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FOR THE SYNOD FOR OCEANIA**

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Editorial

This issue of the Bulletin is entirely dedicated to the **CHURCH IN OCEANIA**. On the occasion of the Special Synod of Bishops for Oceania held during November and December of 1998, SEDOS organised a one-day activity with four conferences. These conferences are an opportunity to listen to the Bishops and specialists from Oceania, in order to know better the gifts and problems of that local Church, and at the same time to renew our options as missionary religious in these Churches. —

Fr ENNIO MANTOVANI, SVD, for many years Director of the Melanesian Pastoral Institute, and now Director of the Anthropos Institute in Bonn, opened the 'Pacific Day' by presenting the audience with some key issues to start a possible dialogue between the culture of Melanesia and Christianity. The clear conclusion drawn by the author was that in fact the Church has humbly to recognize the lack of such a dialogue in the past. —

Ms IRENE HANCY, a Maori woman from New Zealand, spoke in the name of the many indigenous peoples of the Pacific region. In her very personal exposition, she gave a moving testimony of her life-long struggle to make a synthesis between her Maori culture and her Catholic Faith. She summarized her on-going experience in the words: 'The more Catholic I become the more deeply Maori I feel'. —

Bishop MICHEL VISI of the Island of Vanuatu, introduced us into the Church of the Pacific as seen by a Pastor. In his presentation he stressed the many positive contributions the Gospel has made in the Pacific. Christianity has brought a new sense of unity to the Pacific, awareness of Justice and Peace and generous service to the development of the islands. —

Bishop MICHAEL PUTNEY, the Auxiliary of Brisbane, presented a very elaborate study of Ecumenism in Australia. He explained how the different features of modern Australian culture impact on the ecumenical movement and showed why the Australian Church already has a very rich experience of ecumenical work. —

We complete the issue with a study on Melanesian Theology by Fr ARNOLD AROWAE. He touches on many central issues of Christian theology in relation to the local cultures. He concludes that a serious dialogue between these two needs to be established in order to enable a positive process of inculturation to take place. —

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Ennio Mantovani, SVD

Key issues of a dialogue between Christianity and culture in Melanesia

Introduction

Today Papua New Guinea (PNG) recognises itself as a Christian nation. However, Christianity in PNG was not shaped by a dialogue between traditional religions and biblical revelation. It was a monologue by the Western missionaries who did not know the traditional religions and misunderstood much of what they saw. Melanesians accepted Christianity and gave up the symbols the missionaries condemned (e.g. in the Simbu, people gave up the killing of pigs in the cemeteries, the various geruas, etc. These are symbols, i.e., exterior expressions of interior attitudes. By giving up exterior symbols, one did not necessarily give up the interior attitude of which these symbols were the expression. One could replace them with other symbols which the missionaries did not recognise and forbid!). However, one cannot easily forget millennial religious experiences, especially when the environment which mediates them is still unchanged. The danger is that many elements may go underground and continue their existence unchecked. Another and even more serious danger is belief in a Christ who does not fully answer the religious aspirations of Melanesians. As a consequence the search will continue, the religious movements will multiply, and the old religious roots will produce new leaves, new expressions of the traditional religion.

It was not ill will that prevented dialogue. It was, in my opinion, also mainly ignorance on the part of the Western missionaries. The knowledge we have today about religions in general and about Christianity in particular was simply not available (for the Roman Catholics one would have to mention the theological breakthrough of the Second Vatican Council which opened new ways for dialogue and inculturation). On the other hand, the Melanesians never reflected philosophically on their religious experience and therefore were not able to verbalise their religious experiences to enable a dialogue to take place. As much as one regrets what happened, many things, given the knowledge of the people involved, were unavoidable.

In this article I shall compare the characteristics of Melanesian religions with present day Christianity to detect areas of possible friction and of pastoral and

missiological concern.

I sometimes use the term Melanesia instead of PNG. PNG is not Melanesia, it is only part of it. Given the fact, however, that the majority of Melanesians live in PNG, it is quite common to talk in these terms when not referring to a specific ethnic group. What is true for PNG in general is, most probably, true for the whole of Melanesia.

1. The Ultimate

I prefer to use the term Ultimate instead of the more specific one of God, to allow for more scope in referring to that Reality people live for and from.

Melanesian people accepted quite easily the faith in a creator God, source of all things. Their religious traditions, though sometimes nearly forgotten, confirmed this belief. Even the 'father above' symbol, seemingly, was not entirely new to their religious experience (see H. Aufenanger, *The Passing Scene in North-East New-Guinea*, St. Augustin: Anthropos Institute, 1972, p. 79).

The anthropological and missiological problem comes from the fact that this theistic symbolism was often nearly forgotten. ***It was forgotten or, better, not used, because it was not relevant anymore; it did not express the religious concern of the people at the time of the encounter with Christianity.*** Creation and the Creator did not symbolise and express their religious experience anymore and their life was not motivated by these concerns.

Theoretically, two explanations are possible for this fact: either the Melanesians found a better religious symbol, more appropriate to their daily experience, or they were sinners who refused God's revelation through creation.

The missionaries interpreted the disinterest in the creation symbolism as a fall from the worship of the true God; as an expression of sinfulness. Paul in Romans 1:20ff seems to affirm that much. Christianity at that time was not in a position even to consider the possibility of God revealing himself through different but equally valid religious symbols. For Christianity there

was only one valid religious symbolism: the biblical one and creation was an integral part of it.

However, it was not the free gift, symbolised through creation, which had caught the religious imagination of the gardeners in PNG, but the wonder of growth, of fertility, of cosmic life. Creation, as a matter of fact, was experienced as wanting, as something which needed a radical improvement; it needed redemption, as the Christians would say. Let me quote a traditional story to show what I mean.

Once upon a time there was no proper food. People boiled stones and that was their soup. They ate firewood. Children were hungry and cried the whole night so nobody could sleep properly. Eventually a mother asked her child to kill her and to bury her to end this impossible situation. The child did so and out of the grave came the coconut and since that time people eat, children are fat and sleep at night and everybody is happy.

The figure who dies to bring the true life is called Dema. Creation could not be the symbol for the Ultimate the people were looking for. They were looking for the true life which was missing in creation. The Dema offers to die to bring forth that reality without which life was not worth living; without which creation was basically incomplete and wanting. Theologically it was the need for salvation i.e. for true life which made them drop the symbol of creation to pick up the one of the Dema, the one who dies to bring true life. It was not human sinfulness but openness to that revelation of which Paul speaks in the first chapter of Romans.

This experience, as already mentioned, centres on the wonder of life (*bios* in Greek), of growth, of success. This *bios*, this life, binds the whole universe together; makes it into a cosmos. Because of these two elements I call this religious experience bio-cosmic.

This biocosmic religious experience of the planters was not recognised and therefore no dialogue could take place. What are the consequences of this fact?

Consequences of the lack of dialogue

The Melanesian religious experience of the planters was never the object of serious reflection. There was no chance for the Gospel to shed its light on the biocosmic experience and its symbolism because it never understood it. What Christianity knows and condemns in Melanesian religions are the exterior symbols of the same. What the symbols stood for, was basically unknown. The Gospel cannot challenge what it does not

know. (During one of the Orientation Courses for new missionaries a Lutheran Pastor made the participants aware of this aspect: what Western Christianity condemns is its own interpretation of the Melanesian religious reality and not the reality itself and this hinders the Gospel from challenging the Melanesian reality as it is experienced by Melanesians).

Christianity hoped that the 'pagan' biocosmic beliefs and rituals would eventually disappear; but a deep millennial religious experience will not disappear that quickly and will probably go underground and remain unchecked. If it cannot develop in the open, where it can be challenged, it is in danger of degenerating and developing in the wrong direction, harming people and their progress instead of enriching and helping them.

One might be surprised at the proliferation of Christian denominations in Melanesia. One explanation is that traditional Christianity did not satisfy the religious longing of the people and so the religious quest is still on. PNG is famous for the ongoing religious movements often called 'cargo cults'. The 'cargo' activity might have decreased and might have been substituted by other forms, however, the cargo mentality is still alive. Once again, the term 'cargo' expresses the Western reinterpretation and misinterpretation of a Melanesian longing for something of which the exterior signs of growth and success are symbols. It is the longing for a true, holistic life (see J. Strelan, "Search for Salvation. Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults", Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977).

The great traditional feasts in PNG had to do with the celebration of life in all its forms: the harvest, the distribution of wealth, new life in birth, new fertility in puberty, new maturity in marriage, etc. The Christian liturgy which should be the expression of the living faith, does not have any place for the biocosmic symbols. Human and cosmic growth and fertility, gardens and their fertility, bush and rivers and their fertility, do not belong and are not celebrated through the official Christian liturgy. The great celebrations of puberty are in the village but not in the Church. Even Baptism celebrates the new life in Christ but not the physical life as wonder, as miracle. The growth and fertility of pigs do not have a place in the Christian liturgy. *Either the liturgy does not express the living Christian faith or the Christian faith does not reflect the daily life of the planters and their concerns.*

Points of contact

Actually, there was a basic agreement between Christianity and Melanesian religions and this can explain the success of Christianity in spite of the misunderstandings.

Christianity is based on the conviction that something essential was amiss in creation and that God had to become man to redress this situation. Death had entered creation and there was the need for new life. Melanesian religions are based on the same experience of the lack of true life and make the acquisition of true life their religious quest, their ultimate concern. In this Christianity and the religion of the Melanesian planters agree. Melanesian religions have been rightly described as *'search for, maintenance, and celebration of life'*.

Even if there was agreement in the basics, there was difference in other important aspects. The fact that there was a Creator who was good, had consequences for any religious experience based on it. That negative aspects in creation — evil in general, sickness, death, misfortune, etc. — could not be attributed to the Creator and neither to a negative principle which could not exist beside an omnipotent Creator. The evil could be blamed only on human failure, on human sin. In this religious experience, creation, sin, and redemption belong together. Even for Christianity, Redemption needed human sin to take place. "*O felix culpa*" exclaimed St Austin, "which gave us such a Redeemer. We needed a sin to get a Redeemer".

The Melanesian planters saw it differently. The world was not completed; something essential was still missing. It was nobody's fault; the fact of an evolution. The Dema brought that life which was missing. The religious and human concern is on how to participate in it.

Missionaries did not know about this Dema complex and began their preaching from creation instead of starting from redemption. (I never heard a missionary mention it and I never read about it in any publication by missionaries. When I mentioned the Dema mythology the missionaries were rather surprised and even sceptical about it. It was too new to them and also too challenging; it raised too many theoretical and practical questions). They began with a Creator instead of a Redeemer; with the Old Testament instead of the New Testament. They could not begin with the Redeemer because the cause of that redemption — human sin — had to be first stressed and recognised. Christianity preached a God who was Love, but was in danger of putting human sin and not love at the beginning. It was a case of a *'felix culpa'* not of a *'felix Amor'*! It had to introduce sin, as the cause of the lack of true life and as the reason for the death of Christ. For many missionaries this preaching of sin was not easy. Melanesians had trouble in understanding and accepting this universal sinfulness. To exalt God's love the missionaries had to stress human sinfulness. The biocosmic religious experience, theoretically, could stress the redeeming love and the human need of it without needing human sinfulness as a pedestal for that love to appear.

Basically, instead of beginning where the people were spiritually, Christianity had to bring them where it was itself and then presented Christ as the solution which fitted its own spirituality. No wonder, there is such a proliferation of religious movements in Melanesia.

Reality of sin

It was not a question of ignoring sin either. Melanesians knew about sin, even today they are obsessed by it. Every mishap, every accident, every sickness and death is caused by sin. However, they did not project it into the past as the cause for the lack of true life. In a way, that lack of true life was natural and had not to be explained. One does not have to explain that once upon a time there was no fire, that there were no gardens. This is a fact. One only rejoices that today one has fire and gardens that produce; one is solely concerned with how to use them properly; how to make the best of this happy situation; how to get the most out of it. It is in this happy situation that sin comes in as the explanation why, in spite of the true life being given, one does not participate in it. It is in this concrete situation of want that sin, understood as broken relationships, becomes important.

2. God's creative and sustaining power

The belief in a creator God was accepted rather easily in spite of the many serious problems we just mentioned. Where Christianity and traditional religions clashed head on and never accepted each other's position, was in the administration of the creative and sustaining power of God. Both religions stress the need of, and the dependency on, a power which is not human but nevertheless absolutely necessary for human life. Both Christianity and traditional religions stress the need of good relationships on the side of humans to have access to that power. However, these good relationships are addressed to totally different entities in the two types of religion. The difference was radical and caused open confrontation. It was termed 'power encounter' in missionary circles. Missionaries accused the people of believing in other sources of power beside the Creator God; of believing in other gods, be they spirits, ancestors, or whatever.

Present day Christianity is still confronted by this problem. Officially, according to Church teaching, the power is only in the 'hands' of God, however, this misses the point and does not address the deep religious experience of the planters.

First I shall look at this 'power', then at the human responsibility in relation to God, and, finally, at two types of agents: the healers and sorcerers.

The power

Christianity stresses the fact that God is the only source of every power. Nothing can happen without his direct or indirect intervention. The spirits are his angels, i.e., his subordinate ‘messengers’ or his impotent enemies, i.e., the fallen angels, the demons, Satan. God is the source of life and everything. People are totally dependent on him who personally cares for everybody and everything. The human attitude is one of gratitude for what one has received and one of petition for what one needs. If God refuses the petition, there is nothing the creature can do.

The basic difference between Western Christianity and Melanesian religions is that for the latter the power on which everything depends is separated from God. Expressed from a Christian point of view, God has made available to the world that power so that he does not have to intervene anymore. All Melanesian religions have here their starting point. There is a special power already available in the world and nothing happens without it. ***Who or what is the ultimate source of this power is of no concern to the people; is no part of their religion.*** The ultimate source is a philosophical question while people are concerned with sheer survival, with finding access to that power now.

This power is being possessed by or is attached to material things, to actions, to words, and to human or spirit beings. As we already saw, the question is not who originated and gave it to humankind, but who has it now; from whom can one get it now. The concern is on how to enter into a proper relationship with the beings who presently have this power either to avoid being affected negatively or in order to be helped in one’s enterprise. Good relationships are essential, however, not to the ultimate Source but to those who have the power now.

Those who have it now, according to the traditional stories, are no gods, i.e. no sources of that power. They are not independent mediators either. They are members of the cosmos one lives in. Even the so-called ‘spirits’, as they are called in English, are only one head taller than the rest. As a matter of fact, that head can be chopped off — as the stories tell — if one has the proper relationships (I like to mention Fr John Z’graggen’s (SVD) vast collection of stories in Pidgin from the North Coast of PNG).

