

Chapter 9

My History: My Calling

Alaima Talu

I was born a Protestant on my home island, Nanumea, in Tuvalu, on 7 August 1948. I attended school in Tarawa, Kiribati, from January 1963-1968. On 12 January 1980, I made my final vows as a Catholic Nun in the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, in the Cathedral, Tarawa, Kiribati. In taking this step, I had chosen to serve as a Catholic missionary and Kiribati to be my home.

Mission History

Kiribati and Tuvalu were evangelised by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the mid- and late-19th century. Reverend Hiram Bingham and a handful of Hawaiian missionaries arrived on Abaiang on 17 November 1857 and from there evangelised the northern islands as far south as central Kiribati.¹ In the 1870s Protestantism was brought to Tuvalu and the southern islands of Kiribati by the London Missionary Society through Samoan pastors. Catholicism was brought to Nonouti, in Kiribati, first by Betero Terawati and Tiroi in 1881. They had gone to work on the coconut plantations in Tahiti during the labour trade era and had embraced Catholicism. On returning to their home island of Nonouti in 1881, they sent a request to Rome for priests. In response, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, priests and brothers arrived in May 1888 and the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in August 1895.²

Tuvalu and Kiribati became a British Protectorate in 1893. From 1916 until 1975, they formed the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, when they separated to prepare for independence.³ The Ellice Islands became independent on 1 October 1978 and took the name Tuvalu which literally means 'a line of eight' and the Gilberts changed to Kiribati, the local version of Gilberts, on 12 July 1979.

Tarawa with its good anchorage was the main island in the colony and the centre of colonial administration and commerce. On each island there was a Magistrate who presided over both the island and lands courts. He was assisted by four other men, three *Kaubure* (Councillors) and a Secretary. All were elected

by the people and had to be approved by the Resident Commissioner, with the help of the District Officers for each section.

Nanumea is the northernmost island in the Tuvalu group and, therefore, the closest to the southern islands of Kiribati. In the 1960s, the LMS had one secondary school for boys in the Ellice Islands on the island of Vaitupu. It had two secondary schools—Rongorongo on Beru in the Southern Kiribati, Morikao on Abaiang to the north of Tarawa—and a Theological College at Tangintebu on South Tarawa. The Catholic Church had two secondary schools, St Joseph's College, Tabwiroa, Abaiang for boys and Immaculate Heart College, North Tarawa, for girls. Both churches had been engaged in primary education since the arrival of their early missionaries. By the 1960s, the LMS in Kiribati handed over its primary schools to the colonial government. The Catholics continued with primary education until just prior to independence in 1976. The Seventh Day Adventist also ran one secondary school, established in 1949, and one primary school on Kauma, Abemama, in central Kiribati. The colonial government secondary schools for both boys and girls were located in Bikenibeu in South Tarawa.

Family Background

The LMS school in Nanumea which I attended was run by a Samoan pastor, Enoka Alesana and his wife, Usoali'i. The other teachers were Taulu Teuo, who had been a leper on Makogai in Fiji, and Tafaoata Pulusi, one of the few who were educated in Papauta, Samoa, as well as a few young women and men who had completed their studies under the pastor himself. Classes were from Standards 1-6 and the subjects were: Bible Study, English, Arithmetic, Social Studies and Hygiene.

My father was the eldest in a family of eight: four boys and four girls. Of the boys, one died in his teens and the other in an accident in Suva. My mother was the youngest in a family of four. There were three girls and their only brother was killed on Banaba during the Japanese occupation. My father was the local government warden at the time when he sent me to school. He looked after the government station, prisoners if there were any, and attended the Nanumea council meetings. He also looked after colonial government guests on the island. Before this, he had been a policeman and chief of police on Nanumea, after he and my mother had spent 1949-1956 working on the phosphate mine for the British Phosphate Company on Banaba.

It is amazing how memory stores so much history. As part of keeping Nanumea clean, all the pig-sties were located in one area outside the village. It was here that my father met Viane Tabuanaba, the Kiribati Catholic catechist on Nanumea. Viane must have spent around 12 years as a catechist on Nanumea where he learnt the Nanumean dialect. My father also spoke Kiribati from having

grown up on Nui (one of the islands in Tuvalu where the people speak a mixture of Tuvaluan and Kiribati dialect) and from his years in Banaba. From Viane my father learnt that the Australian and Irish Sisters in Kiribati ran schools and took care of girls in schools. Viane's eldest daughter was in school in Tarawa.

One day in 1962, after evening prayer and meal, I was preparing for bed. My father called, 'Alaima, come here for a minute'. As I sat in front of him, he asked me, 'Do you like school?'

I said, 'Yes, I like school'.

He continued, 'Would you like to go to school in Tarawa?'

I said, 'No, I do not want to go to school there'.

My father went on as if he had not heard me, 'In Catholic schools on Tarawa, the Sisters look after the girls well. Think about it'.

I repeated, 'No, I do not want to go to Tarawa'. I thought that was the end of that and returned to my bed.

I was just settling down to sleep when my mother called me. She was surprised I could go to sleep without giving my father a positive answer. She told me to apologise to him. I told her I had nothing to apologise for as I had not done anything wrong. She said I was disobedient. I got up and went to tell my father that I was sorry. In my mind I was apologising for disagreeing with him, not for what I said. I continued to attend the pastor's school as usual. But to my surprise he took my apology as a 'yes, I would go to school in Tarawa', for one evening my father took me to have classes with Viane in preparation for the school on Tarawa. That was a very dark period in my life. I was sad at the idea of leaving home. Tarawa seemed so far away!

