

*"To love God above all things,
to love all people as oneself,
to give one's heart and soul,
one's mind and strength
in order to make people
better and happier, that is
life, that is the law, that is
happiness, justice and truth."*




VENERABLE

✧ **Suzanne Aubert** ✧ ✧ **Meri Hōhepa** ✧

New Zealand's Saint in the making

Nō Aotearoa, he taonga o te hunga
tapu i rarangahia



*“Mother Aubert’s vision and example
– her insistence on seeing Christ in
every person who needed help, her
refusal while doing so to distinguish
between Catholic and non-Catholic
– were among the most pervasive and
enduring forces to emerge from the
Catholic Church in New Zealand.”*

NEW ZEALAND HISTORIAN, MICHAEL KING

A heroic life of service and compassion

When young Suzanne Aubert left home in 1860 to join a mission on the other side of the world, she began a New Zealand adventure that would last for 66 years. She became a health and social welfare pioneer in her adopted country, devoting her life to helping the suffering and the disadvantaged. Her work took her from France to Auckland then to Hawke's Bay, the Whanganui River and finally to Wellington. Along the way, this determined and charismatic woman founded a new Catholic congregation — the Sisters of Compassion — and was tireless in her care of children and the sick. She skillfully combined Māori medicine and Pākehā science and also wrote books in Māori, English and French, adding significantly to our cultural heritage. Throughout her life, she was unbowed by opposition or lack of resources, and stood firm in her belief that everyone deserved equal respect. Her witness shone beyond the Church to influence a wide cross-section of society. When she died, her funeral was one of the biggest ever given a woman in New Zealand. In living a life of bold fidelity to Gospel values, this extraordinary woman became an inspiration to New Zealanders then and now. ✚



Suzanne Aubert's prayer books. Suzanne carried these three early-1800s French prayer books in her pocket wherever she went.

FRANCE 1835–1850

The early years



The photos of her parents are from Suzanne's own album and were sent to her in Auckland in the 1860s. Suzanne's father Louis Aubert and most likely Suzanne's mother Clarice Aubert.

Marie Henriette Suzanne Aubert was born 19 June, 1835 in St-Symphorien-de-Lay, a town not far from Lyon in France. She was born into a close-knit, middle class family with three brothers – Alphonse, Louis and Camille.

When she was about two years old, Suzanne fell through the surface of a frozen pond and became temporarily crippled and blind. Because of this, and the premature death of her disabled brother Louis, she developed an enduring empathy for people with disabilities. Suzanne recovered the use of her limbs and most of her eyesight but she was left with a cast in one eye.

In 1840 the family moved to Lyon, an industrial city in southern France which was active in missionary work. Hospitals, hospices and pharmacies were run by female congregations. Suzanne, her mother Clarice and grandmother, Joséphine, helped pregnant girls and their babies, and cared for girls with sexually transmitted diseases.

Suzanne grew to be an active young woman with the strength and determination to challenge the restrictions of the times. Following the custom of the day, her parents had arranged her marriage to the son of a family friend. Suzanne refused to comply. Clarice sought the support of the Curé d'Ars, Jean Vianney, but he supported Suzanne. God had other designs for her, he said. It was the encouragement she needed.

Suzanne had repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, asked her parents for permission to join religious life. Aged 25, however, she was legally free to decide her own future and she made the brave decision to leave her home town and become a religious sister in New Zealand. It was an act of rebellion, but it was an act of love as well, involving huge sacrifice on her part. In 1869 she wrote to Father Poupinel, "So now you are leaving for Lyon, for Fourvière ...You'll see my father, mother and brother. I won't be seeing them again in this world; tell them everything your kind heart may prompt you to say — nothing can possibly be too loving ..." ✨



FRANCE 1850–1860

Missionary calling

As a young woman Suzanne developed her nursing skills, working as a volunteer alongside the Sisters of Charity to nurse cholera patients and wounded Crimean soldiers. She also continued with private studies in healthcare, chemistry, botany and pharmacy, gaining skills that would prove invaluable in her work in New Zealand.

During this time she had strong links with the Society of Mary. Two Marist missionary priests, Fathers Francoise Yardin and Poupinel, encouraged and advised her. Other influences were Pauline Jaricot, who established the lay Association of the Propagation of the Faith and Marist lay missionary pioneer, Françoise Perroton.

