

## The Catholic Church in Early Otago

by BASIL HOWARD.

The first contact of Catholic missionaries with Otago was made in November 1840, when J. B. F. Pompallier, Vicar Apostolic of Western Oceania, arrived at the Otago Heads in, the course of a visitation of his wide territory accompanied by two Marist priests, Frs. Comte and Pezant. During their stay of three weeks, the Bishop spent some days at Moeraki reaching there by local whaleboat while his schooner "Sancta Maria" remained at Otakou. He had come southward principally to visit the mission station established at Akaroa, the site of a French colonising settlement, and while there he had heard of the whaling base at Otago.

The first Christian service in Otago Harbour was held on Sunday, November 22, when the Bishop said Mass in a shed at the whaling station. The service was attended by all the Maoris and most of the Europeans of several nationalities. A note left by Fr. Pezant adds an interesting social detail: At the first Sunday Mass he was surprised to see a bevy of fine ladies approaching the shed wearing stylish dresses, with leg-of-mutton sleeves and the latest straw hats covering curled hair. He was more surprised to find that they were the local Maori women quite up-to-date in the fashions of Europe!

An unexpected document found recently in Roman archives is a letter written at Otakou by Pompallier and forwarded to Europe by a whaling vessel via Valparaiso. The letter, a report to the Superior General of the Marist Order at Lyons, concerned mainly with his busy missionary activities among the Maoris, makes little reference to topography, to local conditions or to the European population. There is a brief description of New Zealand, of activities at Akaroa and a rather tense record of their hazardous voyage from there to Otago. The dubious guidance of local seamen had set the vessel on a reef and later almost caused disaster again by trying to persuade the captain, Louis Michel, to enter either Papanui or Hoopers Inlet mistaking that bay, in the dusk, for the harbour entrance. The Bishop gives a brief description of Taiaroa's house and the "hands and knees" method of entry through the low door which also served as an exit for smoke. He makes the comment that one always reclines on the elbow in a Maori house because sitting up or standing puts the head into the smoke zone, with painful consequences for the eyes.

During the visit to Taiaroa, the chief brought out from an old trunk an unexpected exhibit—a collection of large pictures of French origin, battle scenes. Austerlitz and other Napoleonic events, the Algerian Campaign, King Louis Phillippe, and to the Bishop's delight two or three of Madonna and Child. These had been obtained from a French whaler ("L'Heroine", Captain Privat, May 1840??) in payment for a cargo of potatoes. Three lesser chiefs also had stocks of similar pictures. The transactions involved are interesting socially and historically, first that these leading Maoris had exchanged valuable potatoes for goods of so little practical use in their surroundings and second that Captain Privat (?) carried in his holds such strange articles instead of the usual printed fabrics, beads and gewgaws. The Bishop made the perhaps unexpected comment that Taiaroa seemed to know the stories attached to the pictures. This artistic display had an amusing conclusion. One of the other chiefs, more progressive than Taiaroa, had a two-roomed house, built in European style with timber lining inside, and he had papered one of the rooms with the French prints. The Bishop was invited to inspect; the party moved slowly round the room looking at the pictures, but as it was growing late the chief sent for a lamp and the inspection continued. Suddenly, the Bishop stopped, transfixed—there were two indecent pictures (probably classical nudes). Pointing imperiously while the lantern wavered in a Maori hand he demanded that they be re-calls by Fr. Sean and Fr. Chataingnier, the latter arriving at Dunedin by sea to make his way urgently to Moeraki on foot. He has left a highly coloured account of his adventures on the way with his "little sack and inseparable umbrella", getting bogged in the mud of Blueskin Bay and benighted in the snow in bush on the Kilmog.

