

The Vincentian Mission in the Solomon Islands

This report is based on an article first written by Raphael Sucaldito, C.M., two years before his death in July 2000. It has been edited and updated by Jack Harris, C.M.

The popular image of the Solomon Islands is that of a beautiful, unspoiled paradise with glimmering emerald lagoons, jagged coral reefs, orchid-laden jungles, thundering waterfalls, forested peaks and native villages on stilts. To some extent this is true, and the people are strikingly handsome with their smooth chocolate-coloured skin. In the jungle villages, many women go around topless while the men wear a traditional grass skirt or “kabilato.” Many men and women wear permanent markings cut into the skin of their faces when they are babies as trademarks of their tribal identity.

The people are gentle, friendly and easy-going but the islands have had a surprisingly violent history, with volcanic eruptions, tribal wars, slave trading and very early missionaries have been cooked and eaten by local people. The islands once earned the title “terrible Solomons.”

During the Second World War, one of the largest islands and the sea around it became the scene of one of the fiercest battles in history, leaving thousands of Americans and Japanese soldiers dead. War Memorials honouring both sides overlook the capital city of Honiara today and they are grim reminders of the terrible conflict that lasted two full years. The words ‘Guadalcanal’ and ‘Coral Sea’ bring back horrific memories to war veterans around the world and the wrecks of US and Japanese ships lie at the bottom of the sea off Honiara in an area now named ‘Iron Bottom Sound.’

Geographically Solomon Islands is part of a one-thousand-island chain stretching from Papua New Guinea to Fiji, known as Melanesia. Its first inhabitants came from New Guinea and Europeans did not arrive until 1568 when the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana de Neyra arrived. He had read an ancient Incan legend about “islands of gold” 5000 kilometres west of Peru. Mendana called the islands “King Solomon’s Islands” but he failed to find any gold and he got a cool reception from hostile local people. The Spanish abandoned the islands and because Mendana had made a mistake in positioning them on the map, no one found the Solomon Islands again until the British came in 1767 and set up a colony.

The islands were believed to be very dangerous especially when the slave trade began and local people were taken to work in Australia and other countries by traders known as “blackbirders.” The locals retaliated by butchering, cooking and eating anyone who stopped by and this included early missionaries and shipwrecked sailors.

The islands became a UK protectorate and remained under British control until independence in 1978 when they became a Commonwealth Parliamentary Democracy in which a Governor General represents Queen Elizabeth II. Decision-making power, however, lies in the hands of a Prime Minister and the national Parliament.

Most of the population of 408,000 is Christian and this seems a little surprising considering how primitive the beliefs were before and how violent the locals could be with one another and with outsiders. Christians today make up 80% of the population. The Anglicans form 30%, the biggest group, followed by the Catholics at 25%, the Seventh Day Adventists who have 20% and then the Baptists, South Sea Evangelicals and a few smaller groups.

Christianity however, has not managed to fully suppress the ancient rivalries between islands and tribes; ethnic violence erupted again in December 1998. Rival ethnic armed groups, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) and the Royal Solomon Islands Police Service were in conflict for over two years. The situation worsened considerably in June 2000 when the MEF staged a coup, overthrowing the elected government. A so-called “cease-fire” had little effect on the violence. Armed groups burned thousands of civilians out of their homes. Civilians as well as fighters were killed or injured, tortured, threatened and harassed. To understand the root causes of the conflict it is useful to know how the population is distributed around the islands.

The majority of Solomon Islands people are concentrated on two Islands – Guadalcanal and Malaita and after World War II thousands of Malaitans moved over to Guadalcanal and to this day, there are unresolved differences over land ownership and use. Malaitans are more aggressive and industrious than the “laid-back” Guadalcanal people and this has also caused friction, reviving age-old envy and rivalry between the two islands.

A peace agreement signed at Townsville in Australia brought some easing of the tension, but details like the handing in of arms and the composition of the police force are still causing problems. Questions of compensation and the relocation of displaced people are ongoing at the time of writing (March 2002) and a freely elected government is in place. The Solomon Islands used to be known as the “Happy Isles,” but since the ethnic tension began this is not an accurate description any more. In the market place, faces that were once smiling are now fearful and suspicious. Where once there was openness and trust, now people are nervous and reserved.

