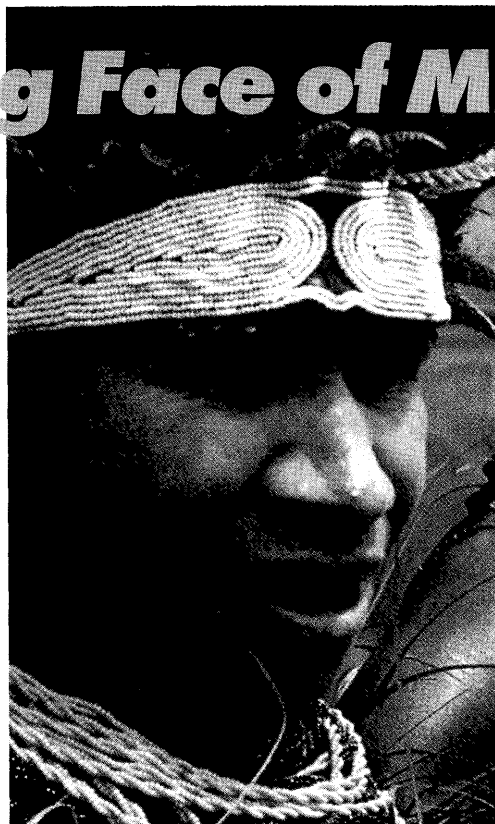


The Changing Face of Mission

Philip Gibbs SVD



Over a hundred years ago, Divine Word Missionaries came to what was then the German colony of New

Guinea. Sixty years ago they penetrated the Highlands, arriving along with prospectors and traders. People saw the missionaries using axes and nails as well as salt, and wanted these things, too. The missionaries had come with a spiritual message, but imparting that Good News, they introduced Western education and modern health services as well. These innovations had a great impact on the people. Faced with this cultural invasion change was inevitable.

In the early mission days most people in the mission-sending countries believed in a slow ethical and religious development of humankind, and thus regarded the "natives" in places like Papua New Guinea as "primitive" both technologically and spiritually. Such attitudes did little to foster a dialogic approach to mission and sometimes local customs were condemned without an investigation into their meaning or their wider function in the society. Western customs like giving European names at

Enga Catholics celebrating the Jubilee Year. Yellow faces are symbolic of the life of the Risen Christ.

One of the many processions during the Jubilee Year celebrations. The Bishop walks in the middle representing Christ as the center pole of the “house.”

