

BOOK REVIEWS

The Mustard Seed: From a French Mission to a Papuan Church 1885-1985, by Georges Delbos, MSC. With an introductory letter from the Right Honourable M. T. Somare, and a foreword by M. Jean Guitton, of the French Academy. Port Moresby: Institute of PNG Studies, 1985, pp. XVII and 448. Price K15.95, \$A29.50.

The present Catholic Bishop's Conference of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Solomon Islands, comprises 22 dioceses in five metropolitan areas (three dioceses, including one archdiocese, belong to the Solomon Islands). These dioceses, the Catholic church in PNG, have their origins in four centres of missionary activities. The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) started their activities in Rabaul in 1882, and extended these activities to the Papuan region in 1885. The Missionaries of the Divine Word (SVD) began their activities on the north coast of the mainland, starting from the small island of Tumelo in 1896, and the Missionaries of the Society of Mary (SM) took up their missionary activity in the Solomons in 1898.

A history of the Roman Catholic church in PNG, as a whole, presented in one book, is not yet available. This makes the book of Fr Delbos very valuable, since it presents the history of the church in one of the four areas, in the Papua region. This study can help towards a more detailed presentation, showing the relationship between the four areas, comparing the similarities and differences in the missionary approach, and tracing the development towards the present Catholic Bishops' Conference. The author does not make any attempt to cover the other three regions, or to show the similarities, etc. It is not part of his purpose. Therefore, only the early years of the Rabaul mission are presented, in so far as they are relevant for the beginning of the mission in Papua.

The book is translated from the French original: *Cent ans chez les Papous*. The English subtitle, "From a French Mission to a Papuan church", which expresses the intention of the author more explicitly, has, however, the less fortunate choice of words, "to a Papuan church", because the goal of the missionary activity is the "church in Papua", not a "Papuan church". The minor correction could still summarise the author's intention, which is again expressed at the outset: He is asked to write a book to answer the question whether the church's mandate to the Society (MSC) to evangelise the Vicariate of Melanesia is fulfilled: "We

accepted the mandate, did we fulfil it?" (p. 6). The answer, at the end of the book, is clear and explicit: "YES, MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!" (p. 422). Every reader, and every body, who took part in the centenary celebration in 1985, will agree with the author: The mission is accomplished, the church is alive in the Papuan region.

The author's presentation of the development in the course of history can be summarised with the words of Paul Claudel: "Never was a land so loved as this one!" (pp. 25 and 40). The repeated reference to the "mustard seed", and especially the presentation of the main characters, – the bishops, priests, and religious – reveal the intention. The dedication and the commitment of the missionaries, and their coworkers, is impressive; the expansion from the island to the coast, and the mountains; the planning of the evangelisation of Milne Bay to the east and Daru to the west, as well as Mendi to the north-west, with the readiness to hand over certain areas to other missionaries, as well as the hardships, difficulties, and sacrifices of the people involved, illustrate the statement of Paul Claudel.

This love can also be discovered in the internal development of missionary activity in this region: the bishops and missionaries believed that the Papuans could continue the mission, which they started. In 1937, the first priest, and future bishop, Louis Vangeke, was ordained. He was the son of a sorcerer, but he was so well trusted that he was sent to Madagascar to prepare for ordination. Much earlier, the Handmaids of the Lord (AD) already shared in the responsibility of missionary work, as religious sisters. A similar attempt was made with the "Little Brothers of the Lord" for young men, a group to which also Louis Vangeke belonged before he decided to go to Madagascar. Then there are the many catechists and coworkers who, too, were called to share in the missionary endeavours.

All this seems to indicate that the development of missionary activity in the Papuan region went ahead in such a way that there was no need for the Second Vatican Council. There is little doubt that the Council belongs to the most important events of the Catholic church, as a whole, and, therefore, also of the church in the Papuan region. However, to what extent did the missionaries feel the need for a renewal of the liturgy, and was Vatican II an opening for the desires and concerns on this level? The opening of liturgical renewal at the Council was deeply influenced by the bishops of the Third-World churches. Does this include also those from Papua? The liturgical aspect of missionary activity could have been developed in more detail. Was the missionary activity merely a question of "saving souls:?"