I am the eldest in a family of 11: two girls and nine boys. The boy immediately after me was born deaf and dumb. He spoke a language of his own, and the third child died in infancy. He had been adopted by one of my aunts. She took him from Banaba to Betio where she lived with her Kiribati husband and the fourth one was too small at the time to go to school. Nine years separated my sister and me. She was also adopted by another aunt. Today it is still a mystery to me why my parents sent me to school in Kiribati. At that time, I could not bring myself to ask them, nor did it occur to me to ask. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that I was given to my grandparents when I was about 14 months old and returned to my parents when I was eight. I learned this story in 1994 from my father. They left me with my grandparents when my parents were employed in the phosphate mine in Banaba. My mother said, 'Your grandparents wanted us to leave you behind with them'. That was why I could relate to my grandparents better. For this reason I could ask my grandparents anything since I grew up with them. However, it did not stop my feeling of being unloved. I always felt I was being passed around like a parcel—as if I was an object. This created a

kind of resentment within me. It is a burden I have carried during my religious life. I generally react strongly to anyone who tries to make decisions for me. It is also one of the reasons why I have not been open to share the 'real me'. When I first wrote my story, I gave it to one of the Sisters to read. At the end of the first draft she commented: 'There is no soul in your story'. I was avoiding having to deal with the hurts I have buried for many years.

My father probably envisaged I might be an asset to the family by earning an income. Since I was the eldest, I could help with the education of my young siblings. I can only speculate. I never plucked up enough courage to discuss this issue with my parents. Thus the insatiable quest for the unknown has remained in my heart. This has caused me much pain over the years. In retrospect, it shows how important it is to have good communication skills. This has perhaps been the most regrettable part of my life since the event has left a deep void within me. It has worsened over the years because, with my parents' passing, I cannot know for certain what was in their hearts for me.

However, those were difficult days for me and only the close members of my family knew I was being prepared to go to school. I was not even sure if the pastor knew about it. The pastor knew my grandfather very well. My paternal grandparents lived on the islet of Lakena. For years my grandfather was the caretaker for the pastor when he visited the islet for the Sunday services. My grandfather also beat the *lali* for Sunday services, as well as for the daily evening prayers.

My father knew how I loved my grandparents and it seems he exploited this too. He went to fetch them to live with us. When I appealed to my grandmother to help me get my father to change his mind about sending me to school in Tarawa, my grandmother said: 'It would be alright if we could live together and die together; but since we're getting old, we will die soon. We would have to leave you behind anyway, so it is better for you to go to school'. I knew then that I was going and there would be no turning back. While these were indeed visionary words, I did not appreciate it then. For I was only a child and I thought like a child. Again, communication failed. Nothing was said to comfort me or to make my journey more bearable and meaningful.

For the purpose of finding meaning in my life, I have chosen to look at this topic. I read somewhere that life is encyclical and not linear. In order to become complete or whole, one has to take into account one's past or learn from one's history and experiences. Some have even gone as far as stating that 'history is therapeutic'. And it is this that I hope to gain from writing my story. It would be impossible to do justice to all that could be remembered, so what I have written is but a slice of that short period of time.

Looking through the list of autobiographies in the library for directions in writing my own story, I was hesitant. I felt insignificant and feared that my

story might not be interesting enough. In fact, it was the titles of the books that determined my choice. I like Sidney Poitier from his films and Mahatma Gandhi from history. Now having read their stories I found that threads of their experiences resonate with my own.

In his *Memoir* (2000), Poitier's preoccupation was to write about 'life itself'.⁴ He had dealt with his Hollywood life in his first book. Now at 70 he had the compelling desire to put into writing how he had lived all those years. He explored his childhood memories on Cat Island and the values he had acquired at that formative period from his family and environment. For instance, failure in tomato farming caused his family to move from Cat Island in the Bahamas to the capital city of Nassau. At the age of 15, Poitier again left for Miami, Florida and then New York to follow his dream. His dream was to get into the film industry. Again in the evening of life, he wished to take stock by closely examining how he had fared in living up to the values he had set for himself especially in the areas of 'integrity' and 'commitment', 'faith' and 'forgiveness', 'simplicity' and 'joy'. I can identify with Poitier's growing up in an island environment. He left home to follow his dream. I had to leave home to follow the dream of my parents and in doing so I had unexpectedly found my own. As he grew he took stock of how he had lived up to his values. Now at this time in my life I am looking back to assess where I have been and what I have done in order to deepen my understanding of the call I have received and readily embraced.

The second autobiography that caught my attention was Gandhi's.⁵ He wanted it to be called *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927). Since India was still under the British at the time, Gandhi did his law studies in England and then worked in South Africa before returning to India. He was encouraged by his friends to write his story but Gandhi's primary aim was to tell the story of his many experiments with truth. From his spiritual path he gained the strength to carry out his work in the political arena. Like great men and women in the history of humankind who had lived life to the full through service of others, Gandhi did not credit these experiments to himself only. For this reason he hoped that all who read his story would find something useful for their own life's journeys.

He echoed St Paul, that great apostle to the Gentiles, in his striving to capture Christ. All aspects of his life—speech, writing, 'non-violence', 'celibacy' and other forms of conduct—were aimed at 'self-realisation' or winning salvation. Gandhi's deep reverence of God made him realise his own unworthiness. To Gandhi the chief principle is truth which involves truthfulness in words and thought. Like Poitier, Gandhi was aware of the vulnerability of the human condition. Just as Gandhi left India to complete his studies in London, so I went to study in Kiribati when the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were a British colony

and stayed to work there. Like Gandhi who experimented with truth, so I am carrying out research, to search for truth, my truth. As Gandhi strove to win salvation through the practice of non-violence, celibacy and other forms of good conduct, so I value celibacy and other forms of good conduct because I have faith in God and I believe there is an after-life.

Beloved Infidel (1959), is the autobiography of Sheila Graham (Lily Sheil),⁶ who came from the slums of East London. Raised in an orphanage, at 14 she had to go home to care for her mother who was suffering from cancer. Lily had an ambition to be wealthy and well connected. To every man who showed interest in her she told a made-up story about her family background. She could not retract the family she had made up for herself, even the phony photos on the wall. She married a man 20 years older than herself and enlisted as a show girl. Young and beautiful, she was pursued by many men from high society. The couple's financial difficulties led to Lily's departure for Hollywood to try her luck as a newspaper writer. There she met F. Scott Fitzgerald whom she grew to love deeply. He became the only one who knew about her and her pretences. They were not able to marry since Fitzgerald's 'wife was in an institution and [he had] a daughter who still needed him'. Among the many things Lily learnt from Fitzgerald was 'an appreciation of literature'. It was he who encouraged her to write her own story and after his death she did.

