

## A FORGOTTEN MISSION (1)

*The section of Brother Superior's 1985 Christmas Letter which he entitled, "Our work for the more distant poor through our Missionary Service" lends a special interest to this account of a Lasallian missionary venture of some seventy-odd years ago. It shows how a small group of German Brothers sought to respond to "the logic of the gospel and the logic of a religious profession" referred to in the Superior's letter. We are glad to be able to offer readers of LASALLIANA the author's own summary of a more extended account, based on original research and soon to be published.*

LASALLIANA

Between April 1914 and April 1921 a group of German Brothers of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools conducted a special school within the mission complex of Vunapope, in what is today the East New Britain Province of Papua New Guinea, but which was, in 1914, the German colony of Neupommern or New Pomerania, part of the German Protectorate of Melanesia and Micronesia.

Because of the historical context in which the foundation was made, and because of the untimely withdrawal of these German Brothers after the conclusion of World War 1, the history of this mission seems to have been largely forgotten.

This article is an attempt to make some atonement for such neglect or oversight.

There has always existed within the Australian District of the Institute a tradition of the existence of this mission, and in 1984/85 I set myself to find out what I could, including a visit to present day Rabaul and the still-flourishing mission centre of Vunapope.

But, first, to glance at the antecedent history of our German confreres:

As may be found from a study of *Rigault* (Tome VIII) our German Brothers were, after 1879, because of the Kulturkampf, in *diaspora*. About one hundred of them, at their highest number, were scattered throughout various large boarding schools conducted by the Brothers of Belgium where they set up German language sections for their faithful clientele from the Fatherland. Eventually they managed to set up at least one establishment directly under their own control, the *Johanni-*

*num* at Grand-Halleux, near to the Luxembourg frontier.

They also had succeeded by the early 1900's in getting entry into the Reichland (the Imperially – controlled annexed territory of Alsace Lorraine). At Guénange, a village in German Lorraine, they were allowed to take over an orphanage. This establishment under the direction of the vigorous Brother Philippus Neri, quickly developed into a *de facto* Mother House for the German Brothers dispersed throughout the Reichland and Belgium.

To return to the foundation of the Vunapope mission: at the end of 1913, in reponse to repeated requests from the Vicar Apostolic of New Pomerania, Monsignor Louis Couppé M.S.C., the Superiors of the Institute agreed to send a community of Brothers to assist in the mission's educational activities.

One factor contributing to the choice of German Brothers was first, and obviously, the fact that Vunapope was a German mission in a German colony, staffed — as German colonial policy demanded — almost exclusively by German nationals, with an admitted objective of promoting German language and culture as well as implanting the Gospel.

But further to this, within the Institute itself, in May 1913 at the General Chapter held at Lembecq in Belgium, a German Assistant had been elected, the remarkable Brother Petronius who took responsibility for the communities of Central Europe, within the Hapsburg Empire and beyond, where German was the accepted common language. In October of the same year, Brother Philippus Neri of Guénange was named Visitor for the German Brothers, though as yet there was no German District in the geographic sense.

There was also very probably a political calculation, the establishment of a successful educational mission in German colonial territory might eventually be used as means of assisting the re-establishment of the Institute in the Fatherland itself.

So, by February 1914 a group of five Brothers had been designated, and having been farewelled at Guénange, they made their way by train to Genoa where on 23 February they embarked upon the North German Lloyd Bremer Steamer, the *Roon*, for a seven week voyage to New Britain. They travelled in company with a group of German M.S.C's, from Hiltrup, the German M.S.C. Centre, who were returning to the same destination.

Our F.S.C. group consisted of five Brothers whom we shall now introduce individually:

... the Director was a mature age man of forty-four, Brother Viktorinus Bruggemann, a religious of considerable experience in the teaching apostolate, and at the time of his appointment, teaching at Metz-Montigny (which may possibly have been at that time a Scholasticate for the young German Brothers).

According to his subsequent *Notice Necrologique* Brother Viktorinus was not an original choice, but was named to head the mission when the original leader-designate fell sick. Among his confreres Brother Viktorinus enjoyed a reputation of being "a

true son of De La Salle" as exemplified in his unwavering regularity and his equally uncompromising insistence on having the Rule observed by those in his charge.

... Brother Donald-Urbain Hinkes (whom I shall call Urban) was a man of twenty-seven, who had also had several years' teaching experience, and was possibly the Sub-Director, though at this time he was not yet finally professed.

... the remaining three were younger men; of these Brother Otto Franz Thalheimer was the youngest. Though he was remembered afterwards by some of his pupils as the physical culture expert, he was in fact a man of poor health, who suffered sea-sickness on the way out, was frequently unwell during his stay in the tropics, and whose poor health was one of the reasons urged upon the Superiors for the withdrawal of the — remaining — Brothers after the end of the War. (We shall return to Brother Otto later).

... Brother Hermann Hahn (officially known as Macédone-Adrian) has left little impression other than that he played the organ at Church services while Brother Urban directed the singing. Like Brother Otto, Brother Hermann was not yet twenty at the time of arrival in Vunapope.

... the last is Brother Edmund Hubert (Peter Noss). Brother Edmund was twenty-three at the time of his coming to the tropics. He seems not to have been happy in his community relationships, and at some time during the war years withdrew from the Institute (probably at the expiry of his temporary vows). It seems that he took up employment on the property of a neighbouring planter, a Herr Wolff, a man of considerable standing in the local community. After that he is lost to memory. There is presumption that he lived and died in the area, but there is no mention of his death or burial in the local Church records.

To return to Brother Viktorinus. It seems he suffered ill health on the voyage out, though his surviving letters give no indication of this. He also contracted malaria early after arrival, but what occasioned his early demise on 21 November 1915, was septicaemia arising out of a tropical ulcer.

The death of the Director occasioned appeal to the Superiors of the Institute – not easy in war-time conditions. But the result was a visit from the Provincial of Australia, Brother Paul Andrew, some time in 1916. In May 1916 Brother Urban, after making his perpetual profession was designated Di-

rector of the remaining group. (Whether Peter Noss' withdrawal was before or after the death of Brother Viktorinus and the visit of Brother Paul, there is no evidence to determine).

The three of them, Brothers Urban, Hermann and Otto continued as best they could to run the school which had been entrusted to them but already now working under quite different conditions, drastic reduction in their own personnel and a changed political situation, with the colony being under the administration of the occupying Australian military forces, and with English coming gradually to replace German as the medium of instruction and the language of future development...

The school of which our Brothers were given charge was the *Sacred Heart School for Mixed Races* (a title which contained fewer pejorative overtones in the colonial world of 1914 than it would today). Up till now, since its establishment in 1898, this school had been conducted first by the mainly French Sisters – Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, and then, since 1902, by the German Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. It was the boys' section — consisting of some fifty lads of a wide-age range — which was to be the Brothers' charge. One of the Brothers' pupils in 1914 is still alive today, living on the Mission property where he has been employed all his life as a motor mechanic.

This *Sacred Heart School* catered for the offspring of European settlers and traders and native women, whether legitimate issue or, more probably in most cases, otherwise.

Bishop Couppé had great ambitions for this group of children. He hoped that because of their racial origin they might come to serve as a bridgehead for wider contact with the native population and that they might be educated to become the nucleus of a Catholic peasantry (whom he would settle on Church-acquired land as small proprietors) in a Catholic indigenous culture. Unfortunately for these hopes of his, history moved too fast and within a generation these "demi-blancs" were absorbed into the indigenous mass. But it must be admitted that many such men and some women lived to take positions of relative prominence, especially in the period of de-colonisation that followed the Second World War.

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