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## **AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS WOMEN ON MISSION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: SISTERS OF MERCY CALLED TO CHANGE IN CHURCH AND NATION (1956-1981).**

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### **THE CHURCH'S CALL FOR AUSTRALIAN MISSIONARIES TO PAPUA AND NEW GUINEA**

#### **The Catholic Church's traditional approach to Mission**

For centuries the traditional approach of the Catholic Church in foreign lands followed a recognizable pattern. In their efforts to 'save souls' missionaries engaged in evangelisation and conversion of the 'heathen' who were perceived to be outside the sphere of God's grace. Bishops and priests established the church as a basis for expanding their missionary activity, and were assisted by members of religious orders and lay missionaries. Their home churches supported them with prayers and money and by promoting missionary vocations. In practice, this 'planting of the church' resulted 'in their transplanting', in another culture 'the church of their origins, with its organizational structure, law, ways of worship and theology'. Generally, they replicated the Western church, which they considered superior, and a way to ensure 'unity', that is uniformity in the church<sup>1</sup>.

By the 1950s, with the colonial empires collapsing, independence movements rising, science and technology advancing, and increasing secularisation, the old theology of mission underwent a severe crisis<sup>2</sup>. The Catholic Church worldwide was awakened by the call of Pope Pius XII<sup>3</sup>, for a renewal of the Church and religious life, and a re-emphasis on mission. He urged the Church to renew its commitment to, and broaden its view, of foreign missions, many of which were in nations emerging from a colonial past. In a significant encyclical letter<sup>4</sup> the Pope gave guidelines in relation to the training of local clergy and the respect for cultures. He emphasised that while the Church's aim was to plant the church firmly among the people of other lands, locally trained clergy were to be chosen from among their own people to form its hierarchy. Furthermore, he urged that 'all that was naturally good, just and beautiful' in local traditions and cultural practices be respected.

Calling for a more comprehensive mission involvement, he invited more co-worker missionaries, professionally trained in education and health care, to help in the reconstruction of mission areas devastated by war, and to help build a better world. He recommended they have a good knowledge of their future area of missionary work.

Meanwhile, in Papua New Guinea<sup>5</sup> the post-war period was a time of renewed mission activity when expatriate missionaries returned, as soon as re-entry was authorised, and immediately set about rebuilding their stations and resuming their work of evangelisation. Among these were the Missionaries of the Divine Word (SVD), assisted by the Holy Spirit Sisters (SSpS), who went back to their mission fields in the coastal areas of Wewak and Madang and the Highlands regions of Goroka, Mount Hagen and Enga.<sup>6</sup> The European and American SVD bishops of these areas looked to Australia for professional co-workers to meet the challenging needs of the people in education and health.

#### **The Church seeks Australian missionaries for Papua and New Guinea**

The vocal and enthusiastic representative of Pope Pius XII in Australia was Romolo Carboni, the Apostolic Delegate of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. He had seen at first hand the acute needs of Papua and New Guinea during this reconstruction phase. At the same time the United Nations was also drawing Australia's attention, as a colonial power, to its responsibilities for development in Papua and New Guinea.

Thus it was that Romolo Carboni encouraged various independent religious orders to combine in a process of rationalisation<sup>7</sup> so that, as unified and more cohesive groups, they

could more effectively engage in ongoing missionary activity. Many orders of male and female religious responded, including the largest one, the Sisters of Mercy, as seventeen independent groups throughout Australia formed new structures of Union (1954) and Federation (1956). They were mobilised for mission, and within a remarkably short time each group sent its first volunteer sisters on overseas mission. Over the 50 year period, a total of 178 sisters came as missionaries to Papua and New Guinea. Although the numbers fluctuated and never exceeded fifty at any one time, a substantial core-group sustained a long-term presence and offered continuity and stability.

### **Australian Sisters of Mercy to the Highlands**

At the special request of Adolf Noser SVD, the Archbishop of Alexishafen - a vast diocese including Madang, Lae, Goroka and Kundiawa - Mother Patricia O'Neill, the leader of the Union in Canberra, sent a community to Goroka under the leadership of Sister Elizabeth Miller in 1956.

