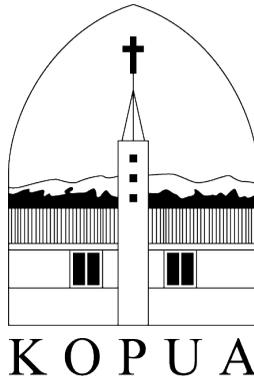


The Founding of Our Lady of the Southern Star Kopua New Zealand



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Overtures

On March 16 1948 Fr Thomas Guinane, Parish Priest of St Joseph's Dannevirke, wrote to Archbishop Peter McKeefry of Wellington,

Mr T Prescott of Kopua, Takapau Parish called recently. He is anxious to leave his farm, 500 acres freehold with some other acreage leasehold, to the Church. He wonders whether an arrangement could be made whereby after his death, his wife's interest could be sustained and in the event of her death his adopted boy could have a home for his life. I mentioned the matter to Monsignor McManus who thinks the proposal is well worth consideration. A farm such as this might be ideal for an agricultural farm conducted by the De La Salle Brothers for instance. Monsignor thinks that his Grace might like to visit Prescotts sometime and go into the whole matter.¹

Archbishop McKeefry replied on March 21 to Guinane suggesting that the monks of Mt Melleray Abbey, Ireland, could be invited to make a foundation on the Prescott property. And he was very clear about his reasons. Amongst the many were: the vitality of the community, the fact that it had founded two monasteries in Ireland in the past decade; their reputation as agriculturalists which could provide for the possibility of founding an agricultural school at Kopua; later the monastery might operate a Minor Seminary for the diocese and for the Missions and, above all, "Such a monastery would advance and enhance beyond measure the prestige of the Church in all of that district and beyond."²

Consequently the major concern for McKeefry was whether the Prescotts would be willing to make an initial grant of some land to

¹ Guinane to McKeefry, March 16 1948, CIST Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington, Archive Office. Henceforth referred to as WCAA,

² McKeefry to Guinane, March 21 1948, CIST WCAA.

the community with the promise of the rest to follow later, sufficient guarantees being given by the monks. If this were possible then he would put the matter before his Council and make an immediate invitation to Mount Melleray.³

Shortly afterwards McKeefry sought counsel about the matter from Bishop James Liston of Auckland. Liston was most enthusiastic and went on to recount that in 1935, while in Ireland, he had visited Mount St Joseph Abbey, Roscrea twice; the second time with the intention of requesting that a foundation be made in New Zealand and so, while there, he penned his request on the Abbey's note paper on September 28.⁴

The request was welcomed by Abbot Justin McCarthy but he indicated that the community was not in a position to make a foundation at present. However he did give an indication that it was a possibility for the future. Shortly afterwards Liston returned to Auckland and the idea slipped from his mind under the pressures of the recession and the war that was looming. Liston urged McKeefry to write to Camillus Claffey who was now the Abbot of Mt St Joseph, Roscrea and renew the invitation he had made in 1935 and so he did.⁵

Claffey wrote back on July 8 regretting that he was forced to turn down such a promising proposition as Roscrea had founded a community in Scotland, Sancta Maria Abbey, Nunraw, two years previously and it would take time before the community would possess the resources to found another community.⁶

³ The full text of McKeefry's letter is given in Appendix A.

⁴ The full text of Liston's letter is given in Appendix B.

⁵ The full text of McKeefry's letter is given in Appendix C.

⁶ Claffey to McKeefry, July 8 1948, CIST WCAA.

Unperturbed, the Archbishop wrote once more seeking some guarantee that the Abbot would consider New Zealand as a possibility for its next foundation. If so, McKeefry would set about discussions with the Prescotts and seek to establish a capital fund immediately.⁷ Claffey replied stating that it was not possible for him to set a date for a possible foundation and that in the circumstances it would be better for McKeefry to apply to another Order.⁸

Undaunted, McKeefry began to look further afield to monasteries of the Order. Abbot Columbanus Tewes of the Abbey of Achel in Belgium informed him that his community was not in a position to make a foundation and added that the Abbey of Tilburg in Holland was about to make a foundation in Java. This was discouraging news for the Archbishop.⁹

McKeefry was in Ireland during September of 1949 and called on the Abbeys of Roscrea and Mount Melleray. The Abbots of both communities were absent attending the General Chapter at Citeaux, France. Roscrea remained firm in its earlier position but Mount Melleray offered a glimmer of hope. Consequently McKeefry wrote to Abbot Celsus O'Connell of Mount Melleray about the possibility of making a foundation at Kopua. He received no reply.

Meanwhile Mr Tom Prescott was making his plans. On August 22 he made a new will: following his death the entire estate was to go to his wife Rosalie for her use during her life time; on her death, after due provision had been made for their adopted son John, the remainder of the estate was to be left to the Archbishop of Wellington for the purpose of providing a school or college mainly for the purpose of educating Catholic youth in agricultural and pastoral pursuits on his lands. One hundred acres was to be made

⁷ McKeefry to Claffey, July 22 1948, CIST WCAA.

⁸ Claffey to McKeefry, August 8 1948, CIST WCAA.

⁹ Abbot Columbanus to McKeefry, January 28 1949, CIST WCAA.

available to the Cistercians or Order appointed for a start to the project in five years.¹⁰

On July 26 1950 the Archbishop wrote again to the Abbot of Roscrea. He mentioned that “The position is this: the Prescotts have made their will, and the property is in trust for the founding of a monastery, preferably the Cistercians. This is the primary object. The possibility of an agricultural college is also laid down, but that is only when the monastic authorities decide. It is not envisaged as beginning with the foundation – it is realised that this can only be a result of natural growth over the years.” It should be noted that the primary objective of the foundation in McKeefry’s view is not the same as that of the donors.

