

III - Marist History

Living Our Marist Story

Gail Reneker SM, Jane Frances SM, Rosemary Simon SM

Introductory note by the editor: On 2 February 2006, the Marist Sisters in the Pacific re-structured their units to form the Region Asia-Pacific. In preparation, Sisters Gail Reneker, Jane Frances, and Rosemary Simon met for a workshop in Australia to produce a story of the historical origins of all former units. They gathered the stories of the respective founding sisters. On 19 April 2017, Marist Convent Levuka, Fiji, Sister Rosemary SM kindly gave me a copy of this work and permission to use it for publication.

The founding sisters were: Sister Sebastien Fiji 1892; Sister Marthe Fiji 1892; Sister Odilon Australia 1907; Sister Melanie Fiji Australia 1907; Sister Cyrille Australia 1907; Sister Adrian Tonga 1924; Sister Cuthbert Tonga 1924; Sister Zita Tonga 1924; Sister Christopher Tonga 1924; Sister Bernard New Zealand 1927; Sister Austin New Zealand 1927; Sister Torika The Philippines 1998; Sister Veronica The Philippines 1998.

Mother Melanie

Mother Melanie was born Helen Mary Withnall on 6th February 1840. She hailed from West London, England, and her father was a book keeper. She did her novitiate in Bon Repos, France and was professed on 23rd November 1861. She was 21 years old.

Melanie was the leader of the first band of sisters that came out to Fiji on the 28th March 1892. She came out from England with Sisters Sebastien (Fanny Foley) and Marthe (Jeanne Lavin) both from Ireland. She also travelled with Bishop Vidal from France and on arrival in Suva and Levuka they received a very warm welcome by the priests, sisters (Third Order Regular of Mary TORM) and people.

Settling into Fiji was not easy at first because of their thick habits, the mosquitoes, the heat, the language, the walks to Loreto and the travel there by rowing boats etc. However, they loved the convent which was large and well structured and close to the church and town. They loved the singing in the church and the dances (meke) of the young children.

Even though the Third Order sisters felt anguish at the arrival of the Marist Sisters they were warm in their greeting and hospitality. Other difficulties they encountered were the distance from their families and the real feelings of loneliness. Melanie said in one of her letters home:

“We are annoyed by mosquitoes and I am terribly bitten”.

“The distance between us is terrible”.

From these snippets one can imagine the hardship endured by Mother Melanie.

Because there was no transport at the time, Melanie and the sisters would walk to Loreto and later even to Cawaci for their mission there. The walking was difficult for her as she said in one of her letters to the Superior General, Sr Ildefonse:

“My legs are becoming feeble; they are too painful to walk. I feel like a worn out old woman.”

Teaching the Europeans and the part Europeans was difficult at first because they were rebellious but they were soon won over. Mother was extraordinary in her dealings with the children and the people of Ovalau. When disaster struck in the year 1901, Melanie allowed men, women and children to take shelter in the convent. A man who was struck by a falling timber was nursed in the convent for five days until he recovered. Melanie was not afraid to do things not usually done in convents those days but she gave courage to her sisters and they were not afraid.

As leader and superior a lot was expected of her and she suffered the burden of sickness in her community, writing to France for more supplies and more sisters, taking the responsibility of preparing to found a house in Sydney and depending on the priests and the Bishop for permission

to carry out her mission. She also had problems with Sister Cyrille, one of the sisters in the community, and in one of her letters to Bishop Vidal she shared:

“I feel very depressed... I am quite unhappy... Let me go home to England as I am old and weak...”

Early Beginnings in Australia

The three founding Sisters of Australia are Mother Melanie, Sr Cyrille, and Sr Odilon. Melanie and Cyrille arrived in Sydney on 30th December 1907 on the *Navua* while Sisters Odilon and Helen arrived the same day from France. Helen was en route to Fiji to replace Cyrille in Levuka.

