

## THE VINCENTIANS IN FIJI 1959-2009

### Vincentian Presence in Fiji

In 1954 the Archbishop of Suva sought help from the Australian Vincentian Province to begin a Secondary College, and in 1956 asked them to undertake the foundation of a Major Seminary, covering at least the first three years of priestly formation. Neither of these invitations could be accepted, however the Vincentians were able to give a series of popular missions in Fiji, Tonga and Samoa in the period 1956-1958.

The call for permanent involvement in the Church in Fiji did not go unheeded. On 22 May 1959, two Australian Vincentians, Fr Arthur Bridgewater CM and Fr Tom O'Reilly CM left Australia to begin the first Vincentian foundation in Fiji. They arrived in Suva on 28 May 1959.

Fr O'Reilly had been sent to commence a Seminary in 1960, and Fr Bridgewater was to take charge of the mission station at Natovi, on the eastern coast of the island of Viti Levu, sixty kilometres to the north of Suva. Up till that time Natovi had been under the care of the Marist Fathers, who had begun the Natovi mission about 1900.

Immediately after their arrival, both were engaged in giving missions and retreats until 13 September 1959, and they did not arrive at Natovi until 23 September 1959. On 1 October 1959 a High Mass was celebrated at the Cathedral during which the Natovi mission was formally entrusted to the Vincentians. The Vincentians Mission were formally welcomed by the people of the Natovi area in celebrations held at Natovi on Sunday 4 October 1959.

The area served by the mission station was quite extensive, covering an area of about 2,000 square kilometres, some of which was quite dense woodland. Travel was by foot, or, if practicable, by boat.

The foundation of the Seminary did not take place as planned, and, at the beginning of 1960, Fr O'Reilly left Fiji for Mosgiel (New Zealand) where the Vincentians had charge of the Major Seminary for New Zealand. Fr Bridgewater remained in Fiji until his death in 1998.

In 1972, the long-awaited Major Seminary – Pacific Regional Seminary – was begun, and Fr Frank Bourke CM was sent to Fiji to be one of the founding members of the Seminary staff.

Since that time, ten Vincentians have assisted the Bishops of the Pacific region to form their priests and lay ministers, teaching at the Seminary in various disciplines, some as full-time staff, and others on a part-time basis. Currently, there is one Vincentian lecturing part-time at Pacific Regional Seminary.

In the same year (1972) the Vincentians extended their pastoral care of the people, taking charge of the Parish of Nausori, a large parish located on the outskirts of the city of Suva. Since this Parish had a sizeable population of Indo-Fijians, some of whom were Catholics, help was sought from the confreres of the Province of India. Four of them worked there over a period of more than twenty years, one of whom is Fr Jose Koyickal who spent thirteen years in Fiji.

A further Vincentian Family contribution to Fiji was the arrival of four Daughters of Charity from the Philippines in September 1979, when they established a house at Natovi. The Daughters were engaged in teaching in the Primary and Secondary schools, in home visitation and in caring for the sick in the Parish Clinic. In later years they were joined by Daughters of Charity from Australia, India and Ireland, and another house was established in Nausori Parish.

### **Fijian Vincentians**

In 1965, the first Fijian to join the Vincentians, Brother Lasaro Dau CM, was received at St Joseph's Seminary, Eastwood. Some years later, after completing his Seminary formation in Australia, the first Fijian Vincentian Priest, Fr Pelasio Vakarorogo CM, was ordained at Natovi in September 1973.

In 1986 St Vincent's House of Formation was established at Wailoku, a few kilometres from the centre of Suva. The Vincentian Students attend Pacific Regional Seminary at Suva Point, where they undertake their seminary studies alongside diocesan Seminarians from a large area of the Pacific and students from a number of religious communities, including the Marist Fathers, the Columban Fathers, and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.

Since the establishment of the Formation House, two Brothers have taken their vows and six Priests have been ordained. There are currently ten students at St Vincent's Formation House, Wailoku, coming from Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea.

The Vincentian Mission in Fiji completes its fiftieth year this year. In that time 18 confreres from Australia, and four from India have laboured there. Some of these have spent many years there: Fr Bridgewater CM for 39 years, Br Tanner CM for 25 years, and Fr Alan Finn CM, at the present the Parish Priest of Nausori, completes 45 years of service on 8 July 2009..

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Watching the Meke at Natovi 4 October 1959.

Fr Bridgewater (with camera) Fr John Wilkinson and Fr Tom 'Reilly (centre)



Boys' Dormitory at Natovi (circa 1963)



Br Brendan Tanner (circa 1963)



Fr Bridgewater and a Parishioner



Fr Bridgewater with some of the Teachers (Ms Foliake, and Mr and Mrs Manueli)



Fr Alan Finn fixing the generator



Fr Alan Finn with one of the men from Natovi in the mission boat





Fr John Halloran, Fr Arthur Bridgewater, Fr Les Troy, Br Brendan Tanner (circa 1962)



Fr Bridgewater outside the Natovi Parish house (circa 1962)



Fr Bridgewater and Setefano Rasila



Fr Pela Vakarorogo, Br Brendan Tanner, Fr Jose Kokickal, Fr Brian Curran, Fr Arthur Bridgewater, Fr Joeli Nabogi, Br Saula Drugunulevu, Fr Alan Finn.