CHAPTER XV

THE OCEANIA MISSIONS

THE PICPUS FATHERS IN EASTERN OCEANIA

Oceania with its islands large and small scattered over a sea area equal to one-third of the surface of the globe, possesses a group of missions that is unique. It is the largest and yet one of the least populous; in it the spirit of the pioneers can still find (in New Guinea for instance) plenty of scope today. And in no other region have the conflicts between papists and anti-papists taken on such dimensions.

Before the nineteenth century, Catholicism had scarcely made an appearance there except in the New Hebrides (and then only spasmodically), which had been visited by the Franciscans who accompanied Quiros. The discovery of Oceania was scarcely completed at the end of the eighteenth century and the descriptions embellished with lewd engravings which had been published by Wallis and Carteret (1766), Bougainville (1768) and above all Cook (1769–78) conveyed the idea that these islands were earthly paradises. So much so that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Tahiti, Otaiti as it was called, was a symbol for a country of dreams, liberation and beatitude, the garden of Eden regained. Of this idyllic picture, the missionaries were to find little more than the countryside, the vegetation, the light and the waters. The natives, when seen at close quarters, were in general not at all like the pleasant Aoutourou whom Bougainville had brought back with him to France. The Whites were whalers, dealers in sandalwood, adventurers of all kinds whom the missionaries

were to find in all sorts of odd places, "a crowd of European and American deserters", as one of them has said, "roaming all over the islands and corrupting what remains of the good physical and moral qualities of these peoples". The missionaries were often to find their work thwarted by such men. And finally they were to be exposed to the hostility and the calumnies of the Methodist ministers who had preceded them by some ten years in different parts of Oceania.

This was the case in the Hawaiian islands, an important port of call for the whaling-ships. The American Methodists had already established missionaries when, in 1819, the chaplain of the *Uranie* baptized two of the chiefs. In 1827, a properly constituted mission arrived: three Picpus Fathers (one of whom, Fr Bachelot, had the powers of a prefect apostolic) and three brothers of the same order. The Methodist party succeeded in having them expelled when they had baptized a few persons. Liberty of worship could not be established in the Hawaiian islands before 1839. And it was there that, a little later, Fr Damien was to die a leper, in the service of the lepers.

In spite of the initial check, the Congregation of Propaganda immediately amplified its plan of action and in 1833, raised a Picpus Father, Mgr Rouchouze, to the dignity of vicar apostolic of Eastern Oceania.

In 1834, two religious of the order, Frs Caret and Laval, landed in the Gambier Islands. The natives tried to kill them in a bush fire. They succeeded in escaping and then completed a Franco-Polynesian lexicon which enabled them to instruct children and soon after adults with unprecedented success. At Christmas 1834, one of the Gambier islands, Akamarou, burned its idols. Aukenia soon followed suit and shortly after, Mangavera, the great island, whose sovereigns were baptized. In two years, the whole archipelago had been converted and Mgr Jerome Rouchouze set up his vicariate there.

In the Marquesa Islands, however, two Picpus Fathers who landed in 1839, met with considerable resistance. Shortly after, disaster overtook the Picpus missions. The ship in which Mgr

Rouchouze had set sail and which was bringing large reinforcements—five religious, one subdeacon, seven Brothers and ten nuns, all belonging to the Picpus institute—sank with all her passengers shortly after passing the Island of St Catherine facing Brazil.

Yet the spiritual conquest continued just the same. Although on Tahiti it had experienced a setback because of the Pritchard affair, it saw better days when Mgr Jaussen, the first vicar apostolic of Tahiti, came out in 1849. Today, a quarter of the population is Catholic.

The long and patient apostolate of Mgr Dordillon was needed to undo the scandal caused by the apostasy of the king of one of the Marquesas. Mgr Dordillon was both a missionary and a scholar. He arrived in the archipelago in 1846 and died there in 1888, as vicar apostolic.

The evangelization of the Tuamotou Islands began in 1847 and was completed in 1889. Easter Island owes much to Mgr Jaussen who wrote a remarkable monograph on the island itself and its mysteries. It was later detached from the Tahiti vicariate after its annexation by Chile.

