian provinces of the Congregation became numerically stronger than the older Western provinces. This development meant that the Eurocentric and supposedly homogenous nature of Mission Sisters' shared life needed addressing in ways that reflected and honoured the Congregation's ethnic diversity.

After this overview of what was happening in the wider Congregation, the interaction of New Zealand-born Sisters with Sisters of other ethnicities and cultures prior to Vatican II will be examined, followed by a similar critique of post-Vatican II developments. One of the reasons for looking at what was happening throughout the Congregation is that Mission Sisters from Aotearoa were often key players in pre-Vatican II foundations, for example, between 1898 and 1961, twenty-four Mission Sisters left to work in the Indian Empire and in Vietnam. Many of them were appointed as provincial and local superiors, and as novice mistresses

Culture, ethnic diversity, and racism in Mission Sisters' documents, 1861-2014

The words, "culture", "ethnicity", and "race" received virtually no attention in the pre-Vatican II life of the Congregation, and do not appear in Barbier's *Constitutions*,

the 1969 *Interim Constitutions*, or the 1979 *Constitutions.*[2] They first emerge as something which warranted attention in the 1984 General Chapter document, "Witnessing to the Gospel beyond All Frontiers". The General Council, we read, was required "to provide a session as soon as possible for those Sisters who are preparing to work in another culture or who have already been doing so for some years … [T]he Sisters should participate in a specific cultural orientation programme, if available".[3] Adequate preparation for living and working in another culture was increasingly seen as important, and this reflected the reality that most Western Sisters who were asked to work in those regions founded by older Western provinces soon after Vatican II – Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Senegal, Peru – had received virtually no such preparation. As Canadian Mission Sister, Marilyn LeBlanc testified: "We were missioned [to Peru] without any prior preparation other than that received through a study of the Vatican II documents. However, we were aware that we were there not to impose our own culture but to learn from the people among whom we lived and served".[4]

A growing awareness of the need to accept and embrace cultural diversity was highlighted by McBride in a paper delivered to Mission Sisters at a 2003 meeting. She argued that the Congregation was now facing "an at times painful transition from East to West, North to South".[5] Similarly, fewer Western Sisters, and the movement of Sisters from African, Asian, and Latin American provinces and regions to places beyond their countries of origin meant the need for ethnic and cultural sensitivity became even more of a missiological imperative. As the 2008 General Chapter stated: "[W]e joyfully nurture relationships that are life-giving and based on a spirit of trust, cultural sensitivity, mutual respect, appreciation, and encouragement".[6] The 2014 *Constitutions* likewise recognise the challenge that greater cultural diversity means for Mission Sisters: "As members of an international missionary Congregation we are challenged to live with mutual respect, reverence, and cultural sensitivity. Knowing that the Holy Spirit dwells at the heart of all peoples and cultures, we celebrate our unity in diversity and embrace the grace of difference with simplicity and joy" (#38).[7]

Many of the Congregational requirements around culture and ethnicity are located in those texts pertaining to the formation of Sisters who would be asked to work outside of their own culture. Thus Directive 34 indicates that "missionary effectiveness calls us to become inculturated in each milieu we enter by studying the culture with its religions, languages, customs and philosophies, and to discover with the people, the Gospel values inherent in the culture" (#34).[8]

The *Congregation Handbook on Mission*, *Congregation Handbook on Administration of Temporal Norms*, and *Congregation Handbook Initial and Ongoing Formation* mandate that Sisters hoping to be missioned beyond their own cultures are to be asked about their sensitivity and openness towards other cultures and customs.[9] The

Handbook on Initial and Ongoing Formation requires that formation personnel visit "the postulant's home and family to become acquainted with her background and culture".[10] Formation personnel are likewise required to check the attitude of a Sister being sent on mission beyond her country and culture.[11] Sisters in temporary vows are examined on their capacity to respond to "the diversity of cultures, personalities, preferences, beliefs and values"[12] they will encounter if sent beyond their country of origin.

Mission Sisters in Aotearoa have never experienced that sort of ethnic diversity characteristic of the Congregation's Asian and African provinces. Māori Sisters were never more than five, while today there are three Samoan Sisters. Since 2005, younger Asian Sisters primarily from Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Myanmar have come to study in Aotearoa, but again there have never been more than five or six in any given year.

While ethnic and cultural diversity in the Congregation was welcomed, such diversity could engender racism and tribalism. In 1990, the General Chapter required that "during the next six years, we address in a special way the following issues, racism … language, and communication across cultures".[13] Racism was again referred to at the 1996 General Chapter which after affirming the Congregation's international missionary identity, stated that "racism and prejudice exist among us".[14] The 2008 General Chapter was even more emphatic about the need to address the problem of racism. It stated: "workshops on issues of prejudice, racism, white privilege, discrimination, and the effects of colonialism both within our Congregation and in the wider society will be offered at Congregation formation programmes and within provinces and regions".[15]

In any consideration of cultural non-awareness and racism, the close and often mutually beneficial association between nineteenth century imperialism and nineteenth century missionary activity needs to be acknowledged. Almost without exception, Mission Sisters embraced education as key in their work in the far-flung colonies of the French and British empires. This involved them "in instructing the natives and bringing home to them the blessings of civilization".[16] In such situations the "blessings of civilisation" meant the blessings of English or French civilisation, and English or French-medium schools. Bruno-Jofré writes that "the Congregation's intentionality, nourished in what Eric Hobsbawm called the age of empire, aimed at bringing civilization through Christian education to other cultures,"[17] and adds that "the Congregation saw the Métis children and youth [those of mixed races, Aboriginal and French in this case] who attended their schools through a Western colonizing vision".[18]

Hierarchical structures in the Congregation and racism

Congregations founded in the nineteenth century were hierarchically structured.

Thus, there were three different classes of religious in the Mission Sisters – Choir Sisters, Auxiliary or Lay Sisters, and Oblate Sisters. Generally speaking, Choir Sisters were better educated, able to pay a dowry, and were the only Sisters who could be appointed as superiors; Auxiliary or Lay Sisters were normally consigned to domestic work, and could not be elected to any office. Lay Sisters ceased in 1947. The third class were the Oblates. It is much more difficult to find out much about this group. Oblates were not professed religious but were attached to communities in the early days. Reasons for not professing the three vows of religion included having previously been married or engaged, being illegitimate, being more than thirty-four years of age, or having limited education. Oblates seem to have disappeared from Western provinces by 1902, although they persisted for longer in India. Congregation documentation implies that cultural reasons were perhaps important in deciding on the status of young Indian women seeking to join the Congregation. The 1912 *procès-verbal* (minutes) from the European superiors to the General Council included the following:

> For some time past our native Sisters in India have caused grave uneasiness on account of the very great inconstancy shown by most of them, and to such an extent that one fears to receive [into the Congregation] any more of them and also to allow some of those who are already received to make perpetual vows. Reverend Father Abbott has advised us to submit the difficulty we are in to Rome, and to ask permission to receive such native subjects and also Eurasian girls of illegitimate birth, several of whom have already been asked to be received and have been refused as Oblates.[19]

Kerala-born Mission Sister, Mary Mathew writing in 2010 about the early twentieth century European superiors asking for more Oblates, suggests that this was thought "to be necessary because experience had shown that the indigenous young girls in general did not have the stability of character needed to make perpetual vows, though they were very devoted and were of great service, especially in teaching the local children".[20]

Attitudes of Western Sisters around race were likewise apparent in the reluctance of the General Council and European-dominated Asian provincial councils to appoint indigenous provincial superiors. In 1947, India gained political independence, while Burma became an independent nation in 1948. The first non-Western provincial superior, Anglo-Khasi Mary Languida was appointed in India in 1968, while in 1966, Mary Agnes Thein Mye was appointed regional superior in Burma. In both instances, political unrest, and in the case of Burma, the expulsion of all foreign Sisters in 1966 figured prominently in such decisions by the General Councils of the time. The first Vietnamese provincial superior was appointed in 1969, and again a rapidly changing political situation seems to have driven such

an appointment rather than the recognition that Western Sisters no longer had a divine right to govern in Asian provinces.

But racism is not just about European attitudes toward "the other". Informal conversations over the years lead me to suspect that there can be negative attitudes between tribal and non-tribal Sisters in Asian provinces, and perhaps between different tribal groups in a province such as Kenya.

Aotearoa's Mission Sisters and the Challenge of Ethnicity

Mission Sisters and their changing relationship with Māori – the pre-Vatican II story

Barbier's great passion was the foreign missions by which she understood bringing the gospel to pagans and infidels so that souls could be saved for heaven. This would happen through the Sisters' devotion "to the instruction and Christian education of children and women, above all in infidel and non-Catholic countries".[21] When the first Sisters arrived in Napier in 1865, the country's demographic profile was very different from that of 1838 when Pompallier and his companions arrived. Māori were then the majority, and New Zealand was not yet a British colony. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi and the changed political status of the country led to an influx of settlers primarily from Britain, and in 1852, political power passed to the settlers. The growing settler need for land was resolved by war and legislation, while involvement with Māori was relegated to the background as pastoral, educational, and social work for the settler community was prioritised by bishops.

Within days of their arrival in Napier in 1865, Mission Sisters were teaching settler children, often enough children of Irish soldiers attached to the British Army's 14th and 65th regiments. There are no written records that suggest awareness of the ambivalent situation in which the Sisters found themselves, nor does an examination of nineteenth century Mission Sisters' archives mention the settler-initiated wars with Māori chief Te Kooti and his followers that were raging throughout the central North Island when the Sisters arrived in Napier.[22] Some of this ambivalence was redressed in 1867 when Marist Māori missionary, Euloge Reignier, asked the Sisters to assume responsibility for teaching young Māori women and girls in a *Providence* or vocational training school, which was later renamed St Joseph's Māori Girls' College. A *Providence* could enable young Māori women to more readily adapt to European culture and its demands. Barbier required that the girls would:

> first of all be trained to virtue, an enlightened, simple, solid and practical virtue…. Care will be taken to give the children a knowledge of the sciences, especially those which are essential to their state of life, for example, reading, writing, grammar, and arithmetic, etc. The children will also be trained in crafts suited

> to women, e.g., knitting, sewing etc. They will help in the kitchen and in the different employments of the house so as to be trained in order and cleanliness and all that appertains to the domestic economy.[23]

This was an education which in its insistence on growth in virtue, on basic literacy and numeracy, and on crafts suited to women, reflected nineteenth century Western patriarchal values. The 1869 Native Schools Act had required that all children at such schools be educated in English, and Barbier assured Reignier that this would be the case, although she also wrote that "these children cannot be expected to hold a conversation on any subject whatsoever, particularly in a language like English so difficult for foreigners".[24] In 1873, the Sisters assumed full responsibility for the *Providence*. The school continued to grow and indeed prosper particularly after the 1931 Napier earthquake when it was relocated to Greenmeadows, and by 1954 there were one hundred and thirty-five pupils.

