

# HOPE OF LIVING

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“Hope of Living” is the title of the poem that begins the collection of poems by Maura Elaripe Mea, published under the title *Positive Reflections* in Port Moresby in 2001.<sup>1</sup> Maura describes her poems as personal reflections, dedicated to all people living with HIV/AIDS, and she appeals to people, all over the world, and especially people in Papua New Guinea, not to discriminate against people living with HIV and AIDS.

In this paper, I will argue for the hidden potential of Maura’s poetry, and of the creative contributions of others like her. She, herself, has experienced very real suffering in a society, which traditionally rejects illness.<sup>2</sup> But she has discovered hope for living, and her reflections are a challenge, and a strong statement of hope, which can inspire all of us. They are an expression of her desire to speak out and to share the hope and joy she has found. The experience of personal suffering that is the raw

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<sup>1</sup> Available from Maino Peer Power Support Group, PO Box 6031, Boroko NCD Papua New Guinea, or [pwhapng@hotmail.com](mailto:pwhapng@hotmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> See Ennio Mantovani, “Traditional values and ethics”, in Darrell L. Whiteman, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures, Point 5*, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1984, pp. 195-212. Mantovani proposes that “Life” is the most important value in Melanesian culture. “Life” is not only biological existence; it is health, wealth, well-being. Earlier, he gives an example of the rejection of a young woman suffering from epilepsy, and quotes a leader in the community, who, in response to a suggestion that the community might help her, replies angrily, “Let her die. We do not get anything from her. Can she get married? No. Let her rot.” Without community support, shortly afterwards, the woman dies by drowning in the midst of an epileptic fit (p. 195).

material of her poetry arises from her experience of living with HIV in Port Moresby today. However, the method I will adopt, and the theme – that God’s word can be seen and understood in new ways, through the hope found in her poetry – do, I think, have universal significance. This will, I hope, illustrate the idea that the church in Melanesia will only truly be the church of Jesus Christ when it has made its own unique contribution to the wider church, and that contribution has been joyfully received.<sup>3</sup>

### **DO I HAVE A HOPE OF LIVING?**

Maura begins this moving collection of reflections with *Hope of Living*:

Sitting on my platform;  
in front of my house  
I tend to question myself . . .  
Where am I heading to?  
Do I have a hope of living?

All sorts of negative thoughts  
crowd my mind  
giving my eyes a hazy view.  
But down within me, there seems to be a  
little flame burning  
encouraging me, and urging me  
to carry on with my life.  
I strive and persevere,  
struggling to be recognised and accepted  
as a productive citizen,  
I look at this life as an opportunity,

an opportunity to leave the world  
a better place than when I came into it.  
AIDS is not going to steal that opportunity  
away from me.  
That’s what gives me the courage to go on.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Paul II. Address to the Aboriginal Australian community, Alice Springs, January, 1986. [www.catholic.org.au](http://www.catholic.org.au). Accessed March 8, 2003.

I am living my life positively,  
and I will continue to contribute my bit  
in this struggle against AIDS  
that is my hope of living.

Maura is fortunate. Her family accepts and supports her. Their love has been an important part of her story. She has lived for many years in a settlement, but one that was established many years ago. It is not far from public transport, shops, and hospital. She has a home, and can find a place to reflect on her life. She questions herself, where am I going? And, more importantly, do I have a hope of living? For many others in the city, who also live with HIV, there is no hope of living, or so it seems. They have experienced painful rejection. They are homeless, and barely survive, living on the city streets. For food, they rely on the kindness of others. For shelter, they gather with vendors at the city's all-night betel nut markets, and sleep during the daylight hours.

There is another very significant relationship in Maura's life, and she describes it in her poem *Bundle of Joy*. The death of her babies was a terrible tragedy; however, she, somehow, entered so deeply into the experience that she could allow even this event to transform her life, and enable her to share the tragedy and the triumph. This poem, she tells us, is dedicated "to all babies who have died of AIDS, especially my two babies".

