

Frans A. Lenssen

FOOTPRINTS IN THE OCEAN

History of the Catholic Church
in Western Oceania

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History of the Catholic Church in Western Oceania

Edited by

Frans A. Lenssen

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SOUTH WEST PACIFIC OCEAN.



Your way led through the sea,
your path through the mighty waters
and no one saw your footprints.

(Psalm 77:19)

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PREFACE

This book is not the result of a professional study of sources of the history of the Catholic Church in Melanesia but a collection of relevant texts compiled from publications of various competent historians. Hence it does not make detailed references to the paragraphs extracted from other authors. However throughout the text general references are made to relevant works listed in the bibliography.

This collection is meant as a handbook for private use with information about the origin and development of the Catholic Church in Western Oceania with special focus on Papua New Guinea.

8 September 2011

Mariannahill College Bomana NCD

Papua New Guinea

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Part A

The Beginning and Expansion of the Catholic Mission in Western OCEANIA FROM 1827 to 1855

1. Circumscription of Oceania

Oceania^[1] is the collective name for the islands scattered throughout most of the Pacific Ocean between Asia and the Americas. The most popular usage excludes Indonesia, Taiwan, and the Philippines from the Pacific Ocean, because the peoples and cultures of those islands are more closely related historically to the Asian mainland. Oceania then in its most restricted meaning includes more than 10,000 islands.

Oceania has traditionally been divided into four parts: Australasia (Australia and New Zealand), Melanesia^[2], Micronesia^[3], and Polynesia^[4]. As recently as 33,000 years ago no human beings lived in the region, except in Australasia. Although disagreeing on details, scientists generally support theory that calls for Southeast Asian origin of island peoples. By 2000 about 12 million islanders lived in Oceania (excluding Australia), and many indigenous cultures were revolutionized by intensive contact with non-Oceanic groups who had intruded from various parts of the Western world.

Part A of this book covers the period from 1827-1855 summarising the chapters 1-35 of Ralph Wiltgen's^[5]

comprehensive volume on this period. In the Parts B, C and D, this book focuses mainly on the history of the Catholic Church in Melanesia - especially in Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands - in the context of wider Western Oceania where the Church was initiated in various regions since 1827.

2. The Prefecture Apostolic of the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) - 1825 [\[6\]](#)

First initiatives

Jean-Baptiste Rives (1793-1833), a French ship's crew member who arrived in Honolulu between 1803 and 1806, became very interested in the Sandwich (now Hawaiian) Islands and decided to settle there. He succeeded to establish good relation with the royal family about 1810 and became their factotum, serving as interpreter, teacher, secretary and doctor of medicine. Eventually he received an invitation to accompany King Kamehameha II and Queen Kamamalu on their voyage to London. The royal couple however died of measles in London. Instead of returning directly to Honolulu, Rives sailed for France, hoping to realise his dream of becoming the first French consul for the Sandwich Islands. To obtain priests for the religious part of his program he called upon Father Charles-François Langlois (1767-1851), superior of the well-known Paris Foreign Mission Seminary founded in 1660, which later became the Paris Foreign Mission Society (M.E.P.). Rives told Langlois of the great possibilities for Catholicism in the Sandwich Islands. In all of the islands these missionaries had only three churches, he said, but they did have school on each island for teaching the children reading and writing. When Langlois asked if the Protestant missionaries might prove hostile to incoming Catholic missionaries, Rives

assured him that the Catholics would be able to work in peace.

Rome contacted

The Protestant missionaries referred to by Rives were actually sent out by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, which had been founded in 1810 at Bradford, Massachusetts. Its first missionaries to the Sandwich Islands arrived there in 1820 and numbered two ordained missionaries and about ten co-workers.

