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# MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

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**Editorial: Signs of the Times**

*Christopher Garland*

**How the Bible Came About: Old and New Testaments**

*Jerome Crowe CP*

**Firefly, and its Meaning in PNG**

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**Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation**

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**A Life of Love and Service: Marie-Therese Noblet AD**

*Genevieve de Massignac AD*

**Petition Form: (See article on “Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation”)**

**Book Review**

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*Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools*

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The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* aims to stimulate the writing of theology by Melanesians for Melanesians. It is an organ for the regular discussion of theological topics at a scholarly level by staff and students of the member schools of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS), though contributions from non-members and non-Melanesians will be considered.

The *Melanesian Journal of Theology* is ecumenical, and it is committed to the dialogue of Christian faith with Melanesian cultures. The Editors will consider for publication all manuscripts of scholarly standard on matters of concern to Melanesian Christians, and of general theological interest. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, and in duplicate.

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[Note: The Bibliography and endnotes 9 to 15, which had been omitted from “Man and His World: Biblical and Melanesian Worldviews” in *MJT* 5-1, were included as an Addendum in the original printed version of this *MJT* 6-1. The Bibliography and endnotes 9 to 15 have now been transferred to their correct location in *MJT* 5-1. The relocation of the Addendum has altered the page numbers for the final three items in this version. –Revising ed.]

## **Editorial: Signs of the Times**

**Revd C. J. Garland, Editor**

How does God communicate with us? Through the Bible, through culture, through the big issues currently engaging the minds of the world, as a whole, through the lives of saintly men and women? Wherever He communicates with us, God has a message of love that can only be expressed by signs or symbols. These signs will need interpreting. Each of our articles reflects the tradition, from which they come and raise questions of interpretation. We trust that readers of an ecumenical magazine, such as, this will show respect for, and interest in, traditions different from their own.

The publication of the Tok Pisin Bible is a great event for Christians in Papua New Guinea, and we are glad to publish an article by Fr Jerome Crowe CP to mark the event. Fr Crowe provides a brief introduction to biblical criticism, with a special emphasis on the importance of oral tradition, to appeal to those with experience of oral tradition in Papua New Guinea.

Any attempt to dismiss the use of the behaviour of animals, as signs of future human events, as mere coincidence, stumbles against the frequency, with which they seem to work. Is it enough to say that they just alert us, and so make us more aware of what is going on anyway? Fr Spencer Kombega gives us a vivid account of a sign that worked, a firefly, and what it feels like, from a Papua New Guinean point of view. At the very least, interest and concern for animals should give us good practice for interest and concern for human beings.

The programmes of the World Council of Churches help us to focus our attention on the big issues of the world, in a Christian way. There may be a danger of specifically “ecumenical” contributions to the debate taking a bland, neutral approach, but the WCC does encourage participants in its discussions to contribute from the riches of their own traditions. The article on “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” is meant to provoke articles, papers, and comments for a MATS Study Institute on the theme. How are we to interpret Isaiah’s vision of a future time, when the lion will lie down with the lamb?

Sister Genevieve de Massignac provides us with a description of the life of Mother Marie-Therese Noblet. Her reception of the stigmata, and visions of the Virgin Mary, are seen as signs of the transformation of suffering by compassion, the victory of good over evil, and of complete obedience to the will of God. The example of Mother Marie-Therese Noblet has been the inspiration of the devoted service given by the Handmaids of the Lord in Papua New Guinea.

We also include some notes omitted from a paper by Fr Theo Aerts. [Now correctly included in *MJT* 5-1. –Revising ed.]

We congratulate Revd Dick Avi on his appointment as a Coordinator of Ecumenical Religious Studies. He will have the support of both MCC and MATS, as he carries out his work, which includes promoting the establishment of a Department of Religious Studies at the University of Papua New Guinea.

## **How the Bible Came About: Old and New Testaments**

*Address by Fr Jerome Crowe CP  
at the University of Papua New Guinea, October 3, 1989.*

### **Old Testament**

I am honoured by the request to speak to you in the celebrations that mark the appearance of the Tok Pisin Bible. A little overwhelmed by the dimensions of the proposed topic – “How the Bible Came About: Old and New Testament” – no less!, but a little reassured by the organiser’s request (in a footnote, so to speak) “to give particular attention to the stage of oral history, and oral transmission”. So, I shall talk about oral tradition and the written scriptures, and try to say something about both Testaments.

It is very appropriate to approach the topic in that way, here in Papua New Guinea, where oral tradition has reigned, not for centuries, but for millennia, and where that oral culture is only now being gradually replaced by a culture of the written word and the visual image. The processes of oral tradition, with which this talk is concerned, are as close to you as your local oral history, tribal epics, and traditional customs and songs.

To me, the “resident alien” in your land, the publication of the Tok Pisin Bible is, first of all, a monument to the remarkable service of the written Word of God, that has produced so many translations in so many of your 800 languages. Few countries can boast such a devoted study of the Bible. But the Tok Pisin Bible is also a wonderful symbol of this moment in your national history. That book symbolises the remarkable effort of your young nation to achieve widespread literacy. It speaks of the unifying power of our shared faith in the life of the nation. Tok Pisin has become a sort of Pentecost language, a gift of the Spirit, permitting men and women of so many tribes, and clans, and *lains*, and *tok ples*, to hear the word of God in a common tongue.

I suppose there are elements in the youth of every nation that are similar to the situation of Israel in the era of new nationhood under David and Solomon. I am sure there are, in the life of Papua New Guinea. In any event, the time of David and Solomon is a good place to start thinking about

oral tradition and written culture. It was not until the time of David, and, more particularly, of Solomon, that there was a writing class in Israel. Everybody knew that the forefathers of the nation, the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were leaders of nomadic, or semi-nomadic, groups, who belonged to a distinctly oral culture. Moses, of course, was reputed to be skilled in the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was even instructed by God to write (Ex 17:14; 34:28). People told a story about a lad, in the time of the Judges, who obligingly wrote down the names of the 77 officials and elders of Succoth for Gideon (Judges 8:14), but it was only with the Davidic monarchy, that Israel really moved into a writing culture.

Only under David had Israel become a nation. Prior to David, there were scattered tribes, each jealously preserving its tribal independence. David had succeeded in imposing a centralised, urban monarchy on that loose confederation of independent tribes. Then came the necessary bureaucrats: the scribes, to write the letters and keep the archives, and the administrations, to look after domestic and foreign affairs – not to mention taxation. Next came the schools, to train the officials and their children. Eventually, there were writers, who were able to tap the oral history of the tribes, and who were interested, at the same time, in discovering their roots, and the stages, by which God had led such a group of late starters to the wonderful position they had come to occupy on the international scene.

We are talking about the late-tenth century. So, anybody, who set out to write down, for the first time, the stories in oral circulation about the patriarchs, was writing about an era at least 700 years before, and to which, he had access only by way of oral tradition. If he wrote about the Exodus, and journey through the desert, he was writing about a time at least 300 years before. The events narrated in the stories of the conquest of the land by Joshua, and the heroic figures of the age of the judges, lay a similar distance in the past. For the story of Saul, the gap was only three or four generations, and David lay within range of living memory, but, only when we get to the story of the succession of Solomon to the throne, did the writer personally stand at all close to the events he writes of, or in contact with eye-witnesses of the events.

Not that the process of oral tradition stopped when there were enough people able to write, to put the items of oral tradition on paper, and shape them into something like a consecutive account. We know of collections of



oral traditions, made in the south in the 9th century, in the north a century later, and of another collection made as late as the 5th century, when a group of writers were still able to retrieve quite ancient elements from the continuing oral traditions of their people. Those 5th-century writers had simply tapped the tradition much further downstream.

What kinds of materials were there in these oral traditions, and where did they come from?

As we might expect they originated in many different places and groups, and they served a range of diverse needs. However proud they were of their newfound national unity, the different tribes, united under David, remained very conscious of their distinctive historical, geographical, and ethnic origins. Gen 38, for example, tells a story of the eponymous ancestor of the tribe of Judah. The stories of the battles in the book of Josh 2-9 are part of the heritage of the tribe of Benjamin. There were stories about famous places, like the burial ground of Sarah and Abraham (Gen 23), or stories connected with places, where one or other tribe had stayed. The great national shrines of old, like Bethel, had their traditions, stories about the way God had touched the lives of the patriarchs at those places. Shechem had been a rallying place of the tribes, and held memories of ceremonies of renewal of the covenant. The most recent shrine, Jerusalem, which came to house the Ark of the Covenant, had developed its traditions as well.

There were significant groups, who conserved important traditions. One of the most important of these groups was the priestly circle. The priests had been associated, for a long time, with the various sanctuaries, and naturally assumed the role of custodians of old and sacred traditions about sacrifices and offerings, rubrics for cultic practices, details of priestly equipment and activity (Ex 35-40; Num 1:1-10:10).

Other traditions explained the how and why of different customs, such as the rite of the Paschal lamb (Ex 12:26f), or why a place got its name (e.g., Judges 2:1-5), or the current state of various tribes (e.g., the blessing of Jacob, Gen 49). Some traditions explain the origin of groups, institutions, trades (Gen 4:20). Sometimes they provide rules of conduct, by justifying a ritual prescription (Gen 32:32), or spell out a clear moral lesson, as in the story of Joseph.

We should beware of simply attaching our label “history” to these traditions. Often, it is true, they originate in the great deeds of the heroes of those times – warrior heroes, like the Judges, religious heroes, like Samuel, or Moses, founder and legislator of the nation, even of the forefathers of the race, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, remembered especially in the places where they lived.

At other times, however, the story of the ancestor is really the story of the groups sprung from him, as in the story of the two brothers Jacob and Esau, or the revenge of Jacob on the men of Shechem (Gen 34). Oral tradition was always more interested in the religious significance of the remembered past, what it shows of God’s providential guidance of His people, than in exactness of circumstantial detail. The stories of the plagues of Egypt are a good example.

Group memory is selective. It sorts out the important events and highlights them. Persons and events of importance to the tribe come up in sharpest focus, the background is usually hazy. When the group recalls its past, it both seeks the reason for the present, and tends to project its present back onto the past.

These oral traditions (and, in due course, the written texts, too) underwent development over the centuries. They were taken up and transposed into fresh settings, with changing social, religious, and tribal circumstances. And, in time, similar traditions were brought together, and organised into groups or cycles. So, there came into being, collections, or cycles, of traditions about the patriarchs, the Exodus, the desert journey, the conquest, Judges, and Saul. Others were clustered around place (Beersheba, Shechem, Kadesh, Bethel), which were usually famous sites or sanctuaries.

Most of us are familiar with the story of the patriarch Jacob. We remember the stories of the birth of the twin sons to Isaac and Rebecca, the trickery of Jacob, the younger, who extorts his older brother’s birth right, and his father’s blessing, how he flees to Mesopotamia to Laban, and is tricked in his turn, marries Laban’s two daughters, suffers greatly, and prospers, has his 12 sons, and then returns to a final, peaceful meeting with his brother Esau.

Scholars show that what looks like a continuous story is really woven of three strands, or cycles, of stories or traditions. There are stories

concerned with the rivalry of Esau and Jacob, a cycle of stories concerning Jacob in Mesopotamia, and a third group of divine appearances at Bethel, Penuel, and Mahanaim. Each of these cycles is made up of units that were originally independent of one another. Over the centuries, then, individual traditions, preserved by this or that group, or, in particular places, were brought together into a cycle, and, in due course, those cycles were welded together to form a continuous story. They give a picture of a process, guided by the God of Israel, through which the father of the 12 tribes was saved from harm, to struggle with God to gain his blessing, and found the tribes that become the nation.

Scholars attempt to re-establish the way the units grew into cycles, and the process of the fusion of the cycles into the continuous story we now have. This kind of work is detailed and painstaking, and I cannot hope to rehearse it now. I hope I have suggested something of the way that the Bible, we have and hold, as inspired by God, originated in the life of our forebears, and how the same processes, as are in action in oral tradition in Papua New Guinea to this day played their part in the origins of the Bible. It becomes clear, though, that when we talk of God's inspiration, we cannot confine it to one writer, as if one writer sat down and wrote those books. We will have to think, first of all, about the way the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, guided the history of His people, how He helped them to give utterance to their faith, in many ways, and how He directed story tellers, collectors, and all who had a part in the collective production.

## **New Testament**

So far, we have been talking, with desperate brevity, about the oral processes that lie behind the books of the Old Testament. What was happening in the study of the New Testament, while all these advances were being made in penetrating into the lives, situations, and worlds that gave birth to the oral traditions, of which those books were composed?

It is obvious, when we read the earliest written books of the New Testament, that they, too, emerge out of a line of oral tradition, by which the gospel was communicated to its first adherents. Paul's epistles make this very clear. They were all written in the decade from 50-60 CE, hence, less than 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Though he is a great pains to claim the authenticity and divine origin of what he calls "my

gospel”, Paul, himself, makes it clear that he is using oral traditions he has learnt from others. Think, for example, of 1 Cor 7, where he distinguishes very carefully his own personal advice from the “words of the Lord”, or of the passages, where he invokes the very language of tradition in the phrase “I handed on to you what was also handed on to me”.

But Paul also offers us samples of the prayers, the hymns, the confessions of faith of Christians before him, and there is immense profit in studying these relics of Christians before Paul. We can admire their struggle to express, in teaching and prophecy, in prayer and song, the mystery of God’s action in the life, death, resurrection, and continuing presence of Jesus. The letters themselves are one written form of communication of the gospel, but they also show how the early Christians communicated the gospel in other oral ways: professions of faith, hymns, moral exhortation, and their way of life (1Thess 1:8). Paul’s letters are a window onto the oral world of the first two Christian decades.

In the 19th century, scholars had devoted their energies to applying the newly-developed methods of critical history to the life of Jesus. In this “quest for the historical Jesus”, the four gospels were subjected to the same sort of critical scrutiny as other written witnesses of the past. Mark was recognised as the first gospel to be written. By comparison, Matthew and Luke were secondary compositions. They were judged to have derived their information from Mark, and from a collection of saying of Jesus labelled Q (probably from the German word for “source”). It was recognised that Matthew and Luke also drew materials from sources available only to the individual evangelists. As far as history was concerned – the record of “what actually happened” – the fourth gospel was regarded as too manifestly a vehicle of its author’s conception of Jesus – the theology of a late age of the church, to be a reliable source for a knowledge of events that happened, perhaps as much as a century before it was written.