I gaze down lovingly  
at the pinkish little bundle  
in front of me,  
looking up innocently  
into my eyes.  
I take her hand into mine  
and wonder  
"Will you make it to the end?"

As the days turn to weeks  
I love my bundle of joy  
more and more.  
I smile and  
she smiles back . . .  
reminding me  
that to live is to love.  
I felt so guilty  
seeing you suffer.  
It was hard work  
bringing you into this world,  
but much harder for me  
when you're infected  
and struggling to keep this life  
that rightly belongs to you.

My bundle of joy,  
I will remember  
your courage . . .  
that last look  
you had in your eyes  
before you left me.

It's your way  
of telling me  
to be brave and  
to carry on with my life.

I miss you  
and some day I will hold  
my bundle of joy  
forever.

Maura's two babies, with their innocent smiles, bring her inestimable joy. Her love for her children is deep and unconditional. Maura knew the precious gift these children were to her. She deeply respected their human

dignity and right to life. But she knew, too, that their lives would be cruelly cut short by AIDS.

Coping with the tragedy of losing two babies in 1997 and in 1999, Maura committed herself to educating her family, and as many communities as she could, about the HIV virus and AIDS. HIV does not kill, she tells people. It is discrimination that kills, and she speaks as one who knows well the suffering AIDS can bring, but also the transformation that is possible, and its hope for living.

### **LIFE-GIVING OR DEATH-DEALING?**

Is HIV/AIDS life-giving or death-dealing? This is one theological question Maura's poetry suggests, and which I would like to make a focus of this paper. For Maura, HIV/AIDS is life-giving. Already, in her first poem, she expresses the mystery of suffering, death, and transformation, as she experienced it. We see how she entered that mystery, and lives it. We come to understand, in a new way, the mystery of Christ's suffering, death, and rising to new life, so as to send us a new Spirit. We begin to understand what Jesus means when He assures us, "I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness"(John 10:10).

The loving community, to which Maura belongs, and her own deep love for her babies, are but a shadow of God's infinite love for all humanity. God's unconditional love reaches out to each one, and will not abandon anyone who seeks comfort and rest. There is one text that readily springs to Maura's mind when asked about the source of her strength. It is the challenge Moses gave to all Israel: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live"(Deut 30:19). For her, this means struggling to be recognised and accepted as a person of worth, as a person who can make a valued contribution to the community. She puts it simply. It is the determination "to leave the world a better place than when I came into it". In spite of the very real threat that AIDS could rob her of this opportunity, she continues the struggle. She believes there is a God who is listening to her cry for help, who will give her strength in every crisis. Her prayers are answered, and, with courage renewed, she goes on.

A second theological question, which arose for me one day recently, when I faced the tragic death from AIDS of a young policeman was: how can I present the gospel in a meaningful way in this situation? But, firstly, what can happen when we bring Maura's story into dialogue with our Christian faith?

## DIALOGUE

Maura tells us that sometimes all sorts of negative thoughts crowd her mind, preventing her from seeing what might lie ahead. But, in spite of these, she can say, "deep down within me, there seems to be a little flame burning, encouraging and urging me to carry on with my life". She makes a deliberate choice that is life giving for herself, and for those whose lives she shares. "I strive and persevere, struggling. . . . I look at this life as an opportunity."

This poem, born out of an experience of suffering, may find an echo in what we call the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah. They were written in a time of disaster. The people were in Babylon in exile. Initially, they look to an outsider, Cyrus, for help, for liberation. But, then, there is the realisation that Israel cannot look to anyone, other than their God, to bring them liberation. Israel must turn inwards, and draw life from her own resources. Israel is in great suffering, and the major question, which the prophet brings to these songs, is, "Israel, what does your suffering mean?" So the songs speak of an ideal Servant, a mediator.

