

# Aubert, Mary Joseph

by Margaret Tennant

## Biography

Marie Henriette Suzanne Aubert (known first as Suzanne Aubert and later in religion as Mary Joseph Aubert) was born at Saint-Symphorien-de-Lay, Loire, France, on 19 June 1835. She was the daughter of Henriette Catherine Clarice Périer and her husband, Louis Aubert, a bailiff.

Little is known of Suzanne's early life but in later years she identified several influences on her calling. A serious childhood accident left her disabled for a long time, and it is to this experience that she attributed her lifelong sympathy for the seriously ill, the deformed and disabled. The Aubert family's contacts with the Marists in Lyons and with the founders of a number of other missionary movements introduced her to the idea of a missionary vocation. She herself later placed emphasis on the spiritual guidance of the curé of Ars, Abbé Jean Marie Vianney, during her teens and early 20s. It was he, she said, who sustained her desire to enter the religious life, despite family opposition. In September 1860, after a period spent nursing, Suzanne Aubert at last made the break with her family. Then aged 25 she sailed to New Zealand on the *General Teste* with Bishop [Jean Baptiste François Pompallier](#) and a number of other Catholic missionaries recruited during his year-long visit to Europe.

With the exception of a period spent in Rome between 1913 and 1919, Suzanne Aubert remained in New Zealand until the end of her life. During this time her work fell into three distinct phases. The first, shortest and least successful was spent in Auckland between 1860 and 1869, teaching young Māori girls. This was followed by a period of missionary work among the Māori, first at Meeanee in Hawke's Bay (years she later described as the happiest of her life), and from 1883 at Hiruhārama (Jerusalem) on the Whanganui River. While at Jerusalem she began caring for unwanted [Pākehā](#) children, an activity which led her into a third stage of endeavour: social work among the urban poor. She achieved most in the period between 1899, when she moved to Wellington, and 1913, when she travelled to Rome to gain pontifical approval of the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion which she had founded. Her activities at this time laid the basis of work still undertaken by the order.

After their arrival in Auckland in December 1860, Suzanne Aubert and the three other French women whom Pompallier had recruited went to live with the predominantly Irish order of the Sisters of Mercy, which had been established in

Auckland since 1850. Suzanne Aubert became a novice of the Sisters of Mercy in June 1861. The association between the French and Irish women was unsuccessful: in May 1862 the four French women were formed into a new order, the Congregation of the Holy Family, under Pompallier's jurisdiction. Responsibility for Māori children in Auckland was transferred from the Sisters of Mercy to the new order, which was the first in New Zealand to accept Māori sisters. Pompallier's niece, Lucie Pompallier, became superior of the new order, and Sister Mary Joseph Aubert, as she was now known, became its bursar.

The Congregation of the Holy Family established a school for Māori girls known as the Nazareth Institution. However, the number of children reached was never large, and the work was doomed after Pompallier's final departure from New Zealand in 1868. Lucie Pompallier accompanied her uncle, leaving Sister Aubert as the last of the European sisters associated with the Nazareth Institution. The Congregation of the Holy Family had relied heavily on Pompallier's protection and, as a diocesan foundation, it officially ceased to exist on his resignation in March 1869. Debts left by the bishop necessitated the sale of the block of land on which the sisters' school and convent were situated. Although Sister Aubert fought for the right to continue her work among the Māori, she was ordered by the new bishop, Dr [T. W. Croke](#), to abandon her school, desist from wearing religious habit and return to France. This stage of her work ended in failure, mainly because of the financial problems which arose during the last years of Pompallier's episcopate. There are indications, however, that Sister Aubert's French background, her single-mindedness and her less than cordial relationship with other religious colleagues in Auckland may have put her at a disadvantage after Pompallier's departure.

