**Pompallier, Jean Baptiste François** 1801–1871

Jean Baptiste François Pompallier was born in Lyons, France, on 11 December 1801, the third son of Françoise Pompallier and her husband, Pierre Pompallier, who died 8½ months after the birth. François, as he was called by his family, received the education of a gentleman. For a time he served as an officer of dragoons and is also said to have worked in the silk trade, possibly with his stepfather, Jean Marie Solichon, a Lyons silk manufacturer. In 1825 he entered the Lyons seminary, was ordained in 1829, and served for seven years in the archdiocese of Lyons, becoming closely associated with the nascent Society of Mary and its founder, Jean-Claude Colin. Chosen by Rome as first vicar apostolic of Western Oceania, Pompallier was consecrated titular bishop of Maronea on 30 June 1836.

With four priests and three brothers of the Society of Mary, Pompallier sailed from Le Havre on 24 December 1836. He left two missionaries at both Wallis and Futuna islands, one priest died of fever on the voyage, and with the remaining priest, Louis Catherin Servant, and one brother, Michel Colombon, Pompallier reached New Zealand on 10 January 1838. It was to be his headquarters and the chief scene of his labour for the next 30 years. For the rest of the western Pacific, in the five years he remained in charge of it, he was able to do little, apart from a visit in 1842 when he founded a third station at Tonga.

His work in New Zealand falls into three well-defined periods, each ending with a visit to Europe. The first was the Marist period, from 1838 to 1850; the second, the 1850s, saw him based in Auckland, with secular clergy and Sisters of Mercy; the third was the New Zealand wars period, from 1860 to 1869.

The first period began well, with the help of English and Irish Catholics and Maori converts, all essential in founding the mission since none of the missionaries knew English or Maori when they left France. Pompallier was quick to learn both, and his impressive bearing – some six feet tall – and charming personality were no small assets. Colin was generous in sending out personnel for the new mission, and this, together with the money that arrived from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, his funding organisation, enabled the bishop to establish mission stations at Hokianga in 1838; Kororareka, his headquarters, in 1839; Whangaroa, Kaipara, Tauranga and Akaroa in 1840; Matamata, Opotiki and Maketu in 1841; Auckland in 1842; Wellington in 1843; and Otaki, Rotorua, Rangiaowhia and Whakatane in 1844. In the course of setting up these missions Pompallier made four voyages down the east coasts of the North and South Islands, reaching as far as Otago Harbour and tramping long distances inland.

Although the mission had grown rapidly, Pompallier was a poor administrator, over-reaching himself financially and having to borrow. This created tensions between bishop and missionaries, which in turn led to a split with Colin, all exacerbated by the difficulties of communication. By 1846, when Pompallier was able to make his mandatory visit to Rome, it was obvious to Colin and the church authorities in Europe that there must be a parting of the ways between Pompallier and the Marists. Pompallier set out in April of that year, leaving Bishop P. J. Viard, consecrated as his assistant bishop on 4 January, to look after the New Zealand mission. His absence was to last four years. During that time Rome divided the mission into two dioceses: Auckland, staffed by secular clergy with Pompallier in charge, and Wellington, staffed by Marists with Viard in charge.

Pompallier travelled extensively in France, Belgium, England and Ireland, with a side trip to the Holy Land, gathering funds and personnel for his new diocese. He sailed from Antwerp with two priests, ten seminarians and eight Irish Sisters of Mercy, arriving in Auckland on 8 April 1850. Viard, who had seen to the building of the stone St Patrick's Cathedral and the two-storeyed, stone St Mary's College at Takapuna, as well as visiting all the mission stations, now left for Wellington, leaving four Marists on loan for a year. In Pompallier's absence the Catholic population of the Auckland isthmus had doubled, largely owing to the four Fencible settlements, strongly Catholic in character, but the Maori missions north of Auckland had virtually collapsed in consequence of the northern war and the feeling against Europeans which it left behind.

Pompallier's immediate problem was to finish the training of his clergy, begun in Europe and continued on the voyage. He made use of the new St Mary's College, which was also a boarding school for Maori boys and a day school for local children. In 1853 the seminary and boarding school were transferred to Freeman's Bay, next to a 40 acre property which Pompallier acquired that year. After ordination the young priests were sent to the stations left vacant by the Marists. Pompallier himself remained in Auckland, struggling to set up an effective financial administration. He kept in touch with the outlying clergy by frequent letters and had constant contact with the Maori, who regularly visited Auckland to trade. But it was not enough. Pompallier did not visit the Waikato, Bay of Plenty and Rotorua districts to build on the foundations already laid. Only one of the Maori stations – at Rangiaowhia under Joseph Garavel – was really successful; and although the Catholic church made steady progress on the Auckland isthmus, with the Sisters of Mercy and the bishop forming a strong, united team, Pompallier's relationship with his priests was less happy. Beset by problems of isolation and poverty, they tended to blame the bishop for their troubles, not entirely without reason. The exceptions were the McDonald brothers, James and Walter, who gave him great support.

In June 1859 Pompallier again sailed for Europe, returning on 30 December 1860 with eight Franciscans, eight seminarians, and four Frenchwomen who were intended to be the first members of his new order, the Sisters of the Holy Family. The party included his nephew Antoine, and his niece Lucie, as well as Suzanne Aubert. The bishop, with his usual high hopes for the future, refused to acknowledge the threat to the country, and especially his diocese, presented by the wars of the 1860s. A British citizen since 1850, he tried to maintain the kind of neutrality that he had attempted to adopt at the Treaty of Waitangi discussions 20 years earlier. His mana among Maori remained high but, in spite of his letters and efforts, he had to watch helplessly as Maori Catholics drifted away. The Maori seminarians, catechists and religious, whom he had been fostering, returned to their people.

In Auckland Pompallier struggled on with a measure of success. His seminary turned out some outstanding priests. His schools continued to grow in size and number. Bishop's House, the Church of the Immaculate Conception, the Convent of the Holy Family and the school and orphanage of the Sisters of Mercy grew up as a sort of Catholic colony on Mount St Mary in Ponsonby. Suburban churches and schools were built and grew strong.

But there were still problems. The Maori missions would never pay back the money Pompallier had borrowed for them. Government aid to schools had come to an end and there were murmurings from the laity at the burden they had to bear. The bishop borrowed what little he could and mortgaged some 45 acres of the 900 acres of land owned by the diocese, but the debt climbed to £7,000 and creditors wanted repayment. When he left for Europe in 1868, Pompallier was under no illusion that the situation was very bad indeed. He was too old, too sick and too tired to cope with it. He resigned on 23 March 1869 and was made honorary archbishop of Amasia.

Pompallier died at Puteaux, near Paris, on 21 December 1871. While accusations and suspicions concerning misconduct with certain religious, widely believed but without substance or proof, clouded his last days in New Zealand, the one thing of which he was really guilty was poor administration. He was not a saint but a genuinely devout man of very considerable talent and vision, an idealist willing to spend his life in the service of others. His vision, however right and admirable, outreached his capacity to fulfil it – and he never realised or admitted the difference.

Pompallier produced 54 printed works, ranging from small pamphlets to sizeable books, in French, English and Maori. His early works included prayer books or catechisms, the first appearing in 1839 (8 pages), the second in 1842 (96 pages) and the third in 1847 (570 pages). His manuscript 'Instructions pour les travaux de la mission', dated 29 January 1841, is an enlightened document for its time in its attitude to Maori customs. He also left behind more than 600 letters, and these, more than anything else, tell the real story of the man who founded the Catholic church in New Zealand.