

*Mother Marie-Joseph Aubert*  
*Religious, Social Reformer*

*October 1*

Marie Henriette Suzanne Aubert was born near Lyons in France in 1835. Her sense of a religious vocation was fostered by the Curé d'Ars (see 4 August), and her concern for the sick and disabled was shaped by a serious childhood accident she suffered. By the age of sixteen she was convinced she had a vocation to serve God as a member of a religious nursing order. Her family was not sympathetic, but when she turned eighteen she went to Paris to begin nursing training. She served as a nurse in the Crimean campaign, mainly at the base hospital in France and on the hospital ships.

After the war she attended medical lectures at the University of Lyons, in spite of the fact that women were not allowed to graduate at this period. Like other young women of her social class, she was encouraged to keep up her languages and music, and for a while she studied piano under Franz Liszt. She persisted in her determination to become a nun, and when she was twenty-five the opportunity presented itself. Bishop Pompallier, who was known to her family, was in France; together with others he had recruited, she sailed from Le Havre for Auckland in September 1860.

Suzanne Aubert began her novitiate in June 1861 as Sister Marie-Joseph of the Congregation of the Holy Family. She joined the other French nuns who with two Maori sisters were attached to the Maori girls' school in Ponsonby. Within a year her command of Maori was good enough for Bishop Pompallier to send her on mission work to both Northland and the Waikato. With the departure of Bishop Pompallier in 1868, the work of the mission became severely restricted and eventually ended. When Bishop Croke instructed her to return to France, she refused, saying, "I have come here for the Maoris, I shall die in their midst. I will do what I like."

In February 1871 she went to Napier to work in a lay capacity with the Hawke's Bay mission run by the Marist Order. She remained with them for the next twelve years, acting as a district nurse to both pakeha and Maori, as well as ministering to the spiritual needs of the Maori. For some years she received a government grant of £40 per annum for medicine to supplement the drugs she prepared herself from native plants and herbs at Meeanee. Dispensary records show that in 1873 alone Meri, as the Maori chose to call her, saw over a thousand patients.

A request she felt she could not deny came from Archbishop Redwood, who sought her help in the re-establishment of the Wanganui River mission. In July 1883, with three sisters of St Joseph of Nazareth and a priest, she left Wanganui for the settlement of Hiruharama (Jerusalem). There, in the midst of an impoverished community, they set up two schools and a dispensary and offered a refuge to orphans and the chronically ill. The work of the mission was supported by work on the land and the sale of medicines in Wanganui.

The Sisters of St Joseph withdrew in 1884, and it was eventually decided that the work would be best supported by setting up a distinct order, with Mother Marie Joseph as its superior. So the Daughters of our Lady of Compassion was formed in 1892.

Up till this point Mother Marie Joseph's work was almost solely among Maori, but between 1891 and 1901 pakeha children were also taken in at Jerusalem. By 1899 it was apparent that this aspect of the work could best be done in Wellington. Accordingly, the next move was to Wellington, where Mother Aubert and several sisters arrived in 1899 to begin district nursing work with the poor and destitute. A year later she opened St Joseph's Home for Incurables in Buckle Street. It was at this time that she gave up her reliance on government grants and the sale of produce and medicines, recognising that for her new venture she would "have to trust

entirely on Divine Providence and the generosity of charitable souls". As well as work with the incurables, she opened a day nursery for children in 1902, and a children's home was soon added to the Buckle Street complex. The needs of the unemployed were met by a soup kitchen in the city. In 1907 the doors of Our Lady's Home of Compassion for handicapped and incurably ill children were opened.

Mother Aubert's order, The Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion, had been formally established at Jerusalem in 1892, but it was not until 1917 that papal approval for her work was granted to her in person. She left New Zealand in 1913 to seek that approval, as a way of circumventing the opposition of the Catholic hierarchy in New Zealand. They would have preferred her to confine her work to Catholic circles. With papal approval of the order she could determine its priorities. She continued nursing in Europe during World War I and did not return to New Zealand till 1920.

In the final years of her life she concentrated on establishing nursing training at the Home of Compassion, but, unfortunately, final approval for this was not given until after her death on 1 October 1926. It is said that her funeral was the largest ever held for a woman in New Zealand.

As well as her nursing, Mother Aubert found time for writing, and her great love for the Maori she lived among for so long resulted in the publication of a *Maori Prayer Book* in 1879. While she was at Jerusalem she wrote a *Manual of Maori Conversation*. In addition, she compiled a collection of spiritual writings called *The Directory* for the use of her sisters.

### **For Liturgical Use**

Mother Marie-Joseph Aubert was born in France in 1835 and arrived in New Zealand in 1860. Her work with Maori, for whom she developed a profound love, took her from Auckland to Meeanee near Napier and then to Jerusalem on the Wanganui River. She later moved to Wellington and remained there until her death in 1926, apart from nursing the wounded in Europe during the First World War. The order she founded, The Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion, opened homes for the incurably ill and handicapped children and provided nursing services for many.

### **Sentence**

The Lord cares for the stranger in the land, and sustains the widows and orphans.

*Psalms 146:9*

### **Collects**

God of love,  
we remember with thanksgiving Mother Marie-Joseph Aubert,  
whose devotion to the needs of others  
transcended race or religion;  
touch us deeply with your love,  
enlarge the boundaries of our compassion,  
and keep us in the way of Jesus,  
for your name's sake.

Jesus of Jerusalem,  
in your compassion, Marie-Joseph visited  
and fed the taurekareka, the unwanted,

the desperate and the criminal;  
give to your whole church, we pray,  
your caring, pioneering spirit.

**Psalms**                    107:1-22                    125

**Readings**

Deuteronomy 15:7-11	Give freely to the needy
James 2:14-18	Faith shown by deeds
Mark 6:34-44	Compassion for the crowd

**Post Communion Sentence**

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.                    *1 John 4:7*