

Evangelization in Papua New Guinea: Essential Cultural Elements, Missionary Opportunities, Challenges, and Hopes¹

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Before His ascension, Jesus entrusted His disciples with a universal mandate: to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. This missionary imperative is consistently attested across the four canonical Gospels. In Mark, Jesus commands, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15). In Matthew, He exhorts the disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). Luke and Acts highlight the necessity of proclamation, stating that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Lk 24:47) and “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Gospel of John likewise reinforces this commissioning: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21).

This mission mandate is not confined to the first generation of disciples; it is a continuing vocation addressed to all Christians across history. Evangelization, therefore, entails the proclamation of Jesus Christ to all peoples, transcending geographical, religious, and cultural boundaries.

Papua New Guinea (PNG), a Pacific nation located north of Australia and east of Indonesia, received the light of the Gospel through the Marist missionaries, who arrived in Milne Bay in 1847. They were later followed by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), who began their work in East New Britain in 1882, and the Divine Word Missionaries (SVD), who established

¹ This essay is dedicated to Fr. Patrick “Kevin” Cantwell SVD, author of *Missionary*, whose work inspired the writer to embrace his mission in Papua New Guinea.

their presence in Madang in 1896.² Alongside Catholic efforts, various missionaries from other Christian churches also established their presence in PNG during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These combined missionary endeavors contributed significantly to the religious transformation of the country.

Today, nearly two centuries later, Christianity is deeply embedded in the life of the nation, with the Constitution explicitly recognizing it as the foundational faith. Nevertheless, PNG retains a rich and complex cultural landscape. Evangelization in this context assumes distinctive characteristics, shaped by indigenous worldviews, linguistic diversity, and ongoing social transformation.

This essay begins by articulating a theological understanding of the Church's identity and mission. It then examines the particular context of PNG as a country marked by both cultural plurality and deep Christian affiliation. This is followed by an analysis of the opportunities and challenges of evangelization in a predominantly Christian yet rapidly evolving society, especially in light of the ongoing demographic shift in Christianity from the global North to the global South and the pervasive effects of globalization. Finally, inspired by the Catholic Church's Jubilee Year 2025, under the theme "Pilgrims of Hope," the essay offers a theological reflection titled "Hope in the Sacred Garden," exploring the author's commitment to mission within the PNG context.

The Identity of the Church

According to Matthew 16:18, Jesus is understood to have founded the Church. As the Gospel narrative unfolds, the reader comes to recognize the Church as the instrument of God's salvific plan, *Missio Dei*, entrusted with the proclamation of the Gospel to all peoples. In this way, the Church not only embodies but also perpetuates Christ's mission of evangelization.

As affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is "the universal sacrament of salvation," called to make Christ present in every age.³ Likewise, Pope Paul VI emphasized in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that the Church "exists in order to evangelize,"⁴ continuing the mission of Christ through preaching, witness, and service.

² Mary R. Mennis, "Foreword" to Paul B. Steffen, *Sios bilong Yumi long Nougini* (Madang: Society of the Divine Word, 2022), 11-13.

³ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, ASS 56 (1964), no. 48.

⁴ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, AAS 67 (1975), no. 14.

The Term *Missio*

The term *missio* originates from the Latin verb *mittere*, meaning “to send.” In the New Testament, this concept is rendered through the Koine Greek verbs ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*) and πέμπω (*pempō*), both of which signify the act of sending someone with a particular purpose. Central to the Christian theological understanding of mission is the sending of the Son by the Father. As stated in the Fourth Gospel, “For God so loved (ἀγαπάω, *agapaō*) the world that God gave God’s only Son” (Jn 3:16), and “God did not send (*apostellō*) the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17).

During His public ministry, Jesus also commissioned His disciples, entrusting them with the mission to proclaim the Good News and heal the sick. This apostolic sending (Lk 9:2; Jn 20:21) culminated in the post-resurrection mandate: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). This Great Commission, far from being a momentary directive, constitutes the ongoing mission of the Church and of all baptized Christians.

The Second Vatican Council reaffirms this foundational identity in *Ad Gentes*: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, for it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, according to the plan of God the Father.”⁵ Mission is thus not a peripheral task, nor is it limited to clergy, religious, or specific ecclesial movements. It is the core identity and animating principle of the Church’s existence. The Church “exists in order to evangelize,” as Pope Paul VI affirmed in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and this remains true for the Church in every cultural, social, and historical context.⁶

Evangelization must therefore be understood as the Church’s primary vocation. It is not an optional or periodic endeavor, confined to particular liturgical seasons or mission appeals. Rather, it is constitutive of the Church’s being. Without evangelization, the Church risks losing its identity, and Christians may forget their vocation as witnesses of the Risen Christ. The missionary dimension of the Church challenges every generation to discern the signs of the times and to proclaim the Gospel anew in changing contexts.

In contemporary times, this missionary call takes on renewed urgency, especially as the demographic center of Christianity continues to shift from the global North to the global South. This shift presents both opportunities and challenges for mission and evangelization, requiring new expressions of

⁵ Vatican II, Degree on the Church’s Mission Activity *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, AAS 57 (1965), no. 2.

⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 14.

Christian witness that are inculturated, dialogical, and responsive to the lived realities of diverse communities. The missionary mandate, rooted in Scripture and tradition, compels the Church to be ever attentive to the world, proclaiming Christ with fidelity and creativity.