McKeefry went on to say that he had asked the Abbot of Mt Melleray to consider sending a small community to make a foundation. He then asked Claffey if he would consider making a joint foundation with Mount Melleray in New Zealand. A similar letter was sent to O’Connell of Mt Melleray.¹¹ Claffey was unmoved and suggested that McKeefry approach the monasteries of the Order in America. O’Connell finally broke his silence saying that “My hands are tied at present. ...My great difficulty is that we are striving to put the new community in Co Antrim on its feet. It will require help for a few more years to come.”¹²

McKeefry once again began to look elsewhere. On September 29 he wrote to Abbot James Fox of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, USA, seeking the possibility of a foundation, only to be disappointed.

¹⁰ Tom Prescott to McKeefry, August 22 1949, CIST WCAA.

¹¹ McKeefry to Claffey, July 26 1950, CIST WCAA.

¹² O’Connell to McKeefry, August 11 1950, CIST WCAA.

In 1951 Bishop James Liston of Auckland wrote to Claffey supporting McKeefry's endeavours. The Abbot of Roscrea was cordial in his reply and then proceeded to outline his reasons for declining the invitation for a foundation: the Prescott's condition of an agricultural school did not harmonise with the requirements of the Order; Roscrea had neither the personnel nor the finance available; the fact that the Archbishop was in Ireland seeking priests for his diocese was not a good indication of a supply of contemplative vocations for a community and the higher superiors of the Order were not in favour of the foundation.¹³

Towards the end of the year McKeefry approached Abbot Edmund Futterer of St Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, MA, USA, for assistance with the proposed foundation. And once again he was to be disappointed.¹⁴ Futterer suggested that he contact the Dutch Abbeys! Eventually he did so.

On September 23 1952 McKeefry wrote to Abbot Willibrordus van Dijk of Tillburg, Holland, in a similar vein, only to be informed that Tillburg was on the verge of making the long-discussed foundation in Java,¹⁵

Undismayed, McKeefry sought the assistance of Bishop John Kavanagh of Dunedin who was in Ireland at the time, asking him to visit Roscrea and Mt Melleray and investigate if there was any interest remaining in New Zealand. There was. On November 17 a letter from the Abbot of Mt Melleray arrived on McKeefry's desk. "I thank you for the kind letter you sent me by Dr Kavanagh. I will be in New Melleray Abbey, R.R. No.1, Dubuque, Iowa, U.S.A, for at least three weeks from the 20th inst. If then you had a suggestion to

¹³ Claffey to Liston, July 26 1951, Catholic Diocese of Auckland Archive Office, henceforth ACDA.

¹⁴ McKeefry to Futterer, December 14 1951, CIST WCAA.

¹⁵ McKeefry to van Dijk, September 23 1952, CIST WCAA.

make I should be pleased to get it while I am in the States.¹⁶ McKeefry replied: “You are nearly half way to New Zealand and I would suggest that you come the rest of the way and see for yourself the property that is available, discuss the whole question with the donors, and then fully informed, you will be able to make a decision. I am willing to pay your return ticket to the United States ...”¹⁷ The offer was accepted and McKeefry cabled O’Connell on December 11: “Delighted letter received glad to pay fare to visit and see for yourself.”¹⁸ On December 31 Abbot Celsus O’Connell of Mt Melleray arrived in Wellington. The door was opening.

II

Preparing the Way

On New Year’s Day 1953 Abbot Celsus O’Connell of Mt Melleray Abbey, Ireland visited Kopua, New Zealand for the first time. He was warmly welcomed by Mr Tom and Mrs Rosalie Prescott at their homestead, *Veradomus*.

In February Rosalie wrote to Archbishop Peter McKeefry thanking him for arranging the visit and adding, “It is not possible to convey to you in words, the feelings of satisfaction and thankfulness we have about the decisions arrived at.”¹⁹ O’Connell was more circumspect. He was open to considering making a foundation at Kopua but was waiting for a guarantee from the Prescotts of a ‘few hundred acres of land’ on which a pioneering group could build a temporary monastery for a community of thirty monks. He observed: “Mrs Prescott seems ready to make any sacrifice to meet our needs. I

¹⁶ O’Connell to McKeefry, November 17 1952, CIST WCAA.

¹⁷ McKeefry to O’Connell, November 27 1952, CIST WCAA.

¹⁸ McKeefry to O’Connell, December 22 1952, CIST WCAA>

¹⁹ R. Prescott to McKeefry, February 5 1953, WCAA.

am afraid that Mr Prescott does not like to hand over any land at the moment.”²⁰

McKeefry wrote on July 14 to O’Connell with reassuring news. The Prescotts wished to make an immediate transfer of 180 acres to help the foundation get under way. He then went on to propose a plan that would avoid taxes being incurred by Mt Melleray:

1. That the 180 acre block of land be transferred to himself and that he would sign a Declaration of Trust showing that the block was being held by himself on behalf of the Pioneers until such time as they had arrived and were incorporated under New Zealand, law.
2. That the remainder of the property be transferred to a Trust consisting of the Prescotts, himself and the monks with the intention of transferring the lands to the monastic community as their numbers increased.
3. That the site chosen by O’Connell for the erection of the monastery which was part of the land to be held under the joint Trust, would be ceded to the pioneers as soon as it was needed.²¹

The community of Mt Melleray voted in favour of making the foundation at Kopua and O’Connell informed McKeefrey by letter on August 8.

Rosalie was certainly prepared to make sacrifices to secure the foundation. On August 14 she wrote to O’Connell, with Tom’s approval, making an offer of their homestead for the use of the Pioneers. She found the large house difficult to care for, particularly when Tom was not well. However the powers that be - Parish Priest and Archbishop – thought differently.

²⁰ O’Connell to McKeefry, July 15 1953, WCAA.

²¹ McKeefry to O’Connell, July 14 1953, WCAA.

McKeefry, too, was concerned about providing accommodation for the Pioneers on their arrival. He remarked to Fr Guinane of Dannevirke that he had offered to provide pre-fabricated accommodation but O'Connell had turned him down saying, "... for a beginning it's shelter and that is all that is wanted. Anything else must be of the monks' own hands ... that's what the spirit of the Order requires and anything else might prevent them getting the full blessing of God, and that would never do with a new foundation."²²

O'Connell at this time was preparing to attend the General Chapter of the Order at Citeaux, France, in September. Having secured the approval of his community for making the foundation, he now had to seek ratification for the project from the Chapter. Accordingly he wrote to McKeefry requesting that he write to the Capitulants endorsing the venture. But he requested that McKeefry omit any reference to the establishment of an agricultural college as that might cause unwanted concern. (It can be assumed with a degree of confidence that O'Connell omitted any reference to the college himself.)

