

J.M.J.

St Joseph's Convent
Matata, New Zealand
8 August 1894

May Jesus and Mary be praised.

My dearest Sister,

I must commence my letters today with a long one to you who so much deserve more than this from me. The next today will be to Sister Andrea, and as many more of my dear old friends and Sisters as I can write to. Since my last to you from Meanee, I was very ill for about a fortnight, but the perfect rest and quiet there was a luxury to me and enabled me to resume my duties sooner than I could otherwise have hoped to do. Now I am again so strong and well, and so happy here with our dear Sisters, who are in their turn working generously and cheerfully in this out-of-the-way place.

To begin, I must give you some idea of what it is like. Imagine a big straggling barn, but a two-storeyed one. On the ground floor we have entrance hall, reception room and large school - used as a chapel on Sundays, holydays and festivals. The school is completely furnished with modern style of desks, etc. etc., has altar, harmonium and space at the back of the altar for vesting, etc. The entrance to this part is from our hall passage. There are besides, downstairs, a sort of passage used for laundry work and a lumber room. Upstairs we have a very nice Oratory, with matting on the floor, four easy priedieux; off this, the vestry and confessional. There is a beautiful statue of 'Our Lady of Light'. In this Oratory we have our dear Lord in the Blessed Sacrament always with us and Mass is daily said here by one of the Fathers.

Off the top landing, a door leads to the kitchen, which is simply a passage about 15 feet long by 6 feet wide. At the end opposite the door, there is a miserable stove with which the cooking is done. Off this kitchen is a little closet used as a refectory 8 feet by 6. A board 2 feet wide and about 5 feet long is fixed against the outer partition, and this serves as table. Shelves above this contain the crockery in use, knives, spoons, etc. All is very neat and clean. In fine weather it is all right, but when rain and wind come, the first pours in in all directions and the second causes the whole place to shake and the fire to smoke. Indeed, at such times, to keep the fire alight and do any necessary cooking, Sister Genevieve has to stand in water - and for the purpose wears strong leather boots. The community room comes next. It is large - 20 feet x 20 feet, and only lined with wood on two sides, with no ceiling - open to the rafters, cross beams and galvanised iron. Off this room, a passage 12 feet long by 5 feet wide leads to the dormitory, a room as large as the community room and like it in every way save that the four walls are lined. Just imagine how cold this must be in winter. From the floor to the highest beam of the roof there must be a height of 20 feet, and there is no fireplace in any room of the house, not even in the kitchen, which has only a miserable stove. Off the passage leading to the comm. room to the dormitory there are, on either side, two small closets measuring about 7 ft 6 inches by 6 feet. These are used respectively as pantry, clothes room, store room and child's room, for we have one half-caste Maori child as a boarder, or orphan rather. Off the community room there is a rude balcony which runs nearly the length of the building - which is from Oratory to dormitory about 80 feet. The balcony only runs the length of the dormitory, passage, comm. room and landing hall - in all about 60 feet long. The balcony has no roof, and the only thing to keep one from falling off or getting giddy is that, since I represented the danger

of it to Father Madan, he came up one day and tied some long rails to a few uprights. Of course no one dare lean on these - or go near them - but their presence there saves one from getting giddy. This balcony is over 6 ft wide.

From the community room and balcony we have a lovely view. From where I sit writing this there is a view of the ocean with several small islands, one being 'White Island' which contains an active volcano which is smoking away at a great rate at present. Looking towards the south-west there is a range of hills - can hardly call them mountains. Between the convent and the sea, just about 5 minutes' walk from here, there is a fresh water creek running parallel with it and only separated from it by a sandy ridge not many yards wide. This is a lovely day and everything looks bright and beautiful. I must not forget to mention that in an easterly direction between here and the ocean we have a full view of the Maori Pa and of the new church which the Fathers are building. It is being built of wood, and will contain recesses for 7 altars when completed. The walls, roof and tower are already finished, but the interior requires a great deal of time and money before it can be ready for use. The old church - a miserable bamboo one - is only used as a place for the Maoris to assemble for morning and evening prayer, over which a catechist presides.

