



**First Community
in Fiji
28-03-1892**



First Community in Fiji (1892)

One hundred and thirty years ago three brave women answered the call to travel to Fiji to start what would become a well-known institution in the country.

They were Mother Melanie from England and sisters Martha and Sebastian from Ireland. Melanie was the leader of the first band of sisters that came out to Fiji on the 28th of March 1892.



Mother Melanie



Sr. Sebastian



Sr. Martha

She also travelled with Bishop Vidal from France and on arrival in Suva and Levuka they received a very warm welcome by the priests, sisters (Third Order Regular of Mary TORM) and people.

The women would lay a foundation that would soon wrap itself around the confines of Levuka history.

Settling into Fiji was not easy at first because of their thick habits, the mosquitoes, the heat, the language, the walks to Loreto and the travel there by rowing boats, etc. However, they loved the convent which was large and well-structured and close to the church and town. They loved the singing in the church and the dances (meke) of the young children.

Even though the Third Order sisters felt anguish at the arrival of the Marist Sisters they were warm in their greeting and hospitality. Other difficulties they encountered were the distance from their families and the real feelings of loneliness. Melanie said in one of her letters homes:

“We are annoyed by mosquitoes and I am terribly bitten”.
“The distance between us is terrible”.

From these snippets one can imagine the hardship endured by Mother Melanie and also the other two sisters.

Because there was no transport at the time, Melanie and the sisters would walk to Loreto and later even to Cawaci for their mission there. The walking was difficult for her as she said in one of her letters to the Superior General, Sr Ildfonse: “My legs are becoming feeble; they are too painful to walk. I feel like a worn-out old woman.”

Such were the women’s dedication, including those sisters who followed, that many Fijians have attributed their success to the education afforded them by the sisters.

The Marist Sisters were actively involved at the Marist Convent School then known as Sacred Heart School from 1892 until today.



Some of the notable former pupils of Marist Convent include the late Prime Minister and President of Fiji Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Rewa paramount chief Ro Teimumu Kepa.

“It was the education that made us what we are today and interspersed with knowing Christ in a different way,” said Nemani Maraiwai, who attended the school in 1962.

“If there was one thing we had, it was the quality of education, the syllabus was very good, we learnt music and other extracurricular activities that was holistic and then we were very well informed. The main thing for us was the education. It was top class.”

Similar sentiments were shared by his colleagues who were present. “My mother sent me all the way from Labasa to attend this school,” reminisced Rosy Chute, who still lives in the Northern town. “The school had a reputation for being one of the top educational institutions then. Many of Fiji’s leaders and prominent people came here.”

So, when Mother Melanie and Sisters Martha and Sebastian arrived in Fiji in 1892, they had made a commitment to serve like all other sisters in other parts of the world.

The sisters taught sewing, embroidery and knitting. Not only students from Fiji attended. There were students from Samoa, Tonga and Kiribati who boarded as well.



Marist Convent School, Levuka old scholars