The Archbishop saw the role of the sisters as building up the Catholic faith among the civic population and townspeople in Goroka, which had been opened a few years earlier as the first administration headquarters and gateway to the vast Highlands area. The parish priest's zeal was directed towards the European population and the sisters began St. Mary's School for this purpose. Lofty plans were made for a Christian boarding school, but, due to lack of numbers and the newly introduced boarding school subsidy for secondary education in Australia, this never eventuated. However, Mother Patricia had appointed an extra sister for the indigenous children and soon Sister Marie Dagg began this work when the local people offered land at Faniufa Village and Sacred Heart School was built. She reported that 'the majority of the students were boys, but, unlike other schools, there was a good proportion of female students. The parents did not want to send their daughters to the government schools because the teachers there were all male, but they knew the sisters would look after them.'<sup>8</sup>

### **Visions for the new Diocese of Goroka**

Within a few years, the arrival of Father Harry McGee SVD from the United States and the appointment of Bernard Schilling as bishop of Goroka heralded new opportunities. Father McGee eagerly adapted to the needs of the situation as a pastor on the ground and pilot in the air. He could see the urgent need for the missionaries to be a Christian presence in the town itself, which was growing rapidly, and in the traditional surrounding villages, which were mainly Lutheran<sup>9</sup>, but where there were pockets of Catholic Simbu workers on the coffee plantations. The schools should be open to all children, not just the Catholics, and it was not the sisters' role to try to make conversions. Father McGee urged: 'Let us be a presence among the people – north, south, east and west of Goroka.'

### **The sisters begin new schools beyond Goroka in 1960**

By the late 1950s, the construction of the ever-shifting Highlands Highway, linking Coast and Highlands, was underway. This enabled the sisters to venture forth to new schools in the bush areas beyond the Goroka boundary – Tafeto (1960), Katagu (1960) Yamiufa (1961) Yabiufa (1961)<sup>10</sup>. Opening a new school meant winning the people's approval for the school, gaining access to suitable land and negotiating its lease, arranging the construction of school buildings by the people, religious brothers or lay missionaries, finding teachers and selecting pupils from the throngs of youngsters yearning to go to school. The lion's share of this was done by the sisters.

### **Financial difficulties**

Money and school supplies were generously donated by the sisters and the school children in Australia. As the schools expanded, female lay missionaries arrived from Australia and Europe to help in teaching and nursing, and the sisters sold second-hand clothes in their spare time to help pay for their stipends. Extra money was needed to pay for the transport costs of the sisters' dilapidated jeeps, sorely tested on the narrow mountain tracks, and sometimes the sisters were short of food, or money to pay the household bills. In her requests for more missionary sisters Mother Patricia, appealed for financial support for the upkeep of the sisters themselves<sup>11</sup>.

### ***The first foundation at Goroka closes***

Despite the idyllic climate of the 'eternal spring' of Goroka, illness befell some of the sisters, forcing their return to Australia. In these sad circumstances their schools were taken over by other church communities, Catholic or Lutheran, according to the area, and, with the exception of St Mary's School for the Europeans, which closed in 1964, continue to this day.

### **Emerging needs in Simbu**

Unlike the 'Lutheran area' of Goroka, the neighbouring district of Simbu was deemed a 'Catholic area' densely populated with 200,000 Catholics or 90% of the Goroka Diocese. The anthropologist, Father John Nilles had compiled the vernacular Kuman dictionary which was used in evangelisation, often with the aid of a catechist interpreter. *Tok Pisin*<sup>12</sup> was not widely spoken by the ordinary village people at that time but was the common language of teaching in the many schools which had been set up on the missions and outstations before the English language policy of 1962.

Such was the popular demand for education that pupil numbers swelled in junior primary schools, where they were taught by basically trained indigenous teachers, but there were hardly any qualified teachers for the middle and upper primary grades. The priests began to look to the professional English-speaking teachers on the Goroka side of the Daulo Pass in the hope that they would take charge of these schools, Religious Education and the upgrading of teachers.

The opening came when there was an emergency at Kup mission station; the priest took ill and the lay missionary teacher and nurse left the country. The Goroka sisters agreed that two of them - a teacher and a nurse - would come immediately and manage the station. Thus the sisters experienced for themselves the growing needs in education and health and within a few years the sisters, in twos and threes, formed religious communities on the rural mission stations of Simbu - Kup (1963), Koge (1965), Goglme (1967), Neragaima (1971). The priests handed over responsibility for the administration of their large primary schools to them. In almost every case, the schools had lost their government registration because of falling standards and lack of qualified personnel; regaining the registration was the sister's first priority. In addition, there were several outstation schools and the sisters took a supervisory responsibility for these. At first sister nurses in the basic health facilities were assisted by minimally trained 'docta bois', but as the years passed and health standards increased, they were replaced by female graduates from the mission training centre at Vunapope in Rabaul<sup>13</sup>.

### ***Localisation - leaving the first four convents in Simbu***

From the beginning, the sisters were conscious, not only of the escalating demand for education but also of the need to localise the system. The work of education was very time-consuming. After teaching and managing schools the teaching sisters taught junior secondary subjects to the teachers so that they would be eligible to apply for middle and upper primary teaching in the teachers colleges. Thus it was that the strength of the indigenous Catholic teaching force increased, and from the beginning of 1974 the primary schools were completely managed and staffed by indigenous teachers, who were sometimes former students. With the closure of the convents of Kup, Goglme and Neragaima in 1973, and that of Koge, towards the end of 1975, the majority of the sisters looked to meet wider needs of the diocese.

