

A
MISSIONARY
DIARY

FIJI 1973 - 2024

Frank Hoare MSSC

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to the people of Fiji among whom I have been privileged to live
and work during the last 50 years.

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FOREWORD

The stories in this book are incidents that caught my fancy while on mission in Fiji. They tell of special people and events I encountered, aspects of culture I discovered, the variety of missionary work I experienced, and insights into myself, life, and God. I have often changed names and details of context to preserve the innocent (as is said). Many of these stories were written soon after they happened and some were written later from memory.

I have written the stories for myself to celebrate the life with which God gifted me. I hope they will be also of interest to relatives, friends and supporters of Columban mission. But they are especially meant for the people of Fiji as an appreciation their cultural and religious richness. I hope that they contribute to a deeper mutual understanding and appreciation of the different ethnic communities in Fiji.

I am grateful to Ms. Rosema Dass, Sr Frances Hardiman SMSM and Mr. Patrick Dass, Ms. Adivasu Levu and Ms. Sera Tawalagi for some photos. I am especially indebted to Ms. Kate Kenny for her work as editor and for her encouragement.

Frank Hoare MSSC
Suva, Fiji
November 2024

INTRODUCTION

1. The Country

Fiji is situated in the South Pacific about 2,000 miles east of Australia and 1,500 miles north of New Zealand. It has more than 300 islands, a total area of 18,000 sq. km. and a population of under one million people. It claimed independence from Britain in 1970. It is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. Indigenous Fijians are about 60% and ethnic Indians, descendants of indentured laborers, are about 35% of the population. The majority of indigenous Fijians are Methodist while about 15% are Catholic. The majority of Indo-Fijians are Hindu with about 15% of them Muslim. Fiji is a republic with a figure head President and a parliament led by a Prime Minister. It is a developing country with tourism and sugar cane as the most important industries. Fiji has a tropical marine climate with hot wet and cooler dry seasons. Rugby, soccer and netball are the most popular games.

2. Fijian Culture: Fijians have a hierarchical and communal culture. Clan members have a very strong bond with the land they own communally, with their chief, and with their ancestor spirit. Fijians have very rich rituals marking installation of a chief, weddings, funerals, reconciliation and visiting. The chief's spokesman has an essential role in rituals. Important symbols in these rituals are *tabua* (whale's tooth), *yaqona* (a traditional drink), woven dried pandanus mats (women's wealth). A *bure* (traditional village house) is built on a stone foundation using bamboo or wooden walls and thatched roof. Common food crops are yams, dalo (or taro), tavioka (or cassava), breadfruit, sweet potatoes, and rice.

3. Indo-Fijian Culture: Indians were brought to Fiji to work in the sugar cane industry and many of their descendants are still sugar cane farmers. The family (including extended family) is the basic block of their community. They value education and the professions. An Indo-Fijian lady wears a colorful sari on formal occasions. Their food consists mostly of curry, *daal*, *roti*, and rice. Men enjoy *yaqona* socially. They have many religious rituals in weddings, funerals and worship and the main symbols used are garlands of flowers, *diya* (oil lamps), *aarti* (waving of lighted camphor). Harmonium, *tabla* and *dholak* drums accompany singing. Classical and modern dancing are popular. Speechmaking is a valued art.

SETTLING IN

I was born to Daniel and Eileen Hoare in Portlaoise, Ireland at the end of 1946. I attended the Christian Brothers' Primary School in Portlaoise and then spent one year at Patrician Brothers' Boarding School in Ballyfin. I then attended Colaiste Einde, an all-Irish speaking boarding school, in Salthill, Galway for four years. I decided to become a missionary priest and was admitted to St Columban's College, Dalgan Park in September 1964.



I arrived in Fiji in November 1973, a recently ordained 26 year old Columban missionary. I lived in the capital, Suva for a year while studying the Hindi language. It was deemed more difficult than the standard Fijian language and it was the language of the Indo-Fijian people who were predominantly Hindu and Muslim in religion.

November is the beginning of the hot and rainy season that lasts for 6 months. The heat was in the low thirties centigrade, humidity often close to 100% and the rain was frequently torrential. It was quite different from the cold grey days with gentle showers of rain that I was used to in Ireland.

I lived in our Columban Center House which was also the presbytery for St Joseph the Worker Parish, Tamavua. I was able to help the parish priest, especially at weekends, by saying Mass in English. Columban priests in other parishes in Suva and in other apostolates visited regularly so it was easy to get to know the Columban group.

I had 4 hours of class every morning in the Archdiocesan Offices in the center of Suva with a young Indo-Fijian lady teacher and I had the use of language tapes and books from a language school in India. All that was needed was the will and the effort.

12 November 1973

STYLE, MAN, STYLE

I arrived in Fiji about 10 days ago. Today I had my first Hindi class at the Archdiocesan Offices near the Cathedral.

Travelling on the bus from Princess Road to the bus station I gasped at the beauty of the flowering trees along the side of Edinburgh Drive. We don't have flowering trees in Ireland. From the bus station I walked over the bridge where boats are docked. People sell fish from them. I crossed the road at the big tree and entered Pratt Street.

The Public Works Department had dug a trench beside the footpath on the right side of the road. In the middle of the trench stood a fine strong Fijian man leaning on his shovel. He had a cigar in his mouth and a hibiscus flower over this ear and a mighty smile on his face. I could only smile at him in return and admire his style. We don't have PWD workers like that in Ireland either.



9 April 1974

THE EASTER EXULTET

While studying Hindi from the Columban Center House in Suva during my first year in Fiji I have been saying Mass at the Home of Compassion nearby. The Sisters, elderly residents and a few parishioners have been attending the Easter ceremonies. I was the celebrant for the Easter Vigil



tonight. This was my first time ever to officiate at the Vigil – the liturgical high point of the year. I carefully studied the words, actions and sequence of the different stages. I decided that it would be safer for me to say rather than sing the Exultet after lighting the Easter candle. Afterwards the community leader remarked to me, "I'm surprised that you didn't sing the Exultet. When Fr O'Loughlin was here he would spend the whole day practicing before singing it. And he couldn't sing.

10 April 1974 **GOSSIP ON THE WAY TO EASTER DINNER**

Christmas and Easter are occasions of feasting for Fijian extended families. Whole pigs, chickens, fish and root crops are cooked in earth ovens. A long table cloth is spread on the floor the length of the house (or veranda) with places set on both sides. The owner of the house or the guest of honor sits at the top and others squat in their appropriate places according to the hierarchy of the extended family.

Three or four of us Columban priests were invited to participate in the Easter feast with a parishioner's family. They lived at the edge of the parish, down a steep incline. We parked above and walked carefully down the slope. Fr Ed Quinn, a fine handsome man with deep blue eyes, was walking ahead of me and there were two ladies behind me. I was startled to overhear one of the ladies say to her companion, "If Fr Quinn wasn't a priest, I would go for him!" Not what I expected on Easter Day, but very human!



Fr. Ed Quinn

29 June 1974 **WHEN TO ASK A QUESTION**

In my early days as a priest while on a visit to the island of Taveuni, I was drinking *yaqona* one night with a group of villagers. About eight or nine Fijians in the group chatted, told stories and, at times, asked questions. The session started about 8.00 p.m. I was on holidays and had a good capacity for *yaqona* at that time. So I was happy to stay on until the end.

Around midnight some of the group left for home. A few remained for another hour or so until only one young man remained with me. He gradually worked up to a personal question. Was it all right to have sexual intercourse with his wife during her period? I tried not to show the inadequacy I felt but tried to answer as best I could.



I was struck afterwards by the setting chosen for this very personal question. After a few hours of *yaqona* the drinkers are calm and sleepy. So less courage is required to broach a difficult topic. It was also safer to raise the question to just one other person. There is less chance of being the butt of jokes or teasing afterwards. Drinking *yaqona* late at night has some pastoral advantages.

4 July 1974

THE PROFESSOR AND HIS WIFE

He got out of the car and stood on the path. His wife linked arms and they walked towards the steps. A brief pause, then they climbed the seven steps together. Another brief pause. They moved forward. Ahead the path takes a 90 degree turn to the left. Reaching the bend, she drew his arm ever so slightly towards her. Together they wheeled left and continued. Reaching the steps leading to the old Cathedral presbytery veranda she gave a slight downward tug followed by the lightest lift of his elbow. They climbed the two concrete steps together. Again, a slight pressure of her hand on his arm. They turned to the right and walked to where I awaited them. Then, it dawned on me. My guest, Professor Moag, distinguished linguist and expert on Hindi language, was blind.

As I prepared coffee for them I reflected on the exquisite delicacy of their partnership. She did not command or even speak. He was completely attentive to her touch. Neither one hurried. Everything was done together, almost as one. He was making himself available. She was his essential guide.

I have forgotten now what information about Hindi I received from the Professor that evening but the lesson of his partnership with his wife remains. We Christians are like the Professor. We have a mission - a service to give, a witness to offer. But we are blind to how we should do it. Obstacles lie before us. We might fall. It seems safer to stay put, to do nothing. But the invitation is persistent and we have a partner to guide us.

The Holy Spirit won't command or demand; won't embarrass or force us. Her touch is gentle and light. But we must give our full attention. Without her direction we won't reach our destination. Walking together as one, we partner with the Spirit. We are led to where we should go; we live our Pentecost.



13 September 1974

FRENCH CUSINE IN FIJI

Today I escaped from my Hindi studies to visit two veteran French missionaries, Frs Cocereau and Debois at Naililili mission station. I was impressed by the fine old church despite the green fungus on the walls. I heard that Fr Debois had polled his way in a boat up the aisle to say Mass there during a flood. It is still no bother to him to tramp in his big boots to nearby villages.



Naililili Church, Rewa

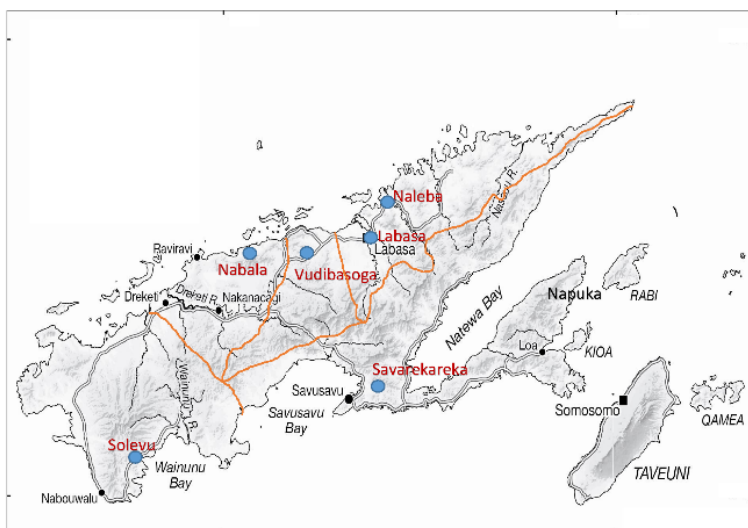
Fr Cocereau showed me his cassava flour factory. The Rewa delta is very vulnerable to flooding. The root crops here - cassava and taro - can be stored only for a few days before they become inedible. Fr Cocereau found a solution. By peeling, drying and scraping the cassava into flour it can be preserved for a long time. The villagers can cook and eat it until the new crops, planted after the flood, are ready. Impressive!

The two priests invited me to lunch and even offered some home-made wine. I was impressed again. The wine was poured into the three glasses and I raised my glass to drink. I was embarrassed to find wine trickling down my raised arm. I hoped they hadn't noticed. I sipped the wine again - very carefully. But once more a trickle of wine ran down my arm. I was totally confused. The two Frenchmen burst out laughing.

The glass was perforated right around, near the lip, with tiny holes. Whatever way it was tipped the wine would leak out. I was one of many guests caught out!



2. NALEBA



A view of Naleba church compound



Naleba is a settlement about 20 km. from Labasa town on the second main island of Fiji, Vanua Levu. It is part of Holy Family Parish, Labasa. There was a small community of about 20 Catholic

families scattered around Naleba and nearby settlements. It had a small wooden church with a room at the back where I stayed. My appointment there was ideal for improving my knowledge and fluency in Hindi.

7th November 1974

EARLY DAYS ON MISSION

After my Hindi course in Suva I came to Labasa a few days ago. Fr Pat McCaffrey, the Parish Priest of Labasa, brought me here to Naleba settlement three nights ago. Fr Pat showed me to my small room at the back of the church, introduced me to a Catholic family celebrating a birthday, and then returned to the town. It is simple living here - no electricity, no fridge, no gas, no oven, an outside pit toilet and shower. It was only when Fr Pat had gone that I realized that he hadn't told me what to do for meals.

I woke from sleep in the middle of the first night. I looked out over the darkened cane fields to the distant sea glimmering faintly in the moonlight. A flash of lightning suddenly lit up the whole countryside below, where my missionary journey would begin. I went back to sleep then but was woken at daybreak by persistent loud knocking at my door. "Get up, Father. It is six o'clock!" I opened the door to find Gabriel, a mentally challenged young man, anxious to see me up early and about my work like everyone else in the settlement.

After some prayers I made a cup of tea using a kerosene stove and ate some crackers with peanut butter. I then had a look around my room and the church before exploring the surrounding area. One of my neighbors was a Muslim family. They called out to me in a friendly way. While chatting I discovered that the daughter in the family had cut her foot. I got my first aid kit, cleaned the wound and put a plaster on it. Her mother offered me lunch. I was glad to accept.

Yesterday, I did a similar round of the neighborhood and changed the dressing on my neighbor's foot. I again gratefully accepted the offer of lunch. On both evenings I went further afield to some Catholic families and after evening prayers was invited to share dinner.

This morning, Gabriel arrived to tell me that his grandmother wanted to talk to me. This fine old lady looked agitated. She said, "Since you came here you have had lunch each day with a Muslim family. You are supposed to come here to my house for lunch like the other priests. You belong to us, not to them!"



Gabriel's Nani (grandmother)

4 March 1975 **INDO-FIJIAN DEVOTION AND ASCETICISM**

It is my first Lent in Naleba. I notice that Indo-Fijians have their own spirituality. Prayer for healing is very important. One of my neighbors – an elderly Muslim lady, said to me when I visited her, “I have a headache, Father. Can you blow it away?” This idea of blowing a headache away was a new concept for me. So I laid my hands on her head and prayed out loud in Hindi for her. I hope she wasn’t disappointed.

Indo-Fijians love *bhajans* (hymns), *kirtans* (call and response hymns) and *naam jap* (chanting God’s name). These are forms of devotion that capture their minds and hearts. They feel close to God and joyful in God’s presence when they sing or chant in this way.