The task of establishing a new community and a new school in a foreign land was a huge one. However, Melanie was grateful to the Marist Fathers of Hunters Hill for looking after them until they moved into their own residence called “Kamona” at 48 Alexandra Street.

Melanie’s desire to have a house established in Sydney showed that she had a wider vision for her sisters and for the congregation as a whole. She saw Sydney as a place where our sick sisters from Fiji would recuperate, a place where more vocations would supply Fiji, and the cost of travel from France would not be so expensive.

It is interesting to note that she was given only 5 days notice by Bishop Vidal about her appointment to Sydney and furthermore she had no money for this new foundation but was given 80 pounds on arrival in Sydney. It must have been a difficult time for her.

After the foundation was established in Sydney, Melanie started a primary and secondary school in Woolwich. Sister Cyrille was the first principal of the high school in Woolwich because she was well trained and younger. Melanie in one of her letters to the Superior General asked for “clever and solid sisters” to be sent from Europe so that they could staff the schools.

While living in “Kamona” in Alexandra Street, Melanie used her initiative in obtaining a much larger house in Woolwich overlooking Lane Cove River. In 1913 she saw a need for a Novitiate as young girls were showing interest in joining, she purchased an adjoining property from a Mr Edwin Lumsdaine.

Melanie had a great belief in divine providence and a great spirit of obedience. She often wrote to the superior general in France and in one of her letters to Sr Ildefonse said:

“I received your letter which indicated your desire to set out for the long awaited foundation in Sydney... I found the task above my strength but I could not refuse it, and now, even if I can’t do it, at least I have obeyed. I thank you for the confidence you have in me.... I shall try to do my best for this foundation... may it be good in every sense.”

This spirit of obedience kept Melanie a woman of strength, able to endure the heat and difficulties of missionary life.

In 1909 the first Novitiate was established in Sydney and Melanie was its Novice Mistress and our first Australian postulant was Catherine Carey, professed as Sister Aloysia. As Novice Mistress she came under fire from Father Marion and Archbishop Kelly who questioned her suitability and qualities. That must have been a hard time for Melanie.

In 1912 when she was 72 years old, she returned to Fiji where she worked for a short time in Delailagi thence to Levuka where she remained until she died at the age of 89. She is buried in Cawaci.

Sister Sebastien

Sister Sebastien was born Fanny Foley, born in County Leitrim, Ireland in the year 1857. She did her novitiate in Bon Repos and was professed on 15th October 1882.

She was one of the first sisters to arrive in Fiji 28th March 1892 at the age of 35. She travelled with Mother Melanie who was 52 and Sister Marthe who was the youngest at the age of 26.

Like Melanie, she too found the heat excessive but with her sense of humour she would say: “I live in it, all the same I nearly melt in it...”

Her wit can also be seen in her comments about the Fijian meke and the first kava she drank in Levuka. After seeking the meke she said: “Well, to see that was worth the weekend of seasickness”. After tasting kava for the first time she said: “I sent my kava to the fishes.”

While Melanie and Marthe took over the teaching in the school, Sebastien was happy to carry out the chores of cooking for the sisters, being the sacristan in the church and doing part time nursing in the mission hospital nearby. The hospital was opened in 1898 and staffed by the Third Order sisters but by the time the Marist Sisters arrived, only one sister was on the staff. In visiting the sick in the hospital, Sebastien must have seen the need for help and offered her services. She offered care to the patients both day and night and this necessitated the learning of the Fijian language. We are not told how she learnt the language but assume she either got help or picked it up from the patients. Learning the Fijian language enabled Sister Sebastien to teach catechism to the Fijian children.

When the hospital was closed in 1894, Sebastien devoted her time to gardening; planting flowers, vegetables and fruit trees. She wrote home for more seeds.

Apparently, the sisters in Ireland enjoyed the letters of Sebastien. She would describe convent events like the renewing of vows on the feast of the assumption, joked about the animals and commented on the Sunday sermons. Of the latter she said in one of her letters:

“We would listen to 3 sermons every Sunday and we would listen with a great deal of attention except to those about the Sacrament of Matrimony or drunkenness!”