Lily was so grief-stricken after Fitzgerald's sudden death that she returned to England. At the time she co-authored her own autobiography with George Frank, she was married with two grown-up children. Her fear of public opinion had prevented her from writing her story earlier; and then there had been her children to consider. Gradually as her children grew up, she found the courage to tell them the truth about her background. Fitzgerald's struggle with his dark side, his drinking, which he conquered towards the end of his life, gave Lily the courage to write her story. I can say I share Lily's fear of public opinion. In this seemingly promiscuous character, Lily, with her outrageous lies about her background, feared being found out. I feared sharing my desire to become a Catholic and further a nun because of my Protestant background. I feared my parents and public opinion because in those days there was much bigotry among the members of these two churches.

The Autobiography of Mother Jones (1980) is the story of a brave and courageous woman of action, fired with zeal to champion the cause of miners.⁷ Mary Harris Jones was of Irish origin and a teacher and dressmaker by trade. She lost her husband and son in the yellow fever plague of 1867 in New York. Her memoirs tell of her trade union activities. She lived in Chicago but her work took her all round the United States and West Indies. She supported various efforts to build labour solidarity among railroad workers and miners. She worked for the abolition of child labour, especially for miners' daughters who were

employed in the mill for 10 hours every day. She gave talks and supported miners' strikes for better wages and to cut down daily working hours to eight. She wrote her story at the request of friends when she was a very old woman. These same friends who knew her from her work helped put the events in chronological order. But her personal story was very much bound up with the national history of trade unions in the United States from 1868-1924. She made history and her story is an inspiration. I admire this brave woman. I found in her story a woman who was totally selfless. I share in the element of being for others through a particular and unique way of life, the religious life. Through my vow of chastity I have given up the power of having a family of my own so that I may be totally available for the mission of the Congregation within the Catholic Church; through Obedience the power to direct my own life, and through Poverty I own nothing and have to ask for what I need.

Kanaka Boy (1985) is an autobiography by Sir Frederick Osefilo, published by the Institute of Pacific Studies, Suva, and the University of the South Pacific Centre, Honiara, the Solomon Islands.⁸ Beginning with the author's childhood, the story moved from school, to World War II in the Solomons, his work in the colonial service and Independence, ending with his discovery of faith. I enjoyed reading about Osefilo's culture, which was very different from my own.

I found it fascinating to see how these five people in their autobiographies were so engrossed with life. Their stories made me question myself. Did I make conscious choices in my life or did I just float with the tide? I like the way Sidney Poitier reflected on his life as a little boy on Cat Island; he had all the time in the world to explore, to think his own thoughts and to observe his family, the people around him and his environment. To him this was the very 'first part of his education'. Here on Cat Island and Nassau where he learned his values, the very values that steadied his course in the excitement and storms of life and against the adverse racial winds of the United States. Even in religious life, one cannot escape racial discrimination. Living very closely together sometimes the very diversity of backgrounds can become a huge cross. I share these authors' search for truth. I admire their humility and courage in facing their truth.

While Poitier, Gandhi and Osefilo were decisive from the outset, Lily was fearful at first. Being able to share her truth with Fitzgerald liberated her from her fears of being found out. On the other hand Fitzgerald, though he was well known and had no reason to hide his family background, had a dark side that not everyone knew. This was his drinking—his 'demon'. From this Lily learnt that her pretences, her made-up family background and false family photos were her 'demons'. Just as Fitzgerald conquered his drinking for her friendship, so did she write her story for him. By contrast we have in Mother Jones, who reached 100, someone who always lived her truth in fighting the cause of the

downtrodden. She was the picture of total availability and selflessness in the service of others.

In writing my story, I speculated a great deal on why my parents and grandparents sent me to school. For me this question is basic. I can remember thinking that my grandparents could get me out of it, but that did not happen. It seemed to me I was being 'ganged-up' against. Today, in retrospect, I can say that they must have wanted me to make a 'better life', one that would be different from their own. Having come from a Protestant island where church services and prayer times were regulated and very much part of the fabric of daily existence, I chose another religious life when the time came for me to decide.

1963-1968 Te Po o Tefolaha — Departure Day!

I left Nanumea on 8 January 1963, *Te Po o Tefolaha* (the day of Tefolaha). Tefolaha was the ancestor the Nanumeans regarded as the founder of the island. This great Tongan warrior drove out two women, Pai and Vau, who were the first settlers on Nanumea. Tefolaha is believed to have left behind three sons to whom all the inhabitants of Nanumea trace their descent. The church term for *Te Po o Tefolaha* is Asopati. This day is commemorated every year because it was the day Nanumea embraced Christianity brought by the London Missionary Society through the Samoan pastors. It is celebrated on 7-8 January. In significance it equals Christmas Day and New Year. The people assemble in the *ahiga* (public hall), feasting and having games and, in the evening, dancing and contributing money throughout the night. The church welcomes those who wish to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in a special service held every month after the usual Sunday service. Looking back I cannot remember what happened on these big days of that last year of 1962. I remember deciding to dance (local dancing) the night out; it is the decision that I can remember, but whether I actually did dance or not, I cannot. Towards the morning, I remember going home to sleep hoping to miss the *Santa Teresa*, the Catholic Mission ship, from the Gilberts. Our house was full, there were people coming and going all the time. I was woken to get ready for the ship. Departure time had come and I was too sad even to think. How I wished I did not have to leave behind those I loved. Since it was my first time to leave home, I was heartbroken; and going to Kiribati was like going to the end of the earth! I was crying, my mother was crying and my grandmother was crying. Though there were others there, I do not remember the faces even of those who kissed me goodbye. My father took me to the ship on his canoe with three other men. I did not shed a tear when I said goodbye to my father. I held him responsible for my going away so I had no tear for him. He had explained that no one would accompany me to Tarawa because Viane had arranged that his two brothers on the ship, one the captain, the other a crew member, would look after his three children—his eldest daughter Teraaniti, Ioane, Teresa—and myself.