Although she boarded at St Joseph's some years after Vatican II, Moana Maniapoto-Jackson's comments on the Sisters who taught her merit attention:

> There were things I liked about the nuns. Most of them had a good sense of humour which I think you'd need to have if you were wandering around with two hundred girls on your hands, although they used to try and encourage us to be ladylike. You weren't allowed to eat when you were walking along the road, and we used to say Grace – and not charge at food ... I do get a fuzzy feeling when I talk to the nuns because they were really nice. They mightn't have had all the answers, but God, they struggled along by themselves. They did the best they could in trying to support us and give us some sort of guidance. They were special because they sacrificed a lot for their beliefs.[25]

Such was the success of St Joseph's, that in 1944 the Sisters undertook to open another school for Māori girls in Taranaki. By 1947, there were eighty Māori boarders, a remarkable achievement considering the school was opened during World War II. However, financial challenges meant it was not possible to continue this work. This did not diminish the Sisters' commitment to Māori children as they were teaching in parish primary schools with significant Māori populations – Huntly, Ngaruawahia, Waitara, Opotiki, Kaiapoi and Kaikoura. Princess Te Puea (1883-1952) affirmed the work of the Sisters who were teaching children from Turangawaewae at St Paul's primary school at Ngaruawahia: "Greetings to you from Te Puea Herangi. At the close of the old year, Te Puea thanks you for all the good you have done for her children. May you be given strength and happiness for your mahi aroha (work of love) in the New Year. Ma Te Atua Koutou e tiaki (May God thank all of you.) [Signed] E. A. McKay. Hon. Secretary".[26]

While education of Māori children and young girls was prioritised, the Sisters involved themselves in other ways too. Pastoral visiting of Māori families was seen

as important by Sisters, as an early entry in the "Opotiki House Book" demonstrates:

> On one side of the Waioeka [river] lies the Māori Pah, as always on a hilltop. Our first visit there was to a Māori family who lived in a whare; there were fowls, dogs and pigs searching for food in the open while the family also had their meal out in the sunshine unless there was heavy rain. It was hardly pleasing to our taste, but we could not deny our Catholic Māoris the pleasure of sharing their meal with us. We also visited a house Māori had built which was well-known as a fine building – one of the finest in New Zealand built by Māoris, wonderfully carved wood inside and outside. It is well built and used as a Church by our Māori Catholics.[27]

Other House Books show that Sisters understood that working with Māori, and visiting Māori, was an essential part of their missionary activity. But while they were aware of the economic hardships facing Māori there is little evidence that they understood what caused Māori poverty. In 1932, Marjorie Leach (Mary Florienne, RNDM) had completed her thesis on Wiremu Tamihana, identified by Pākehā as kingmaker in the Māori King Movement. She described him as "one of Nature's noblemen, a true and simple-minded Christian".[28] Leach visited Turangawaewae while researching her subject, and although older Sisters spoke of her admiration and respect for Tamihana, she provides a minimal critique of the Pākehā land confiscation that he had sought to prevent. Ellen Murphy (Mary Simeon, RNDM), who completed her thesis on Pompallier in 1932 commended the bishop for "the good he did among Māori, not only in evangelising, but in teaching them the art of civilisation".[29]

While the Sisters' involvement with Māori prior to the 1970s was generous, committed, and genuine, it was also maternalistic and Eurocentric. There is little evidence to suggest that they recognised the serious injustices that Māori were experiencing through "settler-driven legislation which deprived them of land, a political voice, and which seriously threatened their culture".[30] But that was to change, not so much as a result of Vatican II but because Māori were insisting on change that would confirm their status as tangata whenua, the people of the land.

Mission Sisters and their changing relationship with Māori – the post-Vatican II story

By the 1970s, Māori were increasingly concerned about their political and economic disenfranchisement. This was apparent in a variety of ways, which included a strong Māori presence in protests against the New Zealand Rugby Union's commitment to playing rugby with apartheid South Africa, a decision which culminated in allowing a whites-only South African team to come to New Zealand in 1981. The country was never the same again. Second, Ngā Tamatoa (The Warriors), younger

Māori, often university students, became prominent in the 1970s as they promoted Māori rights, fought against racial discrimination, and confronted violations of the Treaty of Waitangi.

Most important was Te Roopu o te Matakite o Aotearoa, a coalition of groups established to resist further alienation of Māori land. In 1975, Dame Whina Cooper (Te Rarawa), and past pupil of St Joseph's Māori Girls' College, proposed a march from Te Hapua in the far north to Parliament in Wellington in September to October, 1975.

Significant numbers of Pākehā including many Sisters, were also recognising that injustices suffered by Māori needed to be addressed. Between 1982 and 2004, Mission Sisters sought to be in solidarity with Māori in their struggles for justice. Sisters were encouraged to participate in the anti-racism workshops organised by the Conference of Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand, and in Project Waitangi workshops. Both these programmes aimed at conscientising Pākehā New Zealanders about the strength of the white racism. In December 1987 and January 1988, the Province Leadership Team financed and organised two hui at St Joseph's for Catholic lay representatives from various parish and diocesan organisations to promote bi-culturalism, the belief that New Zealand is a country in which Māori should be recognised as the first people, the tangata whenua, the people of the land. Subsequent waves of settlers were referred to as manuhiri, those whose power and cultural domination threatened the status of Māori as tangata whenua.

As the major grievance of Māori was the loss of their land, through war or legislation, the province leadership team also undertook to

> research land titles of Congregation-owned land to see if the Sisters were land confiscated from Māori after the nineteenth century land wars or on land for which unjust prices had been paid. The research indicated that no properties currently belonging to the province, were bought directly from Māori, and that apart from the Waitara beach house, no convents or schools were on Māori land.[31]

In 1990, after much discussion, the province leadership team invited communities to symbolically acknowledge past European settler injustices with which Māori had had to contend, by donating money to assist in the establishment of a Ngai Tahu archival resource in Kaikoura. More recently in 2002, a seminar, "Mission for 2020", was a chance for Sisters to understand more as to what was involved in proposed government legislation around Māori ownership of the seabed and foreshore. A number of Sisters prepared written and oral submissions that opposed such legislation, yet another mechanism designed to strip Māori of traditional rights.

From the 1970s onwards, Māori Sisters, Mary Katarina Mariu, Mereana Keogh, Marie Chanel McNicol, and Mary Martin McCort, were all actively engaged with Māori, as it was increasingly acknowledged that Māori should be

the agents of their own liberation from the dominant Pākehā culture. These Sisters were also key in alerting Pākehā Mission Sisters to the reality of white racism. The emerging responsibility of Pākehā Sisters was to support rather than direct Māori. Today there are few Mission Sisters with any significant involvement with Māori, and the Māori emphasis on rangatiratanga (sovereignty), and more recently, co-governance, suggests that is the way it should be.

Mission Sisters and their changing relationship with Samoans – the pre-Vatican II story

By 1842, the Marists had assumed responsibility for what was then known as the Apostolic Vicariate of Western Oceania, and Vicariate of Central Oceania. They recognised the important contribution that women could provide in the remote and distant islands on which they lived and worked. The Marist founder, Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875), had opposed sending Sisters to such places and thought that "their role was to pray for the work of [male] missionaries".[32] By 1857, women being received into the Third Order of Mary, were referred to as tertiaries, and were working with women and children in the different Oceanic missions. When Barbier, with significant support from, and under the guidance of the Marists, established a novitiate in Lyon in December 1861, the priests assumed that this new Congregation would be part of the Marist family working in Oceania and New Zealand. It is clear that Barbier did not see her newly founded Congregation in such a light, even though it had not yet been canonically approved as a new religious Congregation.

It was not long before Barbier, the Marists, and also some of the tertiaries in Oceania, recognised that a more formal novitiate programme would better prepare women for the foreign missions. There was flexibility on the part of Barbier and the Marists as to how this might actually happen given the distances involved, and the challenges around communication. But all was not well between Barbier and some of the Marists. Most problematic was the growing estrangement between Barbier and Victor Poupinel (1815-1884), Marist Visitor-General of the missions, who believed he had certain rights when it came to the appointment and placement of the Sisters. The Mission Sisters' General Council reported after its February 1868 meeting that "after making the local Superior look a fool, he [Poupinel] attacks the Superior General by taking words out of the context of her letters and so making her seem to contradict herself".[33]

But despite some difficulties, Barbier was committed to sending Sisters to distant New Zealand, and by the 1870s to Oceania, where the difficulties she had experienced in France with the Marist priests were to fade into insignificance compared with those that were soon to overtake Mission Sisters, tertiaries, and Marist fathers in Tonga, Wallis, and Samoa. Barbier was insistent on the need for

a grille in Samoa and although the Sisters were permitted to wear white habits in hot climates, they chose to wear the black habit authorised by Barbier. Marist bishop Louis Elloy (1829-1878) wrote to Barbier:

> This linen, which is envelops the head and is covered with a heavy veil, is constantly drenched with sweat, and then in drying on the forehead and around the neck, causes violent neuralgia.... [T]herefore, I beg you V.R. Mother, in the name of the souls that your Sisters are to save, not to insist that they wear what could shorten their days, or considerably harm their health, and make them less able to do their work.[34]

Likewise, Elloy resisted Barbier's wish for a cloistered religious life following a monastic timetable, but Barbier was determined that her Sisters' prayer life be safeguarded by a semi-cloistered way of life, and equally determined that her Sisters be an autonomous Congregation, while working with the Marist priests. In 1878, Barbier headed for Rome, where she made it clear to Allesandro Cardinal Franchi (1819-1879), Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, that she could not compromise around such issues. and that if the cost of not compromising were to withdraw the Sisters from Samoa, Tonga, and Wallis, she was prepared to do that. In October 1878, the Sisters withdrew from the vicariate. According to Smith:

> In hindsight, it is possible to feel a certain sympathy for both sides in this conflict. Most [Catholic Sisters] today would not consider it appropriate to be under the direction of male religious superiors, and most nineteenth century foundations that were so established have certainly moved beyond that particular model of governance. On the other hand, the contemporary missionary finds it more difficult to support a lifestyle that seems to set up barriers between the missionary and those among whom she ministers, a position that certainly fell out of favour in the aftermath of Vatican II, as the twentieth century story of the Mission Sisters in Samoa indicates.[35]

Mission Sisters and their changing relationship with Samoans – the post-Vatican II story

The twentieth century story begins after Vatican II, when the five Western provinces of the Congregation, in response to the Council's call to reclaim the vision of their foundresses, interpreted this as starting a new "foreign mission". The Australian, United Kingdom and Ireland, France, and New Zealand provinces chose to return to their former colonies of Papua New Guinea, Kenya, Senegal, and Samoa respectively, while the Canadian province, influenced by US and Vatican fears of Communist governments in Latin America, went to Peru. Western agendas seemed to drive the choice of country.