Sebastien is one of the founding sisters of the Ba community in Fiji. During the flu epidemic, she once again used her natural nursing ability to nurse the sick. She used the classrooms as a hospital and no doubt her experience in Levuka and her ability to speak the Fijian language were assets.

By 1920 there were at least 10 sisters in the country. More children enrolled in the school and she was required to teach in the Fijian school. She taught Indian and Chinese children and said this about them: “I love them a great deal.” The children too loved her and called her “dear Bastien.”

She must have been a good teacher because in 1924 the school did so well that the school was recognized by the Government. They received a grant whereas it was the norm for the Government to give grants only to the European Schools. The indigenous schools were then in the hands of the Catholics or Methodists.

Sebastien was designated by the Bishop through the request of the Governor, Sir O’Brien, to help the sick men, women and children of Levuka and nearby villages. Sister carried out this task with great dignity and love of the people. On many occasions, the Province Doctor would ask Sebastien to visit the sick, size up their condition and even to assist him at his operations. She said about her work as infirmarian: “I love the work... and would give myself heart and soul to it”. In some of her visits to the sick, she nursed lepers and those with elephantiasis. On one occasion she writes:

“The doctor sent me to seek out a man who had elephantiasis. I found him in bed in a corner... covered with a mat. One of his legs was as big as his body. From an opening on his knee, there flowed a liquid the sight of which was awful. I needed more than an hour to dress it...”

It is interesting to note that Sebastien did not hesitate to share her room with the sick. While Sister Angela was suffering from tuberculosis and vomiting blood, Sebastien had her in her room to nurse her. Another incident was when a young girl (Alice Simmonnet) came from Solevu with bronchitis, Sebastien placed her on the bed (in her room) where Angela was cured miraculously through the intercession of Father Jean Claude Colin. This child was dying and on the third day the doctor said there was no hope for her. Sebastien placed a picture of Fr Colin on her chest and on the next morning the doctor found her playing with her doll. She was cured.

In Levuka she nursed a Fijian woman who was dangerously ill and stayed by her side for 10 days until she got well. She also nursed Sister Angela who was ill with tuberculosis until she was cured by Father Colin.

In writing home to Ireland or France she would say:

“Sr Sebastien does not forget you; at the moment my heart swells u and my eyes have more need of a handkerchief than my glasses...” (October 1893)

And again in another letter:

“Fiat! With my feet on the ground, my heart in his two hands, let’s always go forward with firm feet, joyously towards the fatherland!” (November 1893)

It was Sister Sebastien who wrote lovingly of Father Marion who was their benefactor, friend and confessor. She said of him after his death in July 1922:

“O how sad we are about our good Father who has done so much for the Marist Sisters in Oceania...”

Sister Sebastien died in Levuka, 23rd March 1940 and is buried in Cawaci.

Sister Marthe

Sr Marthe was born on 14 October 1866 at Carrick-on-Shannon and was professed as a Marist Sister in Bon Repos on 29th September 1886. At twenty six years of age she was missioned, together with Sisters Melanie and Sebastien, to Fiji where she arrived on 28th March 1892. With her Sisters she was confronted with the strangeness of their new environment, its tropical climate, vegetation, food, life-style, so far away from home and all that was familiar. Ministry in the school in Levuka began immediately together with caring for the European and part-European orphaned and abandoned children. In the school Sr Marthe accompanied Melanie in taking classes. Coping with the somewhat rebellious students was a challenge that gradually was overcome. It was made more difficult by each Sister having to teach a number of different grades, a situation which was overcome by the arrival of the next band of Sisters in 1894. From some letters of Sr Marthe we hear of the three pupils she took for oil painting and of a trip with the Bishop to the mission at Rewa and of their seeing the Third Order sisters there. She tells the story of an old Fijian, the only Catholic on his island, coming to ask if France still existed and if there was still a Catholic religion. For many years he had never failed to call himself to prayer by ringing his little bell and saying the Rosary just as though the priest was there.

