

PAPUA NEW GUINEA PILGRIMAGE

Philip Gibbs, SVD



PILGRIMAGES WITHIN EUROPE OR TO THE HOLY
LAND ARE COMMONPLACE.

But until recently pilgrimages were unheard of in Papua New Guinea. I was fortunate to become a New Guinea pilgrim in November 1997. During the hour-long flight from the capital Port Moresby to the Highlands town Mount Hagen, I tried to imagine the group of people I would be meeting on their 100km walk from Mount Hagen to Wabag, along the route taken by the first missionaries. Due to the pressure of work at the National Seminary I was not able to accompany the group right from the start. I was to join them on the fourth day of their ten-day journey. I carried a tape recorder with me and planned to conduct interviews as we walked. What better way to study the popular religiosity of the people! This would be far better than the academic world of seminary exams!

My dreams were rudely shaken when confronted by reality. There would be no interviews on the

road, as people kept strict silence, meditating on the Bible passages announced at the beginning of each day. It was an eerie sensation, walking with two thousand people, four abreast along the dusty highway with only the sound of footsteps on the stones. 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 only eat once a day anyway, because of food shortages resulting from frosts and a protracted dry season. As one man put it, "How can I eat during the day while my wife and children in Kandep eat only in the evening?"

The first day with the pilgrims began early and we only arrived at our destination long after dark. Finally, around the fire at night I could sit down and find out what I had missed in the previous days. People told me about the "handover" of a special Bible from the