Then, in 1903, the German scholar, Wilhelm Wrede, showed that the earliest of the gospels, Mark, which had been regarded as the surest historical source, and the one that stands closest to eye-witness testimony, was itself directed, not by the historical concerns of the scholars, but by the theological concerns of its author. In its own way, the gospel of Mark was as much a vehicle of its author’s conception of Jesus as John, even though those conceptions differed. There was not a single gospel that was not a

faith document, written to communicate the belief of the writer and his community.

If the quest for the historical Jesus was to continue, then a way had to be found to get behind the gospel of Mark. In 1920, Karl Ludwig Schmidt showed that gospel was compiled by gathering together a lot of small units, which were strung together, like beads in necklace. Take away the connecting pieces, and all that is left is a jumble of individual beads. The beads were connected by passages that were the work of Mark himself. Now, it is precisely in these connecting passages, that we get anything like a geography, or chronology, of Jesus. So, it is to Mark that we owe the movement of the story from the baptism to the arrest of Jesus.

This set the scene for the rise of what came to be called form criticism. By this, was meant the study of the separate units of the oral tradition. That study was associated, principally, with the names of Martin Dibelius and Rudolph Bultmann. In effect, they dismantled the necklace, to study the individual beads. They compared them with one another, and sorted them by literary shape and colour into so many categories, or “forms” – basically, deeds or sayings, which were subdivided into a number of characteristic “forms”. Every one of them, they claimed, had served a particular purpose in the communication of the gospel, and each was born to serve a particular need, or answer a particular question, important to those early Christians. They tried established where each of those beads had come from, and what it was used for. What interested them most, was what had happened to the bead, as it moved from one place to another, before being incorporated in a written gospel.

When stories about the life of Jesus were first told, they were shaped to meet the purpose they were to serve, to show, for example, that the long-expected salvation had come to pass in the events of the life of Jesus amongst the Jewish people. The scholars were convinced that careful study would show what function a given form served in the communication of the gospel. Dibelius claimed that the kind of brief, simple story, such as the story of the tribute money (Mark 12:13-17), was used as an example, by the preachers, to illustrate the preached message of salvation. So, the words of Jesus are made to stand out very clearly, there is a concluding thought, or phrase, of use for preaching a word or act of Jesus, or a response from his hearers. There are longer stories, like the story of the Gerasene demoniac

(Mark 5:1-20), which Dibelius claimed originated in the work of a class of story-tellers in the community, who enriched the miracle content, and enlivened the story with their story-telling ability to make it more lively and memorable.

The sayings of Jesus were divided into their different forms. The parables and proverbs, we are familiar with, show Jesus as a teacher of wisdom, comparable with teachers of wisdom in Israel, Judaism, and throughout the Orient. Prophetic and apocalyptic sayings call to repentance, and offer salvation (Mark 1:15; Luke 10:23-24). There are controversial sayings, or dialogues, shaped in discussions that communities held amongst themselves, or with adversaries, on questions of Law. A well-known succession of such controversies is Mark 2:1-3:6, which answers questions, such as “where does our community get its power to forgive sin?”, “why do we fast – Jesus didn’t?”, “why does our attitude to the Sabbath differ from that of Jesus’ own people?”.

We owe a great deal to the work of the form critics. They showed us how deeply rooted in the lives of the communities are those sayings and stories of Jesus that have been treasured by Christians for centuries. Their studies on the parables have been particularly helpful in showing the way that later generations took up a parable of Jesus, spoken to His fellow Jews in the critical situation produced by His ministry, and showed Christians of a later generation the kind of response it called for in their culture.

An example that comes to mind, is the parable of the great supper, where Matthew and Luke draw distinctive lessons from the story Jesus had told to show the importance of responding to God’s invitation to the Kingdom that had drawn near in His ministry.

### **Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24**

The major criticisms addressed to the form critics were that they exaggerated the creative powers of the early Christian communities, by saying that they really manufactured many of those stories and sayings. Again, they have been judged to attribute altogether too much importance to the influence of the Hellenistic world, in shaping the stories about Jesus, especially the miracles. And they have produced very limited results in establishing the picture of the Jesus of history.

Their most obvious weakness, however, was the way they limited the function of the gospel writers to stringing together a heap of beads, shaped by others, and developed in their passage from mouth to mouth. So, when the next wave of scriptural scholarship fetched up on the shore, it firmly re-established the position of the gospel writers as authors. Attention shifted from the individual units to the final product, from the individual bead to the necklace, and its pattern. The study came to be called redaction criticism.

In this study, they were very much helped by the known dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark. Simply to study the differences in a story told originally by Mark, but used again by Matthew and Luke, is to become aware of the creative liberty of those later writers with the tradition they are drawing on. In this case, they are drawing on a written source, and already-existing, written gospel.

I know of no finer example of this kind of study than the story of the storm at sea (Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25, Matt 8:18, 23-27). In Mark, this is a recognisable miracle story. It shows Jesus as sharer in the divine rule over wind and waves. In Luke, the story remains in the same context, and conveys the same message. But Matthew completely rearranges its setting, and changes the order of events, to offer a beautiful example of what happens to the disciple, who sets out to follow Jesus, and ends up in the same boat as him.

For at least the next 25 years, say from about 1950 to 1975, scholars were exploiting that insight, namely, that the gospel writer was not simply repeating the oral or written tradition he drew on, but adapting or interpreting it with the needs of his own community in mind. Books and writings on the theme of “tradition and interpretation” multiplied. The distinctive approaches of the writers were studied closely, as were the situations of the community, which they addressed. The writers came to be seen as involved in the same process as the oral tradition before them, that of communicating the gospel to new communities, in different times, places, and cultures.

Two remarks before concluding. Just as the stream of oral tradition kept flowing after the appearance of written books in Old Testament time, so, too, with the writing of the gospels. Stories about Jesus, and sayings of Jesus, continued to be handed-on orally. Luke talks about writers engaged in the task before him – there were many others to follow. We can watch the

process in the literature of the second and third centuries. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, relatively recently discovered, consists of a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, many of them comparable to those we know from the four gospels, some of them perhaps of equal antiquity.

Secondly, in recent times, much of the attention of the scholars has moved away from the more-historical approach we have been considering – how the text came to be, and the world in which, and for which, it was written. There has been an increasing concentration on the text, as a finished product, with a life of its own, like that of any other masterpiece.

## **Conclusion**

Let me offer some general remarks, by way of conclusion.

Our Bible, with its books, sacred to Jews and to Christians, we believe to be a written form of the Word of God. Before the writing, that Word was being communicated to His people, in many ways, and, after the writing, God continues to speak to His people in other ways – in their teaching and worship, and in their whole range of their lives. The written books are enshrined within that people, as expressions of God's call and its response.

Our four gospels are four distinctive written forms of the one gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is communicated to each generation of Christians, in the total life of the Christian community. To each, that gospel comes as something, which we receive as God's gift, something that is to grow within us, and something to be communicated to others.

We have seen that the way the gospel was communicated, in the early Christian communities, and by the writers of the four gospels, was not a literal repetition of words so sacred that they could not be changed (not even the words of Jesus were treated this way), or a repetition of events, with photographic or video-tape accuracy. Christians do look back to the past to "remember" the words and deeds of Jesus.

To "remember" them, means to let them shape our responses to God in the details of our present, our history, and our culture.

When, finally, we communicate the gospel to others, we do it by offering them, not only our words, but also our lives, as a kind of translation of the gospel into the realities of their culture.



The Bible in Tok Pisin translates the written Word of God into the realities of the culture of Papua New Guinea. But it stands as a symbol for the lives of God's people, because it is there that the living translation is happening.

# Firefly, and its Meaning in PNG

Fr Spencer Kombega

*Anglican Church, Movi Simbu Province.*

The firefly is a communicative creature, and full of signs in Papua New Guinea culture. It is believed to be a spirit of the dead, that has ties of relationship with the people, and is well believed to be living and sharing in-between the material and spiritual world. The firefly travels longer distances at night than at daytime. Some have very dim light, and are identified as ancestors and relatives, and are much closer to the people than the one with the brighter light.<sup>1</sup>

Asking several people about their own belief in the firefly, the first informant, from Port Moresby, responded, “the confrontation of the firefly shows signs to safety and danger”. The second informant, from the Highlands, also had this to say, “*Firefly em i sanguma*”<sup>2</sup>. Thirdly, I heard my mother yelling angrily at me to spare the firefly, when I took hold of one. Then, I wondered why my mother ordered me to spare the firefly. Many similar answers were also given by older people, such as being identified as ancestors, messengers, spirits, friends, devils, and many more.

My first encounter with a firefly was a night, when I and my brothers lost our way under the oil palm trees in the middle of the night, when on our way home from a feast. Failing to locate a track to our home, we gave up hope, and then, finally, a tiny firefly appeared before us. My cousin brother, with a rich knowledge of customary ideas, grasped his way towards the firefly, and ordered us to follow. With a sigh of relief, it led us to discover the mini-track that lead to our home. This wonderful experience of a firefly, as a guide, however halted my doubt and elaborate research.<sup>3</sup>

On another occasion, in Port Moresby, a figure was spotted up a tree, with fireflies surrounding. This was repeatedly sighted by village travellers.

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<sup>1</sup> Firefly with a dim light is just a dead relative. This belief still exists in Oro Province.

<sup>2</sup> I saw an Eastern Highlander attack a firefly, believing it to be a bad spirit, when I was a student at the Goroka Technical College – *sanguma* really means “devil”.

<sup>3</sup> Even though I was a full-blooded Melanesian, yet I had no belief in a firefly, that it was a helper, till I experienced it myself.

Sometime later, the villagers tried to catch the unidentified figure. The figure avoided being caught by the climbers, and moved fast on the treetops, like a fast-travelling cuscus. However, more climbers were added, and, finally, a funny ugly little man, with a deformed body, who could not speak, was caught. The fireflies dispersed soon after.<sup>4</sup>

Of the views and the stories, several questions can be raised. Are the communicative signs directly and indirectly from God? What is its spiritual- and material-world relationship, and can this be the ancestors' direct involvement? Such questions can be answered within each respective culture, according to its own understanding! Yet the whole issue can be understood by seeing the firefly as a creature of God, that fulfils God's purpose on earth.

There is no indication, in the Old Testament, of the firefly being the guide for the Israelites, yet divine guidance, through light, fire, etc., is often read, and in which Jesus fulfils the concept of light in the New Testament. Papua New Guinean culture, from a theological point of view, can bluntly identify the glorious light of the firefly as a divine guidance in rare cases, such as my own experience of unidentified beings, as in the second story.

I would rather say, though, that we believe God guides the firefly to give an indication of situations that are both good and bad. The firefly is a guide, messenger, friend, or an enemy, in ordinary times, and in times of trouble. Although various cultures in Papua New Guinea may interpret, and explain it accordingly, yet, on the whole, it is a go-between between the material and spiritual worlds.

Western culture disagrees with the Papua New Guinean concept of the firefly,<sup>5</sup> however, our strong belief and relationship still remains. Most importantly, we need to thank God for His communication and relationship to us, through the firefly. We also ought to be careful not to treat the firefly as a mini-God, but as God's creature, as St Francis put it.

Today, I often hear the old people advise the new, growing generation to continue to spare the firefly.

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<sup>4</sup> My Father actually witnessed the event in Port Moresby, and told me the story when I grew up.

<sup>5</sup> I mention Western culture, because I heard an Australian and an English man, at separate times, speak against the firefly as a helper.

# Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation

**Revd Christopher Garland**

This article is meant to be both of general interest, and to act as a discussion starter for the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools' Study Institute on "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation". This Study Institute, in turn, is intended to involve theological students in discussions going on in preparation for the World Council of Churches' General Assembly in Canberra, between February 7-20, 1991. The Council will relate the theme of "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC)" to Christian doctrine, by borrowing the title of the following poem: "Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation":

*Where families are fractured  
by domestic upheavals  
and children forced on to streets  
to fight for survival*

*Where more resources are spent  
on arms and destruction  
and less attention paid  
to sickness and starvation*

*Come, Holy Spirit  
Heal our wounds  
Renew the Whole Creation!*

*Where the acquisition of things  
has become an obsession  
and the worth of a human being  
is measured by one's possessions*

*Where our air, tress, and seas  
are besieged by pollution  
and purblind mercenary greed  
threatens our environment*

*Come, Holy Spirit  
Heal our wounds  
Renew our Whole Creation!*

*Where countries are split apart  
by communalism and racism  
and innocent blood is spilt  
by wanton acts of terrorism*

*Where internecine warfare  
sets nation against nation  
and a nuclear holocaust  
looms ominous on our horizon*

*Come, Holy Spirit  
Heal our wounds  
Renew the Whole Creation!*

Cecil Rajendra, Malaysia.

We will, therefore, begin with some introductory comments on the theme of JPIC, then give a short outline of the debate so far, and then make some suggestions about a Melanesian contribution to the debate.

## **Section A**

In the beginning, when God created the universe. . . . So God created human beings, making them to be like Himself. . . . Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth, and being it under their control. . . . God looked at everything He had made, and He was very pleased (Gen 1:1-31).

The first of the two accounts of creation in Genesis affirms the unity and integrity of creation, by listing every main type of creature, and declaring that they are all made by Him, and He is pleased with them all. Human beings, male and female, are created to be like God in caring for His creatures, as He cares for them. Their control of the earth is not an act of dominance, but an act of stewardship, for they, too, are creatures, and are involved with those, over whom they have been given control.

Modern science, like religion, tries to cope, at once, with the diversity and the unity of creation. While religion looks for the source of unity, in the overall love of God for all the creatures He has made, scientists look for a single unifying law, or material force. It would seem possible to say that any such law, or force, would be the material expression of the spiritual love of God, and would be shaped

and guided by that love. In the past, philosophers used to look for a single unifying law, or reason, behind the universe, which they called the “Word” or “Logos”. Christians identified that “Word” with the Word of God, and said that it became flesh in Jesus Christ. So, the search to integrate the “oneness” of each individual creature with the “oneness” of the whole creation is both a scientific, and a religious, task.