The Trip to Tarawa

The trip to Tarawa took a whole week. We arrived on Beru on our third day at sea. I was as sick as a dog. I vomited all the way there. We went ashore and were welcomed by a number of families. I took for granted that they were Viane's relatives because Beru was his home island. We were back on the boat before dark and arrived at Tabiteuea where the ship stayed for two days. We were taken to Buota village by a woman whose husband was away in Nauru. On Tabiteuea, I noticed that young girls of my age were going round with grass skirts only. Our caretaker wore the same grass skirt and *tibuta* every day. Because there were four of us the woman came with us to sleep in the *maneaba*. It seemed other people sleeping there all the time. We used mosquito nets because the mosquitoes were bad. The woman was very kind: she made us new clothes. I realised then that people were wearing grass skirts not because of lack of clothing or money, but because that was the ordinary daily wear.

Before boarding the ship Ioane, Viane's son, and I were standing outside the church in Tanaeang, the Catholic centre on Tabiteuea North. He was trying to show me the church. It was made of thick cement walls with its white paint wearing off. While looking at the sanctuary, a Sister entered and she seemed to be fixing something around the altar and then disappeared to the back. Ioane said, 'See that's what the Sisters do. They pray every day and look after the church'. I did not have anything to say.

Nonouti was our next stop. Here the Sisters were on the beach to meet the new arrivals. Taneaniti could not make me approach the Sisters to say hello. I walked in the other direction. They were dressed in white long dresses that reached to their ankles, with long sleeves, and veils which seemed like hats showing only their eyes to their chins. Their ears were well hidden away. Here, too, in Nonouti I attended my first Mass. The Sisters ran a primary school in the Catholic station and had girl boarders with them. These girls took good care of us. We only spent a day here. By evening we were back on the ship and left for Abemama. We went ashore at Manoku only for the day. It was a relief to be able to go ashore because I was so sick on the ship. Though the ship spent the night in Abemama, the four of us had to return to the ship for the night by order of the Captain. The last stop was Kuria. Viane had another brother living there with his family. They were very kind to us. We finally reached Tarawa on 16 January. We stayed in the Captain's home in Teoraereke, the headquarters of the Catholic Mission.

First School

When school started, I went in as a boarder and was put in Standard 4. There were quite a number of Sisters in Teoraereke, but Sister Ursula Begley, Irish, and Sister Callistus Flynn, an Australian, were the only two involved with the

school. Boarders came from other villages on Tarawa and from the outer islands. The day students were from Teoraereke village. Classes were Standards 1-4 and three classes in the Infants' Section. In Standard 4 the girls sat the entrance exams at the end of the year to Immaculate Heart College, Taborio, and the boys to St Joseph's College, Tabwiroa, Abaiang and the government secondary schools: Elaine Bernacchi School for girls and King George V for boys, both in Bikenibeu. I found the girls very kind, and we communicated in English as I could not speak a word of Kiribati. The radio had just arrived and every Sunday afternoon Sister Callistus sent for me to listen to the news in the Ellice language. I would be the only one in the parlour because the other three Ellice Island girls could speak Kiribati and they joined the others for the news in the Gilbertese language. One day we were called to see the first bus on Tarawa. The causeway between Nanikai and Teoraereke had just been completed and the bus was on its first trip up to Bikenibeu. It was a big truck that had been furnished with long seats painted white, and had support posts along the sides to hold up the top as shelter from the sun and rain. I was still in Teoraereke when I received my first letter from my parents. I took my letter and went off on my own to sit under the trees. To this day I do not remember what I read in that letter, but I was crying my eyes out. The Sisters came to hear of it and sent for me.

'Did you receive any bad news?' Sister asked.

I replied, 'No Sister'.

Sitting down with me she said, 'If there is no bad news, why so much tears?'

I said, 'I am just sad and very homesick, Sister. This is my first letter from my parents'. She spent some time talking to me and then called one of the big girls and sent me off with her.

The Nuns and *Te Buaka*

Because Teoraereke was the headquarters of the Catholic Mission, there were many comings and goings during that first term. Sisters and priests from the outer islands came in on business and then disappeared back to their stations. Sister Ursula had to leave to take up responsibilities of the school in Marakei because Sister Dennis O'Shea was going on leave and Sister Ursula was replaced by Sister John Bosco Donnelly from Immaculate Heart, Taborio. One day Sister Oliva Glynn visited from Taborio. The girls were all calling her 'Mother'. To me she looked ancient and forbidding. When I finally got close enough to hear her talk she talked in a quiet way and did not waste words but she had the most beautiful smile. What I remember most about my term in Teoraereke was the salt fish I had to eat, the long singing practice and the kind Sisters and girls. Every Saturday we went to the movie in the school field.

'What is the movie tonight?' I asked my friends.

They answered in the Kiribati language, *te buaka*.

I was thrilled because *te puaka* in my language is a pig. I went off to the movie eager to see a pig or pigs. Sitting there with my eyes glued on the screen I saw people being shot dead or people shooting at each other and killing going on non-stop. I closed my eyes because I could not stomach watching people being killed in the film. Crossly, I asked my friends, 'Where is *te puaka*?

They said, 'Open your eyes and see—what is going on'.

So it dawned on me then that *te buaka* meant war. During Holy Week Sister Christine Clark took me shopping with her since I was a non-Catholic and Holy Thursday and Good Friday did not mean much to me. We travelled on the Mission launch from Teoraereke to Betio. I found Betio hot and we had to walk from place to place as there were hardly any cars. After Easter I was told to get my things ready to leave for Taborio. The Sisters said to me, 'Taborio is better for you. There are more Ellice girls there and the girls speak English in school. You do not need to learn Kiribati'.

I travelled with Sister John Bosco who was going back to Taborio for a week's holiday.