The experience that Sister Aubert had gained in Auckland assisted her in her next, more successful, endeavour. In February 1871 she responded to a request from the Marist, Father Euloge Reignier, to join his missionary work at Meeanee in Hawke's Bay. A lay assistant associated with the Third Order Regular of Mary in New Zealand, Sister Aubert worked as a teacher, catechist and nurse. She became interested in Māori herbal remedies and, in 1879, published a Māori-language prayerbook and catechism, *Kō te ako me te karakia o te hāhi Katorika Rōmana* (1879). Later she was to publish her New and complete manual of Māori conversation (1885) which included general rules of grammar and an extensive vocabulary.

Sister Aubert also played a major part in a revival of the Marist mission in the Wellington diocese. The mission had been virtually abandoned during the wars of the 1860s and had suffered thereafter from a shortage of personnel. The ever-increasing demands of the Pākehā population for priests and competition from other mission fields in the Pacific made the Marist authorities reluctant to commit further resources to the Māori mission. Largely as a result of Sister Aubert's persistent representations to them and to Archbishop [Francis Redwood](#), Father Christophe Soulas was appointed to Hawke's Bay in early 1879; subsequently steps were taken to revive the Marist mission on the Whanganui River.

Because of her fluency in Māori language, Sister Aubert was sent by Redwood to assist in the Whanganui mission. Along with Soulas and three Sisters of St Joseph of Nazareth, she arrived at Jerusalem on the Whanganui River on 8 July 1883. A year later the Sisters of St Joseph withdrew. They had found conditions too trying and relations with Soulas had become strained. Soulas wanted a new women's order, capable of coping with the difficult and isolated conditions of the mission. In May 1884 Redwood gave permission for the establishment of another community of the Third Order Regular of Mary. Soulas and Mother Mary Joseph Aubert as superior were allowed to receive postulants. It soon became apparent that the spirit of the Jerusalem community diverged somewhat from the Marist philosophy. The visitor to the Marist missions of Oceania, Father Claude Joly, complained about the 'spirit, the method, the singularity and the pious audacity' of Soulas and Mother Aubert. Redwood therefore agreed that the sisters should form a new diocesan congregation, and in May 1892 they became the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion, with Mother Aubert as the first superior.

The work of Mother Aubert and her Sisters of Compassion encompassed nursing, teaching, the management of a dispensary and the day-to-day care of Māori pupils. Eventually a second school was established at Ranana and the sisters also began to care for a small number of chronically ill and disabled old people at Jerusalem. The activities of the sisters were crucial to the success of the Marist mission, providing a vital element of female support absent from almost all previous Catholic missionary efforts in New Zealand.

Mother Aubert contributed more than her labour to the mission. With her patrimony she purchased a farm property in 1888, hoping that the sale of produce from the farm would fund the work. She also began to market her herbal remedies, entering into an agreement with Kempthorne, Prosser and Company's New Zealand Drug Company in 1891. It is probably for these remedies that she was best known among Pākehā New Zealanders at the time. However, dissatisfaction with the quality of the medicines prompted her to curtail commercial distribution within a few years.

Until 1891 Mother Aubert's activities at Jerusalem were directed mainly toward the Māori population. In that year her work developed in another direction with the admission of Pākehā children to Jerusalem. More than 70 children were received between 1891 and 1901, many of them emaciated and neglected and more than 60 per cent of ex-nuptial parentage. A large number were noted in the Jerusalem register as 'given for ever, unconditionally' and 'no money given or promised'. Others were admitted by order of the Whanganui magistrate. This work closely paralleled that of the founding institutions with which Mother Aubert would have been familiar in France, but it was controversial in the New Zealand context. Welfare responses which smacked of the problems and solutions of the Old World were regarded with mistrust. In particular, Mother Aubert was criticised for concealing the identity of her charges. Her refusal to open her books to government inspection meant that she forfeited the right to register under the Infant Life Protection Act 1893, and was unable to receive payment for the children's care. Her policy was regarded by some as extravagantly secretive, unnecessarily mistrustful of the

discretion of government inspectors, and likely to encourage general suspicion of the institution. A spate of infant deaths in the home in 1898 did little to improve matters, and may have convinced Mother Aubert of the difficulties of managing such an establishment at isolated Jerusalem, distant from medical facilities and public support.

