

# Landing the Waka: welcoming and supporting our newly arrived missionary clergy

by Msgr Gerard Burns, Vicar General

Imagine landing in a country you are not familiar with. Even if you know the main language, it might be spoken with different accents, local slang and there is a whole history of events and people you don't know. Possibly many reading this have had these experiences in migrating to Aotearoa New Zealand. I had similar experiences when working as a priest in Peru.

Across Aotearoa New Zealand in the last 20 years, we have received many priests from other parts of the world – mostly from India and the Philippines, but other places, too. This has been because our bishops have been faced with declining numbers of priests born and raised in New Zealand, and have sought to ensure that sacramental pastoral care is available to all.

Having priests from abroad is not new for Aotearoa. The first priests to come to the country were priests from France (although Wellington's first priest was an Irish Capuchin, J.J.P. O'Reily). The first priests had to learn te reo Māori as well as English. Bishop Pompallier later brought clergy from England and Italy, but it was Irish clergy who mostly came, as the growing Catholic settler population mostly had that heritage.

In the first decades of the Church here, local vocations were mostly sent overseas for their studies, until local seminaries appeared at the end of the 19th century. However, the flow of clergy from Ireland continued until about 1970. Mission to and with Māori – Pompallier's original objective – was largely continued by locally-born Marist Fathers and Mill Hill priests from England, Holland and Germany, working with various religious women.

Because of marginalisation of Māori in NZ social life following the wars of the 1860s, the Māori Catholic stream of Church life became somewhat parallel to the predominantly European stream made up mostly of people of Irish descent, with pockets of Polish, Scottish and English communities.

How all these priests from abroad managed their transitions would have been as various as today, depending on personal maturity, language/culture-learning adaptability, nature of the communities they were sent to, etc. Some didn't manage the change and returned home. However, until the 1970s, the variations within the Church in Aotearoa were less than they are today.

From the 1960s, New Zealand's ethnic mix began to change with the arrival of peoples from other parts of the Pacific – Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau, the Cook Islands – seeking better prospects for their children. Some clergy and religious came from these islands and, more so, to provide pastoral care in home languages. There was prejudice against the "newcomers", but parishes slowly adjusted.

In the 1990s came migrants from parts of Asia, mainly the Philippines and India – again, often to fill gaps in Aotearoa's workforce and again changing the face of parishes. Also coming were communities from South Korea, Vietnam, South America (particularly Colombia) and so on. Social changes have affected the "old" European-



descent community in terms of marriage, family, Church practice, etc. This has made pastoral accompaniment more complex for parishes and pastoral workers.

So, priests arriving from abroad find themselves facing this complexity: language, history, Church culture. While they might find communities of their own nationality in the Wellington Archdiocese, they are expected to look after all who come their way. How do we assist them to learn about this strange place?

One way is the Landing the Waka programme. It was begun in 2011 as an intensive, three-day live-in programme to introduce priests new to Aotearoa to aspects of social and Church life here. Topics include local history, Church history (including recent Archdiocese synods and policies), safeguarding, diocesan structures and offices, inclusive language and general cultural features of life here. Some specific aspects are Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the significance of Anzac Day, ways of celebrating major feasts here, sayings such as "sweet as", "bring a plate", "dodge a bullet", etc.

In the past year, the live-in intensive has had a monthly gathering added, because cross-cultural transition isn't completed in a few days; it takes several years. The process includes discussion and interchange of experiences and questions among the participants.

Our Church family is becoming ever more beautifully diverse, a living reflection of the Spirit who breathes life into all peoples and cultures. This growing diversity is a sacred gift. Yet, it also brings new challenges – for our missionary clergy who leave their homelands to serve and for our parishes as they learn to welcome and accompany them. And it requires all of us "long-termers" and newly arrived to adjust and learn from each other as we honour what has been and been established and the core of our common faith.

As Pope Leo reminds us, our diversity is not a burden but a strength. When we honour the gifts each culture brings, we reveal more fully the face of Christ among us.

I invite all our parishes to open wide their hearts to our newly arrived missionary clergy. Let us offer them hospitality, understanding and a shared sense of mission. In walking together, listening deeply and supporting one another, we help each other to "land our waka", trusting that the same God who calls us into this journey will guide us safely to the shore.