In 1970, three Sisters returned to Samoa, and were soon involved in primary school teaching – all primary and secondary education was English-medium. At the same time, they were planning to build a secondary school on Savai'i, the largest island but less developed then than Upolu where the capital Apia was located. This decision concerned Robin Leamy SM, Director of Catholic Education, who thought it was distant from the nearest village, and therefore the local people would no longer feel that the school was theirs.[36] By 1973, the high school had become an important educational institution on the island, a situation that would last through until the early 1990s, when its long-term future became more problematic.

Other apostolic ministries were begun. Mission Sister Sheila O'Toole, who had worked with tribal people in South Vietnam until she was forced to leave in 1975, went to Samoa where she wanted to start an agricultural project for boys. This project, like her Vietnamese project received significant financial support from the U.S. government's Agency for International Development. The siting of the project was always problematic given its relatively cooler climate, as was the challenge of language. O'Toole had spent a few months learning Samoan, although insufficient to ensure real fluency. Ten years later, it was apparent that the project was not viable.

By 1980, Sisters were asking that pastoral programmes be started at village level. Pastoral work required fluency in, and an understanding of Samoan language and culture, when one *palagi* (New Zealand) and two Samoan Sisters began living in Sataua in 1986. However, two years later, the people were clear that what they wanted was an English-medium primary school for their children: "Well, we asked you in the beginning when you first came to Sataua that we wanted a school, but you didn't respond!"[37]

In 1975, two young Samoan women made their first profession, the first of thirteen to do so. Some forty-five years later, nine of those young women who made their first profession as Mission Sisters had left the Congregation, while four remained. The last Samoan novice made her first profession in 1997. Formation programmes for young Samoan women were located first in Christchurch, then Samoa and finally in Auckland as provincial councils and formation personnel sought to discern what type of formation would be most appropriate for young women from a different culture. Between 1970 and 2010, forty-three Sisters from New Zealand, four Sisters from the British Isles and Ireland province, one Bangladeshi Sister, and one Canadian Sister were missioned to Samoa, while two Josephite Sisters from Aotearoa also worked with the Mission Sisters. In 1986, there were twenty-four *palagi* Sisters working in Samoa. Today, there are two Samoan Sisters in Apia, and one in Kenya.

The relationship of Mission Sisters to Samoa and its people after their return in 1971 demonstrates some of the challenges that Sisters faced working in another cultural context. First, a constant theme was the Sisters' concern around the

inadequacy of the language and cultural preparation. This was true for all *palagi* Sisters, and the fact that many were sent to Samoa to teach in English-medium schools partially explains this. Samoans wanted an education system that followed the New Zealand model. Another factor that contributed to challenges around learning Samoan was that the majority of *palagi* Sisters were middle-aged or older and the challenge of learning a new language was very real. Old age, middle age, or youth, have nothing to do with sincerity of motivation, enthusiasm, and commitment, but old and middle age can make learning a new language, and living in a very different culture, more demanding. Again, a few Sisters undertook to do work – dispensary work, agricultural projects, and pastoral ministry – for which they had minimal qualifications. Not that an adequate professional education would have been a panacea for all difficulties they encountered, but Sisters in schools were qualified and all appreciated their time in Samoa as teachers.

On a more positive note, life and work in Samoa fulfilled a need for many Mission Sisters who had entered the Congregation in the expectation that they would be sent to the foreign missions. That had seldom happened as episcopal priorities around staffing parish primary schools usually trumped congregational imperatives. However, as government monies began to trickle into the Catholic school system in the 1970s, a process that accelerated in the 1980s, it was possible to employ more lay teachers. Unsurprisingly, the influx of *palagi* Sisters into Samoa coincided with the integration of Catholic schools into the state system. When *palagi* Sisters returned to New Zealand, a significant number of them were involved with Samoan migrant communities particularly in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch.

Both the nineteenth and twentieth century narratives of the Mission Sisters in Samoa highlight how important it is for those who work outside their country of origin to understand the relationship of their own culture, congregational culture, and the culture and language of those among whom they are living and working, and to be able to critique all three in order to identify differences and commonalities, strengths, and weaknesses. Such realities point to the wisdom of the requirement in the 1984 General Chapter document that programmes be provided "as soon as possible for those Sisters who are preparing to work in another culture or who have already been doing so for some years…. [T]he Sisters should participate in a specific cultural orientation programme, if available".[38] However, in a pre-Vatican II Church, European superiority over other cultures was accepted as normative. Finally, Barbier's efforts to safeguard the Congregation's autonomy at the cost ignoring local cultural practice seems problematic for the contemporary Sister. As Ollivier writes:

> To introduce elements of the monastic life, imported from Europe, was judged a

> flagrant contradiction to the Polynesian way of life. Bishop Elloy … stressed the "odious" character of these innovations: according to the Samoan mentality, "one only hides oneself when one is doing evil … I have told the Reverend Mother that her turn [revolving door in parlour] was scandalous, that it would bring dishonour on the Sisters, stir up a thousand ideas, and set tongues wagging.[39]

Although the two narratives of Mission Sisters in Samoa emerge out of different historical contexts, both point to the importance of engaging with local culture in a constructive way.

Mission Sisters working beyond their country of origin – the pre-Vatican II story

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, New Zealand-born Sisters were being sent to Australia and to what was then the Indian Empire – present-day India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. By 1930 Sisters had also left New Zealand for England, Canada, and Vietnam. Although there are important differences between New Zealand, Australian, Canadian, and English cultures, there are also important commonalities so attention will be directed to the Asian countries to which Sisters were sent as cultural differences were significant.

In 1891, the first New Zealand Sister, Isabelle Hewson (Marie de Jésus Adolescent RNDM) left for India and was living and working in Burma when that Japanese invaded that country in 1941. Shortly after her release from prison in 1945, she wrote,

> Our Sisters from Akyab [Sittwe] together with the priests and civilians were forced by the Burmese rebels to undertake a dreadful month's journey, through jungle and over rivers to Rangoon where they were handed over to the Japanese commander … Next day those belonging to enemy countries were sent off to the internment camp at Tavoy ... I was left with our four Burmese Sisters at the convent at Sandoway [Thandwei] as we were all ill with fever, and the doctor forbade the soldiers to take us away. The British bombing of all Japanese-held towns began and before long four Allied planes emptied their bullets on our mission-station. We had to escape to a native Chin village. Here the [Burmese] Sisters stayed off and on for two years, helping the poor natives in every way they could. I, being British was enemy No. 1, and was not allowed to stay with them but had to return to jail in Sandoway. As I was really sick, and an 'old woman' as the Japanese said, they allowed Sister Mary St George [Burmese] to remain in jail with me. Before long the jail was so badly bombed that all the prisoners had to leave it. As the convent was the largest building still standing, we were marched down the road to it. Sister and I were not allowed to enter the convent but had to take up our abode in the cow shed. During the monsoon rains we had to hold an umbrella over our heads night and day. Here we remained for five months.[40]

Hewson's story demonstrates the dedication and self-sacrifice of those Sisters who first left Aotearoa for distant provinces with no expectation of returning home. Perhaps the following from the 1928 publication that celebrated the arrival of the Mission Sisters in Christchurch in 1868, sums up well the Sisters' understanding of work in the foreign missions.

> So even now among the extensive good works that engaged Sister Marie's [Barbier] attention in London, the persistent voices of the little savage children in far-away lands who had no one to help them continued to haunt her even as they had done from her earliest childhood.[41]

Such an understanding of the goals of missionary activity was well captured by Estalla Clarkson (Mary de Sales RNDM) who went to India in 1918, and lived and worked there for almost fifty years. She describes the work of the Sisters in Raliang, Assam, India:

> This is a real mission in every sense of the word. Besides three day schools [no boarding accommodation attached], we have an orphanage and an industrial school in which our orphans and the young girls of the village are employed in making lace, stocking cane mats and weaving. We find this scheme of employment an excellent means of raising the morals of the young girls and women, who during the rainy season, are unable to work in their fields – an enforced idleness which proves anything but beneficial to their souls.

Gwen-Mary McCarthy (Mary Floride RNDM) went to Vietnam in 1928, remaining there for over forty years. In her contribution to the 1928 publication, she wrote,

> [Lang-Son] was founded little more than a year ago [1927] … principally with the object of commencing a school for native girls. This however, is not our sole work – there is also a European school, and a dispensary. We are hopeful besides that St Joseph will give us the means of commencing a hospice where the sick may receive more systematic care, a crèche where little angels may fly to heaven (they are usually beyond hope of cure when given up by their parents), or a workroom where the influence of the school may be continued, or supplied for, to the many who do not come to school.[42]

When young New Zealand Sisters left for the foreign missions, they realised that this was a life-long commitment. There would be no home leave every three years, nor the possibility of regular communication with Sisters and family back home. These women were heading off into the unknown to save souls, who if not baptised would be lost forever. As American historian J. P. Daughton writes, "From conversion, all else followed…. [The Sisters] provided humanitarian services such as orphanages, leper hospitals and care for the sick and elderly, but such services

also aided in conversion…. [T]he missionary had to possess three characteristics: faith, zeal, and readiness for sacrifice".[43] The early writings of New Zealand-born Sisters reflect an almost apocalyptic urgency around baptising and converting people so that they are saved. Such urgency implicitly denies that other cultures had salvific possibilities.[44]

The post-Vatican II story

But was that situation changed by Vatican II's teachings around culture? Certainly, mission understood as proclamation of the good news to those who had not yet heard it was changing in a post-colonial age. After the Council, non-Christian cultures were not to be regarded as satanic. Proclamatory understandings of the good news were also subverted by the Western awareness of other important priorities – health work, development projects that would enhance income-generating possibilities for those involved, participation in formation programmes in the Asian provinces, and relief work in war-ravaged countries. While transplanting Western Catholicism into other parts of the world was no longer seen as a priority, Western development models were uncritically seen as solutions to many of the challenges facing Asian, African, and Latin American countries. However, even if such works were seen as desirable by Mission Sisters, little thought was given as to how they might best happen. Thus, while some conversational fluency was seen as desirable, little was offered in the way of more in-depth awareness of the new and very different cultural context in which a Sister would be working. Nor were adequate language courses that would enhance a Sister's capacity to engage effectively with local people offered to many.