However, it was the visit of Bishop Pompallier to Lyon in 1859 to recruit missionaries for his Auckland diocese that would steer Suzanne's missionary zeal towards New Zealand rather than the Pacific Islands.

One of the most influential figures from those early days was the revered priest, Jean Vianney. In 1858 he made predictions that would mirror the course of her life. He told Suzanne: *"You will go to the missions within two years ..."; "You will begin a work there and it will fall down. After many years you will build it up again, but it will again fall down."; "Oh my child, how many different crosses and trials await you in life. But whatever they do to you, whatever happens, whatever anyone will say to you, never, never give way, never let go, take courage, courage, courage."* ✨



Bishop Pompallier, the first Catholic Bishop in New Zealand, recruited Suzanne for his Auckland diocese. Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington



SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 1860

The sea voyage

Suzanne Aubert set sail from France for New Zealand on 4 September 1860. It was a voyage that would test her courage and teach her new skills. On board the *Général Teste* were 23 new missionaries for New Zealand.

The small whaling ship was demanding for passengers. Space was cramped, provisions were short and the days without landfall were long and monotonous. Three sperm whales were caught in the southern Pacific, and the persistent stench of whale oil, and rotting and burning whale flesh, worsened Suzanne's continuous seasickness and put her off sea travel forever.

The trip was terrifying. During the first squall, the ship keeled over in roaring seas and was only righted when her sails were cut. In the second storm, a sailor fell from the mast into mountainous waves and was hauled back on board.

During the voyage Bishop Pompallier and his secretary, Father McDonald, introduced some Māori and English to the French-speaking missionaries. "Have respect for the Māori culture," the bishop instructed them, "and achieve results through tolerance." His words became Suzanne's model. ✕



1860–1871

Auckland

Once in Auckland, Suzanne and the other Frenchwomen joined the Sisters of Mercy. But their real desire was to work with Māori, not teach French, singing, and sewing to the daughters of prosperous Aucklanders. As a result, they moved to the Nazareth Institute, a boarding institute and school for Māori girls. In 1862 they formed a new religious congregation under the jurisdiction of Bishop Pompallier named 'The Holy Family', which was responsible for the teaching of Māori girls. Here, Suzanne, now Sister Mary Joseph, became affectionately known by Māori as 'Meri'.

Suzanne's mentor in all things Māori, including medicinal lore, was Peata Hoki, an influential relative of the powerful Ngāpuhi chief, Rewa. She had been baptised by Bishop Pompallier in 1840, shortly before the Treaty of Waitangi was signed, and became a Sister of the Holy Family.

At the time, Māori were struggling with the effects of war, the destruction of their trading economy and the confiscation of their lands. Amid Auckland's fluctuating fortunes they withdrew from the Christian missions and schools.

Amidst this uncertainty, Bishop Pompallier travelled to Europe in 1868 with his niece, Lucie, to seek support. By now his diocese was in total financial collapse and low on staff numbers. He never returned and died in Paris in 1871.

Suzanne and Peata, who was now going blind, carried on caring for their little family of girls and rallying limited support from lay and non-Catholic Aucklanders, and from northern Māori communities. Their efforts, however, were unsuccessful. Thomas Croke, the newly appointed Bishop of Auckland, opposed their work.

Unwilling to give up and return to France, Suzanne left Auckland in 1871 to live and work at the Marist Māori mission station at Meeanee in Hawke's Bay with Father Reignier and other French Marist missionaries. ✂



Peata, Suzanne (seated right) and their pupils (c1869). *Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington*



Peata, Suzanne and their pupils (c1869) Suzanne is seated on the ground (right) with her pupils – an unusual practice for a 19th century nun. *Canterbury Museum (2536)*

1871–1883

Hawke's Bay



Father Christophe Soulas (1890). Father Soulas was an enthusiastic and energetic supporter of Suzanne Aubert and her projects at Hiruhārama. Marist Archives, Wellington

