A SHORT HISTORY by Br Edward Clisby FMS

This year, we celebrate 200 years since the foundation of the Marist Brothers at Lavalla. Last year, we celebrated 200 years since the foundation of the Society of Mary, the umbrella of our Marist Family of congregations, at Fourviere. And five years ago, we celebrated 175 years of Marist presence in the Pacific. So we would expect to see some historical and other works being published about now – a long-awaited biography of Fr Colin, for example, or a comprehensive history of the Marist Brothers of the Schools, such as the volumes of Br Andre Lanfrey that we have before us today. This paper presents something on a smaller scale, the history of a branch of a branch of the Marist tree, as it were, but it gives us an opportunity once more to celebrate the whole Marist project, particularly since in its beginnings this (former) province of the Marist Brothers reflects quite faithfully the beginnings not only of the congregation of the brothers but of the Society itself.

This may appear a rather bold claim to make, but if you note how this presentation is structured, you may see what I am getting at. The basic structure is the life, death, and what may be called the afterlife of our founder, Marcellin Champagnat. Champagnat died in 1840, after his first brothers had already reached the Pacific. He was declared Venerable some 50 years later, in 1896, when his congregation was expanding worldwide and its educational apostolate was already firmly established in this part of the world. Half a century later, in 1955, Marcellin was beatified, not long before both congregation and province achieved their maximum in numbers of professed religious and candidates in formation. And less than 50 years later, when he was canonised in 1999, both congregation and province were deep into what we might optimistically call a phase of mutation. In each of those stages we observe changing patterns of relationship with the Society of Mary.

When Champagnat died in June 1840, his congregation had clear structures, followed a monastic life style, and was definitively orientated towards education through schools and similar institutions, such as orphanages, in rural areas and the poorer parts of towns. This development is associated with the Hermitage, particularly from 1827 onwards. But if we look back to the beginnings at Lavalla, from 1817 to 1824, we find a rather different picture: minimal structures, a simple lifestyle like that of the peasants among whom they lived, and a variety of ministries. Obviously, the first candidates had to be formed in both religious life and elementary teaching, but this did not prevent them becoming involved in apostolic activities from the very beginning. So we find them visiting the old and the sick, taking in poor children to feed and educate, collecting money and goods for distribution to the poor. Sometimes they did this accompanying Champagnat on his rounds of an extensive and geographically challenging parish. At others, it is clear, they did so on their own initiative. And, as soon as they were ready, they took to catechising in Lavalla and the neighbouring hamlets.

We must remember that at this stage Champagnat did not see himself as a founder. What he was doing was setting up a group of brothers, as he considered he had been entrusted to do, as part of the projected Society of Mary inspired by Courveille. Courveille himself was to join the group in its last year at Lavalla and the first years at the Hermitage. Meanwhile, Colin at Cerdon was giving shape to a rather different vision of the Society, the one that was eventually to be recognised by Rome. But at this stage, despite perhaps some tension between Courveille and Colin, the differences were not apparent for Champagnat and his brothers.

Now, when we look at the lives and experiences of the early missionary brothers in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, we see at once that they do not fit the Hermitage model, but

they do fit the Lavalla one very well. Change the place, change the culture, but the lifestyle and ministries are almost the same. Take, for example, Br Basile Monchalin who came out at the end of 1840, the year Champagnat died, carrying with him a copy of the Founder's Last Will and Testament, which we still have with us. He spent over 50 years on the New Zealand mission and is buried at Napier. Had he remained in France, Basile would probably have spent his life exercising his trade of shoemaker at the Hermitage or elsewhere. In New Zealand, in the early days at Kororareka, in what is now Pompallier Mission, he did work at shoemaking when material was available, but mainly as cook, baker, hunter and butcher. He was sometimes required to act as doctor. At times, he accompanied the priests on visitation and did some catechising. Besides making shoes, he probably helped with bookbinding. Later, at Meeanee in Hawkes Bay, it was building, fencing, farming, droving which occupied his time as well. And he still enjoyed catechising the Maori children in his old age.

Even the fact that, except in rare establishments such as the procure in Russell, they were unable to live in community – something that became a sticking point between the congregation and the Society later in the century – reflects fairly faithfully the period of the beginnings. The first school communities were generally only two man ones, and we have the case of Br Laurent Audras spending much of his time by himself as catechist in the remote parish hamlet of Le Bessat, high on the slopes of Mt Pilat. A not uncommon experience for brothers working in the first decades of the Oceania mission.