The servant comes among the people in their suffering. "He does not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street" (Is 42:2). He comes modestly, quietly, inviting, not demanding, and never insisting. He comes, sure of whom he is, and he is going to invite others to respond. He is very careful. "The broken reed he does not break, and the dimly burning wick he does not quench" (Is 42:3). The reed is one that is already broken – an image of the poor. This reed has just about died. The dimly burning wick is an image of the helpless. As the gardener knows well, it is very difficult to bring an already broken reed back to life, and it is easy to kill it completely. And the dimly burning wick, the very small flame, which is very close to going out, requires great care and constant attention to bring

it back. It calls for hands that will wrap a shield around it, letting the air in gently, letting it gather strength in its own time. If we expect too much, too quickly, we can quench the flame completely.

The chosen servant is equipped, and given a specific task. God points and designates him in the words, “I bestow my spirit upon him. He is to bring forth justice to the nations” (Is 42:1b). The task is no more than suggested, but it focuses on justice. There are further echoes in the following verses. “He brings forth justice in truth”, and “till he establishes justice in the earth” (Is 42:3c, 4b). Maura’s story of her coming to see herself as a messenger, or, at least, as one who is called to break new ground, and perhaps become a light to her “nation” of citizens, who live with HIV/AIDS, reveals an echo of the Servant Song. She has no intention of crying aloud in the street. Instead, using poetry, and sharing her story at every available opportunity, she will speak words of comfort, encouragement, and of challenge. For those, to whom she is sent, bringing forth justice is not to mean death for those already under sentence of death. Maura’s message brings justice in such a way that her actions contradict the harsh law, which would have the broken and the dimly burning perish. The message, instead, brings comfort and life, just at the point when death is threatening. The message, in fact, effects a change of attitude on the rest of the world, too.

The Servant Song continues, again, using the same images: “He does not burn dimly, nor is he broken, till he establishes justice in the earth” (Is 42:4). These lines allude to the same actions as in the previous verse, but these promise the Servant, himself, that he will not burn dimly, or be broken, before he has completed his task. Here, there is the suggestion that the Servant’s task is to involve him in suffering. Maura expresses the conviction that “a little fire burning” will provide the courage she needs, and will keep urging her to carry on with her life, nurturing hope in herself and in others. There is an expectancy of help and of deliverance implied in the Servant Song, when it speaks of “waiting”. Many living with HIV/AIDS are waiting today, yet hardly daring to expect help or deliverance, for a justice that could restore human dignity, a little comfort and hope for living.

Those who are already under sentence of death will have a mediator, who completes his mission, by way of action. The Servant's task also points to one, who mediates by way of a word of truth. The mission of the Servant finds echoes in the mission to which Maura feels herself called, which she describes as living positively, and which challenges the society in which she lives.

For her, love is the key. When she speaks, in another poem, of her family, she declares: "Oh my family, how I love you all. Through good times and bad times, poverty and suffering, you are always for us." And, of her "ignorant, carefree, and loving" husband, she wants everyone to know. "You are the love of my life . . . always standing up for me. You are always my mouthpiece. When I am sick, you are there. When I am down, you pull me up." Prolonging life, rejoicing in what each new day brings, is ever so important. Both Maura and her husband, Max, know this.

Maura is one with the many PNG women whose life is hard. Her poetry expresses her painful awareness of the indignity she has suffered. She sings her lament "Woman, you are the beast of burden; you fetch water buckets one after the other." And, as if this were not enough, she adds, "(Woman) you are abused, beaten, insulted." It would be so natural to allow bitterness to take root in such soil, but it does not. Maura, and so many of her "sisters", have penetrated this mystery of suffering. "(Woman) you never retaliate." And why? "Your heart is full of love for your little ones."

With a smile, Maura can say: "When you give love away it comes back to you." Again, from her family, she receives love. "When we told you our HIV status, you were devastated and sad, but then we educated you on positive living, coping, and caring." And the love came back again. "You encouraged us, stood for us, and supported us all through. We will always love you." Even under stress, there is a determination in Maura to deepen the precious relationship she has with her husband: "No matter what HIV may do to us, I will always look to you, the love of my life forever." Both have experienced that, when you give love away, it comes back to you. Acceptance by family and community has enabled Maura and Max to look

at life in a new, positive way. Friends have given strong support. Out of this experience, has come the conviction, God has a plan for us.

