

## **Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, Pukekaraka, Ōtaki, Aotearoa – New Zealand.**

The Grotto of Our Lady is a testimony to the first French Marist Missionaries who brought their Faith Practices to this new country in 1844. Mary was embraced by the local Māori Catholic who accepted these new priests whom they provided a place to live. They took willingly to the Catholic Faith, including its love of Mary.

A French grotto dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes (in te reo Māori, “Te Ana a Meri o Rouaiti”) was first built in 1901, modelled on the grotto at Lourdes in France. A larger statue of Mary was set up four years later in 1905.

The Grotto has continued to be a place of prayer and at times healing. There are records of healing of eyesight and certainly growth in Faith. To this day different events are celebrated at or near the Grotto. It is common to see persons or groups pause at the Grotto and pray.

The scene from the grotto looks out over the town of Ōtaki and so reminds people of the sense of mission Mary and her Son have to reach out and bless the world. One key set of buildings that can be seen from the Grotto is St Peter Chanel Primary School (‘Hato Petera Kaniera’). Part of the mission of Mary is the education of local children and outreach to their families. That spirit continues strongly today.

Near the Grotto is a marae (or meeting place) dedicated to Mary (‘Hine Nui o te Ao Katoa’; ‘Mary, Maiden of the Whole World’) and one called ‘Roma’ (Rome) because of links with the Pope. An early Pope gave Pukekaraka a Papal Flag and that flag is still flown here.

So Mary is central to the founding and life of the Archdiocese at this early Shrine, and Prayer and Reflection are at the heart of this Grotto.