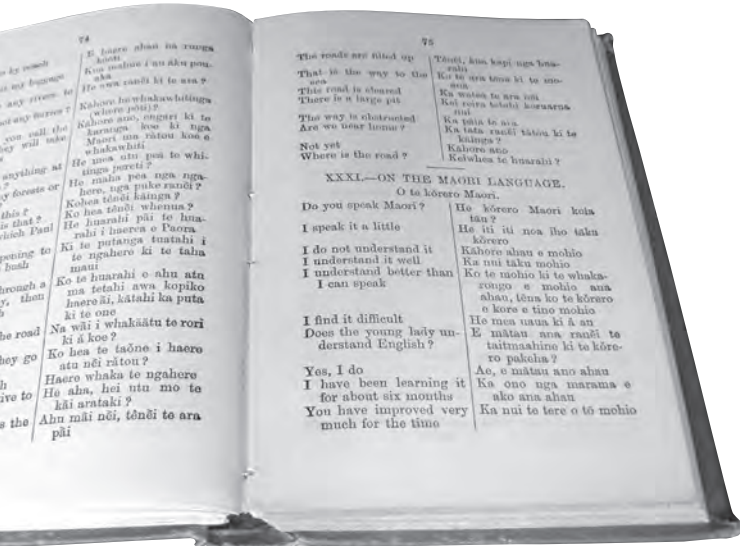
Suzanne Aubert, 35 years old by now and no longer a member of a religious congregation, arrived in Hawke's Bay with two pianos, six packages of luggage and determination to revive the Catholic Māori mission. By this time she was highly proficient in Māori language and tikanga.

She settled in Meeanee, helped on the farm, taught catechism, trained the local choir, played the harmonium, embroidered and prepared the church for religious festivals. She soon became well-known for her skillful nursing and pastoral care. Around this time she was received into the Third Order of Mary.

Suzanne became well known as she walked the district ministering to all — Māori and Pākehā, Catholic and non-Catholic. She discovered that, without compromising her own beliefs, she could relate well to everyone through friendship. Tolerance and friendship became strategies for her mission.

Suzanne pinned her hopes for a revival of the Māori mission on Bishop Redwood who became her lifelong supporter. In anticipation of the arrival of more priests, she began revising and enlarging the 1847 Māori prayer book. She compiled an English-Māori dictionary and produced a French-Māori phrase book. She followed this up in 1885 with a groundbreaking Māori-English phrase book that would be used for decades to come.

Her prayers were answered. In 1879 Father Christophe Soulas arrived from France, familiarised himself with Māori families in the district and soon constructed a new church at Pakipaki. ✨



Māori-English phrase book compiled by Suzanne Aubert

A Māori village was the cradle of our institute.

1883–1899



Hiruhārama/Jerusalem from the Whanganui River (c1895). *Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington (Denton collection, G11231/1)*

Hiruhārama

In 1883 a new chapter began in Suzanne's life when the opportunity came to revive the Catholic Mission on the Whanganui River. Together with Father Soulas, and three Sisters of St Joseph of Nazareth, she set up base at the isolated Māori village of Hiruhārama, 64 kilometres up the Whanganui River.

The Sisters were taught Māori language and customs. Many children and adults came to the school, and became devout converts. The two young Sisters of St Joseph returned to Whanganui after a year. Suzanne was now



South side of the Jerusalem Convent. Chapel level 1. Children's dormitory level 2. *Sisters of Compassion Archives*



Sisters on horseback, Hiruhārama (1916) *Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington*



Church of Hato Hōhepa (St Joseph) Jerusalem (1885) *Marist Archives, Wellington*



Suzanne Aubert with a group of Sisters (1894) *Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington*

appointed to set up and lead a branch of the Marist Third Order Regular of Mary. She recruited more teachers and Sisters Anne O'Rourke, Bridget Brownlie and Carmel Gallagher joined her in 1884.

The next year, the Sisters helped dig the foundations for a new church and Father Soulas set the first pile in place. The local people joined a Whanganui building firm in the construction work and the Sisters stitched carpet for the new church from patterns and wool ordered from France.

On Christmas Day 1885 Bishop Redwood blessed St Joseph's Church but misfortune was on its way. Less than three years later, the building was burned down and Suzanne and Sister Magdalen set off on a year-long collecting tour to raise money not only to replace the church, but to erect a convent as well. They returned with £1,000 and the two new buildings were constructed by 1893.