In *Bundle of Joy*, we cannot escape the question of how a loving God can allow the innocent to suffer. Through no fault of her own, Maura has been visited by a virus, for which there is no known cure, and which will bring her great suffering and premature death. The pain is so much more as she describes poignantly: “I gaze down lovingly at the pinkish little bundle in front of me; looking up innocently into my eyes. I take her hand into mine and wonder, ‘Will you make it to the end?’ ” This picture brings feelings of guilt as Maura waits and watches helplessly, seeing her two babies suffer, and finally be overcome by AIDS. “It was hard work, bringing you into this world, but much harder for me when you’re infected, and struggling to keep this life that rightly belongs to you.”

There is more in the Servant Songs that might help us to find meaning in suffering, when we are confronted with the suffering of an innocent victim. Particularly moving is the fourth Servant Song (Is 52:13-53:12). In this song, the prophet presents an image of the sufferings of the Servant with realism as sharp as if we were seeing it with our own eyes. Usually, when we speak of suffering, it is restricted, only an incident in the life of a healthy person. But, here, there is a distinct difference. The experience described here is an entire life span, with suffering stamped on it. At the beginning, the prophet tells us, “he grew up” and at the end, “he was buried”. This man of sorrows is growing up parched, and without strength. “He grew up . . . like a young plant; and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or comeliness that should have made us give heed to him; there was no beauty that should have made us desire him; his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance” (Is 53:2). Lack of beauty means that no one will pay any regard to him. However, the prophet has more, “He was despised and rejected . . . a man of sorrows, and humiliated by sickness. He was like one before whom [people] hide their faces, despised – we esteemed him not” (Is 53:3).

Here, as in the psalms of lamentation, suffering is accompanied by being despised and rejected.<sup>4</sup> Hiding of the face speaks of wretchedness. The Servant's suffering isolates him in the community; he is despised, and held in loathing. As a result, he has no positive significance for the community. And this echoes the rejection of Maura, the young Melanesian woman mentioned at the beginning, and her desire, more than anything else, to make a positive contribution "to leave the world a better place".

When we look at Maura's poetry, we find different themes – each of which tells us something that is a key to understanding the Christian mystery of dying and rising. The poem *Bundle of Joy* is truly a key to this mystery. Maura gazes lovingly at her baby, as she lies at peace in her lap. The child looks innocently into her mother's eyes. Maura holds her little girl's hand, and wonders what the future holds for this little one.

As time passes, her love for the child grows stronger. Mother and child enter into a deeper, and more intimate, relationship. Maura is learning how it feels to be bound so intimately to another, and how rich life can be. She treasures her precious gift.

But the child suffers as a result of the virus coursing through the blood vessels of her small and delicate body. A pervading guilt invades the peace. Maura remembers her labour pains. It was hard work to bring this small one into this world. But it is much harder, by far, to know that her tiny infant's life is threatened.

Later, her bundle of joy gone, Maura remembers the courage of her baby. Courage expressed in the eyes of this little one, looking innocently and trustingly into the eyes of her mother. For Maura, the message is clear. Do not be afraid. Be brave. Carry on with your life. The pain finds no relief. There is deep lament in the simple expression addressed to her

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<sup>4</sup> This close affinity with the language of the psalms has an important consequence. See C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-60*, London UK: SCM Press, 1969, p. 262. This way of speaking of suffering in general terms is like the psalms, and those who bring their suffering to God in lament.

much-loved daughter, “I miss you.” In the midst of suffering too deep to express, there is hope. “Some day, I will hold my bundle of joy forever.”

