



**The first Marist
community in
Australia
30-12-1907**



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AN IMPROBABLE DREAM TAKES SHAPE -

Just as Jeanne-Marie Chavoin and Marie Jotillon left home and family in France in 1817 and made the long journey to Cerdon 'to begin the work of the Blessed Virgin', so Mother Melanie and Sr. Cyrille set out from Fiji and Sr. Odilon from France, to begin a new mission in Australia in 1907.



Mother Melanie,sm

It was fortuitous that on the 30th December, 1907, two ships arrived in Sydney Harbour within a very short space of time. One was the 'Navua' from Fiji with Mother Melanie and Sr Cyrille on board. On the other, the 'Australien', from Marseilles was Sr Odilon, the third member of the new community to be set up in Sydney. With her was Sr Helen who was to replace Sr Cyrille in Fiji.

Why was Sydney chosen for a new Marist Sisters' foundation? The Marist Sisters first went to Fiji in 1892. Soon after the coming of the Sisters to Fiji, there was talk of the need for the Sisters to start a house in Sydney.

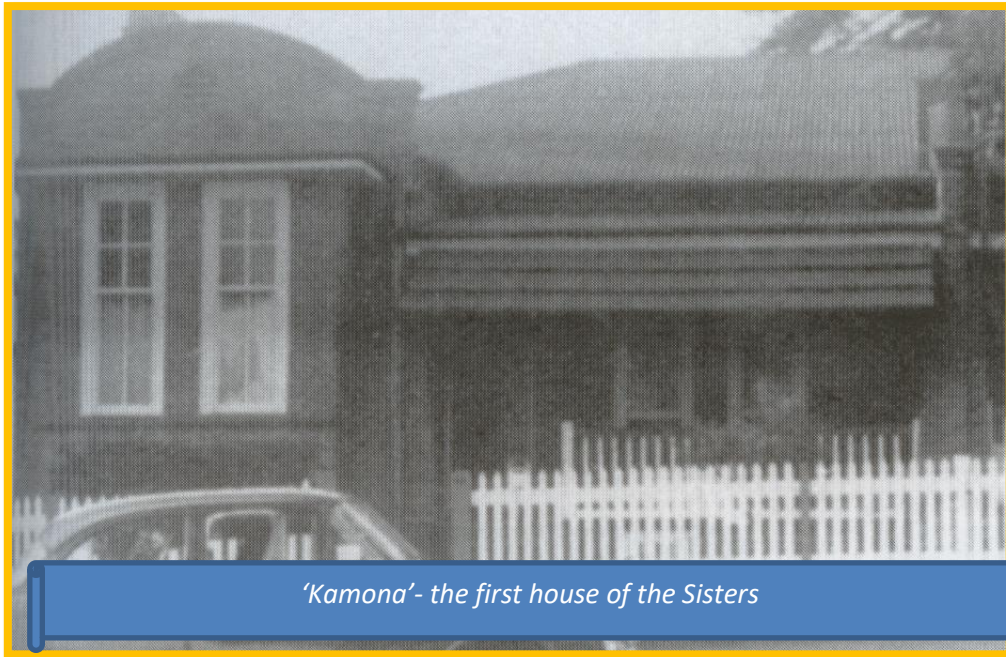
The Marist Fathers, who ministered both in Hunters Hill, Sydney and Fiji, were most anxious that this should happen. Mother Melanie, an English Marist who was one of the early pioneers of the Fiji mission, herself wrote to Mother St Joseph (Bizationalion), Superior General, in 1901 and 1902 about this need. The main reason was that of getting new subjects for the Fiji missions from Australia rather than from Europe, considering the distance and the great cost.

Another reason was the health of the sisters in Fiji. Some sisters frequently fell ill due to the heat and their inability to eat the local food and also a certain level of homesickness. Typhoid fever became prevalent and so the need for a place for the sisters to recuperate in a milder climate and easier conditions became urgent.

