

ABRIDGED DESCRIPTION OF MT HAGEN ARCHDIOCESE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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OCCASION

This article is adapted from a presentation at the installation of the Most Revd Douglas William Young SVD as Archbishop-Metropolitan of Mt Hagen, Papua New Guinea, on September 1, 2006.

INTRODUCTION

In 1934, for the first time, the Divine Word Missionaries entered the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The beginnings of their mission had been very hard. Fr William Ross did everything that was possible, and the Catholic Mission, at the foot of the Hagen range, survived. Later on, with the help of the other SVD missionaries, the Mission, as a part of the Eastern New Guinea Vicariate, developed into a Vicariate on its own, then into a Diocese, and finally, in 1982, into an Archdiocese. The first bishop was George E. Bernarding SVD, from the USA, who was succeeded by Michael Meier SVD, of Germany. On September 1, 2006, the office of the Archbishop-Metropolitan of Mt Hagen was handed over, in the presence of Most Revd Francisco Montecillo Padilla, the Apostolic Nuncio to Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, to Douglas William Young SVD. This event is a part of the history for the Archdiocese of Mt Hagen. The history of the Archdiocese has already been built together with the indigenous clergy,

religious lay people, and with the expatriate religious and fideidonist¹ (the diocesan priest in the mission abroad) missionaries as well. The 72 years of missionary endeavour in the territory of this Archdiocese implies further challenges and hardships for all who want to cooperate and build the local church under the leadership of the newly-appointed Archbishop D. W. Young SVD.

In every epoch, and part of the earth, the Catholic church applied methods of evangelisation that responded to the demands of the time. In the first half of the 20th century, the Christian missionaries were guided by a deepened anthropology and religionism in their activities. In the 1950s, the first fragments of the theology of earthly realities, and the theology of liberation, can be seen in their *praxis*. The Second Vatican Council supplemented these tendencies, and the teaching of the contemporary popes on missionary issues brought a new light. These teachings are contained in the encyclical letters, and other papers, of Gregory XVI, Leo XIII, Benedict XV, Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Being highly gifted with intellectual profundity and the power of interpretation, in particular, Pope John Paul II sharpened the thoughts on the missionary activity of the church, and soundly fixed them in the context of the theological disciplines of ecclesiology, missiology, and ecumenism.

The history of Catholicism in the Archdiocese of Mt Hagen, situated in the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), reflects the theology of the actual practice of mission, begun in this area in 1934 by Fr Wilhelm A. Ross SVD. This activity, from before WW II, is not only recognised as a time of effort and struggles, but also as a time of concrete achievements: the first investigatory journeys and settlements, elementary education, medical and material assistance. This was a time when contacts between Europeans and New Guineans were extended, and brought positive results in, not only the surrounding islands and the coastal areas of PNG, but also in the deep interior, which was discovered around 1930 by Australian explorers. The main credit for the detailed exploration of the PNG Highlands must go to the Leahy brothers,

¹ Pius XII, Encyclical letter, "Fideidonum" (Gift of Faith).

Michael and Daniel, as well as to J. Taylor and K. Spinks. At the beginning of 1933, these four Australians, and their accompanying native carriers from the coast, arrived at the foot of Hagen Mountain (the present territory of Mt Hagen Archdiocese). From there, they moved into other parts of the Highlands, such as Simbu and Enga, in order to look for gold. Following them, at the end of 1933, the Catholic, and then Lutheran, missionaries moved in. The first ones arrived at Nondugl via Simbu. They were members of the Divine Word Missionary Society, coming from the eastern side, at the foot of the Bismarck Range at Bundi. In January 1934, the next missionary expedition (this time officially recognised by the apostolic vicar in Alexishafen) was prepared and arrived in Wilya, near the present township of Mt Hagen. Those who formed it were: Frs Wilhelm Ross, Alphonse Schäfer, Wilhelm Tropper, Henry Aufenanger, and Br Eugene Frank.

The aim of this missionary expedition in the Central Highlands of PNG was to evangelise each human individual living in that territory. This undertaking had links with the earlier pastoral and missionary work done by clergymen of various denominations: in Australia – commencing in 1788; in Oceania in 1797; and, finally, in the islands presently belonging to PNG, or near it, in 1847-1880. As for the PNG highlanders, the first contacts with them were very costly for the missionaries, because they paid with the lives of two of their colleagues, who were murdered at the turn of 1934/1935 in Upper Simbu. Regardless of that, at the same time, the missionaries were able to establish missionary centres there at Denglagu, Dimbi/Mingende, Merani near Kundiawa, and Koge, with their outstations.