Obviously, the ultimate Source of everything is in danger of becoming a ‘*deus otiosus*’ — a retired God. From a Christian point of view, it is his generosity which endangers him! The Source has given all power away and has also given the knowledge on how to tap and use it. People can easily forget him as they do not need him immediately. This, from the missionary point of view, is

the real and only problem and could have been solved without much hassle. Now, after one century of Western indoctrination, the situation is much more complicated.

The disagreement between Christianity and traditional religions is the administration of that power. Christians say that it comes directly from God while traditional religions say that it is administered by other relatively independent entities. As a matter of fact, the disagreement is more theological than practical. When Christianity says, that God is the only source of physical life it does not deny the necessary role of the parents and their sexual relations. The parents and the sexual act become mediators of physical life without denying, for the believer, that they can do so only because God willed it to be so. Melanesians when they look for that power are not different from Christian parents who want a child and therefore have intercourse. That is where God put his creative power for people to use. This is basically the Melanesian attitude. They look for the power where it has been put. One should keep theology and science apart. One can be theologically right — using the power where one believes the Creator has put it — and scientifically wrong — the power is not where one thinks it is. But this is intellectual ignorance which might affect one’s physical health and not an ethical sin which breaks the salvific relation to God. One should keep the two aspects separated. It was the Christian suspicion and misunderstanding that created the confusion and mixed the theological and scientific aspects.

Because of this misunderstanding, instead of helping Melanesians to go to the ultimate Source, we concentrated on denying the possibility of God acting only indirectly in helping his children. When help did come through healing, for instance, we were forced to say it is not from God, so his love could not be experienced in daily life.

Here there was open confrontation between Christianity and traditional religions: all the traditional rituals were proscribed and labelled magic and superstition. Anthropologically, one can suspect that proscription did not solve the problem and only forced the rituals underground. Once they go underground there is no control and the danger is that the worst of the traditional ways will develop and not the best. Individuals will exploit these beliefs for personal, egoistic advantage and gain. It will not be the proper relationships to everything and everybody which will be stressed and cultivated, but the exterior action, the legalism. It will not be the guilt for the broken relationship to the living and dead and to the environment and the desire to straighten them that will be deepened and cultivated, but the legal compensation, the material pay back.

Besides, even were the old rituals not to be prac-

tised anymore, the new Christian rituals are in danger of being reinterpreted in the sense of the old ones. Melanesian religiosity misses the personal involvement; the actions. Prayers are no adequate substitute for the traditional rituals. When praying one is asked to fold one's hands to receive God's free gift but Melanesian religious experience tells one that God has already shown how to plant a garden. Is the asking for food with folded hands instead of getting them dirty not ignoring his gift of knowledge and power? Is that passive praying really obedience to God's plan as experienced by the cultivators or disregard for it? Is it universal Christian faith or Western cultural religious experience? Yes religious, yes Christian, but cultural, limited, Western and not universal.

3. Human 'work'

Human intervention through traditional rituals was formally rejected and branded as magic and superstition. The absolute gratuitousness of God's action and love was stressed and the human intervention was interpreted as denial of this key aspect of God's love. For people nourished by a biocosmic religious experience, by God's revelation through the cultures of the planters, this was not true. The difference between a planter and a gatherer is that the former must tend to the environment to get his food and must do it according to certain rules. The older generation teaches the younger one how to go about getting a good crop. The gatherer does not interfere with the environment. He takes only what is put there by the one who created it. The gatherer only collects, gathers what is already available. He is not involved in the process of cultivating what he collects. These are two totally different attitudes: the former must get involved in the process of getting the crops to grow, the latter not. As a matter of fact, he could not get involved even if he tried. This is the cultural background for the misunderstandings between the two religious experiences.

There was and there is a basic misunderstanding of the biocosmic blind obedience and trust in the rituals, i.e., in the prescribed way. The problem of the biocosmic religion was not the use of human skill to improve, but just the opposite: there was too little trust in the human reasoning and too much trust in and obedience to the prescribed way. Let us take the Dema story I already mentioned. To kill the mother, the source of life for the child, in order that the child might have life, does not make sense. It goes against human reasoning and logic. However, those who follow this nonsensical advice, survive, while those who use their common sense, perish. The distinction between the divine, the supernatural, the non-human is theologically very important but practically irrelevant. The main point was that people did not trust their intellect and followed their experience and

reason. This misunderstanding of the religious situation by the missionaries allowed the worst of this absolute obedience and dependence on what comes from outside human reason, to become the main hindrance to medical and technical development.

The ritual was part of a process of secularisation, of recognising the human responsibility in the world. (I distinguish between secularisation and secularism. The former denotes a process from a situation where everything was expected from the supernatural to a situation of recognition and acceptance of the human responsibility in the world while the latter denotes an attitude which denies the supernatural in this world). However, this responsibility was still very tentative, still bound to a revelation coming from outside human nature and contradicting it. The traditional stories stress this situation very clearly. Humans did not trust their own intellect but relied totally on outside revelation. It is just the opposite of what the missionaries assumed and accused the people of. It was not human skill bending the supernatural, but total human subjection hindering the development of human reasoning and human skills. This is what I read in the traditional stories. The rituals were human involvement but in total submission to a revelation that contradicted human experience. There was open distrust of human reason and wisdom. The missionary task ought to have helped people go to the next step of secularisation: to trust and use their God-given reason.

It is not a question of allowing traditional rituals and practices to continue for ever, but to begin where the people are, offering them alternatives which make sense within their system and can take off from there. An example might illustrate what I mean by this. One day a church worker told me:

When I am sick, sometimes I go to the European nurse and sometimes to the traditional healer. God is our Father and does not like us, his children, to suffer even if it is our own fault if we get sick. He therefore gave knowledge to some people on how to cure sickness. He gave you Europeans the knowledge about injections and penicillin and he gave our ancestors other knowledge on how to heal. Therefore, sometimes I go to the nurse and sometimes to the healer and when I am healed I remunerate those who cured me and I thank the Father in heaven because it was neither the nurse nor the healer who helped me but the knowledge and power of the Father through them.

Here is a man who is a Christian church worker but still very much a Melanesian. For him, God will never help unless humans get involved and follow the prescribed way. God revealed to his children how to cure and now they must do the curing. This Melanesian Christian reinterprets the Western medicine as an alternative

to the traditional one and as a further sign of God's care. Just to pray without going to the healer or to the nurse would have been wrong for him; it would have been a sign of no trust in the Father — a sin against the first commandment in the Christian sense. The best prayer was to use what God had already provided. This Christian still uses both systems, but once the Western medicine proves to him that it can take better care of all his needs, he will have no problem in giving up what does not help anymore. (This is not the case as yet. Western medicine cares for the body but not enough for the heart, the feelings, the emotions of the whole person as traditional healing often does). If he goes to the traditional healer, it is because he still finds help there.

Some denominations like the Roman Catholics offered a compromise through their many rituals and blessings. Other denominations had no such alternatives. However, the basic religious experience is not recognised. The danger is that what is not taken care of officially, is done in bad conscience. What the church worker had done and told me about, is condemned as a sin against the first commandment by the Christian Churches. Anthropologically, one is allowed to doubt whether this religious experience can be forgotten, especially when the cultural environment which mediates it, is still present. The Christian teaching and the daily experience contradict each other. If the problem is seen and discussed in an open dialogue, solutions can be found that can be acceptable and the abuses can be prevented. However, ignorance or denial of the deep religious roots of the problem will not solve it.

This problem of the access to power is further clarified by looking at some of the mediators of that power: the healers and sorcerers, the ancestors, and the 'spirits'.

4. Healers and sorcerers

Christianity recognises the possibility of miraculous actions but miracles always point to God and his direct help. A miracle proves that one is God's friend, that God helps him or her. A miracle by somebody who does not recognise God is interpreted as coming from God's enemy, Satan. When Christianity faced the healers and sorcerers in PNG it was not prepared to assess the situation and to dialogue with it. Either the power came directly from God or it came from Satan. That a person might have naturally such miraculous powers was not considered. The only solution was to reject any claim of validity for the power of these people or to link it with bad spirits.

The fact that Christians still go to traditional healers proves that there is an area of conflict. The lack of dialogue once more allowed the worst to happen. In-

stead of developing a greatly needed process of discernment between healers and fakes, between helpers and exploiters of human credulity, everybody was put into the same category and condemned. Those who had experienced healing could not accept this categorical condemnation. Their experience proved it wrong and so people doubted the ability of the Western Church to understand the Melanesian reality. Even today people speak of 'bush' sickness and 'bush' healing. Bush sickness cannot be understood and cured by Western medicine and the Western mind in general. Christianity with its blank denial prevented the much needed discernment to develop. People can be exploited by anybody who is clever enough to do so. The loser is the faith of the people which misses a chance to experience God's care for them in this important field of healing and the people's pockets which are taxed by the demands of many who only exploit their credulity. Instead of liberating the people from exploitation and opening their eyes to the revelation which takes place continuously in daily life, Western Christianity made it difficult for Christians to free themselves.

5. Ancestors

Western Christian and Melanesian experiences clash on the reality of the dead and ancestors or, better, on the nature of the human person and of human life. Does death end the relationships which make up the human person? Does death change them drastically?

Melanesians see the person, who is constituted by relationships, as continuing after death and this means his or her duties and rights, his or her obligations and expectations which make up the relationships to the community, continue. The dead are still an integral part of human society and of their original community. Western Christianity does not accept this world view. For the West, the dead and ancestors do not belong to human society anymore; as souls, which belong to the category of the spirits, they belong to the world of spirits, not to the human one.

Even the Roman Catholics, influenced by the decisions of the Rites Controversy in China, rejected this Melanesian understanding of ancestors. Christianity spoke about ancestor worship, about a kind of idolatry in which the ancestors took the place of God or assumed the role of mediators, a role which belongs only to Jesus Christ. However, Melanesians felt obligations and had expectations of a social nature; they relate to blood relatives not to supernatural beings. That after a century of teaching to the contrary some or even many are confused is to be expected.

It is interesting to note the changes taking place in some parts of PNG. Today pigs are not killed in the

cemeteries during the funeral but while the old people are still alive to strengthen the relationships and make up for any wrong that might have been done in the past. The old people are then told that no more pigs will be killed at their funeral, proving that the killing in the cemeteries was not a sacrifice to the spirit of the dead, as Christianity understood it, but a meal with the departed relatives to strengthen the communal ties.

The Roman Catholic Church tried to find a compromise with its veneration of the saints, but, even that is the solution of another culture and does not solve the Melanesian problem. Melanesians are not concerned with saints in heaven but with active members of their natural community here on earth. It is not the presence of their ancestors in the Canon of the Mass which interests them, but their presence and help in daily life. They are not interested in saints but in relatives. *Anthropologically, a Christianity in which there is no special place for the ancestors is not Melanesian, is not fully inculturated.*

6. Spirits

Christianity came with its faith in spiritual entities: angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim, etc., etc. It recognised a whole spiritual world between the divine and the human one. So did the Melanesians. Although the traditional definition of Melanesian religions as ‘animism’ is definitely superficial and one-sided, it does stress the relevance of ‘spirits’ in the PNG religious life. However, the Christian and the Melanesian worlds were not integrated. There was no dialogue but monologue.

The spiritual entities were not recognised as symbols of God’s care but were taken simplistically as well defined entities. A whole field of dialogue was thus precluded. The Bible could profess faith in guardian angels of people (Mt 18:10) and places (Dn 10:12-14), but was not able to dialogue with the similar experiences in Melanesian religions. The possibility of linking the ‘*masalai*’ — the Pidgin term for ‘spirits’ — with the care of God for his people, as the Bible did with the Iranian spirits, was not actualised, and Christianity in Melanesia is the poorer for it. Anthropologically this is a key area of friction and should be of pastoral concern.

Conclusion

Christianity in PNG has deep roots and people are ready to die for this faith as Blessed Peter Torot, the catechist who died for his faith during the Second World War, exemplifies. However, the daily life of Christians shows tensions which cannot be explained away by human sinfulness and by evil in people. History shows that the first encounter between the Christian missionaries and the people of PNG, though motivated by love —

and many gave their life for this service — was marred by ignorance and misunderstanding of the local religious experiences. Besides, Christianity was not totally unbiased as it grew out of Israel which, in order to survive as an ethnic group, had to fight against the agrarian and so strongly biocosmic religions of Canaan. That fight for survival did not allow Israel to dialogue with the biocosmic religious experience and its symbols. Christianity followed suit. PNG easily accepted the Christian God, the creator of heaven and earth, the people somehow already knew, but that God was too heavenly, too spiritual and his liturgy was concerned with eternal life, with spiritual grace, with heaven and not with the PNG biocosmic concerns of gardens, pigs, growth, and fertility in all its forms.

Secondly, regarding the relation of the creatures to God, Christianity did not understand the Melanesian religious experience and attitude and branded it as primitive, magical, and superstitious. This misunderstanding prevented dialogue and the Gospel could not challenge these religious aspects but only the Western (mis)interpretations of the same, forcing them to go underground where no check nor challenge is possible. *The central problem is that of mediation: does the creator God act directly or indirectly through mediators?* This mediation refers to the ordinary people who perform so-called *rituals* in their daily life, to healers and sorcerers, to ancestors, and to so-called spirits. Though the traditional definition of Melanesian religions as ‘animism’ is definitely superficial and one-sided, it does stress the relevance of ‘spirits’ in PNG religious life. Christianity to be an integral part of the Melanesian cultures must enter into a serious dialogue about these ‘spirits’.

To stress that there is only one mediator, Jesus Christ, is to miss the point. Who is Jesus Christ for PNG? Jesus is the answer, no doubt, but what is the PNG question?

Mrs Irene Hancy

Cultural Transformation in Rural Communities

"The more Catholic I am the more deeply Maori I feel"

Married with three children and 11 grandchildren; Career. Community Enrolled Nurse for 20 years; Area Manager for Society for Intellectually Handicapped for 10 years; six years as Chairperson of the Northern Pastoral Council. Now – a lady of leisure!!

1. My Beginnings

I was born child number seven into a family of eight sisters and six brothers. Now in all nine family members remain. We lived on a farm, so there was plenty to keep us occupied. My parents, both Maori, were amazing leaders as I reflect on their lives and the roles each played. First, as a husband/wife team and then as parents; they each belonged to different religions — my Father a Mormon, my Mother a Ratana. The Ratana religion also believes in God the Supreme Being, and proclaims this in a truly Maori way. If ever there was conflict between my parents regarding their different doctrines, I cannot recall such a time. I and the rest of my siblings were baptised Mormon in the river that runs through my valley. A routine day would begin with my Father dedicating the day and all family activities to the Lord, for guidance and well being. This would take place in the small hours of the morning. This was and in some of the rural communities is still the practice — to greet the Lord before the birds do in the early morning!