Naleba Choir with harmonium, tabla drums, and other instruments

The most striking aspect of their spirituality for me at this stage is how seriously they take fasting. I was shocked and felt guilty when I heard that the teenage girls attending the church here eat only one meal a day all through Lent. And there is no meat in that meal. This is much stricter than our Catholic rule for fasting. I wonder if I could manage it.

8 April 1975

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Some priests have a talent for developing a site. Not me! Buildings are neither my interest nor my talent. However my appointment to Naleba in November 1974 pushed me to get involved in a small way. There was, on the compound, only a small wooden church with a priest's bedroom at the back. At least, a place for people to hold meetings, shelter and socialize was needed.

Plans were made for a simple shed with two walls, concrete floor and galvanized iron roof. A carpenter and one paid helper were employed. The male Church members would supply voluntary labor. A day was agreed for the men to dig the foundations, which had already been measured out by the carpenter.

It was a hot day and it had been raining early in the morning. A few of the elders arrived and sat waiting for others to come. One of the leaders began complaining that everyone should be present at the agreed time but it looked as if the job would be left to the usual few. I could feel an atmosphere of despondency settle over the small group.

Then, without saying anything the Church Committee President, one of the seniors, stood up, laid aside his jacket and began to dig the foundation. Others soon joined him until all were on the job. It was finished by lunch time.

For me, it was a lesson in leadership.



Fr Frank Hoare with Gabriel, Mr Pitch Muttu, and Mr Emosi Caniogo (of Labasa)

I was invited by a couple of head teachers of primary schools to explain to students the meaning of Good Friday and Easter.

I used as illustrations a scroll of large pictures of the trial of Jesus, his carrying the cross and his crucifixion. This helped me to explain the opposition, unjust accusations, sentence of death and suffering Jesus faced. I also explained how he forgave his tormentors and promised paradise to the repentant thief.

In one school a boy asked, "Why is the day on which Jesus was killed called 'Good' Friday? Surely it was a 'bad' Friday. I had never heard that question asked before, nor had I ever asked it of myself.

I realized that the boy was asking the question from his own Hindu religious background. Hindus believe that the world goes through four epochs in succession and declines in virtue through those epochs. The fourth era, Kali Yuga, is so corrupt that a divine being is born in the world to abolish wickedness by destroying sinful people. The cycle then begins again. For the Hindu boy, if Jesus was a divine man he should have been

powerful enough to restore righteousness by destroying his enemies.



I answered the boy by saying that although, as God, Jesus was all powerful he loved even the evil men who crucified him. He wanted, not to destroy, but to win them over with love. He prayed that their evil deeds would be forgiven and that accepting his forgiveness, they too, like the repentant thief, would receive a place in God's Kingdom. Jesus wanted to overcome violence by non-violence, and evil and sin with love.

The sign that this was actually effected was that God raised Jesus from the dead on Easter Sunday morning. This shows that Jesus has conquered sin and death, our greatest enemies. So we Christians call that day 'Good' Friday because we see revealed there the extreme goodness and extraordinary love of God. It was the day that God offered salvation to all people through forgiveness of their sins.

I don't know if my explanation of the meaning of Good Friday made sense to that young boy, but his question certainly made me think more deeply about my faith.

14 April 1975

EASTER JOY

The eggs that hens lay on Good Friday used to be collected in Ireland and marked with a cross. On Easter Sunday morning these eggs were boiled and eaten by the family. Eggs were a staple food of the poor.

We rejoice in the great gift of life. But as we grow older this gift is overshadowed by experiences of illness, pain, and loss. The certainty of an ever-approaching death often makes life itself seem meaningless.

Billions of Indian people have prayed for over 5,000 years "Lord lead us from falsehood to truth, from darkness to light, and from death to eternal life." That heartfelt cry resounds in all people who recoil at the prospect of annihilation while being helpless to do anything about it.

God, in Jesus Christ, has wonderfully answered this prayer. Jesus, moved by the Spirit, inaugurated the Kingdom of God by healing, casting out evil spirits, calling all to conversion and offering forgiveness and the fellowship of love to all who believed his message. He endured the opposition of his religious leaders, physical suffering, loneliness and even the sense of being abandoned by his Father as he was dying.

Jesus lived and died in solidarity with all humans. He rose above our human nature in forgiving and loving those who killed him, and in being raised from the dead by God. He broke the power of death by enduring it and then conquering it. Jesus was raised to a new and eternal life and offered all, who believe, this amazing grace too.

Women were the first witnesses of this cosmic miracle. Their incredible message caused Peter and John to race to the empty tomb. Mary Magdalen wanted to cling to her beloved Lord. Thomas refused to believe without certain proof. The apostles were paralyzed with fear and doubt until Jesus showed he wasn't a ghost. The experience of their encounter with the Risen Christ changed them completely. They became new people. They found a new life.

The Risen Christ brought peace, forgiveness and a new creation. It was an incredible experience of God's love. It was a new covenant written on the heart. The joy and wonder of it all could only find expression in a mission to share this hope and love with others.

Is it any wonder that Irish people saw in the egg a symbol of new life, gifted by Jesus on Good Friday and offered to us in all its fullness on Easter Sunday?

19 May 1975

MY FIRST INDIAN WEDDING

It was a big occasion. But I wasn't happy. The groom's father had told me that the wedding was fixed for the school holidays in May.

"But I will be in Suva at that time for my annual retreat and a short holiday. You are supposed to discuss the date with the priest before confirming it."

"But our two families have agreed to this. My son is a teacher and the holidays will give us time to prepare well. The invitations have been sent out so it must go ahead."

To make things worse they had fixed the wedding for a Sunday at 10.00 a.m. the normal time for Mass. The wedding was to be at the bride's uncle's home in a different settlement. Although both bride and groom were Catholic, the wedding wouldn't include Mass because many of the guests would be Hindu. To compromise I switched Sunday Mass in Naleba to after the wedding and insisted that the bride and groom must be present. There was some opposition but the groom's father gave in on this.

The wedding was fairly straight-forward as the families had included only a few cultural rituals. The bride's father stood apart and cried loudly as his daughter was leaving with the groom's party. On arrival at Naleba the bride and bridegroom walked the short distance from his home to the small church for Mass.

The groom later filled me in on some background. "It is our custom that after the wedding the bride and groom be very reserved and should not be exposed to outside people. The bride should go directly to the groom's home... The elders at my home were very angry. They said that after the wedding we should have come directly to the house without going to the church or anywhere else. They said that it is against God for newly married people not to go directly home to the house."

Clearly we had a culture clash with different assumptions on both sides.



Mr David Krishna and his parents

24 July 1975

A KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR

The settlement was agog. The rumor spread like wildfire that one of my Muslim neighbors had been caught having an affair with another Muslim neighbor's wife. I was sitting among some men in a house a couple of nights ago. One of our stalwart Catholics inquired of a Hindu man about the incident. "Were they actually caught together in the act?" he asked. He was assured that it was so.

I was surprised this morning when the lady in question arrived at the church. "I have to go to my family house (in another settlement about 10 miles away)," she said. "I want you to come with us please." I was taken aback. I didn't really know her and certainly didn't know any of her family. I protested that there was no reason for me to go as I could do nothing. "No," she said, "It is very important that you come. People will respect you and listen to your advice." My arguments cut no ice. She begged and begged that I accompany them. So in the end, against my better judgment, thinking perhaps that I could encourage reconciliation and forgiveness I gave in and went with them.

On arrival at the large farmhouse there were four or five men gathered with serious faces – her Muslim brothers, I assumed. I was introduced to them and I could see that they didn't know what to do with me but still wanted to be polite. They sat me down in a corner of a large room while they went to the other corner and carried on an intense conversation. I wasn't asked why I was there and certainly wasn't asked for my opinion on anything. I felt acutely embarrassed and foolish.

After about an hour they invited me for lunch and sent me back to Naleba in the same vehicle in which I had come. There was no sign of the lady. Her husband and family left Naleba for good a couple of days later. I never did find out what the outcome of that discussion was.



Fr Frank speaking with some Catholic ladies

On our week long 70 km. journey walking from Naleba to Lagalaga, my young companion, Sog Lingam, and I intended to explain the meaning of Christmas to Hindus and Muslims. All those in a house and sometimes neighbours too would gather around us as I went through the routine.

“Do you know the meaning of Christmas?”

“Yes. It is a holiday. We kill a goat, make curry and have a big feed. The men drink whiskey and beer and women and children drink lemonade. Christmas is a very sinful day. Look at all the animals that are killed for food and all the alcohol that is drunk”.

The idea that Christmas is a sinful day knocked me off balance a bit. But it did introduce the topic of sin (and its opposite – redemption). So I explained how every day is a sinful day but how at Christmas God sent his Son to save the world from sin; and how this Son, Jesus, was born of a poor but faith-filled mother. This child was God’s greatest gift to a sinful world. He would defeat Satan and bring about God’s kingdom of justice and peace. The angels, knowing this, sang their hymn of praise announcing peace to people of faith and good will.

The non-Christians listened with rapt attention. They examined the pictures in our Christmas chart with interest. They could identify with the shepherds who brought their gifts for God’s Son. Then, leaving them a Hindi pamphlet and asking them to say a special prayer for peace on Christmas day, Sog Lingam and I would move onto another house.



The Indian hospitality created a problem for us. There is a limit to the amount of sweet tea a person can drink. I soon reached my limit yet I

knew that to refuse the hospitality would be a refusal to accept them.

We solved the dilemma by asking in most houses for water instead of tea. Walking in the heat was sweaty work so drinking plenty of water was no problem. At the end of the day we were glad to rest with a Catholic family, share their rice and curry and rest our weary legs.

21 December 1975

RAM SAMUJ

Sog Lingam and I arrived at Wainikoro settlement on the fourth day of walking from house to house explaining the meaning of Christmas. Ram Samuj was sitting in front of a shop. He greeted us curiously and invited us to a shady spot on the grass. He asked where we were going. I shared the meaning of Christmas with him. We spoke about the drunkenness and fights that unfortunately gave the feast a bad name.

"You have walked all this way to tell us the real meaning of Christmas. You are a holy man; you are a saint; you are an incarnation of God!" Ram Samuj enthused. I protested that he was going too far, I was very human. But we agreed on the importance of a more spiritual celebration of Christmas.

Christmas came and went.

A few weeks after Christmas I attended a funeral in Wainikoro. Afterwards I asked a local villager how my friend Ram Samuj was. "Oh, that was very sad," he answered.

"What, has he died or is he seriously sick?" I asked.

"No! He drank alcohol on Christmas Day until he got drunk. Then he went outside and began to curse and swear at a neighbour with whom he had a grievance. He threw stones at his house. The police were called and now he is in jail in Labasa!"



The shop in Wainikoro

After fifteen months here I have settled into my ministry among the Indo-Fijians in Naleba. I enjoy attending the prayer meetings in four areas of the settlement on different evenings of the week. I usually walk to these places. Sometimes for a special prayer or Mass in a more distant settlement I borrow the parish van and drive there.

Two SMSM Sisters teach at Naleba College as a missionary service among the Indo-Fijian people. They live together in one of the teachers' quarters just below the church. They also attend some of the nearby prayer meetings and accompany me in the van to other gatherings further away.

This evening I drove Sr Noelita and Sr Frances to a prayer meeting at Wavuwavu. We travelled on a muddy track to reach one of the main roads through the Naleba settlement. We approached a rickety bridge crossing a deep drain. Heavy rain had washed part of the bridge away. Sr Noelita, who may have had some doubts about my driving ability anyway, said somewhat nervously to me, "Be careful Father, the drain is dangerous." I responded sweetly, "Trust me, Sister." Without a moment's pause she retorted, "Father, even God doesn't ask the impossible!"

The score: Columbans 0, SMSM Sisters 1



Sr Noelita (center) at a Hindu wedding

18 April 1976

BAPTISM BY IMMERSION

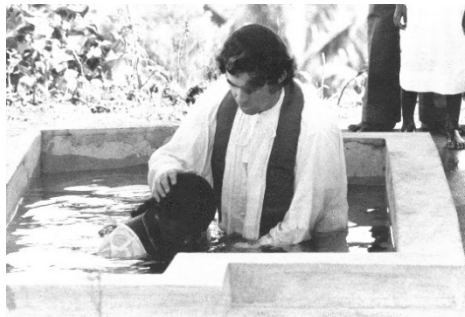
Purity and cleanliness are major values in the ethnic Indian culture. The sacrament of Baptism, which is a ritual of washing, has deep meaning for Indo-Fijians. However, there are complications involved because of beliefs regarding pollution and modesty, as I found out when introducing baptism by immersion to an ethnic Indian community in Fiji.

Vatican II recommended longer preparation and baptism by immersion for adults, as practiced in the early Church. The symbolism of baptism by immersion is seen clearly in the words of St. Paul "By our baptism then we were buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a new life." (Romans 6:4) Archbishop Pearce gave permission for a concrete font to be sited in front of the open shed on one side of the church. Steps led down from one end and up to the other end. It would be kept clean and sheltered by a cover when not in use.

I instructed the community on the history and symbolism of this form of baptism. During discussions with the community some men objected to men and women, even if fully clothed, being immersed in the same water. Fear of pollution from menstrual blood exists in many cultures. This was not spelt out in detail, but it could not be mistaken. One of the church elders came to my support saying, "If Father blesses this water, it is clean and cannot harm anyone!" The shrillness softened, but there was still no consensus. Finally a compromise was reached, to which the men could agree. The water would be flowing and the men would be baptized before the women.

At that time, Hindi films did not show any female nudity. Instead, the shapely female form was sexualized by female actresses falling into water and emerging with dress clinging tightly to their skin. We ensured that a lady emerging from the baptismal font with wet clothes would be quickly wrapped by her sponsor in a large white sheet. This ensured modesty, and the white cloth also symbolized the new life of Christ which they received in baptism.

With these preparations in place, two adult men, two young boys, and two adult women were baptized on Holy Saturday night 1976. It is now taken for granted in Naleba that this is how adult baptism can best be celebrated.

