

TRANSFORMING HUMANITY FROM WITHIN

Inculturation as a Challenge for Evangelisation in Papua New Guinea

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It would appear that Christian evangelisation has been very successful in Papua New Guinea. The majority of the population profess to be Christian (96%), and the Preamble to the Constitution pledges to guard and pass on Christian principles. However, beneath the appearances there is a growing crisis of trust in the land of the disappearing Bird of Paradise. The churches may be overflowing, but in the towns and villages there is disquiet at the amount of violence, spiralling prices, and the number of accusations of corruption. At the dawn of a new millennium many people are changing their allegiance to churches which they feel can better help them find a sense of security and the assurance of salvation. The present atmosphere of societal and religious ferment, calls for a re-evaluation of the apparent success of the first evangelisation.

In this paper I will consider the challenge of a deeper and more effective evangelisation in present-day Papua New Guinea. Evangelisation in depth entails a regeneration of culture, that is, inculturation. Attempts at inculturation from the top or outside often miss the mark because of the changing multicultural nature of society today. Inculturation will occur when the agents of inculturation get involved in people's struggles and hopes. This means beginning with the communities themselves, encouraging them in a continuing process of conversion as they look at their own experience in the light of the Gospel.

Evangelisation

Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* provides a helpful definition of evangelisation. 'For the

Church, evangelising means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new' (EN 18). The phrase 'transforming humanity from within' is particularly relevant here. I note three factors influencing the quality of this transformation: namely, the agents of evangelisation, our understanding of culture, and theological presuppositions about the association of faith and culture.

The first evangelisers came from outside, mostly Europe and America, though some groups such as the LMS received mission personnel from the Pacific Islands. Many early missionaries learned the local languages and shared the life of the people. However, close links of missions with the colonising powers, and an intellectual climate that relegated the 'natives' to a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder meant that first contact was often marred by ignorance and misunderstanding. In post-independence Papua New Guinea, the situation has changed, and of the major churches in Papua New Guinea, only the Catholic Church continues with a high percentage of expatriate missionaries. Like John the Baptist stepping aside, they face the challenge of allowing the thrust of ongoing evangelisation to come more from leadership within the local communities.

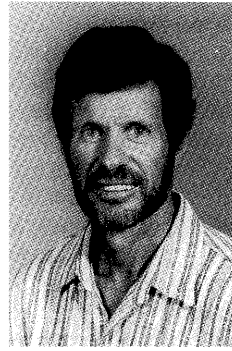
Attitudes to culture continue to have an adverse effect on evangelisation in depth. Too often culture is seen in mechanistic terms as what people do, for example as rituals or artistic expression. This approach can fall victim to a museum mentality which freezes culture in a particular time period and encourages romantic views of ways of living in the past. A preferred alternative is to understand

culture as a system of meanings that are expressed in the way people live. Thus culture is a process by which people shape their lives, helping them to know how to feel, think and behave. Most cultures consist of many sub-cultures, all of which are in rapid transition. There are traditional and modern technological subcultures, urban versus rural mind-sets, youth values and the values of the older generation. This variety must be respected if the Gospel is to take root in such a rich and complex reality.

Theological presuppositions about the association of faith and culture are the third factor affecting the quality of transformation in evangelisation. Revelation is not a set of truths communicated independently of history and culture. The disciples encountered Jesus culturally and so too, our interpretation of the Gospel occurs in the context of the faith community to which we belong. Only with *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973) did the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith admit that dogmas are historical, and in that sense their meaning is partly dependent upon the expressive power of the language used at a particular point in time and in particular circumstances. Once this point is accepted, the way is open for cultural resources to contribute fresh ways of faith expression. For effective evangelisation there must be openness for the Spirit to work through the many positive elements of Melanesian cultures.

Inculturation

Bishops at the recent Synod for Oceania state simply 'There is no evangelization without inculturation.' The term inculturation, which has become popular in Catholic circles, refers to a life-giving encounter between the Gospel and a particular culture. With inculturation, not only does the Good News become an integral part of the value system, attitudes, and actions of the people of a given culture, but these elements of culture will also influence the interpretation of the Gospel. For example, the Melanesian attachment to pigs may lead people to a different interpretation of stories such as the one about Jesus casting out a mob of demons into a herd of pigs (Mk 5: 1-20). Inculturation is an on-going



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dialogical process bringing about a transformation within a given community. It is a difficult task, partly because it requires a dying to cultural elements that run contrary to the message of the Gospel.