We as a family were raised to appreciate that the Bible was the book above all books, that it contained all the answers to wholesome and joyful living, living with integrity, with justice and with love. My parents, both fluent Maori speakers, encouraged us in traditional cultural teachings both at home and in the *marae* (= the Maori meeting house). The evenings then, once the chores had been completed, would revolve around singing hymns, Bible stories, and shared prayer. My Father taught about the love of Christ for us as a family, and the need for us to love each other. On Saturdays all manual chores had to be completed — Sunday clothes ironed, shoes polished, everyone bathed, wood collected, produce from the garden gathered — all in preparation for Sunday. No work was done on Sunday. Baking, etc. was all done on Saturday. Where were we going to on Sunday? For most times, no-

where because Sunday worship was held at home. Neighbours from the community would gather, and my Father would conduct a service of prayer, song, scripture, and testimony bearing witness to Christ. We would afterwards share a sumptuous meal prepared by my Mother. Food was also contributed by our neighbours who had come for the service. Sunday evening after prayer was family sharing time. Any family concerns were dealt with and each family member was invited to have an input.

My education was very basic. With such a big family, my parents could not afford to send us to boarding school. After three and a half years at College, I went nurse aiding in Obstetrics for two years and then into the New Zealand Women's Royal Army Corps. Through my working years I still attended Church activities when I was able to. I enjoyed my three years in the Army and the discipline was great for me, as well as the security of friends and curfews. I met my husband in 1959 and we married in a Registry Office in 1963 but not before two sets of Parents, Grandparents, Aunties and Uncles had tried to reach some compromise between the two families — perhaps a mixed marriage, no marriage? Eventually we went to the Registry Office trying to find a way not to distress either family by marrying into one religion or the other. We each loved and respected our families, but we also recognised that the life was going to be ours to live. With my parents blessing I converted and was received into the Catholic Church 18 months after marrying — our marriage was also blessed. In Maoridom it is common for families to support each other in caring for children. My husband cared for his elderly Grandparents as well as two children. These two children, a boy and a girl, were to become our responsibility (after we had been married for only two years) because of the death of this wonderfully hardworking and devoted lady. In 1968 we adopted our youngest son and now we have 11 grandchildren.

2. My Experience of Church

A. My Journey

My experience of the Church, its ritual and culture, in the beginning was very powerful. Maori people are very much a people of ritual and ceremony, understanding the sacredness of God, of creation and people. So then the 98 per cent Maori community with strong leadership that I lived with, will always be a wonderful memory of ‘Priest and People’ worshipping God in oneness. Latin and Maori, music, beautiful choir singing — Mass was both a joyful and a humbling experience. That was 35 years ago.

In search of work, we settled in a rural parish community. Again, priests and people worked together and even though the dominant culture was European, it seemed not to matter because the Parish Council was aware that many Catholic Maori lived there but were not attending Mass. My role was to take C.C.D. (Confraternity of Catholic Doctrine) on a railway station — in the waiting room. I especially remember the eagerness of the children and the enthusiasm of the parents. The children drew the parents to Mass, and the parish priest was especially encouraging and open to dialogue with Maori people and visited the homes regularly. We were sorry to be leaving this small rural community after seven years.

Moving to the Far North was to prove the most challenging time. Marriage, family work, Church, the sick, the elderly, the children. There were more times that I can recall going to Mass as an observer, rather than as a participant. I have the image of being able to see through a glass panel, but not to be able to get through the glass — hence the feeling of isolation. Some priests were sympathetic, but at a loss as to how to deal with a growing number of Maori parishioners who were seeking more participation in parish affairs including Mass celebrated in the Maori language. Eventually, we were invited to have a Mass one Sunday per month where only the Maori hymns, and later on the responses to the Mass, were sung. The Maori community had also established a Maori Pastoral Committee. The team became very effective in the community outreach. When a Catholic died and was taken to the meeting house to lie in state for three days, the pastoral team were responsible for the smooth running and organisation of morning/evening prayers, the liturgy/Mass within the house of mourning. The meeting house becomes a natural place for evangelization because it is the heartbeat for the Maori community.

Desolation. Loneliness becomes the experience when one has to deny one’s identity, one’s culture, and conform to or assimilate another.

By reason of our common human heritage and our redemption in Christ we have a right:

- To our ancestral and cultural heritage;
- To have our traditions, religious values, language, customs, myths and art forms used in Education in Faith;
- To express Christ’s teaching in terms of our own culture (*NZ Catechetical Directory*: ‘We Live and Teach Christ Jesus’).

The leadership of the Pastoral Committee was very strong. Prayer was our sustenance and guidance. We embraced the sick, frail elderly and lonely, young marrieds and their families, visiting once a week for the Rosary. Parish Council meetings were a struggle, but only because we tended to burden ourselves with parish debt rather than the real needs of parish life, e.g. the youth as our leaders of tomorrow — what of their needs? Our response, a response hopefully that does not widen the gap of faith and love and hope between young and old. For “Parents as first teachers of the Faith”, there now exists a problem because they themselves often do not understand their Catholic faith — and in most cases have great difficulty making time for any religious teaching.

The *Taitokerau Pastoral Council* is made up of nine Parishes in the North. My first attendance at the Taitokerau Pastoral Council meeting was the most wonderful home coming! The meeting with such esteemed Elders and Leaders, Priests and Religious — what joy! This meeting was by Maori for Maori, but not exclusively — other non-Maori were able to attend, but the meetings would be conducted in a way relevant to Maori. Through the report of each delegate, we were able to get an insight into the amazing work that people do because of their love for Christ. We were together, as community; we rejoiced in the strength of God and each other. At the first Maori Mass, I was unable to respond because I was too busy weeping realising how desperately lonely I had been.

The Maori Pastoral Care Plan.

Its purpose:

1. To provide for Catholic Maori the principle, process and opportunity for expressing and living the Catholic faith in a unique and meaningful Maori way within the Church.
2. To provide for the Catholic Church the process

and opportunity for implementing the principles of inculturation for the whole Church of Aotearoa-New Zealand.

B. The Mission Statement:

The Plan promotes the development of Maori spirituality and culture as being essential before there can be any dynamic growth of the Catholic faith among Maori, in a way that is deeply Maori and truly Catholic. In my opinion this has proved to be the most revolutionary ... for Maori as well as for society. It has been both directly and indirectly influenced by the rituals and customs of Maori, God fearing people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Maori proverbs give vivid imagery to God as all seeing, all knowing and eternal. In times past there was no apparent need to write principles and processes for Maori because they were constantly being lived by a consensus people — God, Family, community. Today, however, with the political, socio-economic struggle that Maori encounter there is a greater need for understanding the principle and process for ordered and stress-free living. My life has been greatly enhanced — in fact — transformed. In Tel Aviv written on the wall of the Memorial Tomb for the six million Jews who died during the Holocaust, were these words: *“To forget is to bring exile, to remember is to bring reconciliation”*. How true this is for us all. The Maori Pastoral Care Plan then will continue to transform and liberate people to live with order, peace and joy. The great work where Father Henare Tate has spent the last 30 years recording events, practices, customs unique to each tribe throughout Aotearoa-New Zealand, will be reason to thank and praise God. Fr Tate remembered and wrote so that his people would not remain in exile but be so liberated as to be receptive to the dictum of Christ, *“Come listen to my word, act!”*

St Ignatius has been my great mentor and friend. He introduced me to Christ, invited me into the Synagogue to listen to Jesus preach, and before I came to Rome I visited the Holy Land. I visited the Synagogue and remembered. I was not prepared for the encounter and right now I am unable to describe the experience, except for now to say I was deeply moved, humbled, and yet overjoyed! The more Catholic I become the more deeply Maori I feel.

The Gospel enhances, transforms and releases the cultural understanding of the truth. Every culture has its place in God’s household. The Gospel transforms every culture. Language is at the very heartbeat of any culture, and shifting back to live in the place of

my birth, was given a wonderful homecoming. Surrounded by family, relatives, meeting houses, language nests, the whole community and Church life was exhilarating and still is. My previous parish was predominantly European and it was not until I returned to the Hokianga that I realised how un-Maori I had become.

Listening to Christ’s Word was fine, but how to translate it into Maori and Maori thinking? Quite a task — and it very often requires inner conflict or a struggle to make Christ’s message relevant in a deeply Maori way. When surrounded by non-Maori speakers the habit is to revert to English. While my husband and I have always used the English Bible in the past, we now use the Maori one. The Gospel, through the Maori language has confirmed our sense of identity as deeply Catholic, deeply Maori. The Maori Pastoral Care Plan calls us to rise, to action, to reclaim what we have lost in order to go forward as a dynamic people of faith.

Today in my community there are many reasons to feel new life and hope in Christ. Maori Elders, men and women, people in ministry gather together each month for Gospel reflection and to discuss social issues as well as Church and community needs. High unemployment, drug and alcohol addiction, teenage suicide, are a very real part of Maori existence today. Young people seem to prefer to live together rather than marry — much to the distress of parents and grandparents. Despite all of these things, the Word of God continues to spread, more families attend Mass, more groups meet for music, liturgy, leadership issues, Church teaching. We visit the sick and dying in Hospital, in homes. We mourn our dead with and through the life, death and Resurrection of Christ. We are blessed to have priests who are a community focused on the task of working with the people to build up Eucharistic communities.

While it is little and slow and fragile, it is still exciting in Christ! Who would ever have thought that I would thank God for pain, frustration, isolation and desolation. I most certainly do, otherwise I do not believe I could enjoy the sweetness of this moment but for my journey in *him*.

Mgr Michel Visi

L'Eglise en Océanie

Introduction:

L'Océanie est une région du monde composée de plusieurs pays et ethnies. Il est donc difficile de parler de l'Océanie; car chaque pays a sa propre histoire et expérience de la foi en Jésus Christ. On peut cependant contempler l'Océanie dans toute sa diversité et dire que ce que Dieu a créé est bon. La beauté géographique des îles d'Océanie attire aujourd'hui beaucoup de touristes. Les touristes n'ont pas seulement trouvé des belles plages; mais ils ont trouvé surtout des peuples fiers de leur foi en Jésus Christ. Certains sont revenus des îles transformés par la foi vivante des peuples d'Océanie.

L'appel à la conversion adressé à tous les peuples de la terre ne s'arrête pas ici pour les peuples d'Océanie. Cet appel doit être entendu davantage en Océanie. En effet l'éloge que nous faisons de l'Eglise en Océanie aujourd'hui est le fruit de l'œuvre de tant d'hommes et de femmes qui ont témoigné Jésus Christ. Leur souvenir est un rappel constant de ce que Dieu en Jésus Christ a accompli au milieu de nous.

L'émerveillement des peuples d'Océanie

L'évangélisation de nos îles de l'Océanie a apporté la paix, la réconciliation et l'unité que les chefs coutumiers de nos villages n'ont pas su maintenir au milieu de leurs peuples. Dans une société où la peur des esprits maléfiques et de la sorcellerie a dominé les consciences, l'évangile a été pour les premiers chrétiens de l'Océanie une expérience de soulagement, de liberté et de libération. Depuis le début de l'Eglise en Océanie, la liturgie, en particulier les célébrations des sacrements, ont été des moments de célébrations marqués par les danses coutumières. Jusqu'à présent les gens des îles sont émerveillés de l'Eglise et de l'œuvre de l'évangélisation qu'ils constatent autour d'eux. Les bienfaits de l'évangile de Jésus Christ dépassent tout ce qu'ils peuvent imaginer. L'émerveillement est autant plus grand lorsqu'ils se reconnaissent dans les valeurs que l'Eglise défend et veut promouvoir au milieu des peuples de la terre. L'histoire de l'évangélisation des

îles de l'Océanie est simplement l'évangile vécu en cette partie du monde. Il y a eu accueil et refus de la foi de part et d'autre; mais le témoignage de ceux et celles qui nous ont précédés reste un émerveillement de l'évangile du Christ. Sans doute, l'émerveillement est une expression simple et réel de la foi des gens ordinaires des îles. Émerveillés de ce que Jésus a réalisé au milieu d'eux, les gens des îles se demandent comment suivre aujourd'hui Jésus Christ, le Chemin; proclamer sa vérité et vivre sa vie. Cette question n'est pas un cri de désespoir. Elle exprime la foi des peuples du Pacifique et leur volonté de rester fidèles au Christ et à son Eglise. L'assemblée spéciale du synode d'Océanie répondra certainement à la question ici posée.

L'accueil du concile Vatican II en Océanie

Le concile Vatican II a permis à l'Eglise de revenir à l'essentiel du message de l'évangile et à la tradition apostolique pour mieux se comprendre et définir sa mission aujourd'hui en fidélité avec Jésus Christ. L'Eglise a été donc appelée à se renouveler pour mieux découvrir sa vie et sa vocation. Ce fut le thème de communion qui a résumé toute la vie et la mission de l'Eglise.

Vivre en communion en Eglise, a été un appel que les peuples d'Océanie étaient disposés à accueillir. Cet appel les a atteint profondément dans leur mentalité de vie communautaire. L'esprit de vie communautaire a facilité la communion en Eglise en Océanie. Cependant, vivre en communion a été le plus grand défi pour les populations des îles. Vivre en communion dans son propre village est facile; mais dans la communauté paroissiale formée de plusieurs villages, la communion est devenue une exigence.

Les peuples d'Océanie prennent à cœur les valeurs familiales. Le plus grand défi est de vivre ses mêmes valeurs familiales dans une plus grande communauté qui est la paroisse, le diocèse ou une communauté de vie consacrée. Le témoignage est authentique lorsqu'elle est vrai et qu'il vient du fond du cœur pour exprimer Jésus Christ. L'inculturation est une forme d'évangélisation qui invite chaque personne à

rechercher le Christ et de l'aimer vraiment.

La participation en Eglise

L'application de l'enseignement du Concile de l'Eglise sur la participation et la coopération des fidèles en raison de leur baptême ou d'un mandat délégué par l'autorité de l'Eglise a permis à un grand nombre de fidèles de contribuer à la mission confiée à leur Eglise locale. L'attitude de générosité et de solidarité vécue dans la vie traditionnelle et communautaire des peuples d'Océanie a trouvé une signification nouvelle dans la mentalité des gens des îles. Selon la tradition, le partage exige que ce qui est donné soit être rendu d'une façon ou d'une autre tôt ou tard. Le système de partage des gens des îles d'Océanie est comme une banque. Ce qui est donné ressemble à un emprunt à la banque. Celui qui reçoit à l'obligation de rendre l'équivalent de ce qu'il reçoit. Partager sans d'être remboursé est un témoignage vécu plus particulièrement dans la vie religieuse et sacerdotale par les jeunes qui se consacrent à la vie religieuse et sacerdotale. Donner sans espérer être remboursé; mais être comblés de l'amour de Dieu qui rend au centuple à ceux et celles qui partagent jusqu'au don de soi.