Aside from these considerations Mother Aubert had long-standing invitations from Wellington Catholics to undertake nursing and social work in Wellington. In January 1899 she and three of her sisters left for Wellington, arriving, according to one story, with only 2s. 6d. to spare. After securing a cottage in Buckle Street the sisters began visiting the invalid poor, mainly in the area of Te Aro. To support their work they began begging for alms, using baskets and prams to collect clothing and food. The move signalled a marked change in the nature of the sisters' activities, although the Māori mission still continued at Jerusalem.

In 1902 the Nursing Guild of St John was formed and also began district nursing work among the poor in Wellington. Mother Aubert and the sisters then decided that they would be more effectively engaged elsewhere. Although the sisters again undertook visitation of the sick after 1918, the main thrust of their work from 1902 was institutional care of the ill and disabled, sick children and foundlings. This made financial sense: in the early twentieth century a 'bricks and mortar' approach to welfare was more likely to generate donations and public support.

None the less, the work of the Sisters of Compassion in Wellington was never narrowly institutional. Two projects, in particular, sustained their contact with the poor in the community. In early 1901 St Anthony's Soup Kitchen in Buckle Street was opened for casual and unemployed workers. The Department of Labour disapproved of this kind of assistance, arguing that it was degrading and simply encouraged men to hang around the cities rather than seek work elsewhere. Mother Aubert, on the other hand, wanted to meet an existing need and believed that the provision of nourishing food would not only stop men from going hungry, but would discourage them from entering hotels for sustenance and companionship.

While the soup kitchen hearkened back to older forms of charity, a day nursery established about the same time was an innovation. Mother Aubert recognised the pressure on widows, deserted wives and other women who were expected to contribute to their own support, but who faced criticism when this resulted in less than ideal standards of child care. Women were able to leave their children in the sisters' care between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., paying only a few pence for milk. This was one of the first such facilities in New Zealand; it was to be many decades before the idea of child care became generally acceptable.

The first institution established by Mother Aubert in Wellington was St Joseph's Home for Incurables, opened in Buckle Street in 1900. Although the home's title was regarded by some doctors as unduly negative, like the day nursery it met a vital need. Most inmates were elderly men who had never married, had no family and were suffering from chronic and degenerative conditions precipitated by the hard living of

their youth. Hospitals, which aimed at positive medical intervention, were reluctant to provide beds for 'incurables', while the old people's homes run by charitable aid boards supplied little in the way of nursing care and comforts. The state provided pensions for the elderly from 1898, but in the 1900s less than a third of those eligible received one. In any case, pensions did not greatly assist the homeless, the physically incapacitated and the dying, whose need was for services rather than financial grants.

At the same time Mother Aubert worked to establish a larger institution for young children. In April 1907 Our Lady's Home of Compassion was opened at Island Bay, Wellington. Children were transferred from Jerusalem, and their numbers soon increased as further ex-nuptial children were admitted, along with physically and intellectually handicapped children. The sisters also nursed children suffering and convalescing from acute illnesses, including paralysis, hydrocephalus and tuberculosis. As a result there was a high mortality rate at the home in early years. This caused Mother Aubert considerable difficulty with the Department of Education who had assumed responsibility for some of the school-age children. None the less, government departments came to depend on the home to take in cases refused by other agencies, including the hospital boards. From 1921 the home also took in chronically and incurably ill women.

In 1910 Mother Aubert extended her work to Auckland, establishing St Vincent's Home of Compassion for foundlings. Once again her policy on ex-nuptial children came under attack, this time from other social workers in the Auckland area who may have seen her as a rival for charitable funds. The managers of Protestant maternity homes for unmarried mothers argued that by admitting 'foundlings' and concealing their identity, she was separating mother and child at a crucial time in their relationship, denying the child the right to know its parentage, and allowing young women an easy escape from the consequences of their actions. Mother Aubert's defenders maintained that by taking in such babies she was reducing the likelihood of infanticide and giving single mothers an opportunity to put their sin behind them. Of these two opposed philosophies Mother Aubert's was the less punitive. It may also have been the more realistic, given contemporary attitudes toward unmarried mothers and the lack of financial support for those who did struggle to keep their children.