### **The Bishop's request for Sisters for the Wewak Diocese**

The second Australian foundation to Papua and New Guinea occurred in 1957 when Mother Damian Duncombe, the leader of the Mercy Federation in Brisbane, responded to requests from Bishop Leo Arkfeld, the 'flying bishop' of Wewak. A group of seven selected volunteer sisters from the Brisbane congregation under the leadership of Sister Francis Regis Everingham left for Kunjingini, the most remote and deprived mission area of the Wewak Diocese. An inter-congregational group<sup>14</sup>, bound for the Sepik swamp lands of Torembi with Sister Xavier Byrne as leader, followed in 1958.

### ***Early years in Wewak - Kunjingini***

The sisters took responsibility for the parish primary school, which had opened several years earlier (1951). There were 221 pupils enrolled, with most of them boys and, with more

and more pupils enrolling each day. Very few girls progressed beyond third grade. Gradually the people's resistance to sending their girls to school began to change. Mother Regis made a constant plea that, where possible, clans would send an equal number of boys and girls for enrolment. The message would go round the villages: "One boy, one girl!" More sisters came from Brisbane and within a few years Kunjingini became a large central school for the Maprik area.

### **Health Care**

The nurse, Sister Isobel Condon, who had served as an army nurse during the war, knew what basic health care services were needed and soon settled into the tropical scene. She went out for bush patrol work on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and was kept busy with mothers and patients from the nearby villages. People came in large numbers from the most remote areas, even bypassing the established government aid-posts for treatment. Isobel realised that facilities needed to be improved and added a plan for a permanent maternity hospital built of concrete blocks to the list of buildings going up on the station. That building is still in use, no longer as a hospital, but as a medical research centre. The Kunjingini Health Sub-Centre continues to serve the area, run by the Catholic Diocese of Wewak, with indigenous Sisters of Mercy on the staff.

### **Teacher Education**

The first teacher education centre in the Wewak Diocese began at Kunjingini under the competent and practical administration of the qualified and experienced teacher and pharmacist, Sister Margarita Shannon. It began with just ten male student teachers (primary school standard) from throughout the diocese, who were flown in by Archbishop Arkfeld. Teacher trainees eventually came from Aitape, Vanimo and Daru. Standards were maintained according to the government requirements as Officers such as Bill Magnay and Pam Quartermaine from the Teacher Education Division in Port Moresby came on their inspection visits.

At the beginning of 1969, with an increased enrolment and secondary female and male graduates from the Mercy Sisters at Yarapos and Marist Brothers from Kairiru Island, Sister Margarita's teacher education institute was transferred to St Benedict's Teachers College<sup>15</sup>, Kaindi in Wewak as a joint, regional, inter-diocesan college of Wewak, Aitape, Vanimo and Daru. This was in collaboration with the Christian Brothers, with Sister Margarita fulfilling the role of Deputy Principal for several years.

### **Torembi**

Bishop Arkfeld's second request for Mercy missionaries in the Wewak Diocese was for the Torembi Parish, approximately 120 miles south-west of Wewak in the swamplands of the Sepik River. Winding and coiling 700 miles through jungles and swamps the river can rise several feet and flood the villages along its banks<sup>16</sup>. The sisters' beginnings are recorded in their Chronicle:

*"We were flown by Bishop Leo Arkfeld in the mission plane to the station, landing on the long, hard airstrip, which was the only way in and out at the time. We were welcomed by Father Franz Grubinger. We soon got to know the uniqueness of the environment, and the isolation it caused...The population of 4,000 live in the twenty-five villages in the area. The station is built on kunai land surrounded by sago swamps, and is especially noted, not for its scenic beauty, although it has a peace and a beauty of its own, but for its isolation and mosquitoes. It is a very compact station being built on either side of the airstrip. At times the rain and mud is very depressing but as we depend on a few drums for water we must bless the Lord for the showers<sup>17</sup>.*

The sisters immediately commenced the ministries of teaching and nursing. There were 177 children in the school, most of whom had some two hours' walk to and fro each day. The second year the sisters took in boarders, both boys and girls. Soon there were 80 girl boarders and 40 boy boarders. Four years later, a letter by Father Grubinger SVD stated that there were 420 children on the roll<sup>18</sup>.

