

# **GOD'S GIFT OF PEACE TO BOUGAINVILLE**

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## **Introduction**

The vocation of Christians is to seek God's guidance in all the seasons of their lives. Whether one is at peace, or in a state of crisis, that relationship with God continues. In His farewell discourse to the disciples in John 13-18, Jesus shares the gift of peace with them: "Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you" (John 14:27).

If Christians have to look for a solution to the current crisis in Bougainville, they need to listen to the voice of God speaking to them. We do this through searching the Word of God, and also listening to the wisdom revealed, and shared, by the people of good will in the world. This requires a certain consciousness, and an understanding of the sources of the current crisis.

## **History**

The Bougainville crisis came to a head in April 1988, when the landowners became very active, and very destructive of the huge Panguna copper and gold mine, which started its work in the 1960s. In its very beginnings, Francis Ona emerged as a leader of this localised conflict. What then began as a Landowners Association conflict with the Panguna Mine soon spread almost throughout the whole of the North Solomon Province, as a rebellion against the national government of Papua New Guinea in 1989.

There would be numerous reasons for this conflict, but the obvious root causes of this problem have political, socio-economic, and strong traditional, and cultural, implications. Unfortunately, the pain, suffering, and struggle for identity, autonomy, and compensation have resulted in the lack of understanding of land rights.

One could rightly claim that the traditional values and customs, regarding land, were ignored in the initial mining agreement, which did not include the landowners, and other Bougainvillean leaders. The traditional landowners defended their land, which is their birthright and heritage, the land of their ancestors.<sup>1</sup> Land means everything to the people of Bougainville. It is handed down from generation to generation. Land means security, heritage, and a source of materials required for housing, food, and traditional medicine.

The landowners, themselves, expressed their disappointment by stating that:

Our land is being polluted, our water is being polluted, the air we breathe is being polluted with dangerous chemicals that are slowly killing us, and destroying our land for future generations. Better that we die fighting than to be slowly poisoned.<sup>2</sup>

The future prediction of the conflict had already been made a few years earlier, in 1969, by Professor Gre Dening, who warned those involved:

There will be inevitable trouble in Bougainville if the people are being forcibly asked to accept a legal system of land tenure, for which they have no cultural preparations. . . . Economic pragmatism might be a valid political argument, but it is no solution, of itself, to the problem of people, who have been pushed to the edge of some social abyss, and are being asked to leap blindly into the 20th century.<sup>3</sup>

The crisis came to the point where the mine had to be closed by May 15, 1989. The closure of the mine meant a loss of K10 million per week. The Papua New Guinea currency was devalued by 10% in an attempt to help export-crop producers (cocoa, coffee, copra, palm oil) gain stability. In Bougainville, local businesses were affected, and companies had to transfer to other provinces to continue operations.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Kemelfied, ABC Radio interview: "Background briefing", July, 1990. Tape recording.

<sup>2</sup> Diocesan Priests' Statement from Diocesan Priests of Bougainville Diocese, Kieta (August 1, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> B. Standish, "Bougainville: Undermining the State in Papua New Guinea", in *Pacific Research* (November, 1989), p. 4.

The effort to solve the crisis has gone through several phases. Attempts to reach a solution came with several peace talks. In 1990, on July 29 and August 5, the *Endeavour Accord* was signed between the Papua New Guinea government and the Bougainvillean interim government. The agreement reached was for the restoration of services. In the following year, 1991, from January 17-24, peace talks between the national government of Papua New Guinea and the Bougainville interim government in Honiara resulted in the *Honiara Declaration*, which also agreed on the restoration of services on the Island of Bougainville. Two years later, in September 1994, was the declaration of the cease-fire agreement, and then later, in October, was the Arawa Peace Conference in Arawa. A month later was the signing of the *Mirigini Charter for a New Bougainville*, paving the way for establishing of a Bougainville transitional government. In December 1995, there was a further meeting in Cairns: the “Cairns Peace Talks”. There were many more efforts made by the national government of Papua New Guinea, and the Bougainville transitional government, to seek for a solution to the crisis.

### **The Fundamental Principles under Discussion**

As we return to the Word of God: from John’s gospel, on the gift of peace, Jesus Himself assures us that He is the Way to achieving this peace. Peace is a term that points to the many aspects of the human person. If we long for God’s gift of peace for Bougainville, we are, in fact, seeking for the restoration of the dignity of the person.

#### **1. The Restoration and Maintaining of Human Dignity**

God’s gift of peace to Bougainville calls for the full recognition of the dignity of the person. The principle implies that, because of his or her dignity, and personal basic rights, the human person comes before all ideologies and structures. The human person is at the centre, and becomes the norm, of all socio-economic political structures and institutions. It leads to concern about all types of socio-economic political structures, which promote human dignity, or protect basic human rights. This would mean that Christians have to make a commitment to the search for structures and institutions that would promote human dignity, and protect the basic human rights, of the people of Bougainville.

