



Mother Aubert

Suzanne Aubert founded the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion, New Zealand's only surviving indigenous religious congregation.

Suzanne Aubert, also known as Mother Aubert, was born and raised in France. She was from a middle class family, but developed a great love for the poor by taking food to them. Her grandmother taught her that the face of Christ can be seen in the faces of the poor, and that it was a privilege to serve them.

At the age of 19 Suzanne Aubert heard Bishop Pompallier speak in Lyon, and responded to his request for missionaries to go to New Zealand. When she left to board the whaling ship, her family thought she had gone to the funeral of family friend, the Cure'dArs. Her father had not allowed her to become a religious in her late teens, and by leaving home she was breaking the promise she had made to her father to stay at home until she was 25.

Pompallier taught Aubert and the other missionaries Maori on the way to New Zealand. Eventually she became fluent and wrote a Maori dictionary and prayer book.

In France Aubert had learnt chemistry and botany from a relative. When she arrived in New Zealand she used this knowledge to make remedies for healing. She eventually won the respect of the Maori people, who shared their own knowledge with her.

Under the guidance of the Sisters of Mercy, Aubert and the other French missionaries opened a school for Maori girls in Auckland. When Pompallier left Auckland, he also left behind financial difficulties and as a result the school was closed down. Although she had learnt English after learning Maori, Aubert did not want to work in an English school as she had come to New Zealand to work with Maori. So she moved to Hawkes Bay where she worked as a district nurse and catechist.

Later, she took over a school in Hiruharama/Jerusalem on the Whanganui River from the Sisters of St Joseph. This was how the Sisters of Compassion order began. As well as looking after the school, the women formed an orphanage and cared for babies who had been born out of wedlock and sent to them (often via paddle steamer) by their single mothers.

As many of the babies were unwell, Aubert realized she had to be closer to good medical care, and in 1899 moved to Wellington with the other women. They saw in Wellington a need for a soup kitchen. They established one to help hungry workingmen hold down jobs.



Following this, Sisters of Compassion communities were founded in Auckland and Wellington.

In 1913 Aubert left for Rome to obtain Papal approval for her order. The decree was granted in 1917 but because of the war she was unable to return to New Zealand until 1920. On her return she established a hospital and a system of professional nursing training for her sisters.

Suzanne Aubert died in 1926 at the age of 91. Many businesses and the Courts closed down for her funeral, indicating how respected and influential she was in Wellington society.

In the 1980s processes began for her canonisation as a saint. Jessie Munro wrote a biography of her life and the investigation of three recorded miracles began. Her writings were looked at in detail from both a historical and theological perspective. In 1997 the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference readily agreed to support the first part of the formal process, called the "Introduction of the Cause of Suzanne Aubert".

More information on Mother Suzanne Aubert and the canonisation process can be found on the Sisters of Compassion website. www.compassion.org.nz

Sources:

Munro, Jessie, *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*, 1997
Sisters of Compassion website, 2010

www.catholic.org.nz/History