When we look around us, we see things, each of which, we define as being in some way “one”, everything from a sub-atomic particle, through a piece of rock, to a human being. Within these “ones”, there may be smaller “ones”, yet, at the same time, they are part of bigger “ones”, as human beings are bodies made up of many members, and, at the same time, are members of the “bodies” of one, or more, human communities. Each of these bodies, therefore, has certain a wholeness, or integrity, which is capable of holding together diversity, and, at the same time, has the ability to be integrated within a greater whole, by being related to other bodies. Because they are “ones”, made up of related “ones”, and are able to relate to other “ones”, they have the ability to fall apart, to disintegrate, and then to reintegrate, by relating themselves in new, more-complicated ways to the other “ones” around them. By this ability to disintegrate and reintegrate, they are able to change, and to relate ever more fully to the rest of the universe. They are rescued from being trapped in a lifeless rigidity, which would isolate them from the universe around them, and are called to ever-deeper relationships of love. So, the process of change, of disintegration, followed by reintegration, is a movement from death to new life, which we see going on throughout creation. It is by this process of death and resurrection that the Holy Spirit assists in renewing the integrity of whole of creation, as He assisted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On a material level, the process of the breakdown of old forms, and the emergence of new ones, is called by scientists “evolution”. It is seen to take place among the simplest particles that make up atoms, and as the particles combine to form atoms, so the atoms combine to form molecules, which, in turn, combine to form something higher, and so the movement goes on, step by step, until it reaches human beings. As the movement goes on, there are many places where it seems to be blocked, or it changes direction by accident, so, some people have concluded that the whole process is an accident, a mixture of chance and necessity, the work of a blind watchmaker, the result of a blind material force pushing from below, with no sense of purpose.

Yet, there are others who point out that, in human beings, the process of evolution has produced creatures, who are conscious, creative, and have a sense of purpose. Moreover, with this consciousness, creativity, and purpose, human beings have a sense of being in touch with a consciousness, purpose, and creativity greater than their own, from which their own comes, and which is drawing them to itself, in order that they may cooperate ever more fully with it. The question then arises, whether this same power of attractive persuasiveness was at work earlier on in the evolutionary process, calling creatures onward into ever-more complicated forms of internal organisation, until, in human beings, they became conscious of a purpose and plan that has been giving overall direction to their free movement all along. Such an overall plan and purpose, guiding all creatures, would be what we call the providence of God.

In this case the providences of God, the love by which He attracts creatures towards Himself, so that they can cooperate in the coming of His kingdom, would not only be at work in human beings, but in all creatures, from subatomic particles, upwards. Each would respond to God's particular care, with the level of sub-conscious awareness, of which it was capable, and would reach out to the more-organised forms of life that lay beyond it, which would, in turn, reach out towards more-organised forms of life, until those forms became so organised that they were conscious of being organised, and so could reach out towards the organiser Himself. So, human beings, being conscious, may truly be seen as being at the top of the process of evolution, and, while still being involved with the creatures, from which they have come, are in direct touch with the creator, and are involved in His continuing work of creation. So, human beings represent the creatures to the creator, and the creator to the creatures. In that sense, they are given, by the creator, the duty to care for, and organise, and control, the other creatures. Since each creature is, in some sense, touched by God's providential care, each has a value in its own right, yet each depends upon, and is organised by, the levels of life above it. So, human beings do have the power, given to them by God, to control all other creatures, but they should do so, not just for the convenience of human beings, but for the sake of the creatures themselves, so that they can fulfil their purpose in the overall plan of creation.

Since human beings have disobeyed, and have often failed to carry out the work of caring for each other, and for all creatures that God entrusted to them, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to proclaim the coming of His kingdom, and to recall human beings to their true place in the carrying out of God's plan. As regards to other human beings, the task of human beings is to work for justice and peace, but,

as regards to all other creatures, it is to work for the integrity of all creation. That integrity is given by the one God, who is the source of all unity. If we say that Jesus Christ has made that one Creator God known in a uniquely-full way, we do so in an inclusive sense, rather than in an exclusive sense, so that we can cooperate with all people of good will. If creation had an integrity of its own, apart from God, it would be a material machine or organism, driven by its own force, and with no being to respond to, and, so, with no freedom to respond, and no freedom to change from what the chances and necessities of its own nature made it. If creation were run by a pantheistic, “green”, impersonal life force, which some might call “nature”, which indwells all, then it would, at one, be confined by the limits of the creatures it indwells, and yet, within those limits, would completely direct the actions of the creatures it moved. Neither atheism nor pantheism leaves room for human responsibility. The highest ideal they would allow would be conservation, in the sense that human beings would be required not to interfere with, or go against, the natural energies, by which the natural machine, or life force, pushed all creatures along, to ensure the overall survival of creation.

Yet, if there is a personal God, then personal beings, such as human beings, are responsible to Him for their care of His creation. Such a God would be beyond the natural processes, by which nature is driven and organised. We have described those processes as the process of evolution. At the same time, because He is beyond the processes of evolution, He is able to draw close to the creatures, who are involved within the processes of evolution, and show His love and care for them, in such a way that, while not being dominated by Him, they freely respond and so cooperate in His shaping of their lives. This relationship of love and response takes place most clearly between God and human beings, but all creatures are, in some way, responsive. We see this, even in the way that clay responds to the potter, and much more in the way that farm animals or pets respond to their owners. Sometimes, human beings exercise the love of God for His creatures on His behalf, since they are created in His likeness, and act as His stewards, but there are vast areas of life, where creatures evolve and thrive, without direct contact with human beings. There, God must care for His creatures in other ways, since: “Look at the birds, they do not sow seeds, gather a harvest, and put in barns; yet your Father in heaven cares for them (Matt 6:26). Human beings are at the highest level of organisation in the order of creatures, but all the lower levels have their own degree of organisation, value, and responsiveness, by which God can show His love for them, and unite them with each, and with Himself.



So, God's purpose is to unite the whole of creation to Himself by love. Therefore, nothing is to be wasted or abused. On the other hand, the higher creatures may use the lower creatures for their own just ends, even to the extent of eating them. That may be seen as part of the process of taking lower levels of organisation into higher levels, of bringing new life from death. Even in this, the value and responsiveness of what is used can be respected.

The link between God's dealings with humanity, and His dealings with nature, is also made in the Psalms. It is not only for human beings that the Lord provides food, but for all living beings: "All living beings look hopefully to You, and You give them food when they need it" (Ps 145:15). The Lord cares for each suffering person, and for each star, with the same individual attention: "He heals the broken hearted and bandages their wounds. He has decided the number of the stars and calls each one by name" (Ps 147:3-4). The whole of nature is called upon to rejoice, because the Lord will rule the people of the world with justice and fairness (Ps 96:10-16). The basis of God's care, for both humans and all other creatures, is His covenant faithfulness, revealed in the covenant at Sinai, and traced back through the covenant with Abraham, through the covenant with Noah, to the covenants with the first human beings. The terms of God's covenant at Sinai are the Law, but the same consistency of care is shown in God's treatment of nature, and Psalm 19 uses the glory of the regular natural order as the counterpart to the glory of the justice of the law: "How clearly the sky reveals God's glory! How plainly it shows what he has done! Each day announces it to the following day. "The laws of the Lord are right" (Ps 19:1, 2, 8). The integrity of God's treatment of creation is of a piece with the integrity of His justice. Both are based on His love, and we should respond to His love by cooperating with Him, in working for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

If it is this world that God is uniting with Himself by love, then there can be no separate "other world", into which human beings can escape if they utterly spoil this world. The "next world" will be the final stage, in recreation out of breakdown, which is going on all the time in this world. The pattern for Jesus Christ's coming at the end of the world is set by His first coming, when the death of His body led to the resurrection of that same body, not its replacement by another. So, the death of this world will lead to its resurrection in a new "spiritual", more-fully-organised form. It will be our Lord Jesus Christ, who will be responsible for this final organisation, or "recapitulation".

If we can see God as constantly at work in bringing new life out of death and disaster, then we are freed from both complacency and despair.

We have no room for complacency, for the disasters and deaths that take place are real disasters to creatures, for which God cares, and if they are not able to make their contribution to the final integration of creation, then creation will be all the worse for it. The wholesale destruction of species, the infertility caused by pollution and decay, the threat of flooding, through global warming, are real disasters, which leave that much less to be taken up into the final uniting of the world with God. It is a death and disaster, in the same way that any act of war or injustice prevents a human being from contributing their full potential to the union of humanity with God.

Nevertheless, although we should do all we can to prevent environmental and human disaster, and should mourn them when they do happen, we should not despair. God's creative love is always capable of fostering new life out of the most hopeless, and barren, situation. "Yet for all this, nature is never spent. There lives a dearest freshness deep down things."<sup>1</sup> Reports of the inhumanity of humans to each other, or of the destruction of the environment, make us think that things have gone so far that there is nothing that we can do. We think we are in terminal decline, in a tailspin. We either turn away, and try to pretend it is not happening, by thinking of something else, or we stare at it in a fixed trance, helpless, even willing the very disaster we fear to happen so that, at least, it will break the tension. Either mood can produce false "apocalyptic" teaching about the end of the world. But the true teaching is a message of hope. Disaster is like sin. It cannot be ignored, or forgotten, but it can be forgiven, and the damage it does cannot separate us from the love of God, who is forever reaching out to us, to unite us, and all creation, to Himself. It is a message of hope, for us, and for all creation: "Who then can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship, or persecution, or hunger, or poverty, or death? . . . There is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God, which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 8:35-39). And, by our union with Christ, we are able to unite the whole of creation with Him: "Yet there was hope that creation, itself, would one day be set free from its slavery to decay, and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:20-21). Likewise, in Colossians, we have a vision of the final integrity of creation, not by itself, but in union with God, through Jesus Christ: "through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur", in *English Journal*, 53-4 (4/1964), p. 285.

universe back to Himself” (Col 1:20). We do not fold our arms, and leave it to God to do it all. Nor do we let our arms hang limp with despair. Nor do we rely on our own hands alone, even if aided by the latest technology. Instead, we look at the situation, to see what is going on in human and natural terms, and then ask what signs there of God’s love in action, so that we can cooperate with what He is doing. In many situations, we may be able to see progress and development, the emergence of new life, through new, and better-organised ways, of doing things, the breaking-down of barriers that keep people apart in, isolated units, in order to build up a new unity between creation and God. Yet, on other occasions, there may be forces of breakdown at work, so strong, that the usual methods of human coping cannot deal with them. Then we need to look to see how, even in the midst of death, God is already raising up new life. Where there is injustice, we are to look for signs of dignity, courage, and forgiveness among the oppressed, so that we can strengthen them in their struggle. Where there is war, or violence, we are to look for ways to counter it, with peace and non-violence. Where there is destruction of creation, and disruption of its integrity, and ecological balance, we need to see how new species are springing up, to fill the niches left by the destruction of others, and how new relationships are being worked out between creatures. We need to see, also, how it is, that it is often the poorest, who are nearest to other creatures, and so most sensitive to them, who are taking a lead in working out new relationships with the creatures, and, so, working to restore the integrity of creation. So, working for justice for the poor and working for the integrity of creation, often go together. In both cases, we are “resisting the threats to life”.

In his book, *Resisting the Threats to Life*, Preman Niles gives examples of poor people concerned for, and working for, the integrity of creation, he quotes Mamani, from Bolivia: “I see two contending nations in Bolivia. On the one hand, the immigrant minority, identifying itself as Christian, maintains an ideology of accumulation, domination, and oppression. We Indians, on the other hand, believe that the gifts of creation should benefit all, and that consumption should be limited to what is necessary. Our Aymara communities, and those of all Andean native peoples, are participatory. Our sense of community extends to the relationship between people and all of creation. It includes safeguarding the harmony of nature. If the churches are really concerned for the integrity of creation, they will have to recover a gospel that is good news for all of creation.”<sup>2</sup> Such a

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<sup>2</sup> Preman Niles, *Resisting the Threats to Life*, Geneva Sw: WCC Publications, 1989, p. 16.

participatory approach, in which the sense of community is extended to the relationship with all creation, is shared by Melanesian people.

It is only by building up healthy, “whole” relationships, at one-and-the-same time with God, with all other people, and with all other creatures, that we can work for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. The opposite approach, of dominating other people, and all other creatures, in order to make money from them, at all costs, has often been taken as realistic, as the only way to survive.

In such a view, there is either no place for God, or He is used as an idol, a tool to back up the selfishness of the rich and powerful. Now, social and environmental breakdown is making it plain that it is the dominating approach that is unrealistic, and is threatening the life of all, including themselves. Many of us, in many ways, find ourselves caught up in structures and attitudes of domination, so the call to work for justice, peace, and integrity of creation, is not just a call to oppose the dominators, but to “repent, for the kingdom of god is at hand”.

*Questions:*

1. Is our concern for justice for human beings related to our concern to safeguard the integrity of creation?
2. What can we learn from science, about the integrity of creation?
3. How is the providence of God at work among creatures other than human beings?
4. Do other creatures have any value in themselves, and any rights, apart from their usefulness to human beings?
5. How should the church relate to the “green” movement for environmental concern?
6. When current environmental crises provoke talk about the end of the world, how should the churches react?

**Section B**

The following outline to the background of the discussion of “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” is based on articles by R. H. Preston,<sup>3</sup> and articles on

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<sup>3</sup> R. H. Preston, *The Future of Christian Ethics*, London UK: SCM Press, 1987.

“Issues of Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation”.<sup>4</sup> Parallel with the debate within the ecumenical movement, has been the growth of the “green” movement, of whom “Friends of the Earth” are articulate spokespeople. Their address in Papua New Guinea is PO Box 2554, Konedobu NCD. Also, the United Nations has produced the Brundtland Report.<sup>5</sup> Various churches have also been conducting their own debates on environmental questions, as well as on questions of justice and peace.

The first title, used by the ecumenical movement, to express its involvement in the problems of the world, was “The Responsible Society”. Discussions of the problems of the world was related to belief in God, and the recommendations, that resulted from discussions, were meant to act as a mid-point between basic Christian doctrine and immediate application to specific problems. As work was done on an ever-wider range of problems, so it became necessary to consult experts from a wide range of fields. Members of “young”, “third world” churches played an increasing part in the discussions, and their concerns influenced the topics discussed. A common issue in many discussions was the need to deal with the results of rapid social change. Increasingly, it became necessary to take note of the effects of this rapid social change, not only on human beings, but also on the whole environment.