A more serious problem for Mother Aubert was antagonism toward her work from within the Catholic hierarchy. She had already ignored an instruction from Redwood to confine her work to Catholics. The bishop of Auckland, [Henry Cleary](#), would have preferred her to take up rescue work among women rather than concentrating on the care of children. He put continual obstacles in her way, which led eventually to the closure of St Vincent's in August 1916. By this time Mother Aubert was in Rome, seeking papal recognition of her order and a transfer of jurisdiction from Redwood to herself as superior general. In April 1917 the necessary decree of praise was obtained, and she was able to decide the priorities of her congregation of sisters without interference from the New Zealand Catholic hierarchy.

Mother Aubert's work must be assessed in the context of the expansion of social work in New Zealand. A recession in the 1880s and early 1890s made New Zealanders more aware of problems such as unemployment, child neglect, illegitimacy and family desertion, and more supportive of charitable-aid schemes. The churches became involved in social and charitable activities as they moved beyond the stage of basic establishment. In both Australia and New Zealand there was a marked increase in the number of religious sisterhoods, Catholic and Protestant, combining the salvation of souls with practical social work. In such communities women were able to achieve results which they could not have done as individuals. And yet Mother Aubert's experience showed the constraints which could be imposed on women's initiatives by male leaders within the churches. It took an individual of her determination and confidence to prevail against such forces.

Mother Aubert was remarkable for the breadth of her social concern. Most of the other Catholic sisterhoods specialised in teaching, nursing or the management of women's homes. As a new, indigenous order, the Sisters of Compassion responded to a variety of local needs, from Māori mission work to the care of the elderly and incurable. Mother Aubert was criticised for spreading her sisters' energies too widely, and her work was certainly not without its failures. It was, however, directed to those for whom few other facilities were available: the least attractive, least productive members of society.

In her later years at least, Mother Aubert's approach to welfare was marked by a high level of tolerance for and co-operation with other agencies. Her unpublished treatise on destitution, 'La misère', places equal emphasis on government welfare and private charity. It stresses the importance of education in preventing poverty, and allows for both traditional and new forms of charity. Mother Aubert firmly refused to restrict her activities to Catholics, telling benefactors who wanted to place such a condition on donations that her work was the 'salvation of souls, not the sanctification of Catholics'. She was a member of the St John Ambulance Association and the New Zealand Society for the Protection of Women and Children, had links with the Plunket Society, and enjoyed the strong support of the Wellington division of the New Zealand branch of the British Medical Association.

Towards the end of her life, although she was less active, Mother Aubert was a national figure much admired for her pioneering work. When she died on 1 October 1926 at Our Lady's Home of Compassion, Wellington, aged 91, tribute was paid to her work and to her extraordinarily vivid personality. Her funeral, attended by politicians and church leaders of many denominations, was said to be the largest ever held for a woman in New Zealand. Mother Aubert's career in New Zealand spanned more than six decades. There was scarcely one of these decades in which she did not initiate a new venture or stamp her personality on some major project. Her lasting legacy to New Zealand was the religious order she founded.

---

## Links and sources

## Bibliography

Harper, B. *Unto these least*. Wellington, 1962

Lawlor, P. *A mother of compassion*. Wellington, 1945

Munro, J. ed. and trans. *Letters on the go: the correspondence of Suzanne Aubert*. Wellington, 2017

Munro, J. *The story of Suzanne Aubert*. Auckland, 1996

Rafter, P. *Never let go!* Wellington, 1972

Simmons, E. R. *In cruce salus*. Auckland, 1982

---

---

### How to cite this page:

Margaret Tennant. 'Aubert, Mary Joseph', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1993. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2a18/aubert-mary-joseph> (accessed 13 August 2024)

All text licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 New Zealand Licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nz/deed.en>). Commercial re-use may be allowed on request. All non-text content is subject to specific conditions. © Crown Copyright.