As Maura gazes lovingly at her child, dreams of a happy future life might flash through her mind. Maura has a husband, who cares deeply for her. They have two beautiful children. They may have once dreamed of a home, of a community, of supportive friends. But now, Maura knows that her dream will not happen, and she dreams again, but on a different scale. Her expectations change. In losing her baby, she loses a part of herself, and a new self comes into being. For Maura, a resurrection has just occurred. Her baby is dead, but she, Maura, is still alive, not in the same way as she was alive before her baby died, but with a new life, which she, in faith, begins to move into with some strength. She learns that, if she can be open to receive the spirit of who she truly is, she can be happy. Her happiness does not depend upon somebody outside of her – even this treasured child, so tragically lost, but upon being at peace with what is inside her. The Christian mystery of suffering is the mystery of how we, after undergoing the experience of death, receive new life, and a new spirit. Jesus, in both His teaching and in His life, showed us a clear way of how this should happen.

The Hebrew scriptures recount a similar story of the death of a child – king David’s illegitimate son (2 Sam 12:15-24). Immediately upon hearing that his son had died, David got up off the ground, removed his sackcloth, washed away the ashes, went to the temple, prayed, returned home, ate well, and slept with his wife, who then conceived a son, whom he named Solomon. David’s friends were disturbed by the abruptness of his end to mourning, and challenged him. But David explained: I prayed, hoping that God would heal him. Now he is dead, there is nothing I can do to bring him back to life. I am still alive, and I must go on living, and I must create new life.

Today, Maura is able to travel to places far away from home to share her story, with an inner peace and strength. As scripture tells us, the Holy Spirit is a Spirit given to each of us, in a most particular way, for the particular situation that each of us must face (1 Cor 12). Receiving the

Spirit is very personal for Maura. She receives the Spirit for a mother, who has lost her bundle of joy.

In Maura's story, we see the meaning of the words: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest" (John 12:24). In order to attain a fuller life and spirit, we must constantly be letting go of our present life and spirit. The Christian mystery is a process of transformation. In it, we are given both new life and a new spirit. The process begins with suffering and death. Then new life is given. Time is needed to grieve the old and adjust to the new life. During this time, we must truly let go of the old life. Finally, a new spirit is given for the life we are now living. We see all this in Jesus' own passing over from death to life.

We learn, especially in His death and resurrection, that there are clear and distinct steps in His passing over from death to life. Firstly, on Good Friday, Jesus dies – we witness the loss of life. Then, on Easter Sunday, Jesus is given new life. During the following 40 days, there is time for readjustment to the new life, and the letting go and grieving for the old. Next, Jesus ascends, thus letting go of the old, and letting its blessing effect change. There is refusal to cling to the old. Finally, at Pentecost, there is the gift of a new Spirit for the new life that Jesus is already living.

In Maura, we see a woman who can name the deaths of her two babies. She can cry, and grieve, and sing of them. This enables her to claim a new birth in her own life. She surely grieves for all she has lost, and slowly, painfully she begins to adjust to her new reality. She feels again the depth of guilt, and she lets it go. As she lets it go, the blessing of inner strength and courage to be true to her new calling descends as a blessing. She accepts the spirit of her new life, permeated with hope for a future, in which she will hold her child forever.

For Maura, this cycle is not something she has lived only once. As she lives with HIV, and suffers the weakness and susceptibility to illness that it brings in its wake, she knows what it means to die many deaths. The maturity, the peace and happiness, so evident in Maura, is the fruit of her entering deeply into this mystery of dying and rising to new life.

By entering deeply into the Christian mystery of dying and rising to new life, by constantly naming the daily deaths, which come with illness, discouragement, fear, and anxiety, Maura can claim the new relationship, which is given her by her husband Max, even as she grieves what has died, lets it go, and then is open to receive the spirit of the relationship she is now living. God is always giving us something richer – a deeper life and fuller spirit.

There is much in Maura's attitude to suffering that can challenge all of us. There is no passivity. There is a willingness to face the dreadful reality, not to hide from it. There is much we do not know about her initial reaction to the news of her husband's, and her own, HIV status, and the resulting suffering. "What a blow!" is all she can say. It would be understandable if she spoke of shock, disbelief, fear, shame. In such a state, all available energy would be needed just to survive each day.