The stories of New Zealand-born Sisters demonstrates that while sincerity and dedication are essential qualities for anyone intending to work outside of their own culture, these qualities need to be complemented by an ability to learn another language, the capacity to positively engage at some depth theoretically and experientially with other cultures, and a demonstrated ability to live in community with those whose socio-economic-cultural contexts are different from their own. Then Mission Sisters will know "that the Holy Spirit dwells at the heart of all peoples and cultures", which in turn will allow them to "celebrate our unity in diversity and embrace the grace of difference with simplicity and joy" (#38).[45]

Notes

1 Euphrasie Barbier, letter of July 27 1888 to Mother Marie de Chantal.
2 'Culture' in nineteenth century France more usually referred to music, arts, literature, or other areas of aesthetic value, what today might be referred to as 'high culture'.
3 Twenty-second General Chapter, "Witnessing to the Gospel: Beyond All Frontiers" (Casa Santa Rosa, Grottoferrata: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1984), 17-18.
4 Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Ana Jofré, "Reading the Lived Experience of Vatican II – Words and Images: The Canadian Province of the Sisters of Our Lady of Missions in Peru", *CCHA Historical Studies* 81, (2015): 41.
5 Maureen McBride, "The Future of Our RNDM Mission in Older Provinces, 2003" (Rome: RNDM Archives). No further information available.
6 Twenty-sixth General Chapter, "RNDM Earth Community: We are One, We are Love" (Pattaya: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2008), 10; see too "Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, Handbook on Mission" (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2017).
7 *Constitutions*, 2014, #38.
8 *Constitutions*, 2014, #34.
9 See "Handbook on Mission", 11.
10 Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, "Handbook on Initial and Ongoing Formation" (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2017), 11.
11 Ibid., 45.
12 Ibid., 48.
13 Twenty-third General Chapter, "Facilitation for Mission" (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1990), 1.
14 Twenty-fifth General Chapter, "If You Knew the Gift of God" (Pattaya: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2002).
15 Twenty-sixth General Chapter, "RNDM Earth Community: We are One, We are Love", 20.
16 Brian Stanley, "Colonialism", in *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, ed. Mark A. Lamport (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefied, 2018), 180.
17 Bruno-Jofré and Jofré, "Reading the Lived Experience of Vatican II – Words and Images: The Canadian Province of the Sisters of Our Lady of Missions in Peru", 32-33.
18 Ibid., 33
19 General Council, Procès-verbal, October 12 1912.
20 Mary Mathew, "Gleanings from the beginnings of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions in the East", (Kolkata: 2010). No further information available.
21 Euphrasie Barbier, *Constitutions of the Daughters of Notre Dame des Missions* (Hastings: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1936), #2.
22 A commemorative book records that Te Kooti had captured a banner that he used as a war flag although that had not been its intended purpose. "It was the work of hands dedicated to peace - the Sisters in the Napier Convent. They had made the scarlet banner as a decorative trophy for the chiefs of Heretaunga, Ngati Kahungunu, some of whose daughters were pupils at the Napier school. It was a tapering pennant of red silk on which symbolic emblems were embroidered in white, a conical mountain represented New Zealand, a cross, Christianity, a heart pierced by an arrow, the sufferings of the Māori people. When it was finished, it was presented to Karauria, father of Airini Tonore, who as the wife of G.P. Donnelly, was a frequent visitor to, and friend of the school". *Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions: 125th Jubilee, 1865-1990*, ed., The Jubilee Committee (Gisborne: The Gisborne Herald, 1993), 10. See too Judith Binney, *Redemption Songs* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1995), 132-133.
23 Euphrasie Barbier, "Regulation of the Providence of Our Lady of the Missions", in "Writings of Mother Mary of the Heart of Jesus, 1851-1870, (Rome: RNDM Archives).
24 Letter of Euphrasie Barbier to Euloge Reignier SM, October 1 1873.
25 Jane Tolerton, *Convent Girls* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1994), 202.
26 The original copy of this communication, dated December 1940, is in the "Ngaruawahia House Book, 1928-1971". It was translated by Mary Martin McCort RNDM (Tainui).
27 "Opotiki House Book, 1890-1925".
28 Marjorie Leach, "Wiremu Tamihana: A Study in Maori Statesmanship" (M.A., The University of Auckland, 1932), 2.
29 Ellen Murphy, "The Missionary Work of Bishop Pompallier" (M.A., The University of Auckland, 1932), 3.

30 Susan Smith, *Call to Mission: The Story of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa* (Auckland: David Ling, 2010), 196.

31 Ibid., 199.

32 Donal Kerr, Jean-Claude Colin, Marist: *A Founder in an Era of Revolution and Restoration: The Early Years 1790-1836* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2000), 300.

33 "Meeting of the General Council, Lyon, February 28 1868", in Marie Bénédicte Ollivier, *Missionary Beyond Boundaries: Euphrasie Barbier 1829-1893*, trans., Beverley Grounds (Rome: Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, 2007), 207.

34 Ibid., quoting from the letter of Louis Elloy SM to Euphrasie Barbier, October 24 1873.

35 Smith, *Call to Mission*, 229.

36 Ibid., 239-240.

37 Zita Anderson RNDM, "The Future of the Sataua Community", September 7 1988 (Petone: RNDM Archives).

38 1984 General Chapter, 17-18.

39 Ollivier, 358, quoting from letter of Louis Elloy SM to Euphrasie Barbier, February 25 1878.

40 Noreen Mya Sie, "Myanmar 1897-2011", in *Zeal for Mission: The Story of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions 1861-2011*, ed. Susan Smith (Auckland: David Ling, 2012), 148.

41 "Life of the Very Reverend Mother Marie du Coeur de Jésus, Foundress and First Superioress General of the Sisters of Notre Dame des Missions", in *Diamond Jubilee Magazine in Commemoration of the Foundation of the Convent of Notre Dame des Missions, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1868-1928* (Christchurch: Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, 1928), 8-16.

42 Gwen-Mary McCarthy, "Lang-Son Mission Station on the Hills", in *Diamond Jubilee Magazine in Commemoration of the Foundation of the Convent of Notre Dame des Missions, Christchurch, New Zealand, 1868-1928* (Christchurch: Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, 1928), 81.

43 J. P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44-45.

44 See Gerard Hall, SM. "The Political Dimension of Colinian Eschatology and Praxis", *Forum Novum* 1990, 213-239.

45 *Constitutions – Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions* (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2014), #38.

Chapter Seven

Living Together

Living in Community – Yesterday and Today

Living with other people is not always easy. In my sixty-two years as a Mission Sisters, there have been some challenges, some sad times, but they have been more than outweighed by the blessings that have come my way. In this chapter, I will look at what living together prior to Vatican II meant for Mission Sisters and how that way of living began to change in the aftermath of the Council, a process that speeded up as numbers decreased and as the different ministries which engaged the Sisters were increasingly de-institutionalised. I will first look at living in community, that is, my experience of living with other Mission Sisters under the same roof. In the second part of the chapter, I explore how our lives were governed by those in authority. I will examine our living in community by identifying those developments that have emerged as significant for me:

1. hierarchy to inclusivity and mutuality;
2. saying prayers and/or praying;
3. "holy habits" to secular dress;
4. uniformity to unity in diversity'
5. "common life" yesterday and today.

Hierarchy to inclusivity and mutuality

On 2 February 1959, I became a postulant with the Sisters of Lady of the Missions, and it was like stepping into a new and strange world. Although I do not think I had ever heard of the word "hierarchy", I realise now that I was entering into a deeply and strongly entrenched hierarchical world. For example, there were four of us postulants all about the same age, and I was the third youngest according to date of birth, but as I had arrived first to Christchurch, I was ranked as the oldest postulant. This meant that I "enjoyed" a higher place in the chapel, the dining room/refectory, and in our common novitiate room. Ranking was incredibly important, and words like "inclusion", or "mutuality", were of little significance in pre-Vatican II days. The list in Barbier's C*onstitutions* clearly demonstrated the importance of ranking so that we all knew our place:

Chapter II – Members of the Institute and their Order of Rank

1. The Superior-general takes precedence everywhere over all the other Sisters, including the Provincial and Local Superiors in their Provinces
2. The Assistants-General
3. The Secretary-General
4. The Bursar-General
5. The ex-Superiors-General in the Mother-House
6. The Provincial Superiors according to the date of their first profession
7. The Local Superiors according to the date of their first profession
8. The Professed Sisters of Perpetual Vows; after them the Professed Sisters of temporary vows, according to the date of their first profession, or of their age
9. The Postulants according to their date of entry.[1]

Barbier also required that the Congregation be

> composed on two classes of Sisters – Choir Sisters and Auxiliary Sisters [sometimes referred to as lay Sisters]. The Choir Sisters are entrusted principally with the government and administration of the Congregation, the work of education, and the care of the sick. They alone have the right of being elected to office. The Auxiliary Sisters are employed chiefly in the various manual works of the house. They have neither the right of electing nor of being elected to office.[2]

Choir Sisters were better educated and they or their parents could afford to pay a dowry. The 1947 General Chapter legislated that the Congregation was to no longer have Choir Sisters. But the ideology of hierarchy was deeply ingrained into the collective psyche of Mission Sisters, and most of us, including postulants and novices, uncritically accepted this situation.

Class and wealth-based distinctions were the norm in almost all religious congregations prior to Vatican II, and while such distinctions have been legislated out of existence, some cultures in the Congregation are happier than others to hold fast to some aspects of hierarchy, for example one province still refers to the Congregation Leader as Superior General, although this latter term was phased out from the 1996 general chapter onwards. Though the distinction between Choir and Auxiliary Sisters has gone, there are cultural realities that can mean the emergence of new exclusions. Perhaps in a province such as Aotearoa, advanced years, or a lack of digital skills, can mean a certain exclusion. In other provinces where median ages hover around forty-five, perceived youthfulness can also be exclusionary.