The Sisters at Hiruhārama, in addition to the usual customs of religious life, taught and nursed, farmed newly-cleared bush, tended an orchard, made and marketed medicines, sold fruit to tourists and raised homeless children. The busy community grew and thrived.

The Society of Mary in France, however, was unhappy with the direction the Hiruhārama community had taken. Archbishop Redwood intervened and on 14 October 1892 appointed Suzanne as Mother Superior of a newly-established religious order, the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion.

"Never forget that we were first instituted for the Māori, that we began in the bush, that by our vows we are consecrated to their service," Suzanne wrote later. *"They have the first claim to our love, on our care, never abandon them. The works for illegitimate children and for incurables were begun in a Māori village. A Māori bush was the cradle of our institute."*

During her collecting tour around the country, Suzanne became acutely aware of the challenges faced by poor and unmarried mothers and their babies. In response, between 1890 and 1901, the Sisters took 74 babies and children under their care. Most of them were placed 'forever' by their mothers and came without money.



Many of the children were sick and undernourished when they arrived and some of the more delicate babies died. An inquest was held and Suzanne's policies were challenged. She vigorously defended the right of confidentiality for the children despite the government rule to register the names of their mothers.

The inquest concluded that Hiruhārama was too isolated from medical services to be suitable for a children's home. While the Sisters continued to care for older children at Hiruhārama, Suzanne set her sights on Wellington. ✂

Suzanne Aubert (centre back) with a group of children taken at Jerusalem in 1898. *Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington*



The first Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Mary in New Zealand. Suzanne (on right) is pictured with 'the ABC' of the Hiruhārama congregation, (from left) Sisters Bridget Brownlie, Anne O'Rourke, and Carmel Gallagher. *Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington*

A Healing Ministry

Suzanne's medical training and her knowledge of traditional Māori medicine combined to create a remarkable healing ministry. In Auckland, under the influence of Peata, she nursed Māori and studied rongoā, or Māori herbal remedies. In Hawke's Bay she nursed both Māori and Pākehā and was recognised as Hawke's Bay's first 'district nurse'.

At Hiruhārama, her nursing skills again won her respect and demand for them grew. In 1890 Suzanne and Father Soulas began to market the medicines in order to fund the work of their Māori mission. A contract with drug company Kempthorne and Prosser for the manufacture and marketing of her remedies led to a marketing campaign that heralded "Mother Aubert" as the "New Zealand Vegetatist: her Remedies are the very best". The Evening Post described the medicines as "the chief proprietary medicine of New Zealand". In the first three months, 10,000 bottles were sold in Wellington alone.

However the excessive publicity, the enormity of the work, the increasing scarcity of the herbal ingredients at a time of vigorous bush felling, and the overwhelming demand brought an end to the venture. She had also lost faith in Kempthorne and Prosser. Some complaints about the medicine's effectiveness led to an analysis of the bottles' contents. A court case revealed that Kempthorne and Prosser had begun to dilute the medicines. The case was settled in the mission's favour. ✨



Suzanne Aubert's remedies were exclusively manufactured and bottled by herself and under her personal supervision. *Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington*



1899–1913



When the Sisters began collecting food and clothing in the city they used baskets. Suzanne Aubert asked Edwin Arnold to mount the baskets on wheels. *Sisters of Compassion Archives.*

Wellington

In 1899 Suzanne and three Sisters arrived unannounced in Wellington. They quickly set to work as social welfare pioneers. They established a centre of welcome for disadvantaged people in need of food and clothes, New Zealand's first home for permanently disabled people, and a crèche for the young children of working parents. They also set up a soup kitchen which has endured to this day. All their services were free-of-charge and available to all, regardless of race, sex, age or creed. 'All creeds or none' became an appreciative catch-cry of Suzanne Aubert's many supporters.

Suzanne and the Sisters became a familiar sight around Wellington, pushing wicker-collecting prams, and collecting food and clothing for the needy, whatever their religious background.



Crowd at opening of Our Lady's Home of Compassion (28 April 1907) *Joseph Zachariah collection, Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington*



Babies and Sisters gather under the arches on the first floor of the building. *Joseph Zachariah collection, Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington*



Soup Kitchen, Buckle Street (1901) *Joseph Zachariah Collection, Sisters of Compassion Archives*

Suzanne's vision and confidence grew, as she tackled her most ambitious project to date. In 1907, following a huge fundraising effort. The impressive Our Lady's Home of Compassion was opened on the slopes of Island Bay, initially for the care of children and babies. Civic as well as church leaders turned out in force for the opening. The Sisters' non-sectarian approach, and their tireless, practical brand of Christianity, had won the respect of the Wellington community.