Missionary Disciples: From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth

From the earliest moments following the Ascension of Christ, the disciples exhibited a profound awareness of their missionary identity. Despite persecution and opposition, they remained resolute in their commitment to the mandate entrusted to them by the Risen Lord (Acts 1:8). In Jerusalem, the apostles boldly proclaimed the resurrection, beginning with Peter's Pentecost discourse, which marked the birth of the Church's public witness (Acts 2:14–36). Stephen, the first Christian martyr, engaged in theological confrontation with the religious authorities, ultimately laying down his life in witness to the Gospel (Acts 7:1–60).

The outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem became a catalyst for missionary expansion. Far from hindering the Church's growth, dispersion enabled the Gospel to spread across Judea and Samaria and eventually beyond (Acts 8:1–4). As the disciples journeyed outward, they continued to proclaim the Good News with increasing fervor. Each geographic shift marked a decisive step in the unfolding of salvation history and the fulfillment of Christ's universal command (Mt 28:19–20).

Among the earliest missionary figures, Philip stands out. His encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the queen of Ethiopia, illustrates the inclusive reach of the Gospel and its appeal beyond Jewish boundaries. As Philip interpreted the Isaiah scroll and administered baptism (Acts 8:26–40), this moment symbolically initiated the spread of Christianity to the African continent. Likewise, ecclesial tradition holds that the Apostle Thomas journeyed to Muziris (modern-day Kerala, India) around the year 52, establishing Christian communities along the Malabar Coast. This tradition is recorded in the *Acts of Thomas* and continues to be affirmed by the Syro-Malabar Church today.

Christianity's eastward expansion continued along ancient trade networks such as the Silk Road. Historical records mention Alopen, a missionary of the Church of the East, who arrived in Chang'an (modern Xi'an, China) in 635 AD, introducing the faith to the Tang dynasty. These early missions demonstrate that the Christian movement was not limited to the Roman Empire but took root in Asia and Africa from its inception.

This historical witness affirms a fundamental theological truth. That is, evangelization is not the sole responsibility of ordained clergy or religious congregations, but the vocation of all the baptized. As Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients.⁷

In light of this universal call, every Christian is summoned to become a missionary disciple, a bearer of Christ's light in a world longing for redemption. This vocation transcends cultural boundaries, personal vocations, or geographical borders. In today's globalized and pluralistic world, the missionary mandate assumes new forms. The dramatic demographic shift in Christianity from the global North to the global South has transformed the ecclesial landscape. Former missionary-receiving countries now send evangelizers to secularized and post-Christian societies in Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand. At the same time, migration, urbanization, and interreligious coexistence have given rise to new missionary contexts. These include "migrant missionary disciples," who, though themselves migrants and often subject to the complexities of displacement, cultural marginalization, and social instability, nonetheless bear witness to the Gospel through their lives and actions. Informed by their faith and shaped by the migratory experience, they engage in evangelization within transitory and intercultural contexts, serving as vital agents of dialogue, reconciliation, and hope across cultural and national boundaries.

Thus, the Church's missionary task remains as urgent and dynamic today as it was in apostolic times. Evangelization, rooted in the life of Christ, sustained by the Holy Spirit, and expressed in diverse historical and cultural forms, continues to animate the Church's identity. Every Christian, as commanded by Jesus Christ, the first missionary in salvation history, is invited to participate in the building of God's Kingdom both locally and globally.

The Land of Papua New Guinea

As previously indicated, in obedience to the mandate of Christ, missionaries from various religious congregations of different Christian churches began

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World *Evangelii Gaudium*, AAS 105 (2013), no. 120.

arriving in PNG in the nineteenth century. These missionary efforts introduced the Gospel to the peoples of the island, initiating profound religious and cultural transformations.

Historical Overview

Papua New Guinea bears enduring traces of successive colonial encounters with European and Asian powers, notably Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, and Japan. Each of these colonial regimes contributed to the formation of the nation's administrative structures, linguistic diversity, educational systems, and socio-cultural configurations. By the early twentieth century, the territory had become bifurcated; i.e., the northern region, known as German New Guinea, was under German control, while the southern region, Papua, was administered as a British colony.

During the Second World War, PNG assumed strategic significance in the Pacific theatre. Japanese military occupation of key regions led to intense conflict across the islands. In the aftermath of the war, administrative control of both territories was transferred to Australia, which governed until PNG attained independence on 16 September 1975. Upon independence, Papua New Guinea became a sovereign state, joined the Commonwealth of Nations, and adopted a parliamentary democratic system.

Despite the adoption of democratic governance led by a Prime Minister and a parliamentary structure, PNG's political and social realities remain deeply influenced by tribal affiliations and customary systems. With over 800 distinct languages and numerous ethnolinguistic groups, allegiance is often directed more toward kinship networks, such as clan, tribe, and province. This fragmentation underscores the complexity of forging a unified national identity.

The persistence of traditional culture and customary law has endowed PNG with a vibrant and resilient heritage. Kinship structures, local jurisprudence, and ancestral rituals continue to shape daily life across rural and urban contexts. Nevertheless, these same traditional frameworks pose ongoing challenges to national integration and governance. Achieving a balance between cultural preservation and national unity necessitates culturally responsive policies that promote inclusivity, honor indigenous traditions, and support sustainable development.

Agriculture and Cuisine

Papua New Guinea's cultural identity is deeply interwoven with its ecological environment and agricultural lifeways. Characterized by a tropical climate and fertile volcanic soil, PNG remains predominantly an agrarian

society. Subsistence farming serves as both an economic foundation and a cornerstone of social organization. Household gardens are widespread, supplying a variety of crops that include sweet potatoes/*kaukau*, maize, papaya, pineapple, tomatoes, leafy greens, and assorted fruits. These cultivation practices reflect not only the people's intimate relationship with the land but also the transmission of agricultural knowledge across generations.