L'évangélisation depuis le concile Vatican II a sensibilisé les gens à se reconnaître davantage dans l'Eglise qu'ils forment et à laquelle ils appartiennent par leur baptême. Cet appel s'est fait entendre et beaucoup de fidèles participent à l'animation de la liturgie et offrent leur coopération aux ministres de l'Eglise.

Les catéchistes font un apostolat indispensable dans leur village d'origine et certains sont missionnaires dans un autre village ou île de leur pays. Ils sont plus nombreux que les prêtres et religieux(les). En tant que proches collaborateurs de prêtres responsables de paroisse, ils enseignent la foi dans la prédication, la préparation aux sacrements et dirigent leur communauté selon l'enseignement de l'Eglise.

Un des souhaits des évêques d'Océanie assemblés en Synode Spécial est de mettre en lumière l'enseignement du concile sur les droits et obligations des fidèles afin d'emmener plus de fidèles à se découvrir vraiment pour refléter clairement leur foi là où ils sont.

Le respect des ancêtres

Le renouveau apporté par le Concile est essentiellement un retour au source où l'Eglise prend conscience d'elle-même. Les océaniens ont toujours regardé vers le passé qui est aussi pour eux l'avenir, afin de vivre l'aujourd'hui de leur vie en conformité avec la culture léguée par les ancêtres. Dans la lumière du Concile les peuples de l'Océanie savent que la réflexion sur soi-même est avant tout un retour vers Dieu. La

sagesse des ancêtres vient de Dieu. Cette sagesse s'est manifestée en plénitude en Jésus Christ. Certainement, les peuples des îles de l'Océanie peuvent toujours admirer et suivre les conseils de leurs ancêtres. Ils le feront d'une façon meilleure dans la lumière de leur foi en Jésus Christ..

L'évangile vécu en Océanie

L'évangélisation des îles de l'Océanie a eu un début difficile. Les missionnaires étaient souvent confondus avec les explorateurs et navigateurs et pris pour des malfaisants venus exploiter la mer et les terres des Océaniens. On s'est méfié de l'évangélisation qu'il entreprenaient. Il y a eu des Océaniens qui ont refusé les missionnaires parce qu'il ne voulaient pas laisser de côté leurs coutumes pour adhérer entièrement à la foi en Jésus Christ. C'est pourquoi en Océanie le sang des martyrs a coulé. Leur mémoire est un rappel constant de Jésus Christ le Chemin, la Vérité et la Vie. C'est lui l'unique Sauveur du monde.

Aujourd'hui l'évangélisation de l'Océanie rencontre des nouvelles difficultés. Il y a actuellement des gens qui vivent traditionnellement dans leur village, d'autres vivent à la fois selon la tradition en intégrant quelques éléments de la vie moderne. D'autres encore vivent et travaillent dans des centres urbains. L'éducation a aidé énormément les populations des îles à concilier les valeurs traditionnelles avec la vie moderne. La majorité de la population a trouvé la stabilité dans les nouveaux contextes sociaux. Néanmoins, la sensibilisation des peuples d'Océanie contre les méfaits de la civilisation moderne et pour le discernement des nouvelles valeurs dans la civilisation moderne est un aspect d'évangélisation important, urgent et prioritaire.

La corruption au sein des gouvernements en Océanie

Le changement de style de vie conditionné par la technologie moderne ne tient pas souvent compte des valeurs humaines que la tradition a maintenu jusqu'à ce jour.

Les gouvernements des pays d'Océanie ont adopté le système démocratique de gouvernement à partir de leur indépendance. Quand elle est fondé sur la dignité humaine et le bien commun de la société, la démocratie devient un système où les droits et obligations des citoyens sont protégés. Cependant, le système démocratique n'a pas toujours été respecté. Les intérêts personnels de quelques individus dans l'état sont parfois plus grandes que ceux du peuple. La démocratie a été souvent dévié de la vérité et de la justice qu'elle doit

défendre et promouvoir dans une société démocratique. Dans nos sociétés modernes, comme en Océanie, c'est « *la raison du plus fort qui est toujours la meilleure* ». Presque dans tous les pays de l'Océanie on a parlé de corruption au sein des différents gouvernements. Les peuples des pays de l'Océanie sont chrétiens. Ce sont des chrétiens qui gouvernent les nations de l'Océanie; mais devant la politique et l'économie mondiales, les gouvernements locaux sont obligés d'imposer des structures et des lois selon les conditions économiques extérieures et exigences des pays donateurs sans tenir vraiment compte des besoins des peuples d'Océanie. La justice est une obligation qui revient à chèque personne; car elle est fondé sur le droit de la personne d'être respecté dans sa dignité et dans tout ce qu'il lui revient de droit. Le respect des Océaniens à l'égard de ce ceux qui les gouvernent dans l'état et dans l'Eglise exprime leur loyauté et soumission. Les dirigeants sont considérés comme des chefs. Néanmoins, ceux qui sont en autorité ont souvent été hypocrites à l'égard de ce respect. Ils ont abusé de la confiance de leur peuple.

Les dirigeants nationaux des îles de l'Océanie dépendent beaucoup de l'aide extérieure pour maintenir les services gouvernementaux et réaliser les projets de développements dans leurs pays. L'Eglise en Océanie exige que les dirigeants soient crédibles des finances mises a leur disposition pour servir la nation. Il est aussi important de la part des pays donateurs de bien analyser les projets présentés et de les accorder ou de les refuser seulement après une consultation quelconque auprès des personnes pour qui ces projets sont destinés.

L'évangélisation et le développement

L'évangélisation en Océanie a été étroitement lié au développement sociale. Aujourd'hui sur l'île Tanna au Sud de Vanuatu, l'évangélisation consiste à des constructions des routes, des conduites d'eau, des dispensaires et des écoles. Les congrégations religieuses qui ont oeuvré avec nous depuis le début de l'évangélisation ont contribué énormément au développement des pays de l'Océanie. Le développement a précédé l'évangélisation et reste un moyen important d'évangélisation. L'établissement des écoles demeure le moyen d'évangélisation par excellence. L'éducation humaine, sociale et religieuse donnée dans les écoles catholiques est une contribution indispensable pour l'éveil des vocations et la pratique des valeurs chrétiennes dans la vie familiale et professionnelle de nombreux catholiques et autres qui ont été instruits dans ces écoles. Aujourd'hui l'attention est portée sur les moyens de communications sociales pour transmettre les valeurs chrétiennes et promouvoir l'évangile du

Christ. Sans minimiser l'efficacité des moyens de communications modernes, les évêques d'Océanie constatent que les moyens des communications ne peuvent pas compenser l'évangélisation effectuée dans les écoles catholiques. Les médias peuvent plutôt la rendre plus efficace.

Les commissions de Justice et développement

Les aides financières pour le développement viennent surtout des agents catholiques d'aide de Nouvelle Zélande, d'Australie et d'ailleurs. Les agents d'aide pour le développement ont des critères et des conditions qu'il faut respecter pour présenter et demander une aide quelconque. Nous constatons avec regret que les critères exigés par les agents catholiques d'aide sont les mêmes critères que les autres agents d'aide extérieurs. Nous sommes tous d'accord sur le principe exigeant qu'un projet de développement soit destiné à une communauté; mais ces projets de développements doivent répondre aux vrais besoins des communautés tout en respectant la foi et la culture des peuples d'Océanie.

Conclusion

Le synode spéciale des évêques d'Océanie se situe dans la continuité de l'enseignement de l'Eglise présenté par le concile Vatican II. Le ministère pastoral confié aux évêques d'Océanie est une charge importante et indispensable. Veiller à l'unité de l'Eglise et promouvoir la participation de tous les fidèles, chacun et chacune selon sa condition de vie, est l'essentiel de la mission de l'Eglise. Cette mission exprime la nature même de l'Eglise. Quelque soit le charisme des communautés de vie consacré, c'est l'Eglise que nous sommes appelés à servir. L'Eglise en Océanie est devenue ce qu'elle est aujourd'hui grâce au dévouement et aux sacrifices des congrégations religieuses qui ont exercé leur charisme pour implanter l'Eglise. La communion en Eglise exprime aussi l'unité de l'Eglise dans la diversité des charismes.

C'est le témoignage des missionnaires qui est à la base de l'émerveillement des peuples de l'Océanie est de tout ce que l'Eglise représente pour eux. Le témoignage et le charisme de chaque communauté de vie consacrée est indispensable dans la vie de l'Eglise en Océanie. Les peuples d'Océanie sont appelés à vivre la sainteté de l'Eglise dans toute sa splendeur et dans toute son intégrité dans la diversité de leur culture. C'est pourquoi le témoignage de la vie consacrée accompagnera toujours l'Eglise surtout dans sa marche vers l'an 2000.

Bishop Michael Putney

Ecumenism in Australia today

In the past 20 years, there have been a number of major events which have shaped the contemporary ecumenical movement in Australia. The first of these was the formation of the *Uniting Church in Australia*, in 1977. Its very title indicates that it did not wish to settle down to becoming just another denomination. Rather it believed itself to be called by God to be a catalyst for further coming together of Christian Churches in Australia. This commitment to dialogue and to drawing Churches together does not necessarily mean that Uniting Church ecumenists have in mind the same kind of union which came about when the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia, and the Presbyterian Church of Australia united. They now consider all the models of Church union which have emerged in recent decades. The Uniting Church has retained its membership of the World Methodist Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as well, so there have been Uniting Church participants representing those bodies in ecumenical dialogues on the international scene. The Uniting Church has always been, and presumably will continue to be, a catalyst for ecumenical collaboration.

Another major ecumenical event in recent years was the formation of the *National Council of Churches of Australia* in 1994. This Council is significant, not only because of the inclusion of the Roman Catholic Church for the first time, but also because of its new constitution and its giving a new impetus to ecumenical relations on the national level. These relations have continued to deepen, and around Australia many rejoiced that at the forum this year the Lutheran Church of Australia became a full member. This same Lutheran Church achieved its own internal union within Australia only in 1965.

A similar event of some significance, especially for Queensland, was the formation of *Queensland Churches Together* in 1992 which involved the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church of Australia (Queensland District) for the first time. Since 1992, all remaining Roman Catholic Dioceses and Archdioceses around Australia have become members of their State Councils.

On the occasion of the formation of the *Australian Council of Churches*, all the reports of bilateral conversations between Churches in Australia were published in one volume (Raymond K. Williamson, ed., *Stages on*

the Way. Documents from the Bilateral conversations between the Churches in Australia. Melbourne: JBCE, 1994). Dialogue between the Anglican Church and the Churches of Christ began in 1983, with the Lutheran Church in 1972, and with the Uniting Church in Australia in 1979. The Uniting Church itself entered into dialogue with the Churches of Christ in 1978, with the Lutheran Church in 1979, with the Greek Orthodox Church in 1981, and with the Roman Catholic Church in 1977. A Lutheran / Roman Catholic Dialogue began in 1977. These dialogues have done much to draw the Christian Churches together in Australia.

The holding of the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra in 1991 was also a significant stimulus to ecumenical collaboration in Australia. At a theological students' course on ecumenism held in Canberra prior to the World Council of Churches Assembly, Rev. David Gill, the present General-Secretary of the *Council of Churches in Australia*, drew the theological students' attention to a number of distinctive features of the ecumenical movement in Australia. The first was the *tyranny of distance* in Australia which has led to an enhanced role for State ecumenical bodies in relation to the National Council of Churches. The second was the fact that eight of the 13 members of the then Australian Council of Churches were Orthodox which reflects the multi-culturalism of Australian society. He also drew attention to the impact of the Assembly on the life of the Australian Churches (David Gill, "The Australian Council of Churches", in Denise C. Sullivan, ed., *Living Ecumenism. Christian Unity for a New Millennium* (Melbourne: LJBCE, 1995) pp. 270-276). The public spectacle, the news-coverage, the call to prayer, the visitors' programme, parish visits by delegates and so on, provided a real inspiration and catalyst for ecumenical reflection and collaboration in Australia.

Another event or series of events in Australia was and is the regular gatherings of National Heads of Churches, which began in 1985, and of State Heads of Churches around the country, some of which began even earlier than that. The structure and membership of these gatherings vary from state to state, but the collaboration and real partnership which they inaugurate is beginning to be taken for granted.

This litany of special moments and encouraging events ought not to lead us to form a too rosy picture of

the ecumenical scene in Australia. There are a number of factors with which we still must deal. These are: the impact on Australian culture upon ecumenism, tentativeness about common witness, and the new divisions cutting across the Churches, but also dividing the Churches, one from another.

One could point to at least three influences of Australian culture on the ecumenical movement. Firstly, Australians are very often fairly pragmatic and easy-going. They do not appreciate public conflict or lack of harmony over matters they consider fairly private or “no-one else’s business”. Very often they include among these matters a person’s spirituality or religious beliefs. This means that they have an automatic sympathy for the ecumenical movement because it serves to facilitate the points of intersection between members of different Churches on civic occasions or on occasions of communal social response. Governments at all levels have rejoiced in the Churches becoming ecumenically engaged because it has made it possible to have ecumenical services on civic occasions. Communities have been glad that at times of communal celebration or grief the Churches have been able to serve them together. For many, theological, doctrinal, liturgical, and spiritual differences pale into insignificance in comparison with the massive gain for society of Churches working together and being able to collaborate. There is almost a pressure on Churches to be ecumenical in Australian society for the sake of social harmony.

This phenomenon has very different consequences. It is obviously a great bonus that committed ecumenists in Australia have the support of society for their own labours to bring Christian Churches into a collaborative relationship. Moreover, on the local level, parishes, congregations and communities around the country have a natural foundation of good will for ecumenical efforts because of this Australian sentiment which one might call “natural” ecumenism. However, it is not clear that this phenomenon ought to be considered totally a gain. Perhaps it is truly appropriate to call much of this a *natural* phenomenon. It partly arises out of the Australian mentality of avoiding conflict over private matters, such as religion. This means that very often the result can be more one of non-denominational collaboration than of a truly ecumenical relationship. Full ecumenical collaboration brings into the relationship not just what is shared between the parties, but also those points over which they differ and have sometimes been in conflict. Sometimes Australian society would seem to prefer that we do not bring those matters into our relationship and that we remain on the level of a basic Christian good-will and mutual acceptance of each other.

