

Brother Hyacinth in the Society of Mary

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Marist and Pacific Mission History Library

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The Marist Family in the Pacific

Marist Father (sm)

Marist Brothers (fms)

Marist Sisters (sm)

Marist Missionary Sisters (smsm)

Congregation of the Sisters of Nazareth (csn – Bougainville)

Daughters of Mary Immaculate (dmi – Solomon Islands)

Petites Filles de Marie (pfm – New Caledonia)

Sisters of Our Lady of Nazareth (soln – Fiji, Tonga, Samoa)

Marist Laity

BR HYACINTH IN THE SOCIETY OF MARY

(Copy of an article sent to the Desmet Studio fulfilling an order for a stained glass window commemorating the death of Br Hyacinth which is to be installed in the Church of Brandon (Saone-et-Loire), his home parish. The Covid 19 crisis has prevented the inauguration. The window poses a problem from the fact that nothing seems to indicate that it portrays a Marist. It is, still, interesting that the memory of the distant mission has not been lost.)

It is fitting to situate this Brother in a missionary project which took form gradually, beginning in 1816. It all began with a dozen seminarians who proposed founding a Society of Mary on the model of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), but in a new era. They solemnly formulated their project at Fourviere the day after their ordination in 1816.

This project was to develop into four branches: the Marist Fathers at Belley, founded by Jean-Claude Colin, from St Bonnet-le-Troncy in the north, in the Rhone Department; the Marist Brothers, founded by Marcellin Champagnat at the Hermitage, near St Chamond in the Loire; the Marist Sisters, who would not go to Oceania until much later; and a Marist third order of women. One of the latter, Francoise Perroton, would leave for Oceania on 15 November 1845, to be followed by other lay women missionaries.

Even if all these branches considered themselves as spiritually united under the title of Society of Mary, the societies of the Fathers and the Brothers had quite different aims. The priests were occupied with missions, preaching, colleges, the brothers with elementary schools. The cultural distance between them was great and their relations were often problematic in France and in the Oceanian mission. The latter was launched in 1836, the Roman Congregation of Propaganda confiding to the Society of Mary the mission of western Oceania, then hardly known, composed of many island groups and already the mission field of Protestant missionaries, English and American. To set up the mission mixed teams were created, priests in principle responsible for evangelisation, and brothers with more technical skills: tailors, carpenters, bootmakers, gardeners... and serving as auxiliaries as catechists. In fact, the installation of missions which had to build houses and churches and find ways of feeding themselves often brought the brothers and priests together, and they faced the same dangers among unpredictable peoples. Moreover, convinced they were bringing the "natives" the benefits of Christian civilisation, they had no doubts about their right to settle among peoples whom they regarded as "savages", with all the ambiguities the concept carried: people closer than them to nature and thus more capable than many "civilised people" to discern truth and goodness, and at the same time, people capable of extreme behaviour. Fathers and Brothers knew, therefore, that going on mission was to risk martyrdom and in any case to be exposed to precarious living.

Br Hyacinth formed part of the twelfth departure, from London to Oceania, on 2 February 1845. It was much easier than the first departure which had taken place on 24 December 1836. At this time, France, which had played an important role in the XVIIIth century in the discovery of Oceania, was trying to exert its influence in Oceania, but it was London that was the great port of communication with this region. This is why many of the Marist voyages left from London.

In 1845, a little less than 40 Marist Fathers had left for Oceania, and more or less 25 Brothers. Not all arrived. Some died or had to return. The voyage moreover was very long and dangerous, but in time

became faster and safer. The Marist mission was also very complex. The immense territory to be evangelised had been divided into several apostolic vicariates. That of Western Oceania created in 1836 consisted of New Zealand and the islands of Wallis and Futuna. In 1842, the vicariate of Central Oceania was created under the direction of Mgr Bataillon, consisting of Wallis, Futuna, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. On 18 July 1844, the apostolic vicariate of Melanesia-Micronesia was created and confided to Mgr Epalle. Br Hyacinth was part of the mission team responsible for beginning this mission. The group was an exceptionally large one: a bishop (Mgr Epalle), seven priests and six brothers. But they were destined for different places in Oceania. This was also the period when the societies of the Fathers and the Brothers were beginning to separate from each other. Thus, a certain number of the brothers were coadjutors of the Marist Fathers and not Marist Brothers strictly speaking. In total, the Marist Brothers sent 31 of their members to Oceania between 1836 and 1859.

It is not without interest to detail the steps of Br Hyacinth's "career" in the Marist Brothers. First of all, he was one of the first novices to come out of the novitiate of Vauban, established in 1839 by Marcellin Champagnat and the Bishop of Autun, Mgr d'Hericourt. This was the second novitiate of the Marist Brothers, intended to provide brothers for the schools of Autun. When Chatelet entered the novitiate, he was 23, relatively old. What level of education had he reached? It cannot have been too bad since he left a long letter. But several personal qualities draw attention. First of all, while he received the religious habit in 1841, he made perpetual profession in 1843. Many brothers then were in no hurry to make a decisive commitment so this is an unequivocal sign of strong religious motivation. He is not just emerging from adolescence; in 1843, he is a man of 26. Finally, before entering religion, he must have worked at a trade (carpenter?) which made him of interest to a mission where everything had to be built up. Summing up, he was the very type of brother one was looking for for faraway missions.

We know that his missionary group left London on 2 February 1845. In his letter, he mentions a departure, probably from Sydney, which served as centre for all the Marist missions of Oceania, for New Caledonia. Having certainly arrived at the end of the month, the arrivals could see the mission in course of organisation and part of the group set out again to found the mission in the Solomon Islands, on San Cristobal, where they arrived on 2 December 1845. On the 12th of December, Mgr Epalle went to the island of Isabelle and it was there that he was murdered by the inhabitants. Between 18 January and 1 March 1846, Br Hyacinth wrote his letter recounting the missionary voyage and the death of the Vicar Apostolic.

One may suppose that the mission spent the year 1846 setting itself up and making contact with some of the inhabitants. Br Hyacinth and two priests were murdered on 20 April 1847 while they were passing through a hostile tribe. There is the impression that they were the victims of ignorance of the customs of the local peoples and the difficult relations they maintained with one another. But there was also a certain rejection of violence. One interesting detail on this subject: Br Hyacinth was armed, while the priests were not. You can see there in practice a subtle distinction between the Brothers and the Fathers. In conformity with canon law, the priests had no right to bear arms while lay persons could. Br Hyacinth was responsible for the safety of the Fathers which he could not assure faced with a frankly hostile group.

In total, the mission of Oceania would have few victims: Br Hyacinth is the only Marist Brother killed. The others are Marist Fathers and a Coadjutor Brother.

Br Andre Lanfrey, 2020.