In the Highlands, particularly in regions such as Jiwaka and Simbu, farmers construct terraced gardens on hillsides to manage erosion and optimize cultivation on steep terrain. Sweet potato is the principal staple in these areas. Conversely, in lowland and coastal regions such as Madang, sago/*saksak*, a starch derived from the sago palm, serves as a dietary staple. These diverse ecological adaptations underscore the ingenuity and environmental acumen of local communities.

One of the most distinctive culinary traditions in PNG is the *mumu* pig, an earth-oven cooking method used primarily for ceremonial and communal gatherings. In this practice, pork, root crops, and vegetables are slow-cooked in an underground pit lined with hot stones. Beyond its nutritional value, the pig holds considerable symbolic and economic significance. It functions as a medium of social exchange, a marker of status, and a core element in ritual life. In marriage customs, for instance, pigs are central to bride-price arrangements, with dowries often including several animals, the number determined by the social stature of the families involved. A contemporary example of this cultural practice was witnessed during the episcopal ordination of Coadjutor Archbishop Clement Papa in the Archdiocese of Mt. Hagen in 2024, when more than one hundred pigs were contributed by local parishes for the celebratory feast, an expression of communal generosity and enduring cultural tradition.

In addition to its agricultural and culinary distinctiveness, PNG is renowned for its rich cultural expressions, manifested through traditional attire, diverse languages, and traditional religious practices. These elements continue to define the nation's identity and reflect its complex tapestry of indigenous knowledge, belief systems, and artistic heritage.

Traditional Attire *Bilas*

Traditional attire in Papua New Guinea, commonly known as *bilas*, constitutes one of the most vivid and tangible expressions of cultural identity. Each tribe and region boasts a distinctive sartorial tradition, utilizing materials sourced from the local environment, including bird feathers, shells, seeds, plant fibers, and animal skins. Far from being merely decorative, *bilas* functions as a symbolic representation of social hierarchy, gender, age, and ceremonial roles within a given community.

Elaborate forms of *bilas* are prominently displayed during culturally significant events such as initiation rites, matrimonial ceremonies, funerals, and cultural festivals. These occasions serve as both communal celebrations and reaffirmations of tribal identity and solidarity. Noteworthy among such events are the Mt. Hagen Cultural Show (Western Highlands) and the Wabag Cultural Show (Enga Province), which attract participants and spectators from across the country. During these gatherings, traditional dances and songs are performed by individuals adorned in vibrant attire and body paint.

Face painting is executed with locally available materials, such as clay, charcoal, and mineral pigments, often in vivid hues of red, yellow, black, and white. Particularly revered are the elaborate headdresses fashioned from the plumage of the bird of paradise, a national symbol of Papua New Guinea. These headdresses transcend their aesthetic appeal. They carry symbolic meanings of vitality, beauty, and a profound spiritual connection to the natural world.

Linguistic Diversity

PNG is widely recognized as one of the most linguistically diverse nations on the planet, with over 800 indigenous languages spoken across its territory. This remarkable linguistic heterogeneity has given rise to a tri-lingual norm among many Papua New Guineans, who typically communicate in *Tok ples* (the vernacular or tribal language), *Tok Pisin* (a widely used language), and English (the official language employed in formal education, governance, and national media).

Tok Pisin plays a crucial role as a lingua franca, enabling communication among speakers of different tribal languages, particularly in public settings such as markets, hospitals, and schools. In urban centers such as Lae, it is common for parents to converse in *Tok ples* at home, while children are educated in English. Public interactions with members of other tribes often take place in *Tok Pisin*, thus illustrating the pragmatic and integrative role of these languages. While English and *Tok Pisin* contribute to national unity and cross-cultural communication, *Tok ples* remains a cherished emblem of local identity and community cohesion.

Traditional Religions

Each tribal group in PNG maintains a distinct and deeply rooted religious worldview, comprising beliefs, rituals, and spiritual practices intimately connected to their environment and ancestral lineage. These traditional religious systems are integral to the cultural fabric of the society, guiding ethical conduct, community relationships, and responses to life's major transitions.

Spiritual practices are often centered on the reverence of ancestral spirits, deities, or nature-based entities believed to exert influence over human affairs. Rituals associated with rites of passage, such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death, and seasonal celebrations are performed with communal participation and solemnity. These practices serve not only to seek divine favor but also to reinforce social cohesion and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

An illustrative case is that of the Asaro people from Goroka in the Eastern Highlands, famed for their ceremonial use of clay masks. Known as the *Asaro Mudmen*, these masked figures originated from a local legend in which ancestral warriors used eerie clay masks to intimidate adversaries during a time of conflict. Today, the *Mudmen* serve as powerful cultural symbols of both spiritual resilience and creative expression, embodying the complex interplay of tradition, memory, and identity within PNG's indigenous religious landscape.

Missionary Opportunities

Opportunities for evangelization arise uniquely within every cultural landscape, particularly in mission territories where the Gospel has yet to be fully incarnated. In the context of PNG, a missionary, after engaging pastorally with local communities, may begin to identify specific avenues for meaningful proclamation. These opportunities become vital channels for embodying the mission of Jesus Christ in ways that are both effective and culturally resonant.

Papua New Guinean Contextual Theology

In an increasingly interconnected world, contextual theology assumes a pivotal role in facilitating the faithful's engagement with the Gospel in culturally diverse settings. Rather than merely transmitting theological content, the missionary is called to enter into a dynamic dialogue with local cultural expressions. Through this process, under the guidance of the Church, the message of Jesus Christ is communicated in a manner that is both faithful to the Gospel and meaningful to the people.

