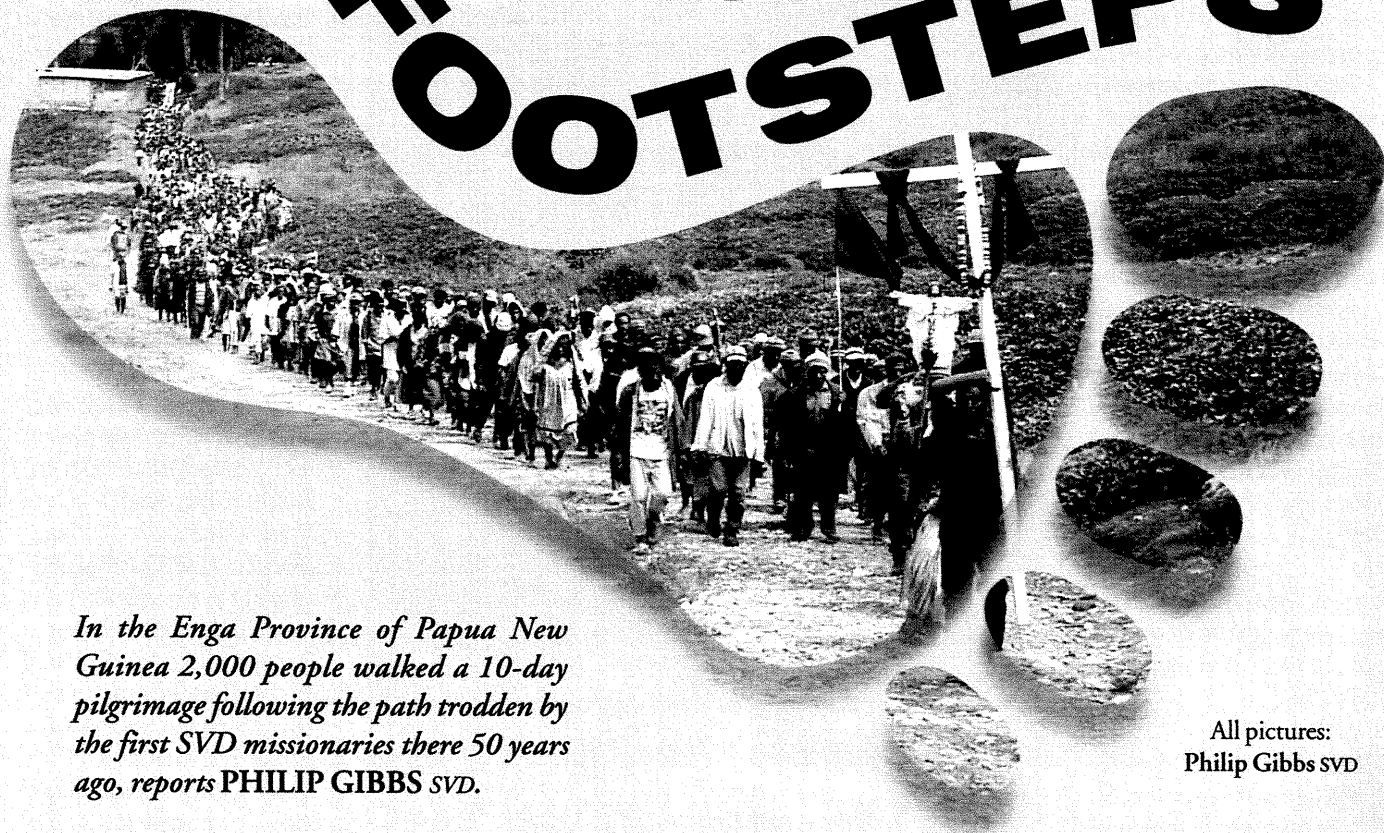


In their FOOTSTEPS



In the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea 2,000 people walked a 10-day pilgrimage following the path trodden by the first SVD missionaries there 50 years ago, reports PHILIP GIBBS SVD.

All pictures:
Philip Gibbs SVD

MANY THINGS have changed in the Papua New Guinea Highlands since the first missionaries set foot there 50 years ago. Where they trekked over narrow, muddy trails there is now a busy highway. Recently I joined a group of pilgrims on the 100-km walk from Mount Hagen to Wabag, following in the footsteps of the first missionaries. I had a tape recorder for interviews as we walked.

What better way to study popular religiosity? But I soon discovered that there would be no interviews on the road!

People kept strict silence, meditating on bible passages announced at the beginning of each day. It felt eerie walking with 2,000 people along a dusty highway with only the sound of footsteps. Not only were people meditating, but most were also fasting from food and drink throughout the day. Some wanted to do penance, while others preferred to be in solidarity with the thousands of people in the Enga Province who eat only once a day because of food shortages resulting from frosts and a protracted dry season.

