

Faith and Culture Workshops

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Child bearing is a difficult and often sad event when death can claim one of every four babies.

Missionaries came to Papua New Guinea along with government officers, prospectors and traders. They came with matches, axes, knives, nails, salt, etc. Missionaries came with a spiritual message, and as part of the Good News, they helped introduce

Western education and modern health services. These too had a big impact on the people. Faced with the invasion from outside, change was inevitable.

Here in the Highlands there are some cultural practices that might seem strange to Westerners, for instance the taboos associated with menstruation, or the ways of dealing with the spirits of dead family members. These are ideas that are particularly rich for the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture. This is where I can give input from a Gospel perspective. When people ask me how they can judge whether a particular cultural practice is "good" or "evil" I try to get them to look at it in terms of shades of "grey" rather than black and white

What is a fitting response to the accusation "You missionaries destroyed our culture!"?

A smoke and a laugh are all part of the decision making process. In Kandep decision making is the task of the men.



and to ask two questions: Is it life giving? Does it promote human dignity? If the answer to both is "yes" then surely it is something that is in harmony with the message of Jesus.

Usually at the end of the workshop we have a special Eucharistic celebration to celebrate their identity as Melanesian Christian men or women. The celebrations can be very moving.

A few months ago I conducted a workshop in Kandep, an isolated mountainous region. Of 58 women I asked about their families, they had given birth to a total of 333 children of whom 245 were still alive and 88 had died. Most women have had to suffer the death of at least one child. One woman had experienced seven of her children dying. During the Mass the women put flowers in a box, one for each child who had died and they placed it on the altar at the presentation of the gifts. It is at times like these that I thank God for the opportunity to be able to serve in the Church here.

New Country - New Life *Displaced people seeking life in a new country*

The geographical boundaries of nations have become more fluid than the lines on a map would have us believe. For a variety of reasons the twentieth century became a time of great movement of peoples within countries and between countries. Migration was sometimes orderly in many countries but because of economic and political reasons it was not always possible. People fled their home countries for a variety of reasons. The words "refugees", "illegals" and "displaced people" became a part of our everyday language. Australia has felt the effects of this movement and has fumbled in its response.

The countries of Asia with shared borders have had their policies stretched and still the people move. Thailand and Burma have such a shared and troubled border. Fabio Periera SVD, a seminarian from Brazil is presently working with the Jesuit Refugee Service in the refugee camps on that border with the Karenni people. Some of these people have been in the camp for over ten years and see no change in the immediate future. Education is a high priority and basics for daily living are always being sought. Fabio spends a lot of time trying to keep the tensions among the youth in camps at a workable level. He believes that sport is a great way to challenge the energies of the young to build up peaceful communities. Finding basics for sport can be a challenge for Fabio, as indeed the space to play sport. In such confined space religions, ethnic values and expression as well as personal needs all compete for the limited resources.

As Fabio reflects on how he can respond in the spirit of the words of St Matthew 'I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me into your homes', let us pray for the displaced person and for those who work with displaced people.

