

**We Worship God Better than in the Finest Churches.**  
**Liturgy and the Early Catholic Missionaries to New Zealand**  
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The Editor of *Liturgy*<sup>1</sup> requested an article about the early Missionaries in New Zealand and the liturgy. The topic is worthy of serious study, I provide some preliminary ideas based on the translations of the letters which have recently been made available online at [www.mariststudies.org](http://www.mariststudies.org). The title chosen for the article is a phrase used by Fr Antoine Garin sm in his description of a missionary trip in the Bay of Islands:<sup>2</sup>

“When the meal [on the marae] has been finished, the bell announces the time for prayer, we worship God better than in the finest churches. Prayer is followed by a short instruction and the singing of some canticle or hymn about the main truths of religion.”

The first Catholic missionaries to New Zealand were religious priests and brothers accustomed to a routine of liturgical prayer in Latin – the Mass and the Office – and of devotional prayer in their native French. An unusually detailed description of their prayer for a day is given by Br Pierre-Marie Pérénon writing from the ship taking him to New Zealand to the General of the Marist Brothers, Br François Rivat:<sup>3</sup>

“Dear Brother Director, you would certainly be edified if I told you how we celebrated the feast of the Purification. We did nothing out of the ordinary but you will find it very interesting when you consider we are in mid-ocean and among Protestants who have no wish to join in our exercises of piety. The day of the feast, then, rising, prayer and meditation were as usual. As we thought we wouldn’t be having any Mass because of the movement of the vessel, we had Holy Communion at 7 o’clock. At 10 o’clock, the sea having become somewhat calmer, we celebrated Mass. It was Mary, without a doubt, who obtained this favour from her divine Son. At half past one we said Vespers and Compline. At 6 o’clock we chanted the litanies of the most holy Virgin, then there was a short sermon, after which we publicly renewed our vows, priests and brothers. The three laymen who had not yet taken vows renewed their baptismal promises. During the ceremony we chanted the psalm “*Conserva me Domine*, etc” and finished with a canticle in honour of Mary. At 9 o’clock we said the Rosary and finished the day with evening prayer. Every Saturday we sing the litanies of the Queen of Heaven and Earth to the tune used at Fourvière, so that we imagine ourselves on that holy hill.”

The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, also called “Candlemas” and the “Purification of the Virgin” on 2 February is a significant feast with a Marian theme. As passengers on board ship they had abundant spare time. There is a hint that they may have been ostentatious in their exercises of piety to impress the other passengers and the crew, though Br Pierre-Marie claims that they “did nothing out of the ordinary”. Note the pre-Vatican II practice of advancing the prayers of the Office. They celebrated evening and night prayer at 1:30pm. They are evidently steeped in Marian devotion, particularly devotions associated with the city of Lyons. The shrine at Fourvière has a special place in the hearts of Marists, being associated with their origins as a congregation.

A year later, Br Pierre-Marie writes again to Br François telling him this time of his impression of the Māori and a little about what they are teaching them:<sup>4</sup>

“All the natives smoke pipes, men, women, and children. They go barefooted and bareheaded, but they cover their bodies. They have lost many of their barbarous habits since they have been mixing with Europeans. They do a lot of travelling and have an aversion for hard work. Their memories are good and they learn by heart everything they want to. It is very edifying to see them make the sign of the cross or to hear them respond to the prayers and sing the hymns. Almost all of them know how to

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<sup>1</sup> Liturgical magazine in New Zealand. We thank Fr Duffy for permission to reprint this article

<sup>2</sup> Fr Antoine Garin to Fr Jean-Claude Colin, Bay of Islands, 22 & 26 July 1842.

<sup>3</sup> Br Pierre-Marie (Pierre) Pérénon to Br François (Gabriel) Rivat, Cape of Good Hope, 25 February 1841, translated by Br Edward Clisby fms.

<sup>4</sup> Br Pierre-Marie (Pierre) Pérénon to Br François (Gabriel) Rivat, Kororareka, Bay of Islands, 20 May 1842, translated by Br Edward Clisby fms.

read and write. They love their books. The place where we live in New Zealand is called the Bay of Islands and the town is called Kororareka.”

The Missionaries comment frequently on the Māori ability to quickly learn prayers, hymns and catechism. They have the memory skills of people raised in an oral culture, yet there is a new widespread literacy and a desire for reading materials. Protestant missionaries were teaching reading, but it appears to have spread well beyond the mission schools. Māori were teaching Māori to read in Te Reo.

The teaching of prayers, hymns, and catechism was the catechesis being provided by the missionaries. They were teaching the Māori to pray, but the prayers were vernacular devotional prayers rather than Latin liturgical prayer because they were *catechumens*, as yet unbaptized. Fr Antoine Garin explains the thinking behind this missiological approach:<sup>5</sup>

“Fortunately Bishop Pompallier visited a little on all sides and began by promising them priests, then they started to say the Catholic prayers, and on our arrival we had the consolation of seeing chiefs coming from all sides to ask for priests, bells, and books, so that now in New Zealand the Catholics are more numerous, at least the future Catholics because all those of whom I speak want to become so, but one does not press oneself to give them baptism for fear they will do, as unfortunately several here have done who, after having received baptism, left and scandalized others by their bad conduct; which is the result of being unable, for lack of priests, to follow up on them, and keep them in their first frame of mind.”