This suffering is unmerited, caused by human insensitivity, intentional at times, and deeply personal, yet social. Maura feels her suffering in solidarity with others, and, in these words, voices the anguish: "The household machine is what you are, WHO RESPECTS YOU. . . . Your man comes home drunk and crazy, demanding his needs to be met. You give in out of fear, not love. Was that why you were created? Then you find out later that you are the innocent victim of HIV/AIDS. What a blow!" And, reaching out to so many of her "sisters", Maura concludes, "How my heart goes out to you, because you are still a WOMAN." There is strength in solidarity with others.

The Christian scriptures are rich with illustrations of lamentations, which express the experience of crying from "out of the depths". Jesus cried out in anguish from the cross, in the words of the psalm: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34, cf. Ps 22). There is deep acknowledgment of suffering and loss, rather than despair or infidelity,

here. It is a suffering and loss that is empowering. It is not passive, but is a precursor to action.<sup>5</sup>

Confronted by the harsh reality, Maura sets about educating herself. “AIDS, AIDS, AIDS, who are you? What are you? Where do you come from? And where are you leading us to?” She searches newspapers, magazines, tunes in to the radio, only to face confusion. “I search high and low. I crawl and weep, trying my best. Who are you?” The question haunts her, till, at last, she can find a name. “You are a killer disease . . . ready to destroy families and cultures.” Then, she turns to the educating of her family. There is no apathy, no passive acceptance of this suffering. Personal and social change for the better, leaving the world “a better place” than when she came into it, is Maura’s mission. It is part of Christ’s ongoing redemptive work, the bringing about of the reign of God, here and now, as well as hereafter.

There are times when the suffering faced must simply be endured. The experience of time spent in hospital “scares the living daylight” out of Maura. She sits up and pretends to look calm, but deep down, she confesses that she is frightened and worried, asking “Will I make it?” In the midst of cries of pain, and witnessing a patient die, Maura can actively endure her own pain, and still find the strength to reach out, searching for a way to help others.

Here is human solidarity amid suffering. She is made in God’s image; she can claim respect and dignity as “the early morning bird and the evening star”. God enters into, and shares, all human suffering. In a special way, those, like Maura, who suffer injustice, remain indelibly etched in God’s memory, and ought to be inscribed in human memory. In the living memory of Jesus Christ, there is hope, even in the face of deep human suffering.

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<sup>5</sup> Theologians, like Johannes Metz and Jurgen Moltmann, join with Jon Sobrino and Leonardo Boff in proposing the “dangerous memory of suffering” as the proper starting point for praxis, the interaction of theology, or faith, with lived experience.

## **THE GOSPEL OF LIFE**

When I walked into the hospital's laying-out room one Friday morning, recently, I saw a body carefully wrapped for burial, lying on a steel hospital trolley. Having read the name of this young man on the morgue tag tied to the body, with the time of his death, and the ward number where he had died, I stood silently. Suddenly, three young men entered the room, came over to the body, read the name, and were overwhelmed with feelings of shock and grief. Each seemed to experience his grief in his own particular and personal way. His head cupped in his hands, one young man could only stand close to the body of his friend and weep. The other two moved away, one to a corner of the room, the other pacing back and forth aimlessly around the room.

I stepped back. Earlier the dead man's sister-in-law told me he was just 29 years old, and in his final year at university. He was a policeman, and living in the police barracks, with his girlfriend and their little daughter. The father, too, had stood by the body of his son earlier, and told me how he had just flown from the provincial town, where he is a health worker. He wanted to be with his son. His wife was still at home. The police would arrange to fly the body back to the province, where the family would bury him in the village. It seemed the dead man had a wife in the village. Someone told me he had refused to eat for several weeks. He had suffered from oral thrush, and found it very difficult to swallow, the social worker later explained. "When diagnosed HIV positive", someone else observed, "he didn't want to live. He gave up the fight."

