

THE CHURCH IN NEW ZEALAND

MEMOIRS OF THE EARLY DAYS

(Contributed.)

CANTERBURY.

III.

(Continued from last week.)

The Rev. Father Chervier arrived in Christchurch as assistant to the Rev. Father Chataigner on April 1, 1861, and together they shared the lot of the pioneer settlers uncomplainingly. A good lady of the little congregation got their meals ready and performed other necessary duties about the church and residence. Although with church and presbytery on the block of land, the section was bleak and desolate. With an eye to beauty and utility Mr Henley set about tree planting, and from seeds succeeded in raising a large quantity of trees. Fruit trees were planted by him upon the site, and many specimens given away to friends. He also planted a row of bluegums along the frontage to Barbadoes street, which in after years attained gigantic proportions, so much so that in recent years, owing to improvements, it was found necessary to remove them. For long years these trees formed quite a landmark and were much admired, and it was with a pang of regret that the old people saw the last of them disappear.

The Ultimate Fate

of this humble little church was described in the 'Tablet' at the time as follows:—'Shortly before one o'clock on the morning of Tuesday, June 3, 1903, the city firebells rang out an alarm, when it was discovered that the Catholic club room, situated near the episcopal residence, Barbadoes street, were in flames. When the two chemical engines arrived on the scene the fire was reducing to ruins the billiard rooms, a new portion of the building erected about two years previously, and was making its way into the library. This portion of the structure possessed an historic interest, as it was in reality the first Catholic church erected in Christchurch. Owing to its ruined state it was not considered worth the trouble or expense of reinstating the building. Among the many uses the building had been put to, besides the original one, was a school (St. Leo's academy), residence for the Marist Brothers, library (parochial), societies' meeting place, and the scene of numerous gatherings in which subjects of great interest to the Catholic community had been discussed and settled. It is recorded as a somewhat notable incident in connection with the demolition of the old building that Mr P. Henley, of Lincoln, was a looker-on, he also being one of the historic group present at the laying of the foundation stone. In marked contrast was the little building to the majestic cathedral now overshadowing the site. Verily, church building in Canterbury could scarcely have had more modest beginnings.'

In 1864 the tide of immigration set in strongly. Among every batch of new arrivals were some Catholics, and as a natural consequence increased church accommodation had to be considered.

At intervals the priests alternately set out on foot to the back country, visiting settlers and those engaged on stations, and in search of stray members of their flock. In the course of their travels they ran many risks in the fording of swollen rivers and the crossing of difficult mountain passes in fulfilment of their mission. Whilst thus engaged they received from time to time the means for extending, in a modest way, the church accommodation in the town.

After a fair sum was in hand the foundation stone of a second church in Christchurch was laid on Whit Monday, 1864, and in the same year one at Lyttelton. When the new church was completed and opened the old one was used as a residence. In later years the second church, after being considerably enlarged, was known as the pro-cathedral. Shortly after starting these works Father Chataigner removed to Timaru, and was succeeded as parish priest of Christchurch by Father Chervier, who had Father Boibeaux as assistant.

About eighteen months after his arrival in New Zealand Mr P. Henley took up land in the Lincoln district, and was the first Catholic to reside on his holding there, his advent to the district taking place on the auspicious date March 17, 1862. His house was used for six or seven years for Church purposes, and he afterwards gave five acres of land in the vicinity as a site for a school and parish residence to Father Chervier.

In 1869 tenders were called for the erection of a church at New Headford and another at Leeston, each 40ft by 20ft, and subsequently churches were erected at Southbridge, Rangiora, Lōburn, Ashburton, and Darfield. In 1873 Father Ecuyer was appointed parish priest of Christchurch, Father Chervier took the country districts, and Father Boibeaux was appointed to Lyttelton. Father Chervier selected New Headford as his place of residence, and Mr Henley gave an additional four acres adjoining his previous gift as a site for a residence. The material for the erection of the house was carted from Christchurch free of cost by the residents, no fewer than thirty drays setting out one morning for the purpose. When completed the house was also used by Father Chervier as a school, at which there was an attendance of seventy children. In 1882 the first church built at New Headford was found to be too small, and was afterwards used as a school. A new church was erected, owing in a great measure to Mr Henley's liberality, and in the following year the whole property was free of debt. Father Chervier also built a second church at Leeston, together with a convent and presbytery—a grand total to his credit of ten churches, two presbyteries, and a convent—probably a record in Church extension.

Waimate.

The following particulars of the experiences of Father Chataigner in South Canterbury have been supplied by one of the clergy. The information was supplied by an old resident, and one at whose house the early missionaries usually stayed when on their periodical visits to the district. The following is Mr Toohar's account of the beginning of the Church in Waimate:—It was early in the year 1862 that the Rev. Father Chataigner first visited Waimate, the district being at the time covered with very dense bush. In 1865 he began his ministry. He came twice a year, and celebrated mass in his (Mr Toohar's) house. There were only eleven Catholics in the settlement at this period. On one occasion when visiting Waimate to baptise a child Father Chataigner was benighted at the 'Low Quarry Bush,' now known as Hook Bush. He was alone, and had but two matches, with which he succeeded in lighting a fire to keep himself warm until morning. On another occasion he was called to attend a sick man at Hampden, and had to cross the Moeraki. Not knowing the river, he asked a man to point out the safest ford, and was shown the very deepest part. It was, he afterwards said, just a miracle that he crossed in safety. When he reached Hampden he found the man he was on his way to attend was dead. Later on he was called to visit a sick woman who resided about thirty miles away. Accompanied by Mr Toohar he walked the whole distance. Losing their way they came across a whare, in which they found provisions that under the circumstances proved very acceptable to them. At last they found their way to the house of the sick person, and, after Father Chataigner had ministered to her and had baptised her child, the return journey was commenced. Having no food with them the priest became very weak, but Mr Toohar pulled some speargrass, which he persuaded his companion to eat. This strengthened him until he reached the hospitable house of Mrs Studholme, where he remained for the night. From this time the visits of Father Chataigner became more frequent. Mass was celebrated every three months, then every month, and as the congregation increased the people met in the Temperance Hall. The Rev. Father Chervier used to come occasionally to aid the struggling mission. The Rev. Father Goutenoire was appointed first parish priest of Waimate, and built the present church of St. Patrick nearly thirty-two years ago. He also built the Catholic school, which is one of the finest and best furnished in the Dominion. Nearly twenty years ago Father Goutenoire was called to Christchurch, and was replaced at Waimate by the Rev. Father (now Dean) Regnault, the present parish priest. Dean Regnault has built a fine presbytery, a convent for the Sisters of St. Joseph, and a substantial brick church at Waihao, an outlying district, twelve miles from Waimate.

(To be continued.)

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