

Some Reasons for the Failure of the Roman Catholic Mission to the Maoris, 1838-1860

ON 10 JANUARY 1838 Jean Baptiste François Pompallier, French bishop and gentleman, landed at Hokianga with a priest and a lay brother to found the Roman Catholic mission to the Maoris. Within three or four years he had been joined by a band of zealous young Marist priests, all French, whose work in the mission stations seemed to promise success. The subsequent fortunes of the Catholic mission are not widely known, nor do its missionaries stand out as individuals in the pages of the historians. As Catholics and foreigners they were, of course, always very much on the outside of the colonial life, lonely and distrusted; as priests they were self-effacing and unworldly. But the anonymity of the missionaries cannot account for the historians' silence: they are unknown because unsuccessful and unimportant. After a beginning strong enough to alarm Protestant opinion the Catholic mission went into a long, slow decline from which it was not rescued until towards the end of the century. The following pages will discuss some of the reasons for the failure of the Catholics to convert or influence many Maoris between 1838 and about 1860. Three points appear to have been crucial: the late arrival of the Catholics in New Zealand, the poverty and unworldliness of the missionaries, and the administrative problems which plagued the mission.

In 1838 English Protestant influence was already strong among the northern Maoris, and this, more than anything else, stood in the way of Catholic success. Both the C.M.S. mission, established in 1814, and the Wesleyan one, which followed in 1822, had been slow to take root; but by the late thirties Hokianga, the site of Bishop Pompallier's first station, was a Wesleyan stronghold, and the Bay of Islands, where he moved in 1839, was dominated by the C.M.S. It did not take the Catholics long to find heathen Maoris more teachable than heretics, and an immediate move into the largely heathen areas south of Waitemata would have greatly added to the thousand converts they claimed by the end of 1841.¹ It was easy for Protestant missionaries to induce

¹ J. B. F. Pompallier, Report on the State of the Mission, 14 December 1841, quoted in full in M. J. Taylor, 'The Origin and Establishment of the Catholic Maori Mission in New Zealand', M.A. thesis, Auckland University College, 1936, pp. 68 ff.

anti-Catholic and anti-French sentiments in friendly northern Maoris, and soon after their arrival the Catholics were in fact threatened with expulsion by Protestant Maoris backed, as rumour had it, by their Pakeha teachers. Since Roman Catholic priests had been expelled from Tahiti as recently as 1836, the possibility cannot have seemed remote.² It soon became clear, however, that the Catholic right to evangelise was supported not only by the French navy but also by James Busby, probably acting on instructions from Sydney: his influence in securing Pompallier's safety was accounted decisive by at least one cool-headed Frenchman.³ So within a few months Pompallier's mission was assured of a future in New Zealand, even if in the Protestant-dominated north it could not be a bright one: Catholic Frenchmen might be tolerated by British officials, but they were anathema to the Protestant missionaries.

Many missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, had grown up in an atmosphere of Anglo-French rivalry, and as a group they were not forward-looking politically. So nationality was one good reason for mutual distrust, and James Stack was not alone in suspecting that the bishop was 'a wily political agent for the French Government'.⁴ C.M.S. missionaries, whether or not they favoured British annexation of New Zealand, were horrified at the possibility of Catholic missionaries predisposing natives in favour of France and so, perhaps, helping France gain a footing in New Zealand. Protestant Maoris were also suspicious of French intentions.⁵ Both Protestant and Catholic missionaries were forbidden to interfere in political matters, and in New Zealand the Catholics kept clearer of them than the C.M.S. missionaries; but since converted Maoris often asked advice on purely secular matters, it was impossible to avoid politics altogether. Missionaries inevitably tended to prejudice Maoris in favour of their own home country. Pompallier would certainly have been happy to see French influence in New Zealand increased. The penetration of French Roman Catholic missions into the Pacific coincided with the expansion of the French navy there, and up to a point the navy and the missionaries worked together: the navy helped missionaries gain a footing in areas dominated by Protestants, and the missionaries deliberately spread a good opinion of France among the natives.⁶

² See J. B. F. Pompallier, *Early History of the Catholic Church in Oceania*, trans. Arthur Herman, Auckland, 1888, pp. 37-40, 43-44; Baron Charles de Thierry, Proclamation, dated 6 February 1838, MS. in Thierry Papers, Auckland Public Library.