As I stepped aside, I caught sight of a police truck full of men – some uniformed, others not, one carrying a very large gun, which hung from his shoulder. It was not the ordinary police uniform, but the "rapid response" unit, popularly called the "riot squad". They, too, were visibly moved, and the man in charge went about organising the transfer of the body in a quiet, respectful way. I introduced myself to him. I felt I wanted to offer to pray with them, gathered there around the body of their friend and colleague.

How could I present the gospel in a meaningful way in this situation? What could I pray that might find an echo in the hearts of these men of the

police force? This question was not easy to answer. The thought that came to me was: Jesus died. Let us remember that Jesus died, and how He died, and who was there when He died.

I thought of Luke's story of the death of Jesus. It tells us that the sun stopped shining, and darkness covered the whole country . . . and the curtain hanging in the Temple was torn in two. Jesus cried out, "Father! In your hands I place my spirit!" The army officer saw what had happened, and he praised God, saying, "Certainly He was a good man!" When the people . . . saw what happened, they all went back home, beating their breasts in sorrow. All those who knew Jesus personally . . . stood at a distance to watch (Luke 23:44-49).

When I offered to pray, there was a readiness, even an eagerness, to stop, and to pray. All became quiet and still as the men surrounded the body, eyes gently lowered. As I greeted those present, and offered them my sympathy, I acknowledged the sorrow, so obvious at the death of this young policeman, and I said, "The Lord is with us here, and comforts us with His word." We prayed the traditional Christian prayers for the dead, commending this young man (N) to God's mercy and goodness. Our prayer asked a loving God to hear our prayers for this son, whom "You have called from this life to yourself. Grant him light, happiness, and peace . . . guard him from all harm, and raise him up. Pardon his sins and give him eternal life in your Kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen." The prayer ended, I stepped back, and the men carried their friend, and placed his body in the police vehicle, and drove away.

My own reflections continued. What is the appropriate Christian response when someone dies of AIDS? It is to pray in a similar way to the way we pray for each person who dies. It is to pray in a way that is sensitive to the way this person died. I think it is to pray in a way that will truly comfort those gathered around the body – family and workmates. It is to pray in a way that does not minimise the tragedy of what we are witnessing, or the pain or the threat to the well-being of each and all of us. It is to pray in a way that expresses the Christian mystery of death, and rising to new life.

Where can we find Christ in this situation? We find Christ in the one who has just died. Christ has gone before us in death. Christ has also gone before us in His rising to new life. We find Christ, too, in the grieving community. They are left devastated by the tragedy. The death of a young man, on whom many pinned their hopes, threatens the community, individually, and as a whole. It severely challenges their hope for the future. It exposes a new vulnerability.

How does one present the gospel in a meaningful way? I think we try to be open to the leading of the Spirit in choosing a story that parallels the experience of the mourners. The story may be a familiar one, but as we listen to the word of God in this situation, here and now, it speaks to us in a way, which it may never have spoken to us before.

Does AIDS reflect the Easter mystery of life and death? This young man's death surely reflects the Easter mystery of dying and rising. The death, and its finality, is very real. The loss and grief, too, are real. Yet there are seeds of hope.

How can the infected and affected reflect God's grace? As I announced the reading from the gospel, one young policeman lunged forward, and beautifully, and with deep respect, signed the dead man with the sign of the cross on his head, his lips, and his heart. This was a deeply-moving ritual, and performed quite spontaneously, and with reverence. It was an expression of the grace of God at work in the heart of this man. The very spontaneous movement of all in the room, when the suggestion of prayer was made, was, too, an expression of the grace of God at work in all present.

For a long time, the Catholic church has been deeply concerned about the AIDS crisis in PNG. This concern has led to practical consequences. In April 2001, the Catholic Bishops endorsed the objectives formulated by the National Catholic AIDS Board.<sup>6</sup> The final objective states simply "that in

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<sup>6</sup> "Statement on AIDS". Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG/SI. Annual General Meeting, Goroka PNG, April 27, 2001, p. 2 at <http://www.catholicpng.org.pg/press/cbc%20stm%20AIDS.html>. Accessed September 1, 2002.

all our efforts, the compassionate Jesus, who said, ‘what you did to these the least of My (people), you did to Me’, be our model and inspiration.”