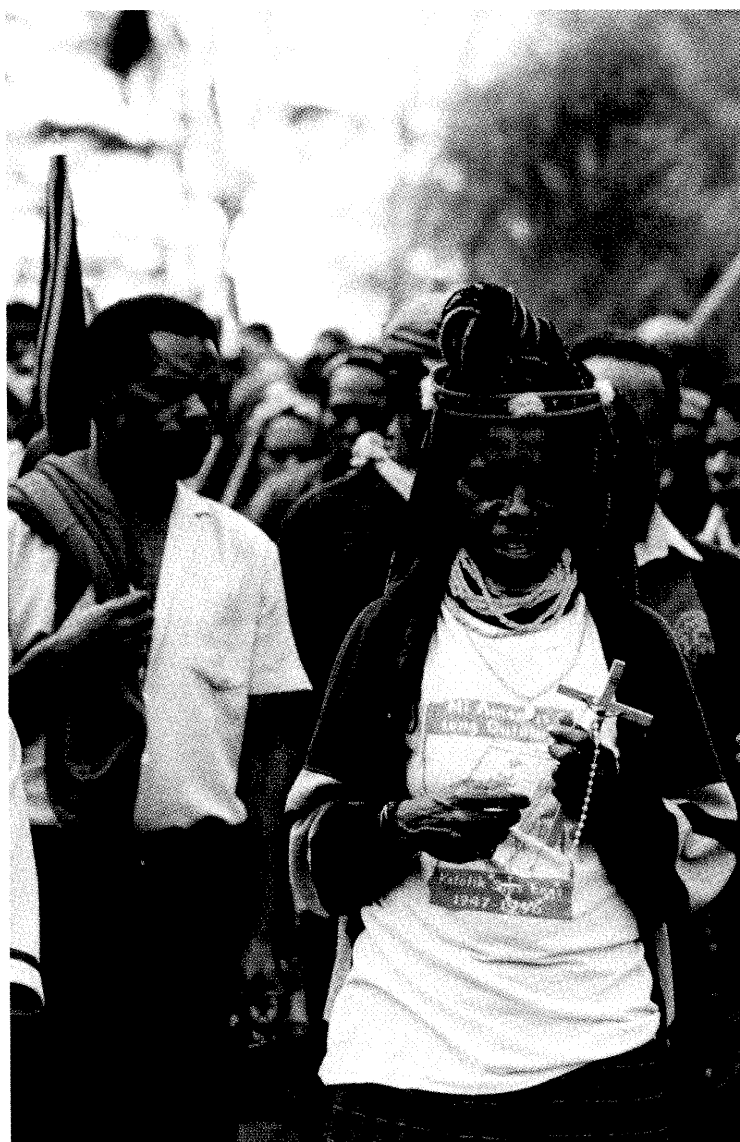
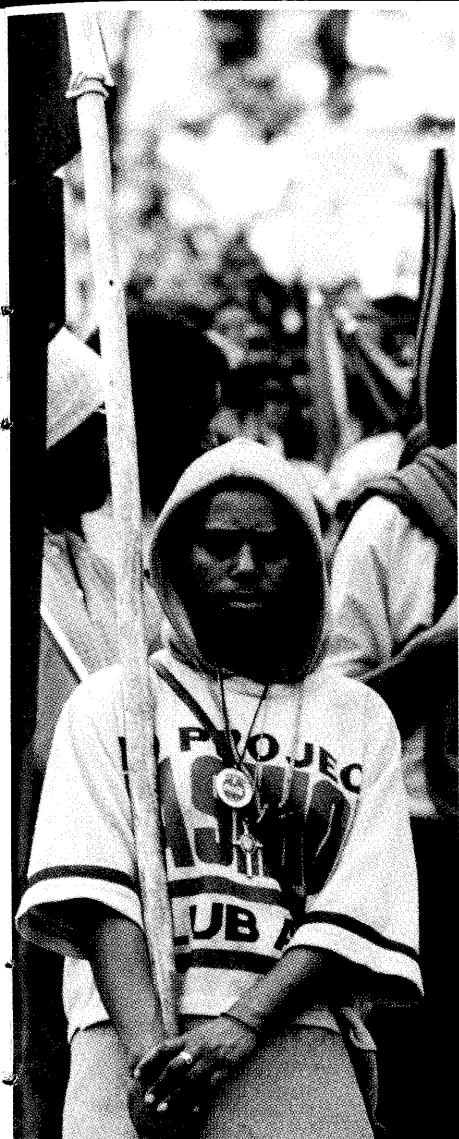
bishop of Mount Hagen to Fr. Bus SVD, the first missionary to walk into the Enga Province, just 50 years ago. Fr. Bus in turn handed the Bible to Bishop Hermann Raich of the Diocese of Wabag. People recalled how when Fr. Bus held the Bible aloft people seemed to be bathed in a special soft light that reflected in the tears in many people's eyes. They also described what it was like traveling over the 9,000 foot mountain range through the forest, mostly dry and brown from the heavy frosts and the fires earlier in the year. Why had God sent the ice to kill the forest and many of the creatures that live there? Was it divine punishment or a sign that should be interpreted in a more positive way?

On the evening of the fourth day, the rain came. It was the first significant rain we had 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 their food gardens again. For months they had been living on rice bought with their meager savings. That would continue for another eight months until their gardens matured. However, with the rain, there was hope. Now they would find safe drinking water within walking distance of their homes, and they would soon be liberated from the depressing cycle of dependence on imported food products.

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

Bishop Raich receives the Bible from Fr. Bus, the first Divine Word Missionary in the Enga Province





parishioners greeted us with a spectacular display of singing and dancing. At first I was somewhat taken back by the women dancing aggressively with spears and long bush knives. Then someone explained to me 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!