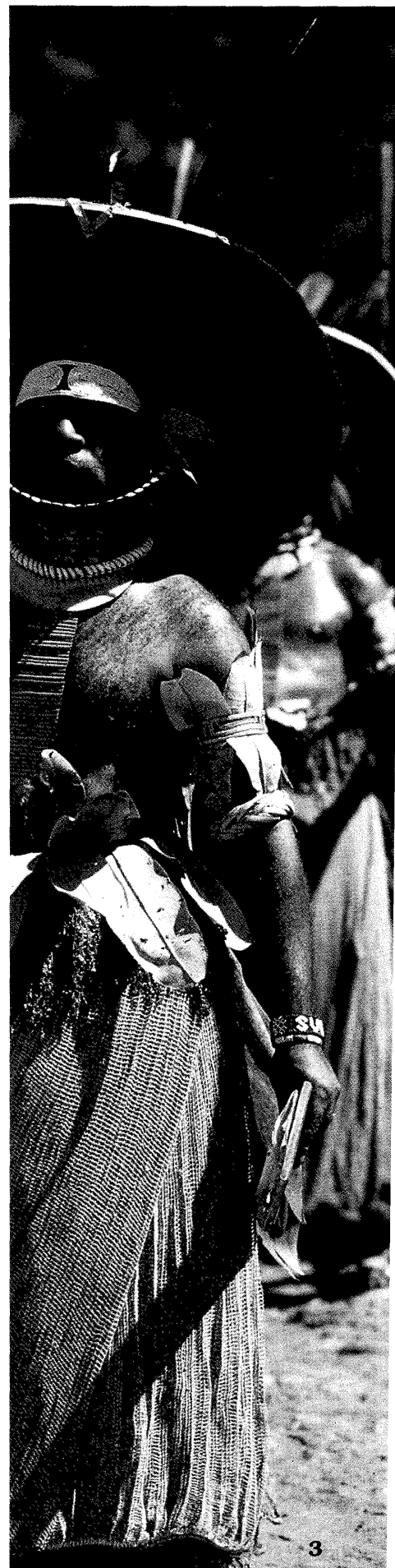


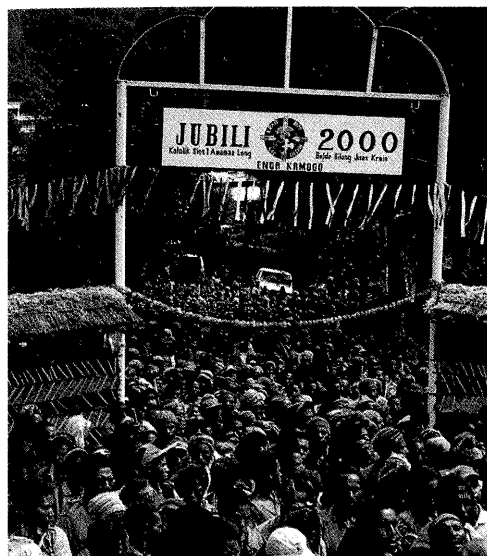
baptism were introduced because they seemed “the Christian thing to do.” The results of this approach to mission are evident today. Many young people in Papua New Guinea’s urban area know more about the lifestyle of characters on television than about the system of meanings that shaped the lives of their forbearers. Just the other day I was sitting next to a young Papua New Guinean engrossed in watching the Muppet Show! Children go to school, but they learn about a world quite different from that of their parents. In many parts of the country, too, boys no longer live in the “men’s” house, and other initiation rites are abandoned or radically changed.

We have come to realize over the years that effective evangelization requires dialogue—listening to where the community is now, and then inviting it to make its own, the way of life revealed in Jesus Christ. Acceptance of that invitation leads to a transformation in

people’s values, attitudes and actions. This is a level of culture in a true sense, and it is here that the missionary must try to be in contact—here where people are spiritually. Genuine transformation grows from within.

Missionary roles, too, are changing today. In post-independence Papua New Guinea, missionaries face a leadership challenge. Without reneging on their own responsibilities, they are allowing the thrust of ongoing evangelization to come from leadership within the local communities. We also witness the changing stance of Divine Word Missionaries in regard to Papua New Guinea’s seminarians. Divine Word College at the National Seminary is full to overflowing and one of the biggest headaches for the provincial leadership is to find suitable seminary staff and formation personnel to cope with the numbers of vocations. There are now a good number of Papua New Guinean Divine Word Missionaries. Some are





working within Papua New Guinea, but others ministering in countries overseas such as Ghana and Brazil.

But advancement does not obscure good work already done. The fruit of the labor of the first missionaries was evident during the Jubilee Year 2000 when Enga Christians gathered in their thousands to

celebrate their Faith and the birthday of Christ. A high point of the Jubilee year was the ordination of Bishop Arnold Orowac, the first Engan bishop, an auxiliary bishop of Wabag diocese.