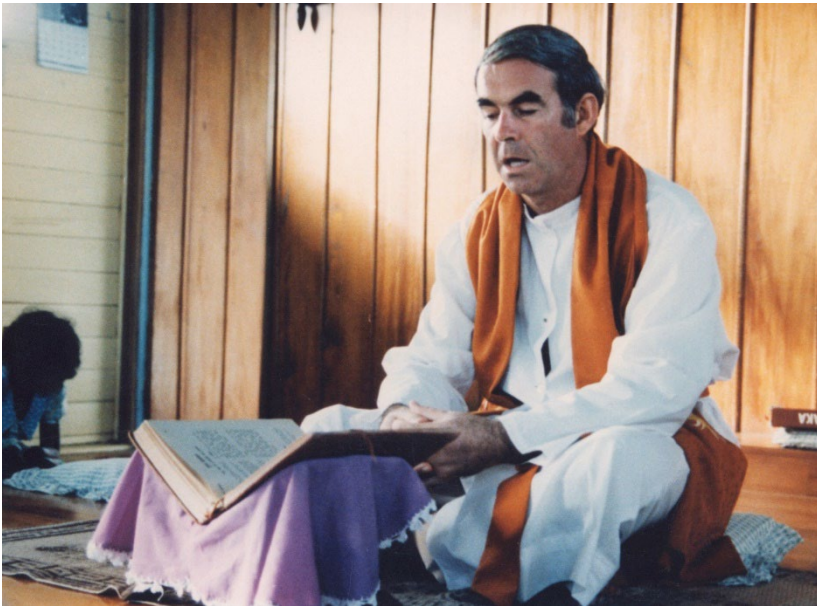


25 April 1976

PREACHING AND PSYCHOLOGY

I am now in my second year in Naleba and I am becoming more at home with Hindi. Preaching in Hindi still takes preparation but I am not so nervous now.

I have been reading about Transactional Psychology recently. The book explains that there is a “child,” an “adult,” and a “parent” inside each of us. The child within us likes to joke and play, the adult within us makes plans and decisions based on reason, and the parent in us acts as a conscience and judges behavior. We need all three aspects of the self but the adult is the most mature of the three.



Last Sunday I decided to introduce some of these ideas to my Naleba congregation. I briefly explained the outline of the theory. I then said, pointing to one of the youths, that there was a child in him. This statement was met with some puzzlement. I pressed on regardless. “There is even a child in Nani (grandmother).” The elderly lady in question looked startled. Now well into my stride there was no stopping me. “There is even a child in Dur Sami,” I said, naming a rather portly but highly respected elder of the community.

By this time the young men in the congregation were holding their sides and putting their hands over their mouths to prevent themselves from laughing out loud. It was time to move onto the story that Jesus had told in the gospel of the day!

3 May 1976

THE PUNDIT'S ADVICE

I called on a Hindu couple today in a rural settlement. The wife welcomed me with a cup of tea, as usual. Her husband was pottering around the compound but he came over to chat.

The wife took the opportunity to complain about him. "We had a fight a few days ago. We are not talking. The only time I speak to him is when I place his meal before him. Then I say, "Here is your meal." Surprised, I asked her why, if they were not on speaking terms, she nevertheless announced his meal.

"It's not because of him," she explained. "It's because the pundit who performed our wedding told me during the ceremony that it is my responsibility before God to tell my husband that his meal is ready. That is why I say it."

I was impressed that a bride would remember and apply the teaching of her wedding day even when she was upset with her husband. It was surely a bridge for reconciliation too.

I hope that some of those whose weddings I have celebrated remember my advice too!



Gabriel's grandmother who hosted me for daily lunch

9 July 1976

SUNDAY MASS ATTENDANCE

My second year in Naleba settlement continues. The neighbourhood prayer meetings (or *mandalis*) are going well. I have a regular schedule of catechism classes with the school children and the ladies' groups. I am often invited to speak at Hindu or Muslim funerals or weddings.

The problem in Naleba is Sunday Mass. I grew up believing that it would be a mortal sin if someone missed Sunday Mass without a serious reason. That belief is not widespread in Naleba. On Sundays, there is only a handful of people in church. The young men say that they have to cut sugar cane. The older folk give the excuse of a Hindu wedding in the settlement or visitors who must be entertained.

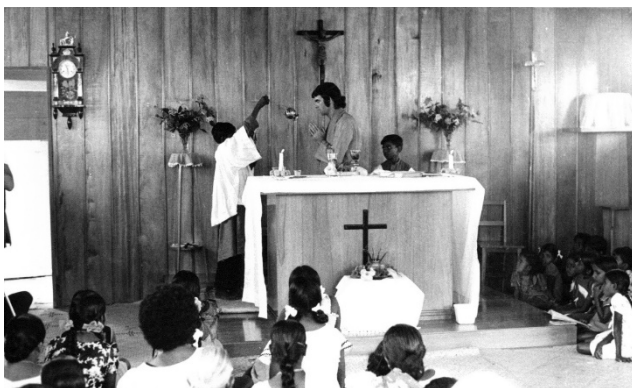
I considered myself a zealous young priest, tasked with improving the practice of faith. So I began visiting the Catholic homes on Saturdays to remind them of our duty to attend Sunday Mass. "Don't forget now.

Ten o'clock. Don't be late. There will still be time to go to the wedding or entertain visitors afterwards!" It felt good to see the numbers at Mass improving.

There were two problems, however. Firstly,

when I left Naleba to learn the Fijian language I heard that the numbers attending Mass had gone down again. It seems that people had attended Mass because of my pressure rather than for their spiritual good. Secondly, my motivation for filling the church on Sundays was not just the glory of God. Unconsciously, I was striving to be successful for my own glory.

I remembered my early years in secondary school. In the first exam I came second in my class. The results of the second exam arrived by post. My mother brought the report card into my bedroom. "You were only fourth," she announced with a disappointed tone. In the next exam, as you can guess, I came first in class. It seems that in Naleba I was still trying to please my mother with my achievements.



My friend Prabhu Dass arrived at the Naleba church just as I finished my breakfast. "Father, Let's go to my uncle's house to persuade the old man to come to a funeral in Lagalaga today."

"Why do you want me to persuade him to go to the funeral? It's up to him, isn't it?" I replied.

"His daughter was being treated badly by her Hindu husband a couple of years ago. My uncle had a big falling out with Subramani, her father-in-law, over that. They haven't spoken since. Now Subramani's son, her husband has been killed in a car accident. The funeral is today. If we can persuade my uncle to attend the funeral it will bring reconciliation between the two old men, because Subramani will have to greet him if he arrives for the funeral."

We went to his uncle's place. Prabhu Dass gave him the news of his son-in-law's death. I chipped in and said that this occasion would never come again. We should all show our respect by attending the funeral. The old man eventually agreed to come with us.

A large number of men were standing around the house of mourning. I didn't know anyone and they all seemed to be staring at me



An Indo-Fijian funeral

wondering who this white man was. I decided to take courage and approach them. I spoke to many of them one by one and introduced myself as the priest from Naleba, a friend of the dead man's in-laws. That broke the ice and I no longer felt like a fish out of water.

After the funeral, Subramani spoke to me. "Father," he said, "My father and son have both died. I have no one now ahead of me or behind me. Will you come back here in a few weeks' time and explain life and death to me." I was amazed at the trust and hope that a Hindu man, whom I didn't know, was putting in me. I agreed. As we returned to Naleba I mused on how the reconciliation had come about together with an invitation to speak about the meaning of life to a Hindu family. I must prepare myself well.

13 September 1976

TIRIKUTTU – A SOUTH INDIAN FOLK DANCE

Our Committee President in Naleba was very interested in Tirikuttu. It is a South Indian dance drama – a form of ritual and social entertainment and a medium of social instruction. It usually tells a story in song from the Mahabharat Hindu scriptures, often focused on Draupadi, wife of the Pandava brothers. The actors wear very colorful costumes. It is performed in an open space with the audience sitting or standing on three sides while the all male actors perform in front of the musicians and chorus. A prayer is said to Ganesh, the elephant god and remover of obstacles, at the beginning of a performance.

Our Committee President used to participate. In fact he was one of the teachers or directors of the dance drama. Our Committee Secretary had strong objections. He said to me that it was scandalous that a Catholic would take part in a Hindu performance. I asked the President about it. He said that for him it was just a pastime and fun. I wasn't sure if there were other issues, between the two, involved. Since I didn't know enough about it I made no pronouncements.

Some months later I was surprised early one Sunday morning to see the President and another Catholic man arrive at the church a couple of hours before Mass was to begin. They asked my permission to say their prayers and go home to sleep because they were tired from dancing the Tirikuttu all night.

I said that I hadn't made the Church law of attending Mass on Sunday so I couldn't give permission to miss it. They would have to make their own decision according to their conscience. They murmured sadly to each other but they were still there when I began Mass a couple of hours later.

They were two tired men trudging home after Mass. But it was their own fault.



Tirikuttu dance

8 October 1976

THE SUGAR TRAIN IS COMING

It was towards the end of the dry season. Six of us set out for an Indian settlement where a school teacher had arranged for us to show the film, *King of Kings*, in Hindi. The projector, generator and three of us men were wedged into the back of the small Mazda van. Something was wrong with the battery and we had to start the van by pushing it downhill. Sr Frances was driving. "Sister, don't let the engine cut out!"

A local youth volunteered to show us to the school. We travelled slowly about two miles along a narrow dirt road, pockmarked with holes and flanked on both sides with ugly mangrove swamps. We halted in front of a narrow gauge railway line running right across our path. I could see nothing on the other side of the tracks.

Our local guide said to drive on the railway line for about 600 yards to reach the road again. He insisted that other cars did it all the time. Reluctantly Sister drove slowly with one wheel outside the tracks and one between the tracks. In the middle, the stones and sand between the concrete ties had been washed away. The van went bump...bump...bump and stopped. The body of the van was resting on the concrete sleepers. We realized in horror that we couldn't go forward or back! We remembered the faulty battery. We must not let the engine die.

The rail tracks lay along a narrow strip of embankment. The stagnant waters of the mangrove swamp lay about four feet

below on both sides of the embankment. It was dark except for the pale light of the moon and stars. Frantically we searched for timber, branches, or rocks to raise the wheels. We men, walking ahead to where the tracks met the road again, spotted two men coming towards us. "You'd better get your van out of there fast," shouted one of them. We have come to meet the sugar train – it's due any minute."

The same possibility had occurred to the women back at the van. One of them was nervously going from one edge of the embankment to the other saying "What will happen to us if the train comes?" The other



old lady stoically asked, "Are you not ready to go? I am." This made the first even more in danger of tumbling into the swamp. Sr Frances summoning all her authority, barked out, "Both of you, sit down at once." They sat down.

We pointed out the problem to the local men. "That's easily solved," said one. "Just drive with one of the forward wheels on top of the track." It sounded impossible but he was insistent. I got behind the wheel. The floor was as hot as hell. But with the two men shouting instructions it worked. When we reached the road, I turned the van around and drove slowly back the same way. We reached the road home. I took a deep breath thanking God that the engine had not cut out. Within two minutes the sugar train came thundering by – just like in the movies.

We didn't reach the village that night. So we didn't preach to others. But we learned a lesson ourselves that we'll never forget.

29 December 1976 **MOVING ON**

My two years in Naleba and Labasa came to an end after Christmas 1976. But it had a fitting conclusion. I organized a tour for 13 of the men around Viti Levu, the main island of Fiji. It was the first time for many to go there. We spent some days in Suva and visited the cathedral and other notable places. We had Mass and socials with groups of Indo-Fijian Catholics. Their hymn singing and speeches were much admired. We also visited Lautoka and Ba in the West of Viti Levu. Catholic Indo-Fijian families hosted them in their homes. They left me in Suva at the end of the year.



The Naleba group in front of the Cathedral

3. FIJIAN MINISTRY 1977-'78

After two years in Naleba and Labasa I began to study the standard Fijian language and culture for six months in Suva. After the formal study I was blessed to live for two months in the village of Nacamaki on Koro Island in a small room at the back of the village hall. Saying Mass in Fijian and eating with a different family in the village every day helped me to practice Fijian, experience the everyday lifestyle and culture and to get to know the people.

I was then appointed to the parish of Nabala, southeast of Labasa, town for eight months before I went to Ireland for my first holiday. Nabala had a church and a secondary school. A new parish center and primary school was being completed inland at Vudibasoga at that time.



Nabala Parish Compound and Secondary School

26 March 1977

THEY ALL SOUND THE SAME!



It is great to have a chance to learn the Fijian language and culture. I have been studying Fijian for almost three months now. It has been decided that I should spend Holy Week helping Fr Seamus McMahon at Naililili.

Just before I started my Fijian course, I did a fifteen minutes' Hindi interview with Thomas Ambika Nand for Radio Fiji. He also recorded me playing the harmonium while singing a Hindi *bhajan* (hymn). I never heard when the program would be broadcast. I actually forgot about it.

Fr McMahon had lined up a full program for Holy Week. Monday evening was for married couples to renew their vows. The anointing of the sick and elderly took place on Tuesday. Tonight, Wednesday evening, we both heard confessions for hours. These were my first confessions in Fijian and I didn't understand all that was said to me. One lady told a very sad story with copious tears. I was embarrassed at not understanding the problem and I had very little in the way of comfort or advice to offer.

After that "baptism by fire" I joined Fr Seamus in the presbytery for a cup of tea. I absentmindedly switched on the radio – just in time to hear myself singing the Hindi *bhajan* (hymn) I had recorded three months previously. I turned to Fr Seamus and asked him if he knew who was singing. He said that he had no idea. "But, you actually know this singer," I said to him. He listened again for a few moments and said, "All those Indian singers sound the same to me!" I laughed.



Mrs Minachi and Anand

Archbishop Pearce was the second Archbishop of Fiji from 1967-1974. He was concerned for the evangelization of the ethnic Indian people of Fiji. He went to India and raised this need in some of the seminaries there.

The first responders to his invitation were the Indian Missionary Society priests who set up St Michael's Parish in Nadi and the Ashram (retreat house) at Namata. A few diocesan priests like Fr Frank Foran and Fr Joseph Mundakal volunteered to work in Fiji. About eight Indian seminarians also transferred to Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva and completed their theology there. They then

worked for some years in Fiji, though most of them moved to other countries later.

Among those who spent a few years in Fiji during the 1970s were three French Canadian Capuchin priests who had previously worked in India. They served in St Agnes Parish, Samabula. I sought to evangelize ethnic Indians so I asked advice from one of them - Fr Dion. "I can certainly tell you what not to do," he said. "Don't do what we Capuchins did in India. We built a big house to live in. The people around us realized that we were rich. They came, in increasing numbers, begging from us every day. So we built a high wall and put locked gates in it to keep them out. Then we realized that it had become impossible for us to spread the gospel because we had cut ourselves off from the people.

We should have gone there with nothing and asked help from the poor people there. Then they would have seen us as holy people. They would have shared what they had with us and come to us for spiritual enlightenment."