For Mass they come to the convent schoolroom, also for Vespers and Benediction. The Maoris sing the Vespers through themselves in their own language, but the Litany and hymns for Benediction they sing in Latin. The Vespers were originally taught to the Maoris by Bishop Pompallier about 70 years ago, and the old Maoris of that time in their turn taught their children. This is an important thing to remember, as they were a long time without priests, for, between wars and changes in the Auckland diocese, the poor Maoris had little to remind them of their religion.

I dare say you wonder how, in this extremely cold climate, the Sisters can keep themselves warm. Well, having no fireplace, they adopt the Maori plan of making up a fire in the centre of the room. For this purpose they first place a heavy piece of iron, about 30" in circumference, having a hole in the centre, and about 9" high on the floor. They may place it anywhere they like in the room - and having done this, they next place on top of it a strong piece of fine zinc about three-quarters of a yard wide, and long, and turned up at the four sides. On this they place the wood and light their fire, gladly putting up with the smoke so long as they can keep themselves warm. Of course work is out of the question and they simply squat themselves on the floor, each one minding her side of the fire, and guarding against any of the embers falling on the floor and so setting fire to the house. I have my side to guard, but finding it hard to squat, am allowed a chair. Of course this luxury of a fire is only indulged in at night. On the coldest mornings and during the day, all have to work and exercise themselves to keep warm. The cold is very much felt during school hours, but so far has had to be endured. Please God this will be remedied next year, for when I return to Auckland, I shall, D.V., not leave a stone unturned to procure stoves for the comm. room, school and kitchen.

The food is of the poorest, meat very seldom, once in a month perhaps - fish just as the Maoris (who are very careless and lazy) please to get them any, wild duck, swans or wild pig whenever any of the Fathers succeed in shooting or killing such. It is often either a feast or a famine here. The chief food is the sweet potato or kumera. Butter and milk are luxuries for which they pay dearly and which they can only procure from one person, a Protestant, whose daughter is the only white child attending the school. Through the kindness of friends down South I was able to send them six ducks, seven fowls and wire netting to make an enclosed yard for the same, so now they have the commencement of a poultry farm or yard, I should say.

Other friends sent a quantity of beautiful butter which will nearly last until Christmas, hams, bacon and other housekeeping necessities.

There are two resident priests here, living in a Maori whare - pronounced 'fare' - but they have their meals at the convent in the reception room. As soon as the meals are ready (the same time as ours), a few strokes are given to the big bell and they come over. Everything is on the table for them, and when they have finished they go back to the 'whare'. They never come upstairs unless to the oratory, and never make recreation with the Sisters. They share in the feast or famine, as it may be, and allow the Sisters about £20 a year extra for their food. At the same time, they do the work required in the garden, yards, etc. for the Sisters. One of them put up the yard netting for the fowls. The same one has just planted 50 young trees around the garden. These trees were given to me in Auckland for the convent, and with them other cuttings. The two Fathers are as delighted as possible to get these and plant them for us. Last night they gave a magic lantern exhibition in the schoolroom. It was the first time I had ever seen one. The views - scenes from the creation of the world to the death of our Lord, and views of Rome, were very beautiful.

The Sisters here are SS. Mary Xavier, Sister B. (one of our first Auckland postulants), M. Michael and Genevieve. They have to teach the prayers and Catechism in Maori, but English is the language of the school. The State School Inspector visits, examines and reports, and so far all his reports have been favourable. Indeed, he has highly complimented the Sisters. Sister M. Xavier, though young, seems to have a special vocation for this work. She speaks and reads Maori remarkably well. One of the Fathers teaches in school every day. So much for the convent and school. I have only to add the Sisters are very happy and contented, and for this may God be praised. It is the sweetest comfort for me to see them as they are. I greatly fear though that Sister M. Michael will not persevere after her vows are up. She prefers being here to anywhere else and is doing her duty, but has great doubts as to her vocation. Pray for her.