³ Pompallier to Colin, 23 December 1837, *Annales de la propagation de la foi*, Lyons, XI, 73. Williams to CMS, 11 January 1838, Henry Williams, Letters 1822-1860 to CMS, typescript, Vol. II, p. 364, Hocken Library, University of Otago. Abel du Petit-Thouars, *Voyage autour du monde sur la frégate Vénus*, Paris, 1841, III, 44-45. Pompallier, *Early History*, pp. 40-42.

⁴ Stack to CMS, 4 April 1840, Church Missionary Society, Archives Relating to the Australian and New Zealand Missions, 1808-1884, MS. microfilm, CN/O78.

⁵ e.g. Shepherd to CMS, 23 September 1839, CN/O76.

⁶ See Archives of the French Ministry of Marine, Documents relatifs aux missions de la Polynésie, microfilm, National Archives, Wellington; extract from J. B. F. Pompallier, Instruction pour les travaux de la mission, quoted in Taylor, p. 35.

If the nationality of the priests seemed to threaten the interests of the Protestant missionaries, their religion was a far more serious cause for alarm. Catholic and Protestant missionaries did not admit each other to be fellow Christians, and Bishop Pompallier's message seriously threatened the position of the Protestant missions in New Zealand, as his first sermon to the Maoris made quite clear: 'In open view was a large tree with spreading branches. He pointed to its grand old trunk, and said it represented the Church of Rome, which had withstood so many storms. The large arms were the Church of England, and the smaller decaying boughs the Wesleyan Church.'⁷ To embrace the trunk was to reject the branches, and in fact Pompallier called on both Protestant and heathen to do so. Catholic writers have sometimes suggested that the first Catholic missionaries were unjustly persecuted by the Protestants, and because of this it seems necessary to point out that Bishop Pompallier's claims challenged the very basis of Protestant missionary activity in New Zealand. All the same, Protestant missionaries were not slow to defend themselves, and Maunsell's well known pamphlet, *Ko te Anatikaraiti*, in which Pompallier was depicted as the Antichrist, was printed within a few months of the bishop's arrival.

Pompallier deliberately aimed to win converts from the Protestants, but the consequences of his challenge were in some ways unexpected. Whatever the origin of the Catholic converts—whether heathen or Protestant—once enlisted as followers of Epikopo (as Pompallier styled himself) they formed a party that was not purely religious. Missionaries might try to remain aloof from the doings of their home governments, but Maoris were alive to distinctions of nationality. British and French were easier to tell apart than Church and State, and Maoris tended to distinguish the French Catholic grouping from the British Protestant one by national as well as religious differences. Between 1838 and 1840 Maoris in the north tended to form into two parties, followers of the British Protestants, and followers of the French Catholics. The Catholic missionaries became the leaders of a minority party, which stood for dissatisfaction not merely with the dominant religion but also with British influence in New Zealand. The discussion which preceded the signing of the treaty of Waitangi in February 1840 shows clearly the nature of this division into parties. The principal chiefs who favoured the treaty were followers of the Wesleyan or C.M.S. missionaries, while the principal opponents were Catholic. Hobson and other British officials and missionaries suspected the Catholic missionaries of deliberately inspiring native opposition,⁸ but this was an exaggeration of the truth. Pompallier denied that he had

⁷ J. G. Turner, *The Pioneer Missionary: Life of the Rev. Nathaniel Turner*, Melbourne and London, 1872, p. 191.