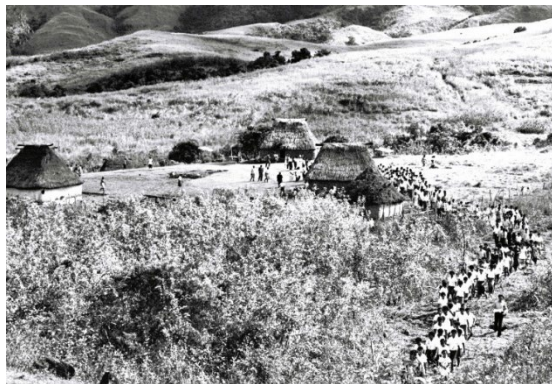


Margatet and Kamachi

27 June 1977

JOURNEY TO NABUTAUTAU.

The people of Nabutautau village believed that a curse was preventing their progress because their ancestors killed and ate a Methodist missionary, Rev. Baker. They invited Archbishop Mataca to come to their village to exorcise the evil. The Archbishop decided to walk in pilgrimage from Vanuakula Parish (where Fr John



People making their way to Nabutautau

Mahoney SSC was the parish priest) to Bemana (where Fr Chanel Cyr SM was parish priest). Fr Tom Rouse and I were just finishing our Fijian language course and we were delighted to go along too.

We set out from Vanuakula with about 50 catechists crossing and recrossing the Wainimala River over 50 times. In one of the villages near the headwaters the old catechist was preventing the young trained catechist from making any changes. Archbishop Mataca thanked him for his service with a *tabua* (whale's tooth) and officially retired him. However when we sat down to eat, the old man straightened up and began, "*E na yaca ni Kalou....*" (In the name of the Father....).

We two young priests suffered on the climb up the mountain track to reach the Nadrau plateau but the Archbishop and the older priests seemed to glide barefooted along. We camped on the plateau under banana leaf shelters. A few catechists caught a large eel which they roasted with the *dalo* (taro) they had brought. I slipped fully clothed into my sleeping bag but hardly got a wink of sleep because of the cold. Descending the mountain was harder than climbing it. Our knees and thighs were paining from constantly breaking our descent.

We rested at Nasauvakarua village and then reached Nabutautau where we were met by a couple of hundred people who arrived by road from the Western side. After the welcoming rituals we assisted at a solemn Mass and blessing of the village. Once dinner was over, a large group sat drinking *yaqona* under the moon and the stars as Fr Jim Johnston SM regaled us with his funny stories. Today we left for Namoli and the sacrament of Confirmation in Draubuta village. But that's another story.

30 June 1977

A SIXTH SENSE

Archbishop Mataca and his entourage of five priests and 50 catechists left the village of Nabutautau after saying a Mass of Reconciliation requested by the villagers whose ancestors had murdered Rev. Baker in 1867. We hiked along the trail until we came to the village of Namoli where we rested for lunch. I began to feel sick. I was advised to stay in Namoli while the Archbishop and followers went onto Draubuta village to confer the sacrament of confirmation.

I rested for two days and was well enough then to strike out with some companions for the parish center at Bemana. That evening I chatted there with the Archbishop about the pilgrimage we had just completed. Archbishop Mataca told me that on awakening the previous morning at Draubuta he went to the river to wash. As he bent down to the water he felt as though there was blood coming from his forehead. He put his hand up to his forehead but there was nothing wrong.

That afternoon after conferring Confirmation and blessing the house foundations he was receiving the ritual thanks and farewell from the villagers under the temporary shelter. Without warning a strong gust of wind lifted the sheets of roofing iron and dumped them sideways. Everyone dived for safety. As he jumped up the Archbishop was struck on the forehead by a timber crossbeam. His forehead began to bleed. He realized then that his morning experience had been a warning of what was



to come. The villagers interpreted the incident as the evil spirit, chased from the village, making a final show of hostility.

The

Archbishop then mentioned another unusual thing. Whenever he decided to visit his home village, Vuaki, in the Yasawa group of islands he would often tell no one of his plans. Nevertheless his family would know that he was coming and would have everything ready to receive him on arrival.

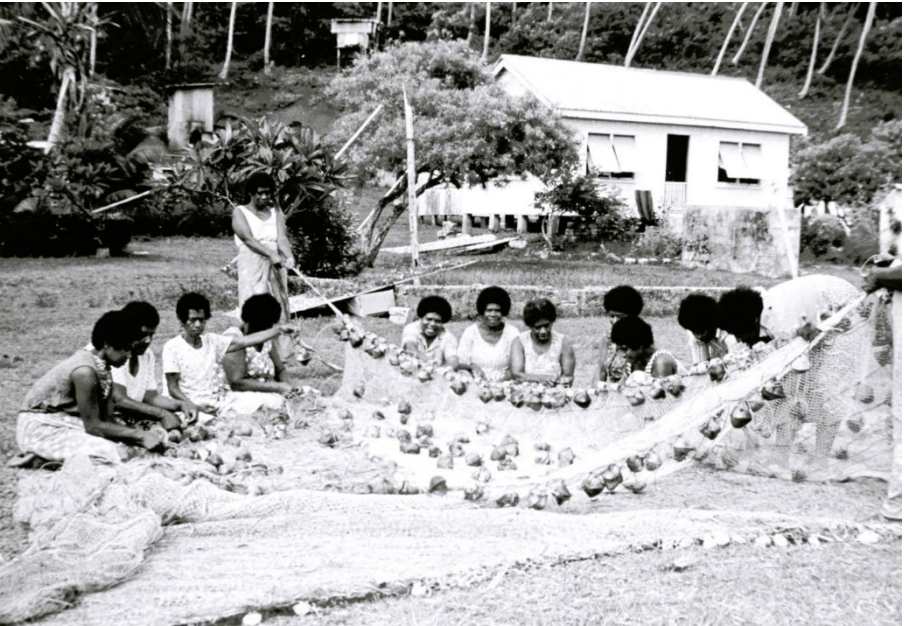
17 July 1977

LEARNING POLITENESS

Here in Nacamaki village on Koro Island, where I am practicing the Fijian language while living in the village, there are many blessings. But there is one frustration. When I sit down with the younger men behind the *yaqona* bowl the elders call me up front to sit with them. They are honoring me but it often feels too formal to me.

Today I sat down behind the bowl. The elders called me to sit up front. This time I thanked them and said that I was fine where I was. They continued to invite me up front. I continued to resist, repeating that I was fine. Eventually they gave up.

Afterwards one of the young mothers, who had been present at the *yaqona* session, met me and said, "You should not have refused the elders' invitation today." "But I want to avoid always having to sit up front," I said. "Then all you have to do is to sit up front for a while and then politely request the elders to allow you to move behind the bowl. They will willingly give you permission." The penny dropped. I saw how her advice fitted perfectly with Fijian politeness. Thank God for people who are not afraid to correct us.



Nacamaki women preparing the net for a fish drive

7 August 1977

A MEKE (DANCE) AND BABY SHARKS

I met the fishermen last night as I crossed the Nacemaki village green on my way to a dance practice. The *dau ni vucu* (composer) was teaching me a *vakamalolo meke* (sitting down dance). The two villagers were going to fish all night. They invited me to join them. Reluctantly I had to refuse because the *meke* practice was important. Arrangements had been made for three of us to formally present the *meke* to the chief a few nights later.

Next morning I was up at 6.00 a.m. and I was about to go to church when I saw the boat pulling into shore. Curious to see the catch I went over to the boat. I was amazed when I saw a large shark and three little ones in the bottom of the boat. The fishermen said that the shark had given birth to the three little ones when they hauled her aboard.

For the grand *meke* performance I wore a grass skirt, rings of leaves tied on my arms, and a whale's tooth, with which to signify and present the dance, hanging around my neck over an oiled chest. One of my companions took the whale's tooth and made the presentation speech. A group behind us began the chant. The three of us (with me in the center), while still sitting, bent forwards and back with arms shooting out to the sides and in front, in time to the chant. The pace was faster than during practice. No one had warned me and I found it hard to keep up. Afterwards I challenged the *meke* teacher on the change in pace. "Of course we had to do it fast," he said. It's a man's dance not a woman's.

Sometime later the chief announced a serious ban on the killing of sharks. One of the villagers had killed a shark with a spade in shallow water near the village. The shark is believed to be an ancestor god of a nearby province of Fiji. Other villagers recounted warning dreams afterwards. I looked around for my fisher friends but couldn't find them.



A fish drive in Nacemaki in 1977

Savenaca was hot and tired as he stood on police guard at the road-side of the chiefly village of Veiseisei as a meeting of chiefs took place. He moved under the shade of a nearby breadfruit tree, innocently gathered some branches and leaves together and sat on them. Some villagers serving *yagona* to their chief and guests noticed. The breadfruit tree is a totem of the Veiseisei people. They were upset to see Savenaca disrespecting their totem by sitting on it. "Ore" they cried, meaning "you must be punished." A villager filled a basin holding more than a liter of *yagona* and, followed by five others each with similar basins of *yagona*, demanded that Savenaca drink the murky brown liquid.

Savenaca was distraught. In vain he pleaded that he meant no disrespect, that he had not realized that the breadfruit was their totem, that it was impossible to drink all the *yagona*. No quarter was given. He must drink the six basins. Savenaca looked out at the sea glittering in the sheen of the mid-day heat under a cloudless sky. He thought of his ancestral spirit, *Tui Naikasi*, the turtle god. As he stared at the haze above the sea he prayed silently, "Grandfather (the respectful term for ancestral spirit), I need your help now."

He took the basin of *yagona* and drank it down in one gulp. He did the same with the five other basins of *yagona* and then in a kind of a trance he demanded that the large *tanoa* of *yagona* from which the guests were drinking be brought to him. Now it was the turn for the locals to become worried. The Veiseisei chief called out to Savenaca and asked where he was from. "Nacamaki village, Sir," he answered. "No wonder," said the chief, "I request that the *yagona* you have drunk be sufficient." Savenaca came out of his trance, stood up and continued his police watch.

Savenaca some years later became a very good, zealous catechist in his village. When he told me the story of what happened at Veiseisei I asked him how he explained his experience that day in the context of his Christian faith. "I don't know", he answered, "I try not to think about it."

Many, probably most, Fijians live a dual system of religion. They are Christian, value the bible, worship on Sundays and hope for salvation because of the death and resurrection of Christ. But they also believe in the traditional spirits, foremost of which is their ancestral spirit, which constitute the apex of their connection to place and clan, to their identity as Fijians. When Christianity does not address everyday difficulties and crises, Fijians turn to their traditional beliefs. The two systems of belief usually remain side by side in their consciousness.

11 August 1977

THE ANGELUS BELL

I am over half way through my two months stay in Nacamaki Village. The villagers are very welcoming and friendly. I eat with different families every day. I swim, go to the gardens occasionally and I have visited the *koro makawa* (earlier site of the village). Best of all, I have the opportunity to say Mass in Fijian every evening and to preach at Mass on Sundays.

Almost every night I can join a *yaqona* session and do my best to share in the *talanoa* (story telling). But there is one *tevoru* (devil) here. He loves to ask me in front of the group to tell about my visit to Israel and the holy places. He does this around midnight just as I am ready to excuse myself to go to bed. That gets me into a prolonged story with many questions to answer. The guy who set me up has, in the meantime, slipped away laughing at catching me out again. It is after 1.00 a.m. when I stumble to my room.



Preparing food for an earth oven with church hall in the background

The problem then is that Felise, the untrained but faithful catechist, rings the angelus bell just outside my room every morning at 5.30 a.m. I have tried to reason with him:

“Felise, maybe you don’t need to ring the angelus bell in the morning; every evening would do fine!”
“Father, you know well that the angelus bell is rung three times a day, morning, noon, evening.”

“But Felise, 5.30 a.m. is too early. At least wait until 6.00 a.m. That is the proper time.”

“I have to ring the bell early so that the school children get up early to reach school in time.”

“But Felise, this is holiday time. They aren’t going to school these days.”

“Father. *Na ka au sa lewa, au sa lewa!* (What I have decided, is decided!).”

End of discussion!



13 August 1977

RESOLVING AN ELOPEMENT.

I have been living in Nacamaki village for six weeks now. I have been accepted as an honorary member of Manukira clan. This evening I attended a gathering of clan members as they collected a *vulo* of *tabuas* (10 whale's teeth). A clan youth had eloped with a girl from a neighboring village some time ago. A deputation of clan elders is to visit that village soon to offer the *tabuas* as their traditional apology for the offense.

The whale's teeth arrived slowly one by one, brought by clan members who had one, or who had been able to borrow one. The *yaqona* was stirred up and shared around every so often. Eventually the magic number was reached. The *vulo* was ready.

The clan chief, an elderly man, then gave a lecture to the culprit who was sitting quietly among his friends. "You see how much trouble and expense we have gone to for your sake tonight," he said. "You had better look after that girl. If we hear that you have beaten her we will all be very upset. We don't want the good name of our clan spoiled and we don't want any more trouble with our neighboring village."

Then, as the culprit looked suitably contrite and humble, someone shouted from the back of the group, "And you youths, if any of the rest of you want to elope with a girl, will you please find an Indian girl who is willing!"



Whales' teeth are collected for a formal apology

22 August 1977

An All-Night Sitting

Yesterday evening the youths of Nacemaki, as usual, played touch rugby on the village green. As darkness fell and the youths began to drift away to their homes one young man lay on his stomach on the grass. At first people thought that, winded from the game, he was just resting. But when someone went to check him he got no response. The young man, Ravuama, was dead.

Later that evening I joined a group of elders and sympathizers who sat with Ravuama's father, Ravulolo. He was a stocky well-built man, the brother of the village chief, Navuni, and like him a convert to Catholicism. I sat cross-legged beside him on the mat. The *yaqona* was served solemnly with the usual regularity to all present. In the intervals there was a murmur of muted voices from different sections of the group. I offered my condolences. Ravulolo sat head bent in sorrowful reflection. We sat in silence for long periods. Gradually I could see that he was open to speaking. I asked about his son's previous health. We agreed that he must have suffered a heart attack. We spoke about Ravulolo's family – wife and seven children. I hadn't really met them during my two months stay in the village. He told me that his wife was Methodist and did not join him in the Catholic Church. His older children had been baptized in the Catholic Church but as they grew up they worshipped with their Methodist mother. So the young man who lay dead had been a Methodist.

I felt the loneliness of Ravulolo and his self-questioning. Why had his family been divided? People were undoubtedly speculating who had inflicted sorcery on the family. Ravulolo may have pondered this too. I tried to help him to accept the mystery of sudden and unexpected death and the futility of a trial by suspicion. I spoke of Jesus' death as a young man cut down in his prime. Jesus shared our human condition even to experiencing a shameful and painful death. His glorious resurrection is a light to pierce the darkness that oppresses us.