But Vatican II meant change. Religious congregations were required to have a special chapter to begin that process of change. For Mission Sisters, the 1969 Special General Chapter meant how we lived together began to change. First, humiliating

penitential practices, and chapters of faults quietly disappeared, as did the rankings required by Barbier. These losses were not regretted. The role of the superior began to change and instead of being monarch of all she surveyed in the community, her role changed quite markedly as the new language of subsidiarity and collegiality was accorded more importance. As the movement away from institutional living towards smaller communities accelerated, the role of a local superior in smaller communities was questioned. A new question emerged in the 1980s: is a local superior really needed? The consensus suggested moving beyond local superior to Sisters in a community sharing responsibility for their life together would be more appropriate. This movement was not without its challenges but most Sisters were happy to go along with such a development.

But further change was about to happen. From the 1980s onwards, a small number of Sisters began to live outside of an RNDM community, by which I mean Sisters living together under the same roof. There were often good reasons for this – living with an aged parent who needed 24/7 care; a particular pastoral ministry; deaths of Sisters meant a community of three Sisters became a community of one, and that a Sister who might opt to continue on as a pastoral presence in a particular parish; and, personal needs which acknowledged that living singly was the right choice for some. Living singly is now the norm rather than the exception; in September 2023, thirty-four Sisters were living singly, ten Sisters were in care, and sixteen Sisters were living in communities of two. In Auckland, Hamilton, and Christchurch, seventeen Sisters are living singly on the same sites – in town-house type accommodation which provides them with the opportunity to gather for their midday meal as happens in Christchurch, or for regular meetings and prayer. De-institutionalised living has also meant that Sisters in need of 24/7 care are now in rest homes or their equivalents, something unheard of prior to Vatican II. Sisters living in the same area see pastoral ministry for such Sisters as an important responsibility. The situation in which we now find ourselves is paralleled in other Sisters' congregations, and to a lesser degree in men's congregations in Aotearoa.

It is difficult to know how history will judge this development as it represents something very different from previous understandings of religious life. Contemporary living singly is not comparable to the eremitic life of those women and men who left their homes to live in deserts, and living in a community of two where responsibility is shared is very different from community life as envisaged by Benedict, the father of Western monasticism in the sixth century. Mission Sisters living singly is paralleled in society as it is estimated that in Aotearoa in 2018, almost fifty percent of all households were made up of a single person.[3] The rate for living alone is higher among those aged seventy plus.

Mission Sisters in our Asian and African provinces have questioned this development. In reports from the different provinces prior to the writing of the

2014 *Constitutions*, we read, "India South notes that living separately for mission is not in keeping with the RNDM charism, while Central India is confused that the issue should even be raised".[4] The Kenyan Province also voiced their concern:

> [W]ith the concept of living singly by raising the question of finance ....[t]he underlying questions ... relate firstly to personal responsibility and accountability, and to the increased costs that single living involves as opposed to those of a group living in community. Single living relates to both finance and mission. Living a common life, contributing to, and receiving from a common purse, have always been integral dimensions of religious life as both the *Rule of St Augustine*, and Euphrasie's *Constitutions* indicate.[5]

It is more costly living singly but all Mission Sisters in Aotearoa are funded from a common purse, and all income that they receive is placed in a common fund. Undoubtedly living singly and living in communities of two has subverted for ever the idea of hierarchy at local level. We will later see whether this same subversion is operative at province and congregation levels.

Saying prayers and/or praying

As a new postulant, I was struck by the emphasis on the rule of silence. Silence was seen as integral in our preparation to be professed as a Mission Sisters, and transgressions required public confession before the community. We were exhorted to walk in "the presence of God", so walking down to school, out to the clothes-line, or to the chapel, provided us with occasions to remember that we were in the presence of God. We were exhorted to say short prayers, such as asking the Sacred Heart of Jesus to have mercy on us. Our relationships with God – after all we were preparing to be "spouses of Christ" – was prioritised over human relationships, which could distract us from our major task, a close and loving relationship with God. We soon knew better than to share any of our personal histories with one another. As historian Jo Ann Kay McNamara writes, "nuns have long been rigorously trained to have no history, personal or communal".[6]

The rule of silence became less a matter of obligation and more a matter of choice from the 1970s onwards. Nowadays, we can wander around listening to Spotify, talking, or not talking, whenever and wherever to whom we wish. Striking the happy medium can be an elusive goal in a media-saturated world.

On reflection, I think we were taught to say prayers, rather than to pray. Fortunately, after the Council, the movement from nineteenth century devotional French spirituality with its emphasis on rosaries, stations of the cross, litanies, and prayers to saints and angels, to more biblically based prayer and more insights into what contemplative prayer required of us has helped me in my own prayer life, and in the lives of many other Mission Sisters. Understanding and appreciating God's

presence in all creation has helped me on my spiritual journey. Being in the presence of God makes more sense to me as I wander around my rural neighbourhood in awe at seasonal changes, the greater presence of piwakawaka in the cooler months, the tui and kereru feasting on the tender new leaves of the kowhai, and both drinking too plentifully of the different exotic cherry trees. This is more life-giving than the short mantra-like prayers so important in a pre-Vatican II era.

Pre-Vatican II religious life encouraged a very regular prayer life as the following *horarium/*timetable demonstrates:

5.30 Angelus, Morning prayer, followed by Morning Office, Mass.
12.00 Angelus and Particular Examen (a personal examination about a particular fault we were supposed to be overcoming).
4.45 Spiritual reading in common. We were all expected to listen attentively to the same book, irrespective of our age, or levels of energy after a busy day in school. There were always some heads nodding off.
5.00 Evening Office, Rosary, Benediction. In Christchurch, after Mass each morning the Blessed Sacrament was taken from the Tabernacle and placed in the monstrance surrounded by lit candles. At Benediction, the priest blessed us all and then removed the Blessed Sacrament from the monstrance and returned it to the tabernacle. As novices we spent extra time each day praying in front of Blessed Sacrament in the monstrance. This latter practice ceased once we were professed.
8.00 Night Office, Night Prayer, general examination of conscience, and off to bed around 9.15.

For Mission Sisters, prior to Vatican II, time together in what were called "spiritual exercises" totalled up to about four and a half hours per day. We also expected to try and fit in personal visits to the chapel as well. When we left the chapel in the morning before breakfast, midday, and evening meals, we processed to the refectory saying litanies to the saints or Mary, the mother of Jesus, the whole way.

What this extremely regular prayer life taught us was the importance of regular spiritual exercises in our lives. But again, in the decades after Vatican II, many of the devotions have disappeared. Vatican II rightly encouraged Catholics to reclaim the centrality of the bible in their lives and so Sisters began praying with gospel for the day, being responsible for their own spiritual reading, being delighted at being able to pray in English rather than Latin, and overall, appreciative of the greater freedom in their prayer life.

Having said that I would be surprised if Mission Sisters today were spending over four hours in prayer every day. I cannot remember the last time I was at Benediction. Very few of the houses in which Sisters are now living have chapels, and nor do priests come every day for Mass. Sisters go to the local parish Church for Mass but not necessarily every day.

Liberationist and eco-theologies are now becoming significant for many Sisters as they identify new entry-points into prayer. The bible is still important for many Sisters but there is an awareness that other religions, indigenous traditions, or reflections from a variety of authors, can also be important entry-points. A recent report that sought to understand what was happening to eighteen women's

congregations in England and Ireland throws some light on what appears to be happening in Aotearoa.

> The spirituality of some participants is expanding to include an emphasis on cosmology and ecology. This articulates a desire to experience integration with the universe as Sisters understand themselves as part of 'something greater.' This is sometimes expressed in a growth beyond the boundaries of the institutional Church. It is unclear whether this embracing of eco-spirituality represents a reaction against or a pull towards something. In some reflection groups it seems to represent the yearning for deeper union with all which may be connected with the process of spiritual maturity.[7]

Whether or not the quite radical developments in the prayer life of some Mission Sisters "expresses a growth beyond the boundaries of the institutional Church" probably merits careful examination.

However, my early years as a Mission Sisters taught me the necessity of prayer, and the need for a regular rhythm in one's prayer life. This has proved to be a blessing in more than one way, and I am pleasantly surprised at contemporary research that indicates how our prayer life can ensure better mental and physical health as we age. American health researcher Deborah McManus, drawing on research in both Europe and the USA, has shown how

> [s]piritual and religious practice infuse human existence, and what is now known through research reveals its significant connections with aging, health, and other aspects of well-being.... [R]eligious and spiritual practice closely connect to meditation and promote both physical and mental relaxation facilitating the process of beneficial aging. Religious practice has been strongly associated with better health habits, including lower smoking and alcohol consumption and greater likelihood of adherence to preventative health care. A significant number of studies has shown that there is an association between cognitive performance and lifestyle practices such as religion and spirituality in older adults. In summary, increased life expectancy with better health outcomes is now of paramount concern to health professionals and researchers worldwide.[8]

Secrecy and transparency

Secrecy, and lack of transparency were also very much part and parcel of pre-Vatican II life for Mission Sisters. There was virtually no communication between superiors and Sisters about decisions made at both the collective and personal levels. For example, in 1965, I was phoned by the Provincial Superior and told to move from Christchurch to Lower Hutt to teach in school there at the end of the week. No opportunity for dialogue was even considered, and nor did I expect it. We were told what to do and we obeyed, at least most of us did. In this instance,

the Sisters whom I was meant to replace in Lower Hutt refused to move and so I stayed in Christchurch. Such examples of independent decision-making were very rare indeed.

The hierarchical governance structures in place effectively meant that the higher up in such structures one was, the more one knew. Lowly young professed Sisters knew virtually nothing. There were no community meetings that provided forums for conversation about the life of the community or the shared work of the Sisters in the primary and secondary schools. Prior to Vatican II, Sisters were to think of superiors, whether community, province, or general, as those with a hot line to God, and so they could pass on to lesser mortals what God's will was for them. Much has changed but improving communication skills and processes is not a task that ever comes to completion, while changing perceptions around leadership still abound.