The celebration of the Last Supper, for instance, provides a useful lens through which to understand this integration. Within Jesus' own cultural context, the Passover meal was marked by significant elements such as bread and wine, staples of the Jewish diet. Though the Gospel accounts do not elaborate extensively on the physical details of the setting, historical and cultural scholarship allows us to envision Jesus and His disciples reclining together in accordance with Jewish tradition. Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper offers a

Renaissance interpretation of this moment, shaped by the artistic conventions and theological imagination of 15th-century Europe. Seated in Western attire at a long table, the figures reflect the cultural lens of da Vinci's milieu rather than that of first-century Palestine.

In contrast, the work of Moses Minipa, a contemporary Papua New Guinean artist, reinterprets the Last Supper through the visual and symbolic language of the PNG Highlands. In Minipa's depiction, Jesus is portrayed as a tribal leader from Jiwaka Province, and the apostles are adorned in traditional attire from various PNG tribes. Notably, Judas Iscariot, positioned fourth from Jesus' left, wears the distinctive dress of the Huli people, known for their acumen in trade and negotiation. The food displayed in Minipa's painting includes local produce such as sweet potatoes, sugarcane, bananas, and other familiar staples. Instead of the traditional bread and wine, Jesus is shown holding a sweet potato, a cultural dynamic equivalence to bread in Jewish custom or rice in Vietnamese culture, and a glass of water, a common and symbolic beverage in the region.

This artistic rendering is more than a creative expression. It is a theological statement. Following the trajectory set by the Second Vatican Council and supported by regional ecclesial bodies such as the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), the Church has encouraged the formation of authentically local models of ecclesial life. During his apostolic visit to Thailand in 2019, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of incarnating the Gospel in the "flesh and face" of local culture. He reminded the Church that evangelization must be rooted in the spiritual traditions, values, and symbols of the people, so that the message of Christ becomes truly incarnate in their experience.

In this light, Minipa's painting stands as a theological and pastoral act. It not only makes the Last Supper intelligible to PNG audiences but also deepens their spiritual identification with the Gospel. As such, it becomes a profound testimony to the transformative power of contextual theology in mission.

Language Acquisition and Cultural Exchange

Evangelization is not merely an act of proclamation, but also an invitation to communion through mutual understanding. For the missionary, this requires an intentional immersion into the linguistic and cultural world of the community being served. Language is more than a functional tool. It is a vessel of collective memory, identity, and spiritual depth. Through language, missionaries gain access to local expressions of suffering, hope, joy, and faith, often communicated in ways that transcend formal theological categories. Acquiring the local language serves not only to enhance communication but also

to demonstrate deep respect for the dignity and heritage of the people. It builds bridges of trust and lays the groundwork for authentic interpersonal relationships and communal engagement. Moreover, such linguistic sensitivity opens space for a more faithful and nuanced communication of the Gospel message.

Intercultural exchange is likewise an essential dimension of mission. In a world characterized by increasing cultural convergence, the missionary is both a bearer of the Gospel and a custodian of their own cultural identity. Through respectful dialogue, missionaries offer elements of their own heritage not as superior models but as invitations to mutual enrichment. True interculturality is marked not by assimilation, but by hospitality, allowing each culture to encounter the other on equal and respectful terms.

A notable example of this cultural exchange occurred in 2024 during the annual Talent Night at Good Shepherd Seminary, Banz, Jiwaka. The author presented a performance titled *The History of the Vietnamese Outfits*, delivered by PNG seminarians. Similarly, during the celebration of the Vietnamese Têt Eucharist, local seminarians offered culturally meaningful gifts accompanied by the Vietnamese hymn *A Hymn of Incense* by Dao Kim. These moments are not merely performative but represent concrete gestures of intercultural communion, mirroring the Incarnation, in which the Word became flesh and entered fully into a specific culture (John 1:14).

Conversely, missionaries themselves have participated in local expressions of faith and culture. In certain mission settings, clergy and religious have joined *singsings*,⁸ participated in tribal reconciliation rituals, or learned *Tok Ples* to better understand the religious imagination of the people. Such reciprocal openness reinforces the Church's universality while celebrating the uniqueness of each people. Through such mutual sharing, the Church becomes ever more universal and yet intimately local, capable of speaking to the heart of every culture while remaining faithful to the Gospel.

The Witness of Christian Life

A third significant opportunity in the context of PNG is the country's predominantly Christian identity. With the majority of the population baptized, the missionary may ask: What does it mean to proclaim the Gospel in a society that already identifies as Christian?

⁸ In the Papua New Guinean context, a *singsing* is a traditional cultural gathering involving dance, music, body decoration, and the performance of tribal identity and stories. Often held during festivals or ceremonies, *singsings* serve not only as expressions of cultural heritage but also as communal events that can carry spiritual and symbolic meaning.

This question reveals a deeper dimension of mission; i.e., the call to evangelize not only through proclamation but through the witness of life. While the initial act of evangelization may bring individuals to the font of baptism, the ongoing mission is one of continual conversion, personal, communal, and cultural. Evangelization in this context must engage the lived realities of the people, addressing the residual challenges of tribal conflict, ancestral beliefs, and the persistent influence of *Sanguma* (witchcraft).

To live as a witness is to embody the Gospel in daily life. It is to allow one's actions, words, and relationships to be permeated by the Spirit of Christ. In PNG, this entails a courageous commitment to forgiveness in the face of customary retaliation, a readiness to promote truth in a context marked by suspicion and fear, and a visible expression of Christian love in a society still navigating the tensions of modernity and tradition.

Furthermore, witnessing is not an individual endeavor but a communal calling. Parishes and Christian communities must become *loci* of renewal, living cells of the Body of Christ in which faith is not only professed but practiced. Here, the Christian life becomes a countercultural witness to solidarity, reconciliation, and human dignity.