There was still the Cook archipelago. When the Picpus Fathers settled there in 1894, though without much success because of the very strong position Protestantism had acquired in the islands, the work entrusted to their zeal had received its foundations.

THE MARISTS IN WESTERN OCEANIA

The western part of Oceania, that is, Polynesia with Melanesia and Micronesia, was raised to the status of a vicariate (Western Oceania) by Gregory XVI in 1836 and was in the hands of the Marists, the missionary institute then recently founded by Fr Colin. The first bishop, Mgr Pompallier, landed in New Zealand in January 1838 and sent Fr Bataillon to Wallis Island and Fr Chanel to Futuna. The events that had taken place in the Gambier Islands were re-enacted here, though at a slower pace. On Futuna, there was

a general conversion, largely due to the martyrdom of Fr Chanel (1841) which brought about an extraordinary wave of conversions far beyond the island itself, while on Wallis Island, conversions were due to the inexhaustible charity of Fr Bataillon, an apostle who put an end to the unending wars between the chiefs by acting as intermediary between them, and who forgave those who had intended to murder him. Rome appointed him as vicar apostolic in 1843. He died on Wallis Island among his people like an Old Testament patriarch, on April 10th, 1877.

The evangelization of Tonga shed lustre on one of his disciples, Fr Chevron, who, by using the same methods as his master and thanks to his perfect knowledge of Polynesian languages, overcame the opposition of the local feudal chief, a Protestant petty tyrant who called himself the "Napoleon of the Pacific". On the other hand, another pioneer, Fr Breton, had no success during his lifetime at Vavaou, a small archipelago depending on Tonga, where he lived as a hermit until 1881. But his death was mourned by the whole archipelago. Even the Protestant ministers wanted to be present at the funeral of the man who has been called the anchorite of Oceania.

The Marists entered the Samoan Islands in 1845. Their founding of a mission there under the direction of Fr Elloy, made it possible to consider that the evangelization of western Polynesia was completed.

That of Melanesia began in 1844, when Fr Bataillon sent Fr Bréhéret to the Fiji Islands. There were hardly any conversions before 1860, but nine years later the number of catechumens was 4,000 and, by 1880, 9,000. The prefecture apostolic of Fiji, which was established in 1863, became a vicariate in 1888 and included the Island of Rotuma.

The evangelization of New Caledonia demanded of the Marists continual patience, apostolic fervour and cost them one martyr. Mgr Douarre and four religious entered the island at the port of Balade in 1843 and had to leave again soon after

in order to avoid a general massacre (one Brother had already been beaten to death) plotted by the natives who considered them responsible for a famine on the island. In 1849, Mgr Douarre again landed but this time in the south. But once more and for the same reason, he was forced to fall back on the island of Pines to the south-east. It became entirely Christian. While he was there, he received orders from Rome to take charge of the Samoa mission and to wait for better times before returning to New Caledonia. But he was drawn to the Caledonians, as St Patrick had been to the Irish. He was at Balade again in 1851 with a few missionaries as resolute as himself and a group of natives whom they had taken away with them when they had left on the previous occasion and thoroughly indoctrinated in the meantime. With the help of these converts the conversion of the island made rapid strides. Then the time came when the colonists, whose numbers were continually on the increase, and the administration drove the natives into the interior. The Marists went with them and tried to group them in "Reductions". But their ministry among the Whites absorbed so much of their time that they were unable to give themselves wholly to this apostolate. Recently, they have found it possible to return to it with some success.

In the New Hebrides, where the Marists arrived in 1886, a population survived decimated by malaria, alcoholism and cannibalism. Yet they succeeded in obtaining a few conversions.

It was in the Solomon Islands that they underwent their greatest trials. The islanders were ferocious by nature and, in the early days, did not distinguish between the missionaries and white men of doubtful character against whom they fiercely defended their independence.