"Holy habits" to secular dress

Great was our excitement when Sisters delegates returned from the 1966 General Chapter to tell us that we could modify our habits. In Aotearoa, we were to be in our new habits by Christmas Eve. What excitement there was for us all, as those of us who could sew speedily took to the sewing room. Despite all the excitement the changes in dress after the 1966 General Chapter were minimal indeed. Fortunately, in Aotearoa, we were spared the harassment and hostility that American Catholic Sisters often experienced when they modified their holy habits or even worse began to wear secular dress.

In any conversation around the habit it is well to remember that habits were not too dissimilar from the clothing worn by women at the time a particular congregation was founded. But it was apparent that what might have worked in the nineteenth century was not going to work in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Second, the habits and their shapelessness suggested they had much to do with concerns around women's sexuality. One important function of habits was to ensure the men did not find Sisters sexually attractive. Donning the holy habit in the morning was accompanied by mandatory prayers, often about remaining chaste. One American commentator sees the furore that accompanied dress changes as originating in ongoing confusion among Catholics around gender. Therese Keely writes,

> Catholic Sisters did not fit neatly into the gender norms of the Catholic Church. They were not male. And the Sisters – because they could not marry or have children – could not fulfil the Catholic ideal of womanhood that equated it with motherhood. Consequently, women religious occupied an 'in-between' status in terms of their gender. At the same time, by leaving the Sisters' faces 'disembodied' and their bodies 'desexualised,' the habit 'functioned as a kind of camouflage….

> 'The habit also gave Sisters some power within a 'patriarchal Church and society.' Although women were locked out of Church leadership, Sisters occupied a higher place than laywomen. And the habit – as a visible reminder of their status as women religious – allowed Sisters to distinguish themselves from laywomen. Sisters' elevated status above laywomen changed, however, when Vatican II declared all commitments and vocations more or less equal.[9]

As the twentieth century drew to a close, individual tastes and wants were triumphing over the former requirement of uniformity. Sisters still wore a silver ring and were required to wear a small symbol with RNDM inscribed on it. Sometimes this happened and sometimes it did not. By the end of the second millennium trousers were part and parcel of many Sisters' wardrobes, truly amazing when we remember that in France, where the Congregation was founded, it was illegal for women to wear trousers up until 2013, although after World War II, few women worried about this law. In our Asian provinces, Sisters tend to wear a uniform dress, but one that reflects their own culture, rather than the habit designed by Barbier. Apart from one or two Sisters, most of us today in Aotearoa could not distinguished by our dress from lay women of a similar age.

Matthew's gospel has a little parable that I find helpful when thinking about the holy habits. Matthew writes, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened" (5:33). The yeast is lost in the cooking but this loss results in wonderful bread. I think religious life today in a secularised country can learn from this parable; we are part of our society, part of our neighbourhood, not separated by cloister, institutional life, or dress. Instead, we are there with other people, and through our good relationships with those whom we meet every day, we can witness to the mystery of God present in creation, and in those whom we meet. I am reminded too of an intervention by a Sisters at our 1969 Special General Chapter when another Sister was adamant that there should be no holy habit changes. In her intervention, the Sister stated that as far as she knew, Jesus spoke twice about clothing in the gospels. In Matt 6:5, Jesus asks why we should worry about clothing as the lilies of the fields neither toil nor spin but look all right, while in Matt 23:5, Jesus criticises the Pharisees for dressing differently from others.

Uniformity to "unity in diversity"

Two months before I became a novice in August 1959, we had to make our holy habits, and what a performance this was. Our early attempts at sewing holy habits, and there were nine very distinct items starting from underneath – chemise, guimpe, a long all enveloping black serge garment, scapular also down to the ground and guaranteed to make one shapeless, big sleeves worn over top of not-so-big sleeves when going to chapel for formal prayer times, a long black mantle or cape for

wearing to chapel for formal community prayer, mentonnière, bandeau and veil – and all these had to be made from serge in the case of black outer garments, linen for our headwear worn under the black veil – coif, bandeau, mentonnière – and cotton for guimpe, chemise, nightdress, and night veil.

As we embarked on the great sewing journey, the then French Superior General, accompanied by her assistant, arrived for the special visitation of the Aotearoa province. A major task of the accompanying Sister was to measure every item of a holy habit as we completed a particular piece, not always expertly. Because we were founded in France, everything was measured in centimetres, yet another challenge for an aspiring novice, and the assistant Sister was quick to point out the difference between nine and ten centimetres. Some unpicking and re-sewing took place, until all were carefully scrutinised and then passed. We wore the same uniform even down to correctly sewn button holes. Such uniformity was meant to achieve a dying to self. I am not sure that it did but it certainly ensured that when we stood in straight lines with heads bowed, faces partially hidden by coif and veil, and hands folded under our scapular, there was not much personality escaping. Holy habits were one important means of preventing us from being singular. Being uniform and not allowing an independent thought to escape was a wise and prudent course if one wanted to make it through to first profession after two years as a novice. Living a "common life", also required that we possessed nothing of our own. I never talked about "my shoes" but always about "our shoes" which of course were the shoes that only I wore. However, after my first profession the situation began to change, although it would be another four years before there were changes around the holy habit. Our way of life was to change dramatically.

The Mission Sisters' movement beyond uniformity evolved thanks to many different factors: an escape from the censorship that had precluded free choice around reading and TV viewing, freedom around what we wore, the disappearance of a cloistered life style, different ways of praying or making one's annual retreat, all of which resulted in more personal autonomy for everyone. Such developments cannot really be criticised and there is little doubt that they allowed for growth towards greater personal maturity.

What does "Common life" mean for Mission Sisters today?

From the *Rule of Saint Augustine*
2. In the first place – and this is the very reason for your being gathered together – you should live in the house in unity of spirit and you should have one soul and one heart entirely centred upon God (Acts 4:32)
3. And then you should not call anything your own but rather you should have everything in common. Food and clothing should be allotted to each of you by your Superior – not equally to all, because you are not all equally strong. Thus, you read in the Acts of the Apostles: "They had everything in common" (Acts 4:32) and distribution was made to each as any had need (Acts 4:35)
4. At the moment of entering the monastery those who had any property in secular life should hand it over willingly so that it becomes common property.[10]
2014 *Constitutions*
42. It is in contemplating the communion at the heart of the Trinity that we understand our call to live unity in our diversity, having one heart and one mind. The Rule of St Augustine invites us to the common life, community of goods, right relationships, prayer, simplicity, charity and humility.[11]

These texts from the *Rule of St Augustine* and the 2014 *Constitutions,* highlight the significance of living a "common life", so significant in pre-Vatican II religious life. As the narrative about holy habits suggests, it was a key factor in ensuring uniformity in respect of dress and living quarters. "Common life" does not figure prominently in the 2014 *Constitutions,* perhaps because at a personal level, the way we live and dress is so far removed from how "common life" was understood in pre-Vatican II religious life.

So, what might "common life" mean for today's Mission Sisters in Aotearoa? Perhaps "common purse" is a more appropriate expression. "Common purse" means that all income is centralised and then dispensed according to the personal budget that each Sisters is required to send into the province administration annually. There are guidelines as to how much a Sisters can request in respect of holidays, personal expenses, or food, while major expenses a community or Sister may incur such as surgery, new car, or house painting are paid directly by the province administration.

The province is also required to annually send money to the Rome-based Congregationen Leadership Team to help cover their expenses and more importantly to help support other parts of the Congregation in their different ministries and formation programmes. While the uniformity associated with pre-Vatican II life has gone in Aotearoa, the belief in the value of the "common purse" is important at personal, community, province, and congregation levels, as it ensures a certain equity in respect of financial management. Today's understanding of "common life" encourages greater personal autonomy, while at the same time the congregational emphasis on our responsibility to share our resources with other members of the congregation encourages a greater awareness of their lives and

ministries, and our shared responsibilities towards one another.

Government, Management, Administration, and Leadership

It is helpful to recognise that different terms can be used when talking about governance of the Congregation or of the province. Distinguishing among them, and then trying to identify what might be the best term is not without its challenges. 'Government' I understand to refer to "the group of people who are responsible for controlling a country or a state", 'management' is best defined as "the act of running and controlling a business or similar organization", while 'administration' is "the process or act of organizing the way that something is done". 'Leadership' means "the action of leading a group of people or organisation",[12] a definition that seems to farewell notions of control or running an organisation and which suggests the language of mutuality, inclusivity, and subsidiarity, more evident in congregation documentation from the 1990s onwards.

In 1973, English theologian Michael Winter wrote an insightful book, *Mission or Maintenance.* Winter argued that despite the excitement generated by Vatican II, and the call to new expressions of missionary activity, some of those in authority were more interested in management than in mission. Winter understood mission, among other things, as embracing the conciliar language of collegiality and subsidiarity.[13] Winter's juxtaposition of mission/maintenance makes understanding the situation around governance/leadership easier today. The Aotearoa province's median age and ever-declining numbers suggest that management understood as the act of running an organisation reflects the reality of the province rather than leadership, which is understood as empowering Sisters for mission.

To appreciate what is meant by this, some of the texts around government/leadership in our different *Constitutions* will be examined to see if the aspirational statements found in the more recent *Constitutions* are being realised in our-day-to-day lives as Mission Sisters in Aotearoa.

Barbier devotes forty-six pages to what she calls "[t]he Government of the Institute".[14] Her required reliance on Canon Law is apparent on every page as the duties and responsibilities of superiors are listed in great detail. There are similarly detailed descriptions of other important pre-Vatican II offices, the Portress who is distinguished by her "fidelity to every observance"[15] for this office, the Sisters Sacristan "who will esteem herself happy to have an employment which brings her so close to Our Lord, and allows her to be oftener in His Divine Presence",[16] and the Infirmarian who "should as far as possible possess some knowledge of the care to be given to the sick, whom she will esteem as suffering members of Jesus Christ".[17] The disappearance of these office after Vatican II points to the disappearance of the cloister, of chapels, daily Mass in most communities, and of large communities where it was easier to provide 24/7 care for sick and infirm Sisters.