McKeefry replied to O'Connell informing him that he had followed his advice with care. "Actually", he wrote, "a paragraph has been left out. The paragraph in question reads: 'The transfer of the lands and the creation of the Trust in favour of the Order shall be in the terms that the Order is to promote the Roman Catholic religion in New Zealand and to carry on upon the said lands agricultural research and establish there a school for the teaching of agricultural and pastoral sciences practices.'²³ (It is worth recalling the observation Abbot Camillus Claffey of Roscrea made to Bishop James Liston of Auckland that "... the Prescott's condition of an agricultural school did not harmonise with the requirements of the Order.")

²² McKeefry to Guinane, August 4 1953, WCAA.

²³ McKeefry to O'Connell, August 5 1953, WCAA.

Rosalie, meanwhile, received a letter from O'Connell saying that he had accepted the offer of the house because 'it could hardly be done without by the Pioneers.' On September 12 Rosalie wrote to McKeefry, "He (O'Connell) considered that the Pioneers would need financial aid whilst making a start, an Oratory and other buildings would be necessary immediately."²⁴

On September 20 O'Connell cabled McKeefry from the Chapter being held at Citeaux, "PERMISSION GRANTED WRITING – O'CONNELL." And the letter followed advising McKeefry, amongst other matters, that the name of the monastery will be 'Our Lady of the Southern Star'. McKeefry replied, "I agree with the name you have chosen, though better than Southern Star would be Southern Cross which is the name for a constellation visible only in the southern hemisphere."²⁵ He was soon to retract the suggestion after discussing the matter with the Prescotts. Rosalie wrote later, "Please forgive me for my reception of your suggestion that the name should be 'Southern Cross', but to that name hangs yet another of those tales, personal, strange and rather bitter, particularly to me."²⁶

On November 3 McKeefry released the news of the impending foundation to the media:

The Cistercian Monks of the Abbey of Mt. Melleray, Ireland are to found a monastery in New Zealand in the Archdiocese of Wellington.

The invitation was made by Archbishop McKeefrey and supported by other members of the Hierarchy. It received favourable consideration by the Abbot of Mt. Melleray, the Most Rev. Celsus

²⁴ Rosalie Prescott to McKeefry, September 12 1953, WCAA.

²⁵ McKeefry to O'Connell, October 16 1953, WCAA.

²⁶ Rosalie Prescott to McKeefry, October 18 1953, WCAA.

O'Connell, and then was submitted to the Chapter General of the Order held at the Abbey of Citeaux, France last month.

A letter from the Abbot-General just received gives the good news that the proposed Foundation has been sanctioned. By the same mail came also a letter from Abbot O'Connell confirming acceptance of the invitation and intimating that he would visit New Zealand in the near future to finalise necessary details.

The name chosen for the N.Z. foundation is Our Lady of the Southern Star.

The first monks to arrive will be six in number, and their task after the manner of the Cistercians throughout history, will be to build from the ground up, the first monastery which will receive the foundation group of 20, both priests and brothers.

Not without significance that this first foundation of Cistercians in the southern hemisphere takes place in the St. Bernard Centennial Year, and in the 100th anniversary of the Immaculate Conception Dogma of Our Lady, being marked by the Marian Year. St. Bernard was an outstanding exponent of devotion to the Mother of God and by his writings did much to clarify the Western Church's teaching on the Immaculate Conception.²⁷

Tom wrote to McKeeffry: "We were delighted to see the announcements, and although not expecting to see much in 'The Tablet' (Catholic newspaper) found it very informative. One point was significant, the names of the Monasteries and their meanings.

²⁷ Media release November 3 1953, WCAA. McKeeffry is inaccurate with regard to St Bernard and the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Bernard, together with St Thomas Aquinas and others was not in favour of the doctrine at all.

We have always understood that the Maori meaning of the word Kopua was deepwater.²⁸

More practical matters were pressing. O'Connell had already chosen the group of Pioneers 'in petto' and he was anxious to learn where they might stay while they were 'fixing up a residence'. He was also anxious to learn of a convenient date for the Pioneers to arrive in Kopua.

McKeefry was in a quandary as his earlier offer to provide pre-fabricated accommodation for the Pioneers had been refused by O'Connell and now he was asking for a temporary residence. In a letter to the Prescotts, McKeefry, endeavouring to read the mind of O'Connell, opined that, "... the abbot would send out three or four monks in March to knock up a temporary monastery which could allow the larger group to come. ... With the larger group on the spot the building of the more permanent group could begin. That would also give your own selves plenty of time in making your own arrangements, and then with your own house available and the larger group of monks temporarily housed, the monastery could be able to function with the use of your own house as a guest house."²⁹

In January 1954 McKeefry suggested to the Prescotts that it would be opportune for the early group to arrive about May or June as it would be winter time and the shearers' quarters would be available for them. He also considered that it would not take the group long to build the temporary accommodation for the larger group and he was hopeful that the old parish church at Dannevirke would be made available for the fledgling community.

²⁸ Tom Prescott to McKeefry, November 9 1953, WCAA.

²⁹ McKeefry to the Prescotts, January 6 1954, WCAA.

Consequently McKeefry advised O'Connell that, "The monks' first accommodation will be in the cottages used by the shearers, and of course they will be vacant until January of next year."³⁰

Difficulties with the proposed Trust were now emerging. (It needs to be recalled that McKeefry had informed Claffey in July 1950 that the Prescotts had made their will and that their property was in trust for the founding of the monastery.) The Prescotts' estate was jointly owned by Tom and his sister, Mrs Dorothy Asher, who was in poor health. The lawyer for the archdiocese, Mr Thaddeus McCarthy, urged Tom to press for the legal transfer of the estate into his name as he could not expect the monks to commit themselves to coming to New Zealand until some form of legal security was provided.