I was recently in the Wabag diocese in the Central Highlands of Papua New

Guinea to attend the ordination of Fr. Robert Plews Laka at his home parish there. Bishop Orowac was the ordaining bishop at the ceremony. In his homily he noted that the priestly life was not easy, and he warned Robert to be prepared to face hardships in his life. The huge crowd showed its support by clapping and by singing enthusiastically in both traditional and modern styles. As is usual with people evangelized by Divine Word Missionaries, these eager Christians showed their special regard for the Scriptures as God's Word by

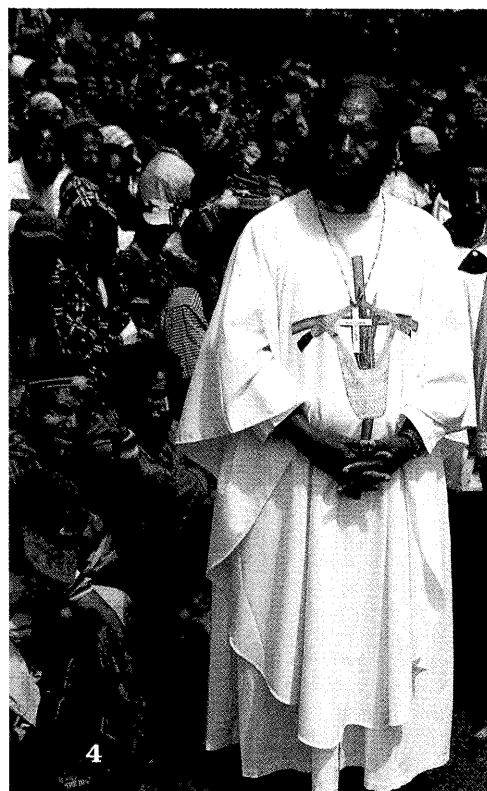
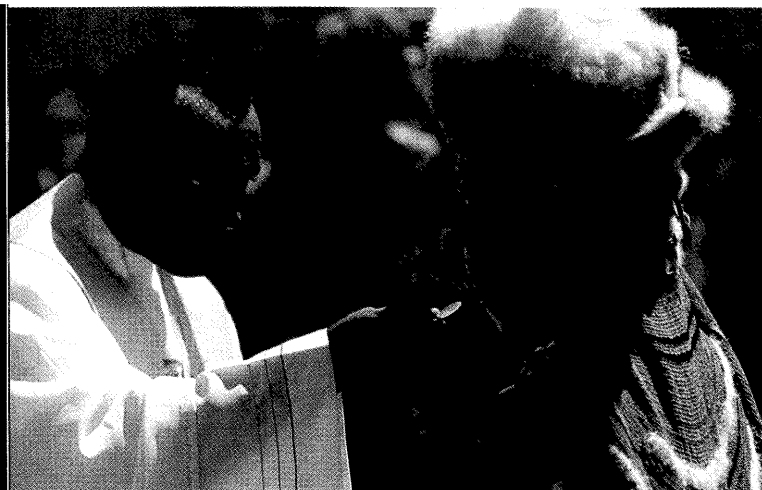
carrying the Bible and honoring it ceremoniously during the celebration.