In 1910 Sr Cyrille returned to Fiji and Fr Marion who had been such a great friend of the Marist Sisters since their earliest days in Fiji and knew all the sisters there, suggested that Sr Marthe come from Levuka to replace her in the Woolwich community. Fr Marion later wrote to the superior general that he ‘made Sr Marthe in your name bursar and superior. She took over the direction of the house with complete responsibility.... Mother Melanie remained superior but... she no longer had the responsibility.’ In a further letter in what constitutes a compliment to the way Sr Marthe handled this delicate situation, he tells Mother St Joseph, Superior General, that ‘contentment and peace reign at Mount St Mary’s’.

Sister Cyrille

Sr Cyrille (Mary McDermott), of Irish, English and French background, was born in London in 1868. She was professed in Ste Foy in September 1889. Sr Cyrille had been in Fiji only 10 months when she was sent to Sydney. Sr Cyrille arrived in Sydney from Fiji on December 30th 1907 on the *Navua* with Mother Melanie. She was 40 years old. The third member of the community, Sr Odilon, arrived on the *Australien* the same day. The Marist Fathers took them to Hunters Hill. The community knew that their task included setting up a school; there had been very little preparation. Sr Cyrille was a trained teacher. When reporting on the school at Hunters Hill, Mother Melanie says that the school has very little equipment or furniture but that will come. Regarding pupils, not many children are expected which is a good thing as “neither Sr Cyrille nor herself is strong”. She says quite bluntly that with good teachers they will succeed, but not without them, apparently considering neither herself nor Sr Cyrille up to the physical demands of developing this new foundation, though she mentions “I am happy that Sr Cyrille is trained, this is necessary for High School here;” and she adds, “you should aim at finding solid and clever Sisters”. To augment their income, Mother Melanie gave music lessons after school and Sr Cyrille French lessons, at a guinea a quarter.

Although the “success of the school is beyond all our hopes” the life among the Sisters was somewhat different. Sr Cyrille was in her nineteenth year of religious profession, but proved a

source of endless concern, with almost continual illness and the need to remain in bed for considerable periods of time. As early as February in the first year Sr Cyrille had been “confined to bed” with the doctor telling her to remain there for another eight days. Fr Marion explains Sr Cyrille’s infirmity: “I suspect that Sr Cyrille’s illness is somewhat caused by some antipathy towards Mother Melanie”. Thus began a pattern of being “confined to bed” on several occasions throughout the year. At one time Mother Melanie sent her to the Blue Mountains to recover, at another to stay with some parishioners. “I have been obliged to do a number of things against our usual customs”, she wrote to the superior general. All of this compounded the problem attached to running a school. Mother Melanie felt that if Sr Cyrille was ill she was not competent to replace her. Sr Cyrille demanded much of Mother Melanie’s time, day and night.

The Woolwich community grew to seven members – Mother Melanie, Sr Cyrille, Sr Odilon, Sr Bernard, Sr Benedict, Catherine Carey, and for a short time, Sr Sebastien from Fiji. Sr Bernard writes that Sr Cyrille was the first principal of Mount St Mary’s, Woolwich. Fr Marion’s correspondence with the superior general of the Marist Sisters reflects that 1909 was an extremely difficult year for this fledging community. Again, the main factor seems to have been the difficult temperament of Sr Cyrille, who Fr Marion indicates, belittled Mother Melanie in the eyes of the new postulant.

Sr Cyrille asked to go back to Fiji in May 1909, as she could not get on with Mother Melanie. The following year, 1910, Sr Cyrille returned to Fiji. Sr Cyrille was with Sisters Peter Claver and Scholastica during the great flood at Delailagi in 1931 when the Sisters spent 36 hours on top of the tallest cupboard in the convent with raging waters surging below them.

Sr Cyrille died in Levuka on 24 September 1942 and was buried in Cawaci.

