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Reality and Challenges of the Mission of the CM in Papua New Guinea

by Rolando C. Santos, C.M.

Province of Philippines

It was in the year 1999, the eve of the great Jubilee, when I first heard the name Papua New Guinea mentioned in our council meeting. Fr. Robert Maloney, the Superior General, sent a letter to Fr. Manuel Ginete, our Philippine provincial, asking for volunteers to serve as formators at Holy Spirit Seminary in Bomaná. Sensing that the council was finding it difficult to find somebody to respond to this request, I excitedly volunteered myself. I felt this was the golden opportunity I had been waiting for to respond to the call of going to the missions.

It was not until six months later when I heard again about Papua New Guinea. I was in Thailand giving a retreat to the Daughters of Charity when I unexpectedly received a fax letter from Fr. Maloney asking whether I wanted to go to Papua New Guinea. It did not take long for me to reply. That very night I wrote my letter. I gave my yes and the reasons why. The year 1999 was the silver jubilee of my priesthood and going to PNG would be a good way to thank the Lord for this wondrous gift of the priesthood. Secondly, the coming Jubilee Year would be just the right time for me to respond to the call to go to the foreign missions and carry on the work of evangelization. Finally, Papua New Guinea was just the perfect place. It is a Third World country and not too far from the Philippines. The people there understand English. And, the work of seminary formation is something with which I am familiar. Moreover, I was coming to the end of my second six-year term as Provincial Director of the Daughters of Charity. Everything seemed to be telling me that PNG was the place for me.

1. Paradise Country

It was not until 6 February 2001 that I finally reached this beautiful country, also called "Paradise." It is the largest of the Pacific nations and lies in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, north of Australia and east of Indonesia. Three-fourths of the country is dense

rain forest. It has very few roads. Of the roads that do exist, only 4% are paved.

What called my attention upon arrival was the color of the people. They are dark-skinned, and hence, called "Melanesians." They like to chew betel nut and you can see the evidence almost everywhere. According to the 2003 national census, there are 5.5 million people in Papua New Guinea. The country is very culturally diversified. They speak more than 800 different languages, though the official languages are Tok Pisin and English.

It was only about 120 years ago that the local inhabitants had their first contact with white people. In the 1800s the Germans came and colonized the northern part of the country and called it New Guinea. About the same time, the British colonized the southern part and called it Papua, meaning fuzzy hair. After the First World War, the German colony was given by the League of Nations to Australia to administer along with Papua. In 1975 the country gained independence and took the name Papua New Guinea. Today, the country is fighting to preserve its abundant natural resources and rich traditions while making a giant leap from the Stone Age to the Age of Globalization.

2. Problems and Opportunities

One of the strong cultural values in Papua New Guinea is kinship. I was amazed how closely they know their relatives, even 4th degree cousins whom they call brothers and sisters. These strong family ties provide them with the support they need for survival. Unfortunately, these strong kinship ties have also led to tribal hostilities, which continue up to the present and bring much destruction to lives and property. The *wantok* system (close ties based on common language) has led to corruption in government where elected officials are often tempted to use government money for the good merely of their own families and clans, and not for that of the larger community. As a result, much needed public services, especially health and education, have been neglected. Many health aid posts are closing down. AIDS is on the increase and many are dying of pneumonia, malaria and other diseases. There is lack of schools as the government cannot provide the needed funds to build classrooms and pay for teachers' salaries.

Criminals are a big problem in many towns and cities, especially Port Moresby. Without education and employment, many young people are driven to criminality. In Port Moresby and the surrounding suburbs, people have to guard themselves against so-called "rascals" who commit armed robberies and do not hesitate to shoot at their victims or even rape them. This has given PNG a bad

name in the international community as being one of the worst countries in which to live. During my first year in PNG, some rascals entered the property of the Franciscans and shot dead a 65-year old Franciscan priest, who was asleep in his room. This happened only some eight kilometers away from our seminary.

