

REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF ARCHBISHOP PETERO MATAKA

By Alan Gibson cm

Nearly two weeks ago on Tuesday 1st July I heard the sad news that Archbishop Petero Mataca had passed away the previous day.

Archbishop Mataca was born on St John's Cawaci, Ovalau, Fiji Islands. He came from a family of 8 siblings. He is survived by Sr Akeneta, a Sister of our Lady of Nazareth (SOLN) who currently resides at their retirement home at Wailoku. He went to school at St John's Cawaci. Later on he went to New Zealand and commenced his studies at Holy Cross College, Mosgiel. This was the beginning of a long association and friendship with our Congregation. His studies for the priesthood were completed in Rome.

He was the first local diocesan priest to be ordained for Fiji. He began the parish Raiwaqa, a parish just a few miles out of Suva's city centre. He later became the first local bishop when appointed as auxiliary Bishop in 1974 and then ultimately became the first local Archbishop for the Archdiocese of Suva in 1976.

I first officially met Archbishop Mataca when I began my ministry in 1999. I was Acting Parish Priest of Nausori at the time and I wanted to see him as I was keen to commence training for both readers and Eucharistic ministers for the people in the parish and have them receive these ministries. It was the first of a number of visits to his office during my twelve years there. My experience was always that he was approachable and I was always received with great courtesy. He also came out to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation during my two year term as Parish Priest of Natovi in 2000-2001. It was apparent that he enjoyed the company of other priests as well the people of the parishes. He seldom missed our annual Vincentian Feast day celebration at Wailoku.

I also had the opportunity to serve with him on the Seminary Senate for two separate terms for four years. He was Chairperson for all of that time. He carried out this role with great commitment and integrity and not without challenge. Over the past few days I have had the opportunity to speak with Alan Finn who served with him for many years on the Council of Priests. They were both born in the same year and Alan spoke about he enjoyed working with the Archbishop and also more particularly his friendship.

His vision for the Church of Fiji was that it become fully localized. He strongly encouraged vocations. As result most of the parishes in Fiji today now have their own priests in charge of them. In addition he also established the Catechist Training Centre at Naivesi. He was also very strong on providing every opportunity for his people to receive an education by establishing 6 schools on Viti Levu.

On entering the Archbishop's office in Suva one could not fail to notice a photo of an Oceania Bishops Synod meeting in Rome. The story is told of an Archbishop's refusal to

purchase a Black Cassock for a one off meeting despite several promptings from colleagues and Curia officials. The Archbishop tells of an enquiry from a visitor to his office. "Who is that other guy with you dressed in white?" This too says something about our late departed bishop and friend.

I went to see Archbishop Mataka just a few days before I left Fiji in December 2011 to say goodbye and to thank him for his support during my time of ministry over there. He had handed in his resignation to Rome before that. I knew that one of his hopes upon retirement was that he would be able to return to his family village in the Yasawas and be able to do some fishing. When I mentioned this and expressed my hope that his wishes would be fulfilled he simply replied "yes I am praying for that."

He finally was able to retire in December 2012. Unfortunately illness intervened soon after that which meant that for medical reasons he was unable to leave Suva from that time until his death.

His funeral took place on Friday July 11th at 10am at Sacred Heart Cathedral. He will be remembered as a man who did much for the Church of Fiji and who was close to his priests as well as the people.