Sister Odilon

Sr Odilon was born in a French village of Vaulx (Haute Savoie) on the 1st October 1855. She was “very intelligent and very tenacious”. As a child, at the age of 9 she wished to make her First Communion rather than wait until the customary age of 12 or 13 but was told by her parish priest she could not do that until she knew the whole Catechism. Within a short time she had accomplished that task and no matter what question she was asked she was able to answer correctly. At the age of 14 she attempted to enter the novitiate of the Marist Sisters at Bon Repos but was put off for a year. She made it clear that, in spite of her outstanding intelligence she wished to become a lay sister rather than a choir sister and took her vows on the 3rd December 1873. Gobillot tells us that she knew she had a domineering manner and wished to overcome that in humble tasks. He saw her as a saintly religious, though not a “ready made” one as she set about overcoming this difficulty in her character. For her, sanctity lay in being joyful.

Mother Melanie and Sr Cyrille arrived in Sydney on the *Navua* from Fiji to make a foundation in Sydney on December 30th 1907. The third member of the community, Sr Odilon, arrived from France on the *Australien* the same day. The Marist Fathers took them to Hunters Hill. The community knew that their task included setting up a school.

As she was a lay sister she was not able to teach Blessed Chanel’s school but she did give great support in manual tasks to Mother Melanie and Sr Cyrille. A further problem was that when she first arrived she spoke only French and also was becoming deaf. With her companions she had no difficulty. Mother Melanie and Sr Cyrille were both fluent in the French language having made their novitiate in France. Sr Odilon was very energetic and had an “imperious, authoritative” character. Through a spirit of obedience she always asked the smallest permissions; for the rest, there was nothing narrow-minded about her love of the Rule. For the people who did not understand her battles of temperament, what strikes them was her habit of prayer. Her progressive deafness developed in her a love of the interior life. She loved the company of young sisters; her jokes were full of spirit.

In the last years of her life her fatigue increased; walking was painful for her and she had to give up her kitchen duties. She would ‘help out’ by sitting and doing the dishes, by sitting and peeling the vegetables.

In April 1929, Sr Odilon suffered a severe heart attack. The crisis passed and she said, "I didn't go yesterday, but I shall soon leave. When the good Lord wants us to build a new house, he has the old one demolished; that takes a couple of days."

On May 23rd 1929, "the saint of the community", Sr Odilon, died.

Tonga

Bishop Felix Blanc, Bishop of Tonga was seeking English-speaking Sisters to work in the schools of Nuku'alofa, capital of Tonga. Requests began in 1913 and were repeated in 1915 and 1917. By 1922 there was agreement that Sisters would be sent. The TORM Sisters had been running the school but the last one died after being there for 42 years and the Bishop was worried that the European children would go elsewhere unless the school was 'properly run'. Bishop Blanc rejected the first three Sisters the Superior General proposed sending: "One a lay Sister, one French and one English and timid in temperament!"

By March 1924, the first Marist Sisters arrived and "gave every satisfaction", both in the "exemplary manner of living their life as religious" and in the school, where they were well accepted. The group led by Mother Adrian was made up of Sr Cuthbert, Sr Zita and Sr Christopher. The Bishop's only problem now was that the Sisters would be overworked so he asked for a fifth Sister to be sent "at once"!

Before long there were problems surfacing – Sr Adrian and Sr Cuthbert could not get along with each other, so Sr Cuthbert withdrew in December 1924 and went to Fiji and Sr Dosithee replaced her in Tonga. At aged 26, Sr Herman joined them in 1926. Sr Zita, with Sr Christopher, opened a new house in Houma in 1928 with Sr Herman joining them in 1929. In both Nuku'alofa and Houma, the main work of the Sisters was in the schools where there were both boarders and day students. Boarders meant anxiety about providing enough food. This necessitated the daily care of pigs, cows, poultry as well as vegetable gardens.