At Mt Melleray on February 22 Fr Basil Hayes recorded in his diary: "Remember the appointment given on the evening of this day – the burden and the responsibility imposed – the sacrifices imposed."³¹ The news was out and soon abroad.

At the time of his appointment Fr Basil Hayes was thirty-five years of age. He was born at Ballyquin, Carrick-on-Suir, Co Tipperary and entered Mt Melleray in 1938 after attending the college there. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1945. He had a reputation for being a most gentle, capable and pleasant monk.

On April 19 Fr Basil and the other pioneers – Br Martin Gilligan, Fr Gregory Kelleher, Br Thomas Morrissey, Fr Fintan O'Neill and Br Placid Shearer – were given the opportunity to return to their families and make their farewells.

Fr Basil found his mother well and in good spirits. During his four days at home he celebrated Mass for the family and walked the farm

³⁰ McKeefry to O'Connell, February 3 1954, WCAA

³¹ Archives Southern Star Abbey. Henceforward – Diaries.

for what he considered to be his last time. He took the opportunity to celebrate Mass in the Parish Chapel and afterwards visit the grave of his father. Basil returned to the monastery on April 23 and noted in his diary how easy the parting turned out to be.

Numerous friends of the Pioneers visited the abbey in the following days. On April 29, the feast of St Robert – one of the three Founders of Citeaux – Fr Basil celebrated High Mass for the Pioneers. Later, after the Office of None, they knelt at the sanctuary step for prayers. Soon afterwards the farewells began and the party left the abbey at 2.00.

They made their way to Rosslare Harbour, Co Wexford, from where they travelled by ferry to Fishguard Harbour in Pembrokeshire, Wales. The following morning they rose at 2.30 and made their way to the railway station. After boarding the train they recited the Office of Vigils and at 4.00 they were on their way to Southampton. The next morning, May 1, dressed in their monastic robes, they were at the docks. Their goods were insured for 5 pounds sterling and they were waved through customs without inspection. At noon the S.S. Tamaroa sailed out of the harbour.

III

Sea Voyage

On May 1 1954 the S.S. Tamaroa set sail for New Zealand. The first week out from Southampton proved to be a trial for most of the Pioneers due to sea sickness, except for Br Placid Shearer. Placid was born in 1923 in the Transvaal, South Africa. A veteran of World War II, he served on the Italian Front as an artilleryman and entered Mt Melleray in 1949. At the time of setting out for New Zealand he had almost completed the studies necessary for ordination to the

priesthood. He was a gifted musician and possessed a fine singing voice.

Life on board the S.S. Tamaroa was very different from life back in the monastery. The Pioneers in their monastic robes felt uncomfortably conspicuous and they were dismayed by the general indifference to religion displayed by many of the passengers. Some scenes witnessed in broad daylight raised Basil's eyebrows.

On May 16 after sailing through the Panama Canal the ship docked at Balboa. The following day they were back at sea and soon Neptune made his traditional appearance for the crossing of the Equator. The Pioneers were presented with three bottles of mineral water to celebrate the occasion. And all the while on the voyage the clocks were being adjusted with Basil making constant references to Mount Melleray as the mean time.

On May 31 Immigration and Customs Declarations were completed and the Oath of Obedience to the laws of New Zealand was taken. Medical inspections followed on June 3 and later in the evening they attended the Captain's farewell dinner. On Sunday June 6, the Feast of Pentecost for that year, the Pioneers sighted land at daybreak. At 9.00 the S.S. Tamaroa docked in Auckland Harbour and at noon all the passengers disembarked.

The Pioneers were met by a group of clergy from the city and taken to meet Bishop James Liston at his residence. From there they set out for the Franciscan Friary where they were accommodated during their stay in Auckland.

IV

Kopua

On Tuesday Fr Basil, Fr Gregory, Br Martin and Br Placid. accompanied by Fr Steve Conboy and Fr Mick Shore, set out for Kopua staying overnight in Napier. Continuing on their journey the next day, they arrived at Kopua in the early afternoon to be greeted by Abbot Celsus O’Connell who had arrived some days earlier, and their hosts, Tom and Rosalie Prescott and their son John.

Thursday was spent inspecting the farm and discussing possible sites for the monastery. In the evening Archbishop Peter McKeefry called to welcome the monks to his archdiocese.

Basil’s diary records that on Friday, June 11, “Difficulties about the land begin. The land intended is not suitable and has no suitable place on which to build. The site for the monastery is very unsuitable. Given promise of 50 acres of good land on the north side with the best site on the farm.”³²

On Saturday 14 boxes of luggage arrived at Kopua Railway Station and later in the day Fr Fintan and Br Thomas, accompanied by Fr McGuire, arrived at Kopua. The Pioneers were reunited. O’Connell wrote to McKeefry on June 16 a letter marked ‘Strictly Confidential’. “We feel that Tom is reluctant to give us any land. In fact he assumes that we are incapable of working it. Then he says that he is to make us his heirs. He can change his mind as readily as Mrs Prescott can change hers. I cannot afford to be supporting six excellent men who are idle. In fact they at every moment run the risk of scandalizing Mrs Prescott. Rather then play a false game here I

³² ASSA, Diaries.

would prefer to send these men back to their monastery where their help could promote the interests of religion.”³³

Life at *Veradomus*, the Prescott homestead, was proving to be uncomfortable for all concerned. The monks rose each morning at 3.00 to begin the daily round of prayer. Rosalie and Tom were not impressed with their sleep being interrupted during the recitation of the Night Office and so the recitation was reduced to a whisper. Eventually no hours of the Office were recited in the Oratory and even the ringing of bells during the celebration of the Mass was abandoned. The enforced idleness – there was no land to work - led Rosalie to comment: “Is this the order of the day for Cistercians?”³⁴. Meals were cooked and eaten in a cottage a short distance away, providing a little respite for the monks.