Up to 1852, the brothers in Oceania had no problem with identifying themselves as members of the Society of Mary. But after the separation of the two congregations that year, while they continued to work for the Society in the missions, they no longer formed part of it. This situation was, of course, much later to lead on to questions about their actual identity, for others though not themselves. Yet I think we can claim that, both before 1852 and after, brothers and fathers living and working together in the missions reflect one of the aspirations of the original Marist project. We have, besides, the sentiments expressed by the Visitor to the Marist Missions, Fr Victor Poupinel, to the Superior General of the Brothers, Br Louis-Marie, in 1865, asking for brothers specifically for the schools: *And who will provide good schools in our distant colonies without the help of the Brothers? Our two congregations began these missions together, the Brothers have found themselves there side by side with the Fathers. Should they not continue in a common accord this difficult but very meritorious enterprise?*

Now let us move on to the end of the century, to 1896, when our Founder has been declared Venerable (Chanel was beatified in 1889). Teaching brothers have been present in the Pacific for some 25 years and in New Zealand for 20. The congregation is in a state of rapid expansion. Just three years have passed since the visit of another Superior General, Br Theophane Durand. Theophane had already visited Canada, Spain and North Africa. One of the reasons for these visitations was to find suitable sanctuaries for the brothers now coming under increasing pressure in France from anti-clerical governments. In fact, in only seven years time, in 1903, the teaching congregations will be suppressed and expelled from France. Over 500 establishments will be closed and a quarter of the brothers in France lost to the congregation. On the other hand, the numbers leaving the country are sufficient for the creation of four new provinces overseas, including one centred on Australia. And New Zealand, Samoa and Fiji will become a province of their own in 1917.

All these new communities follow the Hermitage model. The brothers live a monastic life-style, centred on the schools. Government is highly centralised, with authority being vested in the Assistant General responsible for the province rather than the provincial superior himself.

Since all matters of importance must be referred to him, one can imagine this causing a certain amount of frustration for the provincial of Australia, for example, where an exchange of correspondence might take longer than six months. While reforms in 1903 give the local superior somewhat more responsibility, it is still the Assistant General who has most say in the running of the province.

The schools are mainly primary, some having a Civil Service class to prevent students having to move to a state secondary school. A little high school is opened in Auckland, at Pitt Street, in the early 1890s which becomes Sacred Heart College when moved to a new site in 1903. The brothers have also taken on an orphanage, St Mary's, at Stoke near Nelson, which they will conduct from 1890 to 1900. They run a little juniorate at Napier from 1899 to 1903 and even a short lived novitiate in Samoa, at Moamoa, from 1910. In Fiji, the segregated educational system set up by British colonial authorities requires separate schools for Europeans, Fijians, Indians and other ethnic groups. And in Samoa, the partitioning of the country in 1900 means two separate education systems to adapt to, German and American.

What characterises the communities, at least up the First World War, is their international composition: French, Irish, English, Scots, Germans, Belgians, Swiss, an Italian, even a Luxemburger joining the Australian and New Zealand graduates of the novitiate in Australia. Before 1903, when this part of the Marist world formed part of the Province of Great Britain and the Isles, brothers came from, and sometimes returned to, South Africa, New Caledonia and the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), as well as Europe. The director of the first community in Wellington, Br Sigismond, a Frenchman, went on to South Africa. The first teaching brothers in Samoa, Brs Ulbert and Landry, both French, died in New Caledonia. Another French brother, Philippe-Beniti, having worked in New Zealand, Fiji and Samoa, joined the China mission. One of the German brothers in Samoa, Frederick Henry, came to the Pacific after some years in Brasil, and another, Gerard Meister, after teaching in all parts of the province, was later Director of Education in the Seychelles. In 1889, the provincial, Br John Dullea, had to explain to his Assistant General why it was difficult for him and his council to establish a dietary regime in keeping with the Rule that satisfied the mixture of French, Irish, English, Scottish, Australian and New Zealand brothers in the Australian communities. Fortunately, this seems to have been the only problem, apart from national attitudes to sport, to disturb the harmony of community life. French and German brothers in Samoa during the war appear to have lived, worked and prayed together without much difficulty.

The brothers do, however, face problems in getting themselves established in the Pacific. In New Zealand there is a strong secular lobby which makes its mark on the education system the very year the brothers arrive to open schools ('free, secular and compulsory'). Sectarianism is widespread and sometimes rabid, and there is considerable ant-Irish as well as anti-Catholic prejudice. Within the Catholic community itself, they are caught in the early days in the tension between a French Marist clergy and a largely nationalist Irish laity. Samoa suffers from intermittent civil war and then colonial partitioning. In Fiji, there is strong Protestant opposition to the mission schools and difficulties with the colonial administration.