Sr Peter Claver came from Sydney to visit the Sisters, who were very isolated, in 1932 on behalf of "higher superiors". As a result of this visit, the strained relations between Sr Adrian and the Bishop were noted. The root of the problem seems to lie in the fact that the Marist Sisters were an order of Pontifical Right and not Diocesan and consequently not so directly under the control of the Bishop. Mother Marie-Joseph considered withdrawing the Sisters from Tonga altogether. This did not happen and other Sisters were sent: Sisters Perpetua and Paula were later followed by Sisters Andre, Damian, Rita Gardiner and Marie de Jesus all of whom spent some years in either Nuku'alofa or Houma. In 1933 Sr Ethlebert replaced Sr Adrian who went to Woolwich and then back to France in 1934.

It was the Pacific War in 1940 that forced the evacuation of the Sisters to either Fiji or New Zealand. In December 1942, the Bishop wrote that the Sisters were authorized to return to Tonga. It was noted that the schools were not reopened yet; they would have a smaller house and fewer boarders and only Catholic children would be accepted. Bishop Blanc was prepared to pay a stipend of only £ 17 per annum. With all these reductions, it would have been impossible for the Sisters to live on such a pittance. In Sydney, Mother Chanel spoke with Fr Bergeron who had been in Tonga, and he advised her not to send the Sisters back yet. Mother Chanel reflected it would be time to go back to Tonga "when the Bishop was in Paradise!" A decision was made not to return to Tonga. For the Sisters who worked there it was a case of their sowing the seeds of faith among many Tongans but leaving to others the work of reaping the harvest.

Sister Bernard

Sr Bernard (Mary Gorman) was born in County Sligo, Ireland, on May 13th, 1883. She was educated at Carrick-on-Shannon, entered the novitiate in France in 1904 and was professed on October 7th, 1907.

In July 1908 she was sent to the newly established foundation in Australia, arriving there with Sr Benedict Chaussaigne from France on 10 August 1908. In a foundation which was experiencing very difficult beginnings, these two Sisters, young, strong and very capable were very welcome. Both Sisters took up their ministry in Blessed Chanel's parochial school, with Sr

Bernard relieving Sr Cyrille as principal. Along with the founding group of Sisters they played their part in laying the foundations and forwarding the mission of the community.

At the end of 1908 the community moved into a new residence at Woolwich, a move which plunged the Sisters into debt but which enabled the opening of a secondary school, which also provided for boarders, in February 1909. In 1911 Sr Bernard was made principal of the school, a position she held until the end of 1924.

In 1925 Sr Bernard was sent to the new school in Lautoka, set up as part of the diocesan missionary thrust to Fiji's Indian population. In Mother Marie Joseph's words to Bishop Nicolas, 'Woolwich was sacrificing the best teacher they had in Sr Bernard, who had all the requisite diplomas for a secondary school teacher and experience to negotiate with the government if necessary'. Many difficulties confronted the Sisters, significantly that of there being so few Catholics among the pupils and the initial low enrolment of Indian pupils which necessitated taking Fijians and part-Europeans as well. Sr Bernard notes the ensuing problems: 'The prejudice of colour is something terrible'. She writes of being 'nearly killed with work', exacerbated by the problem of not being able to put all the racial groups together in one class in the school, therefore necessitating much duplication of effort. The manager of the sugar mill with his significant control over the area also posed a significant problem in his opposition to the school. However Sr Bernard succeeded in winning him over to the extent that he allowed the use of the Company Hall free of cost for the bazaar and donated the proceeds from the Company dance on the previous Saturday night to the bazaar fund.

The Bishop, delighted by the work of the Sisters, was naturally displeased when in 1927 Sr Bernard, together with Sister Austin who had come from Australia in 1926 to work in Lautoka, were sent to begin the first house in New Zealand. At the invitation of Fr Gondringer sm and with his encouragement, the Sisters opened a school at Mount Albert, Auckland on the 7th February with eighty two children. Financial struggles were aplenty though the Sisters were wonderfully supported by the parishioners despite Mount Albert being one of the poorest of Auckland parishes. Still they had to ask for further resources and supplement their meager income with music lessons and selling their needlework.