Suzanne never stood still. Her next plan was for a home for foundlings in Auckland which, as well as meeting an obvious need, would also open the way for the congregation to move from diocesan status to that of a papal congregation. But times were changing and so were the authorities. While Rome was tightening up controls across the wider Catholic world, ageing Archbishop Redwood's new Assistant Thomas O'Shea was ordering Wellington affairs. He and the new Bishop of Auckland, Bishop Cleary, decided to rein in the elderly Suzanne.

It was around this time that this determined and dynamic nun had issues with Church authorities. A report on the Sisters' work claimed that the Order was over-stretched and made a number of recommendations, three of which Suzanne could not accept: that the Sisters could no longer work with Māori on the Whanganui River, that they discontinue taking in babies from birth and they operate more within the Catholic parish system.

Since she had arrived in New Zealand, Māori had been part of her life's meaning, and so had the wider mission of unquestioning Christian love for everybody. For Suzanne, Christ was in everyone. ✧

1913–1920

Rome

Suzanne rose to the challenge. In 1913, aged 78, and on the pretext of making a routine visit to Auckland, she set sail for Rome to seek a Decree of Praise. This would give her Order papal recognition and free it from diocesan control. World War 1 intervened and it was not until 1 April 1917 that Pope Benedict granted the Decree of Praise to the Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion, the only surviving New Zealand-born congregation and the smallest congregation in the world to be granted that status. The Decree protected all her works, widened her scope for health care and recognised the distinctive charism of her Order. ✚



1920–1926

Wellington once again

In January 1920 a frail but triumphant Suzanne returned home to Island Bay, where she organised nursing training for the Sisters and expanded the scope and services of the Island Bay hospital. She was determined to provide general hospital treatment and trained nursing free-of-charge to the poor during New Zealand's post-war Depression. She arranged for extensive alterations to the Home to provide a surgical section. In 1922 the Sisters began training for the general nursing the new hospital would require. Suzanne continued to be seen around Wellington, leaning on the arm of one of the Sisters and using her umbrella as a walking stick.

On 1 October 1926, aged 91, Suzanne Aubert died in the presence of her Sisters. New Zealand's newspapers spread the word and huge crowds gathered to pay their last respects. ✚

Thousands of people came in a steady stream to the Home of Compassion to honour her, and her funeral was one of the biggest ever given a woman in New Zealand.



Corner of Women's Surgical Ward 1924. *Sisters of Compassion Archives*



Volunteer work at Our Lady's Home of Compassion (Reservoir Forming) *Joseph Zachariah collection, Sisters of Compassion Archives*



Funeral procession, Willis Street, Wellington
4 October 1926. *New Zealand Freelance*, 13
October 1926

In the words of her biographer, Jessie Munro: *"All these people were responding in gratitude and love to Suzanne's vision of large-hearted spiritual neighbourliness – call it arohanui, her great love – her invaluable legacy now and forever."*

Suzanne Aubert was buried at Karori cemetery. The Sisters, realising that the cause for her beatification might one day be introduced, enclosed her body in a lead coffin which was then enclosed in a simple wooden one. Twenty-five years later her remains were transferred to the home she founded in Island Bay. ✂

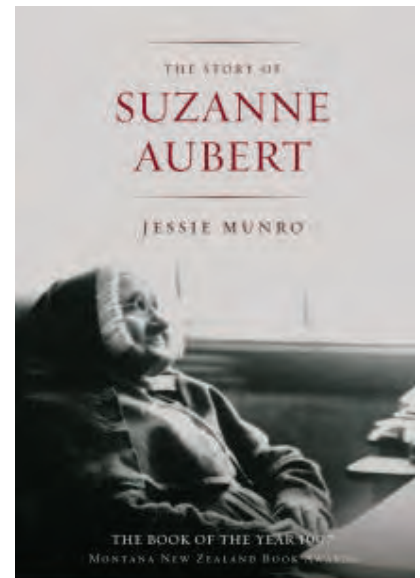
The Journey to Sainthood

The initial impetus for Suzanne's Cause came from two Cardinals in Rome and members of the Roman Curia who had known her. Cardinal Aidan Gasquet, the Cardinal Protector of the Congregation, advised the Sisters to archive any relevant material. A number of steps were taken to advance her Cause but it only gained real momentum over the last decade. A major step was taken with the publication of Jessie Munro's award-winning biography, *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*, in 1997.