Much of Otago history springs from the basic gold-date of 1861, which was also the beginning of permanent residence of Catholic clergy. In April of that year Delphin Moreau arrived again on a tour of visitation planned to last four months, but Gabriel Read interfered with these episcopal plans. When Moreau was in the far south visiting Invercargill and Riverton, the overwhelming Tuapeka gold rush began, but he continued his spiritual work unperturbed by these events. When he returned to Dunedin at the end of July or early August he found that the quiet village he had left in May had become a teeming almost unseemly town with a sudden growth of shacks, tents and temporary hovels and that there were also thousands of men at the diggings. He reported at once to Viard on

the situation and suggested that his duty lay in Otago. While waiting for a reply he made a hurried visit to the new village of Oamaru, with professional calls on the route. Viard agreed with Moreau's opinion and promised that he would try to find an assistant for him. Moreau spent the next few months in a kind of frantic shuttle service between the Tuapeka and Dunedin, busy in every direction. Lawrence and Waitahuna, for example, each had a chapel, a temporary structure, before Dunedin had a Catholic Church.

The Assistant, Fr. Aime Martin, arrived in time for the opening of St. Joseph's Church, built of stone in what is now called Tennyson Street, in June 1862. When the present Cathedral was opened the original church became the parish school. It is still in use and in good condition to-day. The two priests were then able to arrange that on Sundays one was in Dunedin and the other somewhere in the goldfields. It was difficult to announce their arrival among the swarming thousands of miners, so they had a white pennant flag made with a red cross emblem and this they flew on their tent, shack, chapel or temporary home to announce the presence of a priest. On the road, walking or riding, they would not have, been easily distinguishable from the itinerant miners, as they carried a pack of light wood which could be converted into a small temporary altar and which had sufficient room for personal gear, light vestments and altar vessels.

In 1864 Moreau finally succeeded in persuading Bishop Viard to visit the area and learn something of its extent and of the problems created by the wide scatter of population. This episcopal visitation from October 7 to November 29 covered most of the territory—Invercargill, Kingston, Queenstown, Arrowtown, Cromwell, Clyde, Alexandra back to Dunedin and from there to Milton, Waitahuna and Lawrence. (Present names of these localities). The tumultuous welcome given to him everywhere by Catholic and Protestant alike almost overwhelmed Philip Viard, a man of simple piety and personal humility. The visit resulted in an organisation of staff and the establishment of stations rather than of parishes.. Fr. Martin with a new assistant, Henri Belliard, was posted to Invercargill, the territory including the whole of the new Province of Southland up to Queenstown. The Clutha Valley, Tuapeka ("The Old Mines") up to the Arrow was in charge of Fr. Duhig (not a Marist) with headquarters at Lawrence. Moreau remained at Dunedin with responsibility for the rest of the territory, except for the Maniototo under Fr. Royer.

In the following year, Fr. Poupinel, Marist Visitor for the Western Pacific made his second official call to Otago and it was then that the first mention was made that a new diocese of Dunedin might be created. Viard, however, found it difficult to convince Rome of the need for such action.

In the meantime as the nomadic mining population departed or settled down in permanent locations, the work of the clergy became one of consolidation, of building permanent churches and establishing schools. Moreau, looking ahead, had a magnificent church planned and designed by architect Clayton to occupy the site of the present cathedral. He began saving for this purpose, but at some point the idea was abandoned. No trace of the plan has been found, although photographs of Clayton's sketch of the building were on sale in the sixties. Later, in 1870, Moreau had another and more grandiose plan drawn by John Millar, but by that date jurisdiction had passed from his hands.

Staffing difficulties continued to harass the clergy, over-worked in the widely scattered settlements and finally in 1869, the Vatican moved and approved the creation of the diocese of Dunedin extending from the Waitaki to Stewart Island. At that date Moreau was in charge at Dunedin, Belliard in Invercargill, Ecuyer at Lawrence, Royer in the Maniototo and Norris in North Otago. The first three of these, all Marists were recalled by Viard to Wellington when the new Bishop arrived.

At the beginning of 1870, Patrick Moran, Vicar Apostolic in the Vicariate of Eastern Cape Colony finally accepted nomination to the See. When he reached Dunedin in February 1871 he found the Colony and Otago especially, at the beginning of a period of rapid increase in population and of development in transport and communication. He had a large task before him in planning to meet this expansion. Dunedin was no longer dependent on a distant Wellington; Bishop Moran was in sole charge with full responsibility for finding clergy, building churches and schools, providing teaching staffs. He met this challenge with courage and unflagging enthusiasm. The Church in Otago had come of age.