After numerous requests from Fiji from Bishop Vidal, SM and the sisters themselves, and having been informed that Cardinal Moran had given consent to admit sisters to his diocese of Sydney to found a school in the Parish of Villa Maria, on the 12th October, 1907, Mother St. Joseph, the Superior General, wrote to Bishop Vidal informing him that she was sending three sisters to establish a community and school in Sydney. While this news was most welcome, it was a great shock to learn that two sisters from Fiji would be among the new Sydney venture

Upon their arrival in Sydney, the sisters stayed for a short time at 'Villa Maria', the Hunters Hill residence of the Marist Fathers and of the Missionary Sisters of the Third Order Regular. With the help of the Marist Fathers, especially the Provincial, Fr. Marion, the sisters moved into

their own residence which was a semi-detached house named 'Kamona' at 48 Alexandra Street, Hunters Hill.



'Kamona' - the first house of the Sisters

Mother Melanie described this house in her letter to Mother St. Joseph on 12th January, 1908 - 'Our little home of 5 rooms and a little kitchen and backyard is about 15 minutes from the church and the small school'. In the same letter, she bluntly informs Mother St. Joseph that it was only through obedience that she accepted the Sydney move and that neither she nor Sr. Cyrille were capable of meeting the physical demands of the new foundation. However, she also thanked Mother St. Joseph for the confidence placed in her and promised to do her best.

Mother Melanie, now 68 years of age, and having ministered in Fiji for 16 years, was quite upset by this appointment, fearing that her fragile health and lack of teaching qualifications, made her unsuitable for this new role.

It is time now to meet the other two members of this community. Sr. Cyrille, who had ministered in Fiji for only ten months, came from a mixed background of English, Irish and French.



Sr. Cyrille,sm

She was younger than Mother Melanie and a qualified teacher, but her health was to prove a major problem for herself and the other members of the community. She was often to be confined to bed for lengthy periods of time, causing Mother Melanie to keep the school going by taking extra classes herself, for which she felt ill prepared, and also to employ a young lay woman as an extra teacher.



The third member of this pioneering community was Sr. Odilon who was French and a lay sister. She was said to have an outstanding intelligence but had chosen to become a lay sister as she had a domineering manner and wanted to overcome this by doing humble tasks. She was described by P. Gobillot, Marist historian, as a ‘saintly religious’, whose sanctity lay in being joyful. As a lay sister, she was not able to teach in Blessed Peter Chanel School but she did give great support in manual tasks to the other two sisters. A difficulty for her was learning English, as she was becoming deaf. It was a blessing that the other sisters spoke French but this impediment isolated Sr. Odilon from people.

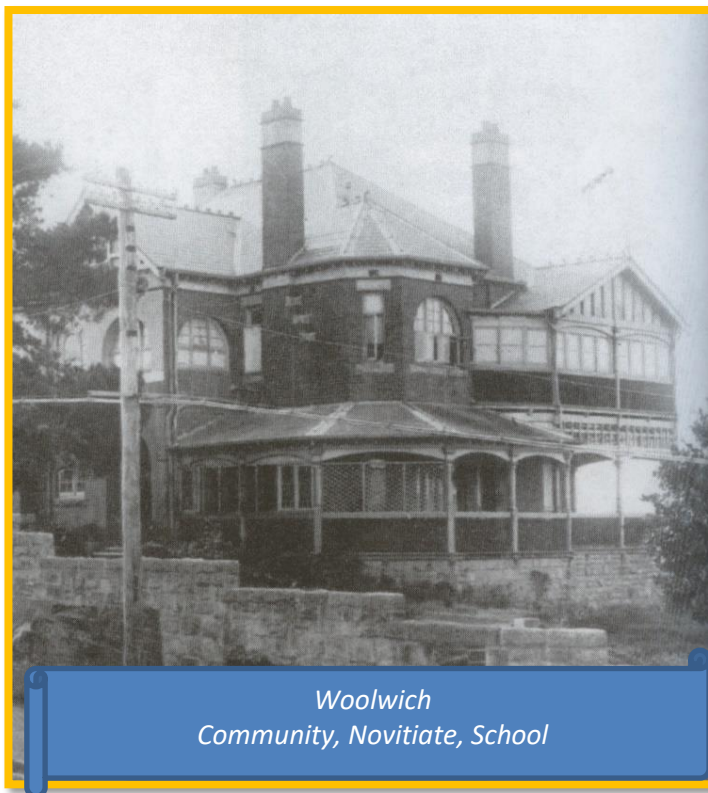
This small community of dedicated but rather incompatible Marist Sisters, so far from home and other Marists, apart from the priests and the Missionary sisters of the Third Order Regular, set about the task of carrying on ‘Blessed Peter Chanel’s School’, formerly run by the Sisters of St. Joseph. Finances were meagre as the school was small and the pupils few and quite needy; school fees were sixpence or threepence a week.