It was a long serious night. As the new day dawned we finished the *yaqona* and slowly moved away. I was glad that I had been able to be a companion for him in the sadness of that night.

24 August 1977

TRUE RICHES

I have been in Nacemaki village now for almost two months. It is a great place for practicing Fijian. I go to a different Catholic family every day for meals. So I get to know who belongs where. The variety of breakfasts is amazing. It is different every day of the week. One day pie, another day *bani* (scones), next day *roti*; then yams or breadfruit or *dalo*. Many different kinds of fruit too! And drinks! They range from tea, coffee, milo, lemon grass tea and so on. I feel like a king.

Ilimo and Kali have been my good friends. On a picnic one day they caught and roasted some fish. They garnished it with '*miti ni wai tui*' (seawater in a rock crevice with chopped up chili in it). We did a two day walk from village to village around Koro Island. I helped the old (untrained) catechist, Felise, instruct Kali and 'Dibuna for marriage. I was struck by the old man's injunction to the couple not to watch the dogs in the village copulating. Seemingly that would give them wrong ideas.

Today I was chatting with Ilimo in his *bure*. He said, "Father, you probably think that I am a poor man when you look around my house and don't see any fine furniture or gadgets here. But you would be wrong. I am a rich man. You know Jeke here? He has a *tabua* (whale's tooth) of mine. I gave another *tabua* to a friend in Nasau village. I helped Patimo build his house. I played rugby with our village team. If I need help I only have to call, and all these people will come to my assistance. Yes, Father, I am a rich man.



A traditional Fijian village

21 October 1977

BEWARE OF NASUVA VILLAGE

I was warned beforehand. They had ambushed Fr Ed Quinn when he was serving at Nabala/Vudibasoga. While drinking *yaqona* after Mass someone distracted him. *Yaqona* should be churned up to maintain a moderate consistency before serving. But the man serving Fr Quinn scooped



The church at Nabala

up a bowl of *yaqona* from the bottom of the *tanoa* (basin). This is known as 'bombing.' After drinking a few bowls of strong *yaqona* the drinker sinks quickly into a numbed sense of suspended animation. Fr Ed keeled over on his back after drinking four or five bowls of the liquid served like that. It took a couple of hours for him to gain his feet again.

So with that warning fresh in my memory I arrived to say the monthly mass at Nasuva village this morning. The men invited me to rest a while and drink some *yaqona* on arrival. I accepted but after one or two bowls I excused myself to hear confessions before Mass.

After Mass, the villagers offered a thanksgiving basin of *yaqona*. I watched the server like a hawk, making sure that he stirred the liquid properly before serving it. After three or four bowls I explained that I needed to walk back to the parish center while it was still light so I made for home. Before long, I felt a heaviness coming over me as I walked. The path through the forest seemed to be swaying from side to side and I couldn't seem to steady it.



I made it home with difficulty, but without vomiting or falling. That *yaqona* was strong! The plant must have been at least six years old. My suspicions about Nasuva were fully confirmed. Thankfully, the other priest of the parish was to go there the following month.

2 December 1977

THE LAST REQUEST

I am always struck by the strong sense of duty emphasized in the Fijian culture. I remember giving the last rites to an old Fijian man in a village. He received the sacraments lying on the bed. But when the rites were finished he sat up straight and said to me, “Father, I have done my duty to my *vanua* (clan), to the government and to the Church.” That was how he summed up his life.

Today I was called to Saivou village to hear the confession of an old Fijian man who was sick. After making his confession he called his eldest son. “My son,” he said, “I owe Samu here in the village a pig; I owe Suliana ten dollars and I owe Marika in Lomaloma village a *tabua* (whale’s tooth). I am sick and dying and I can’t repay these debts myself. I want you to repay them for me.” I admired the way the young man immediately agreed to take on his father’s debts and to repay them himself.

That scene has often reminded me of Jesus’ last request to his disciples (then and now) on the mountain in Galilee just before he ascended to heaven. He said, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore to all nations teaching them all that I have commanded you to do and baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”



Former Saivou catechist Abaramo in 2023

Archbishop Petero Mataca confirmed about 50 young people at Nabala parish today. As part of the preparation, we priests had invited Beniamino, a blind *dau ni vucu* (composer) from Bua Vou Village to teach a *meke* (group dance). He stayed with us for about six weeks. I noticed that each time he entered the church he would *tama* (announce himself respectfully). After receiving communion he would sit immediately and *cobo* (clap respectfully) before being led back to his place in church. Inculturation of his faith was natural for him.



Beniamino sat every evening on the verandah with his three assistant ladies to compose the *meke*. He would hum to himself for a while and then tell one of the ladies what words to write in her notebook. When a verse was complete he would get his small choir to sing it for him as he worked out the body movements and gestures. I was fascinated and asked to participate in the *meke wesi* (spear dance). Once the *meke* was composed, the dance group practiced every afternoon for a fortnight.

Today before the performance, the pale skin of my upper body was rubbed with oil. Then black circles were inscribed on my cheeks and forehead. I put on a grass skirt and ringlets of green leaves on my arms. Our group of twenty marched onto the ground to gleeful shouts from the onlookers. With the shouting and yelling I couldn't hear the beat of the *lali* (drum) and mistimed some gestures. However I was right there for the final charge, the leap and the group shout in front of the Archbishop at the end.



Preparing a formal yaqona offering

This evening I presented Beniamino with a dozen packets of cigarettes in thanksgiving. He immediately shared the cigarettes among a group of youths who were sitting around him. Beniamino was a man who knew and lived his culture.

25 December 1977

A Baby at Christmas



Christmas Eve Mass at Nabala parish centre was packed with parishioners who had come by bus, truck and on foot. The well-practised hymns were sung with gusto. After Mass we drank *yaqona* in a relaxed celebration. I said Mass on Christmas morning in one of the villages in the parish and then returned to the presbytery for Christmas lunch. I was awakened from my afternoon siesta by knocking at the door. “There is a lady who came here for Mass last night who is about to give birth. Could you drive her to Labasa hospital please?” came the request.

I got up and prepared the van. The men decided that it would be best for the lady to lie on a mattress in the tray of the van. We set out. It was hot and dusty. I tried to drive as carefully as I could to avoid jolting her but with as much speed as I could muster to get to the hospital before she gave birth. I felt like a present-day Joseph worrying about a very pregnant Mary and trying to get her to a resting place before the baby arrived.

We arrived at a quiet Labasa hospital with just a minimum of staff and a few visitors. We were directed to the maternity ward and helped the exhausted lady to her bed. We withdrew to the Labasa presbytery. We were happy to hear later that the child was delivered safely and both he and his mother were doing well. He was a Christmas baby indeed.

28 February 1978

LET THEM GUESS!

Fr Ed Quinn began the major work of building a new parish center in the bush at Vudibasoga. He has gone on holiday leaving Fr Theo and myself holding the fort. Both of us are trying to improve our grasp of the Fijian language and we have many opportunities here. We take turns looking after the mission station on the coast, Nabala, and camping out at Vudibasoga. We say Mass there for the parishioners who are planting food crops for the primary school children and building the school and church.



Archbishop Mataca, Fr Ed Quinn at Vudibasoga

There is no electricity in Vudibasoga. We usually say Mass in a shed with light from a benzene lamp. The lamp makes a hissing kind of noise so I try to raise my voice in order to be heard. Last night after Mass some of the elders asked me to request Fr Theo to raise his voice too because they are often not able to hear him.



A benzene lamp

Today, back at Nabala, I met Fr Theo and passed on the people's request. "You know," he replied, "When I start a sentence in Fijian I often get to the middle and don't know how to end it. So I drop my voice and let the people guess how it ends!"

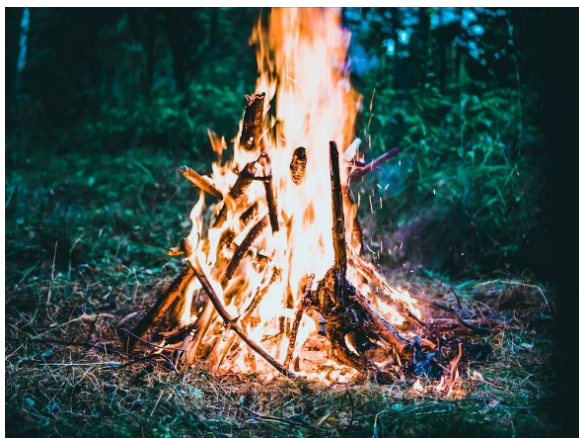
24 March 1978

LEARNING THE MARRIAGE VOWS

The village catechist came to me recently and told me about lowane who had been living with Maria Rosa for about 18 years. They had five children and now wanted to get married in the Church. The catechist assured me that he had given them both the usual marriage instruction and they were ready for the sacrament.

The wedding was fixed for today and all the usual food preparations were made. I walked to the village yesterday and met the couple. We completed the prenuptial form and I went over the ceremony with them. When we came to the exchange of vows I suggested that they say the vows to each other themselves rather than repeat the words after the priest. I gave them a copy of their vows to look over and learn off by heart, if possible.

There is no electricity in the village yet. We had, as usual, been drinking *yaqona* for a few hours last night so I needed to relieve myself about 2.00 a.m. As I made my way out of the *bure* (house) to go to the bush at the edge of the village I noticed someone standing at a flickering fire in the center of the village.



I went over to investigate. It was the groom. He was reading the marriage vows and trying to learn them off by heart! My heart went out to him. I suggested that he go to sleep and not to worry about the vows. I would help him by getting him to say them after me.

The wedding went off fine. He was nervous but he managed to follow my lead and to vow to continue to love his wife until death would part them. I hope that was easier for him than trying to learn the vows!

25 May 1978

REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK

Back for the first time in Ireland after over 4 years in Fiji. Great to be home. My mother has knitted me a warm sweater now that my blood has been thinned in the South Pacific. I'm back to the home-made brown bread and the rashers. Back with so many stories to tell.

This morning I said Sunday Mass for more than 1,000 people in our parish church. In my homily, I spoke about the fascinating cultures of Fiji – how passing strangers greet you with '*bula*' (good health) and a smile and how a family eating dinner calls a passer-by to come and join them. Some lay ministers helped to distribute Holy Communion. I felt happy giving the final blessing 10 minutes before the hour. In Fiji, Sunday Mass always lasts beyond the hour. But, of course, we had no singing today.

On my way out, a very angry newspaper seller accosted me at the church gates. "What's wrong with you," he bellowed. "All the other priests can finish Mass in 30 minutes. I'm late now and will miss the people leaving the other parish church!" I was stunned. I hadn't been reoriented to the tight schedules of newspaper sellers and the expectations on priests in Ireland. I had a lot to learn.

Later when I recounted this to my mother she burst out, "Wait until I catch up with that fellow. I'll give him a piece of my mind!" Mothers are great!



3 July 1978

THE WHALE'S TOOTH FROM IRELAND

I have been back here in Ireland on holidays after my first four years missionary work in Fiji. I'm wearing my mother's lovingly-knitted sweater suitable for the notoriously inconsistent Irish summers. My father interrupted his lunch to go out to his prized garden and pick strawberries for my desert. I am relaxing in the warm welcome of my family.

The Columbans in Ireland are promoting The Far East magazine in the Irish-speaking West of Ireland. I had attended an Irish-speaking secondary school so I volunteered to preach in Irish at all the Masses on the three Aran Islands off the coast of Galway.

Today I preached on *Inish Meain* (the middle island). I talked about Fijian culture - the great generosity and open hospitality there, the respect shown to elders and chiefs, and the friendliness of the people. While talking about Fijian rituals I mentioned the importance of the

tabua, the whale's tooth. After Mass a man approached me and asked me if I wanted a whale's tooth as he had one in his cupboard at home. I was delighted to accept. I was also curious to know how he came to own one. He told me the story:

"A few years ago a whale was beached here on the island and died. The County Council tried to get rid of it as the stench was becoming unbearable. It was too big to bury but they thought that they could burn it because of the oil inside. However that failed. So we islanders agreed that for \$1,000 we would get rid of it ourselves. We gathered with saws, axes,



spades and shovels and hacked it apart. We buried parts, disposed of parts of it in the sea and a few of us took souvenirs. Part of the whale's back bone is now a stool in the pub over there. I myself took this tooth home with me." He showed me a poem he had written in Irish. It finished up describing the

whale's heart floating back out to sea from where it had come.



Inis Meain - middle island of the Aran Islands

4. AN ITINERANT APOSTOLATE 1980 - 1985

After an extended holiday in Ireland, I was given a year in India to study evangelization there. I arrived back in Fiji in March 1980 and after substituting for Fr Kieran Maloney at Navunibitu Parish for six months I was given the very interesting assignment of evangelizing the Indo-Fijian Catholics throughout Fiji while based in Lautoka city.

This meant I could spend a few months in Labasa and a few months in Suva as needed. *Khrish Jyoti Ashram* (Retreat house of Christ the Light) became an important location for me for lay leadership training and for short retreats for youth and others.

My role consisted especially of setting up Small Christian Communities, training leaders to accompany catechumens on the journey to baptism, inculturation of Mass, marriage and funerals. It also involved encouraging indigenous Fijian seminarians to have a cross-cultural experience with Indo-Fijian families during the pastoral year outside the seminary. We also took Indo-Fijians to experience Fijian culture. At the same time I also helped out by saying Mass in the parish where I was staying.



Khrish Jyoti Ashram (Retreat House)

THE *MANDALI* [PRAYER GROUP], RCIA and ANNUAL GATHERINGS

The Small Christian Community (SCC) is widely accepted after Vatican Council II as a priority of evangelization. The SCC is somewhat similar to a traditional Indian prayer meeting called *mandali* in Hindi. In the early 1980s I invited groups of neighboring Indo-Fijian Catholics in different parishes to meet weekly as a SCC. There were 25 *mandalis* in Fiji by 1985.

I introduced the Lumko seven step gospel sharing to the new *mandalis*. This method familiarizes participants with the gospel, supports community through faith sharing and encourages community action in a practical way. It relates religion to real life. Indo-Fijians could now be evangelized in their own language. They were encouraged to also attend the multiethnic area prayer meetings and to participate in the parish.

Fr Joe Dilasa IMS, Sr Frances Hardiman SMSM and I organized 3 week courses to train lay leaders during school holidays in December at *Khrist Jyoti Ashram*. We taught courses on the Old Testament, Jesus Christ, and Church and sacraments. We included morning Mass, sunrise and sunset meditations, afternoon exercise/games, and group discussion on practical pastoral problems.