On the evening of the fourth day, the rain came – the first significant rain in six months. People were overjoyed and saw it as an answer to their prayers. It meant that after the pilgrimage they would be able to plant again. For months they had been living on rice bought with their meagre savings. That would continue for another eight months until their crops matured. Now, with the rain, they would find safe drinking water within walking distance of their homes and they would soon be free of the need to import food products.

On the fifth day we arrived tired and dust-covered at a parish called Pina. The

Young women at Kopen welcoming the pilgrims



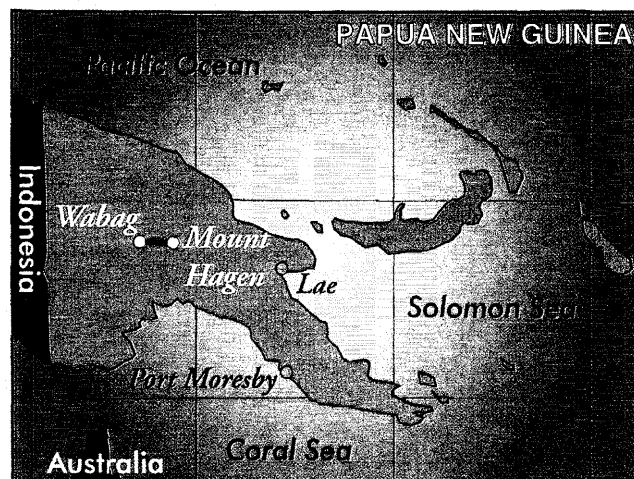
parishioners greeted us with spectacular singing and dancing. At first I was taken aback by women dancing aggressively with spears and long bushknives. Then someone explained that the parish patron is Michael the Archangel who fought and cast Satan into hell. They were acting as Michael's fellow soldiers, ready to confront any form of evil that might come near their community!

IN THE following days I entered into the rhythm of Mass in the morning followed by a presentation of the scripture readings for prayer during the day; then off on the road with the silence interrupted occasionally by a song or the recitation of the Rosary. The line of pilgrims was several kilometres long as it wound like a human river through the picturesque countryside. On arrival at our destination for the day we would be welcomed by the local community with song and dance. Then after an extended prayer service they would offer us a place to rest for the night.

The pilgrimage was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the coming of the first SVD missionaries to the Enga district in 1947. American Fr William Ross SVD and Dutchman Fr Gerard Bus SVD walked over the steep mountain tracks to encounter the Enga people. Fr Ross died in 1973 and is buried in Mount Hagen. Fr Bus, now retired, came from Europe specially for the celebration. Old people recalled their experiences of meeting him 50 years before. Young people were very interested to see the man whom they had only heard about in stories. Fr Bus led the celebration of the Eucharist at Pompobus where he had established the first Enga parish. He spoke about the *Good News* as the news that God loves us and wants us to put aside rivalries and whatever makes us harm others, and come together as brothers and sisters under Christ – an important message in a place where tribal fighting is all too frequent.

Finally the pilgrims arrived at Kopen near Wabag the provincial capital. Kopen was the furthest station established by the first missionaries because in 1947 the territory beyond there was a restricted zone, forbidden to outsiders, particularly missionaries. The local people put on an unforgettable celebration including many songs they had composed and a *Way of the Cross*.

THE CELEBRATION at Kopen also included a *Way of the Cross*. The organizers had arranged 14 large crosses along the hillside and a team of leaders went slowly from cross to cross while parish groups presented prayers or songs about Jesus' suffering and death. Enga people don't do things by half-measures. So participating in the *Way of the Cross* became an intense period of prayer. People, young and old, cried openly. A catechist explained to me that people felt they had been on a journey, following Jesus to Jerusalem. The mountain at Kopen was now Calvary. At the end of the *Way of the Cross* service the sky was dark and there



was prolonged heavy rainfall. The symbolic significance of such an event was not lost on the Enga imagination. They had heard how when Jesus died darkness covered the earth. At Kopen it was only midday and yet it became so dark.

In fact, a woman died that night. She had been ill for a long time but knew that if she died in the week prior to the big event, or during the celebration, it would be very inconvenient because many people would have to go into mourning and would not be able to joyfully welcome the pilgrims. She was determined to stay alive until after the celebration. Then her extended family could attend to her burial. Such sensitivity to matters of life and death is a characteristic of elderly people here. Often I have been called to bring the Sacrament of the Sick to a person, still quite lucid, but who, after receiving it, quietly died some hours later.

After 10 days the pilgrimage concluded with a Mass celebrated by the bishop. I flew back to Port Moresby inspired by having witnessed the faith of so many Enga Christians •

Young men in traditional finery at Kopen