Honiara is still a safe place though because, thankfully, the conflict has not developed into the ethnic cleansing of Rwanda or Kosovo or East Timor, nor has there been the outbreak of criminal lawlessness that continues to beset Papua New Guinea’s capital Port Moresby.

This is the setting in which the Vincentian Mission is taking root, following in the footsteps of Catholic missionaries who first evangelized the people here only a hundred years ago. The French Marists came first and they were followed by their confreres from New Zealand, Australia and the US. Later the Dominicans worked in the Western part of the Solomon Islands and more recently the Missionary Society of the Philippines and the Salesians have joined in. There are three dioceses: the Archdiocese of Honiara has 12 native diocesan priests; the Diocese of Auki in Malaita has 15 native priests and the Diocese of Gizo in the west has 2 native priests.

The Marists are not sending any new missionaries and at the moment have no seminarians in formation; those who remain are getting on in years or are retired. There are very few vocations to religious life, but a good number to diocesan priesthood. Celibacy seems too great a challenge for many young Solomon Islanders and with a low tolerance to alcohol many become problem drinkers, so formators have some difficulties with which to work. These problems, along with culture differences, low educational achievement and the poor economic situation in the seminarians' families, make seminary work very challenging.

The Congregation of the Mission took on this challenge in 1993 and was warmly welcomed when the first confreres arrived. Fr. Marcelo Manimtim from the Philippines and Fr. Tom Hynes from the US were the pioneers. Before starting into the formation work they spent one and a half years helping in a parish in Takwa in North Malaita, mainly to acquaint themselves with the culture and language of the islands. In 1995 they moved to a lay ministry centre called Nazareth Apostolic Centre (NAC) in Guadalcanal and they were joined by Fr. Stanislaus Reksosusilo from Indonesia. The centre trained lay leaders and catechists, but was host to the infant seminary until its site just next door was prepared. Fr. Marcelo and Fr. Tom undertook the task of working with architects and builders to create the new Holy Name of Mary Seminary. They dealt patiently with delays and a few disagreements over contracts and left us with a fine set of practical and durable buildings. The construction took two years and the students and confreres made the half-a-kilometer move in 1997. The buildings are spread over a generous-sized campus with 14 separate structures: 4 staff houses, 4 student dormitories with six study-bedrooms in each; a chapel, library, three class-halls and a kitchen/dining hall. Fr. Marcelo set up a programme of studies along with spiritual and pastoral activities, which helped develop the full potential of each member of a very mixed ability group. Fr. Tom, with his deep devotion to our Lady and the Little Flower, is still remembered with great affection by many of our past-men.

In 1999 Fr. Tom Hynes returned to the US and Fr. Rafael Sucaldito took his place. He became spiritual director and organiser of pastoral activities and he made a deep impression on the seminarians who to this day can still quote many of his conferences and homilies; he also made an enormous contribution to the social life of the new seminary and the physical fitness of the students by building a tennis court. Anyone who faced him across the net found him a formidable opponent. As a community man he was warm and

unassuming and an absolute wizard with a gas cooker. He would treat us to the most wonderful Filipino cuisine and then hammer us to pieces on the tennis court! His visit to the Philippines in May 2000 coincided with the build up of tension here that led to the coup in June. All flights to the Solomon Islands were cancelled, so he was left stranded in Australia where he became ill, with what seemed at first to be a straightforward infection.

Sadly it was much more serious, and we lost a valued member of our community in early July. The confreres in Australia were exceptional in their care for him in his final illness. May he rest in peace.

Just before Raffy's illness the new millennium had opened with the return of Fr. Reksosusilo to Indonesia. He is remembered as a brilliant and clear-thinking philosopher. He was also the seminary bursar and had the delicate task of keeping the seminarians well fed and at the same time balancing a budget. He was replaced by Fr. Jack Harris from Ireland whose interests include communications, media work and electrical engineering.

To date Fr. Jack has improved the seminary's electrical facilities by building a small power station and he has introduced the seminarians to religious broadcasting on the national radio.