If it can be managed, we hope to have a general meeting of all the N.Z. Sisters for the Xmas Retreat. Meanee is decidedly the most central place and has every convenience of rooms, grounds and spiritual advantages but then there are some drawbacks, chiefly jealousies, and the danger of offending particular Bishops and priests. I intend to be very open with these Bishops, giving them good reasons for our all meeting together and regulating the result by circumstances. Temuka, where I would most wish all to meet, is too far removed from Auckland to suit everyone. Then again, there is the difficulty about room (but this could be met by our using the schoolrooms) and that it would be more expensive. Fares are now wonderfully reduced through opposition steamers. We can now get single fare from Auckland to Wellington for 20 shillings, and cheap in proportion to Christchurch. By return it is even cheaper. I have no doubt but that St Joseph will make all clear and easy for us and obtain for us that we do whatever is best and for God's glory. I like Dr Grimes, the Bishop of Christchurch very much. He and his priests are kind and good to the Sisters and see that their spiritual needs are supplied. We have only one convent in the Wellington diocese - Meanee. The Fathers (Marists) attached to the Meanee mission are kind to the Sisters and appreciate their efforts, but I don't think Archbishop Redwood cares much for us. Dr Luck is good and kind, but has had to let the Sisters battle on for themselves. Only that Sister Teresa has had wonderful perseverance and tact, we would not now have the fine schools and convents we have in the city. Since I came over, His Lordship has allowed the Sisters the Blessed Sacrament in the Remuera convent, and allows Mass to be said on Sundays and holydays in the Surrey Hills school chapel. Before that, the Benedictines, who have charge of that part of the city, would

not have Mass at Surrey Hills - only once a week on schooldays when one of them would say Mass in the convent oratory. The walk to St Benedict's in the heat and rain was really too much for the Sisters, particularly when there was no necessity for it if some of the Fathers would only be agreeable, so I begged the Bishop to consider the Sisters, and for their sakes, if not for the people's, to let Mass be said at Surrey Hills. To this he kindly agreed, and now they are very happy and so is good Father Gregory who all along wished that they should have this done for them.

Sister Anselm is buried in a beautiful cemetery where her grave is always kept green by dear Monsignor McDonald, the venerable old priest of Panmure. Ryde cemetery in Sydney is nice, but that at Panmure is more beautifully situated, and Monsignor takes special pride in keeping it green. His brother, Father Walter McDonald, the Maoris' friend, is buried there. We have Sisters buried in many parts now. Poor dear Sr Sylvester is the first in Jamestown, R.I.P. How wonderfully sudden her end came. I have not yet heard from anyone whether she had been complaining of ill-health before, but surely she must have been. Ulceration of the stomach is a most painful thing. When you answer this, please send me a list of the Port Augusta convents as now filled, mentioning who are the L.S's. Tell me about your own health, dear Sister, and be sure to tell me how the Bishop is. When he was ill, I wished to write to him, but hesitated. I feel as if all my old friends are dead to me, and beyond trying to do my duty wherever I am placed, am, in a measure, dead myself. The past with its many sorrows and few joys is a dream. I hope, my dearest Sister, that you had a happy Jubilee day. There may not have been much fuss over it, but perhaps - indeed I have no doubt - it was all the happier for that. Without the convent register at hand, it would be an utter impossibility for me to keep in remembrance the various jubilees as they now occur - which now will be pretty frequent - so I have made up my mind not to particularise any one.

A day does not pass that I do not pray at Mass, Holy Communion, or some other devotion for any Sisters whose feast may then be occurring, or of whose death it may be an anniversary, and then I hope not to leave anyone out in the cold. There are some feasts in particular that I never forget, though I do not always think of them in time to write for the day. Yours, dearest Sister, is one, and as you will, I hope, have this before then, may it be a happy one to you. With all the affection of my heart, I wish you every blessing on that day and hope that you will be spared for many more even in this world. To you this latter may appear selfish, for I well know how you long for your release from this weary world. But take the loving advice I give you and leave yourself in God's hands, willing to live and suffer as long as He pleases, asking Him only to keep you in His grace and love. I find myself beginning to preach, as the saying is, so must conclude this really long letter. With very best love to all, and praying God to bless you and keep you all in the spirit of the hidden and humble St Joseph, and asking you to pray for me, I ever am, my dearest Sister,

Your loving old Mother in J.M.J.

Mary of the Cross.

Remember me very kindly to His Lordship. Rats are plentiful here; as I write, they are running over the beams and making such a noise.

Transcript by Sr Anne-Marie Power 1992.