Immaculate Heart College, Taborio

That was where I was going when I left home. Taborio is situated on three and a half hectares of land surrounded by sea on all sides or reef-mud at low tide except where it is joined onto Nootou village on its southern end. It was a girls' school of just over a hundred boarders, and conducted by the Sisters of the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. There was nothing spectacular about the place except for its timetable. Girls spoke English at all times except for one hour after afternoon work. When I arrived in Taborio there were Forms 1-4 but in the following year Form 4 was phased out and the Colonial Form 3 examination was introduced. This examination was taken by Form 3 in the five secondary schools in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. The subjects included: English, Arithmetic, History, Geography and Health Science. The girls also learnt needlework, typing, singing, music (musical instruments, recorders, mouth organ and others). A primary section was attached to the school with just three Classes 2, 3 and 4 for limited numbers only. The primary section was phased out in 1965, the year I left. Drama and figure-marching were very much part of Taborio in those days: drama for the College's prize-giving at the end of the year and figure-marching for its annual sports day in early August. Extracurricular activities in a school depended on the talents and generosity of staff. There were only four Sisters, and didn't they work hard!

The girls in Taborio came from all over the Colony, the majority from the Catholic islands of Butaritari, Abaiang, Tabiteuea and Tarawa. The Ellice girls

were mostly daughters of government workers from South Tarawa or those whose parents were working on the phosphate mines on Ocean Island and Nauru.

The day began with a 'call', a prayer and then Mass. Charges were followed by breakfast and then school. After lunch, there was a break of an hour and then study and the afternoon lesson. There was work followed by drama and music. After charges were the evening meal, prayer, study and bed. The lights went out at 9.30. The weekend programme was slightly different. Saturday morning was general cleaning, and the midday meal was held outside in the open as the dining room was still wet after the scrub. There was personal washing and sports. The school's four teams competed against each other: Fatima, Lourdes, Carmel and Issoudun. The games were basketball, volleyball, tennis, other ball games, and races. The afternoon charges were usually weeding and watering the gardens, serving the meals, and getting firewood from the bush. After the evening meal were prayers and the movie. The movie was the highlight of the week. For this reason the girls tried to speak English because one would get bad marks for speaking Kiribati. With more than three bad marks one would stay in the classroom to do homework while the rest enjoyed the movie. The Sunday programme was more relaxed. After Mass at nine in the morning was singing with Father Hirsch, a French MSC, the parish priest for North Tarawa and the College, who taught us hymns. After lunch there were sports for those interested, reading for the bookworms and letter-writing to parents and penfriends.

Conversion – First Signs

In the school there was what we called an 'Honour Roll'. Each girl received ten points every week. Marks were deducted for not speaking English, arriving late for or disturbing study. Good marks were awarded for extra efforts at speaking English, being helpful and generous around the place. This was done every Friday evening at a meeting with the principal. The girl with the highest points on the Honour Roll was crowned Our Lady at her feast on 31 May. She received the prize for conduct at the end of the year. Also every year, a visiting priest gave us a weekend retreat.

The Sisters usually put out many religious books for us to read during the retreat. For the first time I encountered the riches of the Catholic Church in the lives of these young girl martyrs. I enjoyed reading their lives, especially that of St Barbara, whose father secluded her in a tower. Barbara studied and prayed and was rewarded with the gift of faith. Secretly she received baptism from a Catholic priest. When her father learnt of it he was indignant and had her handed over to the magistrate for torture and execution.⁹ St Cecilia had consecrated her life to God before she was given to Valerian in marriage. Through prayers she won her husband over to God; and because of this she was thrown into a fire that did not burn her and in the end her head was cut off.¹⁰ St Agnes refused an offer of marriage and was subjected to ill-treatment until she was put to the

sword.¹¹ St Philomena, because of a vow she had made to belong to God alone refused the marriage proposal of a prince from another area in Italy. Her father disowned her and she was tortured to death.¹² These are but a few of the many martyrs whose lives I read. I admired their courage, their love of God and the manifestation of their faith. It was from these courageous young women that I received the inspiration to go against my parents in my 'fight' to become a Catholic. It was at this time, too, that I began to think about religious life. I was not yet a Catholic and I also knew the problems I would have to face. In one of his talks during the retreat, Father Rinn, MSC, was trying to explain the parable of the wedding feast where the bridegroom found one of his guests not dressed in a wedding garment.¹³ Father kept repeating, 'No one can do it for you; you have to do it yourself'. The message for me then was the way to heaven is not automatic. I had to respond to God's grace in working out my own salvation.

The life of the 'Little Flower', St Therese of Lisieux truly inspired me to give my life to God.¹⁴ That was when I heard the call to religious life, but because I was not a Catholic I felt silly in sharing this with anybody. Also I feared my parents. St Therese's little way of doing everything, small things for love of God, touched me deeply. This was something I could do, so I thought to myself. My mother's words rang in my ears: 'You are going to school and not to become a Catholic'. During religion class, Sister was reading to us a passage from the Gospel: '... what would profit a man if he gains the whole world and suffers the loss of his soul?'¹⁵ This further confirmed for me that I had to follow my call. In trying to help me decide about a career, this Sister advised me that I would go further and obtain a higher salary if I worked for the government. After hearing that passage from the Gospel, I could not. I had already decided in my heart to stay in the Catholic Church. I had good friends in school who taught me to say certain prayers besides praying with me. I found the principal very approachable, firm but caring and interested in every student. She was an excellent teacher.

Changes in the Church

The 1960s saw a number of changes in the Catholic Church in Kiribati. When I first arrived, the Mass was still said in Latin. With the death of Pope John XXIII and his successor, Paul VI, there followed a number of visible changes. The Mass was translated into English and the Kiribati languages and the priests started to say it in the vernacular. The Sisters' habits also became simplified. We began to learn the hymns normally sung in Latin in the vernacular. This was Father Hirsch's domain. He was very musical and fluent in the Kiribati language. He was a kindly person who was patient with us during choir practice.

I settled down in Taborio and began to enjoy school life. In August 1963 my father signed up for indenture on the phosphate mine on Nauru. In the few talks

we had before I left, my father had said, 'Alaima, when you have gone to school in Tarawa, I shall leave this job in the same year for Nauru. What I earn here is just enough for us here; but not enough for you in school and us here as well'. My father kept his word and I was not in any kind of need in school. I did very well in school and chose not to continue to do Forms 4 and 5 at the government secondary school in Bikenibeu. Instead, I went to the Tarawa Teachers' College (TTC). When I was accepted, I had to make up my mind whether I would teach for the Catholic Mission or for the government. I decided to teach for the Catholic Mission.