While this still would remain a positive influence or a positive foundation for the ecumenical movement, it does not take that movement any great distance until the relationships are mature enough to carry into them, not

just what is shared, but what is not shared or what is even opposed. This latter, more mature, relationship is not *natural*. It is only achieved through the grace of Jesus Christ. It is the fellowship of believers who share the life of Christ but yet, while retaining that fellowship in Christ, are prepared to acknowledge and deal with the fact that they differ from each other even about very important matters. To be able to hold their relationship together despite those differences is to experience the ecumenical fruit of the grace of Jesus Christ. It is important that our Churches do not settle for the former non-denominational fellowship and believe that they have gone the full distance of ecumenical relationships.

A second feature of Australian culture which has a significant effect upon the ecumenical movement is the relativism sometimes found in contemporary Australian society. As a “post-modern” culture which sometimes has little sympathy for institutions, or for larger traditions, or for any claims of universal truth, Australian culture can easily view as left-overs from a dogmatic past those who maintain that they cannot yet take more radical steps towards Christian unity because of unresolved differences over the truth of the Gospel. This is especially true of young Australians.

When tolerance becomes the favoured virtue in a society, there are not only great gains in the area of harmonious relationships, there can also be some losses in the area of commitment to the quest for truth, and fidelity to the truth once attained. In other words, the reluctance of some in the Churches to be inhibited in any way by the theological differences between the Churches is not simply a sign of the impatience of the Holy Spirit and a “sense of the faithful” which has moved beyond the tardy, slow working dialogues of church leaders. It can also be the impatience of people who no longer believe that it is possible or worthwhile to affirm any truth beyond the variety of stances which individuals have and which ought to be respected in a context of mutual tolerance.

A third feature of Australian culture which impacts on the ecumenical movement is the growing secularism in Australian society. This can have a very mixed effect on the ecumenical movement. Obviously the erosion of church allegiance and certainly of church attendance as evidenced in the 1996 Census and the 1997 Church Life Survey is a cause for real concern. At the same time as Churches confront this context in which they are called to preach and live the Gospel, they can discover that other churches are their colleagues and partners in a shared struggle to keep alive the flame of faith and to pass it on to a society no longer ready to receive it.

This has the potential to lead to a profound spiritual fellowship as each Church community digs deep within its own spiritual tradition to find its profounder sources of life and hope, while it struggles to survive and to grow

strong in a society which tends to marginalise it and which can consider its traditions mildly amusing at best — for these sources of hope are often shared with other Christians. This truly missionary context could, in fact, be the greatest catalyst for ecumenical collaboration and even for Christian unity, if the Churches could but rise to the occasion and recognise that they no longer need be victims of our society, but indeed could enter into it and transform it for Christ. Then, hopefully, they might come to the realisation that there is no point in trying to do this alone, and that they need to discover more and more ways in which to present themselves as one Christian voice to an unlistening Australian society. However, the whole question of common witness is approached only very tentatively by Australian Churches.

In 1982 the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches produced a report entitled, *Common Witness*, with the following central paragraph:

When he prayed that all be one so the world might believe (Jn 17:21), Jesus made a clear connection between the unity of the Church and the acceptance of the Gospel. Unhappily Christians are still divided in their Churches and the testimony they give to the Gospel is thus weakened. There are, however, even now many signs of the initial unity that already exists among all followers of Christ and indications that it is developing in important ways. What we have in common, and the hope that is in us, enable us to be bold in proclaiming the Gospel and trustful that the world will receive it. Common witness is the essential calling of the Church and in an especial way it responds to the spirit of this ecumenical age in the Church's life. It expresses our actual unity and increases our service to God's word, strengthening the Churches both in proclaiming the Gospel and in seeking for the fulness of unity (30) ("Common Witness. Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC, 1982", in Michael Kinnamon and Brien E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement. An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC, 1997) p. 386).

The second last sentence is very significant: "Common witness is the essential calling of the Church and in an especial way it responds to the spirit of this ecumenical age in the Church's life". In describing what common witness might involve, the text emphasised two different dimensions. Firstly: "Through proclaiming the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, they affirm (i.e. those engaged in common witness) that God wills the salva-

tion of his people in all dimensions of their being, eternal and earthly". Secondly, it recognised: "(Common witness) means Christian involvement in matters of social justice in the name of the poor and the oppressed".

Right throughout the history of the World Council of Churches there have been tensions between the different movements which brought it into being. For example, there is a tension between the Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) stream/movement/programme and the Faith and Order or Christian Unity movement/stream/programme. In their earlier forms, these two movements were present and participated in the formation of the World Council of Churches 50 years ago. However, it was only in 1961 that the International Missionary Council became part of the World Council of Churches. Those who are involved in the Faith and Order stream have continually and rightly argued for its importance, indeed its necessity, in the World Council of Churches and the larger ecumenical movement. However, whatever marginalisation has occurred for Faith and Order or the quest for Christian unity, such marginalisation is nothing in comparison with the marginalisation of the missionary movement within the larger ecumenical movement and within the World Council of Churches. The missionary movement has always been "the poor relation".

Many ecumenists seem to be either focussed on the world and its need for justice, peace and the protection of the environment, or on the Churches and their need to come together in Christian unity. One cannot deny that working for justice, peace and the integrity of creation is integral to the mission of the Church and clearly the unity between the Churches is crucial to its mission and the central goal of the ecumenical movement. However, the foundational missionary dynamic of wishing to proclaim Jesus Christ to the world very seldom comes to the forefront in ecumenical programmes or even, perhaps, in the heart of many ecumenists. Everyone easily points to the Johannine text containing Jesus' prayer that we would be one so that the world might believe that it is the Father who sent him, but we are too easily sidetracked into affirming only the first part of his prayer: "that they/we may be one"; or unconsciously concluding it only with: "so that the world will exist in justice, peace and protective of the integrity of creation", rather than with "that the world may believe".

Last year, the fourth phase of the International Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and some representatives or members of classical Pentecostal Churches came to a conclusion. The topic for the phase, from 1990 to 1997, was *Evangelisation, Proselytism and Common Witness*. It is a very interesting document because, as many would know, in parts of Latin America there can sometimes be great tensions between the Roman Catholic Church and Pentecostal Churches because of the rapid growth of the latter at the expense of the

former. In paragraph 118 of the Report, a kind of definition of ‘common witness’ emerges:

Common witness means standing together and sharing together in witness to our common faith. Common witness can be experienced through joint participation in worship, in prayer, in the performance of good works in Jesus’ name and especially in evangelization. True common witness is not engaged in for any narrow, strategic denominational benefit of a particular community. Rather, it is concerned solely for the glory of God, for the good of the whole Church and the good of humankind (“Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness”, *Information Service* 97 (1998/I-II) 52).

There is no suggestion in the report, in fact the contrary, that such common witness between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals would be easy. Later in No. 122 the report indicates that when it speaks of common witness it is not suggesting that there should be any compromise involved in making this possible. On the contrary, “Common witness is not a call to indifference or to uniformity” it says. The report clearly affirms that common witness does not prevent individuals, communities or Churches from witnessing to their own distinctive heritage and, indeed, witnessing separately on matters about which they disagree. “However”, as it says, “this can be done without being contentious, with mutual love and respect”.

This document stands as a testimony to the fertility of the ecumenical movement through the generous loving activity of the Holy Spirit. It also stands as a challenge to all Christian churches. We are very often willing to bear common witness with other Churches on issues of justice, but sometimes less willing to bear common witness to the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Both forms of witness are essential and integrally related. To offer Jesus Christ to a society is to offer the way of life which he came to initiate in our world and that means to offer justice, peace and care for the environment.

But common witness does mean offering Jesus Christ. Have we perhaps become just a little reticent about this? Is one reason for such reticence the fact that we have entered into dialogue with our culture and with other World Religions? If reticence is a result of such dialogue, we have misunderstood the nature of dialogue. Authentic dialogue presupposes genuine witness. There is no value in dialoguing with “the other” whoever that may be, if we are not truly ourselves; and to be truly ourselves is to be fully Christian. In our case it means being truly convinced that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life.

We need to go much further than we already have as Christian churches in our dialogue with World Religions. We must continue to have enormous respect for the gifts of our culture and the signs of the Spirit that are there before we even utter one word of the Gospel. At the same time, we must never forget that we carry within ourselves and in our communities an enormous treasure which is the knowledge and love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and we must be willing to offer this gift, the greatest of all, to our society — and to do it together with other Christian Churches.

If we are so willing, and presumably many are, the question arises of how we might deal with those matters about which we disagree. There is already a common faith which all could proclaim and to which all could bear witness which has become obvious in our ecumenical dialogues, both bi-lateral and multi-lateral. For example, there is the marvellous contribution of the WCC Faith and Order Commission project: “Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today”. This study has explored our common faith as expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and has thereby laid a rich and broad foundation for common witness by a very wide range of Christian Churches.

Some Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches might not see the need for even all that has been discovered in this very important study. They would be content for Churches to come together around a simple message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Some of these would not consider many of the different beliefs and practices of Churches outside of this core as affecting the essentials or the fundamentals of the Gospel.

On the other hand, other Christian Churches, including the Catholic Church, would want to affirm the essential interconnectedness of the various truths of salvation as found in the Scriptures and proclaimed in the credal formulas of the Church through the ages. While we too would begin with a simple message of salvation and also believe that this was a non-negotiable essential core, proclaiming the fullness of the Gospel for us would lead deeper and deeper into the full faith of the Church through the ages as we have come to understand it. So there would be other essentials for us, less central but still integrally part of the Gospel or the Apostolic Tradition or the Word of God as we understand it. We would not want any partners involved in common witness to suggest that other truths of the faith which we hold dear are peripheral or even questionable. We would want any common witness to draw people back to and not away from the Church of their baptism, if such people have already been baptised but have drifted from the church. Such matters would need to be addressed with sensitivity before common witness could take place in an effective way.

Evangelisation, or evangelism, with all the challenges involved has to be an integral part of the common witness of Christian Churches. But again it is not all of it. Integral to bearing witness to or living the Gospel is the way in which we live and the kind of world we are called to work for by the grace of God. To proclaim Jesus and not also to be willing to proclaim reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, in the Australian context, would be to proclaim a Jesus who is not the Jesus of the Gospels. At the same time, to proclaim justice and peace and the integrity of creation but not Jesus, is to offer only the fruits and not the source of the new life our world needs so desperately.

A final issue with which we must deal in Australia is the new divisions which are cutting across our Churches, but which are also dividing the Churches one from another. This has always been a perennial problem in the ecumenical movement. Some issues cut through all the Churches, particularly political ones. The best ecumenical response in the past has always been to try to share wisdom about the issues between the Churches and, where possible, to tackle them together. Increasingly, Australian Churches are confronting together the social questions which arise for all of us such as reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, racism and multi-culturalism, unemployment, industrial relations, divisions within society, etc.

However, some of these issues with which all Churches are dealing have the potential for creating new divisions between the Churches because of the difference in their response to the questions. A good example of this would be the issue of homosexuality which is confronting every Christian Church at the moment around the world just as it is being addressed by all societies and cultures. Another example would be the new bioethical questions arising every day. Some Churches respond to the questions raised by their homosexual members by welcoming practising homosexuals into the ordained ministry and blessing homosexual unions. This raises real concerns for many other Churches and certainly the Catholic Church which would believe such a practice was incompatible with the Christian moral tradition.

While doctrinal issues may be the more fundamental issues dividing the Christian world communions, ethical or moral issues can become equal causes of polarisation between the Christian Churches. If they do so, there is likely to be an increased intensity in the division between Churches, because they touch the very life-style of our members. What is at stake very often in these matters, particularly when dealing with questions of personal morality, is the relationship between the Christian moral tradition and contemporary culture. There would seem to be a rather urgent need for Christian Churches to begin to dialogue about this question and its implications for issues such as that of homosexuality or

bioethical questions lest we find ourselves dividing over a new issue at a time when we have come such a great distance in resolving the divisions caused by old issues.

The 1990 General Meeting of the Australian Council of Churches, the forerunner of this body, outlined the following vision for Australian ecumenism:

Our vision is for ecumenism to be an integral part of the life of the Australian Churches and for us together to experience God's continual renewal and transformation. We yearn to see God's pilgrim people responsive to the Spirit's directing and willing to move into new paths and untried territory, knowing that God has not left us without signposts and pointers for the way ahead.

The prayer of Christ "that they may all be one" constantly challenges any sense of complacency we may have about the way we are and draws us to confession and repentance, to seek healing for our divisions and to express our God-given unity in common worship and in cooperation in evangelism and mission. Our vision for Australian ecumenism is faith seeking understanding as we ask the question: "what kind of unity are we seeking and how is it to be expressed?" Since the ACC was formed we have grown in knowledge and appreciation of each other's traditions and insights. We long to see this develop and to deepen with mutual trust and acceptance of each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Even though much has been achieved, I think that much of that vision still remains ahead of Christians, and so of Catholics, in Australia.

Fr Arnold Orowae

A Universal Approach to Melanesian Theology

The author intends to place religion into a wider theological perspective. Firstly, God is the universal Creator of all and this has to be affirmed by Melanesians in their faith. Secondly, there has to be a universal approach to Incarnation. Thirdly, — it is the Paschal Mystery which makes the process of inculturation possible. Finally, a dialogue between theology and Melanesian cultures has to be established to enable the process of inculturation.

Introduction

Jesus Christ made his point on the universal redemption of humankind very clear when he said, “Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation” (Mk 16:15). Following this command of Jesus, the Church in her apostolic eagerness to evangelise all peoples expanded her missionary activities throughout the whole world. In this process of evangelization people here in Melanesia and elsewhere, either readily or after some initial struggle, accepted the Good News preached to them.

To make the Good News a part of our lives, there is a need to see from our cultural context the universal saving plan of God that eventuated in Christ. When the Gospel message is not presented in the cultural context it cannot really affect our faith, because a vital part of our lives — our culture — is not touched. Therefore, through dialogue and analogy the Gospel message should be contextualised. The Church is no longer as homogeneous as it once was. It is now a multi-cultural and multi-racial society which recognises this plural phenomenon. Thus the Church’s pastoral approach and theology need to have greater dialogue to achieve inculturation.

The intention of this article is to point out the universal aspect of salvation intended in the plan of God. The universality of God’s plan transcends any limitation; therefore it enables the believers of all nationalities, religions, and cultures to live and proclaim the Good News. The universality of God’s plan of salvation also makes it possible for particular groups of believers to worship and express their belief in God and his presence in their own ways. The process of inculturation helps to express their faith in context.

In order to help Melanesians feel a sense of ownership of and belonging to the universal Church, and from

their particular localities with their own distinct cultures, I will make an attempt to present an approach to Melanesian theology. This approach will be discussed under three headings: First, Melanesians as also created in the image of God; Second, the incarnation of the Word of God; and third, the Paschal Mystery. These will be comparatively analysed with the view toward emphasising the process of inculturation in the Melanesian context.

