

# **Fiji Times Online**

Fiji Time: 4:03 PM on Wednesday 10 February

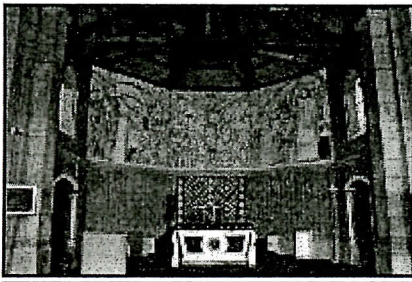
- [Home](#)
- [Fiji News](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [World](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Galleries](#)

/ [Front page](#) / [Features](#)

## **Living with the Black Christ**

Geraldine Panapasa

Sunday, February 08, 2009



[+ Enlarge this image](#)

The mural of the Black Christ

When I told my mother I had just returned from seeing the mural of the Black Christ by French artist Jean Charlot, she looked at me twice in disbelief because she had never heard of such a thing.

She was not the only one with that reaction as I had the same look on my face when Features Editor Fred Wesley mentioned this interesting fact late last year.

Located on a hill in Navunibitu, Ra, Saint Francis Xavier Catholic Parish boasts a striking mural of a black Christ on a cross robed in masi around the waist.

I had read a few notes about the mural on the internet and several old clippings from the internet some three years ago mentioned a brief history of the mural and its artist.

But what these articles failed to mention was the significance of a Black Christ to the community and the Christian faith.

The drive to Navunibitu was exhausting not only riding in the back seat of our new Toyota Hilux with Nai Lalakai reporter Anare Ravula, photographer Atu Rasea and our driver Pictures Editor Asaeli Lave, but the humid atmosphere made the ride a bit uncomfortable, not to mention the poor road condition from the Korovou stretch to the last village in Wainibuka.

As we passed the Ra Maternity Hospital, I knew we were close as a passerby pointed us further down the road to our destination. On the left was an uphill drive heading to Navunibitu Catholic Mission School.

There was evidence of damaged roads and buildings caused by the flash floods, heavy rains and strong winds early last month.

We approached the presbytery where the parish priest, Father Petero Mataca, resides.

He was in Suva for a training program with trainee church catechists when we arrived at Navunibitu.

The view was breath-taking, a clear scenic ocean view of Vanua Levu from the hill. There was more significance in the location of the church that added to its importance in the history of the Catholic faith.

Parish secretary Elani Buadromo met us with a jovial smile and I followed her into the parish office inside the presbytery while Asaeli, Anare and Atu went about taking pictures of the surrounding area and of course, the mural itself.

What's left of the history of the mural is an old single sheet of paper with old type writer fonts, pictures of the Charlot's son, Martin and grand-daughter, and a research book conducted by an international student doing a thesis on the mural — I didn't get to see the book though. It was misplaced somewhere.

But there's one thing that surprised me. It was the reaction of people in the area when asked what the mural meant to them.

It's more than just an ordinary painting of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Most of the parishioners were not familiar with its significance or why it's a Black Christ and not a White Christ.

When I met with one of the oldest parishioners, Gabirieli Adireki who lived just down the road from the church, she shrugged her shoulders when asked what the Black Christ meant.

All she knew was it was Christ and that was enough to keep her Christian faith intact. Likewise with other villagers in the small settlement on the hill, the Black Christ was a symbol of Christian belief that Jesus Christ is for everyone regardless of colour and race.

### **The mural of the Black Christ**

According to written records at the church, the entire setting of the mural is Fijian including natural resources like breadfruit, yaqona and banana plant patterns for the background.

The breadfruit leaves and fruits symbolise the love of Christ. In Fijian, the word uto means breadfruit and heart.

Painted over the wall of the main altar, the mural of the Black Christ forms three panels of equal size. The central panel is flanked by two wings set at an angle. This was a traditional form of religious art at the mission church commissioned by Monsignor Franz Wasner who was part of the mission.

The mural was painted between October, 1962 and the beginning of January, 1963.

Christ is seen on a cross painted in dark skin and crowned with thorns. A cruciform halo sits above his head.

His loincloth is from masi with a design including stylized fish and bird.

The Sacred Heart symbolises the love of Christ for all mankind, the reason for his sacrifice and the source of unity among men.

At the foot of the cross are offerings from the two major races in Fiji - Fijian and Indian.

The left of the central panel has a kava bowl shaped like a stylized sea turtle with its cord and shells stretched toward the one to be honoured.

On the right is an Indian ceremonial offering of blue-burning camphor floating in a brass bowl.

On the left panel, a Fijian in ceremonial dress offers a tabua to Christ. Behind him, a woman waits with her offering, a mat made with her own hands and held in the traditional gesture of giving.