The council brought also a real opening for the laity, with a new awareness of their responsibility in the mission of the church. The author shows how lay missionaries were brought into the activities (p. 253f) some time before the beginning of the Council. Was the Council's teaching on the laity also an answer to the questions that were discussed by the missionaries, e.g., regarding catechumenate, early baptism, etc.? (cf. pp 152; 195). The Decree on Missionary Activity (Nr 21) would certainly bring light to the worries and reflections of the missionaries.

One more example: the author shows the great love of the missionaries for the country. Is this also true for the culture and tradition? Vatican II explicitly expresses in the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions (Nr 2): "The Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines, which . . . often reflect a ray of that truth, which enlightens all men . . ." Does the love, trust, and confidence of the missionaries already express this attitude? Was this emphasis of Vatican II a relief or a new burden for missionary activity? Can we still say: "Mission accomplished", or have we to rethink, and rewrite, history once again, through the eyes of the people of Papua New Guinea, e.g., through the eyes of Louis Vangeke? That would mean: One mission is accomplished, but THE MISSION of the church has just begun.

The author was asked to present a "balance sheet", "no laurels, no panegyric" (p. 5). It is difficult to write a book "for a special purpose – the Centenary of our mission" (ibid), and yet, also to present a balance sheet. Who would not like to make it an occasion to pay homage to all those who have contributed to the development of the church during the 100 years? The author certainly paid homage to the missionaries, but, at the same time, he is also aware of the need for a balance sheet.

The French Original, and its English Translation

Towards the end of 1984, there appeared, with the Fratemite N.-Damedu S-Coeur at Issoudun, France, a book entitled: *Cent ans chez les Papous: Mission accomplie?*, written by G. Delbos MSC (541 pp., ISBN 2902242026). Just one year, later the Institute of PNG Studies made the English translation available, and called it: *The Mustard Seed: From a French Mission to a Papuan Church* (xvii + 448 pp., ISBN 9980680024). The book is said, in general, to include "some

editorial changes” (p. xiv), and it might be useful to specify more closely which changes have been made.

One of the first differences, regards the front and back covers, which now feature “Papuan” and not “New Guineans”, as on the French book. Another is that the note of the editor has been partly rewritten, and illustrated with a map, summarising the colonial histories of West Irian, New Guinea, Papua, and the Solomon Islands. There is, also, at the beginning of the book, a synchronistic diagram, listing some 80 civil, ecclesiastical, and religious dignitaries, who, in one way or another, were involved in the life of the Catholic church in Papua. As to the rest of the book, we will list the differences, both in the illustrations, and in the text.

About one-third (i.e., 37 out of 122) of the original photographs have been omitted, and replaced by 60 new illustrations. Unfortunately, a few of them came out too dark. All the maps have been redrawn, and some new ones added (277, 383, 393, 397, 402), and two more diagrams have been included (38, 230). The rationale behind these changes is to emphasise the involvement of nationals, and also that of the Australian mission personnel.

To the first category, one may reckon some interesting historical pictures, as the one of the first mission set up on Yule Island (96, being a substitute for the less-authentic print of the time, given on p. 137 of the French edition), and the one of a village scene (6), which might have inspired the ancient print given next to it (7). There are also the group of Mekeo ladies (120), a most unusual seaplane (239), and a few old maps (103, 144). The local people will recognise themselves among the various groups of sisters, catechists, deacons, and seminarians (337, 323, 339, 386, 422), and also in the photographs of the Tolai martyr, Peter ToRot (226), and of the two first Papuan priests, Louis Vangeke and Julian Efi (213, 300). Two individuals, however, lost their pictures, viz., the son of chief Aia Rauma, who welcomed the first missionaries on Yule Island (French, p. 136), and the big man Baiva, who later challenged Bishop de Boismenu (French, p. 200); the occasion has not been used, though, to identify, in the English version, catechist Kleto Ivolo, who died in the mid-30s at Waitape, when appeasing fighting tribes (204). From the local scene, are also included the churches of Port Moresby, Veifa, Bakoiudu, Fane, and Nazareth (10, 315-316, 250), together with such civil buildings as the National Parliament and the Headquarters of the Bank of Papua New Guinea (4, 377). Native Christian art, too, has got a bigger share (263, 250, 315.)