Barbier then writes that the Superior General is to love all Sisters "with a motherly affection…. [She] is to be kind and affable towards the Sisters who are weak, but of good will, indulgent to all that only proceeds from frailty, she knows how to exhibit firmness and if necessary inflexibility in order to correct those Sisters who would sow the seeds of discord, tepidity, and insubordination in the family".[18]

A hundred or so years after Barbier's *Constitutions* were approved, the language around the office of Superior General has begun to radically change. The *Interim Constitutions* describe the

> Mother General as the centre of unity in the whole congregation. She is essentially concerned with the constant renewal of its religious life, the effectiveness of its apostolic works, and the spiritual and temporary well-being of each of the provinces, houses, and Sisters. She fulfils her office in a spirit of deep faith, constant prayer, and Christ-like charity.[19]

In the 1979 *Constitutions*, the language around the role of the Superior General suggests a step backwards from that found in the *Interim Constitutions*, and a return to a more hierarchical understanding of governance within the congregation. We read that

> the Superior General is the head of the congregation. She exercises her authority in accordance with the Constitutions. To her faithfulness and foresight, are entrusted government and administration of the whole Congregation. *Every Sisters should show her ready and willing obedience as being the one to whom God through the Church has confided the care of us all* (my italics). She strives to keep the charism of the Congregation alive and dynamic and by love and concern for each Sister, she promotes constant renewal of the life and mission of the congregation. By virtue of her office, she has authority over every Sister as well as over all provinces and all houses, always having due respect for the *Constitutions*.[20]

The 1996 General Chapter mandated a significant shift in the language used of those who held office in the Congregation. Instead of Superior General, there would be a Congregational Leader, and instead of a General Council there would be a Congregational Leadership Team. Instead of the Provincial Superior, there would be a Provincial Leader and instead of a Provincial Council there would be a Provincial Leadership Team. This movement beyond militaristic language such as "general" and the language of superiority/inferiority that "superior" could imply was well received by Sisters.

By the time the 2014 *Constitutions* were presented to the Sisters, we read that the

> primary role of the congregation leader is to keep the charism alive and active, to lead, animate and unify the congregation in its life and mission. In accordance with constitutions and norms of the congregation, the congregation leader has

> authority over all provinces, works of the congregation and the members. She works in collaboration with the council.[21]

Descriptions of the role of Superior General/Congregation Leader are paralleled in the job descriptions for Provincial Superior/Province Leader, and demonstrate a certain softening as it were of the language used. The 2014 *Constitutions* state that

> a province leader has personal responsibility, by virtue of the position she holds, in accordance with the constitutions. She accepts responsibility for the spiritual animation and pastoral care of the Sisters, oversight of ministries, visioning, and administration of the province. She acts in a spirit of unity with the congregation leadership team, keeping the Sisters of the province open to the local needs and to the life and mission of the whole congregation.[22]

What is happening about leadership in Aotearoa today where the most recent first profession was in 2000, where the median age is eighty-two, where there are no Sisters younger than sixty-four, and where, as of December 2023, there are fewer than seventy Mission Sisters?

Ever-diminishing numbers and an ever-rising median age have led to several developments. First, there has been the important and necessary work of handing over responsibility for province-owned secondary schools to trust boards. By the late 1980s, it was apparent that the long-term staffing of such school with Sisters was no longer possible. It was also apparent that the integration of Catholic schools into the state system required an expertise that suggested appointing suitably qualified lay people to trust boards was becoming more urgent. Today, the Province owns four secondary schools, with two of them still providing boarding accommodation for students. It seems likely that in the not-too-distant future, dioceses in which the schools are located, will take over ownership of and responsibility for them. Sisters recognise and accept that this is the right way to go.

Second, just as province leaderships and Sisters recognised that responsibility for province-owned schools can be given to lay people, something similar has happened around how best to care for our aged Sisters, that is, those in need of 24/7 care. The period of large convents with their associated institutional living where the aged could be well cared for has long gone. This reality led to the establishment of what was called "Mission Rest Home", which was opened in 1991 in New Plymouth, and where two Sisters qualified in gerontology care were appointed as chaplains. For the next eighteen years Mission Rest Home fulfilled an important need in the province before evolving into Adele Senior Living, providing independent living that served as a transition for those no longer living in their own accommodation but not yet ready to move into rest home care. This has proved a great move for Mission Sisters in the Taranaki region and also for

lay women and men in the same area.

Elsewhere in the province, Sisters requiring 24/7 care are in rest homes such as Nazareth House in Christchurch or the Little Sisters of the Poor in Auckland. In other parts of the province, living in Catholic rest homes is not possible but fortunately it is possible to find rest homes in which the Sisters are well looked after and are regularly visited by Sisters in the area. More recently, lay health-carers, often professionally trained nurses, have been appointed in some communities of the province. Their important task is to be with the Sisters when their health needs are more than can be met by nearby Sisters.

Third, the management of investment and property portfolios has become much more complex in recent years. That, coupled with the decline in the numbers of the Sisters who can serve as province bursars, means that qualified and salaried lay people have greater responsibility for such management, although the province leadership team retains overall responsibility. Generally speaking, the province has been well-served by lay staff, but there can be tension between what Sisters perceive as gospel values around the management of material resources and the more corporate values espoused by some lay staff. There can also be a certain concern about the isolation of the Sisters from decision-making processes that affect them. The employment of lay staff is on an upwards trajectory and so the need for better formation of lay staff in respect of congregation values must be an on-going process.

Fourth, in the third millennium, three of the Western provinces – France, the United Kingdom and Ireland, and Canada – have invited Sisters from Asan provinces to live and work in their provinces. While Aotearoa has had younger Sisters from Asian provinces coming here to study before returning to their home provinces, the province has not actively recruited Asian Sisters to come and live here, and be involved in different ministries. At the same time, since Vatican II a significant number of well-qualified Sisters from Aotearoa have generously worked in other provinces of the congregation, often in positions of significant responsibility. This in turn impacted the number of Sisters free to assume leadership roles in Aotearoa province. So now with no younger Sisters, and with a median age of eighty-two, those willing and able to serve as members of the province leadership team are few and far between, and our present trajectory looks as though things can only change more dramatically.

Tentative steps, very tentative steps I suspect, are being explored to see if responsibility for what has traditionally belonged to the province leadership team could be shared with an organisation such as Australian-based Emerging Futures Collective Limited (EFC), or with the winder Congregation through the appointment of a vicar provincial by the Congregational Leadership Team. In Australia, EFC has been set up by major superiors of religious congregations with a demographic profile similar to ours “to support and serve Religious Institutes

in transition, to provide access to a Canonical Delegate if needed and to provide shared services".[23] Most Sisters accept that new governance structures are required as we move into an uncertain future, and are keen to learn from our Australian and Canadian provinces which have embarked on such a journey.

As this chapter concludes, there is little doubt in my mind, that the Mission Sisters' story in Aotearoa is coming to an end. This is not something that is distressing to me as the history of religious life demonstrates that apostolic congregations such as ours, can have a time limit. The Mission Sisters' Congregation was founded for a specific purpose, the education of women and children above all in "pagan" countries, but Barbier's enthusiasm for foreign missions is no longer required in contemporary Aotearoa. However, that does nothing to mitigate the important work done since the Sisters' arrival in 1865.

Last year, saw the publication of a history of St Joseph's Maori Girls' College which in 1867 began life as a *Providence* where the Mission Sisters cared for and taught young Maori women and girls.[24] That wonderful story is a micro-story, as it were, of the macro story of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa. Malcolm Mulholland (Ngāti Kahungunu) traces the college's history when the Sisters were responsible for all aspects of life, and how gradually that responsibility was handed over to qualified and enthusiastic lay people, and in the case of the college, to Māori people. Does this mean failure on the part of the Mission Sisters, or does it rather suggest that as missionaries we have recognised that the foundational and important work of the Sisters has finished but that there is no need to worry about the future which belongs to others? The words of John the Baptist in John's gospel as he speaks about the coming of Jesus speak to me about the role of a missionary: "He [Jesus] must increase, I must decrease". A missionary is not into self-aggrandisement, or empire-building, but is simply there to hasten the coming of the Reign of God.

Notes

1 Euphrasie Barbier, *Constitutions of the Daughters of Notre Dame des Missions* (Hastings: Institute de Notre Dame des Missions, 1936), #6.
2 Barbier, Constitutions, #5.
3 See Stats NZ, Tatauranga Aotearoa, https://www.google.com/search?q=what+percentage+of+nz+population+live+alone&rlz=1C1CHWL_en&oq=what+percentage+of+nz+population+live+alone&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQABiiBDIHCAIQABiiBDIHCAMQABiiBDIHCAQQABiiBNIBCjE1NTU4ajBqMTWoAgCwAgA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8&bshm=rime/1, accessed September 3 2023
4 See Susan Smith, *Many Tongues: One Heart and One Mind: Rewriting Constitutions in an International Missionary Congregation of Women* (Nijmegen: Nijmegen Institute for Mission Studies, 2019), 92.
5 Ibid., 93.
6 Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 632.
7 Catherine Sexton and Gemma Simmonds, *Religious Life Vitality Project: Key Project Findings* (Durham University: For the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2015), 8.
8 Deborah McManus, "A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Roman Catholic Sisters and Successful Aging", *Journal of Holistic Nursing American Holistic Nurses Association* 38, no. 4, (2020), 352-353.
9 Therese Keeley, "Clothes Make the Nun? Feminism, Fashion, and Representations of Catholic Sisters in the 1980s", *Gender and History* 31, no. 2 (2019), 483.
10 *Constitutions – Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions* (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2014), 13.
11 Ibid., #42.
12 See Lesley Brown, ed., *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vols 1 & 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
13 See Michael Winter, *Mission or Maintenance: Study in New Pastoral Structures* (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, 1973).
14 Barbier, #259-437.
15 Ibid., #402.
16 Ibid., #406.
17 Ibid., #411.
18 Ibid., #274.
19 *Interim Constitutions and Directives, Dec. 8, 1969* (Hastings: Chapter of Renewal, Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1969), #81.
20 *Constitutions* (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1979), #132-133.
21 *Constitutions – Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions* (Rome: Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 2014), #106.
22 Ibid., #125.
23 *Emerging Futures Collective Limited*, https://www.emergingfuturescollaborative.org.au/, accessed 3 October 2023.
24 See Malcom Mulholland, *A History of St Joseph's Maori Girls' College* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2022).

