

## VENERABLE SUZANNE AUBERT

(1835-1926)

Venerable Suzanne Aubert lived her whole life dedicated to God. It was a life of heroic service and compassion; a selfless life given to others. She was the founder of New Zealand's only indigenous religious order, the Sisters of Compassion.

Suzanne Aubert was born on 19 June 1835, at St Symphorien-de-Lay, a village not far from Lyon, France. She was baptized in the parish church two days later. Of particular note in her early life was an accident that occurred when she was two years old and which affected her for the rest of her life. She fell into an icy pond in the grounds of the family home and both eyes and limbs were seriously affected. It took several years of hydrotherapy and exercise before she was well enough to attend school. Her eyesight improved, it was said, due to the intercession of Our Lady of Fourvière.

Suzanne's secondary education took place under the guidance of the Benedictine Sisters at La Rochette, a select boarding school catering for about forty pupils. Two of her aunts were members of this congregation. Under her name in the school register is written: "Left for the Missions."

At the age of fifteen Suzanne returned home where she continued her studies in music, art, needlework, languages, literature and classical devotional books. She was an exceptional reader, and taught herself Spanish in order to read the writings of St. Teresa of Avila in the original text. Her father arranged for her to learn cooking at home from their chef, a skill she never regretted.

Suzanne's desire to become a missionary quietly matured during this period, aided in a special way by a visit to the Curé of Ars. In 1858 he made predictions that would mirror the course of her life. He told Suzanne: "You will go to the missions within two years...". "You will begin a work there and it will fall down. After many years you will build it up again, but it will again fall down."; "Oh my child, how many different crosses and trials await you in life. But whatever they do to you, whatever happens, whatever anyone will say to you, never give way, never let go, take courage, courage, courage."

Other influential figures from those early years were Marist missionary priests, Fathers Françoise Yardin and Poupinel. Also Pauline Jaricot, who established the Lay Association of the Propagation of the Faith and Françoise Perroton, a Marist lay missionary pioneer. However, it was the visit of Bishop Pompallier to Lyon in 1859 to recruit missionaries for his Auckland diocese that steered Suzanne's missionary zeal towards New Zealand.

On 1 September 1860, Suzanne Aubert boarded a whaling boat with Bishop Pompallier and 22 other missionaries to begin a new phase of her life in New

Zealand - a country isolated, undeveloped, in need of Christian ministry and which required a practical, pioneering, roll-up-your-sleeves work ethic.

During the next 66 years Suzanne ministered to the New Zealand people. She had a special call to care for the indigenous Māori people and children. She often walked. She was known as a person who stepped beyond race and creed to reach those in need. . She discovered that, without compromising her own beliefs, she could relate well to everyone through friendship. Tolerance and friendship became strategies for her mission.

Suzanne brought to New Zealand her skills as a healer. Together with Māori knowledge, she studied the medicinal properties of native plants, and grew or harvested them to produce medicines for common ailments. Her healing skills extended to a holistic restoration of family and village relationships.

Hiruhārama (Jerusalem) on the Whanganui River became a very special place for Suzanne Aubert because in this Māori village in 1892 she founded the Sisters of Compassion. While in Hiruhārama she wrote and had published her Manual of Māori Conversation, written with the intention that both Māori and Europeans were going to get along in this new society. At Hiruhārama, Suzanne and the sisters, in addition to the usual customs of religious life, taught and nursed. They also farmed newly-cleared bush, tended an orchard, made and marketed medicines and raised homeless children. The community grew and thrived.

At the invitation of priests and doctors, in 1899, Suzanne moved to Wellington, at first caring for permanently disabled people and visiting sick people in their homes. Later she opened a Soup Kitchen and a crèche. In no time she became a familiar figure around Wellington. In 1907 Suzanne Aubert opened a large home for children at Island Bay. A section of this building was later converted into a surgical hospital for the training of her sisters as registered nurses. It was to be for the poor and needy.

In 1913, Suzanne Aubert travelled to Rome to gain papal recognition for her congregation. Pope Benedict XV granted the Decree of Praise in favour of the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion on 21 April 1917. Because of World War One, Suzanne was prevented from returning to New Zealand until 1920. Wanting to help, she volunteered her services with the Italian Red Cross, nursing victims of the Avezzano earth quake and casualties of the war. While caring for the sick she wore her St. John's Ambulance medal (NZ), finding it useful as 'an English Nurse's' badge. . Suzanne also used her time seeking advice and redrafting the Constitutions of the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion. She wrote the 'Directory', a collection of thoughts and spiritual insights she had gained during her lifetime.

Suzanne Aubert died in Wellington on 1 October 1926 and was accorded the biggest funeral ever given to a woman in New Zealand at that time. In New Zealand, when reflecting on goodness, people often think of Suzanne Aubert. She was a person who loved God and all people, but with a special preference for the needy and

marginalized. The light of her compassion and the sharpness of her vision are remembered to this day.