Sister nurse, Mary Wildie, who set up a clinic a short distance from the convent, later recalled the experience of pioneering health work in Torembi:

*There was an established aid post and the Docta boi Nicholas, was a great assistance to me, especially as my interpreter until my knowledge of Pidgin improved and I became more familiar with Pidgin. After twelve months he was later transferred to Ambunti and I was on my own as the subsidy was paid to the mission for my services.*

*Maternal and Child Health Clinics (MCH) were set up in the villages and I, in the company of Father's haus-boi would walk to the villages for clinics and this would entail walking through the kunai grass well above my head, negotiating log crossings over rivers and canoe rides through swamps to reach my destination. Oh! to be young again and so trusting! I had no fear for my safety and trusted the New Guineans assisting me completely. They were happy days despite the extreme heat, mosquitoes and isolation.*

*The school children brought in the timber for the church. They had carried it from Korogo on the Sepik. The boat would come up from Wewak, to the mouth of the Sepik. Father had a pedal wireless and when he heard a boat was due in, the top grades would all go out to the river with some men and carry the iron and everything. The men had cut the big posts in the bush.<sup>19</sup>*

### **Attempts to adapt to the culture**

The sisters enjoyed teaching the children and had positive relationships with the people but experienced the culture as strange and elusive. From time to time, the priest and the *luluais*<sup>20</sup> would come to enlighten the sisters about cultural traditions. Other national people who worked closely with the sisters on the station, the domestic girls in particular, would do this more directly and sometimes playfully, but no less effectively, as mistakes occurred in the day-to-day carrying out of duties. One of the early sisters recalls: *'Mother Damian has stressed we had to be aware of their own culture and not downgrade it as it was their culture and sacred to them.'*<sup>21</sup>

### **The sisters' convent**

The sisters' accommodation was a large bush building which had been erected by Fr. Raymond Kalisz SVD, designer and builder and later Bishop of Wewak. The village people provided the workmanship and the supply of bush materials. It was a ten-minute walk down the airstrip to the church, and the sisters soon learnt to manage this distance on bicycles – the more adept ones being able to pat the dog as they sped along the flat surface at the edge of the airstrip!

### **A dream of primary and secondary education for girls**

The sisters encouraged the primary education of girls, and female enrolment, attendance and achievement increased dramatically. Soon the possibility of girls completing primary school at Torembi and Kunjingini became a reality and it was time for the next step to be taken. The building of a Mercy boarding high school for girls at Torembi Mercy College would cater for the girls from the Wewak Diocese who had completed primary education.

Sister Valerie White, the first Headmistress, had the initiative, enthusiasm and drive for the task. Father Grubinger got builders to construct the school buildings for the school to commence in 1963. Under Valerie's leadership the early students of Mercy College (at Torembi and later at Yarapos) were certainly captivated by the spirit of learning. Some progressed first to Yarapos, then to All Hallows in Brisbane to complete their secondary education<sup>22</sup>. They were among the first lay professional women and leaders as the world around their people was rapidly changing.

### **Mercy foundations from Australia**

The pioneer sisters in Goroka and Wewak were followed by many others as teachers and nurses from Australia formed small religious communities on the mission stations and existing communities subdivided to meet emerging needs in the dioceses. At the request of Bishop Bernarding of Mount Hagen Mother Philomena Ryman of North Sydney arranged for a group of five to 'rescue' the school at Pumakos in the remote Enga region in 1965 and a few years later the community spread to Holy Trinity Teachers College at Mount Hagen when the combined

College of the Highlands<sup>23</sup> and Madang had its first intake of female students and Sister Cecily Geary was appointed Deputy Principal and Dean of Women. The Rockhampton and Townsville Mercy Sisters sent separate communities to Yangoru and Negrie in the Wewak diocese. The last major foundation from Australia was in response to William Rowell, bishop of Aitape, when a 'task force' of volunteers was sent to save St. Mary's Hospital from imminent closure<sup>24</sup> - an operation which lasted 15 years! During that time the Sisters filled the roles of Matron, Ward supervisors, Principal of the School of Nursing, Maternal and Child Health supervisors and organizers of bush patrols. As 'mentors', they left a fully localised hospital with a long-serving, experienced and qualified senior nurse, Lena Miroi, as Matron (1992 – 2004).

### **Summary: the early years on the mission stations**

Arriving in the country just ten years after the war, the first sisters worked with religious men, the Divine Word Missionaries. The majority of these were from Europe and America, and this international link greatly informed and enriched the missionary approach of the sisters. They lived on established mission stations and were inspired and informed by the vision of parish priests and bishops. Supported by funding and resources from Australia, and with the help of lay missionaries, they engaged in primary, secondary and senior secondary education, health services, teacher education, town and village pastoral work, religious education and adult catechesis. They found themselves in a situation of continuous professional development of lay indigenous men – teachers, catechists and health workers who had barely a basic training.