Langlois lost no time in contacting Rome. While Rives was still in Paris he wrote on 23 March 1825 to eighty-year-old Giulio Maria Cardinal Della Somaglia (1744-1830) who, in addition to being the secretary of state to Pope Leo XII (1823-9), was serving provisionally as pro-prefect of the Sacred Congregation 'Propaganda Fide'. This sacred congregation or commission of cardinals, today called also the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelisation of Nations, had been founded by Pope Gregory XV on 6 January 1622. It was Rives' strong attachment to the Catholic faith that made him want to take along to the Sandwich Islands some Catholic missionaries, since he was convinced that very many of the people there could easily be won over to the Catholic faith. Langlois gave some details on the Protestant missionary work there and referred to the seven-page questionnaire filled out by Rives. The Rives-Langlois proposal onew mission for the Sandwich Islands was handed over for action to Archbishop Pietro Caprano, secretary of the Evangelisation Congregation since 1823.

Picpus Congregation looking for Mission

On 15 July, the founder and superior general of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary

(SS.CC. also called 'Picpus', the name of the street of their headquarters in Paris) Coudrin presented to Archbishop Caprano, secretary of the Evangelisation Congregation, a memorandum expressing his community's readiness and eagerness to serve in missions in Europe or in foreign missions. The Sacred Congregation could send the first three members at once to whatever mission it considers best. It was this memorandum which now prompted Della Somaglia and Caprano to see if they could interest Coudrin in accepting the Sandwich Islands. But before approaching Coudrin they sought clearance from Pope Leo XII, since the Picpus Fathers up to this time had never been engaged in foreign missionary work."

Oceania Mission offered to Coudrin (Picpus)

Della Somaglia's letter said that a new evangelical harvest seems to be springing up which could well be entrusted for cultivation to the sacred labourers' of Coudrin's religious community. 'If in your ranks you have some members who are fit to launch this new mission, then let me know so that we can make the necessary arrangements.' It was Coudrin's ardent zeal for the propagation of the faith', the cardinal added, that forced him to hope for an affirmative answer. This letter reached Paris on 29 September and Coudrin set to work immediately reading books and contacting people. He wanted to find out all that he could about the Sandwich Islands and how his missionaries might get there. From Langlois, mentioned in the cardinal's letter, he learned that the 'certain Frenchman' so interested in getting priests was Rives, and he obtained a copy of the Langlois-Rives questionnaire that had been sent to Rome. Ten months earlier Rives, who wanted the French government to name him consul in the Sandwich Islands, had given a glowing report to Baron de Damas, Minister of Foreign Affairs, on how advantageous for French commerce

it would be to have a trade route in the north Pacific from the west coast of North America via the Sandwich Islands to Canton, China. Rives had also said in his report to the Minister of Foreign Affairs that French influence in the Sandwich Islands would be more lasting if French priests were to establish a mission there.

Coudrin accepts the mission on Hawaii (Sandwich Islands)

Coudrin wrote back to Della Somaglia on 6 October 1825, exactly one week after the cardinal's letter had reached Paris. He wrote that he gladly would take charge of the mission on the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) which the cardinal had offered to the Picpus Fathers. He was already negotiating with a French ship that would sail to those islands in November and expected to have two or three men available to get aboard. Coudrin also begged the cardinal that the faculties to appoint a prefect apostolic would be given to him. Was Coudrin asking for too much here? Designating the prefect apostolic a long-standing prerogative of the cardinal prefect of the Evangelisation Congregation, and he might not want to surrender this right. Coudrin went on to say that the mission without doubt would soon need more priests. The 'obstacles' created by bishops on these occasions would be eliminated completely, Coudrin declared, if the pope were to authorise 'any Catholic bishop in communion with the Holy Apostolic See to ordain ... the professed members of our congregation who are assigned to the Sandwich missions or to other foreign missions that may be entrusted to us.'