Ultimately, the missionary is called to make the presence of Christ visible and tangible. Through a life marked by humility, compassion, service, and integrity, the Gospel is no longer merely proclaimed but embodied, heard not only through words, but encountered in lived experience. In this way, the Church fulfills its missionary identity, allowing the Good News to take root in the soil of Papua New Guinea and bear fruit that endures.

Missionary Challenges

The Church's mission of evangelization in PNG commenced in the 19th century. Through the zeal, perseverance, and sacrificial dedication of foreign missionaries, the church in PNG has grown substantially, establishing 19 dioceses, producing one cardinal and numerous bishops, priests, and religious men and women. Furthermore, the Church has contributed significantly to the development of educational and healthcare systems and, most importantly, has sown the seeds of Christian faith among tribal communities that traditionally adhered to distinct indigenous belief systems. Today, Catholics constitute approximately 30% of the national population of around 8 million.

As the fruits of the Christian faith continue to take root across the country, the local clergy and religious are increasingly assuming leadership within the life of the PNG church. Nevertheless, as with many Christian communities

worldwide, the evangelizing mission in PNG is confronted with complex challenges shaped by its unique cultural landscape and the broader dynamics of an evolving global context.

Paradigm Shift from Global North to Global South

Stephen Bevans observes that “since the end of the twentieth century, the ‘center of gravity’ of Christianity has shifted from...Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand to the world of [Africa, South American, Asia and Oceania].”⁹ Likewise, Tonia Pernia states, “Cardinal Bergoglio’s election puts a new face to the Catholic Church, i.e., a Church that is no longer a European Church, but a truly global Church. It also reflects the so-called ‘demographic shift’ of the Catholic Church, i.e., the Catholic Church’s population shift from the global North to the global South (that is, Latin America, Africa, Asia), where about two-thirds of the 1.2 billion Catholics now live. In fact, almost 50% of all Catholics live in Latin America alone.”¹⁰ Consequently, the Church in Papua New Guinea finds itself within a broader ecclesial transition marked by the shifting center of gravity in Christianity from the global North to the global South. Once regarded as a “mission territory” evangelized by foreign missionaries, PNG is now called to embrace its new identity, as a missionary church capable of sending forth evangelizers, including to the very countries that once sent missionaries to its shores.

This shift is not merely geographic or demographic but signals a profound theological and pastoral conversion in missionary consciousness. The local Church can no longer remain dependent upon foreign congregations or international organizations. Instead, it is imperative that local clergy, religious, and lay faithful take active responsibility for deepening their understanding of Sacred Scripture, the Catechism, Church teachings, and pastoral practice. Such formation is essential if they are to become authentic witnesses and agents of the Gospel in both local and cross-cultural contexts.

To be a missionary church entails both receiving and giving. Even the smallest and poorest communities, whether a remote diocese in the mountains or a modest village parish, can serve as vital sources of missionary dynamism, contributing vocations, pastoral initiatives, and Christian witness. As *Evangelii Gaudium* asserts, every baptized person is a missionary regardless of geographical location.¹¹

⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009), 5.

¹⁰ Antonio Pernia, *Paradigm Shift in the Catholic Church* (Class Lecture, Tagaytay: Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, 2019).

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120.

Fulfilling this mission requires intentional investment in human formation, particularly among the youth. This includes not only theological and pastoral education but also the cultivation of human maturity, spiritual depth, intercultural competence, and the courage to leave behind comfort zones for the sake of the Gospel. Seminarians and future pastoral leaders must be spiritually grounded, intellectually equipped, pastorally competent, and mission-ready, even to evangelize contexts where Christianity is now in decline.

Tribal Conflict and the Challenge of Forgiveness

A profound obstacle to the Christian mission in PNG is the entrenched culture of violence and retaliation. The principle of *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”, functions within many tribal communities as a means of preserving communal honor and safeguarding group cohesion. Failure to retaliate when harmed is often interpreted as weakness, leading to societal shame. Consequently, cycles of violence persist, fostering deep social fragmentation and trauma.

In such a cultural milieu, the Christian call to forgive, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44), poses a radical challenge. The Gospel message directly contests traditional conceptions of justice and communal dignity. Thus, missionary proclamation must go beyond rhetoric. It requires lived witness, authenticity, and profound pastoral sensitivity.

The province of Enga, formerly renowned for its numerous religious vocations, has in recent years become a locus of violent conflict. Tribal warfare has resulted in the temporary closure of parishes, evacuation of seminaries, and the disruption of pastoral programs. Churches have been burned, entire villages displaced, and ecclesial life severely strained. These are not merely material losses but deep spiritual wounds inflicted upon the Body of Christ in PNG.

In such volatile conditions, missionaries are called to become beacons of reconciliation and instruments of peace. They must accompany suffering communities, choosing to remain amid conflict rather than retreating to safety. Through acts of presence, solidarity, and pastoral care, sharing in the hardships of the people, offering hospitality, and mediating dialogue, missionaries embody the merciful love of Christ and help lay the groundwork for enduring peace.

Evangelizing in a culture shaped by retaliatory justice thus constitutes not only an external mission but also a profound interior struggle. It demands a life deeply rooted in prayer, sacramental grace, and the support of the ecclesial community. Moreover, the task of promoting peace cannot rest solely on individual missionaries or Church leaders. It necessitates collaborative efforts

among the Church, state authorities, educational institutions, civil society, and traditional leaders.