The sisters showed ingenuity and self-reliance in arranging for the setting up and renovation of buildings and the clearing of land for their ministries. The girls' high school at Torembi was transferred to the new site at Yarapos which had to be cleared of jungle first. The teacher training college, begun in Kunjingini, was later established at Kaindi, which at the time, was an unused marsh area. Needless to say, it was a combined effort with the students as well as the builders. Many are the examples of the sisters in the various dioceses showing similar initiative and enterprise.

Enlightened through their growing relationship with the people, the sisters made their own professional assessment of the needs, particularly of girls and women. In circumstances which seemed almost impossible the sisters used their powers of persuasion to convince parents of the importance of education, self-reliance and employment opportunities for girls and women.

Following the western system of education and teaching the Australian curriculum of the colonial government, the sisters saw christian education, literacy and numeracy as essential for the foundation of a free, democratic country. They held the general belief in the power of christian education to transform society. Although the early sisters and those following them were far from insensitive to the clash of cultures their approach implied a certain reliance on western ways, which to Melanesian people would have been taken as a disregard for their own cultural richness. Seeing the disruption to village life caused by formal education<sup>25</sup>, the sisters were among the first, particularly in the rural areas, to commence vocational schools for girls, emphasising self-reliance skills and family health issues. They eagerly introduced the government initiatives of 'cultural studies' and 'melanesian values' in the curriculum in schools and teachers colleges. In their concern for the social ills of increasing poverty, breakdown of village structures, substance abuse, tribal fighting, violence and lawlessness, some sisters entered the field of social and pastoral ministries. They bravely spoke out on behalf of the people in petitions through organized protests and demonstrations, letters to the newspaper and, perhaps, more powerfully, by standing with them during difficult transition times.

Sister nurses made adaptations as, working in under-resourced health centres, they were called upon in emergencies to diagnose and perform procedures that would be the prerogative of doctors in first world countries. They carried out extensive bush patrols on foot, on dangerous roads, and in turbulent seas. They came to view their prime purpose of saving lives in a long-term constructive way. They became managers of health centres, concerned with preventative medicine, health education and training, the use of the people's natural remedies, and the training of indigenous staff. They worked in collaboration with the Catholic Church and Government health authorities, as well as with other Church agencies. Some sisters represented the Catholic Church at diocesan and national levels.

## **ADAPTATIONS TO MEET CHANGES IN NATION AND CHURCH**

Soon after settling in their educational and health ministries, the sisters found themselves influenced by forces within the country which was heading towards self-government and independence, and within the Church itself. Changes that had been evolving in the colonial context gathered momentum in the 1960's.

### **Preparation for political independence**

Urged by the United Nations, the Australian Administration, after a history of reliance on the various Christian missions since the 1880's for education and health services, put in motion economic and education policies to prepare the country for political independence<sup>26</sup>. The Australian Labor Government made a commitment to a 'New Deal' for Papua<sup>27</sup> and New Guinea<sup>28</sup>, emphasising the priority to be given to the interests of the local population and to the 'educational, economic, and political progress of the people'. For the first time, there was a serious injection of government funding for the purpose of overall development. This was particularly so in the government centres and in the recently opened up Highlands areas<sup>29</sup> where half of the country's population lived<sup>30</sup>. However, the mission infrastructure for education and health predominated, particularly in the regional centres and rural areas.

By 1960 Papua and New Guinea formed basically a Christian country. The Christian churches, such as Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican and the London Missionary Society, which had operated in the country virtually from the beginning of mission activity in the latter part of the nineteenth century, consolidated and expanded their influence, through evangelisation, education, health and development.

### ***Pre-Independence Policies in Education***

In the interests of promoting national unity, English was declared the medium of instruction in 1962<sup>31</sup>. A United Nations mission recommended the expansion of secondary, technical and higher education and as a result of the Currie Report of the Commission of Higher Education (1962) the first tertiary institutions were established at Port Moresby and Lae.<sup>32</sup> An Advisory Committee on Education (the Weeden, Beeby and Gris Report) recommended equal pay and conditions for mission teachers (1969) This was followed up two years later by the establishment of the National Teaching Service, providing teachers of mission agency schools with equal salaries and status with those of the administration agency schools, and endorsing national curricula, with English as the language of instruction for all registered schools. 1974 marked the year of localisation of primary schools, with serious implications for overseas mission teachers.

### ***Political developments towards Independence***

Developments escalated after the first parliamentary meeting of the House of Assembly of Papua and New Guinea in 1964. Seeking public opinion in preparation for setting up an autonomous government, the Constitutional Planning Committee visited town and rural centres in 1972, and Self-Government was proclaimed the following year. Independence in 1975 was a significant moment as people of over 850 different languages and cultures united to form one nation. The written Constitution endorsed the traditional values and Christian principles as the foundation for the new nation state<sup>33</sup>. The direction was expressed in the ideals of the Eight Point Plan<sup>34</sup>, prioritising equal distribution of economic benefits, decentralisation, self-reliant economy, equal and active participation of women in all forms of economic and social activity and the retaining of Melanesian cultural ways.