He had just done one term of teaching when the ethnic tension deepened and the seminary had to close. Fr. Jack and Fr. Marcelo stayed and protected the seminary buildings while we nearly had World War III going on outside our gate. There were killings and horrific injuries all around us, but we were safe. It was inconvenient to have no electric power, very little food and a lot of time on our hands, but thankfully we survived it all and our seminarians did pastoral work at home under the supervision of their local priests.

Then Fr. Marek Owskiak arrived from Poland in January 2001 to set up and direct the special Spiritual Year programme and oversee the spiritual direction of the rest of the students. He is young and energetic and thinks nothing of jogging ten kilometres. He launched the Spiritual Year Programme for students who had already done one or two years in Bomana in Papua New Guinea. They came to us in the seminary, but the rest of our students remained in their home villages for a further few months to let things really settle down.

When term did begin again we were joined by Fr. Agustinus Marsup from Indonesia who like Fr. Rekso is a philosopher and like Fr. Raffy is a brilliant cook. He is director of students and he coordinates their pastoral work. He also has the thankless task of community bursar which in an international group consists of catering for widely different tastes, and he does it with quiet and unassuming efficiency.

Fr. Marcelo's term of office came to an end in 2001 and he returned to the Philippines having charted out the course for Holy Name of Mary Seminary and

supervised the development of its structures and programmes. He did not want a highly regimented system of training, but a trusting and encouraging environment in which students had an input and felt involved, so that they could take responsibility for their growth in maturity and relationship with God. He left behind him a well organised and integrated, happy place in which the future needs of the Church in this part of Melanesia are in sure hands. His place was taken by his Filipino confrere Fr. Frank Vargas who has continued to develop the infrastructures that Marcelo put in place and his arrival has coincided not only with a big reduction in the ethnic tension, but also with an unprecedented growth in the intake of seminarians. Every room is in use with 28 seminarians, five of whom are in the Spirituality Year and live with their director Fr. Marek in a house at NAC. This large number puts pressure on all our facilities, but it has not changed the relaxing, yet challenging, atmosphere.

The formation work is challenging because of culture differences and the mixed abilities of our students who come from a wide variety of academic and religious backgrounds. We have to be very sensitive to the native culture and try to understand local customs in order to gain the confidence and trust of the islanders. Teaching takes patience, but the seminarians are eager and willing to learn. They are mature and relate well with authority, so that discipline poses no problem, but one aspect of Melanesian culture can be disconcerting. This is the tendency to be always willing to please, and not say anything they think might not be acceptable. Often they will tell you what they think you want to hear, rather than what they really think or want to do!

The seminary is in a very real sense a community or family, as we have a community of local sisters, a single sister from an international community and a family living on the campus. The local sisters are called Daughters of Mary Immaculate and were founded by a Marist bishop in the Solomon Islands in 1931. Our sisters here take care of catering for the students and the confreres and they make an important contribution to the guidance and direction of the students because of their first hand knowledge of local culture and customs. So too does the young married man who looks after maintenance and lives in the seminary compound with his wife and children. The other sister is a Marist (SMSM) and she is on the teaching staff. She runs the library and counselling courses as well as teaching scripture and general theology.

Seminary formation here takes seven years to complete. Students for the three Solomon Islands dioceses spend three years at Holy Name of Mary Seminary where philosophy and theology courses are integrated in the curriculum. After this they stay here for their spiritual year before proceeding to Bomana in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea where they do the last three years of formation before ordination to diaconate and priesthood. Finding staff for the seminary in Bomana has been a problem for many years and at one stage they had one priest doing the job of rector, procurator and dean of students, with no one to look after their spiritual needs.

The formation apostolate by the Congregation of the Mission is becoming an integral part of the Church in Melanesia and will no doubt be of great help in building, but also perhaps in saving, the future of the Church in this part of the world. At the moment, no province takes direct responsibility for the mission in the Solomon Islands, so assignment to work here is on a voluntary basis. The tenure of assignment is indefinite as long as we have the willingness and the health and ability to withstand the challenges of the work.