The Prefecture Apostolic of the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) - 24 October 1825

After posting his letter to Della Somaglia (Pro-Prefect of the Evangelisation Congregation) on 6 October, Coudrin lost no time and visited Baron de Damas, Minister of Foreign Affairs, on 7 October in order to request free passage for his missionaries aboardship of the Royal Navy. The French government ultimately promised free passage for the missionaries and 4,000 francs as a subsidy for their first foundation. Coudrin's concern for a speedy decision was shared by Cardinal Della Somaglia who took action in Rome long before the letter for Cardinal Pacca had arrived. Della Somaglia asked Archbishop Pietro Caprano, secretary of the Evangelisation Congregation, to see Pope Leo XII on 24 October 1825. At this audience Caprano requested the desired ecclesiastical privileges and powers—technically called faculties—for the new prefect apostolic and for the missionaries still to be chosen by Coudrin for the Sandwich Islands. By granting these faculties the pope also created the Prefecture Apostolic of the Sandwich Islands.

Coudrin's haste, however, kept preying on Caprano's mind. Coudrin explained further that after getting the first letter from the cardinal he had visited the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the king of France. This official had promised free passage for his missionaries aboard French ship which had delayed its departure and was now scheduled to leave for the Sandwich Islands in December. Then Coudrin listed the names, birthplaces and birthdays of the three missionaries chosen for the Sandwich Islands. And he requested that Father Alexis-Jean-Augustin Bachelot, born 22 February 1796 at Saint Cyr-Orne, France, be named the prefect apostolic with the faculty of sub-delegate in vice-prefect, if circumstances should require it. He also asked that the three missionaries 'be given all faculties and privileges that were given to the Jesuits when they were first assigned to the Indian missions in America, since the circumstances are the same'. Inquiry was made

as to whether the Reverend Coudrin, superior and founder of the new Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, and Vicar General of Troyes, would be prepared to take charge of the Sandwich Islands mission in the Pacific Ocean, a mission for which the Fathers of the Company of Jesus (Jesuits) did not believe they could offer themselves.

Bachelot Prefect Apostolic of the Sandwich Islands

Finally Alexis Bachelot was named the first Prefect Apostolic of the Sandwich Islands and letters patent were issued to his priest companions, Fathers Abraham Armand and Patrice Peter Short. Extraordinary faculties were also granted to the three missionaries in accord with the wishes previously expressed by the pope. Actually the nuncio had sent letter to Della Somaglia dated 30 November 1825, but this letter and the cardinal's second letter of 3 December crossed in the mail. In three large pages the nuncio attempted to show how inopportune it would be to start Catholic mission in the Sandwich Islands at this time. 'The people still adore idols, and only short while ago stopped sacrificing human blood', he said. In the entire population of 500,000 'there was no single Catholic', although two men without being well instructed had been baptised by French priest aboard ship which had stopped there.

Coudrin while in Paris on 26 December 1825 received from the Holy See the decree approving the rule submitted by him for his religious community. Impatient with Rome's apparent delay in sending the necessary authorisation for the Sandwich Islands mission, Coudrin on the following day visited Nuncio Apostolic Macchi. It is not difficult to imagine that his enthusiasm made Archbishop Vincenzo Macchi, nuncio in Paris see many reasons which guaranteed the success of the Sandwich Islands mission.

Macchi now also had information on the three priests chosen for the mission. As for funds, Coudrin had promised to provide his missionaries with certain amount of money. And the French ship, which was to bring the missionaries to the Sandwich Islands free of charge, would also bring them back again, if for some unforeseen reason they should not succeed in establishing themselves there.

Coudrin, expecting the faculties for the Sandwich Islands mission to arrive in the offices of the nuncio apostolic at any time, paid him another visit on 1 February. As Macchi informed Della Somaglia, the letter of 17 January from Rome, authorising him to hand over the official documents to Coudrin, had arrived just prior to this visit. Returning to his house on rue de Picpus after seeing the nuncio, Coudrin had the community sing the Veni Creator in praise of the Holy Spirit and on that same day handed over to Bachelot his official appointment as Prefect Apostolic of the Sandwich Islands. At the same time he informed them that the Holy See had entrusted the Sandwich Islands to them as a mission field.