The proclamation of traditional values and Christian principles as the basis for the new nation had the power to hold and bind hearts. Prominent among the traditional values – expressed as 'Melanesian ways' – were reverence for the spirit world and the spirits of the ancestors, commitment to family and clan, obedience to custom and law, respect for elders, care and preservation of the environment and hospitality<sup>35</sup>. A new emphasis, long valued and upheld by the sisters in their ministries, was that of equal participation of women.

## **The second Vatican Council**

The Catholic Church of PNG responded to the renewed theology of the second Vatican Council (1962 – 65). Its themes were enthusiastically taken up: inculturation – seeking and developing expressions of Christianity within the various Melanesian cultures; using the language of the people instead of the ancient Latin language; encouraging the use of the Bible as the Word of God; and establishing a new and mutual relationship with non-Catholic denominations and non-Christian religions.

However, it was the overall radical change in church and mission theology which were at the heart of these renewals. The church officially abandoned its negative stance to modernism<sup>36</sup>, and positively embraced the modern world in the ideals of love, care of and responsibility. Beginning with a Trinitarian centre for its origin<sup>37</sup>, mission was placed at the very heart of the church, not because of some command that had been laid upon the faithful, but because, it emanated from the life of the Trinity itself<sup>38</sup>. The central theme of the mission of the church to further the reign of God is captured in the words: 'The pilgrim Church is missionary by its very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit (to bring about the reign of God) that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father'<sup>39</sup>. As a pilgrim people in a common search for the fulfilment of the reign of God the catholic church was being called to constant reform. Moreover, embracing a wider sense of the one true church, the Catholic church entered into a new relationship of dialogue with christian and non-christian churches to build up the true church of Christ.<sup>40</sup>

These teachings were integrated by Pope Paul VI in an encyclical that came to be recognised as his 'pastoral testament'<sup>41</sup>. He reiterated that 'the task of evangelising all people' constituted 'the essential mission of the church', which was called to 'constant conversion and renewal'. Referring to the church in its work of evangelisation, the Gospel message should be absorbed, interpreted and enlivened within the particular cultural context, rather than through the filter of the foreign culture. Other themes reinforced were that of the church's commitment to development and liberation, and openness to the truth of other religious ways<sup>42</sup>.

The Catholic Church in PNG conducted its own self-study<sup>43</sup> (1972-75) to determine local, diocesan and national issues and concerns, and Sisters of Mercy took a significant part in this process<sup>44</sup>. Within the context of its major finding 'We are the Church', local issues of the family, ministry training of catechists and church workers, formation of priests and seminarians, and the rights, responsibilities and participation of the laity were identified, giving more concrete direction to the vision of the growth of the local Church as the 'People of God'. No longer was the church to be seen primarily as a hierarchical institution. This exercise of the Self-Study proved to be a significant follow-up to the Vatican Council and a major source of renewal.

## **Sisters of Mercy Adapt to Changing Needs**

New institutes and centres were formed to explore the implications of these new directions and individual Sisters of Mercy were involved at different times in teaching and/or management. The Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service (MI, 1973) and the Liturgical and Catechetical Institute (LCI, 1974) were formally established in Goroka. The Catechist Training Centre at Pumakos, Pastoral Centres at Tangugo and Negrie in Wewak, Par in Enga, and Mingende and Kefamo in the Goroka Diocese were also established. In addition, sisters were on the staff at inter-diocesan seminaries – St John's, Kairiru, Good Shepherd, Madang and Holy Spirit Seminary, Bomana, in the capital, Port Moresby<sup>45</sup>.

Of tremendous significance for women religious, and one in which Sisters of Mercy played a significant role, was Xavier Institute of Missiology for Women Religious of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (1971) in Port Moresby. Through Xavier Institute, the teachings of Vatican II, particularly in relation to the renewal of religious life<sup>46</sup>, inculturation and pastoral ministry, were open to scores of young women religious and eventually the men religious who eventually joined in the programs<sup>47</sup>.

Sisters also took leadership roles in the Union of Women Religious based at Xavier Institute<sup>48</sup>, with regional centres throughout the country, and the Conference of Major Superiors (which eventually evolved into the Conference of Women Religious of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands). These bodies focused on religious and cultural formation

appropriate to Melanesian women religious, and pastoral approaches to contemporary social issues. This involvement demanded insight, sensitivity to culture, tact and courage on the part of the sisters, speaking and writing on behalf of women in a male-centred church and society.