For a striking illustration, we need look no further than the orphanage at Stoke, the largest of the communities in New Zealand and the Islands in the last decade of the 19th century. Here we have a typical community of the period – French, Belgian, Irish, New Zealand and Australian – in a Marist parish, running what since 1880 has been redefined as an industrial school, something close to the Social Welfare Boys' Homes of the 1970s, and with the same problems. The reports of the provincials of the period detail the progress of both staff and

students, praising improvements in discipline, classwork, religious practice and living conditions, and criticising sometimes harsh punishments and deficiencies in administration. In his report to the superior general in April 1900, the director, Br Loetus, paints a glowing picture: a flourishing farm, students engaged in cultivating commercial crops and experimenting with growing vines, exam passes as good as those in the state schools, a school band and a proposed cadet corps, and most former students going on to become good citizens and good Catholics. But are the brothers to be commended for this? They are not.

This same year, there is a resurgence of anti-Catholic feeling stirred up by the Irish Protestant Orange Lodge, and when two runaways in May are found and returned to Stoke via the courts, rumours spread that their punishment will be too severe. Such is the state of local opinion that the government is obliged to set up a Royal Commission to inquire into the running of the school. Its findings do little more than confirm the criticisms made by the provincials over the decade and are clearly not damning enough for the bigots, who then level charges of assault against two of the brothers. These charges are dismissed one by one during a three week trial, and the two are discharged without conviction. But the reputation of the institution and the brothers has been tarnished and some of the provisions of the new Bill introduced into parliament as a result of the enquiry make it impossible for the brothers to continue at Stoke. They are withdrawn in September. Thus a very promising project is brought to an abrupt end through bigotry, opportunism and political cynicism. Sad to say, the 'Stoke Affair' was still being cited, for much the same reasons, as recently as the 1990s.

As we have seen in Fr Poupinel's letter of 1865, the close association of the congregation and the Society of Mary continued in the founding of the schools. It was Marist vicars apostolic and bishops who invited the brothers to their missions and dioceses and Marist priests who asked them to open schools in their parishes. It was Marist priests also who from the beginning directed likely vocations to the juniorate and novitiate. This close association continued throughout this period in the missions, but in New Zealand there was a gradual distancing due first to competition in the field of vocations recruitment, and then as the two congregations became established and institutionalised.

Champagnat was beatified in 1955. The middle years of last century were, I think, for all of us a period of stability and achievement. We Marists had just celebrated the canonisation of Peter Chanel, and were soon to celebrate 125 years of presence in the Pacific, 150 years since the Fourviere pledge and the foundation of our congregations, 100 years since the opening of our first schools in New Zealand and 50 since the foundation of this province. Many of our schools and missions were celebrating jubilees. The 1950s and 1960s have been justly called the golden age of Catholic schools, in the traditional sense, in this country, while the same years saw the emergence of former students of our schools in Samoa and Fiji as leaders of independent countries. Not to mention the impact Marist Old Boys were making on the sporting fields of all three countries! The period was also a time of rapid and widespread social change and, for Catholics, the *aggiornamento* introduced in the Church by the Second Vatican Council was bringing both exhilaration and apprehension.

The 1920s and 1930s witness the establishment of formation centres, the juniorate at Tuakau in 1922, the novitiate at Claremont in 1932, the scholasticate in Auckland in 1935. Further primary schools are opened and some secondary departments or high schools. But secondary education really takes off after the Second World War with the reforms of the Labour government and pressure from a growing Catholic population. The brothers, for example, in the space of only 13 years, 1945 to 1958, besides resiting Sacred Heart College, open six

secondary schools, three of them taking in boarders. You can imagine the pressures placed on manpower and formation. The provincial, Br Adrian Scott, has first to suspend the scholasticate programme (until the authorities in Rome find out!) and then withdraw the brothers from Timaru for several years. At the same time, an intensive recruiting programme fills the juniorate and novitiate and leads to the opening of a much larger scholasticate, Marcellin Hall, in Auckland. The development of Marist Old Boys associations and sports clubs proceeds apace.

In the Pacific, the brothers establish secondary departments in Fiji in Suva in 1936 and in Samoa in Apia in 1950 which develop into Marist Brothers High School, Suva, and St Joseph's College, Lotopa. Thus they become instrumental in helping form the first generation of political and religious Pacific leaders. They also become involved in teacher training in Fiji at Cawaci from 1929 to 1947 and in Samoa at Mulivai from 1965 to 1969. On the other hand, conflict with the Vicar Apostolic of Fiji, Victor Foley, leads to their withdrawal from the mission schools of Cawaci, Nailili and Wairiki in the early 1950s.