Tarawa Teachers' College

I found the Teachers' College challenging in many ways. Our group was made up of students from Taborio, Tabwiroa, King George V and Elaine Bernacchi and Hiram Bingham, Rongorongo, Beru. Since we were admitted from Form 3, ours was a three-year course. Those students who were admitted from Form 5 and those who had been abroad on scholarships in New Zealand or Australia followed a two year course and therefore joined whatever group was in their second year at the time of their entrance. We entered in 1966, the year after the main building was completed and opened. Members of staff were mostly English and two locals for the vernacular, the Kiribati and Tuvalu languages. In all, there were 60 students: 30 boys and 30 girls. In TTC I kept company with the Taborio girls and continued to attend Mass and religious instruction for Catholic students. Gradually I began to enjoy life and made new friends. I still wanted to become a religious.

In the Christmas holidays of 1966, the *Santa Teresa* went to Nauru, and Takenrerei Taukoriri, Bwebwenteiti Tebwebwe, Ioanna Ben Kum Kee and I took the trip to visit our parents who worked there. The trip to Banaba took three days and we stopped there for several days before setting off for Nauru. Banaba and Nauru are raised coral islands, and from the ship it appeared we were looking up at them. On Banaba we met some ex-Taborio students who were working as typists for the British Phosphate Company, and as nurses in the hospital. We were also able to catch up with our relations from our home islands. We stayed for Christmas and the New Year in Nauru.

In my second year in TTC, Sister Berness Claxton joined the staff. Her fields were maths and education. We met over a boyfriend I had whom she thought was too old for me and too much of a playboy. She even told him to leave me alone. She became someone I could trust. She was the very first person with whom I shared my desire to be a religious. She listened attentively and offered encouragement every now and then but did not push me. From then on, we began a friendship that lasted till her death in 1990. In my last year at TTC, Air Nauru began flights to Tarawa. My parents invited me over for the Christmas holidays. I was apprehensive about going because I was finishing from TTC and

my parents could keep me in Nauru. Sister Berness advised me to go and see my parents and I must trust God to get me out of Nauru. Consoled by such words, I had my first trip by plane at the end of 1968 after graduation from the Tarawa Teachers' College.

Just as I had feared, my parents wished me to stay and work in Nauru. They had already approached the principal of the location school for a teaching position for me, but my father's boss had advised him not to keep me in Nauru but to let me return to work in Kiribati. My father wanted me to go and see his boss, an Australian, to ask him to let me stay. I told my father that I could not do it. One day my father asked me who was writing to me from Australia and Hong Kong. My little brothers just loved going through my things, my bag and my suitcase and they had shown him my letters. Because the letters were in English he could not really understand the content. I told my father who my correspondent was. He was from Nanumea but at that time was studying abroad. My father expressed his displeasure at the thought of having him as my future husband. He had nothing against him as a person but he preferred I did not marry into that family. To me he was a good friend but there was nothing serious. Then he said, 'You do not have to get married if you do not want to'. I was surprised to hear that from him.

On New Year's celebration some cousins of my father were at our house. In front of my parents one of them said to me: 'You can stay in Kiribati to work for as long as you wish. When you have had enough you come home to Nanumea. We shall choose a husband for you. We will make sure that you settle down well into your new home. If not, we shall take you back'. This I found disturbing for I was not ready to have anyone choose a husband for me but I also knew they could. This confirmed for me that it would be better to become a nun. When they had gone and my parents said no more about the matter, I assumed they agreed with them. One evening the Kiribati catechist on Nauru saw my name in the Catholic *Itoi ni Kiribati* (Catholic quarterly newsletter) among the Catholic teachers for the New Year 1969. In joy he poured out his heart to my father saying how happy he was that I was going to teach for the Catholic Mission even though I was not yet a Catholic. My father listened but was shocked as he was not aware of this. At home he quietly told me to change from the Catholic Mission to the government school. On this note I returned to Tarawa. It was not a pretty scene. In their displeasure my father cried and my mother was furious.

Back in Kiribati, I went to see the Chief Education Officer, Mr Urqhart. I thought he could make the change for me so I would not have to bother the Catholic Education Office. He was the principal of TTC in my first year and he used to give us oral English lessons. In fact he was not pleased with my visit nor the subject I discussed with him. He told me so. I sought the Catholic Director of Education, Sister Mary John Bosco Donnelly and Sister Berness. After much

discussion Sister John Bosco and I went to see Bishop Peter Guichet, MSC. Sister tried to explain my problem with my parents to the Bishop. After listening to Sister, the Bishop simply asked me, 'Do you want to teach for the Mission or for the government?' I replied from my heart, 'For the Mission'. That was the end of our interview. He turned to Sister and stated: 'She stays in the Mission'.

1969-1972 – First Teaching Experience

My first teaching post was Immaculate Heart, Taborio! I was thrilled even though my training was for the primary level. Among the Sisters, four were for the College and the fifth one was for St Dominic's primary school in the village. The principal, Sister Veronica Hollis, taught me in my last year as well as the principal when I was in school. Among the other three Sisters was Sister Mary Gormley who had also taught me. I really enjoyed my three years in Taborio. I enjoyed working with the Sisters as well as the students. In mid 1971 we said goodbye to Sister Veronica and Sister Nora Hanrahan who had won scholarships to study in Nova Scotia. Also at this time we had the sad tragic loss at sea of Sister John Bosco Donnelly and Sister Rita Mary Skinner and the boatmen who were travelling with them.

Conversion to the Catholic Church

In 1970 I asked to be admitted into the Catholic Church. The present Bishop, Paul Mea, MSC, was the parish priest of North Tarawa. He gave me catechism lessons to prepare me for admission into the Catholic Church. That memorable day fell on 22 October 1970 and I was confirmed on the Sunday of that same week. I did not ask my parents but informed them when they again invited me to go over to Nauru for the Christmas holidays. I must have shocked them tremendously because they stopped writing. The following year brought me a letter from my mother. She just wanted me to know she was very disappointed and displeased with what I had done. I wrote back apologising and then told them that what I was doing was not a bad thing and would they please trust me.