Departure for Oceania 16 November 1826

Now that Coudrin had the official documents, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baron de Damas, was approached again and on 13 February and he renewed his promises to help the Sandwich Islands missionaries. Meanwhile the departure of the missionaries was delayed for many months, due to unforeseen circumstances. New obstacles especially the fear that the Protestant mission on Sandwich island would cause great trouble when Catholic missionaries would arrive there, delayed the final departure for whole year. The missionaries finally embarked in Bordeaux on 16 November 1826, which was exactly one full year after the original sailing date mentioned by

Coudrin in his first letter. Coudrin wrote to Della Somaglia again on 3 December 1826, saying 'a complete year' had elapsed since the cardinal's important letter of 3 December 1825 entrusting to his community the Sandwich Islands.

Arrival in Valparaiso (Chile)

Their ship reached Valparaiso (Chile) on 8 February 1827 and made stopovers at Quilca and Lima (Peru) and also at Mazatlan (Mexico) before reaching Honolulu. Father Patrice Short wrote from Honolulu on 27 July 1827, saying, 'We arrived here in good health on the 7th of this month, which was the 20th day after our departure from Mazatlan and the 230th day after our departure from the mouth of the Garonne at Bordeaux. We were under sail for 150 days and spent 80 days in the various ports. . . .' The difficulties initially caused for them by the Protestant missionaries there, he said, were overcome under God 'by the joint efforts of the American and English consuls'. He said that the English consul had been particularly civil toward him, 'promising me from the very beginning complete protection as an English subject, saying that it was his duty to protect me, no matter what religion I might have'. On 14 July the missionaries said Mass for the first time in the Sandwich Islands.

3. The Vicariate Apostolic of Western Oceania

Prefecture Apostolic of the South Sea Islands - 10 January 1830^[Z]

Fr. Gabriel de Solages, a French priest who had volunteered for mission work in the South Sea Islands was offered the position of Prefect Apostolic of Bourbon (now La Reunion), a French colony in the Indian Ocean 684 km

from Madagascar. This position was vacant since the Prefect Apostolic Pastre (since 1821) had resigned for reasons of bad health. De Solages accepted although at the same time he has a strong interest in the South Sea Islands in the Pacific Ocean and was also told that the two missions were not compatible. He was named Prefect Apostolic on 17 August 1829. But he wanted in addition to the powers and title of Prefect Apostolic of Bourbon the new position of Prefect of the South Sea Islands including New Zealand, in spite of the enormous distance between the two regions. His idea was to set up a kind of pastoral institute on Bourbon that would provide missionaries for Madagascar as well as the South Pacific. For personnel he counted on Coudrin and his Picpus community.

De Solages Prefect Apostolic of Bourbon and of the South Sea Islands

De Solages' project on a new mission on the South Sea Islands was accepted by the Evangelisation Congregation in Rome on 22 December 1829. On 10 January 1830 Pope Pius VIII confirmed the decisions of the cardinals and thereby formally established the Prefecture Apostolic on the South Sea Islands and appointed Father de Solages as the Prefect Apostolic. Fr. Coudrin of the Picpus Fathers had been too slow in submitting a request for support of the eastern half of Oceania.

After many discussions and frictions de Solages set finally sail from France to Bourbon on 27 September 1830 without donations from any of his benefactors. There were only two priests and a layman with de Solages. De Solages was Prefect Apostolic of Bourbon and also still of the South Sea Islands, but he did not have in his company a single man for Oceania. The voyage from France to Bourbon took four months. When he reached Bourbon on 7 January 1831, it was the

end of his ambitious dream and the beginning of harsh reality. Less than two years later de Solages died in Madagascar. De Solages was dead but not his dream. Others would make it come true, the Picpus Fathers in Eastern Oceania, the Marists in Western Oceania and the Jesuits in Madagascar.