One significant development in the immediate post-war period is the brothers' return to the Maori Mission when they are invited to transform St Peter's College, a school for catechists in Northcote run by the Mill Hill Fathers into a normal secondary school. While the Mill Hills continue to control the boarding establishment, the brothers become responsible for all school matters, including sport and, at the beginning, Maori language and culture. The 1950s see the production of a series of Maori operas and the establishment of a Maori Club. But their involvement in this aspect of college life ceases at the end of the decade. In the 1960s, the roll reaches 100 and the school has begun to make its mark academically and on the sports field. By the end of the decade, the roll has doubled and an ambitious building programme is underway. The Mill Hills no longer have the men to staff the boarding hostel and so in 1970 the brothers take over entire administration and management of the college. In 1972, now known as Hato Petera College, it becomes the largest Maori boarding school in the country. Former students are priests, brothers, teachers, academics, lawyers as well as local community leaders and noted sportsmen. One of the early lay teachers, Lang Davis, will later become principal of the college.

If we can all pride ourselves on our progress and achievements in the middle of last century, I don't think we can do as much in the field of inter-Marist relations. Our congregations have for the most part gone their separate ways, with little contact except at the levels of leadership and local missionary activities and the occasional celebration. No one is sure whom the pioneer missionary brothers belong to and the fact that Champagnat was a priest of the Society of Mary seems ignored by most of the brothers and forgotten by most of the fathers. Fortunately, the appeal by the Vatican Council to religious congregations to go back to their origins is beginning to encourage the research which will remedy this situation.

And now 50 years later, in 1999, we come to Champagnat's canonisation. And what a difference we find! The formation centres have been closed and sold. The network of primary schools has been reduced to one at Napier. Many brothers have left the congregation and very few candidates are offering for the novitiate. This situation is largely a result of the Second Vatican Council and, in New Zealand, the Integration of Catholic schools into the state system in combination with sweeping social changes. The Council, in formulating a new vision of Church, has empowered the laity and challenged religious to find new models of religious life. Lay people have been encouraged to take an active part in areas of church life formerly the preserve of clergy and religious. In fact, this has become a necessity in countries such as New

Zealand, where the rising cost of education and the decline in numbers of religious compels the hierarchy to enter into partnership with the state. During the 1980s, therefore, we see a series of closures, mergers and new foundations as Church schools are integrated into the state system. And we also see what Rory Sweetman described as *the flight of the religious orders from teaching.*

One factor not anticipated by the hierarchy and the Catholic community generally is that one of the effects of Vatican II has been to move the focus of religious beyond their traditional apostolates. Integration, for example, has given New Zealand religious the opportunity to move out of the classroom and formal education and concentrate on specialised ministries or respond to the needs of places or groups outside the mainstream. In the first instance, the brothers set up a school retreat team based at Tuakau, open an alternative education centre at Glenfield, and introduce the REMAR youth movement into the schools. In the second, they find openings in the poorer urban areas such as Otara and impoverished rural regions such as Northland, where small communities in Panguru, Kawakawa and Kaitaia become involved in both formal and informal education and youth and social work. Some of these ventures are relatively short lived while others still continue.

Similar developments take place in the Pacific, with foundations in the remoter areas of Fiji at Napuka and Savarekareka, both in collaboration with other congregations, and of Western Samoa at Palauli. Alternative education institutions are later opened in both countries at Vatuwaqa in Suva and at Palauli. A Pacific novitiate is opened in 1971 at Lomeri in Fiji to serve the New Zealand and Australian provinces, taking in candidates from Fiji, Samoa, Papua-New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Kiribati, Vanuatu, and even India. It has produced the men who are the leaders and formators of today's Districts of the Pacific and Melanesia. Inspired by the Council's re-emphasis on the centrality of the missions, the province also accepts invitations to found communities in two new places in the Pacific, Tonga in 1978 (strictly speaking a return after over 100 years), and Kiribati, north of the equator, in 1984. Although a shortage of manpower obliges us later to leave Tonga again, individual brothers respond to the congregation's millennial 'ad gentes' project by going to work in the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Africa. We may see here something of a renewal of that international spirit characteristic of the early communities of the region.

And we are aware too of a renewed and greater understanding of our origins and union as members of a wider family of Mary, another fruit of Vatican II. This received memorable expression in our country at the end of the century in the creation of the Marist Pastoral Centre at Marcellin Hall, when fathers, sisters and brothers formed a team to help with religious and pastoral renewal in New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands. Although you will find no trace today of the physical buildings of Marcellin Hall, there are many priests, religious and lay people who are conscious in their own lives of the presence of the spiritual edifice it helped build. And further signs of its expression are evident in events such as the one we are holding today. This is, I consider, a source of strength and inspiration for us as we look towards an as yet uncertain future.

Many of you will remember that in times past many works of English literature were translated into graphic version in the form of the classic comic. Indeed, this was for many people their only connection with the world of literature. Well, you could consider this presentation as a sort of classic comic version of the history 'Far Distant Shores' that we had intended to launch today. If it has worked for you on that level, it has achieved its purpose. But we also hope it

may have wet your taste for more, and that this work, finally published, and the much more interesting and comprehensive work of Br Andre Lanfrey, will have their share of readers too.