Tension was so high that on June 23 the Pioneers, having lost all hope, packed their bags in readiness to depart. McKeefry arrived the next day and organised a meeting between the parties which provided some satisfaction. The monks were to be given three paddocks connected with the new site they had chosen for the monastery.³⁵

On June 29 the Parish Priest of Dannevirke, Fr Thomas Guinane, who at the time was in the process of building his new Parish Church, visited the site accompanied by his architect and engineer. Mr Devlin, the engineer, proved to be particularly helpful. O’Connell left later in the day for Wellington and Dunedin. The next morning the first sod of the foundation of the ‘temporary monastery’ was turned. And so, despite their feelings of insecurity, the Pioneers commenced the building process.

³³ O’Connell to McKeefry, June 16 1945, WCAA

³⁴ ASSA Diaries, entry for June 20, 1954.

³⁵ This site is occupied by the monastery today. The first site chosen was in the vicinity of the wool shed on Kopua Road.

O'Connell returned from his travels on July 4 both refreshed and encouraged. News of the foundation was greeted with enthusiasm wherever he went and consequently he considered that they could not leave. But the situation was forever changing; Basil recorded in his diary for July 7 that the Abbot was quite disturbed by their position and had made up his mind that they should leave. However, he changed his mind and allowed the group to stay.

On July 9 the Abbot departed for Wellington on his return journey to Ireland; the Pioneers were now totally responsible for the foundation. Work went on apace at the monastery site: drawing shingle from the river, clearing scrub land, and fertilizing paddocks. The first shed to house equipment was soon in place and three tons of cement arrived for work on the foundations.

McKeefry wrote to O'Connell on July 6. A note attached to the copy in the archives makes it clear that it was handed to the abbot on July 9. In the letter McKeefry provided an update on the Trust, which had to be changed following the selection of a new site for the monastery by the monks after their arrival. "All of the land owned by Mr T.G. Prescott will be transferred to the Trustees who will be the Archbishop of Wellington, the Superior of the Order at Kopua, Mr and Mrs T.G. Prescott and Mr T.P. McCarthy. Within the deed of Trust there shall be an arrangement guaranteeing security of tenure and occupancy rights as of freehold to the area, approximately 200 acres, on that side of the road where the monks have agreed with Mr. Prescott to site their monastery."³⁶

Did O'Connell read this letter? McKeefry in a letter to Basil dated July 28 says he did. Events, which were to unfold later, suggest that he did not understand its contents.

³⁶ McKeefry to O'Connell, July 6 1954 WCAA

Back at Kopua ‘strong reports’ were trickling back to the Pioneers from the people in the vicinity saying that the monks were rejecting offers of assistance with the foundation. In fact the monks were disappointed with the apparent lack of support and Basil believed that the Prescotts were discouraging offers of assistance.”³⁷

Meanwhile O’Connell, pausing on his journey to Ireland at New Melleray in Iowa, USA, penned two letters successively on July 19 and July 27 to McKeefry. The archbishop found them waiting for him upon his return home after an absence of ten days from Wellington on August 10. In the first letter O’Connell wrote; “We have made a mistake. The sooner the foundation is concluded the better. “³⁸

The second letter of July 27 is surely the work of an overwrought mind. “Your Grace, I hope you in your kindness are arranging for the passage of my dear spiritual children. They have received exceptional kindness from Mr and Mrs Prescott. I am sorry to be disappointing them after all the sacrifices they made for us. I will explain matters to them. The ugly tricks you have played in arranging that the contract be signed behind my back make me lose confidence in your sincerity. “³⁹. The letter continued with a number of accusations: McKeefry had dissuaded the Prescotts from assigning their entire land to the community in the future and he had been negligent in providing shelter for the Pioneers.

Meanwhile, Basil was also concerned with the position of the community at Kopua and took his concerns to the Parish Priest of Dannevirke. Basil notes in his diary for July 24: “Went to the P.P. We must remain adamant about ownership. Ownership of sufficient land is the foundation rock of a Cistercian foundation. We are also

³⁷ ASSA Diaries, entry for July 19 1954

³⁸ O’Connell to McKeefry, July 19 1954 WCAA.

³⁹ O’Connell to McKeefry, July 27 1954, WCAA.

exempt religious. We cannot hold property in trust with the Archdiocese. Settlement of affairs now seems impossible.”⁴⁰ That evening Basil wrote to McKeefry.

Four days later McKeefry replied to Basil. His reply included all the information mentioned in his letter of July 6 to O’Connell. And he followed this up with a visit to Kopua on July 31. After the visit Basil noted in his diary that all had been set right and that peace had been restored.

Back in Ireland in early August, O’Connell wrote yet another letter to McKeefry which demonstrated a continuing degree of disturbance of mind.

All the while the Pioneers were getting on with their life and on August 2 vacated the Prescotts’ homestead, taking up residence in the Shearers’ Quarters.⁴¹ Living conditions were decidedly cramped, there being but a kitchen and three small bedrooms for the six of them. This ‘hut’ was the simplest and lowliest of monasteries for the time being. Basil wrote that day: “The Divine Office is celebrated in a bedroom – when one prostrates on the knuckles (A semi-prostration: the monk kneeling and then bowing until his knuckles touch the floor at his knees.), he is on the opposite side of the Choir.”⁴²

Six days later Br Thomas received news of his mother’s death. The sacrifices being asked of the Pioneers were mounting. Thomas hailed from Fermoy, Co. Cork. As a young man he represented the County in football. A carpenter by trade, he entered Mt Melleray as a Lay Brother in 1934. His expertise as a builder was fully employed in the

⁴⁰ ASSA Diaries.

⁴¹ This building is known today as The Honey House. The name was given later as the result of Br Matthew preparing honey from his hives there.

⁴² ASSA Diaries.

foundation years of two of the daughter houses of Mt Melleray: Mellifont Abbey in Co. Louth, 1938 and Our Lady of Bethlehem Abbey, Portglenone, Co. Antrim, 1948.

And then on August 9 Basil received a letter from O'Connell which read: "Quit New Zealand and come home." Basil, confident that his abbot would approve of the arrangements outlined by McKeefry in his letter of July 6 and discussed with him at Kopua on July 21, chose not to heed the command and wrote to him on August 12 informing him of the improved and promising situation.