### **Agency of the Sisters: A broad focus of mission – church and nation**

The sisters were part of the unfolding events in Church and society, and their involvement related closely to the growth of the local Church and the preparation for, or consolidation of, Independence. Government and Church policies promoted localisation – empowerment of indigenous people through preparation for new roles of responsibility.

As they responded to contemporary needs of Church and nation they were led to a broader focus of mission – one which encompassed the parish, deanery, diocese and neighbouring dioceses. Many sisters were at the forefront of vibrant exploration, research and practice. They moved from teaching in primary schools to high schools, teacher education or vocational centres. They ‘stepped sideways’ and they ‘stepped down’ – to be a supportive presence for indigenous people in new leadership roles in church and government institutions. They moved across geographical boundaries – from the coast to the highlands (and vice versa), and to the national capital, Port Moresby. New Mercy inter-congregational communities and support groups emerged, in some cases replacing the original more conventional types of living together. Where necessary, they prepared for pastoral work, catechist training, and pastoral and church leadership training through further study and training within the country<sup>49</sup>, Australia or the Philippines.

The sisters had worked closely within the dioceses and their personalities, talents, dedication – and readiness to face the difficulties of the roads - were well known. Requests came from bishops or priests within the diocese or from government personnel and were usually followed by a process of consultation within the religious community. Written references, and applications were required for these management positions in education, health and pastoral ministry. As these well-known sisters moved around the local areas in new supervisory or management roles their presence offered a sense of continuity, stability and neutrality to the people, during a time of political uncertainty

Although this appeared to be a *diaspora* as the sisters left the security of their mission stations new ministries were not undertaken lightly, nor without considerable debate! Seeing themselves as ‘agents’ of change, sisters nevertheless constantly questioned, critiqued or corrected their approach. At first some ‘religious life’ and ministry changes (preceding those later initiated in Australia) were not readily understood by the Australian Leaders, and, to ensure their continuing support it was incumbent on the missionary sisters to articulate and communicate their needs – and also to show how they fitted in with the diocesan pastoral plans<sup>50</sup>.

Within the ambit of the Catholic Church, Sisters of Mercy lived with a certain amount of criticism and misunderstanding because of their readiness to adapt to the ‘signs of the times’. This was shown by their simplified religious dress, their moving into ministries before many of their male counterparts, their readiness to stay over-night in the villages for ministry or on nursing patrols and their readiness to speak their truth for themselves and for others.

There were many challenging, exciting and rewarding moments, but there were times of danger and confusion as sisters faced difficult questions. As individuals they chose whether to leave the country to continue ministry in Australia (and there was some indication of an ‘exodus’ about this time), to stay with the potential threat of racial uprisings (as had occurred in some African countries), or to take up PNG citizenship (which they rejected, keeping their identity as ‘guests’ in the country). They questioned whether to be financially dependent on the mission or to manage their own resources. They experienced the inevitable tension between religious community and ministry and grappled together to find creative and constructive solutions for changing times. There were often no simple, and very few unanimous solutions, to complex everyday problems of mission.