This commitment to caring means a commitment to people infected with the HIV virus, and to the family, and wider community, who are affected. It means working to prevent the stigmatisation and unjust treatment of those who suffer from AIDS. It is not AIDS that kills, but discrimination against those living with HIV, Maura reminds us. Working together with all diocesan groups and agencies, such as, family life, education, health, youth and women’s offices, will provide HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention programmes, training in counselling, counselling and support services for AIDS patients, their families and communities. The bishops remind us that HIV/AIDS thrives, and spreads rapidly, in an atmosphere of ignorance, silence, and denial.

In response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS in Africa, the World Council of Churches’ statement and plan of action in November, 2001, highlights the barrier created by shame. It begins with a story, told by a young woman:

When my cousin was dying of AIDS, he found it easy to tell his family and friends about HIV/AIDS. In his final days, we gathered the family together to say goodbye, and discussed with Mathunya the plans for his funeral. We asked him what he wanted to happen at the service, and he said, “I want you to tell them the truth that I died of AIDS.” So we planned a service that could celebrate his life, and educate those who came to the funeral, especially the young people.

At his funeral, my grandmother walked to the front of the church, and laid her hand on her grandson’s coffin, and said, “My grandson no longer has to suffer with AIDS.” Then, with her hand still on his coffin, she turned to the pulpit, and said to the preacher, who was about to preach to the people gathered in the church, “Now talk to them freely about this disease. To us it is not a shame.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Global consultation on the ecumenical response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS in Africa, Nairobi Kenya, November 25-28, 2001, p. 2 at <http://www.wcc->

As I prayed over the body of the young policeman, I made no mention of the fact that he had died of AIDS. I mused on the possibility of visiting these same young men in their workplace over the coming week, and offering each the opportunity to share what this experience meant to them. It seemed impossible for me, and I began to think of others who might be available. As it happened, I did meet them again, the following week. There had been a funeral service in the morning, and a very large crowd of family and friends were waiting in the airport departure lounge to board the flight, which would take them and the young man's body to their home province for burial. I was told a little about the service. The pastor had not felt able to "talk to them freely about this disease". Instead he said that it does not matter how we die; what is important is that we turn back to God. To many of us, AIDS is still a shame.

There is confession in the face of a world living with HIV/AIDS, where God's children are dying of AIDS. "As people of faith, we have done much, and yet there is much we have avoided. We confess our silence. We confess that sometimes our words and deeds have been harmful, and have denied the dignity of each person. We preach the good news 'that all may have life', and yet we fear that we have contributed to death. It is time to speak the truth. It is time to speak only out of love. It is time to overcome fatigue and denial. And it is time to live in hope."<sup>8</sup> I was painfully aware of my own silence, my fear to speak the truth.

## CONCLUSION

The very poor, especially women and children, are the most vulnerable to the HIV virus. AIDS is unique as a new disease, but, as a form of human suffering, it can teach us how to approach other tragedies. What we say about AIDS, within the context of theology, may have implications beyond AIDS, and possibly even for theology. The Catholic church, in a concerted call for compassion, has singled out AIDS, among all diseases.<sup>9</sup> More than

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coe.org/wcc/news/press/01/hiv-aids-plan.html. Accessed September 1, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., John Paul II, "Pope Addresses Vatican AIDS Conference", in *Origins* 19 (November 30, 1989), pp. 434-436; National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Called to

any disease, AIDS links sexuality, disease, guilt, shame, suffering, and death, in ways that grow more complex, when we place them in the context of the complex realities of poverty, race, gender, class, culture, and religion. AIDS asks not only for the church's pastoral response, but also for our theological attention, in order to find meaning within the context of faith.

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