McKeefry set about answering O'Connell's letters of July 19 and 27 on August 10. "My Lord Abbot, after an absence of ten days I find your two letters of July 19 and 27 awaiting me. To say that your letters have given me a surprise, would be to put it mildly, and I am at a complete loss to know what has led to the writing of these two letters. ...

"I received one from Fr Basil in which he expressed a certain concern about the area of land at Kopua. I paid a special visit to Kopua and there explained the position to him, just as I had explained it to yourself. I left him perfectly satisfied and content to await the completion of the legal formalities. To return and find your two letters was an experience that I hope I shall never have again."⁴³

McKeefry was firm with O'Connell and informed him that he would not be making arrangements for the return of the Pioneers to Mt Melleray and that, if O'Connell persisted in his demand, he would inform the Apostolic Delegation in Sydney immediately and request that the Holy See conduct an enquiry into all the matters surrounding the earlier negotiations for the foundation and what had transpired since.

⁴³ McKeefry to O'Connell, August 10 1954 WCAA.

The letter continued: “Upon your arrival here this year you changed from the proposed site and selected the one on the left side of Kopua Road. I must point out that Mr Prescott thought you were going to take the original block. He had stumped and prepared 40 acres of virgin land so that it could be turned into immediate productivity by the monks on arrival. Further, as you had agreed to accept this block, he had planted winter feed for his sheep and had taken no steps to regulate the position of two leasehold blocks, nor to prepare an alternative site for his lambing paddocks, and also an alternative site for the air strip used by the topdressing planes. ...

“In my last interview with you at Kopua it was agreed that the area being made available immediately would be acceptable, and you seemed satisfied with that, as also on the occasion of your last visit here (Wellington) when I gave you the signed letter of July 9.

“Subject to the clearing of the complications caused by your choosing of the other site, the original proposals stand, the Prescotts on their side destining the whole of the property being the property of the monks, and I on my side in no way limiting or interfering with their generous intention.”⁴⁴ McKeefry then provided a digest for the Abbot of the relevant correspondence written over the years and promised to send on the dossier to the Apostolic Delegation, together with the offending letters of July 17 and 29, if he persisted with his plan in withdrawing the Pioneers from Kopua.

On August 12 Basil received another letter from his Abbot insisting that he demand from the Prescotts the absolute possession of 300 acres or withdraw from the foundation. Obediently Basil wrote to McKeefry on the 14th informing him of the new demands. McKeefry visited Kopua on the 19th, meeting with Basil and Placid for three hours discussing the matter. Consequently a new proposal was made; the monks would be given 200 acres within a short time. McKeefry

⁴⁴ McKeefry to O’Connell, *ibid.*

also informed them that he would take the matter to Rome if there were any suggestion of closing the foundation.

McKeeffry did write to Bishop Romolo Carboni at the Apostolic Delegation in Sydney, informing him of the situation and indicating that he was prepared to appeal to the Holy See if necessary. Carboni, a diplomat by training, used his considerable skills to resolve the situation to the mutual satisfaction of O'Connell and McKeeffry.

O'Connell wrote a conciliatory letter to McKeeffry on September 7 concluding with: "If there was a misunderstanding between Your Grace and us it was my fault. I should not have left for Ireland until all matters concerning the contract were cleared up. From the first interview I had with you I believed all would go well with us. I believe that you can forgive strong language from an Irishman where his children are concerned."⁴⁵ McKeeffry indicated in his reply that O'Connell could consider that the offending letters had not be read and that his only desire was to see the foundation made and for it to prosper.

Meantime the archdiocesan lawyer, Mr Thaddeus McCarthy, visited Kopua and drew up a new agreement which was approved by the Prescotts and Basil on the spot. This was communicated directly to O'Connell at the General Chapter being held at Citeaux. O'Connell replied on September 14 expressing his satisfaction with the arrangements, indicating that he was ready to send another group of six as soon as there was accommodation to receive them.

The future was looking much brighter. O'Connell informed McKeeffry on October 19 that the Procurator General wished to register Kopua as a foundation of the Order and that he required a letter of consent from McKeeffry as the ordinary of the archdiocese. McKeeffry complied with the request a week later. The Procurator

⁴⁵ O'Connell to McKeeffry, September 7 1954 WCAA.

General acknowledged receipt of the letter on November 6 and. on the same day at the Vatican, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith approved the foundation of Southern Star Kopua. On November 18 the same congregation approved the opening of a novitiate at Kopua. At last the foundation was on a firm footing and now able to open its door to aspirants. It was high time to get on with it.

Appendix A

*Letter of Archbishop Peter McKeefry to Fr Thomas Guinane*⁴⁶

**10 Guilford Terrace
Wellington**

March 21, 1948

Very Rev Thomas Guinane,
Catholic Presbytery
Dannevirke

Very Reverend and Dear Father,

Many thanks for your letter of March 16. As I said to you last evening, I am delighted with the prospect, and have thought much over it, prayed and consulted with Monsignor Connolly.

I make the suggestion about monks from Mt Melleray for the following reasons:

1. The bringing of such an Order to New Zealand would be of the most incalculable value, even apart from the pure spiritual side.
2. Today Mt Melleray has an excess of vocations – in the last six years, making foundations at Mellifont and in Scotland.⁴⁷
3. As agriculturalists, they have a reputation second to none, and could begin with an agricultural school. Later they might

⁴⁶ WCAA CIST.

⁴⁷ In fact the foundation in Scotland was made by Mount St Joseph Abbey, Roscrea.

even operate a Minor Seminary for the diocese and the Missions.

4. While the monks begin mostly in wild land, in Scotland it was not so. Here in New Zealand they would not have the charity of a people rich in Faith, and to begin with something already productive would help them, and bring about sooner the building of their own Monastery – the same Monastery to be also a Retreat House for laity of the Waiarapa and Hawkes bay area.
5. Such a monastery would advance and enhance beyond measure the prestige of the Church in all of that district, and far beyond.
6. The donors could be certain that their adopted son, John, could have the best care in the world.
7. The donors themselves could be able to derive the greatest joy and consolation in knowing that their action would bring the greatest blessings upon themselves now, and make their name blessed by future generations.