Inspiring ideals of the church and nation offered positive directions, guiding the sisters in circumstances that were often overwhelming due to internal and external social forces (which are beyond the scope of this paper). While comparatively few sisters were gifted in the fields of anthropology, language, or evangelism in the traditional sense, collectively the sisters helped build up the church as the people of God as they worked in the diverse strata of society – formal and non-formal education, teacher education, adult pastoral ministries, training of seminarians and catechists, health care in its widest sense, and formation of indigenous religious women and men. Overall, they offered the people of Papua New Guinea a commitment of over fifty years – ample time for mutual relationships to be established, cross-cultural learning to be strengthened and love, care and forgiveness to be treasured. The mission of the Australian Sisters of Mercy entered a new phase when, comprised predominantly of indigenous sisters and under their leadership, they were granted autonomy by Rome as the Sisters of Mercy – PNG Region, taking their place along side the seventeen congregations and their foundation in Pakistan, which since 1981, have made up the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy Australia.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Phan, Peter, Proclamation of the Reign of God as Mission of the Church: What for, to Whom, by Whom, with Whom, and How, paper presented at McAuley Campus, ACU, 2002, pp1-11.
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>3</sup> MacGinley, M.R., Presentation Sisters in Papua New Guinea 1966 – 2006, Wagga Wagga, NSW: Triple D Books, 2008, p 21.
- <sup>4</sup> *Evangelii praecones*, 1951.
- <sup>5</sup> Waiko, John Dademo, A Short History of Papua New Guinea, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993) p134.
- <sup>6</sup> (Mihalic, F., Readings in PNG Mission History: A Chronicle of SVD and SSpS Mission Involvement on Mainland New Guinea between 1946 and 1996, (Madang: DWU Press, 1998).
- <sup>7</sup> This process has been reported in Flaherty, T.A., in Crossings in Mercy-The Story of the Sisters of Mercy Papua New Guinea 1956-2006 (Adelaide: The Sisters of Mercy Papua New Guinea Region: OpenBook Howden, 2008).
- <sup>8</sup> Sister Marie Dagg, in an Interview reported in Crossings in Mercy
- <sup>9</sup> According to an early government practice the various Christian churches were assigned to particular 'spheres of influence'.
- <sup>10</sup> This information is preserved in the archives, Diocese of Goroka<sup>10</sup>
- <sup>11</sup> Circular cited in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy Victoria Square, Western Australia.
- <sup>12</sup> In 1931 Tok Pisin had been adopted by the Church as the language to be used in evangelisation. Cf Mihalik, F., SVD, Readings in PNG Mission History: A Chronical of SVD and SSpS Mission Involvement on Mainland New Guinea between 1946 and 1996, (Madang, DWU Press, 1998).
- <sup>13</sup> This Hospital and Nurse's Training Centre were conducted by the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart.
- <sup>14</sup> Sisters from Cairns, Townsville, Brisbane and Grafton formed the community.
- <sup>15</sup> Currently this forms St Benedict's Campus of the Divine Word University, Madang.
- <sup>16</sup> Excerpt from the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>18</sup> Extract from a letter by Sister Mar Wildie, preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy Rockhampton
- <sup>19</sup> From an interview with Sister Elva Russell, May 2005.
- <sup>20</sup> Clan officials appointed during colonial times.
- <sup>21</sup> From an extract in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane
- <sup>22</sup> Information provided by Mrs Rose Maule, and ex-Yarapos Sisters. Among these students were Rose (Asoli) Maule, Heriberta Narombi, Elizabeth Saulep, Maria (Primong) Siria, Monica Tonjin and Christine Tamin,
- <sup>23</sup> Western Highlands, Eastern Highlands, Simbu, and Southern Highlands.
- <sup>24</sup> The administrative staff of the hospital, the Franciscan Sisters of the Divine Motherhood, were recalled by Chapter to England.

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- <sup>25</sup> This is also reported in Waiko, 1993:155-157.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid* 155-157
- <sup>27</sup> Papua was under Australian domination from 1905.
- <sup>28</sup> New Guinea was under Australian control from 1914.
- <sup>29</sup> The Highlands were discovered in 1933, were put under government control in 1947.
- <sup>30</sup> Waiko 1993, p132
- <sup>31</sup> Coping with the 850 different vernaculars proved too difficult.
- <sup>32</sup> The University of Papua New Guinea in 1966, and the University of Technology in 1967
- <sup>33</sup> Waiko 1993, p189
- <sup>34</sup> Waiko 1993, p 156
- <sup>35</sup> cf the writings of lawyer and contributor to the PNG Constitution, Bernard Narokobi.
- <sup>36</sup> Kaspar, Walter, The future of Christianity: Truth and Dialogue in a Post-Modern Era, paper presented at Bonython Hall, Adelaide University, Adelaide, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2003.
- <sup>37</sup> BEVANS, Stephen B., and SCHROEDER, Roger P., Constants in Context – a Theology of mission for Today, (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2004, pp249-250, commenting on Ad Gentes, the Decree on the Mission activity of the Church.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, Ad Gentes 40.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, Ad Gentes, Par 2
- <sup>40</sup> In Lumen Gentium (8) the Catholic Church is said to *subsist* in the true church, but is not identical to it. This theme of relationship with non-Christian religions is elaborated in the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate).
- <sup>41</sup> Evangelii Nuntiandi 1975 ) Bevans
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, (1-6).
- <sup>43</sup> An initiative of the Catholic Bishops, ecumenical in membership and goals, implemented by the Melanesian Institute
- <sup>44</sup> (Herman Janssen: Founder of the Melanesian Institute, and team leader of the Self-Study, personal communication).
- <sup>45</sup> Mihalik, F., 1999.
- <sup>46</sup> In his address to all Religious Pope Paul VI (1964) called all religious to a commitment to renewal of religious life emphasising a total commitment to the person of Jesus, living out of Gospel values, and a fidelity to the charism of the founders in meeting the needs of the modern world.
- <sup>47</sup> This Institute of Missiology for women religious of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands was initiated by Sister Catherine Sullivan, OLSH (1970).
- <sup>48</sup> Examples of the influence of Sisters Helen O'Brien, Rita Hassett and others are provided in Flaherty, T.A., Crossings in Mercy. 2008
- <sup>49</sup> Courses were held at Melanesian Institute, including Orientation Courses for new missionaries and at Xavier Institute of Missiology.
- <sup>50</sup> Many records in Archives, as reported in Falherty, T. A., Crossings in Mercy, 2008.