At other times in the year we conducted a similar evening course over 5 weeks in Suva and Lautoka cities for leaders who were not able to get away in December. More than 80 lay leaders graduated.

As well as leading their neighborhood *mandali* Indo-Fijian lay leaders were able to accompany non-Christians, wishing to become Catholic, in a year-long catechetical preparation for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). The lay leaders knew the cultural background and life context of the catechumens and facilitated witness and sharing among them. They encouraged catechumens to join a *mandali* where they could pray, sing and participate in gospel sharing in the Hindi language. The catechumens would receive the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist during the Easter Vigil.

Starting in 1981, I encouraged an annual Hindi religious convention, called *dharmsammelan*, in the three main areas of Fiji to bring large numbers of Indo-Fijian Catholics together. After a well-prepared Eucharist in Hindi a guest speaker spoke on a relevant topic. Then *mandalis* from parishes performed short devotional programs. After a good lunch the *mandalis* contributed items of entertainment to the enjoyment of all present. In this way, the faith of Indo-Fijian Catholics was strengthened, new ideas were shared, new friends were made, parents could look for partners of the same faith for their children and the *mandalis* had something to look forward to and prepare for each year.

INCULTURATION IN HINDI LITURGIES

Catholics worldwide became aware of the Second Vatican Council when the celebration of Mass changed from Latin to local languages. Translation of the lectionary and sacramentary into Hindi were quickly done in India and these were made available for Fiji's ethnic Indian people also.

Liturgical adaptation for Indian Catholics was prepared by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. A number of new adaptations for Mass in Hindi was allowed with permission from Rome by 1968. These adaptations included using Indian style vestments, gestures, and altar furnishings that have meaning for people of Indian cultural background.

Fr John Reilly, an Australian Jesuit who worked in India, came to Fiji for 6 months in 1969. He introduced the inculturated Hindi Mass to Indo-Fijian Catholics in a few centers in Fiji. Some people were very impressed at the solemn, beautiful Indian style. Others were dismayed believing that the adaptations gave the impression that the Catholics were becoming Hindu.

This controversy continued for decades. How Hindi Mass was celebrated depended on what was acceptable to the priest and most of the Indo-Fijians in a particular place. How to distinguish between necessary legitimate inculturation and dangerous syncretism? How can we use a different symbolic vocabulary to be understood? Difficult questions.

As the late 1970s gave way to the 80s increasing use was made of an Indian form of Catholic marriage. The families of the couple could choose to use a number of rituals which are used in the Hindu marriage while bible readings and verbal exchange of promises remain central.



Fr John Snehadass and Archbishop Mataca celebrating Diwali Mass

Catholic celebrations of the feast of Diwali became common and accepted in many parts of Fiji. They usually consist of a multiethnic congregation celebrating Christ the light of the world in a Hindi Mass followed by the sharing of Indian sweets among all.

3 November 1981

THE CROSSCULTURAL EXPERIENCE

In the early 1980s I tried a social experiment. Could ethnic prejudice be diminished through an experience of living in another community? The seminary pastoral year seemed an ideal time to check this out.

One of the first to volunteer for this experience was Vitori Buatava, a young Marist seminarian from Rewa. He and Rafaele Qalovi spent four months in intensive study of Fiji Hindi in Suva. He lived with an Indo-Fijian family and gradually got used to Indian cooking.



Mrs. Tara Nair teaching Hindi to two Fijian seminarians

Some of his friends couldn't see any point in what he was doing. He felt hurt when one said, "Heh! Your hands have the stink of curry about them." He was encouraged though by the welcome he received from the family. "Don't be shy. This is your house," he was told.

Arriving in Naleba, in Vanua Levu, to stay with a rural family was a bigger test. It got on his nerves that neighbors were finding excuses to visit and stare at him. Taking part in the everyday work of the household helped him. He surprised the women by presenting them with a sack of freshly sawn timber for their kitchen fires.

"By being present at Indian weddings, films, festivals, worship, burials and cane cutting I have learned many things. How people relate and react, their sorrows and joys are very different from Fijian culture. This experience helped me to grow a lot in my relationship with Indians. I have felt loved and have grown to love them," Vitori reported.

Work on Sundays was a culture shock. Indigenous Fijians generally observe the Sabbath rest whereas Sunday has no special meaning for Hindus or Muslims. Sugar mills crush cane continuously so cane gangs must work on Sundays. Vitori feared that he might be asked to work on Sunday too. However, that did not happen.

He used to attend the weekly neighborhood prayer meeting. A talented singer, he quickly learned to sing and enjoy the Hindi hymns. "They are a very prayerful people as I witnessed in Karokaro on Sunday," he said. "Before I went to bed I heard the husband and wife praying

together in the next room even though we had all just come from a prayer meeting. Very early next morning I heard them praying again.”

Two eventful months came to an end. Vitori summed it up, “I have discovered that a lot of the harsh generalizations about Indians are just not true. I have been helped to reflect seriously on my past prejudices. A part of my life that was in darkness is now lit with the light of Christ. A conversion has taken place in my life.”

I was very happy to have accompanied Vitori in this adventure. We sat together every week and I helped him explore and understand his experiences. Not only did he learn about Indo-Fijians he learnt about himself too.

28 November 1981

THROUGH ANOTHER MAN’S EYES

“I was afraid that I would be murdered,” said Rafaele, glancing at the group of Fijian villagers, after drinking a bowl of *yaqona*. The villagers, nodded with sympathetic understanding. “Well, you know what I mean,” he continued, “Since I was a boy I had been hearing that Indians are dangerously quick-tempered and would use their sugarcane knives to murder when angered. When I was getting into the van that was to bring me to Naleba, I was sweating. “It’s very hot,” I said, but really it wasn’t the sun that caused the sweat. It was the fear.



“When we reached Naleba and arrived at the family where I was to spend the next two months I looked all around as far as the eye could see. There was no Fijian village anywhere. I have travelled to other countries like Tonga and Samoa, but I tell you this was the first time in my life I felt I was outside Fiji.”

Someone offered Rafaele another bowl of *yaqona*. He swallowed the milky brown liquid, shook his head slowly, chuckled and continued. “It is terribly important to give it a go. It is discouraging at times, very tough at times, rather annoying at times, hopeless at times and yet personally enriching.”

Rafaele was a Marist seminarian who had spent a pastoral year away from the seminary. He worked first in a parish among his own

indigenous Fijian people. He asked to spend some time among the Indo-Fijian people also. He was venturing into new territory.

He began with a four months' intensive study of Hindi language. He had six hours drilling on new words, new sounds and sentence patterns daily. But the real test arrived when he left Suva city and went to live with a farmer's family in Naleba, 20 kms. from the nearest town. He couldn't sleep on the first night. He felt awkward moving around the house. The Indo-Fijians spoke too fast with many strange words. Time seemed to drag. Everything was strange.

Taking full part in the work of the household helped Rafaele to a break-through. He planted yams and helped dig a well. Cutting sugarcane was the toughest assignment, as he had never done it before. A scorching sun burned down from a cloudless sky every day. The crushing season was speeding to a close and the cane cutting was behind time in Naleba. Farmers were worried. The farmers and families were working double shifts in the fields.

Rafaele had a touch of sun-stroke but he refused to quit. He worked with a group amid the cacophony of shouted orders, playful banter, and occasional arguments. They rested occasionally by day in the blessed shade of a mango tree. They discussed the events of the day around the *yaqona* bowl at night. Gradually sounds became intelligible, ways of reacting became more predictable and growth in mutual understanding and acceptance happened.

As the session with the villagers drew to a close Rafaele said, "You



know, we Fijians think of the Alliance Party as our party and the National Federation Party as the Indian party, and so politics divides us further from each other. We must look for ways to come to appreciate each other and not see the others as a threat to ourselves."

Peter Loy Chong (later Archbishop) on left, and another seminarian harvesting rice with Indo-Fijians

30 November 1981

A RADICAL CHANGE IN ISLAM IN FIJI

I am supervising two Fijian seminarians in their cross-cultural pastoral year. They studied Fiji Hindi in Suva for four months and are now living with Indo-Fijian rural families. I am also introducing them to the other world religions here – Hinduism and Islam.

A couple of years ago Islam in Fiji was so open that I was invited to give a speech on Prophet Mohammed's Birthday in a rural settlement. I was helped to write my speech in Urdu by a very friendly *maulvi* (preacher) at the Labasa mosque. His office was bare and there were no books on the shelves but he was very helpful.

I was also invited to give a speech at a Muslim wedding a few weeks later. One of our local Indo-Fijian Catholics met me a day or two afterwards and declared that my Urdu speech was so good that he didn't understand a word of it!

But today was different. On arrival at the mosque with the two seminarians I found that my *maulvi* friend had been replaced by a *maulvi* who had been trained in Pakistan. I noticed that the shelves in his office were packed with books and leaflets. He immediately went on the attack, trying to persuade us to become Muslim if we wanted to get to heaven.

When he didn't make any headway there he said, "Christians are people of the Book. You have some chance. But Hindus have no chance at all. When they die, God will wrap them in red hot chains that will burn their flesh away. When their flesh is gone God will give them more flesh so that it can burn again." I shuddered at his concept of God and quickly left with the two seminarians.



Sunni Mosque at Labasa

I'm at the Namata Ashram running a Hindi-speaking lay leaders course. I've just met with a Fijian seminarian. I supervised him on his cross-cultural pastoral experience a few months ago. He reminded me of the first week he stayed with his Indo-Fijian family.

"I haven't slept all week," he told me at our meeting at the end of that first week.

"Why, what's wrong," I asked?

"I'm really afraid that if I go to sleep at night, the Indian householder will come and kill me with his cane-knife.

I was appalled. "But I wouldn't put you with someone who would harm you." I said. "Did you hear people in the village say not to trust Indians because they would chop you?"

"Yes," he said, "I did." We talked about racial prejudice and how it poisons relationships

between people. He went back to the Indo-Fijian family the next day. He gradually got used to being there. The family was very good to him and he got on really well with them.



Fr Frank discussing with Rafaele and Vittori their experiences.

Now, months later, he came to me today. "I've discovered why I was afraid of being killed in my sleep." "What have you discovered," I asked eagerly, "Was it not just because of racial prejudice?

"It was more than that," he said. "When I was a small boy at home, my father often gave me a hiding. I never knew why. I was really afraid of him. The same feeling of terror came over me when I tried to go to sleep in that house. The fear that was buried inside me from childhood came up into my mind again."

I was amazed at his insight. I then encouraged him to talk more about his childhood difficulties. We discussed what might have caused his father to be so violent.

"Go back in your imagination to one of those beatings," I suggested. "Stay with the feelings. Invite Jesus to be with you there. Speak to Him about it. Then, if possible, forgive your Dad."

22 February 1982

SENIORITY HOLDS SWAY

The Catholics of Naleba settlement held their annual Church AGM while I happened to be there on a visit. Some young teachers who had just completed a 3 week catechist course, were full of enthusiasm to move things on. They felt that no progress was being made. The church committee members were elderly. The same elders had held the same positions unopposed for many years. One of the teachers persuaded a companion teacher to stand for election.

Today at the AGM elections one teacher proposed the other for the position of president. Pandemonium erupted! The incumbent kept a dignified silence. But his supporters were very vocal. How could this young inexperienced person challenge his elder who had served so long! Has he no respect for his uncle! And the proposer is not a born Catholic. He has only been baptized four years ago. Who does he think he is?

The person who was most indignant in this situation insisted that he spoke as a founder member of the church and recent members should recognize the distinction. Actually, this gentleman hardly ever attended Sunday Mass or a prayer group and he was never around when there was work to be done. However the nomination was withdrawn. The same committee was reelected.

23 March 1982

A SMART INTERMEDIARY

The *mata ni vanua* (spokesman) has an important place in Fijian culture. In the Indo-Fijian culture too, if a problem between two important men is causing trouble to others in the community, one or two intermediaries may be called on. They talk to both parties separately and put pressure on them to reconcile. Today I realized that European priests and a local community can be helped by a suitable intermediary.

My informant told me that he had attended a meeting of the church committee. Some of the Indo-Fijian committee members were quite strong in their views about different matters and they seemed to have annoyed Fr Theo. One of their leaders put a key question to Fr Theo and they all sat up attentively waiting for his answer. But Fr Theo said nothing. He gave no answer. He remained silent for a long time.

One of the leaders of the community, who was a big support for the priest, noticed that though Fr Theo was silent the toes of both his feet were wiggling. The lay leader read this as a sign of frustration and perhaps anger. So he turned to the questioner and said, "Fr Theo will think about that question and will give you an answer later!"

7 April 1982

AN ALL-NIGHT EASTER VIGIL

This year the celebration of Easter at Raviravi in Ba parish on the Western side of Viti Levu was different. It was an all-night vigil climaxed by the Eucharist at dawn. We began at 11.00 p.m. in the shed behind the church. Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians, Christians and Hindus numbering about one hundred people were present. The nine scripture readings, with appropriate slides, were read slowly. The response to each reading was a Hindi and Fijian prayer and hymn. We then relaxed for about fifteen minutes with a bowl of *yagona* or a cup of tea and chatted.

After the reading from the book of Exodus about the freeing of the Israelites from the bonds of slavery, everyone was invited to write down on a piece of paper the bonds of sickness, worry and sin they experienced. A prayer for healing and liberation followed.

At 3.00 a.m. we showed the Hindi version of the movie *King of Kings*. Then about 4.30 a.m. we lit the Easter bonfire on the lawn beside the shed. Those present placed the papers with written forms of bondage into the fire. The Easter candle was then lit from the fire. All present lit their candles from the Paschal candle and renewed their baptismal promises.

The people sat on the grass facing east and we began the Easter dawn Mass. As the Mass progressed all were aware of the rising sun dispersing the darkness which had surrounded us all night. So full use was made of our most basic symbols – light, darkness, fire, water, food and drink. The atmosphere of the liturgy was most impressive. The people expressed surprise at not feeling sleepy or finding the vigil long. Those present experienced a sense of community in time and space with Christians of all ages and lands who celebrate on that night the most important event of history and of our own personal lives.

10 July 1982

DISTORTIONS OF HISTORY

Election fever is at a high pitch. Just a couple of weeks to go. Ordinary people are usually fearful in the run-up to any election in Fiji. Campaigning always becomes racial. The politicians try to get their own community behind them by warning of the dangers of the other ethnic party winning. This year is worse, though. A new regional party in a strategic alliance with the opposition party seems likely to undermine the governing party. The opposition are distributing tapes of an Australian television program critical of the governing party and Prime Minister. Some people are enraged by this. They claimed that the television program insulted their high chief.