Those in brief are my own thoughts about this whole matter, and I would be glad if you and Monsignor McManus were to discuss my ideas – take your time – and let me know what you think.

One thought in my mind is this – would the donors be willing to consider making an initial grant of some area, the rest to follow later – sufficient guarantees to be given now and later by the monks. If such a thing were feasible, then I would put it to the Council for the purpose of getting an immediate invitation extended to the monks. What would you both think of that?

I am enclosing a memo re some items, but this matter of the land and my ideas is known only to myself, Monsignor Connolly and to Monsignor McManus. That is when you tell him.

I am indeed most grateful to you for bringing this whole affair to my notice and only hope that God will give us the enlightenment and grace to carry through something for His honour and glory.

...

Finally, I appreciate your guiding remark about Monsignor McManus's advice. I have taken special note of it, and it will form the basis for whatever discussion does take place.

Sorry that this letter is so long, but you will understand.

All best wishes.

I am,
Yours sincerely,
+ Peter T.B. McKeefry
Coadjutor-Archbishop of Wellington.

Appendix B

*Letter of Bishop James Liston to Abbot Justin McCarthy*⁴⁸

Mount St Joseph Abbey
Roscrea

September 28th 1935

The Right Rev. the Lord Abbot,
Mount St Joseph Abbey,
Roscrea,

Dear Father Abbot,

Humbly and earnestly I beg of you and the Community the favour of a foundation of the Order in the diocese of Auckland, New Zealand. The idea has been in my mind for many years, and has in the course of time grown stronger; and I know that clergy and people alike would welcome a Community with all their hearts.

My reasons for making the request are these:-

- (1) The blessings that would come to the Church in New Zealand and to our country from the prayers and sacrifices of a Community in our midst.
- (2) The help that would be given to Bishop and priests. We have perforce to be busy about many things in a new and missionary country; building of churches and schools, their maintenance (for the Catholic schools, receiving no aid from the State, are supported wholly by our own resources), the

⁴⁸ Mount St Joseph Abbey, Roscrea, Archives.

ordinary parochial work in large districts, the continual effort to keep our people good and to reclaim the lapsers – and all this in the midst of non-Catholics, who are gradually losing their hold on Christian truth.

Our priests, therefore, have many discouragements, and would be greatly strengthened if they had a Religious house, such as yours, to which they could go, and which would be an ever-present reminder to them of the supreme importance of prayer. Thanks be to God, we have in Auckland as throughout New Zealand, a splendid body of priests, who would thoroughly appreciate the blessings of an enclosed order.

- (3) What is here said of our priests holds in due measure of our Religious, men and women, and of our people. Our people work hard on farms and in cities; most of them are keen to make money or gain a good position; they are surrounded by the indifferent; the papers they read are secular in tone; pleasure is easy to hand. They are, for the most part, well-instructed in the faith; loyal to it in all simplicity, sacramental, generous in supporting all works of religion and charity; but, in view of their surroundings they do need some emphatic reminder, such as an Enclosed Order would give, of the supernatural. I am sure they would at once catch the meaning of it all, and react to it.
- (4) Non-Catholics - 7/8ths of our population, of English and Scotch descent – are losing hold of their Christian faith. They retain a non-Christian sentiment, and are full of all sorts of fine natural virtues, but in matters of religion are becoming indifferent. They are friendly to us, they are growing in deep respect for Catholic life and teaching, and very many of them would be greatly impressed by the detachment shown in an

enclosed order. In years to come, that example might come too late.

- (5) We are to start in the near future in the diocese a Community of our secular priests in order to seek the conversion, by preaching and personal contact, of non-Catholics in our midst. Such a work will be vain unless it has the solid backing of prayer and penance, and I appeal to you to come amongst us and thus help to win to Our Lord these Christians who are fast going away from Him.

I enclose some notes of our country and an official booklet of facts and figures.

During the month of July I went to Lourdes to place this petition in the hands of Our Lady, and under her patronage and in the name of Our Divine Redeemer I humbly make it to you and your Community.

Asking a share in your prayers, I am, dear Father Abbot,

Yours sincerely in Christ,

+ James M. Liston Bishop of Auckland

Notes

1. Population of New Zealand: 1,530,000 of English, Irish and Scotch descent, and some 70,000 natives.
Catholic population: 200,000
Total population of the Auckland Province: 500,000
Catholic population Auckland Province (diocese): 65,000
2. The climate is excellent: about 2,000 hours of sunshine during the year, no snow or frost along the coastline, or in the North; good frosts and a little, very little, snow in the South, interior. The rainfall is abundant; rivers and streams everywhere; soil is very rich and will grow almost anything; the land is used mostly for dairying and for that purpose is the best in N.Z.; it has been the home of our finest forests; electric power for lighting and heat is available almost everywhere.
3. New Zealanders are a friendly people and the Government and other authorities are all very cordial. We have the most perfect freedom in the exercise of our religion. There is no State religion. All religious bodies hold property with ease and safety, and the Church has never had any difficulty in that way. The Bishop in each diocese is a Corporation Sole and Religious Communities hold their property through their own Trustees and in that way are not subject to Death Duties. We pay – except in the case of schools and churches – taxes and rates.
4. The area of the Auckland Province (& diocese) is about the same as that of Ireland. The peaks part has been settled, this of course not intensively; there are still large forests, land not yet broken in and hillsides awaiting clearing and cultivation. Our finest dairying land at present – where the price is not affected by considerations of proximity to a city or town – is valued at about £30 to £35 per acre. During the period 1914 – 1924 the same land was valued at £60 - £80 an acre.

Appendix C

*Letter of Archbishop Peter McKeefry to Abbot Camillus Claffey*⁴⁹

**10 Guilford Terrace
Wellington**

28 June 1948.

The Right Reverend Abbott,
Mt. St. Joseph Abbey,
Roscrea,
IRELAND.

My Lord Abbott,

In the name of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ I am beginning this letter to you, for I look upon it as possibly the most important letter that I shall write in my life.