Why I Became a Catholic

As a young girl far from home, far from parental guidance, I found the Sisters' teaching substantial, genuine and meaningful. They did not only teach in the classroom but they were personally involved with us outside class. I felt they were interested in my life and nurtured me as best they could. For instance, they made me listen to the radio in my language. When they discovered I felt isolated they sent me to Taborio where there were other Ellice Island girls. All these efforts gave me a sense of belonging and identity. There was a strong tendency within me to identify with what I was learning since the desire for identity and a sense of belonging is strong at that age. I found this identity in

the Sisters and in the lives of those early martyrs I read about during my school days. They say that 'God can write on crooked lines'. It certainly was true in my case. Amidst all my adversities, loneliness and emptiness and the longing to be loved by my parents, somehow I sensed that God was watching over me and drawing me to a call I wanted to embrace. The call had a dual dimension. It was primarily the call to embrace the Catholic faith, and secondly the call to the religious life. These two calls were no small challenge particularly for one with a Protestant background like myself. It meant going against my parents. This brought a lot of unhappiness to me because I knew that my parents strongly disapproved of my 'conversion'. However, like the simple girl that I was with a simple faith, I plucked up courage and took the necessary steps for my own inner peace of mind and heart. I felt my call was a very personal response to God's personal love for me and my desire to follow a way of life that would enable me to serve others, fulfill my aspirations, and enrich my purpose in this life.

The following year I asked to become a nun, a Carmelite. Sister Oliva Glynn kindly informed me that if I wanted to become a Carmelite I should go to Samoa instead of Papua New Guinea. One of the Kiribati Sisters of the local Order, the Sisters of St Teresa, had gone to Papua and New Guinea to join the Carmelites there. She had returned and rejoined the Sisters of St Teresa. Samoa would be better for me. To me at that time Samoa was too far away and I could not imagine it. Then she said, 'Why don't you join us?' I said, 'Oh, no. You work too hard'. She laughed and said, 'But you are doing it'. I did not take long to think about it because in that same year I wrote to Sister Marie Timbs, who was in charge of aspirants in Sydney, to be admitted into the Novitiate. There were two of us, Witake Tawita and myself. We left for Sydney on Easter Monday of 1972.

The Novitiate: 1972-1975

Five of us entered on that same date. Anne Ihlein, Anne Searson and Catherine Howard were Australians, Witake Tawita and myself from Kiribati and Tuvalu. After the feast of the Sacred Heart in June 1972, we were joined by an American girl, Dale Maxwell. All of us had been teaching with the exception of Cathy Howard who had come straight from Year 12. Five Sisters made up the Novitiate staff—the Novice mistress, her assistant, the Music and Sewing mistress, the Sister in the kitchen and the Sister who gave us Theology. There are two parts in the Novitiate, the first one is the postulancy where we were gradually introduced into religious life. We learnt about the Order, its spirit, charism, prayer and lectio-divina and mission. Work consisted of cleaning, laundry, gardening and cooking. Once a week we went to Mater Dei in North Sydney to attend talks on Scriptures, Prayer and the Vows with Postulants and Novices from other Congregations. The Novitiate also invited speakers from other Congregations to give talks especially on Scripture, Theology and Church history.

Since we were to make our vows to live religious life according to the Constitutions of the Order, we had to learn the Constitutions by heart. That was a time of learning about the Congregation and discerning if religious life was for me. On the other hand, the Congregation tested and discerned if I was suitable for religious life.

After six months in the postulancy we were accepted into the Novitiate programme. The first year in the Novitiate is also called the canonical year when the Novice starts on the religious path, as it were. As an external sign we wore a simple religious dress with a veil which we received on our reception day. We studied in some depth the constitutions of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and tried to apply it in our daily lives. It is during the canonical year that a novice is confined to the Novitiate and is not allowed to leave the Novitiate for any length of time. In the Novitiate I used to think that we were always praying and working. Silence was to be observed at all times except at recreation after the evening meal and sometimes in the afternoon when we were out in the garden. Also on big feast days we would be given extra recreation time. This silence does not mean that we could not talk if we had to. There was the monthly retreat on the first Friday of every month as well as the annual eight-day retreat before and after Christmas. Usually when we came off retreat we would go to visit the old people at Harbison Home in Bowral. It did not take long to walk there.

In the three years I was in the Novitiate we used to prepare the place for the Sisters coming in from the missions—from PNG, Kiribati, the Philippines, Port Keats, Thursday Island, and Darwin where they worked as teachers, nurses or social workers. They usually came to Hartzler Park Novitiate to make the eight-day retreat. I used to look forward to seeing those great missionaries at the end of the year. When Hartzler had calmed down and all the retreatants had left we all went to Austinmer in early February on the coast of Woollongong for 10 days' holiday. There we slept, swam, ate, wrote letters and went for long walks. That was our holiday for the year before plunging into the new year's programme. Sometimes the Novice mistress gave us some quiet days to catch up with unfinished homework and to write home. I wrote to my parents every month, trying to share with them as best as I could what I was doing in the Novitiate. I tried to tell them about the application of the vows in my life after the Novitiate. My father wrote to me but not my mother. He did not say much beyond keeping me posted with family news.

The second year of the Novitiate is spent preparing for first profession, when the Novice makes a public profession of the simple vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. So I was in the Novitiate from 9 April 1972 to 12 January 1975, when I made my first profession. Dale left the Novitiate for good at the end of 1973 and Anne Searson in March 1974 due to illness. After she recuperated she

re-entered the Novitiate when it moved to Manila in 1982. Again her sickness returned and she was able to make her vows just before she died in 1984. Sister Anne Ihlein's and Sister Catherine Howard's families came for their profession. For Sister Rotia Tawita and me, some Sisters from Kiribati came. A few days after that memorable day, Sister Rotia and I left for Melbourne by train to catch Air Nauru back to Kiribati.

One setback in the joy of 'coming home' was that the Gilberts and Ellice Islands were separating. I had heard talk of separation before leaving for Australia, but I did not realise it would be so soon. I was glad I was able to see some of my relatives before they left, but the impact of the separation stayed with me. It was something that I thought long and hard about in deciding whether to make final vows. In the Novitiate, the novelty of learning about religious life and the knowledge that I was there only for a short time did not make missing home too bad. I knew if I made final vows I would be going home for holidays only. And then how could I practise my faith in Tuvalu? Around September the *M. V. Nivanga* left the Betio wharf for the Ellice Islands, never to return.