The Australian contribution to the Papuan mission history is exemplified in the photographs of the legendary Brother George Tweedy (162), and of the long-time parish priest of Port Moresby, F. M. McEncroe (197), of the Bishops J. Doyle, who first headed the mission of Samarai (302), and of V. Copas, who, at one time, was administrator of the diocese of Bereina (340), and of such groups as the De La Salle brothers (257), and the lay missionaries (259). One should add here, too, such non-mission figures as the famous police magistrate of Thursday Island, H. Chester (79), and that crusty American settler of York Island, “Yankee Ned” (84); the distinguished Sir Peter Scratchley, with staff and party on a luxury boat (93) form an eloquent contrast with the wretched missionaries of 100 years ago (96). The end of World War II is fittingly illustrated with some Australian soldiers liberating the mission personnel from their imprisonment at the Ramale camp, near Rabaul (224). Lest incorrect conclusions be drawn, it may be noted that the two Italian missionaries (88) do not belong to the first group of their countrymen, who came to Papua, but to a later generation, and that the amphibian plane of the Archbold expedition (239) was used during the second New Guinea expedition (1936/1937), and not during the visit of 1939, referred to in the text of the book (238).

The main text of the publication runs to 15 chapters, against only 14 in the French. The reason is that a new division was made in the original chapter XI (1946-1960), thus separating the prodigious expansion of the years 1946-1954 (which remains chapter XI), from what is termed the “retarded growth” in the period 1954-1960, and which was caused, among others, by the post-war priorities in Europe (now dealt with in chapter XII). This means that the three remaining chapters in the English version are one out of step with those in the French original.

In general, the translation shows a tendency to abandon the flowery style of the French, usually by reducing the length of the sentences. But there are some additions, too. They concern, for instance, the post-war developments in such an “old” district as that of the Mekeos (passim between p. 317 and 327), the mission involvement in education, and in the training of catechists (325, 338), and the fresh beginnings in the Gulf area, which later became the diocese of Kerema (329). Elsewhere, too, a few new paragraphs have been inserted (e.g., 212, 395); some try to situate better, such Australian MSC’s as Brother George Tweedy (164f) and Archbishop V. P. Copas (434). The opportunity of the translation has been taken also to restore one page, which, inadvertently, was missing in the French original (404-406, cf. French, p. 508).

Although the book retraces the history of the Catholic commitment to Melanesia, ending in the retrenchment of the French-Swiss Sacred Heart fathers to the one diocese of Bereina (new map: 383), a greater attention to other historical centres has been given, at least up to World War I, and this is shown in newly-added photographs of the Catholic mission societies based in Mendi, Daru, and Wewak (284, 291, 396-399), and in the maps of the early foundations in New Britain, Northeast New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands (393, 397, 402). The synopsis of the hierarchical divisions in Melanesia between 1844 and 1985 has been corrected in several places (404, cf. French, p. 509).

Following the French example, the bibliography distinguishes between “English language sources” and “books in other languages”. However, the number of references has been substantially increased, and covers now almost 11 pages. A 1,000-entries index concludes the work (14 pages), a feature not found in the French text. The latter list reveals, for example, that over 50 nationals find a place in this history of the Papuan church, but there are over 50 columns on expatriate fathers, brothers, and sisters, even though no attempt was made to provide a comprehensive list of foreign mission personnel, and most living missionaries were omitted altogether. Having accomplished the task of planting a church in a foreign garden (cf. French, p. 531), “the mustard seed” now faces the future.

Theo Aerts.

[The above review is reprinted from the *Australian Catholic Record* 63-3 (1986), pp. 344-346. Other comments were made by A. Strathern, *The Times of Papua New Guinea*, June 9, 1985, p. 24 (also *German Pacific Society* G 132 (1986), pp. 21-23); R. Lacey, *Catalyst* 16-1 (1986), pp. 74-79 (also *Post-Courier*, January 3, 1986, p.23); R. Wiltgen, *Verbum SVD* 28-2 (1987), pp. 213-216; J. Garrett, *Pacific Perspective* 13-1 (1984), pp. 90-92; D. Langmore, *Pacific History, Bibliography* (1986), pp. 69-70; Hermann Jansenn, *Zeitschrift für Missions und Religionswissenschaft* 71-1 (1987), p. 96; J. Baumgartner, *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* (1/1988), pp. 76-77). Further, on the French original, by H. Maurier, *Cultures et Development* 16-1 (1984), pp. 240-243.]



What the reviewers say:

THE MUSTARD SEED is "a readable book based on official archives and personal letters from the participants in this history.

A great treasure preserved in the book is the photographs.

This is the history of gradual but significant change in the attitudes of the Europeans.

A book rich in anecdotes, vignettes and stories."

Rod LACEY

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