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to give definite consideration to the invitation to establish a monastery of your Order in New Zealand. The circumstances surrounding the origin of this invitation are as follows:

A middle-aged couple, Mr. and Mrs. Prescott, have a first-class farm of some four to five hundred acres. They are childless and have expressed a wish to transfer this property eventually to the Church, with the object that an agricultural college should be founded. When the idea was made known to me I immediately thought this a heaven-sent chance to try and induce the Monks of Mt Melleray to come to New Zealand. Mr. and Mrs. Prescott intended that the transfer of property should occur sometime before their death,

⁴⁹ WCAA Cist.

thereby saving death duties and keeping the property intact. I wrote to their priest-adviser and suggested that their proposed gift could be given a more definite form so as to enable me to extend an invitation to Mt. Melleray. I suggested that perhaps they make available immediately a block of 50 acres, the rest of the property to be incorporated into a trust, the usufruct of which would be available to them for the duration of their lives, the whole property to go to the Monks on their death. They have agreed to my suggestion and in a discussion yesterday said that I could open negotiations immediately with a view to working out a solution.

Possibly you may think that I am taking a lot for granted as regards your coming, but I have reason for feeling confident. Since this suggestion could seem a slightly revolutionary one for a country as young as this, I discussed it with Bishop Liston of Auckland a month ago. My purpose in so doing was not to secure endorsement as much as a clarification of ideas through discussion. As I told Bishop Liston the idea, I noticed that his countenance indicated a rising of emotion, and when I had finished, his first exclamation was, "Thank God for what you have told me." He then went on to tell me that in 1935 he had made two retreats at Roscrea and that the second was with no other purpose than securing God's guidance in the matter of extending an invitation to your Abbey to make a foundation in the diocese of Auckland. As he told me this, my mind went back to 1936 when on several occasions he spoke of the great joy that he had in visiting Roscrea, and from the way he spoke I received the impression that he would like to see the Monks in New Zealand. He never told me, however, about his plans.

After hearing my idea he then went on to explain how he had extended the invitation, and that a promise had been given. He spoke of the difficulties he had experienced in doing something definite prior to the war, and that the war years had increased his difficulties. Since he had not written further about the matter, he had been

inclined to think that possibly you would have also forgotten. "You can imagine," he said, "how deeply I was moved when Dean Murphy returned in February and told me that in the course of a visit to Roscrea he had learned that the promise there given was remembered and that the Monks were hoping for its fulfilment, so much so, that the Dean says they refused an invitation from Dr. Mannix, on account of the promise given to me. There are still difficulties for me, and in view of what you tell me, I now hand over the project to you. I was not inviting them for the diocese of Auckland. I was inviting them for New Zealand, for just as their work has not been limited to Ireland and their spiritual benefits extend to the world, so if they come to New Zealand, the benefit of their work will not be limited to the Archdiocese of Wellington, and their presence amongst us will be a great blessing for the country."

We then went on to discuss other aspects of the matter, and finally it was agreed that as soon as I was in a position to report first-hand to you on the proposal, I would do so, and that if necessary Bishop Liston, himself, would support my request and do all in his power to give it reality.

I spent yesterday with the couple concerned, and walked over most of the land. The property faces the local railway station of Kopua, about 130 miles from Wellington, and on the line from Wellington to Napier. The countryside is called the Takapau Plain, which is almost in the centre of our wealthiest sheep country called Hawkes Bay. This particular land is on a tableland of an average height of about 1700 feet above sea level. In the summertime it is warm and dry, and in the winter dry and cold, but rarely so cold as to experience a frost. This particular land is limestone country and built-up river silt. The 1600-acre block, of which this is a portion, is regarded as being some of the best land in the whole of Hawkes Bay province. A river flows through it, the Manawatu, whose source is just a few miles away. Mr. Prescott told me that in the recent drought

of 9 months, he was able to carry all of his stock and he did not have to get rid of any for store purposes. I do not know how much he takes off it each year, but he told me that his wool cheque alone for this past season was £4,000.

Across the river there is a gentle slope, more or less hemispherical. To me it would seem an ideal site for a monastery. The whole place is as quiet as if it was a mountain-top and yet, within a few hundred yards, there is a railway line and good roads link up the property with the main road about three miles away.

So much for the property. My idea is, provided you accept, that with the 50-acre block you could make a beginning. It is not for me to say how you would start, but in my dream I would see not only the monastery, but also a Catholic agricultural college attached to it, and also a retreat house. The priest who is advising the Prescotts was inclined to think that you would not be anxious to take land of such good quality, but against that I hold that you should, for whereas in Ireland you would have the charity of people of great faith, here though our people are generous, you would be better founded if you had land that would be immediately productive.

I do not know if there is anything else I can say at this moment except this, that I hope you will give the most urgent consideration to my request, and may God and Our Lady bring it to pass that in this young land we shall have the privilege of seeing your Monks established amongst us. We are a young land, a new land, and whilst our people come from the old countries, we have not here that background of tradition and faith, and our environment is such, our members comparatively few, that we could doubt if we would ever be able to produce the treasures of faith that are part and parcel of the life in Ireland. It is my dream and hope that you will come amongst us and that your coming will give that colour to the texture

of our faith that we long for, but sometimes seemingly almost in vain.

I leave the matter now in your hands, but before closing I entreat you to reply as soon as possible, by airmail, (not by cable) giving me some indication of your mind, even if much will have to be done before we can arrive at finality. I confide the project to Almighty God and to the patronage of Our Lady, and I hope that as St. Joseph found a home for Her and Our Divine Lord once, so also the prayers of your Patron will lead you to establish a sanctuary to the glory of the Son and in honour of the Mother in this land of the Southern Cross.

With all good wishes, I am,

Yours sincerely,

+ Peter T.B. McKeefry

Coadjutor-Archbishop of Wellington.

P.S. I forgot to mention that the whole matter is being held under the strictest confidence and only Bishop Liston, the Prescotts and their parish priest know anything about it. There are many excellent reasons why confidence must be kept, and I should be glad if you preserve this confidence until some finality has been reached between us. For your own information I should add that though only Coadjutor Archbishop, I am empowered to handle any matter of this nature.