Once in Kiribati the two of us were stationed in Teoraereke, our headquarters. Though we had been professed we were 'the babies' of the Kiribati region and had to be around headquarters at least for our first year in the field. It was my very first year too to teach in primary school and I was given the senior classes—7, 8 and a handful of supposedly Class 9. Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Primary School at the time was a selected school and the teachers were paid by government. Since I had not taught for the government before, my salary was that of a new graduate teacher from the Tarawa Teachers' College. I enjoyed teaching these students as well as my extracurricular duties. I collected the 20c that all the students paid every month for the building of the teachers' houses. Some of the teachers were Mission-trained and had not yet been to the TTC so they were paid by the Church. Their salaries did not amount to much. Whatever funds we raised through extracurricular activities went to the teachers and the construction of houses for them. The school bought a deep-freezer and one of these teachers' wives helped me make ice blocks and sandwiches to sell to students and teachers. Once a year the school raised funds in their teams by selling food they had made. For the Open Day at the end of the school year, the students learnt dancing for the entertainment of their guests and parents. The year went very quickly and after Christmas, New Year and the annual retreat I was assigned to Catholic Junior College, Tabwiroa, Abaiang.

Abaiang is the outer island to the north of Tarawa where I had spent time before. In Tabwiroa there were five Sisters—three Australians, an I-Kiribati and myself. The principal was Sister Veronica Hollis. She had returned from Nova Scotia where she had studied Theology for three years. The other two I also had

worked with in Taborio. I was new to Tabwiroa which is far bigger than Taborio. There were four other I-Kiribati teachers and three VSOs. Tabwiroa at that time was a co-ed and catered for Forms 1-3 with two classes for each form. Those who passed the Form 3 examinations would continue either to Catholic Senior College, Taborio or Elaine Bernacchi and King George V, Bikenibeu, to do Forms 4 and 5. In the Christmas holiday of 1977 Sister Rotia and I went back to the Novitiate in Bowral to prepare for renewal of vows early in the following year. We met up with Sister Catherine Howard and Sister Anne Ihlein. The latter made her final vows while the three of us made renewal.

In the Provincial visitation of 1979, Sister Berness, who was then on the Provincial Council in Australia, was part of the team that came to Kiribati. Since I had not been home at all she advised me to go home to see my parents. I was due for final vows the following year. I had come to a point where I could no longer postpone seeing my parents. I went, but in my heart I was scared. I was afraid of my parents. I did not know how they would receive me. My grandparents had passed away. Were I going home to see them, I would have had no fear. Even if I had committed the worst crime on God's earth, I still would fear nothing from my grandparents. Such was my certainty of their love and acceptance of me. But I had always seen my parents as forbidding and formidable. I was never sure of myself when with them. Had I grown up with them or had they not given me away to my grandparents when I was small, perhaps I would have felt differently. Perhaps I would have been assured of their love.

When I got to Funafuti, the main island in Tuvalu, I waited for the country's only ship to go on its trip to the northern islands. I had a month's holiday and it was almost two weeks before *Nivanga* left. Because it had to call on two other islands to drop passengers and cargo, as well as pick up those bound for Funafuti, the whole trip to Nanumea would take almost a week. To wait on Nanumea for the next trip was another two weeks. Perhaps I could have taken the time to give myself one month at home, but I did not think of it. I meticulously counted the month from the day I left Tarawa to the day when I should get back. For the life of me I do not know why I thought like that. I did not give myself time nor did I give my parents time. I did this on each of my trips home every four years. Yet the first time I went home after they had both left this world, I took three months. Looking back now I do not know who I was punishing, my parents or myself.

I did not let them know I was coming for a holiday. Members of the extended family on Funafuti sent many messages from the time I arrived on Funafuti to let my parents know I was on my way. Tuvalu is a Protestant country and on achieving independence in 1978 had called its church, the Church of Tuvalu. In a small place like that, a nun, even if she is a Tuvaluan, became something of a curiosity to the people. I regarded the stares rude and I preferred to stay in

the house all the time. When I finally reached Nanumea, my parents had prepared for my arrival and this is why looking back I am sad I did not stay, even if it had meant going over the normal holiday time. The ship arrived during the night and the captain let me go ashore with the Minister in the Tuvalu House of Parliament, Maheu Naniseni, my mother's cousin. With the familiar smell of food I knew then all was well. My parents had been preparing for my arrival. They had just turned down the lantern to go to sleep thinking passengers would be coming ashore in the morning. It was a happy reunion and after telling stories for awhile, we slept. Little did I know, that was my only time with my parents.

The next morning I wanted to go everywhere. I wanted to see everything—even Lakena, the islet where I had lived with my grandparents. When I returned to the house it was noon and the extended family had gathered. I wanted very much to see my parents alone but I realised there was no time. Then from among the people sitting there, a lady cousin of my father spoke up. From the many things she said I could remember only one. 'You go back to Tarawa and when your vows are expired in January, we shall meet here when you return.' I knew then I could not tell my parents my news. When I left in my heart I said goodbye because I was not sure if my parents would want to see my face again. I had meant to tell my parents that I wanted to make final profession.

Final profession in Kiribati is a big event because it involves the Sisters' families. I wrote to my parents explaining that I was making my final vows and I did not invite them. Because I did not invite my parents I could not bring myself to invite anyone of my relations either. Sister Rotia's family came from Abaiang and because they had known me from there they included me in their preparations. They were very kind. Somehow my relatives on South Tarawa must have heard because they got together and prepared food for the feast after Mass. Some of them even came to the Mass, participated in the liturgy and the feast in the *maneaba*. I was very grateful for what they did. Their presence made me feel good. I was not alone after all. I was home!

ENDNOTES

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 529.

Telling Pacific Lives

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mtt 22.12.

¹⁴ Bowden, *Miniature Lives of the Saints*, 447.

¹⁵ Mtt.16.26.