Attaining government registration was also particularly demanding. They had to submit to repeated visits from a government inspector who spent the whole day watching them and then sent a report. In the report from October 1927 the inspector Mr Leslie congratulated them: 'If it continues in this way I will give a report as favourable as that of the Gladstone Rd School in Mount Albert, which is our best public school'. His report spoke favourably of the Sisters and how very well they were in touch with the New Zealand syllabus. At the end of the year they presented successfully three pupils for the Proficiency exams. As there was no Catholic secondary school near Mount Albert a new project of a secondary school and a small boarding school was soon initiated and on the 11th March 1928 the Bishop blessed the new construction.

Earlier in January he had summoned Sr Bernard to write to the Superior General requesting Sisters for a new school at Herne Bay. In September Sister Austin from Mount Albert was joined by Sr Kostka from Sydney and classes began. Sister Bernard was superior of both Mt Albert and Herne Bay until 1932. Under her leadership the influence of the Sisters went beyond the pupils in their schools to their parents, to children in public schools and to adults, especially those whose faith life had been neglected.

In 1933 Sr Bernard returned to Lautoka, resuming energetically the work she had begun there. Anxious to reduce the debt on Lautoka she sought to use to their best advantage the proceeds from bazaars. She recognized the need for a concerted effort, writing in 1935: "If we, the priests and nuns, don't work hand in hand in the missions, all will be chaos. The resources are so small that independence is impossible and it will be only through great sacrifice that God's work can go on". The successful establishment of Lautoka was due in no small way to her wisdom, her tenacity and her ability to get on with others.

Sister Bernard's mission in Fiji finished in 1939 when she returned to New Zealand, ministering in Trinity Street and Mount Albert until 1953 when she was sent to Australia to serve as the Provincial Bursar. She returned to New Zealand in 1964 living at Herne Bay until her death on January 18th, 1969.

Sister Bernard was a simple Marist whose ambition was, as she expressed it, 'that God's work can go on'. Her foresight and enterprise earned the title 'Bernard the Builder'. Her efforts to secure a house for the Sisters in Karori extended to meeting the Prime Minister to gain her point. After her departure from Wellington, the capital, it was jokingly said by an eminent member of the clergy that the government would now be able to resume its work which had to take second place until her problem has been successfully resolved.

This excerpt from a speech given by Sr Austin for the 40th anniversary of the opening of the primary school, Mt Albert provides something of a testimony to Sr Bernard:

"Mother Bernard was my superior and guide for six years. She has been my friend and object of admiration for forty years. Mother's example of zeal for God's glory manifested in her work of teaching, administrating and organizing, her humility, her consideration for others and her untiring devotedness to our congregation has ever been an example for all of us Sisters. With Mother Bernard as superior, buildings went up at a surprising rate. But of course Mother Bernard had a big credit account in the Bank of God's Providence. She was never in the clink for unpaid debts. Mother Bernard had a big part to play in the establishment of every one of our convents in New Zealand".

Mother Bernard died January 18th, 1969, at Herne Bay.

Sister Austin

Sr Austin (Pearl Woodbury) was born on April 28th, 1904 in Spencer on the Hawkesbury River, New South Wales, Australia. She was received as a novice on September 12th, 1923 and was professed on September 30th, 1924. Her first teaching appointment was to the primary school at Woolwich and it marked the beginning of a forty eight year teaching ministry which spanned Fiji, New Zealand, and Australia. She was a great teacher and excelled especially in preparing children for First Confession and Communion.

In 1925 Sr Austin went with Sister Bernard to Fiji as a foundation member of the community at Lautoka. She was to be a foundation member of four more communities during her life – Mount Albert, Herne Bay, Karori in New Zealand and of the Blacktown community in Sydney.