Bishop Pompallier and the other missionaries considered as Catholics, those who “said the Catholic prayers” which inclined them to inflate the numbers who had been influenced by their evangelization. The Missionaries who themselves prayed the prayers of the liturgy in Latin, and engaged in devotional prayer in French, began their evangelization by teaching prayers and hymns in Te Reo.

In 1840 Br Michel Colombon describes to Marcellin Champagnat a typical missionary visit:<sup>6</sup>

“In the three or four days we were with them they learned their prayers and other truths of the Faith. They all asked for priests and have built houses and chapels of reeds for them. Fr Viard is leaving today to start a new mission at Tauranga, the largest of the tribes we visited. In a few days, another is going to start at Kaipara, two days walk from the Bay of Islands.”

The “chapels of reeds” built by such tribes were a place for mass to be celebrated in Latin on the rare occasion that a priest visited. Their more frequent function was as a place for the “Catholic prayers” but these do not seem to have been restricted by place.

Even when the Eucharist was being celebrated the congregation was more likely to be praying in Te Reo. Fr Chouvet, whilst complaining to Fr Colin about the poor relationship between him and Bishop Pompallier, mentioned that the Bishop “said the Mass for the natives, and was unwilling for me to assist him, even having the natives’ prayers during the holy sacrifice led by a native.”<sup>7</sup> This gives us a glimpse of a liturgy being celebrated by the bishop, while the congregation are led in devotional prayers. The Māori *attended* the mass but in the days before dialogue liturgy were not expected to verbally engage with it and, being catechumens, they would not have received communion. Being present, and praying along with the mass was the expected behaviour.

Br Claude-Marie describes the dynamic to Br Francois:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Fr Antoine Garin to Fr Jean-Claude Colin, Kororareka, 22 September, 1841, translated by Virginia Spencer.

<sup>6</sup> Br Michel (Antoine) Colombon to Fr Marcellin Champagnat, Bay of Islands, 17 May 1840, translated by Br Edward Clisby fms.

<sup>7</sup> Fr Auguste-Joseph Chouvet to Fr Jean-Claude Colin, Bay of Islands, 29 June 1845, translated by Br Edward Clisby fms.

<sup>8</sup> Br Claude-Marie (Jean-Claude) Bertrand to Br Francois (Gabriel) Rivat, Hokianga, 26 Jul 1842, translated by Br Edward Clisby fms.

“I see these fine New Zealanders coming in their canoes to assist at the divine mysteries of our holy Faith, saying their prayers and singing the hymns the Fathers have composed for them in their own language!”

Prayer, *karakia*, and chants, were already part of Māori culture. The innovation brought by the Catholic Missionaries was a new set of prayers, not the idea of prayer. Fr Forest tells Fr Colin about a missionary trip in the very Catholic region of Opotiki:<sup>9</sup>

“We continued on our way reciting the prayers in Māori, and chanting the litanies of the Blessed Virgin. We formed two choirs, Fr Reignier and one of the natives chanting the invocation *e hata Maria* etc [Hail Mary], the other Māori and I chanting the response *inoi mo matou*, 'pray for us'. We experienced a joy impossible to express in being able to mingle these consoling chants to the Queen of heaven with the sound of the foaming breakers dying at our feet.

Towards sunset we came to a Māori *pa* containing about thirty people, twenty-four of them Catholic and following the prayers of *epikopo*. On our arrival we witnessed a *tanghi*, the welcome Māori give their relatives if they have not seen them for a long time. In fact we were going to stay with the sister of one of our guides. When this woman saw her brother she started this ceremony. It consists of a mutual rubbing of noses, then she began her *tanghi*, a tearful chant in which she described the joy, the happiness she had shared with him in times past. Once the *tanghi* was over, they said prayers.”

Fr Forest clearly considers the *tanghi* to be a ceremony which is linked to, and perhaps a part of, prayer. The “prayers of *epikopo*” are the prayers introduced by Bishop Pompallier. *Epikopo* is a Māori neologism based on the Latin for ‘bishop’ *episcopus*.

Fr Servant describes with admiration a request to be catechized:<sup>10</sup>

“One day, while convincing me that I should see him frequently to give him instruction, a chief told me: When I pray, I don't know how to say anything to God except: ‘O my God! I can tell you nothing except that I love you, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’”

In the same letter he made it clear that the Māori understood the connection between right worship and right action:<sup>11</sup>

“A European asked one of our converts to persuade a sister of his to consent to a sinful proposal. The convert went and fetched his little prayer book and, showing it to him, shouted: I believe in God and if you were to give me all the goods in the world, I would not agree to offend him.”