⁸ Enclosure 3 in Gipps to Russell, 19 February 1840, GBPP, 1841/H.C.311, p. 8. Hugh Carleton, *The Life of Henry Williams*, ed. James Elliott, Wellington, 1948, p. 313. *The Founding of New Zealand: the Journals of Felton Mathew*, ed. J. Rutherford, Dunedin and Wellington, 1940, p. 36. William Colenso, *The Authentic and Genuine History of the Signing of the Treaty of Waitangi*, Wellington, 1890, p. 34.

recommended natives not to sign the treaty, but he was, of course, consulted on the question, particularly by the chief Rewa. From the statements of Rewa and others at Waitangi it seems a likely deduction that the bishop tried to explain impartially what was involved in signing away the sovereignty of the land, and the chiefs (no doubt correctly) took this explanation as an indication that he thought they would be unwise to sign.⁹ So at Waitangi (and later at other places where the treaty was taken for signatures) there appeared to be a clear cleavage between the dominant pro-British Protestant party and the smaller anti-British Catholic party.

The triumph of the British Protestants in 1840 marked the end of hopes for widespread Catholic conversion of the natives. The arrival of British settlers and officials, and the influence of the British Governor, strengthened and consolidated the position of the British Church. In 1844 Father Pezant was told, somewhat plaintively, by a group of Waikato natives 'If [the French missionaries] had appeared first in New Zealand, all the inhabitants would have been Catholics; but what should they do now that they were Protestants, accustomed to their prayers; that almost the whole island was, like them, Protestant; and that the Governor and all the *rangatira pakeha* . . . were Protestant!'¹⁰ And the vast majority of Maoris took what was plainly the only sensible course.

A second reason for the Catholic missionaries' lack of success with the Maoris was their poverty and their unworldliness. The Catholic mission was always short of money, and the missionaries always poor, in bad times acutely poor. But even in the best of times they neither sought nor envied the Protestant missionaries' prosperity, and often referred disparagingly to the affluence of their rivals.¹¹ The Catholic missionary received no regular salary, and could own no land or home of his own; the Protestant missionary, a small patriarch by contrast, commonly headed a large family established on the land. On missionary journeys the Protestant was apt to carry tent and food, but the priest ate and slept native, believing that souls might be won by this demonstration of love.¹² The priest's objectives concerned the other world almost entirely: to save souls was his aim, not to civilise.¹³ The single-minded self-denial of the Catholic missionary could not fail to impress: his renunciation of the land especially appealed to Maoris. But in the long run his closer imitation of the apostolic life did not further the

⁹ Pompallier, *Early History*, pp. 62-63; Colenso, p. 34; Enclosure 3 in Gipps to Russell, as in previous footnote.

¹⁰ J. Pezant, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire de la station Catholique de Rangiaowhia* (Waikato), MS, microfilm, lent by Marist Archivist, Wellington.

¹¹ e.g. J. Lampila, *Autobiographie 1841-1866*, MS., microfilm, lent by Marist Archivist, Wellington, p. 8. J. A. M. Chouvet, *Un tour du monde*, Avignon, 1855, II, 171-6. Petit to Pompallier, 16 July 1840, Société de Marie, *Annales des missions d'Océanie: correspondances des premiers missionnaires*, I, Lyons, 1895, 40.

¹² Petitjean to Colin, 14 December 1841, quoted in A. Monfat, *Les origines de la foi Catholique dans la Nouvelle-Zélande*, Lyons, 1896, p. 363.

¹³ See extract from Pompallier, *Instructions pour les travaux de la mission*, translated in Peter McKeefry, ed., *Fishers of Men*, Wellington, 1938.

spread of his gospel. In an ideal world virtue might be rewarded, but in New Zealand the C.M.S. missionary's home and family, his relative wealth, and his greater interest in practical matters all assisted his progress with the Maoris.

The priest's renunciation of home and family illustrates his disadvantage. 'Go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor', was his Lord's command, and he obeyed, putting himself at the disposal of the Church to preach the gospel where it liked. The C.M.S. missionary was at his Church's disposal in a much more limited sense, since once settled in his mission station with his flourishing progeny, his furniture and his farmyard animals, removals could not lightly be thought of. As a result the C.M.S. missionary easily won the affection and respect of local Maoris: after ten or twenty years he was an old identity. On the other hand only one Catholic, Father Lampila, worked as long as thirteen years in a single Maori mission station, and it was rare for the term to exceed six or eight years. If there was a new station to be formed or an old one to be refurbished it was easy to shuffle the cards and turn up someone suitable. Missionaries sighed, but schooled their hearts, and submitted to authority as they knew they must. The result was a loss of that personal influence which counted a great deal in winning the allegiance of the Maoris.

