

THE CHURCH IN NEW ZEALAND

MEMOIRS OF THE EARLY DAYS

(Contributed.)

WELLINGTON.

(Continued.)

ALONG THE NORTH-WEST COAST.

During the year 1844 the Rev. Father Comte was placed by Bishop Pompallier in spiritual charge of the Maori population in and adjacent to Wellington. These were settled in large numbers along the coast, and among them this pioneer missionary labored with enduring results. Working his way from place to place he finally made Otaki his centre of activity, and thus established the Mission there. On December 30, 1894, in the presence of His Grace Archbishop Redwood, the jubilee of the Mission was celebrated with befitting solemnity and interesting ceremonial at Otaki. A number of French Missionary Fathers also participated in the ceremonies. The church was beautifully decorated for the occasion with bannerettes and flowers. A throne, with the shield of the Archbishop in the middle, had been provided. The crib, also the first ever seen in the church, had been erected with great taste. In the evening the Archbishop, attended by several priests and acolytes, and with a very solemn ceremony, blessed the cross which had been erected on the hill to celebrate the jubilee of the introduction of Catholicism into the district. The cross (made of totara, 30ft. in length, 10 x 10 in. square, and very pretty with turned ends, brackets, and rays) was erected on the site of the old church in which Father Comte, who will be remembered as the first priest who laboured in Otaki, officiated. Near the cross was also erected a flag-staff on which was hoisted an elaborately-worked flag, bearing the word "Pukekaraka" and the dates 1844 and 1894. Pukekaraka, we may explain, is the name of the hill—signifying a hill covered with karaka trees—and in the centre of the flag one of these trees with a red cross among its branches was represented. The hill is included in the Mission property, the church, convent, and presbytery standing on a flat at its foot.

The view from the top of the hill where the cross stands is a grand one—the ranges on one side, the sea and Kapiti Island on the other. Before the spectator lie the pretty township and river of Otaki. By turning round, if the weather is fine, he may clearly see Mount Egmont—looking like a white peak rising from the ocean.

After the ceremony of blessing the cross had been performed his Grace addressed the crowd, composed of Maoris and pakehas, assembled at its foot in touching words. The venerable Father Comte, he said, whom he knew so well, and who was present to-day in spirit, rejoiced with them, and gave them his blessing in their celebration of Otaki's jubilee. The cross, he said, was a symbol of faith, hope, and charity. It represented the faith of those natives who, fifty years ago, were the first to become Catholics there and whose mortal remains were now lying beside that holy spot where they had their modest chapel. The same cross proclaimed also the faith of their children who had erected it.

Close by the jubilee cross a small carved house had been erected on the site where Father Comte had his whare in 1844. A large photograph of the venerable missionary was hung at the entrance of this building, and was looked at by those present with great respect and admiration. The photograph had been given to Father Cognet by the venerable missionary, Father Comte, on the eve of the departure of the former from France on the 3rd of the previous month.

At the end of April, 1899, news was received in Otaki of the death of the Rev. Father Comte (Kometa, in Maori). He died in France on January 14 of the same year, at the age of eighty-seven years. In the Catholic Church at Otaki on the Sunday following reference was made to the good work done by Father Comte over fifty years previously. He was the first priest, who came to Otaki, and had his

first church on top of the Pukekaraka Hill, with his little whare close to it. Having converted the Ngatikapu and several other tribes up the coast to Christianity, he proceeded with wonderfully successful results to civilise them. He induced, and assisted them to erect a flourmill and a rope-making concern at Waitohu; to buy a fine schooner, the Elizabeth, in order to convey their produce to Wellington; to cut and saw up the Otaki River—the timber for the building of the church. However, he left Otaki before the church was erected. The deceased priest's memory is quite green even now amongst the Natives, and also amongst the few old settlers who were in the district and knew him. They all speak in the highest terms of him. A few days after receipt of the news of Father Comte's death a solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated in the local church. At the conclusion of the service the Maoris had a proper tangi in honor of the late Father Comte. The Natives have decided to perpetuate the memory of their first priest by erecting a tablet in the church after the building has been renovated and enlarged.

The Rev. Father Seon, the companion of the Rev. Father Petitjean, and who shared with him the work of establishing the Mission foundation of Wellington, was also identified with the spiritual well-being of the Natives in the vicinity and some distance along the coast. On occasions he rode a distance of 53 miles along a comparatively roadless route from Wellington to relieve Father Comte at Otaki. Worn out with his labors for a period of nine years among the Maoris at the Bay of Islands, he subsequently directed his attention to the secondary stations of the district from the Wellington centre. Between times he travelled along the East Coast, traversing forests and unsettled wastes, evangelising the Maori tribes. Bishop Viard, knowing his generosity and devotedness, found him always ready to take up the most arduous duties. At last a stroke of paralysis terminated this life of zeal and abnegation.

'In 1851 (writes Mr. A. H. Blake in the 'Record') I had the pleasure, with other schoolmates, of visiting Father Comte's Mission at Otaki, a place situated over 50 miles north of Wellington, on the West Coast. This very route, only a few years previously, had been the scene of many tragic events during the war with Te Rangihaeata and Te Rauparaha. Father Comte had built the Natives a flourmill, and amongst other arts of civilisation was instructing them how to manufacture flour. Peace and contentment apparently reigned supreme, and the hospitality extended to us was of such a character as to produce the impression that their ancestors must have come from the Emerald Isle, rather than from one of those of the South Pacific. One simple incident in connection with this good missionary may be worth relating. When Father Comte first made his appearance amongst the Natives he was suffering from an affection of the eyes, in consequence of which he continuously wore darkened glasses. This was quite a phenomenon to the aboriginal intelligence, and a complete mystery, the solution of which was, as they understood it, that the inner eyes were occasionally closed in sleep, but the outer ones never. This impression, in the first instance, created a wholesome respect for the watchfulness of the wearer, and counteracted, to a certain extent, the cupidity of the untutored Natives.'

(To be continued.)

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