The prayers of the Marae, whether Catholic or Protestant, were public events performed at regular times signalled by the ringing of a bell (or the banging of a spade!):<sup>12</sup>

“Our Catholics number about 200. They are good enough but not so enthusiastic about coming to church on workdays. They are all *whakama* (ashamed) that the Protestants have a huge bell of 250 to 300 pounds while they have one of only 8 to 10 pounds which can scarcely be heard from the edge of the pa.”

That Catholic Māori had a little prayer book was the result of hard work by Bishop Pompallier - the author - and the brothers and laymen at the new Catholic printery in Kororareka (Russell). Br Emery is pleased to describe the outcome:<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Fr Jean Forest to Fr Jean-Claude Colin, Bay of Islands, 26 March 1843, translated by Fr Brian Quin SM.

<sup>10</sup> Fr Catherin Servant to Fr Marcellin Champagnat. Hokianga. 29 May (?) 1841, translated by Br Edward Clisby fms.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Br Claude-Marie (Jean-Claude) Bertrand to the Brothers of the Hermitage, Opotiki, 6 January 1846, translated by Br Edward Clisby fms.

<sup>13</sup> Br Emery Roudet to Henry Garnett, Kororareka, 2 Nov 1843 translated by Fr Brian Quin SM.

“Now our place is always full of natives, especially since we have built two big houses for them behind our big house. Now it is a very fine sight. Every evening these good Maori can be heard singing their hymns, reciting their catechism, their rosaries or other prayers. They learn very quickly. They know their catechism from one end to the other.

I am a printer, with dear Brother Luc, and Mr Yvert is our instructor. We have already printed two books. The Māori are now very proud of theirs. They make fun of the Protestants who always said that they would not have any.”

Books were not the only objects wanted by the Māori in connection with religion, Fr Servant gives an account which suggests that the idea of objects with power and relics of the dead were not unknown to Māori:<sup>14</sup>

“Our natives are fascinated by pious objects. They like crucifixes, medals, and rosaries. They frequently press us to obtain them. One woman asked me one day for my rosary. When I refused, she retorted: you preach to me to detach my heart from the things of this world and here you are attached to your rosary? They also have all sorts of questions for us touching on the tiniest detail. Some ask if in time of war they can carry the bones of their ancestors with them, others if they can cook their food on Sunday (the heretics declare it a grave fault for them to prepare food on that day). Still others, wishing to clean up an *atamira* or cemetery where the bones of their ancestors are laid, invite us to go to those sites and say prayers to drive away their former gods whom they now call Satan.”

When the first Catholic missionaries arrived in New Zealand they were few in number and the people they wished to evangelize were spread across a great geographic area. The prayer they initially introduced was not dependent on the presence of the clergy. When a priest was present he was asked to be the leader for prayer, but normally the prayers were led by lay people. They were prayed either in unison or responsorial style. There was frequent communal hymn singing. It was very much a prayer of the people and by the people.

When the Pakeha settlers arrived, they were few in number and lacking in clergy. One creative response by Bishop Pompallier is recorded with reference to the little town that was to become Wellington:<sup>15</sup>

“The Irish Catholics at Port Nicholson are roughly 200 in number. They have a piece of land on which to build a church, a house for the priest, a school building, and to make a cemetery. During a visit from Bishop Pompallier a sizeable collection was taken up to build the church and the priest’s house but nothing yet has been done. A young man there, a zealous Catholic and doctor for the settlement, enjoying widespread trust, showed us a document which had been given him by Bishop Pompallier, of which the gist is roughly as follows: We F[rança]ois Pompallier, Bishop of M[ar]onea, grant all the powers which can be given to a layman in spiritual matters. We authorise him to preside at Sunday prayers, to lead prayers in the presence of the sick, to bless the dead with holy water, to lead them to the cemetery while reciting the prayers prescribed by the Church. This document seemed a bit strange to us, especially to Father Grange.”

The sources used above are all from the first eight years of the New Zealand mission. Bishop Pompallier, Fr Catherine Servant and Br Michel Colombon arrived in 1838. Thirty-seven other missionaries joined them in that first eight years, some of this group went on to elsewhere in the Pacific or did not continue as missionaries. The evangelisation of the Māori was their initial focus but as time passed they became more engaged with Pakeha settlers. Fr Antoine Garin is an example of this, he worked two years in the Bay of Islands, four years immersed among the Māori at Managakahia, and was then transferred, at the end of 1847, to be parish priest of the Fencible settlement at Howick. Liturgy is not divorced from life, and clashes between Pakeha and Māori were to disrupt the patterns established by the early missionaries and church politics were to mean that none of them were to continue in their original mission stations after 1850.

The liturgical patterns established at the start of the evangelisation of Aotearoa-New Zealand have had an effect on Catholic life, especially Māori Catholic life, ever since.

<sup>14</sup> Catherin Servant to Marcellin Champagnat, Hokianga, 29 May (?) 1841, translated by Br Edward Clisby fms.

<sup>15</sup> Fr Jean Forest to Fr Jean-Claude Colin, c. 22 May 1842, translated by Fr Brian Quin sm.