Therefore, in 1979, the World Council of Churches convened a conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on “The Contribution of Faith, Science, and Technology, in the Struggle for a Just, Participatory, and Sustainable Society”, to which leading scientific experts and theologians, including many from the third world, were invited. Concern for the survival of planet earth had been growing during the 1970s, partly as a result of a report made by the Club of Rome in 1972, which made an exaggerated claim that the earth was running out of resources. Despite the later admission by the Club of Rome that the report had, indeed, been exaggerated, scientists continued to produce evidence of the damage being done to the environment by human activity. The United Nations sponsored an influential book by Barbara Ward and Renee Dubois,<sup>6</sup> to emphasise that care of the planet was vital to the survival of the human race. It was against this background, that, in 1974, the World Council of Churches began to talk about a

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<sup>4</sup> “Issues of Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation”, in *Ecumenical Review* 41-4 (October 1989).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, *Brundtland Report: Our Common Future*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Ward, and Renee Dubois, *Only One Earth*, New York NY: Norton, 1972.

sustainable society. The word “participatory” was added soon after, to reflect the concern of third world theologians, for participation in development. The report of the MIT Conference was entitled “Faith, Science, and the Future”. It represented an attempt by the scientists and theologians to give an integrated, unitive view of the world, based on the discoveries of science about the interrelatedness of all life, and the Christian belief in one Creator, who cares for all life. Third world theologians pointed out how far science, conducted by first-world theologians, was conditioned by first-world interests, and called for greater participation by third-world representatives, responsible for the control of science. They pointed out that most first-world science was conducted for military or commercial reasons, and, so, contributed to the domination and exploitation of the third world by the first world.

While the debate on a just, sustainable, and participatory society was still going on, a new theme of “Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation” was introduced into ecumenical thinking, in a way that overlapped the previous debate. The phrase “The Integrity of Creation” first appears in WCC thinking in the report of the Programme Guidelines Committees for the Vancouver Assembly of the WCC, in 1982. It goes further than talk of sustainability, which implies mere survival, to respect for all living creatures, and recognition of the contribution of each creature to the ecological balance of the whole of creation. Various disasters, such as, Seveso, Bhopal, Three-Mile Island, and, later, Chernobyl, plus the damage caused by acid rain, and the multiple consequences of deforestation, were making it ever clearer that one act of pollution or destruction could have consequences right through the ecological chain, and across much of the planet.

In particular, man was seen to be the main culprit in such disasters, because of his attempts to dominate, and manipulate, other creatures, as well as other human beings, for military or commercial ends. Christian interest in the debate of the degrees of man’s responsibility for the degradation of the earth was sharpened by Professor Lynn White’s article.<sup>7</sup> He argued that the Christian religion puts humanity too much at the centre of the world, and that the control over nature, given to humanity in Genesis, has been used as an excuse to arrogantly dominate nature. Some people, therefore, argued that human beings should be seen as just another animal, and they should conserve the world by doing as little as possible to interfere with other creatures. Christians have replied that the control given by God to human beings was not meant to be used to dominate nature, but to be a

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<sup>7</sup> Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis”, in *Science* (March 1967).

form of stewardship, so that humans could look after nature on God's behalf. Having been set free from being dominated by nature, human beings were in a position to discern and assist its inner movement towards ever fuller integration, and to direct that movement to its proper end of union with God.

In recent thinking, therefore, talk about the integrity of creation has taken a greater role, alongside talk about justice and peace. For some people, concern for the environment seems to have overshadowed concern for human beings. The "green" movement has, for some people, become an ideology, with many of the assumptions of a pantheistic religion. Respect for creatures has become a sort of nature worship, and people have been prepared to attack other people in order to defend animals or plants. This is a distortion, which encourages over-reaction against care for the environment. In fact, of course, care for human beings, and care for all other creatures, do go together. Human beings are animals, and they are also more than animals, so they are, at once, able to feel for animals and plants, and also exercise control on their behalf. Also they need plants and animals to survive, if they are to survive themselves. The way we treat other human beings is often, although not always, on a par with the way we treat other creatures. Those who dominate other humans, especially the poor and oppressed, are usually those who dominate the environment. A properly-ordered human society is one that is in a better position to care for the environment, and a better environment makes possible a better society.

The World Council of Churches has recently (March 1990) held a conference on Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation at Seoul, Korea. At this conference, participants affirmed that all exercise of power is accountable to God; they affirmed God's option for the poor, the equal value of all races and peoples, that men and women are made in the image of God; that truth is the foundation of free people; the peace of Jesus Christ; the creation, as beloved of God; that the land belongs to God; the dignity and commitment of the younger generation, and that human rights are given by God. The participants covenanted to work for a just economic order, and for the liberation from the bondage of foreign debt; the true security of all nations and people, and for a culture of non-violence; preserving the gift of the earth's atmosphere, and for building a culture that can live in harmony with creation's integrity, and an end to racism. The affirmations and covenants of the conference will be presented to the general assembly of the WCC at Canberra, in February 1991.

*Questions:*

1. What are the major threats to the sustainability of the environment?
2. What hinders full participation by the ‘third world’ in decisions that affect the whole world?
3. Has Christianity encouraged a too-human-centred view of life, and an arrogant domination of nature?
4. A speaker at the Seoul conference on JPIC warned against the idea that God only cares for the poor. Can the bias to the poor be taken too far?
5. Should more be done to ensure equality for women in Papua New Guinea?
6. What basic human rights are necessary to ensure that there is justice for all?

**Section C**

In this section, we shall look at some Melanesian issues, and ask if there is a distinctively Melanesian contribution to discussion on justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

When we look at some of the problems facing Melanesian people, we see how the various strands of Justice, peace, and the integrity of creation are intertwined. In Irian Jaya, the Indonesian government is following a policy of transmigration, in order that Indonesians should come to outnumber Melanesians in their own land. Already, the local Melanesian culture is being pushed down by the culture of the immigrants, and when the immigrants are in a majority, the Melanesian culture will probably be smothered. At the same time, the human rights of the Melanesians are being ignored, and the great natural resources of the country, both trees and minerals, are being destroyed, or removed, and taken away, for use by Indonesians. Where Indonesians have tried to settle, and use their own methods of agriculture, these have been found to be inappropriate. As a result, the environment has been laid waste, and even the Indonesian migrants have gone hungry. Any protest by the local Melanesians is dealt with harshly. The domination by Indonesia of Irian Jaya is a violation of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. The situation is described in George Monbiot’s book,



*Poisoned Arrows*,<sup>8</sup> which includes a petition to the United Nations for justice, which is given as an appendix to this article.

On Bougainville, mining has led to destruction of the environment. Also, the local people have been given only a small share of the profits from the Panguna mine. Further, government troops killed and injured innocent people in their attempt to deal with the militants. Once more, there was a comprehensive violation of JPIC. The local people feel pain, from the damage to their land, as well as from the death of their people, and the unfair agreement over profits from the mine. Any settlement, that ignores the future of the environment, will fail to satisfy the people.

The destruction of rainforests, throughout the tropics, has consequences for the whole world, since it could lead to drastic global climate change. Also, it could lead to the loss of many species of plants and animals, which are not only valuable, in themselves, but offer untapped sources of food and medicine. In Papua New Guinea, logging has mainly been in the hands of large, foreign companies, who export the logs, and only pay the local people a small amount, about 2.75% of the final price of the logs, in return. Many local landowners have expressed concern over the loss of their children's heritage. Much of the logging is done by clear felling, with little attempt at reforestation. The Barnett Report found much evidence of corruption. It is possible to operate a policy of sustained management of the rainforest, by which only mature trees are removed, and younger trees are given time and space to replace them. If local landowners, whose future depends on the future of the environment, could be helped to operate a policy of sustained management, the result would be more just, and would sustain the environment.

Other issues, such as the rights of the Kanak people, on New Caledonia, could also be considered from the three-fold aspects of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

In seeking a Melanesian approach to these issues, we may note that the Melanesian sense of community includes community with the land. A student of Newton College, Gabriel Menai, has written of his Eilovoan people: "A person, in Eilovoan society, is always seen in relation to his or her community, a community of both living and dead. There is an awareness of the total environment, and the consciousness that people, and ancestors, animals, rivers, and mountains, are part of the whole of life, and are meant to live in harmony."

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<sup>8</sup> George Monbiot, *Poisoned Arrows*, London UK: Joseph, 1989.

Then Gabriel gives an example of a type of healing, which shows the link between relationships within the community and relationships with the land. The example is that of a sick child: “Meanwhile a process of discussion and divination had been started by the family, with the help of the traditional healer, who had encouraged the parents to take the child to the aid post. The conclusion was reached that the child’s father had broken a taboo, by cutting trees in an area, where he had no right to be, and that the nature spirits, *masalai*, from that place had afflicted the child, who happened to be with him at that time. In other words, the man had upset his relationship with the land. The land, as represented by the *masalai*, had retaliated, by causing someone related to the man to become ill. While the aid post orderly, and nurses, treated the external symptoms of the illness, the traditional healer helped the father to perform a ritual – the sharing of a meal of pig with the *masalai* – through which he restores his right relationship with the land. The *masalai* consumed their share of the meal, by enjoying, and absorbing, the smell of the cooking meat.”

The story shows an attitude of respect towards the land, and a discipline in its use. Trees should only be chopped down when the community permits. It shows that the land has a “life” of its own, an integrity that should not be violated, for fear of unforeseen consequences for the human violator. It shows a need for reparation to be made for damage to the land. Even if some of the assumptions and customs, by which these attitudes may need to be expressed, would be changed by European influences, the underlying concern for disciplined respect for the life of the land, and the desire for harmony with that life, is in accord with modern European ecological thinking, and may be reconciled with Christian teaching about the value of creation. The aim would not be to replace Melanesian culture with European, but to interpret Melanesian culture in a Christian way, and in a way that could engage with the challenge of European culture.

Another way, in which Papua New Guineans express their relationships with each other, and with other creatures, is in the dance. As they dance, the dancers move with intricate, regular footsteps to a rhythmic beat, and form circles, lines, squares, and crosses that meet the human need for order. Yet, within that order, there is an exuberant dignity, that uplifts all who watch the dance. Many of the dances are based on the close study of the behaviour of birds or animals, and, by copying the creatures’ antics, the dancers seek to share in their life, and to harness it, within the organised activity of the human community. The result is a blend of reason and feeling, which can give shape and enthusiasm to the everyday life of the people. In this way, attentive and reflective contact with the natural world is a

source of emotional and spiritual well-being for human beings. Such an approach could be interpreted in a Christian way, as rejoicing in the wonder of God's creation, and not dismissed as superstitious dependence on spirits. Dance is an important instrument, and a sign of healing of individual and communal ills, and of distortions in the relationships between human beings and the environment, because it is a union of order and energy. The dance is therefore a fit symbol of the integrity of creation, which we seek. If the dance is done in honour and praise of God, who gives both law, and spirit, order, and energy, then it can remind us that the integrity of creation comes from its union with God.

Another illustration of the attentiveness to nature of Papua New Guineans, and their search for meaning, in the behaviour of non-human creatures, is in their readiness to see animals as messengers of blessing, or disaster, in the human world. In this journal, Fr Spencer Kombega gives an example of this, in his article on fireflies. All over the world, animals have been seen as omens of good or ill. It may go back to the way that, when we hear a rustle in the bush, we are alerted to danger on the natural level, but, from that, our minds keep on working to think of possible threats we face on a human level. So, by association of ideas, animals, including fireflies, act as an effective alarm signal for our human problems. As T. S. Eliot wrote: "Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children: hidden excitedly, containing laughter. Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind cannot bear very much reality".<sup>9</sup> Even at a more-down-to-earth-level, it is good to be attentive to the presence and absence of animals, both for their own sake, and ours. Canaries used to be taken down the mines, because, when they died, the air was no longer safe for humans to breathe. A silent spring, where no birds sing, is a world unsafe for humans. For reasons of poetry, and of science, it is well that Papua New Guineans should continue their habit of attentiveness to the behaviour of animals. Sensitivity to the behaviour of God's creatures, and reflection on that behaviour, in the light of the human condition, can provide us with parables of God's care for His creation.

It is hoped that these suggestions may provoke further thought on distinctively Melanesian instincts on the issue of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

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<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, London UK: Faber & Faber, 1941.

*Questions:*

1. Is Indonesian treatment of Irian Jaya just and peaceful, and in accord with the integrity of creation? If not, what can be done?
2. To whom does Bougainville finally belong? To the people, or to God? Should any settlement include restoration of, and care for, the land?
3. Is what happens to the rainforest the business of the present landowners alone? Is it also a matter for future generations? Is it a matter for the rest of the world, who might be affected by climate change, or loss of species?
4. What is the link between human health and the wholeness of the land?
5. What are the benefits for human beings of an appreciation of the beauty and harmony of nature, especially in art forms, such as PNG dance?
6. What messages are there to be gained by human beings, from close study of the behaviour of animals, especially when the animals are interpreted as signs?
7. What other bases are there in Papua New Guinean culture for a theology of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation?

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# A Life of Love and Service Sr Marie-Therese Noblet AD

## Sr Genevieve de Massignac AD

[It seems some text was missing from the start of this article in the original printed version. This missing text includes references to endnotes <sup>1</sup> and <sup>2</sup>, which are shown at the end of this article. –Revising ed.]

This humble study will be mostly based on the following sources:

- the *Notes* Mother Marie-Therese wrote herself, around 1906, about her miraculous cure at Lourdes, in 1905;
- those she wrote in Papua in 1925, on the request of Bishop de Boismenu,<sup>3</sup> about her childhood and her youth;
- the *Notes* Bishop de Boismenu wrote, almost day by day, between 1921 and 1930, as he followed Mother Marie-Therese's spiritual life and her mystic experiences;<sup>4</sup>
- and the *Souvenirs*, which he wrote, on the request of his niece, Mother Solange Bazin de Jessey, who succeeded Mother Marie-Therese as Superior of the Handmaids, from 1932 to 1942.
- We will also refer to the biography, written by Father A. Pineau MSC, who was a chaplain at Kubuna, (Diocese of Bereina, now), then the Mother-House of the Handmaids of Our Lord, where Mother Marie-Therese lived, died, and is buried.<sup>5</sup>

### Introduction

It will be, indeed, very difficult to describe such a rich personality, or recount in a few pages, such an eventful life, as that of Mother Marie-Therese Noblet. We will only be able to mention a few episodes, and some aspects of her saintly character, and of her spiritual life, trying to let her speak herself, and to see what others have written about her.

Before we begin our “journey” into her life, it may be good to prepare, ourselves to face the sort of life she led.

Throughout the history of the church, we find individual people, or groups, who have been called to a special vocation or mission, and who have rendered more visible the life and love of God in men, and, through them, in the world, and for the world.

Such were the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, saints, etc., a huge “epic” of love: born of the love of God, they lived in love, and radiated love.