The same pattern was followed by the missionaries, who settled at the foot of the Hagen Range, at Wilya. In 1934, Bishop Francis Wolf SVD sanctioned these two missionary districts, issuing the official documentation on June 15. The bishop stated that it was the right time to commence missionary activity in Mt Hagen, and this should go ahead in parallel with that in Simbu. At this time, five missionaries worked in Simbu, and only two in Mt Hagen. These were: Fr Ross and Br Frank, who settled in the Melpa region, at the foot of the Mt Hagen range, and helped set up the very first foundations for the future church of this area.

Br Ross and Br Frank, both from USA, understood their daily tasks very well, and supported each other in their religious-missionary vocation. Therefore, in response to the circumstances, they found themselves in three ministries – of the Word, of grace, and of charity – that were successfully exercised, and this was the form of the first evangelisation. In the programme of Fr Ross and Br Frank, it is easy to recognise two characteristic elements: spiritual and material. Although the spiritual dimension was not neglected, more visible were the material aspects of their missionary work (the realm of sensory perception). These were: erecting the main mission centre at Wilya, with the church building in the middle, establishing other mission stations and their outstations, Samaritan assistance, organising the school, concern for the daily needs and existence, both for themselves, and their coworkers as well.

After a few months spent in the area of Mt Hagen, Br Frank shook hands with Fr Ross on January 2, 1935, and left Wilya for three weeks, to have his spiritual retreat, and a short break, at Bundi. Fr Ross did not even imagine that his farewell to his companion would be the last, and that he would be alone for longer than expected – a few years – as the missionary from Simbu, Fr Charles Morschheuser, and some weeks later, Br Frank, were killed. Because of this incident, from 1935, the missionaries, working in the Central Highlands, were not permitted to move further than an eight-kilometre radius from their main stations. These administrative restrictions remained in force until 1947. Despite these bans not always being seriously respected by the colonial authorities, the missionaries were sometimes able to do more than was officially permitted. Nevertheless, the restrictions were on paper, and missionaries generally had to stick to them, whether they liked to or not, and so they paid more attention to the main stations, and the people living nearby.

This style of the primary evangelisation that took place at the main stations, which was a way of coexistence with the locals, allowed the strange newcomers to form stronger relationships with them, be more secure and established. The second advantage was that the missionaries had more time to organise a proper programme for schools, which they had to establish, in order to teach children and first catechumens, the very

basic parts of the Christian faith, catechism, prayers, *singsing* hymns, and reading the Bible. Fr Ross spent a lot of time translating the necessary texts into the Melpa language. At the same time (1935-1938), he deepened his knowledge of this language, studied the local culture, and learnt something more about the traditional religion of the people from the Melpa area. After four years of hard work with the catechumens in the mission school, 28 youths were baptised at Christmas in 1938.

Since the first Australian prospectors built the primitive airstrip at Wilya, Mission planes were allowed to land there, as well as to fly regularly from the coast to Mt Hagen. This communication was a great support for Fr Ross, at the beginning of his missionary activity among the Melpa people. Thanks to this, he could be supplied properly with cargo, and other items like mail, and, from time to time, his confreres were able to come and visit him for a time. This was very important, because, in 1935-1938, Fr Ross was a lone missionary, and he had to defend himself against isolation and moral decadence.

Later on, starting from Christmas 1938, the main mission station was transferred from Wilya to Rebiamul. It did not function in the way Fr Ross wished, because, in 1939-1940, he was not able to stay at Rebiamul. In 1941, when Fr Ross returned to Rebiamul, together with the young, newly-arrived missionary from USA, Fr George E. Bernarding SVD, more life entered into the mission programme at Rebiamul and beyond.

During WW II, missionaries were ordered to leave Rebiamul and go to Australia. Because they were US citizens, they had to stay in Australia only for one-and-a-half years (from the beginning of 1943 to the middle of 1944). After that period, they were allowed to come back. The other missionaries were still under restrictions, especially these of German nationality.

