

Into what unknown does Mercy call us now?

Nga mihi atawhai – greetings to all in Mercy! April 9 has become etched on our local Mercy calendar, recalling the arrival in New Zealand of the first Sisters of Mercy, after their eight-month voyage from the other side of the world. They stepped ashore on a piece of Auckland’s shoreline which has long since disappeared as a result of quarrying for the settlement’s roads and buildings.

The first report, published by *The Southern Cross*, one of the colony’s early newspapers, was bedevilled with small errors. It spoke of 10 nuns, and named them as Sisters of Charity.

In fact, there were eight Sisters of Mercy, most of them from St Leo’s Convent in Carlow, led by Mother Cecilia Maher. Writing some 75 years later, Auckland’s sixth Catholic bishop, Henry Cleary, an editor in his time, was at pains to correct some of the details. “In spite of the right goodwill of the old-time journalist who must have hearkened to the call of duty with the tolling of St Patrick’s bell, the interests of historical truth require that we should tell more accurately the glories of that eventful day.

“Old residents have told us, ere they passed to their reward, that everyone in the village was down at the shores of the vanished Commercial Bay to welcome the nuns, the Catholics being in the minority. The newly-arrived ladies were rowed ashore in an open boat, to land at Smale’s Point, at the spot where now stands the Government Buildings in Customs Street West.

“A procession was formed. Preceded by the whole Catholic population up the ti-tree lined track, then (as now) called Albert Street, the Sisters in twos, flanked by Catholic members of the garrison as guard-of-honour, were followed by acolytes, the priests, the venerable Bishop and his coadjutor, Dr Viard SM.

The never-ending journey

E Te Atua hoa hikoi,
God, companion on our journey,
in every age you invite us
to move into the unknown,
trusting that you will guide us
and sustain us on our way.

We give thanks for the pioneers
who came here to share their faith,
for the Sisters of Mercy
who left hearth and home
to spread the good news
of more abundant life.

Call us in our turn
to be the bearers of good news
to all who live in darkness
and the shadow of death.
Be the light that shows the way,
be the way we dare to walk,
in mercy’s name. Amen.

Imaging Mercy Today



FLASH-
BACK:
To mark
150 years
since
their
arrival,
pupils
from St
Mary’s
College in
2000 re-
enact the
landing of
the first
Sisters of
Mercy in
New
Zealand.

“When they reached St Patrick’s, Pontifical Benediction was given, hymns were sung, and the *Magnificat* and *Te Deum* intoned. Dr Pompallier briefly expressed his gratitude to God for this happy culmination of his dearest wishes, and welcomed the Sisters to their new home. The citizens afterwards extended their greetings in the recently erected schoolroom, where refreshments were provided for all.

“‘It was the grandest day I ever remember,’ a dear old lady once told the present writer.”

Bishop Cleary wrote lyrically of Dr Pompallier’s meeting with the sisters in Carlow the year before. He had told them “the moving story of his hopes for his diocese, his difficulties and the needs of his people. He looked to Ireland for assistance; many of his people in Auckland were of the garrison, the 58th and 99th Regiments; and if he could enlist the active cooperation of the Sisters of Mercy he knew that, as from another Iona, Irish missionary labours would, with God’s help, bring about the conversion of his Maori children and sustain the faith of the youthful pakeha.”

Mother Cecilia Maher had been the first to volunteer, Bishop Cleary reports. “Her community were astounded and besought their bishop, Dr Haly, to dissuade her. Well aware of the singular merit of their superioress, the good bishop did not hesitate to assent. ‘I am very sorry to part with Cecilia or any of you,’ he said, ‘but God’s glory demands this great sacrifice. If St Patrick, St Augustine and many others of whom we read had stayed at home, how would the holy faith have been transmitted to us?’

“So on August 8, 1849, leaving all that was dear in her native land, Mother Cecilia with her seven companions set out for an unknown, reputedly savage country at the other end of the earth....”

We can never recall the courage of those first Mercy pioneers without wondering into what unknown we are being called, for mercy to be done in our day. - Dennis Horton

Celebrating Memories: A ritual to mark the arrival of the first Sisters of Mercy in Aotearoa, Old Chapel, New St, Ponsonby, Sat 12 April, 8.30am, followed by breakfast in St Mary’s Convent. RSVP to JRoberts@somauck.org.nz by Tue 8 April.