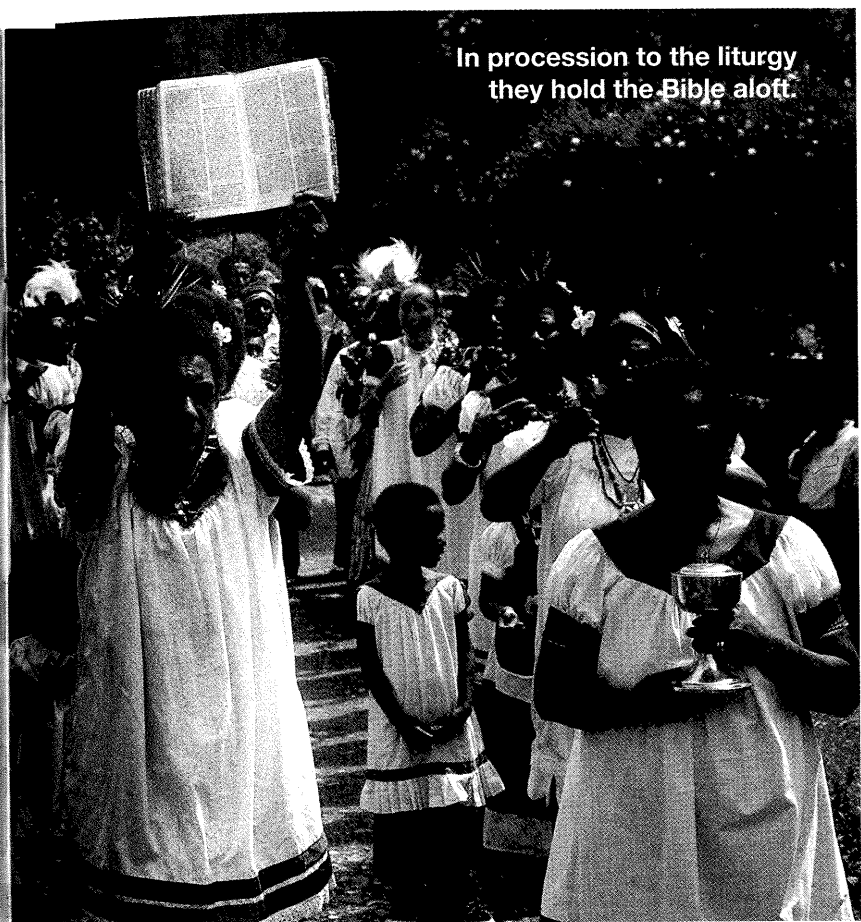
Fr. Robert belongs to the Enga people whose reputation for being strong-willed is as fearful in tribal fighting as their Faith has made them solid and devout Christians.

Appropriately, he appeared for his ordination in traditional Enga finery, wearing a large wig made out of human hair, and holding a spear. Halfway through the ceremony, after being presented to the bishop and the Divine Word Missionaries' Provincial by his family, Robert changed into his white cassock. He then lay prostrate on the mat made for the occasion from leaves of the pandanus tree, while the whole congregation—using their own Enga language, and using traditional tunes—joined in the Litany, calling on the saints and even Robert's "good" ancestors to witness the event.

After the ordination I asked Robert how he felt about being a Divine Word Missionary. First he recalled how he had been away from home, studying in the Philippines. "For six years I have been overseas; two years at the novitiate and four years at the school of theology. My being overseas has helped me to come to appreciate the true spirit of internationality in the Divine Word Missionaries."

I questioned him about how he sees himself as a Papua New Guinean Divine Word





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Missionary. Robert replied, "I see the Divine Word Missionaries as an international community, working here in Papua New Guinea. We share the same charism as our founder. I see myself working in Papua New Guinea as a Papua New Guinean Divine Word Missionary. I realize it is a blessing to be able to work with my own people, sharing the same Melanesian spirit but seeing a Melanesian Christ. Working in Papua New Guinea is also an opportunity to give back what the early missionaries have brought."

Robert's ordination came just two days after the death of a German Divine Word Missionary, Fr. Werner Angenent, who had been working with the Enga people for over thirty years. People were quick to point out how Fr. Robert was being ordained to take his place. Robert, like other Papua New Guinean Divine Word priests and Brothers see it as a challenge to take over from the early missionaries and carry on the continuing missionary task of the Church. ♦

Papua New Guinea Then & Now

Our Founder, Blessed Arnold Janssen, sent the first group of missionaries to New Guinea [now Papua New Guinea] in 1896. In many areas, Divine Word Missionaries were the founders of the local Church. When the missionaries first arrived, the country was not very developed economically and the missionaries made great efforts to make the mission of evangelization self-supporting through the establishment of plantations and shops.

Two world wars, especially World War II, devastated the mission. About half of the more than 200 Divine Word Missionaries in New Guinea during World War II were killed. The mission was entirely rebuilt after the war, primarily through the efforts of American Divine Word Missionaries.

In 1975 Papua New Guinea became independent of the United Nations trusteeship which was administered by Australia. In recent years, the growing separation between the poor and rich has led to significant social problems. Youth who migrate to cities cannot find jobs and many of them become involved in crime.

Today more than 160 Divine Word Missionaries are assigned to the Papua New Guinea province.