Key to long-term transformation is the integration of peace-building values, reconciliation, restorative justice, and nonviolent conflict resolution, into educational curricula and community life. By equipping young people with the tools for peaceful dialogue and critical thinking, the Church can contribute to breaking cycles of revenge and nurturing a culture of peace.

In his testimony for the canonization of Blessed Peter ToRot, Fr. Thomas Patrick, a priest of the Diocese of Wabag (Enga Province), recounted a profound personal experience in which he turned to faith to help mediate a violent tribal conflict between his own community and a rival tribe. In his twenties at the time, he approached the frontlines of the conflict bearing four potent symbols of Christian witness: a cross tied around his waist, a *bilum* containing soil and water from the grave of Blessed Peter ToRot, and a Bible. With courage and conviction, he addressed members of the opposing tribe, invoking the words of Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” as a plea for peace and reconciliation.¹²

If the Gospel is indeed the light that dispels darkness, then in regions scarred by violence and division, the missionary is called to be a steady, unyielding flame, a living testimony to the crucified and forgiving Christ whose love alone can heal and renew the human heart.

***Sanguma*: Witchcraft and the Challenge of Evangelization**

While the Catholic Church in PNG continues to experience growth in faith and mission, one of the most persistent and complex challenges remains the widespread belief in *sanguma*, a term encompassing witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, and other occult practices. Despite the formal acceptance of Christianity through baptism, many faithful still hold onto traditional cosmologies, including belief in malevolent spiritual forces, ancestral curses, and supernatural causes of misfortune. These enduring beliefs serve not only as vestiges of indigenous religion but also as coping mechanisms in a society shaped by chronic insecurity, economic hardship, and limited access to healthcare and education.

In rural and isolated communities, where scientific explanations and professional medical care are scarce, unexplained deaths, diseases, or personal misfortunes are frequently attributed to *sanguma*. Those suspected of engaging

¹² Thomas Patrick, *A Testimony to Blessed Peter ToRot* (Banz, Jiwaka Province: Good Shepherd Seminary, 2024).

in such practices, often marginalized individuals such as widows, orphans, or people displaying atypical behavior, become scapegoats for communal fear. Accusations are commonly made without due process, leading to ostracism, physical violence, forced exile, or even extrajudicial killings. These acts represent profound violations of human dignity and constitute an urgent pastoral concern.

For the missionary community, this reality presents a dual challenge. First, there is the evangelical imperative to proclaim the truth of the Gospel, that God is the author of life and hope, not a source of fear or destruction. Second, there is the need for deep pastoral sensitivity in addressing a spiritual worldview that is both complex and fragile. Simply preaching doctrinal truths is insufficient. Missionaries are called to walk with the people, serve as advocates for the vulnerable, and help communities discern between fear-driven superstition and the liberating message of Christ. In this light, Tuan Viet Cao emphasizes that during times of illness, pastoral missionaries should offer compassionate support through visits, prayer, and spiritual guidance, helping the sick prepare for death, consoling families, and encouraging trust in God and the Risen Lord rather than reliance on sorcery.¹³

In this context, effective missionary engagement demands not only theological formation but also a basic understanding of psychology, anthropology, and public health. Proactive efforts such as organizing educational workshops on health and disease, training in psychological resilience, and promoting critical thinking are indispensable. These initiatives are not ancillary to evangelization but rather integral expressions of the Gospel's transformative power.

Missionaries in areas affected by *sanguma*-related violence often face significant personal risk, including threats to their lives. Nevertheless, it is precisely in these crucibles of fear and misunderstanding that the Gospel's light shines most brightly. By entering spaces where many believe God is absent, missionaries bear witness to a God who is especially present among the afflicted, the misunderstood, and the outcast.

Thus, missionary work in the context of *sanguma* is a journey that requires discernment, intercultural dialogue, and the courage to challenge destructive cultural norms with the light of the Gospel. It is a witness to Christ who liberates humanity not only from sin but also from fear, superstition, and social exclusion.

¹³ Tuan Viet Cao, "Sorcery and Witchcraft: A Critical Challenge in Papua New Guinea," *Religion and Social Communication* 22, no. 2 (2024): 434.

The Global Network: Digital Media and Cultural Displacement

Contemporary Papua New Guinea finds itself amid a rapidly transforming sociocultural landscape, where the traditional communal fabric is increasingly shaped, and in some cases undermined, by the pervasive influence of digital media. Among the most pressing challenges is the silent incursion of globalized communication networks, particularly through smartphones and social media platforms such as Facebook. While these technologies offer clear benefits, improved access to information, greater connectivity, and new avenues for evangelization, they also expose users, especially youth, to ideologies rooted in individualism, consumerism, and secularism, many of which stand in tension with both indigenous values and the Christian worldview.

This digital influence has contributed to a gradual erosion of traditional virtues such as simplicity, solidarity, and respect for communal authority. Young people, increasingly immersed in digital content, often adopt foreign lifestyles and aspirations detached from their cultural and social realities. This disconnection results in identity disorientation that can extend to religious life, weakening the rootedness and coherence of their faith. Without a strong cultural grounding, faith risks becoming superficial, privatized, or fragmented.

Responding to these phenomena requires proactive and culturally sensitive strategies. Hence, the Church in PNG, particularly its missionaries and pastoral leaders, must play a leading role in media literacy, cultural formation, and moral discernment. This involves equipping young people with critical tools to navigate digital content responsibly, creating programs that reconnect them with their heritage, and fostering a holistic integration of Christian faith into everyday life. Moreover, missionaries themselves must be both culturally competent and digitally literate, capable of using media effectively for evangelization while helping communities evaluate and resist harmful cultural imports.