Inculturation is particularly relevant for Papua New Guinea with over 800 languages, each representing a different cultural grouping. The *Instrumentum Laboris* from the Synod for Oceania notes the way indigenous cultures have enriched the liturgy and devotional practices of the Church in Oceania. Local languages enrich the liturgy. Traditional and newly composed songs and dances make rituals more meaningful. Church buildings are designed and constructed by local persons and often decorated with paintings or carvings by local artists. Catechesis is made more lively by the use of traditional stories, modern drama and poetry. Processions, pilgrimages and devotions to Mary and the saints have been enriched by local symbols and customs. There is a positive use of indigenous symbols in marriage and burial rites. Traditional gestures have been introduced in reconciliation ceremonies. 'Spontaneous and enthusiastic expressions of faith and communion in Christ have been fostered by contributions from many local and indigenous peoples.'

While the examples given in the *Instrumentum Laboris* are admirable, they illustrate a tendency to focus on ritual and worship for inculturation. This tendency may bypass the conditions for an in-depth transformation of humanity to occur. The starting point for inculturation is the community, and the point of entry is the way of life of the community. To evangelise a community in depth requires a dialogue of listening to

where the community is at and then inviting them to make their own the way of life revealed in Jesus Christ. Acceptance of that invitation leads to a transformation in people's values, attitudes and actions. The resultant (inculturated) Christian living then finds its expression in inculturated worship. The primary agent of inculturation must be the living community, and attempts to impose change from above will most likely result in superficial forms of cultural expression which do not come from the heart.

At the Synod for Oceania, Bishop Gilles Côté of Daru-Kiunga argued for the importance of building Church upon values found within Melanesian communities:

The only way to build the Church, Mystery of Communion, in our Melanesian Society, is to build it with the participation of all, making sure that the key values of the culture become somehow the key values of our process of evangelisation ... Our efforts and our methods used for evangelisation need to make it possible for the Catholic faith to immerse itself in our Melanesian culture and to be re-expressed according to the legitimate forms of that culture. Will the institutional Church allow Jesus to walk the way of the people of Melanesia, just like he did in Palestine, challenging the truth of their own religious experiences, purifying and enriching their lives, not from outside or from the top, but from within?

Changing Cultures

In Papua New Guinea the Gospel must be re-expressed in rapidly changing cultures. The system of meanings that shaped the lives of previous generations at the time of the first evangelisation no longer exists as such. How does one evangelise the heart of a culture when many people feel alienated from their tribal roots? How can one help to transform the way people feel, think, and behave when they are so unsettled? One hears that 'the crisis of evangelisation is more than just a crisis of faith; it is also a crisis of culture.' In the midst of rapid change and the resultant effects on people's self-identity, which can reach crisis proportions, evangelisation from within becomes all the more necessary and ever more difficult. It is surely one of the greatest challenges for the Church in Papua New Guinea on the eve of the Third Millennium.

There are excellent studies of Melanesian culture and Melanesian religious values related to Christian values. In-depth evangelisation must recognise and work with values such as the integral character of indigenous spiritualities, a sense of the sacred, and a spirit of sharing and communal ownership. However, in urban areas, and rural areas with easy access to towns the dynamic and pluralistic nature of present-day Papua New Guinea society obscures traditional values. Young people with their modern education and diet of contemporary music and perhaps television too, often find village traditions strange and threatening. They frequently shy away from custom for fear of behaving incorrectly and thus feeling ashamed. However, in-depth, inculturated evangelisation must be directed to young people because they form more than half the population. Evangelisation begins by listening to what they think, feel, and do and tries to address their felt needs. The success of some conservative evangelical churches in attracting youth may be attributed in part to those churches providing rules and a sense of communion that young people are searching for.

Life in the Light of the Gospel

From what has been outlined above it is clear that evangelisation must begin with the reality of peoples lives, at the level of values, attitudes and actions. This will ensure that the life of the community is taken seriously. Starting with lived reality is not merely the first step in an inductive see, judge, act process. Rather, it is an affirmation that what happens to people in their daily lives is important, and essential to any reflection on faith. This helps counter tendencies to divide the spiritual and the material with a consequent separation of faith and life. It also supports the integrated, life-centred character of traditional Melanesian spirituality in which the sacred is experienced within this world.

The next task is to find how the Gospel can shed light on the changing life of the community. Here Gospel is understood in the broad sense as the Good News that 'God is with us, to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal

life' (DV4). The Gospel may be shared in the form of teaching or proclamation, but equally important are witness and worship, for what has been handed on through the church includes 'everything that helps the people of God to live a holy life and to grow in faith' (DV8). Thus the Good News can be revealed in the witness of human service which puts God's love into practice. Likewise, the loving purpose of the God of life may be shown by work that frees people from sinful and death-dealing situations.

