



The Church Confronts Witchcraft in Papua New Guinea

Philip Gibbs SVD



Men discuss witchcraft issues during a parish workshop to raise awareness.

Missionaries have always had to deal in some way or other with culture and the belief in spirits, both good and evil. I have worked in Papua New Guinea over forty years, but it is only recently that belief in witchcraft has emerged as significant problem. As secretary for the Commission for Social Concerns of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, I am assisting the Church in developing an appropriate response.

Here is one example among many that I have encountered. When a young man died in the hospital, doctors were unable to determine the cause of his death. During his funeral, word spread that after his death, the man made a cell phone call, accusing two women of removing his heart and causing his death. A group of men rounded up the two women and proceeded to torture them with heated iron rods and long knives, demanding to know where they had put his heart and insisting on its return. Obviously, the women were not able to locate his heart or to put it back, so they were brutally assaulted. One woman was murdered. The other woman, whom I will call Maria, was terribly burned, but managed to escape to a hospital in another province, where she was treated for her injuries.



Fr. Philip Gibbs with a victim of torture recovering after months in hospital. Scarring from burns is visible on her arm.



In his report, the doctor wrote:

[She] remained in critical condition for the first ten to fourteen days in the hospital. . . . She required three months of intensive care for her wounds. . . . The patient was seven months pregnant at the time of this assault. Her baby died and was delivered on the following day. The baby also suffered from burns even while in the uterus.

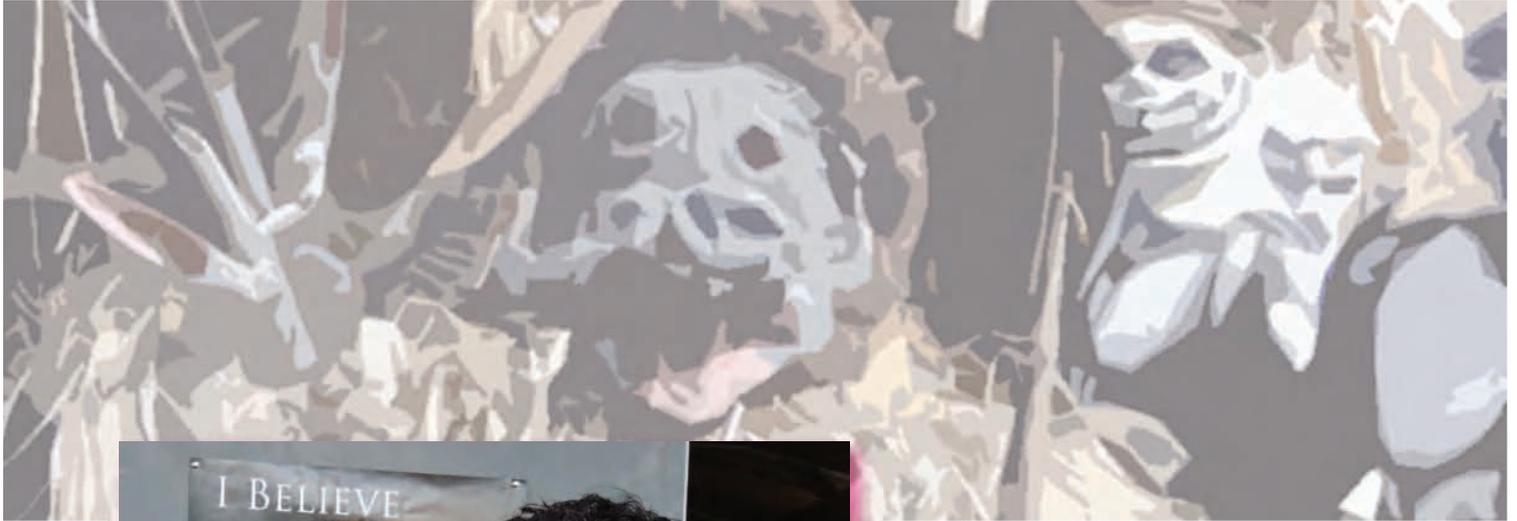
Maria is a faithful Catholic and a member of the Legion of Mary, but this seemed of no concern to her accusers. Shortly after she was released from hospital, her husband and I went to visit her. Maria said she looked forward to returning home to be reunited with her husband and children. She stated her plans to have her innocence declared publically through a court hearing.

This will be a long, hard road. Taking her accusers to court will mean summoning her husband's cousins. It was their brother who died in the hospital, and they were the ones who instigated her torture. Moreover, many people, including church-going Catholics, believe in witchcraft and are afraid of her return.

I have spent many hours talking with people in Maria's community. They are reluctant to support a person who has been identified as a threat to society. They fear



An innocent woman who was accused and tortured recovers from her injuries in a hospital.



**A victim of witchcraft
accusations is
welcomed by the
Christian community.**

that people might get violent again and that she could be killed. Anyone supporting her might also be assaulted or even killed.

The group directly involved in the torture is unchurched, but the surrounding community is predominantly Catholic, and some of them are confused. Although they are Christians, they admit their belief in witchcraft. I have run several workshops in the community and some bring up the Easter ceremonies in which they renew their baptismal promises, pledging to “reject Satan and all his works and empty promises.” For some, this reinforces their belief in how good and evil can be personified; good is personified in Jesus Christ and evil is personified in Satan.

People seek explanations for good and evil, particularly misfortune and death. Why did the tree branch fall when he was beneath it? Why was there a car accident? Why does a person die? Such questions are often phrased using “who” questions. “Who” caused him or her to get sick and die?

In the workshops, we discuss how science can provide alternative explanations for sickness and death. Science may not provide satisfactory explanations to “who” questions, but it can usually provide explanation for “why” questions. For many that is enough.

In order to provide some clarity, the Catholic bishops from the five Highlands dioceses of Papua New Guinea met in May 2013 to discuss the spread of belief in sorcery. The bishops claim that a remedy will be found in strengthening people’s Chris-



tian commitment. An excerpt from their statement reads:

We bishops challenge our priests, religious brothers and sisters, catechists, and all church leaders and ministers, and we invite other churches too, to join with us in taking a clear, unambiguous, and strong stand against all talk about sanguma (witchcraft) and all attempts to lay the blame on anyone, especially at the time of sickness and death.

Last November, Maria made a brief visit to her home and attended Sunday Mass at the local parish. After Mass, a community leader addressed the congregation of about five hundred people. A majority of adults in the congregation greeted Maria warmly, although several who had been directly involved in the accusations and assault kept their distance. Later that day, I accompanied Maria and her family to another province, where she currently stays.

It is noteworthy that conversation within the local community has included discussion on a faith level, including statements from the bishops read out in church and circulated afterward. People are faced with the issue of how they, as Christians, might respond to misfortune and untimely death. Discussion on this level is very important since it leads to a direct confrontation with belief in sorcery and witchcraft. Admittedly, many people still struggle with seemingly contradictory viewpoints. But the conversation is ongoing, and I think it is important for protecting women like Maria and bringing about lasting change in people's attitudes and beliefs in the future. ♦