I. A UNIVERSAL APPROACH TO CREATION

A. Different Beliefs About Creators

When we look at the universe, we tend to wonder at the displayed beauty, peace and harmony, intelligence, instinctive character of the creatures, their reproductive systems, the ordered movement of the planets and other heavenly bodies, etc. Gazing on these mysterious entities and the amazing movements of creation one cannot deny, but simply acknowledge that there is a power behind them. There must be an ultimate power that created and controls the universe and all that it contains. It is a common understanding that from large international religious bodies to small ethnic groups, all refer to some mysterious spiritual beings or superpowers from above or beyond as the cause. I will mention a few examples of what people believe about how the earth or the universe came into existence.

1. The Melanesian concept of creator

The many ethnic groups in Melanesia have their own beliefs about their creator and the world around them. For many of these groups it seems that there is a lack of detailed pictures of the creator, and yet creation is often attributed to some deities, spirits, or mythical heroes. For instance: Among the religious speculations of Melanesia the people of **Lalibu** trace their origin to **Yakili** as

the single being who created the **Lalibu** world and its people (Simon Apia, “Footprints of God in Lalibu”, *Point Series*, n. 8, 1985, p. 226). The people of **Enga** trace their origin to a god known as **Aitawe**. **Aitawe** was believed to be the creator of the Enga world and its people. He lived in the sky world, far removed from the people and the Enga world. Although **Aitawe** was thought of as the creator and a benevolent god that provided and preserved the Enga world, there was only a casual relationship with him (interview with Thomas Kangu of Anditale, Enga Province). In the Eastern Highlands, the people of **Kainantu** believed in two dominant creative gods, **Morofonu** and **Jugumishanta** (Ian Hogbin, “Religion and Magic”, in *Anthropology in Papua New Guinea*, Melbourne University Press, 1973, p. 209). These represent the highland people of Papua New Guinea with their religious beliefs of the creator gods.

To mention a few of the Coastal places and Islands of Papua New Guinea, the people of the **Misima** Islands in the Milne Bay Province believed in a god known as **Yabowaine**. He is believed in as a creator and source of life (Simeon Namunu, “Spirits in Melanesian and The Spirits of Christianity”, *Point Series*, n. 4, 1986, p. 96). The **Lakalai** of West New Britain believed in a supreme god known as **Tamahili**. He is said to be the creator of the world and progenitor of humankind (C.A. Valentine, “The Lakalai of New Britain”, in *God’s, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*, P. Laurence and M. Meggit ed., Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1965, pp. 183-184). In the North Coast of New Guinea the people of Madang believed in **Kilibob and Manup** as their creator gods. They even gave them their customs (Ian Hogan, *op. cit.*, p. 210). Most of these gods are remote, but unlike these gods the Sepik Coast and its off-shore islands believed in **Wunekai**, a creator god who was not remote and distant, but was very close and was often invoked for help and protection (*ibid.*, pp. 31 -32). Cf. Also, Henry Auffman, *The Passing Scene in North East New Guinea*, St. Augustine, Germany, 1964, pp. 4-12).

The beliefs in the creator gods mentioned above are representative of the many ethnic groups in Melanesia. Besides stories about the beliefs in creator gods, there are other origin stories related to other empirical and non-empirical beings which makes it difficult to identify the real creator, but above all it seems common that the notion of a supreme creator god is believed in everywhere by the different ethnic groups in Melanesia.

2. The Jewish concept of creator

In Judaism, the superpower is believed to be Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a monotheistic God who is the source of all creation. The book of Gen-

esis in the Old Testament gives a clear picture of this God and an account of his creation (cf. Gn 1-2:25). For the Jews, Yahweh is the only God that created the whole universe and besides him there is no other.

3. The Christian concept of creator

Christians also believe in this same God and share the same Genesis story of creation with Judaism. But the God of the Christians, fully revealed by Christ, is not a solitary being but is Trinitarian — three persons in one nature — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who love and communicate with each other unceasingly for all eternity. This God who did not wish to live alone forever in the splendid Trinitarian communion freely chose to create — though not by necessity — in order to communicate himself to creation, and to make creation share in his life. This communication is reflected in the world of creatures that share and represent the infinite goodness of God to a greater degree than any could by itself.

These examples certainly give us some indications that all peoples do trace back to what is believed to be their origin. The Genesis story presents a beautiful story of God’s creation with a neat description. Likewise other traditions circulate their creation stories, but in most of them there is a lack of a clear and detailed presentation of the creator.

It seems to me that there is a large number of similar elements or concepts in most creation stories. The idea of attributing creation to a superpower or to some deities seems universal. It is obvious that there are a lot of differences of beliefs, philosophical and theological conceptions, images and representations of the creators, the objects of worship, etc. These differences seem to depend on the creator’s importance, and to what extent the people rely on the creator. Thus the degree of emphasis varies from one creator to another according to the roles they play in their respective ethnic groups throughout the world.

B. God the Creator of the Universe

In the account of creation, the author of Genesis sets forth the work of God as done in six days, with God resting on the seventh day. After creating everything, God saw that his creatures were good and pleasing to him. God did not leave them to exist on their own, but sustains their existence and directs them to the goal for which he created them. This means that, where God is, his creatures are, or where his creatures are God is. Even if a mother were to forget her child, God would not forget his very own creation. His mind and heart are where his creatures are. God created and governs the universe for one purpose: that creatures could reflect his own power and glory, and that they could share his life and

goodness. There is nothing which is not subject to God's creation and government, for it is God who maintains all creatures in existence.

As there are traces of God in humanity — a very special creation — so too there are traces of God in the whole cosmic order. Everything that God created is good and gracious, since it corresponds to the essential goodness of God himself. This results in all things reflecting the goodness and glory of God in the mysterious presence, movements and growth of the creatures under his providential guidance. The transcendent and immanent God knows no restrictions, therefore he permeates everything and everything exists in relation to the life of God, who is a Trinitarian communion. Through the inner dynamic of love and communion, the Trinitarian God manifests himself outside the intimate circle of the Trinity, in his creatures (Leonard Boff, *Trinity and Society*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1988, p. 221). Therefore we can rightly affirm that the whole temporal order does express and reflect the goodness of God who sustains its existence. The creation and sustenance of the universe is the manifestation of the love flowing from the divine power and love of the eternal God.

Having said this, we can now analogically look at the Melanesian world to integrate it into the pattern of Christian belief in God as the creator of the universe, which will enable the Melanesians to affirm that Melanesia is also part of God's creation and sustenance.

C. God's Presence in Melanesia

As noted above, different ethnic groups in Melanesia do believe in different gods which they identify as creators of their world. With Christian faith, when we fully accept Yahweh as the God who is the creator of the universe, can we not say that this God has made it possible for the Melanesian people to trace the origin of the universe to himself? Without any clear revelation, people — even Jews and Christians — would have been less likely to draw the conclusion that God Yahweh is the true Creator. If from the beginning, God had revealed himself to the Melanesians as he did to the Jews, the Melanesians would have no problem in believing in him as the ultimate cause of creation. But because God did not reveal himself in the strict sense as he did to the Jewish people, the Melanesians could not but have distorted ideas or conceptions of the superpowers behind the universe. On the other hand, God providentially led the Melanesians to seek him, and traces of this search are evident in the myths, ideologies, religious practices, and other good patterns of behaviour in their social lives.

In the human person there is an instinctive sense of desire to be fulfilled. People do experience dreams and a vague drive for something more than what they pos-

sess or can produce. This truth was described by St Augustine when he said that our hearts were made for God and are restless until they find rest in God. Human beings are created in the condition of needing to reach beyond themselves. The experience of dissatisfaction or emptiness is a sign of their being drawn to the "higher good". Thus all created beings are tied together in their thrust towards fulfilment. This idea is expressed by John Powell when he says;

Man is so made that he strives always towards a good that seems to him worthy of his effort. This may be near or remote, tangible or ideal, (physical) or spiritual. He may be in error; but he strives, in his own way towards a fulfilment. In a rightly ordered life, struggle is towards perfection, the only final real good: God (John Powell, *A reason to die! A reason to live*, Argus Communication, Texas, 1972, p. 105).

For such yearnings to be fulfilled there is a widespread notion of the creator, which is also found among Melanesians. Throughout Melanesia the notion of the creator is vaguely explained; there are different names, slightly different concepts, experiences, and expressed beliefs; and there are varieties of descriptions. Can we not say that through such instinctive desires for the creator and the way in which Melanesians tend to the deities, God is indirectly leading his own creatures to himself? Can we not say that this inner desire or longing which drives the people to tend to the gods and seek the truth, is God providentially leading the people to himself? If the answer is positive, then we can undoubtedly say that God is the creator of the Melanesians and was here leading and sustaining them without fully revealing himself in the strictest sense.

Any piece of art reflects the thoughts and personality of the artist. Likewise the goodness and beauty of the Melanesian world seen in the lives of the people and in nature is a clear reflection of the love and communication of the Trinitarian God expressed outside of itself. This is also true of the whole universe of which Melanesia is a vital part. If we believe that God is the source of all beauty and goodness, then we cannot separate him from Melanesia, because the Melanesian world provides more than enough evidence of such beauty and goodness, in nature and in the lives of the people with their rich cultures. "The shadow of God hovers over Melanesia". In other words; the Spirit of God in his good pleasure gently moves and preserves Melanesia in place, among all his creation, God was here and drew the Melanesians to himself, though the Melanesians could not perceive him directly. In time God revealed himself to the Melanesians through Christian evangelization. This is evident in the acceptance of the "Good News with little resistance when it reached the shores of Melanesia".

The *Catechism* asks; “Where is God?” The most obvious answer is: “God is everywhere”. This confession of faith expresses the omnipresent God who cannot be isolated or limited to particular localities, or identified with only certain elements of the universe. Therefore Melanesia can rightly say that God was here and continues to be present here, as he was and is present in Palestine, or Europe, or Africa, or Asia, or America, etc. The existence of Melanesia without contacting or depending on the wider world for many generations indicates that God was already here. Thus Melanesia’s existence must have been sustained by God, as St Paul says: “He (God)... sustained the universe by his powerful command...” (Heb 1:3). Melanesia is within this universe that St Paul talks about.

D. Humankind Created in the Image of God

We learn and believe from Scripture that the human race was created by God in his own image and likeness. With God’s blessing to multiply and fill the earth, and through his creative power, from our first parents came forth the whole human race that live all over the world. This fundamental truth is affirmed in the Genesis story.

God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying to them; Be fruitful, multiply, fill the-earth and conquer it (Gn 1:27-28).

The glory of human beings is their being in the image of God. The words image and likeness give us the key to their meaning, indicate the source of their mysterious emergence into being, and also reveals the fundamental truth of their creation and destiny. Human beings who stand visible in this material world, are at the same time in the “image of the invisible God”.

When we talk about human beings as being in the image of God, what does that really mean? Does God look exactly like a human being with the physical features we see of a man or woman? The answer is: “we do not know what God looks like”. We profess of the ineffable mystery of the living God that there is only one true God who is perfectly “eternal, immense, unchangeable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, and indescribable...” (*The Church Teaches*, Documents of the Church in English Translation, B. Herber Book Co., Kansas, 1955, p. 32). God is a spiritual reality and is transcendent, therefore it is not possible to limit him to our little human conceptions. Theology suffers from the acknowledged inadequacy of our human concepts and expressions to grasp the richness of God in his perfection and fullness of life, which to a large extent remain a mystery. Our terminology can have only some analogical and indicative meaning. Sometimes we think of God and identify him with images and concepts that are created

and presented by theologians and pious souls. But these only indicate or represent God in a small way, so that our simple minds can understand at least something of God, because God is so great and transcends all things. God cannot be limited to any image or human conception. These images are not what God is like, simply because we do not know what God looks like.

With such inadequate knowledge, how can we make an attempt to clarify the statement, “human beings are created in the image and likeness of God”? Charles Muckenhirn distinguished three degrees of participation in God’s being which can give some idea of how human beings can be described as the image of God. The most basic degree of participation is that humans have spiritual principles of existence, which are the sources of their spiritual powers of knowing, loving, and acting. Therefore humans by nature are like God in the sense that they can perform activities which are characteristic of spirit-being. The second degree is seen on the manifestation of divine grace which makes humans intelligent creatures to share in God’s life. With their intellect and will power humans are made capable of knowing and loving God, and other humans as God knows and loves himself. The third degree is that which is achieved in the light of glory, where the saints and angels are devoted to knowing and loving God directly in the beatific vision (Charles B. Muckenhirn, *The Image of God in Creation*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliff, 1963, p. 53).

Charles Muckenhirn also gave another example of humans as the image of God in relation to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, the perfect image of God. “He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation” (Col 1:36f). While assuming human nature, Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, elevated humanity to a supernatural order and shared in this life to the pride of humankind as the image of God and reveal them to their source and destiny (*ibid.*).

Explaining a little further: in humanity the image and likeness of God could also be related to the good and God-like qualities they possess. Humans possess faculties of the mind, will and intellect, graced by God as his gratuitous gifts to think, to know, to judge, to reason, to sense, to understand, to love, etc., so they are rational beings. Humans as intelligent beings are free and self-determining, having free will and control over their actions. All other creatures also reflect God’s creative power and love, but it is in the very nature of humans to show some likeness of God in their inner being and in their most truly personal activities.

Humans, as the crown and masterpiece of God’s creation, were bestowed with the God-like spiritual qualities which make them rational beings, different from animals and other species in the universe. Because of

the human's spiritual and immortal soul, "the principle of immaterial activities of knowing and loving" (*ibid.*), there is a fundamental reason for saying that humans are in their entirety the image of God. This spiritual soul is the substantial form and principle of life which is integrated in the body, the contact of the soul with reality and its instrument of expression. We must note here that the correct notion of human nature is that it is a body-soul. It is of great importance to have the correct idea of humans as bodied-spirit, the image of God in flesh (*ibid.*, p. 12). These ideas about the image of God help us to embrace and clarify the whole meaning of humans in their natural and supernatural existence.

Our first parents emerged from the creative power of God as beings of flesh and blood, animated by spiritual souls which made them by their very nature images of God. By natural generation all humans who inhabit the earth are descended from these first parents formed by God. As the creation of a new human being begins by natural generation, God's mysterious creating power creates a new soul to form one complete human being. "Flesh is born of the flesh and God creates a new soul and infuses it into each person" (*The Church Teaches, op. cit.*, p. 150). This is the case in the creation of the whole of humanity.