Evangelisation 105

'Evangelisation 105' has featured recently on the front page of the Papua New Guinea newspapers. 105 refers to the Goilala people, being a code, developed by criminals, for the first three letters of Goilala written backwards. Goilala is one village in the mountains of the Central province; however, over time the whole mountain region has taken on the name. Ever since first contact with the West, the Goilala people have had a reputation for violence. It was normal practice to cut the hand off a victim to show to the Australian administration as proof that someone had been killed. Today the Goilalas have a reputation around Port Moresby for being heavily involved in criminal activities. Mothers talk about hundreds of their sons having been shot by the police in recent years, and in the villages there are many young widows.

The Goilala people are predominantly Catholic and the Evangelisation 105 campaign began after a meeting of catechists in 1996. They decided to make a crucifix and carry it from village to village with a three-fold message: to forgive, to be reconciled and to prepare for the jubilee year 2000. The evangelisation continued for three years among the Goilala villages, then travelled over the mountains to Popondetta where it was received by the Anglican bishop. One hundred and fifty people then took turns to carry it over the Kokoda trail to the capital Port Moresby. On February 24, 1999 the cross was received by the Catholic archbishop of Port Moresby and then for a month the campaign moved around the parishes and communities of the city. With the arrival of the cross there were frequent dramatic scenes as young men who had

been leading lives of crime, came to surrender their weapons (often after firing them first!).

Witness and worship together showed the power of faith working through the community. Public displays of penitence were backed up with references to reconciliation in the Bible. The parable of the Prodigal Son was interpreted as the story of a wayward young man being accepted back into the community. The test of a real change of heart would be seen in their willingness to go and witness to others. At a mass at Gerehu parish, Fr. Ekako told those who had surrendered their arms, 'you have not surrendered to the Prime Minister, the police or any other authority but to God ... I am begging you to go out and convert others to follow your example to ensure that there is real peace within the communities in Port Moresby.'

The campaign among the Goilala people provides an example of inculturated evangelisation. The processions and public displays of repentance captured peoples' imagination because the original idea for the campaign came from within the community, prompted by the deaths of so many young men. Outsiders fear going into the Goilala area, so the area is poor in educational and medical services. When Goilala people come to town they find it very difficult to get work because employers are afraid of attracting criminals. With their experience it seemed only appropriate to identify with the suffering and death of Jesus by attaching the number 105 on the cross. Women played a prominent role in receiving the cross into the villages. As they wept openly before the cross, it was like welcoming back a Son or Brother who had died. They would pray, 'Jesus, you have come a long way and the rain has poured on your feathers. You were hungry, and you had to cross rivers, and sleep in the forest. You are our Son, please help us!' And they would rearrange the feathers on the corpus and wipe it with their mourning clothes.

Traditional symbols added to the effectiveness of the campaign. Arrangements were made through the system of chiefs. A letter would not be taken seriously unless it was accompanied by betelnut and tobacco. Pigs were killed as a sign of a real commitment to reconciliation. Surrenders took place only

after the proper rituals had been followed for receiving the body of Jesus into the village. The cross itself was decorated with feathers from the Bird of Paradise. These feathers were so important that when someone removed them in Port Moresby, they had to be restored in a ceremony involving the killing of a pig and smearing the blood on the cross.

Conclusion

Several principles emerge from the account above.

1. Evangelisation should begin with the lived experience at the community level. What happens to people in their daily lives is important, and essential to any reflection on faith.
2. Evangelisation from within involves inculturation because inculturation entails a conversion of values, attitudes and actions in the light of the Gospel.
3. Inculturation influences evangelisation in its various elements such as proclamation, witness and celebration.
4. Becoming involved in people's struggles and hopes means encouraging them in a

continuing process of conversion. The young men who have laid down their arms will now need to be supported by love in action, for example, through rehabilitation programs.

To these four principles may be added a fifth. It should be remembered that the true measure of the universal Church is when the value of each culture contributes to the whole body. The focus on local communities should not be at the expense of the Catholicity of the church, yet all the communities need time and opportunity to receive the Gospel message in a way relevant to their life situation.

These principles, if taken seriously, would have an impact on pastoral planning, the training of leaders, including seminarians, and the allocation of Church resources. Further research is required, along with follow up to studies on Melanesian spirituality and changing cultures. Church leaders need to ask whether they have a united vision of an evangelised culture in Papua New Guinea today. Finally, theologians must work to develop a contextualised theology that will encourage people to reflect on their lives in the light of the Gospel.