Ultimately, the Church's mission in the digital era is not to reject modernity, but to transform it, "baptizing" new forms of communication so they become instruments of communion, truth, and peace. In doing so, the missionaries in Papua New Guinea can guide their people, especially the youth, to embrace their faith with depth and authenticity, rooted in cultural identity yet open to the universal message of the Gospel.

The Pastoral Model: Listening – Accompaniment – Transformation – Hope

As previously discussed, the mission of evangelization in PNG is confronted with complex pastoral, cultural, and social challenges. Therefore,

evangelization cannot be limited to the sacramental life or catechetical instruction alone. Rather, it must be deeply rooted in the concrete realities of human existence. In the words of Pope Francis, missionaries must be willing to “smell like the sheep,” embracing the full spectrum of people’s lived experience. In this context, an effective missionary approach must be grounded in four interconnected pillars: listening, accompaniment, transformation, and hope.

Listening to reality and the inner voice of the people

Genuine evangelization begins not with prepackaged programs or imposed frameworks, but with the humble act of listening, an attentive, reverent openness to the voice of the people and the movement of God within their history and culture. Evangelization in PNG must not be conceived as a one-sided transmission of the Gospel, as though the presence of God were previously absent. Rather, it is a dialogical pilgrimage that recognizes the prior activity of God in the lives of the people, their traditional religions, and their socio-cultural narratives.

This first stage entails a deep listening to both the historical memory and present concerns of the people: the legacies of tribal life, rich cultural symbols, and the growing pains of a society in transition. Of particular importance is the silent suffering carried within many hearts, arising from poverty, intergenerational violence, political instability, and socio-economic inequities. Such suffering often gives rise to existential questions about justice, identity, and the meaning of life in light of both traditional beliefs and Christian hope.

These dimensions of life are not adequately understood through statistics or formal reports. They can only be grasped through the incarnational presence of the missionary, by dwelling among the people, walking with them in daily struggles, and cultivating relationships of trust. Missionaries are thus called to be companions rather than instructors, fellow pilgrims rather than distant authorities. Their task is to listen as one listens to a sacred story, with compassion, attentiveness, and maternal tenderness.

In such listening, the voice of God is often discerned not in dramatic manifestations, but in the fragile, whispered pain of the marginalized: the wounded, the forgotten, the displaced. It is through this compassionate attentiveness that evangelization becomes an act of salvific dialogue, wherein the Gospel is received not as a foreign imposition, but as a seed that takes root in the Niugini Garden, in the soil of local culture and experience.

Accompanying with patience and a spirit of service

Following the act of listening, the next pastoral movement is that of accompaniment. To accompany is not merely to be physically present but to adopt a posture of solidarity and shared humanity. It is to “walk with” rather than “walk ahead of,” echoing the mystery of the Incarnation, where the Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us (Jn 1:14). Authentic accompaniment is not sentimental or superficial. It involves sustained engagement through concrete acts of service. These may include initiating educational programs, catechetical formation, youth outreach, and peacemaking in contexts of tribal conflict. Through these actions, the Gospel assumes flesh and blood, becoming tangible, credible, and life-giving.

A compelling example is the *Children’s Pastoral Program* led by Fr. Thomas W. Patrick. This initiative addresses not only faith formation but also offers social, emotional, and spiritual support to children, particularly those who are orphaned, disabled, marginalized, or from other religious backgrounds. The program’s catechists engage children through basic catechism, moral education, liturgical music, prayer, and various pastoral activities. Such initiatives provide a valuable model of accompaniment that other missionaries may emulate or support.

Accompaniment, when practiced with patience and humility, becomes a sign of radical service, an embodiment of Christ’s self-giving love. In the face of cultural misunderstanding, resistance, or even violence, the persevering presence of the missionary becomes a living testimony to God’s unwavering fidelity. The Church in PNG is thereby transformed into a leaven in the dough and a beacon of light, bearing witness to the kingdom of God through the quiet, persistent love of those who choose to stay.

Transformation through the Gospel

The pastoral journey must ultimately lead toward transformation, not merely external or behavioral change, but an inward conversion of heart, community, and society in light of the Gospel. Such transformation, however, is neither imposed nor abrupt. It is the fruit of long-term commitment, loving accompaniment, and spiritual discernment. At the heart of this transformation lies the respectful dialogue between the Gospel and the cultural identity of the people. Culture is the context in which individuals come to know themselves, relate to others, and encounter God. As articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Gospel does not reject culture but seeks to purify, elevate, and fulfill its deepest aspirations.

This pastoral principle is essential in the context of PNG, where traditional customs coexist with Christian values in both harmony and tension.¹⁴ One significant area for cultural conversion is the persistence of *sanguma*, the belief in and practice of sorcery and witchcraft. While rooted in traditional cosmology, *sanguma* has often become a vehicle for fear, violence, and scapegoating, particularly targeting vulnerable individuals such as widows or outsiders. The Gospel stands in radical opposition to such dehumanization. It affirms the sacredness of each person, proclaims freedom from fear, and calls for communities of forgiveness and healing. The transformative power of the Gospel lies precisely in its ability to unmask falsehoods, dispel fear, and nurture social structures rooted in dignity and justice.

True transformation also entails the building of communities modeled after the values of Christ, places where women and children are respected, where tribal divisions are healed, and where forgiveness, solidarity, and service are practiced as daily virtues. Evangelization must be holistic: addressing not only the soul but the social, moral, and communal dimensions of life. The Risen Christ invites all to journey together toward a shared future, where wounds are healed, and hope becomes the new language of existence.