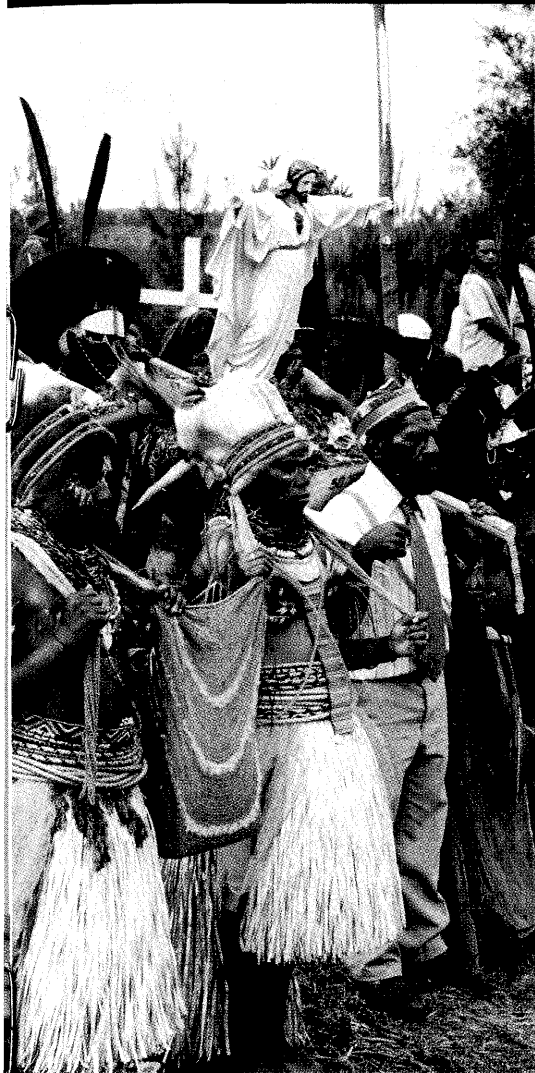
In the days that followed I entered into the rhythm of Mass in the morning followed by a presentation of the scripture readings for prayer during the day, then off on the road with the silence interrupted occasionally by a

song or the recitation of the rosary. The line of pilgrims was several kilometers long as they wound like a human river through the picturesque countryside of the mountain valleys. Two special symbols were at the head of the procession: a man carried a large cross draped with a red cloth, representing Jesus' death and resurrection. This was followed by a woman wearing a net bag containing the Bible. She carried it hanging from her head and down her back as women here carry their children. Later in the pilgrimage, other symbols

were added, such as a statue of the Sacred Heart and another of the Virgin Mary. On the 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, the local community offered us a place to rest for the night.

The pilgrimage was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the coming of the first Divine Word Missionaries to the Enga district in 1947. American Divine Word Missionary, Fr. William Ross, SVD, and Fr. Gerard Bus, SVD, from Holland, walked over the steep mountain tracks to encounter the Enga people. Fr. Ross died in 1973 and is buried in Mount Hagen. Fr. Bus is now retired, and came from Europe specially for the celebration. Old people recalled their own experiences of meeting him fifty years before, and 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 Pom-pobus where he had established the first Enga parish. He spoke about how the Good News is really the news that God loves us and wants us all to put aside rivalries and whatever makes us harm others, and join together as brothers and sisters in Christ. That is an important message in a place where tribal fighting is still all too frequent.





Finally the pilgrims arrived at Kopen near Wabag the provincial capital. Kopen/Sari was the furthest station established by the first missionaries because in 1947 the country beyond Sari was still 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 organizers had arranged fourteen large crosses across the hillside and a team of leaders went slowly from one cross to the next while parish groups presented special 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 how people felt

they had been on a journey, following Jesus to Jerusalem. The mountain at Kopen was now Calvary. At the end of the cross service the sky was dark and there was a prolonged heavy rainfall. Such events are not lost on the Enga symbolic imagination. They had heard how when Jesus died darkness covered the earth. At Kopen it was only midday and yet it became so dark. One man told me, "Jesus died here today at Kopen!"

The ten day pilgrimage concluded with a Mass celebrated by Bishop Raich, SVD of the Diocese of Wabag. I flew back down to Port Moresby inspired from having witnessed the faith commitment of so many Enga Christians. The people went home wet and tired, but spiritually renewed and ready to begin the task not only of starting new gardens, but also of nurturing the seed of God's Word so that it might produce thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. ♦

Missionaries in communities
and students preparing for religious life
pray morning and evening prayer
from Christian Book of Prayer
which contains the official prayer of the Church

With a gift of \$25.00
the Mission Office will be able to provide a missionary
overseas with a copy of Christian Prayer.

*Please help us provide these much needed books for
our missionaries around the world.*

For your convenience an envelope
has been provided at the center of this magazine.