The immediate reality after WW II was not much different from that experienced in earlier days. Missionaries continued their work, and tried to visit various tribes located further out in the Melpa area. Where they could, they constructed schools, built small aid posts, established farms,

in order to be self reliant, initiated plantations, and introduced the trade stores. In this post-WW II period, two cycles can be identified: the first was from 1944-1947, which was very short, and then, the second one, stretching over the years 1947-1959.

The first cycle still faced colonial restrictions, and the impossibility of extending missionary activity. The second lasted for 12 years, and was very crucial. At this time, the missionaries brought many developments to the Highlands, both spiritual and material. Side by side with the Catholic missionaries, the Lutherans were very active. There is no doubt that the Lutherans were a challenge to the Catholic way of evangelising and doing mission.

In the 1960s, the missionary tasks grew to include the catechumenate and practical ecumenism. Mt Hagen missionary district was elevated to the rank of apostolic vicariate, and the Enga area became part of it. When the restrictions were lifted by the colonial authorities, missionaries had to extend their field of penetration, and visit other tribes, some of them living in the remote and distant areas. Luckily, the missionaries, at this time, were more secure, and their patrols were relatively safe, compared with those of the 1930s, made by the missionary pioneers: Fr W. Ross and G. Bus. Their evangelising tasks were more defined, because missionaries found Christians already living there. This happened, thanks to young people, who had travelled into the Christianised areas, and had heard about the Good News, and carried this home to restricted zones. Wherever missionaries went, they always had a committed local catechist, who stayed with the people for a longer period than them, and continued what the priest set up on his first arrival. The achievements of these catechists in this first evangelisation of the Highlands are immeasurable.

As other denominations followed Catholic missionaries, cooperation and mutual understanding was not easy. It can be said that their approach to each other was anti-ecumenical. This does not mean that the missionaries did not try to implement, practically, Jesus Christ's teaching, while dealing with Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, or Pentecostals. It must be said that, in the field of human development,

all these denominations participated, more or less equally, with the Catholic church in similar projects and undertakings.

In 1966, Mt Hagen Vicariate was elevated to the level of diocese. The further fashioning, rationalisation, and localisation of the church began to take place. The Apostolic Vicar, Bernarding, was made the first Diocesan Bishop of the newly-erected Diocese of Mt Hagen. He then initiated many new pastoral and promotional projects. He established 11 new missionary parishes, divided the whole diocese into deaneries, and, having very dedicated SVD men and SSpS women missionaries, he continued and extended activities, especially in the fields of education, health, and social development. He paid special attention, assisted by Notre Dame Sisters, to the young girls, whose chances for education lagged behind those of the young men. In the diocese, two pastoral centres were founded, and, in every smaller or bigger outstation, catechumenates and catechetical groups were formed.

In the years 1966-1982, some other religious communities of women and men appeared in the diocese: Christian Brothers, De La Salle Brothers, Charity Brothers, Marist Brothers, Michaelites, Missionaries of the Holy Spirit, Franciscans of the Third Order, Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, and the members of the Society of Catholic Medical Mission Sisters. To complete this list of various missionary groups arriving in the diocese, it is worth mentioning the diocesan priests, those incardinated and fideionists, and also the lay people (lay missionaries and volunteers).

The diocese strongly promoted local vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. Up to 1982, four young men were ordained priests. Unfortunately, these later became a headache for the bishop, and were an obstacle for the personnel in the diocese. At present, the diocese has 12 younger, ordained men as diocesan priests and two deacons. In addition, three men, coming from the territory of the diocese, have been ordained as religious priests, and five others are serving the church as lay religious brothers with final vows. Among women, 13 religious sisters, with final vows, have come from this Archdiocese (but two of them have already died). These are working outside of the diocese as well. Some other

native sisters, who serve in the diocese, originally came from outside of the diocese. These are the Sisters of St Therese community, from Madang. The Sisters of the Holy Rosary, from Wewak, worked within the diocesan borders, up until 1982, but the part where they still serve is not within the boundaries of the Mt Hagen Archdiocese anymore.

Generally, it can be said that the missionary activity, carried out in the territory of the diocese in 1966-1982, led to ongoing expansion, and a stronger consciousness of the local laity that the church is the people of God, which means all baptised. As a sign of such conviction, in the diocese and in PNG, there were two workshops at the national level, in 1972 and 1975, which involved discussion and self-study. These meetings, and the realisations that led to their being held, were the cause and source of changes in the parishes and outstations. These changes began to make people more and more aware that they must take responsibility for the daily life of the church, and must be involved in her affairs as partners.