Our own time is not deprived of such people: Father Maximilien Kolbe, who died a martyr during the Second World War, our contemporaries, John Paul II and Mother Therese, and others. Mother Marie-Therese was a follower, and a lover, of Christ, of that calibre. While her exterior life was ordinary, though radiant with love and peace, her interior life was enriched by extraordinary graces, which were purposely hidden by God, to all, except for a few priests, who were the only privileged witnesses of these “marvels of God”<sup>6</sup> in her soul.

It might not be useless to also mention that, because the Catholic church has only been in Australia for two centuries, there has not been any such “cases” – at least, publicly known – in this end of the world. This might render the concepts, we will consider, and even the vocabulary we will have to use, a little difficult, or strange, to some readers, especially to those who may not be quite familiar with the Catholic tradition.

It is evident that, without an attitude of faith, the facts, we will recall, would appear as madness. On the contrary, seen and appreciated with eyes of faith, and hearts full of a desire to be filled with whatever God has in store for those who believe in His work in “the little ones”,<sup>7</sup> the simple daily life of Mother Marie-Therese brings us closer to the One, who was the source of the holiness of her life.

We will follow the “itinerary” proposed, in a few words, by Father A. Pineau, in his *Biography of Mother Marie-Therese*, already mentioned:

Born in 1889, Mother Marie-Therese had her first great illness at the beginning of her eighth year; eight years later, in 1905, she was miraculously cured at Lourdes; eight years later, in 1913, she received the call to the life of a victim. Again, a portion of eight years, and, in

1921, she was leaving for Papua, to suffer there, for another eight years, until her death in 1930.<sup>8</sup>

As Archbishop de Boismenu wrote in the *Souvenirs*, gathered spontaneously for his “daughters”, the Handmaids of Our Lord:

To fix your eyes on her, to call in mind what she has been, what she has said, what she has done, will do more than a 100 discourses, to draw you all after her to the love and to the service of God. . . . If He poured out His favours on her, it is because she poured out her love on Him, a love so generous that she never refused Him anything. It is this great service of love that can be imitated in her admirable life. No doubt ours is a more modest programme. It is made to our measure. It will sanctify us if we really do our best to fulfil it, as Mother Marie-Therese did hers.”<sup>9</sup>

### **1. As a Child, She Early Discovered the “Life After Life” (1889-1896)**

Our story begins, a 100 years ago, far away from Papua New Guinea, in Signy, a quiet little town in the forest country of Ardennes, in Eastern France. This is where Marie-Therese Noblet’s grandfather had established a prosperous spinning mill in 1815, and where her father, Charles Noblet, had set up his home, in order to carry on his father’s work.

Marie-Therese was born on September 30, 1889, the second of three children:<sup>10</sup>

“I was born as happy as one can be on earth. The good Lord had placed me into the hands of good and virtuous parents. My father had a spinning mill and a large house at Signy; this is where I was born. I had a brother, one year older than me; his name was Louis, and, younger than me, I had a little sister called Madeleine. Mama was beautiful, and, above all, very kind. Papa, too, was very kind and charitable. He had founded an orphanage near the spinning mill, and he had about 30 little orphans, brought up by the five sisters of Saint Chretienne.<sup>11</sup> Papa and Mama lived very happy, during seven or eight years. At Signy, for us children, it was perfect happiness.”

Marie-Therese was five when clouds appeared on this clear familial sky. In 1894, a general slump in business resulted in the spinning mill

working at a loss. Mr Noblet fought to save his business and keep his workers.

“Then, Papa fell sick, and died after only a few months. (23.9.1894) Mama was left alone, with three little children, my brother was hardly six years old. . . . My poor little Mama, very courageous, got a fatal shock, because, with the death of our father, material downfall was to be added to the painful separation, and everything had to be sold at Signy: properties, houses, spinning mill. All was bought by my Uncle Palle, at a very low price.<sup>12</sup>

“Mama left for Reims with her three little children. At my maternal grandparents’ home, we were welcomed with open arms. My grandfather had replaced his father as a professor at the medical school, and had also carried on his private practice. . . . My grandparents settled my mother in a flat, which had been comfortably fitted out for her.”<sup>13</sup>

October was the reopening of school, after the summer holidays.

“It was then, as a day pupil at the school of the infant Jesus; I was going back home to take my meals.

“A few months later, my little sister, Madeleine, died suddenly (February 1895), as a result of capillary bronchitis, and, in January, the good Lord took Mama also: to a great extent, she died of sorrow (3.1.1896).

“When my mother died, I felt it more, because I understood better. When my father died, I had the idea that he was going for a long trip, and that, after a while, he would come back. But, for my mother, I understood, and I suffered more. I was then six years of age.

“My grandmother, then, fell more seriously ill from her heart disease, and, the following November, it was finished for her, too.<sup>14</sup>

“When I lost my grandmother, whom I loved dearly, I felt really unhappy. I could not complain, because I could see my grandfather was very lonely; but, at the bottom, right at the bottom, of my heart, it was as if I was losing my second mother.



“Then, I was put in boarding school full-time. I was going, every Sunday, to see my grandfather, who was bringing me to see Louis, at the college of the Jesuits.”

Then Marie-Therese admits: “All these successive blows had deeply shaken me.” It is no wonder that, one month later, she felt sick.

On Christmas day, after the family gathering, Marie-Therese went back to the boarding school.

“That night, I began to vomit so terribly and painfully that I was carried to the infirmary. Grandpa was notified, as soon as possible, the next morning. It was very serious: peritonitis.<sup>15</sup>

“The three doctors, who came to see me, many times a day, found me on the verge of death. An operation was suggested, but it had little chance of succeeding, and grandpa answered that he would rather see me return peacefully to God than see me die during the operation.

“He asked the chaplain to give me the last sacrament. . . . It was a beautiful ceremony: all the sisters, holding lighted candles, were following the priest, who was very moved. I had been told: ‘little Jesus will come to get you’, and I understood very well that we should be in a feast-day mood to welcome the dear little Jesus, and I was very happy! I was waiting impatiently for His coming . . . but little Jesus did not come!

“A novena to our Lady of Seven Dolors was started to obtain my cure . . . and, behold, the last day of the novena, when they were giving up hope of saving me, the abscess broke out, of itself, in the outside. It was quite unexpected, and providential: I was saved! The Blessed Virgin already wanted to show herself my mother, and she was already saving me from certain death.”

Though she was miraculously cured, Marie-Therese was in the infirmary for a few months, and was sent to the country, where fresh air and sun brought her back to good health. This gave the nine-year-old girl plenty of time to think of all her beloved, who had gone “home” to God, to become very familiar with the thought of heaven, and, more mature than others, in

regard to the aim of our life. She was already finding consolation and peace in the invisible world.

## **2. As a Girl, She Learned to Suffer (1897-1905)**

“At the reopening of the school, in October, 1896, the sisters were a bit reluctant to take me back on account of my health, but, at last, they made up their mind and I went back as a boarder, at the same time with the others.

“From 1897 to 1900, nothing special happened in my life: I was at school, and the holidays were spent between our two families in turn.<sup>16</sup>

These were three quiet years, during which she was happy at school! Her school friends, who were still alive in the 1970s, remembered her vividly as a frail young girl, very quiet, gentle, and always smiling. They were specially impressed by her beautiful, great, blue eyes, and the intensity of her attention during the catechism lessons, when the subject would bring to her mind God and heaven.

But another sorrow was soon to increase her solitude: on August 23, 1900, her good grandfather, Doctor Panis, died.

“This separation was another cruel wound, because it recalled all the others. We had placed all our affections on our poor grandfather. We can say that our dear Lord was taking them one after the other, probably so that we may be more His, only. . . .

“After the death of grandpa, the board of guardians met, and were put under the guardianship of my Uncle Bur, of Epernay. They were perfect for us: as father and mother as possible, treating us as their own children. May the good Master bless them abundantly.”

The following October,<sup>17</sup> Marie-Therese continued her boarding-school life in Reims, though Epernay, where her uncle and aunt lived, became “home” for her. She was 11 years old, and, by then, the Lord had stepped dramatically into her life so often that it would seem almost natural that she would live, in mind, heart, and soul, where her dear ones were, near the Lord, in His Father’s house.<sup>18</sup> And we are not surprised to read in her *Notes*:

I made my first communion on May 22, 1901; on that day I gave myself to our good Jesus forever.<sup>19</sup>

Her choice was made: He had not called her to Himself in death, but she was ready to answer His call, if it was His will to live in His love.

Each painful departure had brought home, in her heart, the reality of the “One”, who was calling all the members of her dear family, in turn, and the long hours of reflection, due to her periods of sickness and rest, had brought her to turn her love towards the “good Jesus” of her childhood, and to envisage spending her life with Him, and for Him, who had, so often, been her consolation, and had given her strength to go on living . . . with a peaceful smile.

“The years passed, I loved my boarding-school, my teachers, my companions. Unfortunately (humanly speaking!), I was not strong. I had continual headaches, though I had a very joyful disposition, I was often living with our dear ones: when I was filled with sadness, the chapel, and music, were of comfort to me.”

We cannot go into details about what happened during the months that followed. Turning the pages of both note-books, we see Marie-Therese, every year, “staying in bed for some time”, and finally, in December, 1903, going back to Epernay, to her Uncle Bur’s home, never to return to school.

During the following year – 1904 – she was often sick, and treated in various places. In May, we find her on the seashore, in Western France, with a cousin and his family, with whom she had accepted to take a rest.

“In January (1905), I had violent pains in my back, which could not be calmed by any treatment.” After a few days, they had to decide to bring her back to Paris for a medical consultation.

After a tiring trip, “I was brought straight away to the private hospital of Doctor Chipault (a great specialist), and, the next morning I was put in a plaster cast.”

In her first account, whose subject was her cure at Lourdes, she goes into many details of these painful months of treatment, of the anxious deliberations as to what best treatment could be found to help her, and of the

exquisite kindness of her family and friends, when she spent many months in bed, at Epernay.

A severe winter passed and spring came. “Finally, in May, the doctor declared that I needed open air. My uncle decided, then, to put me at Avenay.” There was, in that village, situated on the railway line, a quarter of an hour from Epernay, a beautiful property used for retired persons, where she was admitted by the Superior, in spite of her young age, because the Sister knew the Bur family, and was happy to render them a service.

“The religious, who ran the house, were Sisters of the Holy Saviour, an Alsatian order. And, it happened, that the good parish priest of the village knew my paternal family very well, as he was from Civet” (a small town, close to Signy). Again, let us turn a few pages about her life there. “The dear parish-priest could not have been more devoted to me, and, after a while, he took it into his head to bring me to Lourdes. When father talked to me about it, as it had always been my great desire to go to Lourdes, imagine how overjoyed I was!”

In the account of her miraculous cure, written soon after, she devotes 14 pages to the eventful trip to Lourdes, in the special train of the yearly “pilgrimage” of the diocese of Reims. Two facts come out clearly. Firstly, we see Marie-Therese suffering intensely, but always thinking of others, and offering her pains, discomfort, and anxieties for the fellow- travellers, who, like her, were suffering on stretchers, day and night, during the three days’ journey, which brought them also on pilgrimage to the village of the Curé of Ars.

Then, through vivid, and sometimes slightly mischievous, details, we cannot but see the fatherly love of Father Dieudonne – the parish-priest of Avenay – expressed in rather fussy, and often rough, ways and remarks, full of good intentions.

The train of pilgrims finally arrived at Lourdes on 31 August, in the morning. Her uncle, Mr Bur, her brother, Louis, and a Sister from Avenay, Sr Rene, had accompanied Marie-Therese on this memorable pilgrimage.

Before leaving Avenay, Marie-Therese had had a small opening made in her plaster. “Just at the place, which was attacked by the disease, a large

red spot could be seen on the vertebrae”, and the doctor had said to her, “we did all what we could do, now, it is up to the Blessed Virgin to do the rest.”

As she lay down on a bed of a ward of the hospital of the Immaculate Conception, her one desire was to go and “see” the famous grotto. But, “totally exhausted, on my bed, I humbly required to be allowed to rest until the next day. They promised me to do so.

“And I do not know through which misunderstanding the stretcher-bearers brought me to the grotto, in the afternoon. When I arrived there, I saw the statue of the Virgin, beaming with beauty and kindness. Then, I lost consciousness, and I did not see anything anymore.”

She attended the Procession of the Blessed Sacrament, and showed such signs of deep exhaustion, that they rushed her back to the hospital.

“When we arrived in front of the hospital . . . I do not know what happened to me! Suddenly, I did not feel any more pain, and a sweet and strong voice was telling me: ‘Get up! You can walk.’”

“Grabbing my blanket, I called out: ‘Father! I am cured!’ I could still hear the sweet voice telling me to get up. But, with a rough voice, Father said, ‘Stop talking! You do not know what you are saying!’ ‘But, Father, I assure you, I am cured!’ ‘Hold your tongue, you are mad. It is not here that the holy virgin works miracles!’”

“We were just at the gate, at the entrance of the hospital. The stretcher-bearers had stopped. They had believed straight away.”

“The next day, I was brought to the office, where miracles are studied”, and the long examinations took place, which Marie-Therese describes in five pages!

Her account is shorter in her 1925 story: “They broke the cast: I was cured! I can still hear Doctor Boissarie<sup>20</sup> whisper: ‘The Holy Virgin picks them young!’”

To cut our story short, the judgment of the church was published on July 30, 1908, in Reims, and signed in Rome on February 11, 1908, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, by Cardinal Lucon.

“The cure of Miss Marie-Therese Noblet, which occurred at Lourdes, on August 31, 1905, is miraculous.”

Of course, the return trip to Reims, and the triumphal welcome, were to be unforgettable souvenirs for the grateful young girl, who had learned to suffer, and experienced the wonderful love of her beloved Mother Mary, who had confirmed her special care – we could almost say “plan” – for her. After this tiring experience, Marie-Therese went back to finish her convalescence among her dear old friends at Avenay.

### **3. As a Young Woman, Marie-Therese Begins to Receive Supernatural Favours (1905-1914)<sup>21</sup>**

“I was almost 17 when I went back to Epernay, where my family was anxiously waiting for me. I loved my aunt very much, and I had an easy life. It was a happy family life. I was actively involved in a club for young girls, and the meetings of the sodality of the Children of Mary, the singing practice at the parish, were taking a lot of my time.”