If we accept such teachings and the Genesis story of creation in faith, then regardless of our prejudices against each other, we can affirm that the whole of humanity has its origin in God. We should consider the fact that the universe and all that it contains comes from God, and humanity is no exception. As all humans reflect the image of their cause, who is God, there must be fraternity in humanity, not through flesh and blood but in the Spirit of God. If God is the cause of the essence of our being, then no external distinctions should question our common origin. The various degrees we discussed of humans as images of God do not categorise humanity. As St Paul said, from one stock God created the whole human race and made it live throughout the whole world (cf. Acts 17:26-28). Thus no group of humans should regard any other group as unequal or as lesser beings.

Throughout the world we witness within religions, nationalities, and cultures some clear classifications of humanity: men and women, slaves and masters, rich and poor, superiors and inferiors in different caste systems, etc. These are the result of ungodly attitudes, created by humans to satisfy their own needs. Such attitudes degrade humans as the image of God because they deny equality, love and respect. They do not allow for an atmosphere that helps humans to see and discern the work of God and his presence in other peoples' life and culture.

To see and understand others in the right perspec-

tive, we can do justice to all people by saying that there is no one race, culture, or ideology that is superior to another. God created all people equal and all are his sons and daughters that bear his image. Thus no one group is subordinate or inferior to any other group of people. Everyone is created equal, in God's image. Such a positive approach will help all people — even here in Melanesia — to see and experience God's presence in our own context. As humanity tries to trace back to its origins, all groups of people can claim that God is their Father and Creator. This means Melanesians are no exception. In faith they also can claim God as their creator and sustainer. God's creating power, love, and care — characteristics that are part of his total being — are factors that enable him to create and maintain all peoples' existence and growth.

This can be affirmed when we see the Melanesians show good human qualities upheld by people of faith which reflect the goodness of God. Thus we can definitely say with St Paul: "We too are children of God" (Acts 17:28).

E. Summary

Not to limit the transcendent God to this world, nor to identify him with any one nationally or culture, what we have discussed above about creation and the presence of God in Melanesia can be true anywhere. As we believe in God's creation of the universe out of nothing, he must be seen as a universal God, and all things and persons must have the right to claim him. This is not in contradiction to the claim of the Israelites of the Old Testament to whom God revealed himself. In faith, with the grace of revealed truth, we believe that the God of the Israelites is the God of Christ, the God of the universe. At a certain time in history God chose to reveal himself to Abraham and his descendants to prepare them for the Messiah who would reveal God fully to the whole world. And God did so through the Incarnation of his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Looking at God's Creation of the world, especially humans as a special creation in his image and likeness, we believe that everyone has the right to claim God as Creator. Such an understanding helped Melanesians to affirm in faith that God created them in his own image and likeness, and that he must have been caring for them as he also does for all others. Thus God can be perceived and responded to from the Melanesian context.

II. A UNIVERSAL APPROACH TO INCARNATION

A. Sin as Condition for Incarnation

In the Genesis account, Adam and Eve are pictured as being on familiar terms with God. But after they had

sinned, and before any punishment was formally imposed, they hid themselves from the presence of God. As their punishment, God banished them from the Garden of Eden; they may never return again. God even posted the cherubs to keep them away from the tree of Life (cf. Gn 3:8-24). This clearly indicated a total separation and isolation of humans from God. The first parents' hiding themselves from God, and the deprivation of their gracious life after they had sinned against God means that they had enjoyed divine grace prior to their punishment. This divine light was extinguished in their eyes and they became strangers to God. Even the creatures were hostile to them. Such is the origin of the idea that God is far away and hidden from human perception.

The universal inclination to sin derives from the sin of the first parents. Therefore either personal sin or the sins of humanity which deprive humans of God's grace are the consequence of the original sin of the first parents. St Paul affirmed this when he said: "Sin entered the world through one man, and through sin death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned" (Rom 5:12). Further on, St Paul says the same thing about original sin (cf. 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 5:15; 1 Jn 2:2; etc.). "Therefore as from the offence of one man the result was condemnation to all men.... Just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners...." (Rom 5:18, 19). The universality of sin is mentioned in many of St Paul's other Letters and in other pastoral Letters. This undoubtedly conveys the universal influence original sin has exerted on all of humanity. Thus Melanesians were included in this "condemned mass of the human race" (William Hogan, *Christ's Redemptive Sacrifice*, Parentice-Hall, Englewood Cliff, 1963, p. 5), and so they were unable to conceive the truth. The helpless situation in Melanesia and their distorted notion of God must have been conditioned by original sin.

For our purpose here, it is important that sin be recognised as a fact of human history and part of the context for which the incarnation of the Word took place: to redeem human beings from their sinful state.

B. Divine Initiative to Save the World

The helplessness of humans in sin under the power of the devil made it impossible for them to know God and reach out to him. Even with their free will humans could no longer attain the supernatural end to which they were ordained by God. As God took the initiative in creating the universe, he also took the initiative of revealing himself to human beings, for he did not wish his own creation to be condemned for ever to the slavery of sin and death. "God wishes all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4). To liberate hu-

mankind from its sinful state and to restore it to the supernatural order required that none other than God himself intervene. Humankind lost its graced powers and its innocence in the sin of Adam. No one is capable of rising from the depths of this loss by his or her own power and free will if the grace of the merciful God does not lift him up (*The Church Teaches, op. cit.*, pp. 156-157).

The initiative of God in preparing humankind for salvation was made explicit in his revelation to a certain race. It is evident in the references to the universal salvation of all humankind in the sacred writings of the Old Testament. As part of God's revelation, he inspired sacred writers and leaders among the Chosen People to describe the inclusion of all humankind for salvation (also cf. Gn 9:16-17; Dt 28:10; 1 Kgs 8:43; 2 Chr 6:33; Ps 33:8; Is 42:6; etc.). For instance: "In you shall all peoples of the earth be blessed" (Gn 12:3). "I am the Lord, the God of all humankind" (Jer 32:3). "The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all humankind together will see it" (Is 40:5). We can definitely accept in faith that Melanesians and others outside the Chosen Race are included in the phrase "all-humankind", or other words of a similar nature used in the Old Testament.

C. Incarnation of the Word

The initiative of God in creation and his intervention in revealing the mystery of his will to save humankind came to a climax in the incarnation of his only Son. "The Word was made flesh" (Jn 1:14). Humans in their sinful condition cannot save themselves and yet there is every desire and hope for a life of perfection that gives satisfaction. This shows the need for the incarnation of the Son of God to implement God's freely chosen plan of redemption. The sending of his Son is a gracious act of God showing his infinite love and mercy for his own creation. The loving and merciful God is identified in the words of the prophets and sacred writers, summarised by St John as follows: "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that those who believe in him may not perish, but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

The Son of God, whom we call Jesus Christ, was conceived by Mary with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit. In this mysterious incarnation the Son of God became a man like us in all things except sin (cf. 2 Cor 5:21). We believe that God, through Jesus Christ, humbled himself by taking on our sinful nature, so that, with that nature he could accomplish his plan of redeeming humankind and reconcile it to himself.

For the incarnation to take effect, God could have chosen any nation in the world. Or, God could have used other means or ways of redeeming the world. For instance: God could have had Jesus bilocate in his human

nature, or have multiple incarnations take place everywhere. God could have chosen anyone else from this world to make up for our sins, or perform a great miracle to redeem the people, etc. But God did not use any of these ways. Instead, God chose Abraham and his descendants and prepared them well for the incarnation to take place in time. God who is eternally wise and all-knowing foresaw that through this act of incarnation everyone else would come to know him and those who believed would be saved. And so, Jesus, the Son of God, was born into a certain nation that had its own culture, ideology, politics, and religious background. Jesus was born a Jew. Jesus is rightly called a Jew because he was born in Bethlehem, of a Jewish mother from Nazareth, and grew up within that Jewish environment. Jesus could have been born in Germany and called a German, or in Nigeria and called a Nigerian, or in India and called an Indian, or Melanesia and called a Melanesian, etc., but in fact he was born in Israel and was a Jew. While identifying the historical Jesus as a Jew, I am not questioning the substantial and permanent unity of the divine and human nature in the one and same person, Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, the Second Person of the Trinity. This Second Person of the Trinity assumed human nature and became fully human. Thus he is truly God and truly human at the same time (*The Church Teaches*, *op. cit.*, p. 195). The full humanity of Jesus helps all people to identify themselves with him. What follows will be a comparative analysis which will show humankind is included in the incarnation.

D. Comparative Analysis

For the purpose of inculturating the Gospel message, the incarnation speaks more to us than explanations about God's intervention in human lives. The incarnation is not meant for a particular group of people, but is meant for the redemption of all humankind. The Word of God became a man so that the whole human race is included, how can we analogically affirm this in the context of incarnation?

1. Humanity implicated in incarnation

When we look at the man Jesus, he is just like one of us with his human nature. He was born a child of flesh and blood, and grew up with the pains, toils, and joys of everyday life. His life reflects and resembles our own human lives. The Word of God becoming a man and sharing our human nature elevates humanity to a supernatural order from its sinful state. This process recognises humanity as a special creature destined to share in the fullness of God's life. The Incarnate Word revealed humans to themselves, their sinful condition, and their need to rise above that state, to the supernatural order. Jesus shared in our pride of being human. He is the perfection of our human lives. In this, the Melanesians also

share the pride of being human, as a masterpiece of God's creation made in his own image and likeness. The universal character of incarnation should help the Melanesians to include themselves, as part of the human race in which Christ shared. Such a general understanding should not isolate the Melanesians but help them gain enough confidence to "Melanesianise" the universal message of incarnation, through faith and through reason.

The Word Incarnate should not only be associated with his human flesh, but also with whatever is characteristic of human lives, expect sin. In Jesus' humanity God was truly speaking our language, which makes it possible for us to understand and accept that what is true of the wider approach to incarnation, is also true and adaptable to the local context. The incarnation enables us to share an image of Christ that corresponds to our life situation. Thus we are able to say that Christ is one among us in flesh, one among us in our human languages, one among us in our culture, and one among us in all other characteristics and forms of our human identity. There would be no wrong in conceptualising Christ and having images about him relating to what we have and what we are, i.e., from the Melanesian context. Such a process has already begun with people like Joe Gauquare who referred to Christ as "the Melanesian Christ" (Joe Gauquare, "Indigenisation as Incarnation: The concept of Melanesian Christ", *Point Series*, 1977, pp. 149-150).

2. Culture implicated in incarnation

Effective evangelization must not be seen only as preaching the Good News to a large number of people in wider geographic areas but also as transforming the various "strata of humanity" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Exhortation of Paul VI, n. 19). One aspect that people all over the world often emphasise is their "culture" which in fact is very important, because people are always linked to their own respective cultures. Culture necessarily has historical, social, political, economic, and religious overtones that developed in time. From culture every nation and age have drawn the values needed to foster human growth and existence (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 53). The incarnation of the Word was not only meant to redeem and elevate humankind in flesh, but also to redeem and elevate what is characteristic of humanity, including culture. Jesus respected culture, grew up in a particular culture, and used cultural images and language to present the Good News of the kingdom of God. He did not come in order to abolish what humans had built up and possessed, especially the good of nature and culture, but to affirm and enrich them. With the universal understanding of incarnation and its consequences we are able to say in faith that each culture is recognised and enriched by Christ in its good values. The

Melanesians are no exception, so they can be happy with their own culture and enrich it with Christian principles, enlightened by Gospel values, to build the kingdom of God here.

The Word Incarnate cannot be identified with any one culture. Jesus transcends all cultures — especially after the Resurrection — and yet at the same time he is preached and followed by people who are “profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 20). This requires that evangelization consider and emphasise the heart of the culture that inspires, conditions, and determines the lives of the people. Culture is touched when Christians express their faith by living the Gospel message in their own cultural forms, and preach it in the context of their locality. Thus Christ and his Gospel message “becomes incarnate among the people and assumes their culture” (John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, *Puebla and Beyond*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1979, p. 179). Incarnation becomes concrete when the Gospel message is immersed in the life and culture of a people where, we believe, the “seed of the Word” is already present (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 53-58, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, nn. 20, 54). The local Churches incarnate the Gospel and Church teachings when they express them in their own language and use their own wealth of human resources rooting them in their social and cultural *milieu*. While effecting this, the local Churches should at the same time be sensitively aware of the universal character of the Church’s vocation and mission, and not allow themselves to be locked into emphasising the values of their own cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions, thus cutting themselves off from the universal Church (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 62).

E. Summary

The understanding of incarnation from a universal approach makes it possible to incarnate the Word of God and his message among humankind in all cultures, including the Melanesian culture. The “seed of the Word” that is already implanted in the life and culture of the Melanesians — because they originated from God — can be enriched and revitalised by incarnating the Word of God in Melanesian culture. The people of Melanesia must be Melanesians and respond to their faith in Melanesian ways. For this to happen Christ must be brought into their context. Then the people will not only respond to Christ in Melanesian ways, but also perceive and relate to him as Melanesians. If we can say that God created Melanesia, then he must be the God of the Melanesians. Likewise, we believe that the Son of God became a man like us in all things except sin by assuming human nature. Can we not say that in the mind of the Melanesians Christ became like a Melanesian in all

things except sin; therefore he is a Melanesian in his Melanesian members? A positive answer would enable the people to relate to and conceive Christ as a Melanesian, in Melanesian ways, concepts, or images. Because of the universality of the incarnation, the process of incarnating the Word is possible.

III. PASCHAL MYSTERY

A. Paschal Mystery for Universal Redemption

When we look at the redemptive acts of Christ, we see that they have universal effect. It is firmly believed by the Church that the works of Christ were done for the benefit of all humankind without exception. The New Testament has many references to this: “There are other sheep I have that are not of this fold and these I have to lead as well” (Jn 10:16). Jesus’ concern here as shepherd goes far beyond the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Here Jesus includes all of humankind. Jesus visited and preached in Samaria (cf. Jn 4:40); he declared that descent from Abraham was not a guarantee of entry into the kingdom of God (cf. Jn 8:39). It was a Roman centurion who expressed great faith, such faith as Jesus never saw in Israel (cf. Mt 8:8-10). A Samaritan leper who was cured returned to give thanks (cf. Lk 17:18), and it was a Samaritan traveller who showed the kindness that all people must copy (cf. Lk 10:37). Jesus also said that many would come from the East and the West, the North and the South, to sit down in the kingdom of God (cf. Mt 8:11, Lk 13:29). Jesus mentioned that he is not only the light of Israel but of the whole world (Jn 8:12). Finally, Jesus instructed his disciples to go out into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all nations, baptising the people and make them his disciples (Mt 28:19-20). These and many other indications give references and assurances that Jesus’ life and sacrifice are not particular but universal.