Conclusion

A new expression has entered the lexicon of apostolic congregations of Catholic Sisters in the Western world – "coming to completion". This language recognises that rising median ages, declining membership, and little interest on the part of younger women in joining an apostolic congregation, could herald the disappearance of a significant number of congregations founded in the nineteenth century. Thus in 2023, the president of the Sisters of Charity in New York said in an interview that the Sisters had decided "to embark on a path to completion".[1]

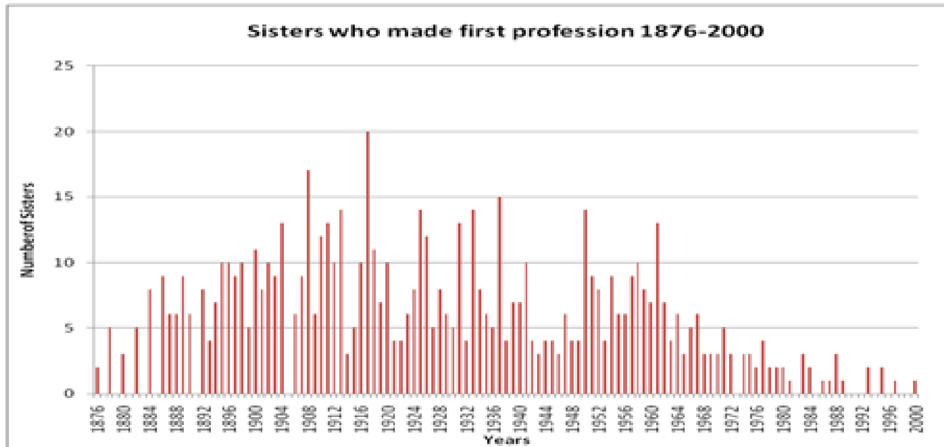
Are the Mission Sisters coming to completion in Aotearoa? In 1971, Mission Sisters worldwide totalled 1270,[2] while in 2023, they numbered 834. The decline in numbers is much more obvious in older Western provinces. For example, in 1961 in Aotearoa, on the eve of Vatican II, Mission Sisters numbered approximately two hundred and fifty Sisters whereas in late 2023, they numbered fewer than seventy. Commentators on religious life believe that the history of religious congregations is cyclic rather than linear, even if some Sisters prefer to think of an ever-expanding institutional growth. However, the reality is that apostolic congregations founded in the modern era have a life expectancy of between two to three hundred years. As the graph indicates, the number of young women seeking admission to the Congregation in Aotearoa is now virtually non-existent.[3] A 2022 PwC actuarial

report prepared for the province leadership team projects that by 2057, all Mission Sisters in Aotearoa will have deceased.[4] This presumes that Sisters from Asian provinces have not come to live and work in this province, and to date the different province leadership teams have not proactively pursued such a course.

As I noted above, a history of apostolic religious congregations suggests a cyclic pattern – foundation, growth, stabilisation and institutionalisation, and decline. This pattern is useful for appreciating what is happening for the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa today. The first Sisters arrived in 1865, and two years later were teaching in a parish primary school. A fee-paying school for girls of a "better class", was then opened, a development that helped augment the Sisters' meagre income, while in 1867, Sisters began caring for Māori girls in the *Providence* – all quite an achievement for four French Sisters in a British colony. By 1900, the Sisters were established in Napier, Christchurch, Nelson, New Plymouth, Ashburton, Hamilton, Pukekohe, Opotiki, Leeston, Stratford, Rangiora, and Kaikoura. A novitiate had been established, and in addition to teaching in parish primary schools, Sisters were teaching in congregation-owned secondary schools; and in caring for orphans in some places. (My mother recalls that when she was four, her mother had to go to hospital for surgery and so she went up to stay with the Sisters in Napier where she remembers being well-looked after). Between 1900 and 1962, immediately prior to Vatican II, another twenty-one houses were opened.

Prior to Vatican II, these foundations were all canonically established as 'convents', and required episcopal approval. After the Council, another thirty.one homes were opened but these were not canonically established convents, and usually two sisters or occasionally three lived in such homes. They were opened, closed, and re-opened as Sisters died or relocated to other homes more suited to aging personnel. That thirty-one homes were opened does not suggest an increase in the numbers of Sisters but rather reflects the growing movement from institutional living in large convents to smaller suburban houses. Today around forty-five Sisters are living in forty separate dwellings, while around while fewer than ten are in rest home accommodation.

I wonder if the way we now live might be one factor behind our "coming to completion". Patricia Wittberg has researched the sociological implications of American sisters moving from canonically established convents into apartments, or in the case of Mission Sisters in Aotearoa, to suburban homes. She argues that once Sisters have made such a move, often enough at their own request, they tend to stay put.[5] Wittberg claims that "[w]hile abandoning their communal convent lifestyles might have enabled individual sisters to avoid the 'severe price in psychological terms' that group living exacts from the members of intentional communities, their new more independent life styles might not be functional for the survival of the religious order as a whole".[6]



We Catholic Sisters often like to think of ourselves as counter-cultural. We take this to mean that we are opposed to many of the values characteristic of our culture today with its emphasis on individualism and consumerism. I wonder if we need to be more careful before making such claims, and take seriously Wittberg's claim that our independent life styles might not ensure the survival of our province here in Aotearoa.

Religious life will survive. That is certain – but it will survive in ways that are very different from those that were characteristic of religious life prior to Vatican II. Church history teaches that for the first six to seven hundred years of its life, Christianity was strong in those parts of the world we now call the Middle East, where today Christian churches are almost non-existent. From the early Middle Ages through to the twentieth century, Christian churches were strong and vibrant throughout Europe and responsible for an extraordinary missionary outreach to the Americas, Asia. Africa and Oceania. Now those churches, like religious life, are in decline.

The statistics show how the growth of the Mission Sisters peaked in 1916, some sixty years after the arrival of the first Sisters in Napier. There were spurts of growth after 1916 but the end of Vatican II coincided with a steady decline, the most recent first profession was in 2000 and that Sister, who was then finally professed six years later, is now in her sixties. It would seem as though the writing is on the wall. That initial and exciting growth, and the stability with its corollary of increasing institutionalisation that followed, suggest that the institutionalisation contains within it the seeds of decline.

Irish theologian, Diarmuid O'Murchú, has written extensively on the decline and fall of religious congregations,[7] and argues that as accelerating rates of decline set in, congregations are faced with two options: to allow such acceleration to continue;

or, to seriously engage with the task of refounding, a strategy first enunciated by New Zealand-born anthropologist, Gerald Arbuckle SM.[8] Arbuckle visited Aotearoa in the late 1980s to lecture to congregational leaders about refounding but the process followed by him and David Fleming SJ failed to energise Catholic Sisters. O'Murchú argues that

> [t]he initial vision [of a particular congregation after Vatican II] was hyped with euphoria and false expectation. Some thought the refounding process would commence almost immediately and produce a new breakthrough in a matter of a few years. Although Arbuckle contextualised the refounding process within the breakdown of an old system (the chaos), many did not grasp the crucial paschal dimension. Traditional groups hoped that new life could be activated while still resourcing their former commitments. People were hoping for a resurrection without having to undergo a calvary.[9]

McDiarmuid's last sentence resonated with me. I have appreciated the disappearance of rules and regulations imposed on Catholic Sisters by a hierarchical and patriarchal church. However, I wonder if the changes we all embraced so enthusiastically were more about "resurrection" minus "suffering and death". The freedoms that came with Vatican II reforms excited us, and when that initial enthusiasm was expanded by an ever-growing interest in liberation, feminist, and eco-theologies, it meant many Sisters morphed from being faithful and obedient daughters of an institutional Church, which clung on tenaciously to hierarchical structures, to becoming a loyal opposition.

I suspect a critical examination of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions in Aotearoa, and a careful reading on contemporary studies of religious life in the Western world, suggests that by the middle of the twenty-first century, Mission Sisters will no longer be a viable presence in Aotearoa. However, I am heartened by Jesus' words in the fourth gospel: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12-24). The Mission Sisters can look back over more than one hundred and sixty years of committed ministry to thousands of New Zealanders – Māori, Pākehā, Pasifika, and more recently Asians – and know that in different ways they have hastened the coming of the reign of God. Their cross-cultural ministries overseas have often enabled them to touch in positive ways the lives of hundreds. Today, younger generations are stepping up to assume responsibility for such missionary activity, witnessing to the truth that the seed must die before there is new life.

Notes

1 Donna Dodge, "How a Religious Congregation Decides It's Time to Close-up Shop", ed., "The Jesuit Review", *America* (New York: Jesuits of the USA, 2023), 220.
2 Susan Smith, Many Tongues, *One Heart and Mind: Rewriting Constitutions in an International Missionary Congregation of Women* (Nijmegen: Nijmegen Institute for Mission Studies, 2019), 48.
3 Susan Smith, *Call to Mission: The Story of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa*, (Auckland: David Ling, 2010), 175.
4 PwC. "2022 Update to Actuarial Funding Study", February 15 2023 (Petone: RNDM Archives).
5 See Patricia Wittberg, "Residence Stability and Decline of Roman Catholic Religious Orders of Women: A Preliminary Investigation", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32, no. 1 (1993): 76-82.
6 Ibid., 81.
7 See Diarmuid O'Murchu, *The Prophetic Horizons of Religious Life* (London: Excalibur Press, 1988); Diarmuid O'Murchú, *Religious Life in the 21st Century: The Prospect of Refounding* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016); Diarmuid O'Murchú, *Reframing Religious Life: An Expanded Vision for the Future* (Middlegreen: St Pauls (UK), 1995).
8 See G. A. Arbuckle, *Out of Chaos: Refounding Religious Congregations* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988).
9 Diarmuid O'Murchú, *Religious Life in the 21st Century*, 220.

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In these pages Susan Smith tells the story of one community's journey from a legalistic, authoritarian understanding and practice of religious life to a more personalist, participative understanding of it. In doing so she tells the story of many religious congregations in our day, both female and male. She is not sure of the future of religious life, especially in New Zealand, but she is sure that the journey was worth the great effort toward renewal in the light of Vatican II. There is a sadness in her conclusions but also a deep faith and hope that the journey must continue and that God is with us every step of the way.

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Susan Smith's Coming to Completion: A History of the Mission Sisters in Aotearoa New Zealand and Samoa, 1865-2023 is notionally a history of the Mission Sisters. On that count alone – and as an example of how history should be written – it is a success: rich, varied, tightly written and ferociously well researched, and peppered with just the right number of personal recollections of a life lived within the order. But there is much more to Smith's book than that. There is insight and wisdom here too, reflections on the history and future of the Mission Sisters woven in amongst thoughts on feminism, the rise (and perhaps fall) of institutions, the flow and ebb of colonisation and the state of the Catholic Church in the context of the secular societies of which it is a part. It is the kind of book I wish I had been able to read as a much younger person, for I suspect it might well have changed the nature of my own relationship with the Catholic Church.

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