After 16 years of being a suffragan diocese of the metropolitan see of Madang, Mt Hagen was promoted to the rank of Archdiocese. So, from that time on, Mt Hagen itself, together with four other suffragan dioceses: Goroka, Mendi, Wabag, and Kundiawa, makes up the ecclesiastic province of the highlands of PNG. The metropolitan-archbishop's see is Mt Hagen, with the residence at Rebiamul. The first archbishop of this newly-established Archdiocese was Bishop Bernarding. As pastor, teacher, and administrator, he was assisted by his closest coworkers: general vicars, diocesan consulters, and forane vicars, up until 1987, when Archbishop Michael Meier SVD succeeded him, and kept his office until July 17, 2006. In order to run all diocesan matters smoothly, the Archbishop opened various offices, and set up a number of committees. This pattern has persisted up to today. These posts developed gradually, to better to serve all faithful Catholics of the Archdiocese: grown ups, youth, children, Christians of other denominations, and any people, who needed support, help, and solidarity in their spiritual life, or earthly situation.

Today, this cooperation is more open, because of the closeness brought by the ecumenical atmosphere existing among Catholics and the majority of the other confessions. The Catholics, with such attitudes, are open to share their Catholic values and faith with non-practising persons and non-Christians, because they feel that their faith in Christ Jesus, and in moral principles, fills important and unquestionable needs in the life of each human being. The local church of Mt Hagen is also tranquil in its mission, because it is able to face the material and financial demands of remuneration of the workers, running necessary institutions, keeping ancillary personnel working, and controlling the all-important petty cash.

The Archdiocese of Mt Hagen continues its mission, and many details from its past indicate that this part of Catholicism is able to be a leading community, not only in PNG, or in Melanesia, but also in the whole Pacific. Trying to make this dream a reality, the Archdiocese needs a proper pastoral plan, zealous native pastors, the support of missionaries from outside, and far-reaching and intensified spiritual, sacramental, catechetical, and intellectual formation. This is very much needed in the parishes, outstations, and basic Christian communities, among the adults, young people, and children. Although its pastoral activity focuses particularly on the ordinary level of society, it does not mean that individual and special pastoral care is out. Not at all! In the Archdiocese, there exists a need for special spiritualities, and the pastors must be aware of that, and implement this in their pastoral programmes. They must be prepared for this intellectually, they must challenge themselves, and all Christians, and ask how to improve evangelisation in the society, which is marked by great cultural variety, and is already partly secularised. Despite this, it must be remembered that this society still follows traditional values, lives in tribal structures, and, very often, in the remote areas, follows old wisdom, which is not always in tune with the knowledge of modern times.

So what is the future for the Archdiocese? The answer to this question is simple. Its future depends on the local Catholics (the local church), their spiritual formation, and intellectual abilities. There are no other options for the church of Mt Hagen. Hence, it is no surprise that this statement corresponds with the vision and mission that the Archdiocese formulated

during its so-called Archdiocesan Assembly, held at Rebiamul on June 3-5, 2004.

Here is the vision: “All the people of the Archdiocese of Mt Hagen are the Body of Christ, sharing the life of the Trinity.” Then comes the statement of the mission that says: “In order to truly be the Body of Christ, sharing the life of the Trinity, all the people of the Archdiocese of Mt Hagen commit themselves to work together in all that they do together.”

These summary statements of vision and mission are like a programme for future action in the Archdiocese, especially in connection with new evangelisation. If the Archdiocese is to be able to put it into practice, families must be properly formed, further general educational promotion must be emphasised, together with the provision of daily catechesis. As well as this, all the faithful in the Archdiocese must be treated and served equally. Those people, living in remote areas of the bush, should be convinced that they have the same rights, pastorally, as those living near the main centres, roads, and more-important settlements. These are the three priorities: family, education, and catechesis, together with proper care of everybody in the Archdiocese. These are the challenges and obligation of everybody, who really experiences the reality of the existing Catholic church of Mt Hagen, in its situation, deep in the highland interior of PNG. These, especially, are the challenges for the newly-appointed archbishop-metropolitan of Mt Hagen, His Grace, Douglas W. Young SVD, who was officially installed into his office on September 1, 2006, at Mt Hagen Catholic Cathedral at Rebiamul.

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