The Protestant missionary's lady was not only of value in providing goods, chattels and children with which to anchor her lord. She was often the best sort of sturdy pioneer herself, and of the greatest service in teaching Christianity and civilisation to young Maoris in the house or in school. When the missionary was away she could often act in his place. The Catholic missionary was often assisted by a lay brother, but he was usually a craftsman or agriculturalist, and neither as influential nor as well educated as the missionary's wife.

The C.M.S. missionary's modest wealth must have aroused the cupidity of the local Maoris. The missionary was the last person to wish to encourage such feelings, and so he rarely made gifts; but he bartered freely, hoping in this way to encourage habits of industry and thrift. In return for pigs and potatoes to feed the missionary and his family, Maoris could obtain many coveted European goods. The Catholic missionary's poverty and consequent inability to supply much in this line made him less attractive, as these remarks made to a traveller by a Rotorua Maori show: 'The Catholic priest . . . is a kind civil man, I keep him on my left hand, but I keep the missionary on my right hand, for his *payments* are good.' The traveller went on to observe: 'The fact is, the Catholic priest is poor, and his expenditure is trifling, while the more ample means of the members of the Church Missionary Society enables them to live in a more liberal manner, and to purchase provisions from the natives whose self interest is thereby gratified . . .'¹⁴

In accordance with their instructions Catholic missionaries spent little

¹⁴ John Johnson, 'Notes from a Journal', in *Early Travellers in New Zealand*, ed. Nancy M. Taylor, Oxford, 1959, p. 160.

time at first in civilising their charges. But as time went on many of them began to see the advantages of a partnership between civilisation and the gospel: wheat and fruit growing were promoted, mills established, and trading encouraged. A few priests, like Father Comte at Otaki and Father Garavel at Rangiaowhia, were enthusiastic, though rivalry was certainly a motive, and Father Lampila's efforts even smacked of bribery.¹⁵ Lack of money and of united purpose effectively prevented any major plans for the material improvement of the Maoris.

In their attitude to the bodily welfare of their converts and followers Catholic and Protestant missionaries could hardly have displayed a greater contrast. The C.M.S. missionary's interest in medicine was often more than merely amateur. He was usually the possessor of an elaborate store of medical supplies and was plainly highly valued by Maoris as a source of remedies. To the Catholic missionary, with his almost exclusive concern for the health of souls, all this must have been rather exasperating. Miraculous cures interested him, since they pointed to God's favour,¹⁶ but the average priest did not consider medicine to be a part of his job. Father Garin was one who did travel with a small medicine chest, but others carried only holy water, or such simple provisions as tea, rice and sugar for the sick.¹⁷ One enterprise which the C.M.S. missionaries took up with enthusiasm was the vaccination of the Maoris, and many vaccinated large numbers themselves. Bishop Pompallier, however, declined to interest himself in the matter, since, as he said, 'the overwhelming duties of [his] sacred Ministry towards . . . Souls' prevented his undertaking other good works.¹⁸ This attitude was typical and consistent, but unfortunately not calculated to further the Catholic faith, since other good works interested the materialistic Maoris at least as much as the salvation of their souls—if indeed they fully appreciated metaphysical distinctions of body and soul. One C.M.S. missionary was told by Catholic natives that 'all the good things of this life had been brought by [the C.M.S. missionaries] and that certainly "*theirs was a poor religion*"!'¹⁹ The unwillingness and inability of the Catholic missionaries to provide 'the good things of this life' hampered their progress in winning souls for the next.

In one respect the priests were, if not more worldly, then more worldly-wise than their rivals. They had no high expectations of sudden moral conversion, and were notably more tolerant than C.M.S. missionaries of moral lapses. It was Catholic policy to alter local customs only gradually, and although priests spoke out against clear breaches

¹⁵ Moreau to Poupinel, 1 May 1873, D. Moreau, Letter Book, MS., lent by Marist Archivist, Wellington. John Golden, *Some Old Waikato Days*, Dunedin, 1922, p. 24. Richard Taylor, *The Past and Present of New Zealand*, London and Wanganui, 1868, p. 59.