From 1906 to 1910, Marie-Therese led the normal life of a young woman of her age, between her family, her friends, her parish activities, and her social life. She was appreciated as a friend, and loved to help others, or to visit sick people in the hospital, and old people, lonely in their homes.

As she became more mature, and more conscious of what had happened to her during her childhood, and her early youth, she realised how, through her various sufferings of body, heart, and soul, which had been the source of great graces, she had become more and more aware of God’s love for her, and of her wish to give herself to Him. It must have been at that time that she made a private first step towards a consecrated life. In her notes, she mentioned it, in brackets, in 1910, when she settled at Signy, in what she thought was to be her vocation: “I had made a temporary vow of virginity for two years.”

It was also in 1908 that she received, again, a special grace at Lourdes, “where I used to go back about every other year. When I was about 19, I had a painful appendicitis, which our sweet mother cured again at Lourdes.”

Then, the “good Lord” – as she often called Him – really tried her vocation. He gave her the opportunity to meet a fine officer, who was in a regiment at Epernay, and who became very fond of her. He wanted to marry her. Marie-Therese loved him, too, but she loved her divine master still more, and she decided to be faithful to her word, and keep her whole heart for Him. Though, realising how hard it would be for her suitor, she told him of her resolve to break off all relations with him. Little did she know then that, more than ten years later, in her little convent in Papua, God would allow her, in the middle of a mystical experience, during the night of May 8, 1922, to find herself kneeling at the bed of this young man, and to pray for him, as he was dying in a place, which she could not identify. Bishop de BoisMENU, in his notes, written at that time, after relating this incident, adds: “she then felt a great strength in her heart, and offered his soul to God.”<sup>22</sup>

This decision, against the eventuality of living as a good Christian wife and mother, brought her to a point, where she had to make a decision about her future.

“I was getting close to my 21st birthday and, all around me, knew that I wanted to consecrate myself to God. Marie<sup>23</sup> wanted very badly to see me start an institution in Signy, a little sister of hers. It would be supported, to a great extent, by the Paris house. I was hesitating. . . . I would have preferred to be truly religious.”

On the other hand, she had knocked at a nearby convent, where her family was well known, and had been told that she would never be strong enough to follow the rhythm of religious life, and share the work of the sisters.

Her cousin, Marie Palle, whom she had met mostly during the holidays at Signy, at their grandmother’s home, was ten years older than Marie-Therese. She lived a consecrated life as a lay-teacher, and devoted herself whole-heartedly to an institution of education for girls, at Neuilly, near Paris, and thought the same type of work would suit her young cousin, especially in the quiet environment of their dear Signy.

Eventually, after asking advice, Marie-Therese decided to grant her cousin’s desire, and began organising her future life.

“During the holidays (August-September, 1911), we looked for a little house to be rented in Signy,<sup>24</sup> and I had my furniture brought from Epernay. My uncle and my aunt of Epernay asked Madame Lundy (a secularised religious) to come with me as a lady-companion. . . . The parting from Epernay was very painful.

“At Signy, happy to be at home, and to live only for God, I gave myself wholeheartedly to my new life. How fond I was of my poor little girls.”

We cannot go into details about these happy first steps in Marie-Therese’s life of service and devotedness. Let us only notice that, in the margin of the exercise-book, as if it was not important, Marie-Therese added: “it was at Signy, in 1911, that the o. (“old one”, one of the names Mother Marie-Therese used to give to her to her enemy, the devil) began to tease me, tying me by the hair, so that I could not sleep in the night, throwing things into confusion in my room.” This was written in 1925, in her notes, when she was familiar with “him”; but, at that early stage of her life for God, she did not yet identify the author of these disturbances.

Here, we see the first episode of the extraordinary side of Mother Marie-Therese’s life. In order to begin trying to follow her on this mysterious way, let us see how Archbishop de BoisMENU explained to the Handmaids of Our Lord – many years later – why the devil, Satan,<sup>25</sup> stepped into the life of their Mother.

“These evil spirits infest our earth. They roam about everywhere, seeking to do us harm. They are jealous of our souls, which are destined for the heaven they have lost. They are trying their hardest to steal them away from God, to populate their hell, and share their torments. They want to make us fall into sin, in the hope that death may come and snatch us away in that state.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of these troubles, she continued her charitable work, and even considered the possibility of opening a primary school. She gave herself completely to her people; her generosity was going to be an outstanding aspect of her personality. But this happy life was not to last long.

“In January, 1912, I caught a chill, and soon after, pleurisy broke out. This time, I was completely bed-ridden, and for months, when the fine



weather came back, the doctor insisted on my going back to live in my grandmother's house, where I would be able to enjoy the garden."

In May, she was not yet very strong, when another sorrow fell on her. "At this date, I received news that my grandmother (Noblet) was seriously ill, and a few days later, a telegram brought me the news of her death." This was the occasion of a sad reunion with her brother, and her family, who came to Signy for the funeral.

The following month, they were gathered in the dear old family home again for a happier circumstance: "The wedding of my brother was decided for August 12."

This family event has to be mentioned, because it was going to be a milestone in Marie-Therese's life. She continues: "At Marie's request, Father Cordonnier accepted to bless the marriage. We were in a time of deep mourning, so the ceremony took place in the strictest privacy. They brought me to the church in a carriage, and I was able to attend the mass."

Father Cordonnier was a priest of the parish of Neuilly, near Paris, where Marie-Therese's cousin, Marie Palle, lived, in the institution we have already mentioned. He happened to be well acquainted with the spiritual way of life called "victim", lived by persons, who accepted to consecrate themselves to God, and to offer their prayers, their sufferings, and their whole self, for the salvation of souls.<sup>27</sup>

Seeing Marie-Therese so courageous and peacefully generous in her poor physical condition, and in her sad familial situation, he was inspired to suggest to her to use this "texture" of her life to make it her way of consecration to God.

"It is during this short stay at Signy that Father Cordonnier often came to see me, and talked at length about 'reparation',<sup>28</sup> and he did not come once, without my welcoming him with abundant tears. I could see where he wanted to lead me. I ought to be a victim, and my whole being rebelled against it. I could only see a bed of suffering, when I was dreaming of a life of active devotedness."

We cannot go into the details of the months, which followed this first step. Marie-Therese had to give up her dear work at Signy, and her beloved

people – to the great sorrow of all those who loved her, and appreciated her help so much – and she spent the following months at Neuilly, with her cousin Marie.

“Leaving Signy was a great sorrow for me. I think nobody noticed it, and, at the bottom of my heart, I was happy to offer this great sacrifice to the good Master.

“At Neuilly, it was evident that the ‘old one’ (the devil) was acting, and I had the sufferings of body, heart, and soul that I expected. Marie and I really believed that he ‘rented’ a room on the same floor, where I was staying.”

Of special interest, is a happening, which she mentions only briefly:

“Towards the middle of the year, the sickness took an alarming turn, and the doctors, who were anxious, decided on an operation. Just in time, our Holy Father Pope Pius X cured me, through a little piece of his cassock.<sup>29</sup> For this, I keep a very great gratitude to him. Father Meyer had sent us this relic.”

Father Meyer was, at the time, Superior General of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart – whose missionaries, priests, and brothers, had been in Papua since 1885. He was residing in Rome. He had been corresponding with Marie-Therese since she was eight years of age. She had most probably known him through the *Annales of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, a periodical, which Marie-Therese must have read regularly. This spiritual “link” with Father Meyer was to have capital importance in her life.

On the whole, the first half of 1913 could be considered as a period of initiation to her new life for Marie-Therese. Father Cordonnier was to be her spiritual director, until she left for Papua New Guinea with Bishop de Boismenu.

Then came the real “call”!

“I spent these last holidays of 1913 at Signy and Epernay.

“It is at Signy, while I was praying in front of my crucifix,<sup>30</sup> that the good Master clearly asked me if I wanted to really become His little

victim, and I answered, with all my heart, and with all my soul: “*ecce ancilla domini*”.<sup>31</sup> It was done. At that very instant, as if our beloved wanted to prove that He, too, accepted His little one, I felt a violent stab in my heart. During the afternoon, I had a spitting of blood, and a big red cross appeared clearly on my side, over the heart. It was on the first Friday of August or September, 1913. I was bearing the sacred insignia. There was nothing more for me to do but to go on and thank God for having been chosen.”

The extraordinary event, which took place at Signy, that Friday, was similar to the very famous episode in the life of St Francis of Assisi, when Christ appeared to him, suffering on the cross, and allowed rays of light to come from each of His five precious wounds and imprint on the same parts of his body bleeding wounds. Other saints had smaller bleeding marks of the same character. These “*stigmata*”, as they are called, are a seal of Jesus Christ, a sign that He has seized the one, who has accepted to share His passion, and given him or her what Marie-Therese would call her “*assurances*” – we could say “*proofs*” – that He loves them in a very special way, and will, henceforth, share His infinite love for men with them.

Little did Marie-Therese realise what this memorable, and deeply moving, and painful experience would mean for her, and eventually bring in her life. But, like Our Lady at Nazareth, without hesitation, and with a heart full of love, she answered a “*yes*”, her “*ecce*”, expressing her full consent to the will and the programme of God for her.

Without insisting on this souvenir, Marie-Therese passes on, directly, to one of the consequences of this divine call: her considering, once more, to join a Congregation of Sisters, and choose the religious life.

“Followed closely by Father Cordonnier, the divine happenings, and the others,<sup>32</sup> became more frequent. We seriously considered my joining the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.”<sup>33</sup>

But, once more, the risen and suffering Christ, who had manifestly chosen her for His “*spouse*”, did not want her in a convent, at least, not in the one Father Cordonnier was regularly serving as a chaplain.

The end of 1913, and the first half of 1914, were, for Marie-Therese, a time of discernment, of abandonment: in patience and trust, to the love of the

One who, in His own good time, would show her where He wanted her to love Him, and to serve His church.

There were many more days, with various supernatural experiences, and even more trips with Father Cordonnier, to places in France, to envisage religious life in different convents and monasteries. They went to Nevers, where Sainte Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes had spent her saintly life, to Paray-le-Monial, on the steps of Saint Marguerit-Marie Alacocque. In none of these places did Marie-Therese hear the final, decisive call of God.

It was through unexpected, sad events, due to the First World War, that Marie-Therese was to find her way to her destiny.

She was at Signy for the yearly, summer holidays with her family, when France was invaded by the Germans, at the beginning of August, 1914, and soon the inhabitants of Signy had to leave their village, because of the rapid approach of the German soldiers, and their redoubtable shells. It was an "exodus" by a bereaved population. Marie-Therese, and her family, had nothing else to do but to follow the crowd, for safety's sake. But, after passing through Paris, Mr and Madame Palle, their daughter, Marie, and their niece, Marie-Therese, arrived at Issoudun, the birth-place of the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. As we know, the two cousins had kept in touch, through the years, with Father Meyer, their Superior General, who was residing in Rome.

"We found a house to rent. Then Marie wrote to Father Meyer, to tell him about our exodus. Father Meyer answered very quickly. As kind as ever, he offered us the house of a priest, one of his councillors, adding that it was situated in the south of France, and we could stay there until the end of the war."

Father Jullien, who, as a councillor, was also living in Rome, being the only child of his parents, who lived near Marseille, had inherited their home, which would eventually belong to his Congregation.

"My uncle and my aunt decided to accept. We left for Marseille."

The family soon settled at "La Betheline", a three-storeyed house, situated in open country, close to the small town of Chateau-Gombert.

Marie and Marie-Therese soon fell in love with it, and with its beautiful surroundings. The family appreciated the mildness of the climate of Provence – well known for its beautiful coast of the Mediterranean Sea – and recovered from the emotions and fatigue of their ordeal. It was a period of sad events, and heart-breaking news: the invasion of Signy, and its countryside, the bombardment of the beautiful cathedral of Reims, and, above all, the great Marne Battle, which, though a victory, would be remembered as one of the most-costly battles in French history, as far as young human lives were concerned.

As Marie-Therese puts it in her *Notes*: “We settled down, with the idea that it would be only for a few months, because everyone firmly hoped, at that time, that the war would be finished soon.”

Marie-Therese, who had been reasonably well since their departure from Signy, was a source of comfort and courage for all: her kindness, her generosity, and courage, and her joyful smile, in spite of her poor health, were the consolation of her family.

She continues: “In February (1915), Father Andrew arrived from Rome to put himself at the disposal of the Bishop of Marseille. We were shocked to see him.”

Little did she know that Father Andrew Jullien would bring her to her final vocation! But it would take her another six years to find it!

#### **4. As an Invalid, Marie-Therese Finds Her Unexpected Vocation**

The Bishop of Marseille, who had many of his priests on the battlefields, had asked Father Meyer – the Superior General of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, who was at Rome- to lend Father Jullien to his native diocese for the time of Lent and Easter. He placed “Father Andrew”, as he was known in the Mission, in a parish, situated 30 kilometres from “La Betheline”.

“Appointed to a village near Marseille, he was able to come and visit us from time to time. He had become our director, he was so devoted ... But he was called back to Rome after a certain time, and was supposed to come back if the war was to last”, says Marie-Therese, in her *Notes*.

The improvement in Marie-Therese's health was not to last!

"In June, 1915, as I was trying to open the door of the house, I fell backward. A few days later, I had to stay in bed. It was on the day of the Feast of the Sacred Heart. I stayed, lying down for many months, in the large bedroom of the third floor."

As a consequence of this fall, her spine was so badly damaged, that she was almost completely bed-ridden for the following five years, with pains, paralysis, and a heart attack, which the doctors could not cure.

Marie-Therese knew that this was the programme our Lord had for her and she accepted it, with all her heart. She was patient and generous, completely abandoned into God's hands. She was, without the knowledge of her family and friends – except her cousin, Marie – continuing her double life: one, as a patient, interested in others, and ready to enjoy a joke; the other, at the same time, as lover of Christ, sometimes lost in His intimacy, sometimes at the mercy of the devil. But her secret was well kept, according to God's will. She received encouragement from Father Cordonnier, from Paris, and from Father Jullien, from Rome.

Soon, God had pity on His generous "worker", and her devoted cousin. He inspired the Bishop of Marseille to call Father Jullien back again, this time to take charge of Chateau-Gombert, which was at a walking distance from "La Betheline", and, as there was no other residence of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Marseille, Father Meyer told Father Jullien to settle in his own, old home, with the "refugees". This is how he became so intimately involved in Marie-Therese's spiritual life. She notes: "Father Andrew had become our spiritual director, he was so devoted!" And, about herself, she only drops a gentle hint: "Since our arrival at "La Betheline", the supernatural happenings had occurred almost daily."