Archbishop Petero Mataca was the Fijian parish priest at the time and is robed in white. On the right panel is an Indian woman dressed in a mauve sari, an Indian farmer and an altar boy dressed in red.

The mural also portrays Saint Peter Chanel, a missionary martyred in the Pacific. He's holding the instrument of his death, a sculptured war club.

### **Significance**

Parish priest Father Petero Mataca - the nephew of Archbishop Mataca - said the painter wanted to give a message to the people that Christ came for all races including Fijians.

"That's why he painted Christ as a Fijian. Charlot's also included traditional Fijian materials like the tabua and yaqona," Father Petero said.

"The major races are united in the mural. It goes to show that Christ came for everyone. The missionaries who came to Fiji in the early days brought a foreign God.

"The artist painted that God as a Fijian, a local to show that God is also Fijian. It holds a lot of significance.

"He localised the foreign God brought in by the early missionaries.

"But there are many parishioners who still do not understand the real meaning or the significance of the mural or why Charlot painted Christ Black."

Father Petero said the mural brought a sense of closeness to God especially when he is Fijian.

He said the mural sent out a message that Christ is not a foreigner but lives among all people.

Some years back, a sign was erected in front of the church that read 'Black Christ'.

He said the locals pulled the sign down thinking it was an anti-Christ message.

"This was because of the lack of understanding about the significance of the mural of the Black Christ," Father Petero said.

"In 1962, we had the second Vatican Council meeting and the okay was given for local traditions to be included in our liturgies.

"Before worship was done in Latin changed."

The Catholic Archdiocesan Office also runs the Ra Maternity Hospital. Just like the French designed churches in Bemana and Naililili, the Navunibitu church also boasts tainted glass designs and the words 'Venite Ad me Omnes' above the entrance. The words are Latin meaning 'You all come to me'.

Even for Elani, the mural of the Black Christ has made her faith strong. To her, Jesus Christ is black or has the same skin colour as her.

She said for some one else, Jesus Christ is a white man. The mural serves as a reminder that Jesus Christ is for everyone regardless of skin colour.

"I asked the peace corps volunteer, Ahndree or Arieta who Jesus was. She said he was white. I told her that for me, Jesus is black. He is like me, dark skinned," she said.

"It doesn't matter if Jesus is black or white. What matters is the meaning behind the mural that Jesus is for everyone and its faith as Christians to see that regardless of the colour of your skin, or where you come from or your religious denomination.

"We are all equal and we are all united in our Christian faith and belief. I'm proud to be a parishioner with a mural of this significance and I know other parishioners share the same sentiment whether they realise it or not."

### **History of the church**

It's amazing to see the foundation of the church, remnants of the dedication and commitment of the parishioners' faith.

The church is named after Saint Francis Xavier, the patron Saint of the Mission Church and of India. More than 70 years old, the church is roughly 20 miles towards Suva from Rakiraki Hotel and 50 miles towards Lautoka from Tailevu Hotel.

Elani has spent nine years digging up oral history from elders in the community and is working on compiling a brief history on the church.

The church has more than 2000 parishioners from 26 villages in Ra.

There are 12 smaller churches including Saint Rose church in Rakiraki and other churches from as far as Nailuva and the interior of Ra.

"I've dug up a brief history of the church and from what I was told by some of the elders, the church was supposed to be built in Nararavou Village, Ra," she said. "But the priest and the builders were

thinking of the distance the parishioners would have to travel to get to the church.

"So it was shifted to its present site now. During that time, the men had to dig and flatten this hill down 20 feet.

"It was so high and there was only one bamboo tree on this hill which is why this place is called Navunibitu.

"Everything was done manually.

"It was a very hard life that time especially when everything was done manually. Despite the challenges that time, the faith of the people kept them working to build the church."

Like most mission churches built in the 1800's, education was part and parcel of life. After the church was built, the mission school was built in 1920.

Today, it has a school roll of about 200 students but the recent weather conditions have destroyed the dining hall and a block of the girls' dormitory.

Students from as far as Veidrala, Dreketi, Muana and Rokovuaka attend boarding school where three parents take turns looking after the boarders.

There is so much to see at Navunibitu from the mural of the Black Christ, to the first classrooms of the mission school, old burial sites of the missionary sisters and priest, the grotto where the Mother Mary, Jesus Christ's mother, sits atop a tiny waterfall and a church bell in the lali bure made in Lyons, France in 1896.

The mural of the Black Christ is a proud heritage of the church and parishioners of Saint Francis Xavier.



- [Email to a friend](#)
- [Print this story](#)
- [Back to top](#)

## Today's Most Read Stories