In 1927 Sister Austin joined Sister Bernard in being the first Marist Sister to set foot in New Zealand. Together they set about establishing a primary school in Mount Albert until in August 1928 she was sent with Sister Kostka to Trinity Street, Herne Bay, to pioneer the second foundation in Auckland, and to begin a school there. Sister Austin's humour and gift for story telling is apparent in an account she writes of the first days there, including this story:

"A neighbor had called in a few days before and in the course of conversation remarked, 'But you must not be worried, dears, if you hear strange noises at night. Did you see dark stains on the floor of that second room there? That's where a woman was murdered. But it was years ago now, dears, so you needn't be afraid.' 'That second room there' was the one designated to be used as a dormitory and where the Sisters had actually been sleeping! In a short time both of the Sisters found very good reasons why another of the rooms would be more suitable for a dormitory even though no strange noises were heard and the dark stains on the floor could not withstand the onrush of the caustic soda (that we'd been freely using sixteen hours a day for several days to clean the floors)".

Alongside the humour however there were significant difficulties. As young Sisters in a new foundation they felt the absence of a resident superior, and no telephone to contact her when necessary. There was no chapel and they were a mile from the Church. There was surprise and some feeling in the parish that the new school wasn't in the hands of the Sisters of Mercy who were already in the parish and running a boarding and secondary school. Only nine children enrolled for the opening of school and the Sisters took turn to face the embarrassment of ringing the bell each day in full view of the surrounding locality for these nine.

Sister Austin remained in New Zealand for further 28 years, including four years in the Maori Mission in Waitaruke and eight years in Karori. She returned to Australia in 1954 to teach in St Margaret Mary's Merrylands until 1959 when she was missioned back to Karori and then to Te

Hua Hua to teach the Maoris again. After some time in Mount Albert she returned to Merrylands, Australia, for two years and then went north to teach in Gladstone, Queensland. In 1974 Sister Austin returned to Merrylands, retired from teaching and took up visiting the elderly in Gilroy Village. Her deep interest in others and her compassion for those in difficulty found a new expression in these visits. Her wonderful community spirit and her enthusiasm for community activities brought joy to those with whom she lived, as did the beautiful results of her interest in gardening.

In 1988 ill health and her need for more constant nursing care required that she move to Marian House. It was there on 24 February 1990 that she died.

Sisters Torika Wong, Veronica Lum

The Plenary General Council of April 1996 advised the General Council to investigate an invitation from the Marist Fathers to go to Davao in The Philippines. In October 1996, Torika Wong travelled with Jane Frances to the Diocese of Davao on the island of Mindanao where under the guidance of Fr Philip Callaghan SM, they investigated the possibilities. Pastoral concerns were great: tribal people, children and youth, women, peasants, the urban poor, fisherfolk and the disabled were all pointed out as being areas of need. Marist Fathers, Brothers and SMSMs were already at work in Mindanao. The Archbishop of Davao told the Sisters that there was much work to be done and that whatever they could do would be welcome, in any place of insertion with the poor.

In September 1998, an international foundation was made under the direction of the General Administration. Two Sisters were missioned to Davao in 1998 – Srs Torika Wong and Veronica Lum both from Fiji in the hope that as the mission developed, other Sisters from the congregation would join them. Torika and Veronica attended a programme at the Maryknoll Institute of Language and Culture in Davao City after a period of preparation in Fiji. During their time at the Maryknoll Institute, the Sisters began their discernment for future ministry. They sought to enunciate a common vision for Marist community, lifestyle and ministry in the light of our Congregational criteria and their personal gifts and resources.

‘Balay Pasilungan’ was the first place for the Sisters of insertion into this mission. Here Torika and Veronica worked alongside the Marist Fathers in a shelter for street boys. As time went on, Torika took over the directorship of the shelter ably assisted by Veronica who kept an eye on the financial running of the Balay.

Since that time, other Sisters have joined them from New Zealand and Fiji and in 2005 Sheila became the first professed Filipina Marist Sister. Vocation discernment and initial formation are priorities as are the poor with whom they live and work.