Father Jullien, indeed, was a true "missionary". He had left his heart in Papua. He had arrived at Yule Island in 1894, only nine years after Father Vedus had celebrated the first mass on Papuan soil. The next year, he had become Superior of the Mission, becoming one of its first pioneers. Anxious to bring the gospel to the people of the mainland, and especially to the thousands living in the beautiful mountains he could admire from the coast, he had organised three long expeditions: in 1894, 1896, and 1898, going right up to explore the unknown ridges and valleys of the Kuni and the

Fuyughe tribes. The latest expedition had been done with the newly-arrived Father Alan de Boismenu. It had been an unforgettable experience, where they had narrowly escaped death.

Then, from 1900 to 1909, Father Jullien had been the closest adviser and helper of Bishop de Boismenu, until he had been called to reside in Rome as Assistant of his Congregation.

All these souvenirs, so dear to his heart, were the subjects of the daily conversations of Father Andrew with his two companions, who were captivated by his stories. And Marie-Therese began to pray, and suffer, for this far-away land, which was becoming so dear to her heart, too.

But this happy life did not last long.

“On Good Friday, on his way to the church to celebrate the office, Father Andrew suddenly fell sick. He had to go to bed at the presbytery, and they brought him to ‘La Betheline’. The next day he had phlebitis. The doctor was very anxious, for a few days, then he realised that the phlebitis was spreading, and that the most complete rest was required.

“Father was leaving his bed, only to go on a lounge chair; after a while, he was able to move about a little upstairs, and to come to see me.”

The expression “to see me” refers to the help Marie-Therese needed for the “supernatural happenings”, about which we will know more later, when we can use Bishop de Boismenu’s own words to describe at least some of them.

She continues: “Two patients, far away from everything, did not make things easier. Father Andrew decided – under Father Meyer’s advice – to buy a property at Chateau-Gombert, where we could be accommodated. After many difficulties and troubles, the bargain was concluded, but a lot of changes and repairs had to be done in our “Gineste”! A cousin of Father Andrew carried us by car, Father and I.” This setting up was going to last until the end of 1920. Again, Marie-Therese adds: “Father Andrew, in spite of his serious illness, had always been able to help us in time of need.”

As a matter of fact, Marie-Therese was accepting this way of life as the programme of God, and was ready to live it to the end, there, in their little home of “La Gineste”, under the loving care of her dear cousin, Marie, who, on her side, had accepted her delicate charge and the will of God for her.

“La Betheline” was to become the Novitiate of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, where many young men would prepare themselves to become priests and brothers in Papua. As for Mr and Madame Palle, they settled in a home of their own in the village. The two cousins seemed to be, at last, settled for life. According to a friendly, but legal, contract, the two cousins would look after Father Jullien, who needed constant care, and would remain in his house after his death.

This is where Marie and Marie-Therese heard the good news of the end of the war in November, 1918. And a few months later, Father Jullien was happy to receive the first letters from Papua, after four years of very difficult postal communications, during the war between the two ends of the world. News, which was a real joy for the old missionary, was that Bishop de Boismenu had started a religious congregation, on the Feast of the Annunciation, 4 April, 1918, with five Papuan girls. A fifth one was soon to join them, from Thursday Island. The six new postulants were preparing themselves for religious life at Inauaia, in Mekeo, under the care of Mother Bernadette, who was kindly lent, for this purpose, by the Congregation of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. A dream, dear to many missionaries, was becoming a reality.

Father Jullien shared this great news with the two cousins, and added that Bishop de Boismenu would soon come to France, and to Rome, for his ten-yearly visit to the Pope.

In the *Notes* we have largely quoted, which were addressed to Bishop de Boismenu, since written under his request, Marie-Therese continues: “One morning, in July or August (1920), you arrived with Father Bernard and Father Lanctin.

“My lord, I had no idea, at that time, about what you would become for me. On the contrary, I was very frightened of you, and was only trying to avoid you. I think the ‘old one’ was really scared of you, and he was right!” She refers, of course, to the devil, who was her faithful



companion! “We had a party in the bedroom of Father Andrew, who had not been able to get up. After a few days, you left for Rome, promising to come back in winter. What a change would have taken place in our lives, when you would come back!

“On December 7, in the night, Father Andrew felt very sick. He called us. Straight away, his condition became alarming, and Father Meyer, who had been informed, arrived three days later. A telegram was sent to you, my lord, but it never reached you.

“On December 15, at 6 o’clock in the morning, our Father Andrew passed away, without being aware of it.

“On December 17, the funeral took place, under the snow. You arrived that evening, at 10.30. What memories!

“Since that day, they are all common between us.

“Since our arrival at Chateau-Gombert, our good Lord had given me some strength back, and I could help around. Of course, I had to lie down on my couch, from time to time, but, after a little rest, I could start again. Nevertheless, I was not able to go out, and the stairs were causing me great pain, too, and I could hardly sit down. In spite of that, I was happy. The nights were always very painful, but the thanksgiving (after communion) was very pleasant, consoling, and comforting, in the great union with our Beloved.”

And so end the *Notes*, written in 1925. The meeting of Archbishop, then Bishop de Boismenu, with Marie-Therese Noblet, on that 17 December, 1920, was the providential, event which she had been prepared for, in spite of herself, through an eventful, and rather tragic, life, and which brought her to become the “cofoundress” of the Handmaids of Our Lord.

We cannot go into details about what happened during the six following months, which Bishop de Boismenu was invited to spend at “La Gineste”, in order to have the rest he badly needed after ten hard years in Papua. This brought him to be the witness of Marie-Therese’s daily life, with its graces and its trials. We read, in the preface, mentioned above:

“How beautiful was the soul of Marie-Therese, and how well I understand God’s special love for her, and the jealousy of Satan! That cherished spouse of Jesus Christ had learned from Him that to love Him truly, is to serve Him, and to love Him perfectly, is to suffer and die in His service. Thus, the Redeemer loves our souls. Thus it was that Marie-Therese loved her adorable Master. Her life was a continual martyrdom in the service of souls. She served with incredible zeal, and died at her task.”

Through the succession of providential circumstances, Bishop de Boismenu became convinced that Marie-Therese was entrusted to him to become the mother of his Papuan daughters, and, in spite of fears from some, and doubts from others, he brought her back with him to Yule Island where, after a three-months voyage, they arrived, with the famous war hero, Father Leon Bourjade, and a dear old missionary, “Brother Paul”, who was to be devoted as a big brother to the “little sisters”, until his death, at “Nazareth”, near Port Moresby, in 1963.

##### **5. As a Handmaid of our Lord, She Gave Her Life, in Love, to the End (1921-1930)**

Before following Marie-Therese in the last stage of her life, we have every reason to ask ourselves two questions.

In the first place, why, when he saw her in January, 1921, did Bishop de Boismenu think of bringing such a sick person as Marie-Therese to Papua?

To understand this apparently foolish desire, we must realise that the Bishop of Papua had left his mission in a very critical situation, after four years of war, during which many missionaries had died, while none had come from France to continue their work.

When he arrived in France, in mid-1920, “Bishop Alain”, as he was known, was full of hope. He visited the houses of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, saw the Superiors, and went to Rome. He expressed his needs, and trusted that God would listen to his prayer. But, in France also, his Congregation had suffered, both from the tragedies of the battlefields, and from the want of vocations, during this very critical period.

When he finally reached Marseille, for his very needed rest in the mild climate of Provence, his “shepherd’s” heart was heavy! He had little hope of going back with a large group of missionaries, as he had expected to. This was surely one of the topics of his conversations with his old friend, Father Meyer, when they spoke, heart to heart, after Father Jullien had gone “home” to God.

Once, rather as a joke, Father Meyer said to the Bishop: “Why don’t you bring these two ladies with you?” – meaning Marie and Marie-Therese. “What could I do with them?”, was the answer.

But, soon after Father Meyer had gone back to his duties, Marie-Therese fell sick, and the Bishop was called to her bedside. He was then brought to discover the treasures of her spiritual life: her courage and generosity, her total disposability to God, her immense love for the crucified Lord, her zeal to “save souls”, and the power of her sufferings, so totally united to those of Calvary. The thought came to his mind that the prayer and suffering of Marie-Therese would be a wonderful “power house” of spiritual wealth for his Mission, and could make up for the missionaries he could not find. But was not this foolish? She would have to be cured!

This is what he told his daughters, the Handmaids of Our Lord, in his *Souvenirs*:

“It was during one of the holy hours that our Lord entrusted the soul of Marie-Therese to my care, with the task of assisting her in her tragic and fearful mission of “child of Calvary”. It was then, too, that the hope was born of seeing her in New Guinea one day, helping in our apostolate. Surely a vain hope, when our Mother was so sick, given up by the doctors, with no prospect of being cured, much less of being able to journey half around the world to come here!”<sup>34</sup> But God stepped in!

Then, our second question. How did the Bishop think of Marie-Therese as a Mother for his Handmaids of Our Lord?

There, too, he was facing a big problem. In 1918, he had entrusted his young future religious to Mother Bernadette, a daughter of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart,<sup>35</sup> who had generously shared the life of the little new born Congregation for over two years, first in her own station, at Inauaia, in

Mekeo, then in their new home, at “Kubuna”, at the foot of the Owen Stanley Range. But this situation could only be provisional. The Bishop had gone to Issoudun to discuss the matter with the Mother General. Mother Bernadette could not continue to live away from her own Congregation, and her Superiors could not give her a companion, a solution, which, anyhow, would have still been temporary.

As usual, the Bishop put his trust in ‘his divine Master’. Let us listen to him again: “God has always taken the lead, so much for everything in our work! We have only to follow, and to accept. It was not I who founded your religious family. I only considered it, and established it, at the prayer of your first little sisters,<sup>36</sup> who came to me, asking for the religious life, and unable to find it elsewhere. God brought them to me, I received them gladly.

“Thus it was for your little Mother in 1921. At the worst point of a hopeless illness, she begged God to cure her, so that she could give herself to our Mission. The Blessed Virgin came to heal her on April 4, and gave her to you. I accepted her. . . .” And he added: “Thus it has been for all in our dear family of the Handmaids. God has led it by the hand, like the very little child, the baby of His church. Really, we have only to keep our eyes fixed on His, and our hand in His own. All will be well.”<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, the “roads” of Marie-Therese Noblet, and of the daughters of Bishop de Boismenu were converging towards one another for a long time. On the one side, Marie-Therese had been cured at Lourdes, and, when called, Mary of Nazareth: “*ecce ancilla domini*”, expressing a total acceptance of His will for her. On the other side, the “Little Sisters” had been called “Handmaids of Our Lord”, because they had been founded on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1918, and they had, and still have, a great and special love for Our Lady of Lourdes, because their “father founder”, Bishop de Boismenu, had said first mass, after his ordination, on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, 11 February, 1895. The fusion of the two roads would be easy.

This is what we will see as we recall the last years of Mother Marie-Therese on earth.

Let us now go back to find Marie-Therese, on the last stretch of her long trip from France. After a quiet week at Yule Island, where she had been

warmly welcomed, Marie-Therese left, with Bishop de Boismenu, for the convent of the Handmaids, situated along the Kubuna River, about 30 kilometres inland from the coast, opposite Yule Island.

As we have seen, the new Congregation had started at Yule Island, in 1918, and, after a few months at Inauaia, in Mekeo, had settled in the “home” prepared for them, in the middle of a beautiful forest. It is there that the first group of Sisters: Sisters Marie, Annie, Mona, Antoinette, Mathia, and Dorahad, had taken the habit, on May 31, 1919, to begin their novitiate – the first step of religious life – and pronounced their first vows on November 30, 1920.

The arrival of Marie-Therese was a surprise. This is what we read in the *Journal* of the community:<sup>38</sup> “On November 28, we went to meet our Bishop on the road, with our Mother Bernadette, who was still our Mother then. He arrived with Mother Marie-Therese, who is now our Mother. How happy we were to have our Father Bishop with us again, after his long absence of one year.

“We made our six-day retreat with him.

“The last day of the retreat, when our Bishop had finished his conference, he announced to us the sad news that our dear Mother Bernadette was to leave us. We loved her very much, as she had been with us for three years. It was a great sacrifice to see her go.

“The day before our Feast of the Immaculate Conception, our dear Mother Marie-Therese, as she had already been prepared in France, took the habit of the Handmaids of Our Lord, in little chapel. How moved we were to see her with our habit. After the ceremony, our Bishop introduced her to us, and said, ‘This is your Mother.’

“On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, our Mother Marie-Therese made her profession. What a beautiful ceremony! She was in our own little chapel. We, the Little Sisters, went to get her, and accompanied her in a procession, with lighted candles, to the church.

“The next day, our dear Mother Bernadette left Kubuna. We were very sorry, but we knew she could not stay always with us, because she belonged to another Congregation.”

From that day on, Mother Marie-Therese shared the life of her daughters. Except when she was really sick, she was with them in their community exercise, their prayer, their work, and their recreations.

Unable to go into details, let us look over the years, to see the main events of the following years.

As soon as 1922, Mother Marie-Therese wanted to see, herself, how her daughters could be of help in the missionary work among their people.

In May, the Bishop was going to Fane, in the Fuyughe Region, for a great ceremony of baptism of adults. Mother Marie-Therese took this opportunity for a first trip to the mountains. It was a five-day journey on horseback. Let us open the *Souvenirs*, and read what marvellous surprise God had for her at Fane – a fact, which, of course, was revealed by Bishop de Boismenu, only after Mother Marie-Therese had been called to God. “It was on the occasion of your Mother’s first trip to the mountains that the most Blessed Virgin came to see her, and smile at her in the church of Fane, on the evening of May 31, 1922.

“There was a crowd for the first adult baptisms. It was a majestic and beautiful ceremony, in the morning.

“Toward evening, we had benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and, of course, your Mother was there, in spite of her fatigue.

“It was then that her tender Heavenly Mother came to her aid. While she was gazing lovingly at our Lord, in the monstrance, all at once, she saw the most Blessed Virgin in person, near her Son, standing on the altar step, turned towards the people. Right until the end of benediction, she remained there, smiling and leaning, sometimes towards the priest (who was the Bishop, himself), and sometimes towards her Son’s little servant at the back of the church.