## **2. A Certain Understanding of Person<sup>4</sup>**

The urgency for Christians to maintain the human dignity of persons, who are in oppressive situations, arises from a proper understanding of “person”. The word refers to the distinct selfhood of the individual, something that is unique, and incommunicable. It also refers to the person, who is the subject of rights and duties, and who is, therefore, an end, and never a means. Finally, it refers to the person, who can meaningfully experience, and influence, the environmental abilities that are consequent on consciousness and moral sense.

To speak of the dignity of the human person is to speak of the worth or value of the concrete, existing human being. Human beings have a value, or a worth, qualitatively different from that of anything else in the world. This dignity is inalienable, in the sense that it can never be lost, and that it is never permissible to merely use a human being to attain some end or purpose.

## **3. Elements that both Reveal and Point to Deeper Levels of Human Personhood**

God’s gift of peace to Bougainville leads us to a humble appreciation of the deeper revelation of human personhood. A proper understanding of it assists us in the realisation of the brotherly and sisterly concern we have for others.

As we search deeper into a profound understanding of human personhood, we soon discover that, to be a person, is to be someone worthy of respect and protection of a unique kind, qualitatively different from the real respect that is owed to the natural world, and to the varied forms of life that populate it. A person, therefore, has rights, which are to be respected and protected, because of his or her personal dignity, and all rights aim at the protection, and preservation, of this dignity.

Furthermore, to be a person is to be one, who is morally responsible, to be one, who experiences an absolute demand, in the sense that the demand is not conditioned on our desire to obtain some particular goal or other, and is,

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<sup>4</sup> Judith A. Dwyer, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1994, p. 724.

therefore, not under our control or disposition. The moral demand is one we must acknowledge, and ignore only at the risk of rejecting our very humanity.

Morality and moral responsibility deal with the question, “What must I do to act rightly and well?” And this question is related to human dignity, in two distinct, but closely related, ways. Firstly, the human person is one, who should act in a morally good way. To be a person, is to be claimed by values that impose an obligation. And, secondly, moral obligation is the summons to acknowledge the concrete dignity of human persons, and, in this sense, human dignity is the criterion and norm of all moral activity.

Finally, another element in human dignity is freedom, and this points to a still-deeper level of the mystery of human dignity. Only one, who is free, can be morally responsible. Moral responsibility, therefore, implies the possibility of moral irresponsibility, and both are possible, because an answer has to be given to a claim, or a demand, that has been made on us.

### **The Fundamental Basic Human Rights<sup>5</sup>**

God’s gift of peace to Bougainville further calls for an understanding of basic human rights. Each Christian has that responsibility to work towards the restoration and respect of basic human rights. It would mean that, with God’s help and assistance, Christians will assist all peoples of good will to search for, and build, a better society, which has better a social structure, better economic structure, better political structure, better social services, and a better ecological consciousness.

If Christians recognise the presence of God in our society, then they will not fail to pray, and also demand, the restoration and respect of human rights to the people of Bougainville. It is not something that is added on to our responsibility, rather, it should become part of our mission as faithful Christians.

Therefore, Christians need to emphasise the fact that each person has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means, which are necessary, and

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<sup>5</sup> See Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) (1967), #14-21.

suitable, for the proper development of life. These means are primarily: food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and necessary social services. Therefore, each person also has the right to security, in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case, in which he/she is deprived of the means of subsistence, through no fault of his/her own.

Each person maintains the right of respect for his/her person, to his/her good reputation, to freedom in searching for truth, and in expressing, and communicating, his/her opinions, and should be free to develop, to the maximum, his/her artistic abilities. It means that he/she has the right to correct and truthful information about public events.

As Christians offer the gift of God's peace to Bougainville, they must seek for that society, which will make possible for each person, his/her right to share in the benefits of culture, and, therefore, the right to a basic education, or to technical or professional training, in keeping with the stage of educational development within that society. And, furthermore, to ensure, and enable, persons, on the basis of their merit, to go on to higher studies, so that, as far as possible, they may occupy posts, and take on responsibilities, in accordance with their natural gifts, and the skills they have acquired.

The rights, mentioned already, are some of the rights of the human person. These would include: the right of religion, the right to choose, freely, one's state in life, economic rights, rights of assembly and association, rights to emigrate and immigrate, and political rights.

### **The Nature of the Peace Offered to Us<sup>6</sup>**

The nature of the peace that God gives to us, and that which we would want to share with the people of Bougainville, needs to be understood more thoroughly.

Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called "an

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<sup>6</sup> See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World), #78-90.

enterprise of justice” (Is 32:7). Peace results from that harmony built into human society by its divine Founder, and is actualised by people, as they thirst after ever-greater justice.

This peace cannot be obtained on earth, unless personal values are safeguarded, and people freely, and trustingly, share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and their talents. A firm determination to respect other men, and women, and peoples, and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood and sisterhood, are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence, peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide.

Earthly peace, which arises from love of neighbour, symbolises, and results from, the peace of Christ, who comes forth from God the Father. For by His cross the incarnate Son, the Prince of Peace, reconciled all men with God.

### **Conclusion**

If Christians have to look for a solution to the current Bougainville crisis, then they need to ceaselessly continue to be in constant dialogue with the Lord in prayer, and in seeking wisdom from other persons.

### **Bibliography**

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