Hope in the sacred garden

Just as Jesus, the first missionary in salvation history, proclaimed God's redemptive love with hope, so too is hope at the heart of every authentic missionary vocation. This hope is not a vague optimism, but a theological virtue rooted in the Resurrection of Christ and the unwavering promise of God's saving love. It is this hope that sustains the missionary through the long, often difficult journey of evangelization. As a spiritual force, hope empowers missionaries to remain steadfast amid discouragement, resistance, or apparent failure, trusting in the transformative power of divine love at work in the world.

In PNG, the missionary is called to embody this hope; i.e., to walk alongside wounded communities with tenderness, to dispel darkness with the light of the Gospel, and to proclaim the possibility of transformation. As the missionary accompanies the people, he or she becomes a living sacrament of God's presence, calling all to new life, deeper communion, and a shared future in Christ.

In light of this hope, after nearly three years of missionary engagement in PNG, the author continues to encounter a sense of cultural unfamiliarity and

¹⁴ Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, AAS 58 (1966), no. 44.

contrast. The initial experiences with the country's unique rhythms of life, rugged terrain, and complex socio-cultural norms have demanded ongoing adaptation and deep reflection. For example, navigating poorly maintained roads, riddled with potholes and flanked by pedestrians, has proven not only challenging but also hazardous. Traffic incidents are common, particularly when children play near roadways or intoxicated individuals wander into the path of vehicles. In such contexts, local interpretations of justice often reflect a principle akin to *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," with communal intervention sometimes occurring immediately at the scene of an accident.

Similarly, the unpredictability of air travel poses a recurring challenge. Like many locals, the author has endured long, uncertain days at airports, often without clear information regarding flight departures. On several occasions, flights were cancelled without explanation, highlighting the infrastructural limitations and systemic unpredictability that shape daily life in PNG.

Further complicating the situation are frequent power outages, which disrupt water supplies, hygiene routines, and access to communication technologies. These interruptions are particularly consequential in educational and missionary settings, where continuity and stability are essential for effective formation and ministry. Thus, life in PNG demands not only technical resourcefulness but also profound resilience, adaptability, and a spirit of service.

Despite these hardships, the author describes a gradual and grace-filled immersion into what he terms the "Sacred Garden," a metaphor for the spiritual and cultural richness of the people of Papua New Guinea. Like Moses before the burning bush, the missionary must also approach the people and their culture with reverence, humility, and openness. This journey necessitates a re-learning of basic human experiences: local languages, culinary practices, social customs, and relational dynamics. The phrase "*Mi mas lainim kaikai kaokao*/I must learn to eat sweet potatoes" has come to symbolize this self-emptying, an embrace of a worldview rooted in local wisdom and daily life.

Such a process of inculturation involves relinquishing preconceived notions and inherited cultural frameworks in order to see the world anew, through the eyes of the people. Mission is thus not merely the act of proclamation but a witness of life: marked by inclusion, mutual respect, and a shared humanity. In navigating these cultural and existential differences, the author has come to understand mission as fundamentally dialogical: an encounter that invites mutual learning, growth, and communion.

This transformative journey is not unfamiliar to the author. Having "migrated" as a Vietnamese refugee, first from Vietnam to Malaysia in 1982, then

to the Philippines in 1983, and finally to the United States in 1984, he vividly recalls the disorientation and gradual assimilation that accompanied life in San Jose, California. Adapting to a new linguistic, culinary, and social landscape in the United States, he was sustained by the enduring hope that, through grace and perseverance, he would find his place in a richly diverse society.

It was this same hope that inspired his vocational response to join the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) in 1997, committing his life to serve those on the margins. Leaving behind the familiarity of San Jose, California, he followed this call to Chicago, Illinois, where a new chapter of faith and mission unfolded.

Just as Abraham believed in God's promise and became the spiritual father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, so too did St. Arnold Janssen, founder of the SVD, nurture a bold hope, to send missionaries to China in obedience to the evangelizing mandate of Christ. Today, the Society of the Divine Word joyfully prepares to celebrate its 150th Foundation Day on September 8, 2025. Aligned with this celebration, the universal Church enters Jubilee Year 2025 with the theme "Pilgrims of Hope," a fitting reminder of the Church's missionary and pilgrim identity, as proclaimed in *Ad Gentes*, "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature."¹⁵

Rekindled by Abrahamic hope, Arnoldus hope, and *spes Ecclesiae*, a hope that sustains through trials, sees beyond daily hardship, and trusts in the quiet blossoming of the Gospel, the author continues his journey. Empowered by this theological hope, he walks his missionary pilgrimage in the Sacred Garden of Papua New Guinea, where faith takes root in the richness of local cultures and the Spirit continues to renew the face of the earth.

Conclusion

Missionary work in Papua New Guinea reveals a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities, shaped by the nation's cultural diversity and the broader dynamics of globalization. This reflection has underscored that the Church's identity as a missionary and pilgrim people demands a renewed commitment to proclaiming the Gospel in ways that are both faithful to Christ and responsive to local contexts.

The missionary is called to imitate the heart of Christ, marked by humility, incarnational presence, and loving accompaniment. Such a mission requires deep cultural sensitivity and spiritual discernment, affirming the intrinsic value

¹⁵ Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, no. 2

of local traditions while also proclaiming the transformative power of the Gospel. Evangelization, then, is not experienced as an imposition but as a seed sown into the fertile soil of PNG's spiritual and cultural landscape.

Nurtured by authentic witness, patient dialogue, and consistent pastoral presence, this seed can flourish, bearing fruit for local communities and the universal Church. As the Church journeys into the Jubilee Year 2025 as "Pilgrims of Hope," the mission in Papua New Guinea offers a compelling testimony to how faith can flourish when the Gospel is proclaimed with courage, compassion, and enduring hope.