“This wonderful secret had to be kept to ourselves. But, the next day, armed with a good knife, I went, in secret, to carve a little cross on the alter step, just where the Blessed Virgin Mary had placed her feet. That step has been kept in the new church. It is still there, with its little cross, often adorned with flowers.”<sup>39</sup>

There is an aerodrome, now, just near the church. Anyone flying to, or through, Fane can pop into the church and see the little cross.

The following year, April 5, 1923, we read: “Our Father Bishop gives the sacrament of the sick to our Mother.”

This sentence will be found seven times in the *Journal*: April 5, and August 1, 1923, May 1, and December 31, 1925, January 22, November 10, and September 21, 1926. Her daughters were used to seeing their Mother in bed, and to go and nurse her, as well as share with her, the happenings of their daily life. After a few days, sometimes a month, in bed – during which she would carry on her responsibilities – Mother Marie-Therese would resume her daily life with her community. Surprisingly, her attacks of malaria, big fevers, even pleurisy, always left her in time to follow her programmes of visitations, or travel, so that she could do her duty as Superior. All, for her, was part of her life as sharer of the passion of Christ, whose “programme” she followed, with love and trust.

In February, 1924, Mother Marie-Therese wrote in the *Journal*: “We begin to speak about foundations.”

The trip of 1922 had shown the Papuan Sisters would be very helpful to their missionaries in their stations, and soon, though still very young, they were “sent out” to the service of their brothers and sisters: two at Rarai, in Mekeo, and two at Fane. These two small communities were the first of many, which would be founded later. The Handmaids are now in seven dioceses.

“The work of the Sisters was shared between helping the missionaries in their material and apostolic needs, and attending to the people, at the station or in their villages.

From the beginning, the Sisters had been called to take care of children. By 1925, so many little orphans, whose mothers had died giving them birth, were brought to the convent, from different parts of the mission, that a special house was built for them. It was familiarly called the “baby shed”, in association with the “cow-shed”! It soon became well known, and the care of children became one of the most important works of the Little Sisters.

Every year, Mother Marie-Therese would visit the two stations, go to Yule Island for special occasions, and even to Port Moresby. At home, she would have the visits of many missionaries passing through Kubuna, on their way up and down the mountains. Those who lived with her, or met her, could not help noticing her kind gentleness, her loving smile, her wonderful patience, her sense of humour, her courage, and her joy.

Yet, her fight against the demons continued. "God let the demons persecute your Mother Marie-Therese very much, because she was a saint, eager to offer to Christ Jesus the utmost possible, in suffering and expiation, to gain souls to Him. It is not astonishing that the devil had such a great hatred for her. She worked so well against him for God."<sup>40</sup> But this was her hidden life, known only to Bishop de Boismenu, and, to Father A. Pineau, the chaplain of Kubuna, who were helping her.

The secret of her attitude towards the daily events of her life was in her little word: "ecce", the "yes" of Our Lady, which she had said as a young girl in France, and which was, and still is, the motto of the Handmaids of Our Lord. It meant, for her, complete abandonment, in love, to her heavenly Father; unbounded love to her divine spouse, Jesus Christ; and complete openness to His love, to His spirit, which meant, finally, a life of deep intimacy with the Trinity.

"Ecce" was her final word on January 15, 1930, when she was suddenly on the point of death. After working in her office, she went up, at 11 am, to her bedroom for a rest, as she had often done the previous day, being at grips with a persistent fever. Three hours later, she called out, in great pain. The Sisters found her suffering so much that they called the Bishop, who arrived just in time to anoint her, as she pronounced clearly her "ecce", her eyes fixed on her crucifix, offering Him her life before entering into full union with Him.

And so ended her life of love of Christ, and of heroic service of His church, in a complete gift of herself to those He had entrusted to her care, and whom she helped, through her love, her prayer, and her suffering.

As a conclusion, we must ask ourselves: "How is Mother Marie-Therese's life and example relevant to our time?"



We could not find a better answer than the words of Archbishop de Boismenu: “That cherished spouse of Jesus Christ had learned from Him that, to love Him truly, is to serve Him, and to love Him perfectly, is to suffer and die in His service. Thus, Christ loves our souls; thus it was that Marie-Therese loved her adorable Master. Completely surrendered to God, she left to Him the ordering of her life’s plan. Moreover, the exemplary practice of the Christian virtues, and devotion of the duties of their state in life, is the proof of the supernatural character of the facts in the lives of the saints; that is what sanctifies; that, alone, is what the church canonises, and proposes for our imitation. Marie-Therese lived her Christian life, her religious life, and her missionary life in the manner of the saints”.

Mother Marie-Therese Noblet was a great woman of love, of prayer, and of action. She teaches us to say “yes”, (her “*ecce*”) to God, lovingly, in simplicity, and joy, with a great trust in His boundless love for us, and to love Him in all those we meet, or live with. Her total gift of herself in trust – expressed by her “*scio*” (I know in whom I trust), gives us an example of readiness and generosity in doing the will of God, for courage, and of devotedness. Since it is in Papua New Guinea that she finished her life as a Christian religious, and missionary, we can count on her prayer for our country. Her prayer will help us to love God as she did, and to show our love for Him, and for His children in giving ourselves to them, and doing, as faithfully and well as possible, the humble duties of our daily lives.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The Congregation of the Handmaids of Our Lord is an Order of Religious Women, which was founded by Archbishop A. de Boismenu, in 1918, in Papua New Guinea. The “AD Sister”, as they are familiarly called, has their General House at Waigani, Port Moresby, and their “Mother-House” at “Nazareth”, near the Laloki River. They have members working in six Dioceses in Papua New Guinea, and have two houses in the Dioceses of Cairns, in Australia.
2. Archbishop Alain de Boismenu was consecrated Bishop in 1900, aged 30, and remained “Vicar Apostolic of Papua” until his resignation, because of old age, in 1945. He finished his holy life with the Handmaids of Our Lord at the “birth-place”, Kubuna – about 50 km from Bereina, where he died on November 5, 1945.
3. During this story, we will refer to Archbishop de Boismenu as “Bishop”, as it is the title and the function he had at the time of Mother Marie-Therese’s stay in Papua New Guinea.

4. By “mystic” experience, we mean spiritual graces of union with God, which are beyond men’s understanding, and are given, by God, to persons He chooses, purely out of love. We must accept that such graces remain a mystery for those, who have not experienced them.
5. Acts 2:11.
6. Matt 11:25.
7. “Marie-Therese Noblet”, A. Pineau MSC Dillon, Paris, 1938, p. 140.
8. *Souvenirs of Marie-Therese Noblet*, written by Archbishop de Boismenu for the Handmaids of Our Lord around 1940. These few lines are from the introduction.
9. The following texts are taken from the notes Mother Marie-Therese wrote about her childhood, and her youth: some in 1908, after her cure at Lourdes, others in 1925, at the request of Bishop de Boismenu.
10. A Congregation of Sisters, whose Mother-House was in Reims, 60 kilometres from Signy, a city famous for its beautiful cathedral, and for its “champagne”, the wine called after the surrounding region, planted with vine.
11. Mr Palle had married the sister of Mr Noblet, Marie-Therese’s father. Mr and Madame Palle had two daughters: Germaine, who died young, and Marie, ten years older than Marie-Therese, who plays a major role in her cousin’s life, as we will see.
12. Doctor and Madame Panis, parents of Marie-Therese’s mother, lived in a two-story house in the centre of Reims.
13. Madame Panis died on November 23, 1896. In two years, Marie-Therese had seen four of her dear ones “called to God”. The “life after life” was a reality for her.
14. Peritonitis, an infection of the appendix, which generally requires an urgent operation.
15. Louis and Marie-Therese would go to their paternal grandmother at Signy, and on to their mother’s sister, Madame Bur, who lived with her family at Epernay, a town 30 kilometres south of Reims.
16. October, in Europe, is, each year, the beginning of a new school year, after the summer holidays, like our February in Papua New Guinea.
17. John 14:2.
18. Marie-Therese made her first communion late, as it was the custom until Pope Pius X allowed children to receive the Eucharist at seven. She was mature enough to make a responsible “gift of herself” to God.
19. Doctor Boissarie was the very well-known physician, who was responsible, for many years, for the judgment on the authenticity of miracles.
20. From now on, the quotations, without references, will be from the second account of 1925 only.
21. “Notes” of Archbishop de Boismenu, 1921-1930, p. 104, typed copy.
22. Marie Palle, her first cousin. See note 11.
23. Marie-Therese did not want to live in the large home of her Grandmother Noblet. A small cottage, between the homes, in the village, was sufficient for her humble life of service to the

poor. Her furniture came from her Uncle Bur's home at Epernay, where she had her own room.

24. "Satan", the devil, is the enemy and the tempter of men, since he succeeded in making the first man fall. The demons, as evil spirits, are fallen angels, who have become the helpers of Satan. They obey him and work under him. The Resurrection of Christ marked the victory of Satan and all his followers. But they continually try to make men fall into sin, and the Church is engaged in a war against them. God watches over His privileged children.

25. *Souvenirs*, of Archbishop de Boismenu, paragraph 25.

26. To be a "victim", in the spiritual sense of the word, is to continue the sacrifice on Calvary, to prolong it, as it were, from generation to generation, and, according to St Paul's words, to complete it: "I am happy about my sufferings, for by my physical suffering, I am helping to complete what still remains of Christ's suffering, on behalf of His body, the Church" (Col 1:24). Even if we tried to explain these words, we would still have to say that suffering is a mystery.

27. Reparation: prayer or sacrifice offered as compensation for one's sins, or the sins of others.

28. A "relic" is a little piece of clothes, belonging to someone renowned for his or her sanctity. Having a relic is a sign of trust, for the person, who used this piece of material, and, if a cure occurs, it can be seen as God's answer to the prayer of that person, who interceded near Him in heaven.

29. This crucifix is now hanging on a wall at the Mother-House of the Handmaids of Our Lord at Waigani.

30. "Ecce Ancifia Domini", in Latin, means "Behold the Handmaid of the Lord". These words are the answer of Mary to the Angel at the Annunciation, the expression of her acceptance of the plan of God for her. "Ecce" will be often used in this story, as an English translation would take off its spiritual "savour".

31. "The others" = the diabolical happenings.

32. Father Cordonnier was their chaplain in Paris.

33. *Souvenirs*, of Archbishop de Boismenu, paragraph 30.

34. The Congregation of Sisters, who worked with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. They have been founded, like them, by Father Chevallier, and have their Mother-House at Issoudun, a small town in the centre of France, where the Congregation was born.

35. The Handmaids of Our Lord were then familiarly called "Little Sisters". They are now known as "AD Sisters", "AD" standing for "Ancilla Domini", "Handmaids of Our Lord".

36. *Souvenirs*, paragraph 7.

37. A diary, where the main events of the life of the Sisters are recorded.

38. *Souvenirs*, paragraph 66.

39. *Souvenirs*, paragraph 25.

40. Preface written by Archbishop de Boismenu for the *Biography of Mother Marie-Therese Noblet*, by Father A. Pineau.

COMPLETED COPIES OF THIS PETITION SHOULD BE RETURNED TO THE EDITOR

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## Petition for Justice in Irian Jaya

We petition the United Nations to ask the countries providing aid to Indonesia to impose humanitarian conditions on the grants and loans they make. The conditions should include the stationing of a team of United Nations observers in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya. The observers should have freedom to travel to all parts of Irian Jaya, without a government escort, and to investigate allegations of human rights abuses in the province. They should be aware of the destructive effect of continued transmigration to Irian Jaya, of any negligence of the indigenous people's land rights, and efforts to force them to abandon their cultural traditions. They should recognise that the uncompensated removal of land, and the involuntary rehousing of tribal people, the "acculturation", racial discrimination, and forced labour there, contravene the United Nations provisions for human rights. They should be alert to the possibility of extra judicial killings of civilians by the police and armed forces, of the removal or destruction of civilian property by government representatives, and of the torture and imprisonment, without trial, of suspected dissidents. If the United Nations team finds that transmigration, or those other inhumane and destructive practices, listed above, are still, with government backing, continuing in Irian Jaya, it should recommend to Indonesia's foreign sources of financial aid that the money should be terminated or reduced.

*Signed:*

Name	Address

## Book Review

***Papua Neuguinee: Gesellschaft und Kirche: Ein Okumenisches Handbuch***, Herwig Wagner, Gernot Fugmann, Hermann Jansenn, eds, Neuendettelsau: Freimund Verlag, 1989, hardcover, 464 pp, 16 colour photographs; folding map. No price given.

It would be of little use to describe this German book, if it were not (1) that it proves the substantial interest, which Europeans have in PNG, in particular, for the new challenges placed before the local churches, and their responses, and (2) that the book contains some insights, which deserve to be taken up locally, in order to further develop a contextualised theology in Melanesia.

The title, listed above, is handsomely produced by an editorial board of three people, who each have had ten years or more experience in this country. They were able to enlist the cooperation of over 30 other specialists, including nine Papua New Guineans, belonging to several Christian denominations. Their “ecumenical handbook” depicts, in the first half, the historical and sociological background (13-108), and subsequently describes the various churches and Christian organisations, which feature, on the religious map of PNG (111-226). The main essays of section one are by H. Janssen, about prehistory society and traditional religion, and by K. D. Mrossko, who fills the historical picture, from the first Portuguese explorers till political independence in 1975. Shorter essays treat Melanesian identity (Bernard Narakobi), national and international politics, and even the recent issues affecting the economy and ecology.

The next section, of also 100 pages, opens with the longest contribution of the whole book, by R. Pech, detailing church growth, from the Marists Fathers (Woodlark, 1845), till the arrival of the evangelical churches after World War II. This synthesis is followed by shorter expositions about the major churches, dedicating a greater-than-usually-expected space to several groups associated with the Evangelical Alliance. There is also a sympathetic article about the SDA church (R. K. Wilkinson), but one misses the presence of the Salvation Army, whose profile, in PNG religious life, is greater than its small numbers would lead one to expect.

In the shorter essays, the ecumenical dimension is repeatedly touched upon (159, 175, 187, 195), while it also receives its own treatment, from the pen of J. D. May (219-226). We find, for several churches, relevant maps, and even detailed statistics (132, 141, 146, 164, 189, and also 386), but a chance has been missed to harmonise these data; neither do they agree with the overview given in the appendix (429). The discussion by J. Snijders in *MJT* 2, 1989, 208-213, should be consulted. In the course of the text, about a dozen or so instances of institutionalised cooperation are mentioned, but it is impossible to make out each time which religious groups belong to any given umbrella organisation.

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