3. Christianity and the Challenge to a New Evangelization

In spite of all the criminality and violence in the country, PNG regards itself as a Christian nation. The first Catholic missionaries to arrive in the country were the Marists. They came in 1845 and settled in Woodlark and Rooke Islands. Then came the PIME priests and brothers in 1852. These, like the Marists, did not stay long due to sickness and lack of progress in the work of evangelization. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart then arrived in 1882, and the Society of the Divine Word in 1896. The Congregationalists, Methodists, Lutherans and Anglicans also arrived in the latter part of the 19th century, while the Seventh Day Adventists came in 1908. Today, according to the 2000 census, Roman Catholics are still the single largest Christian group in the country. They comprise 27% of the total Christian population. However, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Evangelical Alliance and Pentecostals have registered a 71% increase in membership from 1990 to 2000, while the Catholics increased only by 24% against the 38% increase for the total Christian population. This poses a challenge to the Church to reevaluate her presence in PNG and ask whether she is truly responding to the needs and aspirations of the people, who are now switching in big numbers to the new Christian groups.

There is no denying that Catholic and Protestant missionaries have contributed much to the good of the country, especially in evangelizing, pacifying hostile tribes, and providing greatly needed services in health and education. At the same time, however, the efforts of missionaries have also uprooted many Papua New Guineans from their own culture. Some have fostered a paternalistic and superior kind of attitude, and did little to contextualize the gospel. They have also contributed to the splintering of tribes, clans, communities and families into different denominations.

While the first missionaries arrived 156 years ago, many areas in Papua New Guinea were evangelized only about 50 to 70 years ago. Many non-Christian practices still persist today like tribal fighting, polygamy, sorcery and payback. The need to deepen the faith received from their great grandparents is one of the urgent challenges today for the Church in PNG.

4. Bomana

Located about 12 kilometers away from Jackson International Airport in Port Moresby is the suburb of Bomana. It is well known for its prison as well as the War Memorial Cemetery. Bomana is also home to the Catholic Theological Institute (CTI), Holy Spirit Seminary (HSS), and seven other houses of formation belonging to different religious congregations. These are all located on one large campus. This year, 2004, there are 165 seminarians studying at CTI: 74 come from HSS, and 91 from the religious. The students of HSS come from 16 different dioceses in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

HSS has five priest formators on the staff. Two are diocesan and three, Vincentian. The two diocesan priests are the rector, an Australian, and the assistant spiritual director, a national. The three Vincentians are Frs. Tulio Cordero, Homero Marín and Rolando Santos. We also have a lay missionary volunteer who acts as bursar and business manager of the seminary.



Fr. Rolando Santos after celebrating the Eucharist with a group of *Mekeos de Maipa*, Bereina (Papua New Guinea), who are wearing traditional dress.

5. A New International Mission

It was just last year, 6 May 2003, that the Vincentian Community in Bomana was created. It is one of the new international missions established by, and directly under the supervision of, the Superior General. The confreres of Bomana come from three different provinces. Fr. Santos is from the Philippines and arrived on 6 February 2001. He is the spiritual director of the seminary and professor of Homiletics, Spiritual Direction and Spiritual Theology at Catholic Theological Institute. He is also the superior of the community. Fr. Marín, comes from the Province of Colombia and arrived on 26 July 2002. He is the vice-rector of the seminary, pastoral director and in charge of the infirmary. He is also the community treasurer. Fr. Cordero comes from the Dominican Republic but belongs to the Province of Puerto Rico. He came last year, 27 February 2003. He is the academic director, librarian and music director at the seminary. He helps out in spiritual direction and teaches Church History at CTI. He is also our community secretary.

It is not clear how long we will be staying at Holy Spirit Seminary. Fr. Maloney made us to understand that we are not here to run the seminary but only to assist until local formators can do the work. Our contract will be ending next year, 2005, but it will most probably be renewed.

6. Urgent Need for Formators

As a newcomer to Bomana, I was told that the Vincentians had long been awaited to help in seminary formation. HSS was then suffering from a lack of formators. There was also a constant change of formators such that it was difficult to establish a steady tradition in the seminary. Moreover, because of the difficulty of finding a rector and spiritual director, there was talk that HSS might be closed.

Sometime in the 1990s, there were bishops who felt unhappy with the way priestly training was done at Bomana. As a result, the dioceses of Rabaul and Vanimo pulled out their seminarians and personnel. HSS was then left without the needed formation staff. There was a plan to have national priests run the seminary but there was also the difficulty getting them because bishops were holding on to their personnel. The lack of available, willing and qualified formators somehow affected discipline in the seminary. It was then that the bishops sought the help of the Vincentians, knowing that formation of the clergy is one of our important charisms.

