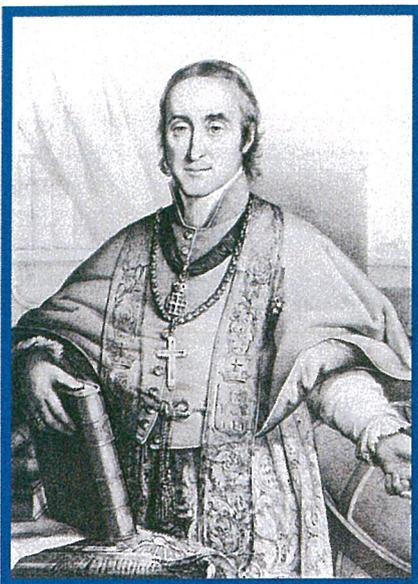




Home at last

– Danny Keenan



Auckland City Library

In May, the remains of Jean-Baptiste Francois Pompallier were interred in a special crypt beneath the altar of Hata Maria, a small church at Motuti on the northern shore of the Hokianga harbour.

It was, in a sense, a homecoming. Although Pompallier was born and died in France, he spent nearly 30 years of his life setting up 16 mission stations and bringing Roman Catholicism to thousands of Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand.

Motuti is close to the first of those mission stations he established at Purukai, a settlement that has long since been abandoned.

His interment there followed a 14-week pilgrimage around New Zealand after his remains were brought back from France in January.

Marae after marae hosted the entourage and paid their respects until the bishop was finally laid to rest in the Hokianga.

The response signalled an influence on Maori by Pompallier that seems to have overshadowed that of any English missionary, including Samuel Marsden and Henry Williams.

Pompallier was born into a wealthy family in Lyons, France, in 1801. In his teens, he was drafted into the army,

then worked in the silk trade. But at 24, he entered the priesthood, was ordained five years later, and served in Lyons for another seven years.

During that time he worked closely with a special missionary order known as the Society of Mary, and became Bishop of Oceania.

In 1836 Pompallier decided to move to New Zealand as soon as possible, to establish a Catholic mission presence, although he knew it would not be easy.

Anglican missionaries had already been here for over 20 years – since 1814. The Wesleyan missionaries had been in New Zealand for 15 years or so as well. And both mission societies were fast attracting Maori followers all around New Zealand.

Pompallier set out from France in 1836 and arrived in New Zealand in 1838 – minus two young missionaries who were left in Melanesia and another missionary who died en route.

The early days were difficult. Pompallier could speak neither English nor Maori, although he learned both quickly with the help of Irish and English Catholics based at Kororareka.

Because he was initially well-funded by the Society of Mary, he was able to establish mission stations in the Hokianga in 1838 and at Kororareka in 1839.

The Kororareka station was especially important – it took Catholicism into the Anglican heartland.

It also prompted the Anglican and Wesleyan mission societies to drop their disagreements and work together to combat the French threat.

Stations were also established at Whangaparaoa, Kaipara, Tauranga and Akaroa in the South Island. By 1844, Catholic teaching was also extended to Maketu, Auckland and Rangiawhia (near Te Awamutu).

Pompallier didn't stick to the motorways. He tramped through the bush and met face to face with many Maori in far-flung communities.

He got a good hearing from them too, because many were rapidly becoming disenchanted with Britain and the

British influence – and because they warmed to him as a man. They tended to respect and trust him.

Pompallier's missions grew quickly because they were well-funded. But he was not a great administrator and the whole operation grew too big for him to control. He was snowed under and often had to borrow to keep things going.

Such admin problems created tensions between Bishop Pompallier and his missionaries, and the authorities took the side of the missionaries.

Ultimately there was a serious split between him and the Society of Mary in France.

When Pompallier later visited France, he found that the Society could no longer support his missionary work or his plans to expand his Catholic mission influence even further among Maori.

While he was back in Europe, Pompallier travelled extensively and included a visit to the Holy Land. But his heart was clearly in New Zealand.

He eventually returned here in 1850, this time with the support of 20 mission staff. But the focus of the Catholic Church was now changing. It was moving away from Maori towards new settlers.

There had been another development too.

The Maori Catholic missions north of Auckland had all but collapsed, largely because of Maori antagonism to Pakeha after the Northern War. Missionaries were seen to be taking the side of settlers and of the British against Maori.

As the Bishop of Auckland, Pompallier worked hard to train his new mission staff, ran a boarding school for Maori boys and still kept in touch with Maori who visited Auckland where he was based. But his contact with Maori now suffered because he was not able to travel so much. He couldn't visit the mission stations in the Waikato, Bay of Plenty and Rotorua.

And he had more problems with his priests. So his progress with Maori was limited.

In 1859, Pompallier made another

visit to France and returned to New Zealand with more support staff, including Sister Suzanne Aubert, who established a mission station in Jerusalem (Hiruharama) on the Whanganui River.

But by this time, the New Zealand Wars were looming. Relations between Maori and all mission stations were severely strained.

Pompallier found it hard to accept that the Catholics' neutral stance to the wars would be interpreted by Maori as directly opposing them in their defence

of land and their tino rangatiratanga. Missionaries also saw Maori resistance as anti-Christian.

So Pompallier's relations with Maori suffered. He opted for neutrality but found many Maori Catholics leaving his parish and going back to their people, especially when tensions heightened in the Waikato.

The 1860s saw many Maori abandon their Christian beliefs and few missionaries could understand why. Some understood though – such as Felice Vaggioli and Suzanne Aubert,

both of whom spoke out strongly on behalf of Maori.

Once the wars were over, Pompallier increasingly put his efforts into his Pakeha flock in Auckland and to trying to deal with his administrative and financial problems.

When he left in 1868 he knew that his mission work was finished and he died in France in 1871.

He is remembered as a devout man who had a special compassion for Maori. It has long seemed fitting that he return to lie in his first Maori parish.



Tania Webb / Northern Advocate

Jean-Baptiste Francois Pompallier comes home.