This universal idea of salvation was also affirmed by the disciples of Jesus when they started moving out of Jerusalem, proclaiming the Good News not only to the Jews but to the Gentiles as well. This clearly shows that God wills salvation for all people. His will to save people from sin, death, and the devil, is as wide and free as his will to create people. The universality of salvation identified in Jesus’ words and deeds was stressed by St Paul as is evident in most of his pastoral Letters. For instance:

My advice is that there should be prayers offered for all people.... God wants all people to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth.... For there is only one God and only one mediator between God and humankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus, who sacrificed himself as a ransom for them all (1 Tm 2:1-6. Cf. Also, Rom 5:19; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 5:19; etc.).

This and other similar texts in the pastoral Letters help us to understand that God wills salvation for all people. He is their God and Christ is their one mediator. The inclusion of all humankind shows that Christ gave his life for the benefit of every human being. St John also stresses the same fact in a compelling way when he says: "He (Christ) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:2). All these statements allow for no exceptions but extend to all of humankind, including Melanesians. Therefore Christ's redemptive acts must be seen as universal. Consequently, Christ and his Gospel can be easily incarnated into the life and culture of believers everywhere in the world.

B. Inculturation of the Paschal Mystery

Christians throughout the world rightly claim in faith that Jesus died and rose from the dead to save them all. Because of this universal application of the paschal mystery, it becomes possible to speak of it in a particular context. In the Melanesian context, the Paschal Mystery may be viewed in relation to ritual killings or violent deaths which are believed to restore broken relationships or bring about new life (cf. Philip Gibbs, "Lepe: An Horticultural Theology", *Catalyst*, Vol. 18, n. 4, 1988, pp. 216-218. Cf. Also, Ennio Mantovani, "Celebration of Cosmic Renewal", *Point Series*, n. 6, 1984, pp. 152-153). These beliefs are presented in myths and rituals that have a sacrificial nature.

Many ethnic groups in Melanesia have similar myths about heroic figures who died violent deaths which bring new life. These mythical heroes are commonly known as "dema deities" (Ennio Mantovani describes: "The dema is a being who through his/her/its violent death and burial originate the key elements of culture". Cf. *Catalyst*, Vol. 20, n. 1, 1990, p. 40. Darrell Whiteman says: "Throughout Melanesia there are a group of mythical ancestors known collectively as dema deities". Cf. *Point Series*, n. 6, 1984, p. 106. Both of them agree that the dema comes from the Marind-Anim people who live on the Southern Coast of Irian Jaya, near the border of Papua New Guinea). Darrell Whiteman gives this explanation of the dema deities:

A *dema* is an ancestor who because of some difficulty or other is either killed violently or chooses to die but its body is hardly in the ground when something miraculous happens. From the body of the dead ancestor grows a coconut tree, a yam, sweet potatoes or taro, or pigs come forth from the grave, or some other plants or animals essential for the livelihood of the community appear. The interesting principle is that through the death of one we have life for all; the death of one brings life to the community (Darrell Whiteman, "Melanesian Religion: An Overview", *Point Series*, n. 6, 1984, p. 106).

This explains the beliefs of the Melanesian about death and life as presented in myths which are of a special nature. There is an emphasis on the death of the heroic figure of the past which brings about something essential for the well-being and livelihood of the community. Therefore this death is interpreted as sacrificial in nature and has a saving purpose.

Another type of death is that which occurs from brutal killing; it is evident in the practice of most Melanesian societies. In ritual sacrifices animals are killed and offered to the spirits to placate them, or to restore a broken relationship, or to seek some favour for the well-being of the community. It is believed that these ritual killings of animals indicate the notion of sacrificial death, a giving of the animals' lives for a greater good: some form of salvation in the community. The consistent practice of ritual sacrifices in the Melanesian past, and even to some extent now-a-days, affirms this belief.

For Christians, these types of death cannot replace or equal the life-giving sacrificial death of Christ. To redeem the whole world there was only one life-giving sacrificial death, and that was the death of Jesus Christ. But on the other hand, for a better understanding of the Paschal Mystery which has a universal saving effect, and to make it part of the people's life and culture, we need to look at some of the beliefs about death that brings life in the Melanesian context. The Melanesian death stories cannot be substituted for the sacrificial death of Christ, nor are they necessary requirements for strengthening Christian faith among the people. Yet, by respecting these traditional values we can better understand the people's experiences of religious beliefs and practices and this could be beneficial for inculturation. Their religious disposition could enable the Melanesians to see that the stories about violent death that gives new life are universal; they are a prefiguration of "the Christ" who brought salvation through his brutal death. For the purpose of inculturating the Paschal Mystery, a parallel analysis with Melanesian death stories could serve as a preparation for their realisation in Christ.

The belief in death that results in new life has great significance in the life of the Melanesian people. What we have seen above affirms this statement. This kind of idea also had great significance in the life of Jesus who said: "I tell you most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (Jn 12:24). There are other related ideas found in the New Testament. For instance: "Anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:39). Or the reference about destroying the temple and raising it up within three days (cf. Jn 2:20-21), which we believe refers to Jesus' own death and Resurrection. These words of Jesus were ac-

tualised in his life when he went through the scandalising brutal crucifixion and death that resulted in a glorious victory over death through his Resurrection which gave new life to the world. The Melanesian beliefs about sacrificial death should make it easier for the people to grasp the meaning of the Paschal Mystery, and enable them to understand better the redemptive activity of Christ. And so the process of inculturation would be effective.

Jesus' preaching about death and new life, which we referred to above, should not only inspire us to die to our own ego and live a new life in Christ, but also to apply this message in our cultural context, because our culture also needs to be evangelised. No culture is perfect, including the Melanesian culture. We have our own good cultural values, and yet at the same time there are some cultural aspects which are sinful, evil, and immoral, which should be eliminated. If any of our cultural elements contradict the Gospel message and are not for the ultimate good of humanity, they should die or undergo real transformation. Can this idea be affirmed by a more explicit use of the paschal mystery? The death of cultural elements that oppose Christian principles and work against the ultimate good of humanity, can lead to a rising again of a new enriched culture because it was confronted with the risen Christ. The renewed emphasis on evangelization should focus not only on people, but also on the culture, because culture is a major part of our lives and affects us deeply. Through evangelization our culture can die to its guilt and social sin, as well as its limited ideologies, and rise to a new and living culture that is enlightened by Gospel values. This would enable the people to live with an enriched culture that is Christian and at the same time Melanesian. We could witness our culture in real dialogue with the paschal mystery which enables inculturation (cf. Aylward Shorter, *Towards Theology of Inculturation*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1988, pp. 83-84).

C. Resurrection

To apply the universal effects of the paschal mystery in inculturation, another aspect to be considered is the event of resurrection. The Resurrection of Christ gave him an entirely new form of existence that does not limit him to any particular locality, nationality, or culture. Despite the brutal and scandalous death of Jesus on the cross, there was continuity after Good Friday in the risen Christ. This is evident in the experiences and reports of the early Disciples. The Disciples saw the familiar Jesus when he appeared to them after the Resurrection, and yet at the same time he was radically different. Jesus appeared to them from nowhere and disappeared in front of their eyes. He talked to the Disciples and they felt very close to him. Some took him for a ghost, while others believed in him as the same Jesus, but the risen

one. He ascended to heaven in front of their eyes. The risen Christ has an entirely new form of existence. The experience of the early Disciples made them believe that Jesus was no longer dead, but was living and was very close to them, not only in Jerusalem but also everywhere they went proclaiming the Good News, even in Gentile territories. After the Resurrection believers could speak of Christ's presence everywhere at all times without any limitations. This made it possible for inculturation to take place as the Good News was proclaimed in many areas among different groups of people, each with their own religious beliefs, ideologies, and cultural backgrounds. In this regard Aylward Shorter says;

“The resurrection enabled Christ to transcend the physical limitations of an earthly life bounded by time, space,... and culture. The intercultural contacts of the earthly Jesus was necessarily limited. After the resurrection, Christ belonged to every culture at once. The resurrection made it possible for him to identify explicitly with the cultures of every time and place, through the proclamation of the Gospel to every nation. The resurrection made possible the release of the Spirit to people of every culture, when people of diverse languages heard and understood the one language of faith. The paschal mystery, then, is intimately linked to the inculturation process itself. It is precisely because of the resurrection that we can become members of Christ and that Christ, in his members, can become African, Indian, American, (Melanesian), etc.” (*ibid.*).

Aylward Shorter clearly demonstrates that the Resurrection makes it possible for Christ to be identified with all of humanity, with their cultures, and be present to all at the same time. The locked door could not stop Jesus from entering the house where his Disciples were in Jerusalem, and at the same time he was present with the Disciples at Emmaus. The risen and glorified Christ transcends all physical limitations and becomes present to all people, everywhere, at the same time. This makes inculturation possible.

Speaking from the context of Melanesia, when the people readily accepted the Good News preached to them, they in fact accepted the risen Christ and his lordship. The Resurrection enabled Christ to become part of them and of their culture too. Through Baptism the Melanesians became members of his body and Christ became part of them and their culture. In Melanesian Christians Christ becomes a Melanesian; in their profession of faith Christ becomes the Melanesians' Lord; and in their proclamation Christ is spoken of from the Melanesian context, rather than a foreign context. If this does not happen, then Christ will always remain in foreign concepts and images as presented in the early catechesis. Thus, the Resurrection plays an important role, in that it makes the process of inculturation possi-

ble and effective here in Melanesia and elsewhere as well. The Resurrection enables people to speak in faith of Christ as the “Melanesian Christ” (Joe Gauquere, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150). Christ can be identified as Melanesian in his Melanesian members:

D. Summary

Christians believe that the life of Christ, had a saving purpose which climaxed in the paschal mystery. The life and activity of Jesus was an execution of his Father’s plan to redeem the world. Jesus’ passion, death, and Resurrection contain the most decisive action for redemption. The sacrifice of the cross effects the salvation of all humankind from the effects of sin. The references made by Christ to the universal message of salvation help us to see that the paschal mystery has a universal purpose: to save the whole world. The Resurrection, in a special, gave Christ a new form of existence that transcends all physical limitations. Believers become members of his body through Baptism, and therefore can identify themselves with Christ, speak of him effectively, and relate to him from their cultural context. To make this idea explicit, the process of inculturation is important and necessary for local Churches all over the world, including Melanesia. Inculturating the Gospel message within particular cultures after a certain amount of dialogue helps believers to contextualise Christian theology and the expression of their faith. This process will help Christians to know and understand better what they believe, whom they worship, and how they serve the Lord in their Christian responses.

IV. CONCLUSION

For a universal approach to Melanesian theology, God’s creation, incarnation of the Word, and the paschal Mystery are the specific areas which I have discussed in this article. The method of approach was to present the basic beliefs of the Church’s tradition, emphasising the universality of God’s creation and redemption. This universality makes it possible to understand and speak of God and his Christ in a particular cultural context. Therefore one could speak of inculturating the Word of God, or inculturation.

I have used the words “incarnation” or “incarnating” in the second part of this article in relation to the person of Jesus, the Word Incarnate. The words “inculturation” or “inculturating” were used in the third part, which is related more to the anthropological aspect of the Gospel message. These words overlap in many parts of this article. Some would prefer one or the other, but in this article both are used to emphasise the contextual aspects of theology. For this purpose, at the end of each section I have tried to bring to your attention the particular context — especially the Melanesian

context.

The people of Melanesia are greatly affected by their acceptance and practice of the Christian religion. Christianity is recognised by the people, the Government, and other non-Christian bodies. Christianity is effectively battling its way into the life and culture of the people here in Melanesia. The vast majority of believers are still a rural people attached to their cultures. At this stage of evangelization, the Churches in Melanesia are working zealously to root the Gospel message in the life and cultures of the people so as to enable the people to understand and adhere to the faith as an integral part of their lives. For Christian faith to be an integrating force in their lives, there must be some theological dialogue with Melanesian life and culture. Such dialogue will not only lead to a better understanding of the Christian faith, but will also lead to inculturate the Gospel message. Thus Melanesians will take their place in the universal Church which is made up of different peoples, each with their own cultural identity. This will underline the universal perspective of Christian unity in diversity or plurality.

While emphasising the good values of Melanesian culture, it should not be seen as an absolute and be isolated from other cultures. While upholding the good values of Melanesian culture, there should also be some dialogue with other cultures, respecting and learning from them, and even inserting into our own culture good values we see as helpful to enrich our own culture. This is already happening, whether we like it or not. We cannot deny it. This means that we are moving into a new age where we are part of the universal world which is multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-religious. At this stage, while learning from others, both in theology and in secular science, our distinct cultural, social, and spiritual values. Only then will we be part of the universal Church as contributors as well as receivers. The life of the universal Church of which we are a part will be alive and meaningful as we actively participate in the life of the Church in Melanesia, expressing the faith with our own distinct social, cultural, and spiritual identity.

It is good to note here that when we talk about inculturation, we have to consider the positive values of a culture as well as the “living culture” of the present situation. Some cultural aspects have died due to colonisation and missionary influence, and some are in the process of dying. Whether those dead aspects will come to life again or whether those that are in the process of dying can be stopped lies in the hands of Melanesians. What develops will depend on how vital a role the cultural values played and will continue to play in the lives of Melanesians, for a good end.



COMING EVENTS

WORKING GROUPS			
Tuesday,	16 February	World Debt	15:30 hrs at SEDOS
Thursday,	4 March	Mission in Conflict	15:30 hrs at SEDOS
Wednesday,	17 March	China Group	15:30 hrs at SEDOS
Friday,	26 March	Mission in Conflict	15:30 hrs at SEDOS

**5th symposium of SEDOS
synod for Europe 1999**

13 April

1. Dr Rangoni Machiavelli, Brussels,
President of the Economic and Social Committee, Brussels

BEYOND ECONOMY — A HUMAN FACE FOR EUROPE

2. Dr Ian Linden, London,
Director of CIIR, Catholic Institute for International Relations

**THE CHURCH IN DEFENCE OF HUMANITY —
A NEED TO QUESTION PASTORAL PRIORITIES**

4 May

3. Fr Tomáš Halík, Czeck Republic
Catholic Academy of Prague

**CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE
DURING THE FIRST DECADE AFTER COMMUNISM**

4. Dr Irene Egle Laumenskaite, Vilnius, Lithuania
Professor at the Centre for Religious Studies, Vilnius University

**THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE CHANGING SOCIETY
OF EASTERN EUROPE — NEW ROLES FOR WOMEN**

5. Fr Bernardo Antonini, St Petersburg, Russia
Rector of the Major Seminary of St Petersburg

CHURCH IN RUSSIA TODAY — DIFFICULTIES AND HOPES