The Marist Fathers’ Superior gave a stipend of one pound a month and Fr. Ginisty from the Fathers’ city parish, St. Patrick’s, Church Hill, also helped. To augment their income, Mother Melanie gave music lessons after school and Sr. Cyrille, French lessons. The Fathers and people were very pleased with the progress of the school but for the sisters it was a continual battle against ill-health, fatigue, difficult community relationships, financial worries and no visible progress in realizing their purpose for being in Sydney.

In those early days, the plan to set up a secondary school plus a novitiate seemed unattainable. The school was too small to provide a proper income and the house could not accommodate any candidates for religious life.

In a frank letter to Bishop Vidal of Fiji, Mother Melanie opens her heart and expresses her unhappiness and lack of peace in her relating with one of her sisters. It is worth noting that Mother Melanie used her common sense and tried to help this sister by sending her to The Blue Mountains to recuperate after illness and to stay with some parishioners at other times – this at a time of quite strict enclosure for Marist Sisters.

In her letter, Mother Melanie also speaks of the need for a much younger superior and one more capable of running the school and able to gain the respect of the other sister. This cry from the depths is such a poignant one and captures so graphically the loneliness and ‘dejection’ present in this far-flung community. This cry must have been relayed to Mother St. Joseph, and on 10th August, 1908, Sr. Bernard, Irish, and Sr. Benedict, French, two young, very capable sisters, arrived to help implement the purpose for setting up this first Marist Sisters community in Australia.



In spite of the apparent unsurmountable difficulties, by July 1908 candidates were already asking to join this little group of Marist Sisters. The Marist Fathers were working overtime to help the sisters find larger premises. Fr. Huault, parish priest of Hunters Hill, heard of suitable premises in Woolwich farther down the peninsula from their current house. He organised a bank loan and together with the generosity of some parishioners, the property on the Lane Cove River at Woolwich was acquired.

At the beginning of 1909 the sisters moved to their new home and immediately opened a secondary school for girls which included a primary school and boarding facilities. Within no time, a novitiate was begun and the first Australian postulant was received on 2nd February, 1909. In that same year Sr. Sebastian arrived from Fiji for recuperation after severe illness.

The community had now increased to seven and the future looked brighter. But it was the heroism and the faith-filled perseverance of those first three Marist Sisters that gave life to the Dream.

And it continues to do so despite the departure of the Sisters from Woolwich after 110 years on 13th December 2018. The natural sadness felt with the departure of the last five Sisters from Marian House was tempered by a quiet confidence and joy. This rested in the knowledge that that Dream planted by our pioneers was still being lived and furthered in the hearts and minds of the staff and students of the Marist Sisters' College Woolwich which continues to occupy and serve the catholic education of young women on the property.

(Sources used by Sr Carmel Murray in writing this story of our first community in Australia: Sr Joan McBride 'When we are Weak, then we are Strong'. P. Gobillot -Marist History)