Today I got into conversation with an Indo-Fijian. He talked about the struggles that Indian indentured laborers faced on arrival in Fiji in the late nineteenth century. "You know," he said, "one of the early transport ships ran aground on Nasalai Reef. Some of the people were eaten by the local Fijians. They were cannibals then." I was shocked at this because I knew that actually many Indians survived the shipwreck because local Fijian villagers risked their lives to swim out and rescue them. How did the facts become distorted in this man's mind?

Then I remembered hearing in India some years previously how a peasant there claimed that years ago Gandhi had come through his village breaking windows. It turned out that when Gandhi had led a salt march through the village some colonial police had a confrontation with local youths which resulted in a few windows being smashed. The peasants, decades later, were unhappy with the local authorities. The combination of a famous name, a vaguely remembered incident, and a current conflict had resulted in a distorted recollection. It illuminated the story teller's feelings more than the historical facts.

I realized that the same was true of my encounter in Fiji today.



The Olympics and World Cup are the two greatest international sporting events. Some features of Western culture stand out in them. The intense competitive spirit, the commercialization, the combat-like participation of athletes and fans are interconnected. They are key aspects of the socio-economic and political systems of the Western world. These systems threaten the world with nuclear holocaust and destroy the life systems through climate change and loss of biodiversity. We must learn from the values of other cultures which also appear in their traditional games.

Veitiqa is a Fijian game for men. A reed three or four feet long capped with a six-inch oval point of hard wood is thrown with the forefinger in such a way that it will skim along the ground to a distance of 100 yards or more. One team has its innings first and each member has his throw marked by a reed. The opposition then throw and when a throw of theirs surpasses the mark of one of the other team that marker is removed. The number of markers to surpass the best throw of the other team becomes the score for that round of the stronger team. The rounds continue until one team reaches a certain score, perhaps ten.

Cage moli is a Fijian game for women using much the same scoring method as *veitiqa*. The women kick a large orange with the upper instep of a bare foot and can make it travel 40 yards or more.

The two games are played with much good humor, chanting of slogans and cheering from the participants. A remarkable thing about the two games, from the point of view of a non-Fijian, is that immediately after the game the winners assemble a stock of clothes and tie them to long bamboo poles. They then proceed in formation to where the losers are seated shouting derisive insults and mocking them about their ability. Then the captain of the winning team gathers the poles together, chooses one and presents it to the captain of the losing team. When he or she has formally accepted them, the clothes are distributed among the losers.



Seeing this, one of the Indo-Fijian youths said, "If we Indians were playing that game we would all try to lose," The acquisitive aspect of Indian culture was highlighted for him by seeing its contrast in another culture. There was no television, no drug testing, no national anthems, no spectators in Savusavu I Taqa that day. Best of all, there were no losers.

31 December 1982

NOW I SEE

On New Year's Eve 1982, a few minutes before midnight a group of young men and women waded waist deep into a river pool. They joined hands and sang a hymn. They pulled paper blindfolds over their eyes on which were written some aspect of cultural blindness each one had become aware of during the previous week. At midnight they submerged themselves under the water and, on reemerging into the New Year, released their blindfolds downstream.

Then each one placed a lighted candle on an overhanging branch or on a rock jutting out of the river. Together the washing, release of blindfolds and lighted candles symbolized and celebrated this group's experience during a week in which they shed cultural prejudices and gained a new awareness of the siblinghood of all humans.

These committed Indo-Fijian Christians had come to Vudibasoga, a new parish center for indigenous Fijian Catholics, at the center of over a dozen surrounding villages. Six groups, of three participants with a group leader, were taken to one of the nearby Catholic villages for three days of living, eating and sleeping in a Fijian environment.

They received a formal traditional Fijian welcome. They ate with the villagers in a central shelter. The food was different for the Indo-Fijians but they enjoyed it. The villagers took their guests to their plantations to explain and demonstrate their methods of farming. Some groups went hunting wild pigs with their hosts and many of the ladies tried their hands at Fijian craft work. The villagers put on a display of their traditional games of *veitiga* (throwing a spear-like reed) and *caqe moli* (kicking a large orange).

The Indo-Fijian participants were very impressed by the unity and cooperative organization in the daily tasks of the village. They were amazed at the hospitality and generosity of their hosts and were enthralled by the fun and entertainment. The farewell speeches on the last morning were very touching. Many people wept unashamedly.

The Indo-Fijian course participants spent a further two days reflecting on their experience and clarifying what they had learned from it. All said that many fears and prejudices were gone forever. They had been cured of their blindness. They felt ready to celebrate a New Year in a new way.

14 January 1983

A DRAMATIC PARISH LITURGY

It was the final Sunday of a cross-cultural course. Young Indo-Fijians has spent three weeks in a rural Fijian parish. How could we bring the course learning into the liturgy of the Word in a dramatic form? Could we connect the Word of God with what we had experienced?

Indigenous Fijian youths and Indo-Fijian youths sat separately on either side of the altar in front of the congregation. They were discussing common phrases, in their respective languages, to caricature each other. A catechist gave a short sermon on love. The two groups discussed it and agreed that it meant loving members of their own ethnic group only. Then angry words were exchanged between the groups leading to an enactment of a violence resulting in the death of all members of both groups.



Ms Irene Sami and Ms Sisilia Marama

Ezekiel's prophecy over the dry bones was then read by a reader who walked up from the rear of the church. As this was read the drama participants slowly stood up again and reached out in acceptance of each other. They sat together bestowing on each other their

different cultural symbols of respect and love. A reading of a gospel passage about love completed the liturgy of the Word.

The cross-cultural course was a unique learning experience not only for the Indo-Fijian lay leaders but also for the Fijian host parishioners. Through personal contact, discussion and common liturgical participation all had to reflect on some basic questions of life in a multicultural, multi-religious society in the light of the gospel message.

15 April 1983

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE



Mr Joseph Nair

Joseph was from Taveuni Island where his parents cut copra to feed a large family of nine children. I first met Joseph when he was newly married and staying in Jittu Estate in Suva. He learned the skills of construction and building maintenance and started his own small firm.

He was living in Nadera and I was staying in Kinoya while teaching during the week at Pacific Regional Seminary. At the weekend, Joseph would sometimes accompany me in visiting other Catholic Indo-Fijians whom we were inviting to join our *mandali* prayer meeting.

I wanted to visit a “black sheep,” Vikram, at his home. Joseph and I had difficulty finding his house but we eventually arrived there. He was at home but refused to come out to speak with us. I gave vent to some frustration but Joseph calmed me down by saying, “Father, don’t be too hard on him. He is a poor man and has to struggle for life.”

1 June 1983

CARING FOR THE CARER

Mrs. Catherine Singh was a well-known Catholic lady in Lautoka. She had a sunshine personality – always with a broad enthusiastic smile and a pleasant greeting. Her children had grown up and she was tirelessly active in helping the poor. She was famous for charming the business people in the city and cajoling food and donations from them for the needy. She seemed to have endless energy and never complained. But it took its toll.

I noticed her looking particularly tired one day. I suggested to her to take a rest somewhere. She side-stepped the advice and made a joke about it. I searched my mind as to where she might escape to for an undisturbed few days. Then it hit me! A convent attached to a small Catholic maternity hospital about 100 kilometers down the coast would be ideal. Having worked in that parish a while beforehand I knew that the Sisters would welcome Catherine.

Actually, I was surprised and happy when she agreed to let me drive her there a few days later. The concrete proposal overcame her reservations. She enjoyed the rest and returned to her social work full of life. We must look after our generous activists too.

3 July 1983

INDO-FIJIAN FIRE WALKING

Today I went to take photos of the fire-walking at the Hindu temple at Nadera, a suburb of Suva. In the early 20th century the British colonial government brought indentured laborers to Fiji from South India. These brought their ancient practice of fire-walking with them.

I arrived to find a large crowd already seated on the benches parallel to the 30-foot long fire pit. In this pit there were smoldering ashes, six inches deep, of logs which had been burning for the previous twelve hours. A dozen men and women of different ages had undergone purification rituals for nine days and, on returning from bathing in the sea, would be led across the hot ashes by the Hindu priest.

Without a telephoto lens I needed to get close to the pit across which the devotees would walk. Spotting an empty space near the pit I excused myself as I crossed over the outer benches to reach it. As I sat down I heard a young woman behind me say to her companion in Hindi, "How can this be! Your father-in-law has just arrived and is sitting in front of you!" She presumed that I was a tourist and didn't understand Hindi. Communication is not allowed between father-in-law and daughter-in-law in Indian tradition.

I said nothing at the time, but concentrated on taking photos as the Hindu priest cracked his whip urging the devotees to cross the burning ashes. Some ran across, some walked with dignity but all crossed the pit without anyone getting burnt. For Hindus, this was a manifestation of the power and protection of the goddess whom they had worshipped. When I was ready to leave, I turned around to the two young ladies behind me and said in my best Hindi, "Your father-in-law excuses himself as he must leave now!" They almost fainted.



11 October 1983

A MARRIAGE ANNULMENT

I met with Fr Theo today. I was anxious to get all the recent news and gossip from him but I was especially interested in a marriage case I had been involved in investigating and writing up for the marriage tribunal.

Manikum had married a Catholic girl about 25 years before but she ran away because of his mistreatment of her. After some further mishaps he finally he found a partner who stayed with him. However Manikum could not receive communion. His partner wanted to enter the Church. She could not be baptized, however, as Manikum and she could not be married in the Church since his wife was still alive.

I interviewed an elder who had been involved in arranging Manikum's first marriage. He claimed that both parties had agreed to the wedding when they were asked. I then visited Manikum's first wife and asked her about the wedding.

"I never wanted to marry him," she declared. "I knew his reputation as a scoundrel and I knew he would treat me badly."

"But you agreed to marry him when you were asked," I replied.

"Yes. I knew that my father would beat me if I refused," she retorted.

"Did you show any sign that you were unwilling," I asked.

"I cried all day before the wedding, I cried the whole day of the wedding and I cried all the next day too."

I went to see the elderly Columban priest who had celebrated the wedding. I asked him if he remembered the wedding. "I'll never forget it," he said. "I know that all Indian brides cry when they leave their family after the wedding. But I have never experienced crying like that before or since. She never stopped crying!" Now I had corroboration of the lady's witness. I wrote it all up and handed the case into the marriage tribunal before I left for holidays.

So, when Fr Theo told me that Manikum had been granted the annulment of his marriage, that is, an acknowledgment that it was not a true marriage, I said confidently, "the annulment must have been given on the basis of 'force and fear.'" "No," said Fr Theo with a wicked smile. "They were first cousins and they hadn't applied for a dispensation from the bishop." All my careful detective work overridden by a technical hitch! Manikum marched proudly up to Communion the following Sunday. He wasn't seen at Mass then for months.

22 February 1984

Maturing a Trouble Maker

Catholic weddings in Naleba were few and far between. They were usually fixed for the middle of the school holidays so that people would be free. The May and August holidays, moreover, in the dry and cooler season were more comfortable.

By a strange twist of fate, I was asked to celebrate four Indo-Fijian weddings within two weeks on a visit to Labasa parish in early 1984. Two were scheduled for successive Saturdays and two in mid-week. The weddings took place in the respective bride's compound in a temporary shed with galvanized iron roof and no walls. The guests sat on sacking or mats in the shed. The low table altar was situated at one end and its backdrop was decorated with colored sheets, streamers, fairy lights and other adornments. The bride and groom were seated on one side of the altar and I, as celebrant, sat at a right angle to them.

It was the hot wet season with pot-holed approaches and mucky compounds. It was very humid. Having enough clean dry clothes was one of my concerns. Another concern was the local philosophy I heard in evening discussions. The debate was about a young male trouble-maker. Someone said, to general agreement, "The only way to get him to mature is to marry him off." I was shocked and begged to differ. "What about his wife! What will happen to her while he is considering maturing?"



Meeting of relatives of bride and groom before a wedding

14 May 1984

HOT CURRY AFTER STRONG YAQONA

Last night Fr Theo and I decided to visit separate Indo-Fijian families in the same settlement about 5 miles from town. We borrowed the parish van. I dropped him off at the family which was hosting the *mandali* (*prayer meeting*), promising to pick him up later that night. I drove about a mile further and climbed a steep winding lane to a house on a hill top. Here a Catholic woman lived as one of two wives of a Hindu man. Her brother had appealed to me to visit them.

The man of the house welcomed me with a handshake while his Catholic wife brought me a cup of tea. Introductions over, he called for *yaqona*. He served the *yaqona* into two enamel bowls at regular intervals as we chatted. I broached the delicate subject of the marital arrangements carefully. He was open and not in any way defensive. He made it clear that his Catholic partner was free to leave him if she wished. By this time I began to feel the effect of the strong *yaqona* and I asked to be excused from it. He persuaded me instead to have one bowl for every two bowls that he drank. When the *yaqona* was finished my host called for dinner. I had no sooner finished the hot, but delicious, curry than I had to rush outside to vomit.



The family tried to persuade me to stay the night but I argued that my companion was waiting to be picked up. The van was temperamental and could only start on an incline. A light push sent it rolling down the hill but as I reached the first bend the engine spluttered and died. Again the family begged me to stay the night. "Your companion will know something has happened," they said. "He will sleep in that house and you can pick him up in the morning." I was won over by their insistence, by the unreliable van and by the hairpin bends on the track ahead.

The next morning when I reached the other house the family told me that Fr Theo had waited for me until midnight. Then, despite their urging him to stay he walked the five miles back to the presbytery in town! When I arrived there, he greeted my explanation and apology with a deep silence. I think the silence will last for a few days!

13 June 1984

ST ANTHONY'S FEAST AT RAVIRAVI

St Anthony is a favorite saint of South Indian Catholics. Today I celebrated his feast with the mainly Indo-Fijian congregation at Raviravi, a rural settlement on Fiji's main island. A South Indian Catholic, known as Tambi, had built a small thatched church in his honor. Later in the 1960s Fr John Mahoney, a Columban from the U.S., had the present church constructed. St Anthony's feast is the high point of the Church year in Raviravi.

A few hundred people attended the mass this year. Afterwards the officials tied the statue of St. Anthony holding the child Jesus on a palanquin with ropes. People vied for the honor of carrying the palanquin as it was taken in procession three times around the church.

I was walking behind a Hindu woman on the second round when a rope came loose and the statue fell to the ground. I noticed the Hindu lady raise her eyes to the sky rather than see this inauspicious accident. There was general unease as the statue was retied and the three rounds completed. People then made a donation to the Church and waved burning camphor on a brass plate in front of the statue three times.

