

Suzanne Aubert

1835 – 1926

Sister Mary Joseph, often known as Mother Aubert, was a trail blazer in New Zealand, devoting her life to looking after our sick and poor at a time when social services didn't exist.

Her funeral at St Mary of the Angels in Boulcott Street on October 5, 1926, is probably still the largest held for a woman in New Zealand, with thousands of mourners lining the streets – even standing on rooftops – to watch the hearse travel to Karori cemetery.

Mother Aubert battled the establishment throughout her life, but in 2010 was nominated for sainthood; the request is being considered by the Vatican.

Her purpose-built crèche, designed by John Sydney Swan in 1914 (and now relocated at Pukeahu National War Memorial Park), is the oldest remaining purpose-built crèche in New Zealand.

Suzanne Aubert was born in France in 1835 and nursed in the Crimean War. Shortly after, refusing to accept an arranged marriage, she sailed to New Zealand in 1860 to work as a missionary, having taught herself te reo Māori on the ship.

She began working with young Māori women in Auckland, then joined the Marist Māori mission station at in Hawke's Bay. In 1883 she moved to Jerusalem, on the Whanganui River, to revive the Catholic Mission, and – with her fellow sisters – taught, nursed, farmed, grew fruit and raised homeless children. Their charity work became widely known throughout the country. The costs were funded by patent medicines Mother Aubert made, largely from native plants.

Mother Aubert was acutely aware of the problems of unmarried mothers and the misery of life in urban slums, and soon realised Jerusalem was too isolated for the medical services needed for high-need patients.

In 1899 she moved to Wellington with two other sisters of her new religious order, the Sisters of Compassion. They opened a hospice in 1900 and established a soup kitchen in 1901 (which still operates in Tory Street). Then in 1903 the nuns opened a crèche in Buckle Street for the children of working parents living around Te Aro. In 1907 the nuns opened Our Lady's Home of Compassion in Island Bay, caring for orphans, handicapped children and terminally ill women.

Mother Aubert pushed a wicker handcart through the streets to collect food and donations for the poor, and organised charity drives and working bees to ensure her institutions were debt-free. She walked everywhere to save money, until in her 80s she began travelling by the cheapest form of transport, trams.

Twenty five years after her death, Suzanne Aubert's remains were reinterred at the Home of Compassion she built in Island Bay.