Mgr Épalle, the first vicar apostolic of the archipelago, was beaten to death a few minutes after he had landed on Isabella Island (December 12th, 1845). At San Cristobal, another small island, Fr Montrouzier in 1845, and in 1847 two religious

and a brother, perished victims of a cannibal feast. Finally, malaria decimated this first mission. The Marists received orders to evacuate the archipelago in 1852. They returned at the end of the century and on this occasion were given a hearing.

THE ISSOUDUN FATHERS IN NEW GUINEA

In New Guinea, on the other hand, evangelization is far from complete, but where else in the whole world has it met more obstacles? Even Torres in his time, when crossing the straits to which his name has been given, had noted that around this island, one of the largest in the world, navigation was exceedingly difficult. When the Italian naturalist, d'Albertis, provided precise information concerning its relief, its snow-covered mountain tops (and this in the Tropics) close together and separated by steep chasms covered with an impenetrable undergrowth, New Guinea seemed to offer more obstacles to discovery than any other territory in the world. As for its inhabitants, it was gradually to be discovered (and there still remains a great deal of work to be done in this connection) that they belong to human groups which have been cut off from the rest of mankind for thousands of years. They have distinguishing characteristics of every kind and obey a moral code which authorizes infanticide, homicide, cannibalism and polygamy. The planisphere made for the Holy See in the eighteenth century was therefore not far from the truth when —although from hearsay alone—it described New Guinea as *l'Isla de las malas gentes.*

Gregory XVI had included it in the Marists' mission field. They tried to approach it via Woodlark Island in 1848 and were decimated by fever. Priests from the Milan Foreign Missions relieved them in 1852 but after the murder of Fr Mazzuconi in 1855 they were obliged to give up any hope of remaining.

For more than twenty-five years, the Congregation of Propaganda made no further move in the matter. Then, in 1881, it

appealed to the Congregation of the Fathers of the Sacred Heart of Issoudun. Three religious, one of whom was Fr Navarre, set out during the same year with this final blessing from Leo XIII: "Go without fear, it is the Church who is sending you."

Their destination was Papua, that is, the English area of New Guinea. After a halt at New Britain, they landed on Thursday Island in the Torres Straits, then on Yule Island (1885), a small holm lying nearest to the great island itself. Frs Navarre and Verjus organized there a base from which to operate. Fr Verjus went forward and established the first mission post in Papua on Moou, three hours from Yule in a rowing-boat (1889). Meanwhile, Yule itself, now wholly Christian, served as the residence of the vicar apostolic. This office had been given to Mgr Navarre and soon after Mgr Verjus was appointed his coadjutor. He, with the help of a few pioneers, opened some ten mission stations in the Mekeo country, beyond Moou. Nothing could stop them, neither the climate which gives almost no respite from attacks of fever, nor famine, a constant threat, nor the hostility of the natives. He returned to Europe to inform the pope of the first results of the mission (and these were not to be despised, since a Christian village was in existence at St Anne in 1891), and died worn out by his labours.

In 1894, Papua had already taken a toll of twelve victims among the youngest and most active members of the Issoudun Congregation. But new recruits were constantly coming forward. Mention must be made of at least one of these, Fr de Boismenu, Mgr Navarre's successor. He was the moving force behind a simultaneous movement which included discovery, the erection of mission posts even in the most unlikely places, and the deepening of the Christian life by well-prepared catechisms in the various dialects, and the training of good catechists.

Some ten years after the arrival of the Issoudun Fathers, the German Fathers of the Divine Word began to evangelize the

eastern and western regions of New Guinea. There also, through suffering and sacrifice, they founded firmly established Christian communities before 1914.

In New Britain and New Ireland, the islands to the north-west of New Guinea, the Issoudun Fathers experienced the same ups-and-downs as in Papua.

In Micronesia, they settled on the Caroline and Marianne Islands in 1886 and 1891 respectively. These islands had already been evangelized in the eighteenth century by missionaries from the Philippines. In 1888, the Issoudun Fathers were on the Gilbert Islands. The evangelization of Guam island was undertaken in 1911 by American Capuchins. In a word, immediately before the Great War, there was no island in Oceania which had not heard the good news of the Gospel.