¹⁶ e.g. Pompallier, *Early History*, pp. 40, 59; Lampila, p. 4.

¹⁷ Garin to his parents, 17 April to 15 July 1846, *Annales des missions*, pp. 182-3, 188. Pezant, p. 24. William Colenso, *Journals 1841-1854*, MS., Hocken Library, p. 419. Matthews, *Journal*, 20 December 1845, CN/O61.

¹⁸ Pompallier to Colonial Secretary, 6 December 1854, National Archives, I.A. 1/122, 54/3914 and 54/4201, attached to 54/4238.

¹⁹ Matthews, *Journal*, 5 November 1847, CN/O61.

of the ten commandments, they were cautious in condemning practices such as tattooing and some native dances, which they classed as undesirable but not strictly against Christian morality.²⁰ C.M.S. missionaries, who believed that only by a thorough rooting out of 'heathenish feasts and customs' could a truly Christian society be built in New Zealand, took a dim view of such half measures.²¹ And in 1838 they were probably right, since a policy of gradual change, which would surely have paid dividends earlier, no longer appealed. Seventy years after Captain Cook Maoris were ready to throw over old ways and follow their new masters. So the Catholics arrived too late to profit from their tolerance. Paradoxically, neither their Christian charity and tolerance, nor their devotion to spiritual life, helped the spread of their faith.

Administrative problems, especially those centring on lack of money and manpower, were another serious cause of weakness in the mission. The chief source of funds was the charity of Catholics in Europe, through the channel of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. After the early forties, when the triumph of British Protestantism in New Zealand seemed a certainty, missionary recruits were increasingly hard to find, and it is likely too that less money was allocated to New Zealand than to other missions of comparable potential. But if the trouble began with bad luck it was aggravated by bad management.

The responsibility for bad management in the first ten years or so was certainly Pompallier's. Unlike the more democratic Church Missionary Society, the Catholic mission was autocratic in structure, and its head, appointed by the Pope, had almost absolute power over his subordinates.²² His decisions, untempered by committee discussion of the sort the C.M.S. indulged in, determined the distribution of missionaries and mission stations, and the delimitation of the area to be proselytised. A man of some vision, and able to inspire admiration and respect in both races, Pompallier appears to have dreamt of little less than the evangelisation and conversion of the entire Maori population of New Zealand. By the end of 1841, when his little band had swollen to a dozen or so, missionary journeys had taken him as far as Otago, and wherever he went, he stimulated interest in the Catholic Church. Seven mission stations had been founded between Whangaroa in the north and Matamata and the Bay of Plenty in the south,²³ a fair beginning, as it seemed, though some of the missionaries knew very little Maori. But he was far short not only of his final goal but even of providing missionaries for his declared followers. No doubt he hoped for reinforcements, but the requisite number of missionaries never came.

²⁰ Pompallier, *Early History*, p. 51.

²¹ e.g. H. Williams, Report, 30 June 1843, CN/O94; Puckey to CMS 21 September 1839, CN/O72; Stack to CMS, 4 April 1840, C/O78; Morgan, Report for 1847, *ibid.*, CN/O6.

²² See Papal Brief of Appointment, 13 May 1836, translated in front of McKeefry.

²³ Hokianga, Kororareka, Whangaroa, Tauranga, Opotiki, Maketu, and Matamata.

In 1850 there were nine stations, each with a permanent missionary;²⁴ after that year the number of permanent, full-time missionaries decreased. Despite this shortage, Pompallier had spaced out his stations in an attempt to cover a wide area. Father Borjon recorded that in his district (round Rotorua) it would take at least a month to visit successively all the little villages.²⁵ The Waikato missionary served the entire area between Matamata and northern Taranaki. Father Lampila, stationed at Whakatane, travelled as far as southern Hawke's Bay almost every year, and Father Comte, at Otaki, visited both Wanganui and the Wairarapa.²⁶ Besides this, when a station was vacant, the neighbouring missionary was expected to keep an eye on it, which meant even more travelling. In 1840 Pompallier had himself written that at least one missionary was needed for each tribe of any size if the natives were to be kept firm in the faith.²⁷ Although not numerous, the early missionaries, who were all Marists, were devoted to their task, and could have accomplished more with better direction.