The Marists interested in the new Vicariate Apostolic of Western Oceania^[8]

The premature death of de Solages in Madagascar on 8 December 1832 left vacant the two offices of Prefect Apostolic of Bourbon (near Madagascar) and Prefect Apostolic of the South Sea Islands (Oceania). Without losing any time Cardinal Prefect Pedicini of the Evangelisation Congregation on 27 July 1833 wrote to Father Fourdinier, superior general of the Holy Ghost Fathers, saying that Father Pastre could go as soon as possible to the Island of Bourbon to take up once again his previous office as Prefect Apostolic of Bourbon. Rome had great confidence in Father Jean-Louis Pastre of Lyon, whom Bertout as early as 15 January 1823 had described for Pro-Prefect Consalvi of the Evangelisation Congregation as a priest in Bourbon who is truly an apostolic man. Pastre had arrived there on 18 May 1817 and was named prefect apostolic of Bourbon in 1821 and resigned because of ill health in 1829.

In 1829, when Pastre was making his plans for returning to Bourbon, Frasoni, the new cardinal prefect of the Evangelisation Congregation on 21 November 1834 wrote to him on 4 July 1835, asking if he would like to become head of the mission of Western Oceania left vacant by the death of de Solages. Pastre, an experienced missionary, was known in Rome as 'a hard worker' and was highly esteemed. Believing that he was still interested in devoting

himself to missionary work, Pastre thanked Frasoni by return mail on 17 July for the great honour of offering him this new mission, but declined because of his age, being already 55. At the same time Pastre - much annoyed that he was not able to accept the new mission of Western Oceania -, contactepriest of the society of the Marists, and the two of them discussed the Vicariate Apostolic of the Friendly Islands (Tonga), Fiji Islands, etc., etc., and also New Zealand, which the Sacred Congregation was planning to found in Western Oceania. This priest then consulted with his companions for very many days and then proposed to Pastre to ask the 33-old Father Jean Baptist- François Pompallier (1801-71), one of the approximately twenty Marist priests residing either in the Diocese of Belley or the neighbouring Archdiocese of Lyon. Pastre interviewed him without delay.

Pompallier proposed as Vicar Apostolic

The superior Father Jean-Claude Colin (1790-1875) who was the founder of the or Society of Mary as the group of priests came to be called, wrotletter to Pompallier, which Pastre in turn forwarded to Rome. Colin had already reacted to Rome's earlier request for missionaries. He had made aheadformal request for papal approbation for his society. If Pastre were to tell the cardinal prefect of the Evangelisation Congregation that members of the Society of Mary were available for Western Oceania, Colin reasoned, 'this offer of ourselves could not but be well received, and it would also prove of advantage to our society'.

Colin's strategy was simple. If Cardinal Frasoni, prefect of the Propaganda Fide had the well-founded hope of getting Marist priests for Western Oceania and if he saw that Colin was holding out for papal approbation of his

society prior to assigning priests to that mission, the cardinal most likely would use his influence with other cardinals of the Roman Curia and even with the pope himself to obtain for the Society of Mary the desired papal approval. Before founding the Vicariate Apostolic of Western Oceania, the big question still had to be resolved, who would supply the staff for Western Oceania? Four archipelagos in the Vicariate of Eastern Oceania had nevertheless been assigned to the Picpus Fathers on 2 June 1833, and this new mission required no few members to staff it.

Colin with his new Society of Mary was most likely to be entrusted with the new vicariate. However, before accepting this mission he wanted to have his group better organised and had decided to wait for the brief containing papal approbation. The final point in the report stated that when the apostolic administrator of the Archdiocese of Lyon was invited by the Sacred Congregation to procure excellent priests for the mission of Western Oceania, he had praised the priests of the Society of Mary, had said that it could provide five or six members to start the mission, and had announced that the society would also oblige itself to supply as many priests as would be needed to maintain the mission in the future.

Two questions were to be answered by the Evangelisation Congregation: 1. should the new Vicariate Apostolic of Western Oceania be established? 2. If so, to whom should the new mission be entrusted? As for the second question, it was clear from the report that the Picpus Fathers had responsibilities enough in the Sandwich Islands, in the archipelagos south of the equator in Eastern Oceania, and in Valparaiso (Chile).