The process began in earnest in 2004 when an official Diocesan Enquiry was held into her life and her heroic exercise of Christian virtues. The results of this enquiry were forwarded to Rome and approved by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. In 2007 Father Maurice Carmody was appointed Roman Postulator for the Cause and, together with Sister Margaret Anne Mills and Sister Jo Gorman, used this material to prepare the Positio (official case for the beatification and canonisation of Suzanne Aubert).

The Positio was submitted to Rome and in 2013 it was approved unanimously by church historians. It was then approved by church theologians and relevant ecclesiastical authorities. In 2016 Pope Francis formally declared Suzanne 'venerable', the first major stage on her path to sainthood.


The next stage will involve enquiries concerning any miracles which may be attributed to Suzanne Aubert's intercession. Approval of one miracle will pave the way for her beatification while approval of a second miracle and proof that she is a model for the universal church will enable her to be canonised as New Zealand's first saint. ✂



The Story of Suzanne Aubert by Jessie Munro won the Book of the Year award in the Montana Book of the Year Awards in 1997.



Suzanne with one of her babies, Home of Compassion (c1912) Sisters of Compassion Archives, Wellington



*“We cannot do anything
without prayer, and we
can do everything with it
because God has promised
everything to it.”*

SUZANNE AUBERT

Steps Towards Canonisation

SERVANT OF GOD > VENERABLE > BLESSED > SAINT

There are a number of stages in the canonisation process:

- 1 Relevant material is gathered and archived.
- 2 An official Diocesan Enquiry is held into a Candidate's life. Results forwarded to Rome for approval.
- 3 Once approved, the case for beatification/ canonisation – known as the Positio – is prepared.
- 4 Committees of historians and theologians examine the Positio. Once approved, the case is presented to a group of Bishops and Cardinals for their final approval.
- 5 The Pope then declares the Candidate 'Venerable'.
- 6 Following the recognition of a miracle attributed to the Venerable Candidate, he or she is recognised by the Pope as 'Blessed'.
- 7 Following a second miracle and proof that he or she is a model for the universal Church, the Candidate is then declared a 'Saint'.



The legacy lives on

The spirit of Suzanne Aubert lives on today in the work of the *Sisters of Compassion*. The Sisters are engaged in social work, pastoral care, prison and hospital chaplaincies, education, working with refugee and disadvantaged migrant communities, residential and home care of the sick and the elderly.

You can share in their mission as a supporter or volunteer – learn more on:
www.compassion.org.nz



Care with Compassion
Te Rauhi i Runga i te Pūaroha

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 Island Bay, Wellington.
 PO Box 174, Wellington 6140

PHONE: 04 383 7769

EMAIL: archives@compassion.org.nz

Sisters of Compassion is a registered charity. Registration no. cc10246

SHARE THE JOURNEY

FIND OUT MORE about this extraordinary woman on www.suzanneaubert.co.nz



Visit our website to find out how you can be involved. You can:

- **SIGN UP** to receive regular information on the Cause.
- **BECOME** a 'parish promoter' and key contact in your parish
- **JOIN** our Prayer Team as we pray for the Cause and for others
- **BECOME** a supporter of the work of the Sisters of Compassion.

You are also very welcome to visit the Suzanne Aubert Heritage Centre at 2 Rhine Street (off Murray Street), Island Bay. See www.compassion.org.nz for opening hour. To book a guided tour, contact Sister Josephine Gorman – tel 04 3837769 or by email sr.josephine.gorman@compassion.org.nz

The Sisters of Compassion commissioned this portrait of their Foundress. Suzanne Aubert (1835–1926) is pictured in full habit with its distinctive wimple and medal. The oil painting was done by The Studio of St John the Baptist, an Auckland-based studio which specialises in sacred art and iconography.

