



PEACE

Divine Word Missionaries were the first Catholic missionaries to come to the Enga province, Papua New Guinea. That was in 1947, just over fifty years ago. Tribal fighting was a way of life for the people in 1947 when the first missionaries arrived, and despite the conversion of most of the population to Christianity, finding true peace is still a major challenge for evangelization today. Traditionally there were codes of conduct even during times of warfare. For example, formerly warriors did not kill women. Today, however, with the breakdown of traditional values and access to modern high-powered guns, women and children also find themselves in mortal danger.

BRIDGE

Philip Gibbs SVD

Missionaries try to preach and to live the Good News. But the Gospel will only penetrate the changing culture in a vital way when the local communities themselves take on the task of evangelization. One such community in Eng'a is called "God Triwan" (Trinity) community in the Pompabus parish of the Wabag Diocese.

In the mid-1980s, Matthew Ima, a catechist and community leader was reflecting on how to boost the lagging enthusiasm in the Pompabus parish. Matthew says that he felt like an "empty tin can." One night while praying with his community, however, he had a powerful religious experience. He found himself crying out: "I care for my sheep, but wild dogs are eating them!" Thinking that perhaps he was influenced by an evil spirit, he reached out to hold a crucifix. As if by a power of its own, the crucifix led him around the community. Eventually he felt a sense of peace, and on opening the Bible, he found the passage from Exod. 3:10-11: "I send you to Pharaoh to bring the children of Israel, my people, out of Egypt . . . this is the sign by which you shall know that it is I who have sent you."

Matthew and his community realized that to follow where God was leading them, they had to start at home with the pacifying and the re-evangelization of their own clan, which at that time was engaged in warfare with a neighboring clan. Instructing a relative to go





secretly and bring back a warrior's spear, Matthew brought the spear to the public gathering, and before all those present, he cut off the sharp tip, announcing that he had "broken Satan's teeth." Subsequently the fighting subsided, but it erupted again in the year 2000. The members of the God Triwan community felt isolated as the fight raged all around them, but they knew it would be perilous to visit other communities. Leaders of the movement prayed that the fight would end, but when it continued, they felt they had to do something more.

During a period of prayer, Matthew was inspired with the idea of building a bridge across the deep ravine which lay between his community and the enemy. (The image of the bridge came from a drawing in an early edition of the Wabag Diocesan Pastoral Plan.) Building a bridge seemed like a risky idea. It appeared even more foolhardy when Matthew announced that it would be built with a base of stones carried from the river, and that people would carry the stones in silence, praying as they did so and fasting from dawn to dusk. It was a massive challenge for the small community. They worked together for a full six months between 2000 and 2001. While the tribal war continued nearby, causing the deaths of over a hundred people, the God Triwan community fasted, prayed and carried stones to build the bridge. The base, some 10m across was formed with three tiers of stones, the tiers representing God in the past, now and in the future. They used no cement, but simply fitted the stones together, and when one part collapsed, as sometimes happened, they would build it up again. Eventually the base was formed, and high on top of the stone tiers, they built a triangular wooden support structure—the triangle representing the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then vines and saplings were strung across the top. On their side of the bridge they planted a coffee tree. (They would have liked to plant a grape vine, but there are no grape vines in Papua New Guinea.) However, the coffee tree had much the same symbolic meaning: prosperity and good times. On the "enemy" side they hung a notice: "Welcome to the road to Emmaus."

Miraculously, despite occasional enemy gunfire, no one was injured during the construction of the "Peace Bridge" and miraculously, too, the fighting ceased at the time the bridge was completed. Matthew had a hand in the

last stages of ending the fight. Noting where fighters' supporters would sit on hilltops under the cover of darkness, to observe and direct the fighting, he crossed the bridge to erect crosses on the observation sites. Those involved in the fight found the presence of crosses unnerving when they came the next day.

Men did much of the physical work in building the bridge. However, women from the community not only helped carry stones, but also contributed in a special way through their "generator teams." People note how at dusk, the Pompabus mission station appears as an island of light in the darkness after the diesel generator is started. In an analogous way, groups of women became "generator teams," who prayed around the cross to generate "prayer power." They saw their prayer around the cross like the connecting of a power line to God. Who can doubt that while they pray, the power is on, and they and their community are no longer in darkness subject to the power of Satan or evil spirits'. Their prayer links them to the light of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The fighting has stopped at Pompabus, but there is an ever-present danger of violence in other parts of the province. Only last year a young woman, Dorothy, was shot while waiting for a bus in Wabag, the provincial headquarters. Dorothy's family had been so proud of her because she had just completed her studies to become a nurse. People said that it was a case of mistaken identity—that the killers had intended to avenge the death of a man from another tribe. Ordinarily, Dorothy's murder would have ignited another tribal fight. The devout Catholic parents, however, and the leaders of the community decided not to take revenge.

Just prior to Christmas 2003, moreover, parents and leaders asked me to celebrate Mass at Dorothy's gravesite. The Triwan community invited the surrounding communities to be with them for the occasion. The original idea was that the former enemies would come across the "Peace Bridge," but after heavy flooding, the bridge had fallen into disrepair. Instead, the former enemies brought a replica of the bridge with a statue of the Holy Family: Mary, Joseph and the Child Jesus enshrined on the bridge. The Peace Bridge model was mounted on the altar for all to see; indeed, the symbolism was strikingly obvious.

The Good News brought by the early missionaries is beginning to take root, bringing communities together. There is hope that this people will be blessed with peace for years to come. ♦