7. Holy Spirit Seminary

It was in March 1963 that the Catholic Bishops of PNG and the Solomon Islands established Holy Spirit Seminary for the purpose of training candidates for the Roman Catholic priesthood. It was first opened in Kap (near Madang) under the auspices of the Society of the Divine Word. Then it was moved to Bomana where the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart had opened *de Boismenu* Seminary. In 1994, as a result of the recommendations made during the Roman visitation conducted by then Bishop George Pell, HSS became two institutions. HSS caters to the non-academic dimension of diocesan priestly formation, while Catholic Theological Institute caters to the academic formation of both the diocesan and religious candidates to the priesthood.

8. Rascals, Malaria and Papuan Blacks

Anybody who comes to Bomana soon falls in love with the beautiful natural surroundings and the non-polluted environment. However, one also learns sooner or later that there are three things to which he needs to be alert. These are the *raskol* (common criminals), malaria and the deadly Papuan Black. The year I arrived, rascals came and carted away about 4,000 kina (US \$ 1188) worth of food supplies from our kitchen. A year before this, rascals came to the Franciscan house and shot two seminarians in the leg. Malaria is another problem. Every year many students catch malaria. The symptoms are familiar: headache, dizziness, vomiting, body pains and fever. Fr. Homero attends to them, refers them to the doctor and provides them with medicines. A third problem are Papuan Blacks. These are small poisonous snakes whose bite can kill within 15 minutes. They abound on the seminary property. A couple of months after Homero arrived at the seminary, one seminarian got bitten by this snake. Fortunately, the seminarian survived.

9. The Seminarians

Most of the seminarians come from families who are subsistence farmers. Their ages range from about 22 to 30 years old. They are strong and hardworking, as well as kind and friendly. They enjoy being together, chewing *buai* (betel nut), telling jokes, and walking barefooted. I particularly admire the diligence and effort they put into their studies, and how they manage reasonably well in class in spite of the limited education they received in their home villages. I also admire their common sense, their interest in justice and family issues, their frankness and their sense of humor. Their faith is simple and it is edifying to see students spending extra time in the chapel

for prayer. Those who have previously finished Religious Studies stay at HSS for three years of theology. Those who have not stay for six years. They then go back to their respective dioceses to be ordained as deacons and priests.

10. Some Challenges in Seminary Formation

Though PNG and the Solomon Islands have many vocations, unfortunately, there had not been an adequate screening of candidates to the seminary in the past. Many seminarians have also not had the experience of receiving regular spiritual direction. As a consequence, we, on the formation staff, encounter at times seminarians who have drinking problems and problems associated with chastity. We also encounter seminarians who are not clear about their vocation or their motives for becoming a priest. Entering the seminary seems an easy way for some to get a free education or to become a “big man.” Lately, however, the different dioceses and seminaries have been more careful in the selection process. Bishops make sure that their students take prayer and spiritual direction more seriously. In HSS, through talks, spiritual direction and the Thursday formation sessions, students are starting to appreciate more the value of prayer and spiritual direction, and to discern their vocation more honestly. It is also wonderful that 32 priests and religious, who live mainly on campus, have made themselves available for spiritual direction to the seminarians.

Another challenge is providing the seminarians with appropriate role models to follow. Seminarians usually admire the zeal and piety of the missionaries as well as of some national priests. However, there are also those who are scandalized. There are national priests who continue to run for political office despite the threat of suspension from their Local Ordinaries. There is also the problem of drinking and unfaithfulness to the vow of celibacy. These pose a challenge for us Vincentians to be true to our own priestly commitment and be role models to the seminarians.

A final challenge in HSS is that of culture. The five of us, who are on the staff, come from five different countries and hence, also, from five different cultures. Moreover, three of us are Vincentians while the other two are diocesan. The seminarians also come from various cultures. This multicultural diversity at times becomes a source of potential conflict and misunderstanding among us. However, we are learning to listen more openly and respectfully to one another, to resist the temptation of being judgmental and absolutizing our own narrow view of things, and to allow ourselves to be enriched by each other's experience, formation, culture and individuality.

In general, we, Vincentians, here at Holy Spirit Seminary, are happy to be here in this country and consider ourselves privileged to

serve the Church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. We are ready to serve for as long as we are needed. Our only request is that you, who have read this article, remember us in your prayers because it is only with the grace of God that we can persevere in our Vincentian commitment of following Christ and working together faithfully and joyfully for the evangelization of the poor and the formation of the clergy in Papua New Guinea.