The mobility of the Catholic missionary, and the lack of continuity in the mission stations which resulted from his comparative freedom to move round, have already been mentioned. By 1850 things had settled down, and several stations which had changed hands rapidly at first had kept their missionaries for six, seven or eight years. But in 1850 there was a major reorganisation in the mission: the Marist Fathers were transferred to the newly created diocese of Wellington under Bishop Viard (himself a Marist), while Pompallier, now in charge of Auckland (the northern two-thirds of the North Island), had to find an entirely new set of priests. The reason for the withdrawal of the Marists was a disagreement between Bishop Pompallier and the Superior of the Marist Order in France. It is worth mentioning in passing that such a major upheaval would never have been attempted by the Church Missionary Society, and was only made possible by the self-abnegation of the Catholic priests, by their lack of worldly ties and their habit of obedience. The results were little less than disastrous for the Catholic mission to the Maoris.

In all the established mission stations there was a break in continuity, and it came at a very critical time, since by the fifties the novelty of Christianity was beginning to wear off. Pompallier did succeed in obtaining about a dozen new priests for the Auckland diocese.²⁸ They

²⁴ First 5 of above, and Whakatane, Rotorua, Rangiaowhia, Otaki. Evidence for the continuous existence of the mission stations is fragmentary. See my M.A. thesis, Jane Thomson, 'The Roman Catholic Mission in New Zealand 1838-1870', Victoria University of Wellington, 1966, pp. 152-60, 169-79, 206-16.

²⁵ Borjon to Colin, 21 January 1842, *Annales des missions*, p. 113.

²⁶ Pezant, pp. 8 ff. Kay Mooney, *The Work is Great: Napier Catholic Parish 1859-1960*, [Napier?], 1960, p. 9 (quotes records of baptisms 1844-50). Colenso to CMS, June 1846, William Colenso, Letters 1834-1853, MS, Hocken Library, p. 138. Anon., *Sketch of the Work of the Catholic Church for the Last Half-Century, in the Archdiocese of Wellington*, Wellington, 1887, p. 22.

²⁷ Pompallier to Colin, 14 May 1840, *Annales de la propagation de la foi*, XIII, 49.

²⁸ *ibid.*, XXI, 445.

were secular priests, not affiliated to any Order, and included Frenchmen, Germans, English and Irish; there is little sign that more than three of them were much interested in the Maori mission. Others served a year or two, then either left New Zealand or went to work among the European population. The task facing the Marist missionaries had been difficult enough, but by the fifties it was far more difficult to make or keep Maoris faithful Catholics, and the men who had the job were pitifully few, and with some notable exceptions, far less devoted to missionary work. During the forties the Catholics had had more success south of Auckland than in the Protestant-dominated North Auckland peninsula, and it was in these stronger stations that Pompallier concentrated his depleted forces in the fifties. The Wellington diocese, which included the entire South Island, was a large area in terms of European settlement, but the Maori population was relatively small and already mainly Protestant. Some of the Marists tried to combine missionary work with their services to the Europeans, but by 1860 only Lampila on the Wanganui River was working full time as a missionary.²⁹

So by the fifties the organisation of the Catholic Maori mission had virtually collapsed. The French Marists, who had come to New Zealand to convert the Maoris, were working conscientiously among the English-speaking Europeans in the south. In the north, where the Maori population was much larger, very few priests were really interested in the mission. From the fifties, not surprisingly, more Irish and English than French priests came to New Zealand, and they came primarily to serve the settlers, not the Maoris. The few remaining stations, which were concentrated in the central part of the North Island, were swept away by the Maori wars, which merely completed the ruin of the Catholic mission.

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²⁹ See Thomson, pp. 175-9.