Later, I happened to be standing behind two Catholic men as they chatted. "Wasn't it terrible that the statue fell today," said one to the other. "Ah, yes," the other replied, "but it could have been worse. Only the child Jesus lost his head. St Anthony wasn't damaged at all.



“Why don’t you missionaries leave those foreign people alone? You are colonialists forcing them to change their ways and become like you. Let them be!” The assumption of this challenge is that the missionary is the one who acts and the local people are acted on. The reality is not so simple.

Scandal at school: Dev Shankar was an Indo-Fijian sugarcane farmer with three sons and three daughters. His daughter, Premila, a pretty fifteen-year-old girl, attracted the attention of a male classmate at the local Secondary School. Following the custom of those pre-mobile phone days, the love sick youth committed his passion to writing and got a mutual friend to pass the love note to Premila. She in turn responded in writing. Other notes were exchanged until a teacher confiscated a note. He called Dev Shankar to the school and gave him Premila’s love note.

Dev Shankar walked home in a blazing temper. This news would spread around the village. People would say that his daughter had loose morals and that he had no control over his family. His good name would be spoiled. How would he later make a good match for her? The shame of it! After all he had done to give her a good education. This is her thanks!

Hot and bothered on arrival home, Dev Shankar had little interest in the cup of tea his wife offered him. He ranted bitterly against Premila. He blamed his wife too for not bringing her up properly. She protested loudly. She had regularly warned Premila to concentrate on her studies and avoid the boys. They both gave voice to their anguish and pain. Then a very uncertain Premila arrived.

Crisis at home: Dev Shankar, already red in the face from arguing with his wife, now attacked his frightened daughter. “What kind of a trollop are you,” he shouted. “Is this how you thank me for a good education? You won’t be going back to school anymore! I’ll teach you to destroy the good name of this family!” Dev Shankar grabbed Premila by the wrist and began to wallop her with his leather belt. Premila, already in tears from the verbal abuse, twisted and tugged until she broke free. She rushed into the nearby cane field and hid among the tall, thick cane as night fell. Her parents searched with torches, calling her to return home. They eventually gave up.

Now Dev Shankar began to worry that Premila might commit suicide. All sorts of grim possibilities flashed before his eyes – drowning, hanging, poison. A suicide would finally ruin his good name in the village.

No more speeches at social functions. No longer to be consulted by others. He would have to resign as overseer of the cane harvesting gang and from the school committee. Oh, the shame of it! Sleep didn't come for hours, and was fitful and shallow when it did.

In the early morning a cold, exhausted and scared Premila crept home. Her mother gruffly told her to go to bed quickly before her father woke. Later, as Dev Shankar sipped his sweet tea he heard the news with relief. He pulled on his boots and took the bull out to graze. One terror had passed, at least for the moment. But if, true to his promise, he refused to let Premila return to school wild rumors would spread that his daughter had had an affair. What could he do now?

Managing the missionaries: After brooding over the situation all day Dev Shankar caught the bus that evening to the church in town. He explained to the young missionary priest and the three Sisters that he had come to ask advice about a serious personal matter. He explained his hopes for his daughter and the sacrifices he had made to educate her. Now she had let him down badly and he had told her that she would not be allowed back to school. She would just have to help her mother at home. But before making a final decision, as a strong Catholic, he wanted the advice of his Church leaders.

Of course the young priest and the Sisters persuaded Dev Shankar that he should not keep his daughter away from school. She would learn her lesson from this incident. Young women should be educated in the modern world. Forgiveness is a core Christian teaching. Dev Shankar's mercy and compassion would be rewarded in heaven.

Dev Shankar listened carefully. He said, humbly but reluctantly, that he would accept the guidance of the missionaries. He would tell Premila that only on account of the appeals of his religious leaders was she being allowed back to school. Even the slightest rumor of bad conduct in the future would see her confined permanently to the house.

Postscript

A few years later, Premila was married. After the wedding Dev Shankar sat drinking tea with friends and neighbors. He reviewed the marriage - the massive crowd of people that attended, the generous spontaneous help of many, and the blessing of God in the shower of rain that fell after the ceremony. "But" said Dev Shankar, "what makes me most happy at this time is that my daughter never, ever did even the slightest thing to dishonor her family's name."

I celebrated the wedding of Edward and Josephine Shankar's son today. Indian weddings are usually celebrated in the compound of the bride's home but the families agreed to have this wedding in the small wooden church at Nausori town.

The wedding was in Hindi. The bride and groom knelt on two kneelers in front of the altar. Between them and the altar was a tall Indian brass lamp with 7 lighted wicks saturated with *ghee* (clarified butter) from the cup of the lamp.

The choir, led by harmonium and drum, sat on the floor to one side of the spouses and the altar. Joseph Nair, the groom's uncle, sat with the choir singing from his hymn book. I was wearing my *kavi* (orange colored) Indian alb. I decided to come out in front of the couple for the homily.

I got absorbed in my homily and didn't realize that I had backed into one of the lighted wicks. I was shocked when I found Joseph striking my backside repeatedly with his hymnbook. Then I realized that my alb had been on fire and that I was lucky that he took remedial action quickly. When my friend Fr Theo heard about this incident he began putting it around that Fr Frank was trying to do a Hanuman act – trying to set fire to Nausori with his fiery tail.

[According to the Hindu Ramayan Hanuman was the chief of the monkeys who helped Ram to rescue his wife Sita from her captivity in Lanka. Ravana had Hanuman's tail set on fire but he then burnt Lanka, Ravana's kingdom.]



15 August 1984

A DEFT USE OF CULTURE

Raksha Bandhan is a two-week period in the fifth month of the Hindu calendar. Sisters visit their brothers and tie a yellow thread (*rakhi*) around their wrists, feed them some sweetmeats and give them a small present. This symbolizes their sisterly love for him and a request for his protection. The brother accepts by eating the sweetmeats and giving her a small gift in return.

I talked with Shweta, a pretty Hindu secondary school girl to-day about *Raksha Bandhan*. A boy in her class had decided that she was his girlfriend. He demanded that she not speak to any of the other boys. He expected her to bring some food from her home for his lunch. He was pressing her to go with him to a film in town on Saturdays. Her parents had warned Shweta to study hard and to avoid the boys. She didn't fancy this fellow either but he insisted that she was his girlfriend. What to do? An inspiration hit her.

Yesterday at lunch time she tied a yellow thread around his wrist before he realized what she was doing. Then she stuck a *gulab jaamun* sweet in his mouth and meekly presented him with a new handkerchief. "Thank you for being my brother," she said. "I know that you will always help me in my difficulties." With other friends looking on, he had to accept what had happened. He realized that he could no longer call her his girlfriend!



Ms Rosema Dass ties a Rakhi on Fr Frank in 2023

She slowly waved the brass plate with the small oil lamp in front of me. She tied a small yellow thread to my wrist. Then she gave me a few homemade sweetmeats and invited me to eat the meal she had cooked. I, on my part, handed her a small present. This was the feast of *Raksha Bandhan*, celebrating the protecting love of brothers for their sisters. The yellow thread around my wrist meant that Sunita accepted me as her brother

Sunita, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of four and grandmother of two, is one of the most committed Christians I know. She has started five different *mandalis* (Indian-style Small Christian Communities) and attends weekly meetings of some. She also began a women's club where Hindu and Christian women teach each other different crafts. Sunday, after Mass, sees her accompanying a group of adult catechumens preparing for baptism. Indian couples receive pre-marriage instructions from her and, when required, she teaches Hindi to Church personnel. She is also a popular speaker in high schools on the topics of interpersonal relationships and marriage. Yet only six years ago Sunita was a Hindu. Her spiritual journey is a remarkable testimony to God's grace and her own courage.

She is the second youngest of ten siblings. Her father died when she was very young. Sunita grew up in Suva with a widowed mother who had little time to devote to her because of the struggle to make ends meet. In her mid-teens she often felt lonely and not understood. She fell in love with a boy waiting for the school bus each morning who was interested in her and sympathized with her difficulties at home. David, a South Indian Catholic, was eighteen. Sunita was just sixteen.

Her family came to know about them. Sunita was taken out of school and kept under "house arrest" Despite a couple of beatings she sneaked out occasionally to see her boyfriend. One evening as they were chatting they saw her brothers out searching for her. They decided to elope. Next day a legal marriage was arranged. Some of her family said to Sunita "We will have nothing more to do with you. You are dead to us." Sunita felt guilty. She realized that her family had lost face in the neighborhood because of what she had done. But there was no going back now. She had burnt her bridges and had nowhere else to turn.

Sunita, a fairly traditional North Indian Hindu, now found herself in a Westernized Catholic South Indian family. Catholic, that is, in name mainly because no one there seemed to go to church. "Now you are no longer Hindu. You are going to be a Christian and so you have to eat beef and pork like us," she remembers being told. At night she cried to herself wondering, "How am I going to put that meat in my mouth?" She spoke to David

explaining that eating beef was strictly taboo for Hindus and she would get sick if she tried to eat it. He spoke to his family. Then no one forced her.

Married life was very different for Sunita from her dreams at the bus stop. She gave birth to three children in quick succession but still had to cook, wash and clean for her husband and his family without appreciation. Her sense of guilt and fate made the hardship seem a fitting retribution for her own wrong-doing. She lived now for her children.

Anna, her eldest daughter, asked Sunita to come to church with her because all her friends had their parents with them. Sunita understood immediately and agreed, though with some trepidation, since she didn't know how to participate in Christian worship. "You just look at me and do whatever I do," Anna reassured her. Things were not so simple though. Following her cultural and religious instincts, Sunita left her shoes at the church door and entered barefoot. Inside, Anna demanded to know why. "I believe that this is God's house. When we go to His holy place, we must take off our shoes. That's my culture, so I'm going to do it no matter whose God it is," was her reply.

Sunita was happy to see Indo-Fijians in the congregation. But hearing them speak English, rather than Hindi, among themselves made her feel out of place, especially since her own English was not very good. She felt she didn't belong anywhere. She had been rejected by her tradition-conscious Hindu community and Christianity seemed to be for English speaking Westernized people. Moreover, she felt herself a sinful outcast who would pollute religious people. "One day I was standing and a Sister's cloak touched my hand. I looked at her and thought, 'Man, that's pure white. Through me some kind of sin must have passed to her. There was nobody to tell me otherwise. How could I know?'"

She used to take her turn cleaning the church. While dusting a hanging crucifix, part of a cobweb fell in her eye. She rubbed and blinked her eyes, then looked back at the crucifix. "He was looking directly at me," she recalls. "I didn't know what to say to Him and what to pray for, even though I was loaded with so many problems. I just looked at myself and started crying. I went to the statue of Our Lady. Her feet were covered with dust. I thought to myself, 'When they clean the church, do they just clean the floor, tidy the seats, put hymn books in place. They must never clean close to God and to Mother.' When I cleaned her, I had a different feeling and she said to me, 'You are a strong mother like me'. I was very happy and I said to her in Hindi, 'Thank you very much'.

I went home. I couldn't sleep. I shared it with my husband. He listened as if it was wasting his time. I told my husband's sister-in-law, a Catholic Rotuman Islander. She said, 'You are the luckiest person. You are

so nice. You are so good.’ I hugged her and I cried because I had never heard anyone before say that I was good. It really touched me.”

Around this time, on returning from a year of study in India, I gave a presentation about religion and culture in India in that parish. Some people spoke with me afterwards. Last among them was a young Indian woman who blurted out “Father, will you come to my home and teach me about religion.” That was how I met Sunita.

I visited her home. “How should we pray,” she questioned. “When do you feel close to God?” I asked in reply. “I like singing hymns,” she answered. She sang a hymn in Hindi. She had a fine voice. “Would you like to hear a hymn from me now,” I asked. “Yes, very much,” she replied. I sang a simple hymn in Hindi with repeated phrases, “Lord show me yourself, come into my heart; You are the giver of life, have mercy on me; You are the giver of salvation, have mercy on me; You are the giver of peace, have mercy on me.” She was thrilled. She learnt it there and then and afterwards always considered it her special hymn. “That hymn has completely changed my life,” she never tires of saying.

She and David did a Christian leadership course in Hindi. “When I came back, I was a different person”, she recalls. “I wanted to reach out to all the Indians and tell them what I had learned and what it is like when you find the light.” She completed her instruction, was baptized, and she and David had their marriage blessed in church.

From then on, we had no more zealous and effective missionary in the Church in Fiji than Sunita. She appreciates the need her own people have for the gospel of Christ. She knows many of the obstacles which prevent them from hearing it because she herself has experienced them. She appeals to priests and religious to learn and use the Hindi language and Indian culture in the church so that other Indians who are searching, as she was, will feel understood and welcomed by the Church.

I have often asked myself how many more people of Sunita’s zeal and potential remain hidden from us. They remain unaware of their own ability to give life to others because their goodness and talents have not been recognized and affirmed.

Sunita was an outcast from her family. She lost her brothers and sisters. In finding Christ she found the ultimate caring and protecting brother “I found out that I was rich with Christ’s love and I didn’t want to keep it to myself,” is how she puts it. So, in and through Him, she has discovered many other brothers and sisters. Is it any wonder that the feast of *Raksha Bandhan* has a special meaning for Sunita?

29 September 1984

THE RCIA SESSION

Kashi Ram was lucky to be accepted into Xavier College, Ba in 1954, in only the second year of its existence. There were no other secondary schools in the Ba area at that time. He lived in the village of Moto, about 8 miles from Ba town. His parents were very religious Hindus.

The Columban priests at Xavier College gave classes on Christianity each day. Kashi Ram was inspired by the Sermon on the Mount especially by the passages on non-violence (“Let the one who slaps you on the right cheek slap you on the left cheek too.”) and love for enemies (“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”). He shared his admiration for Jesus with his father and got his permission to become a Catholic. Fr Jim Gavigan instructed him at Xavier College and baptized him Francis.

Years later, as a parishioner of St Joseph the Worker Parish in Tamavua, he was a member of the *mandali* prayer group and was also an animator on the RCIA team. One day he and I were in the Crypt of the Cathedral conducting an RCIA session with non-Christians preparing for baptism. Half way through the lesson we heard singing coming from the Cathedral above as a group began their devotions to Mother Mary. Master Francis suggested that we pause the lesson and join the devotions.

I countered that we should finish the work for which we had come. Francis admitted later that he was very annoyed with me at that time. When he thought more about it afterwards, he realized that sharing our faith in Christ and explaining the gospel message is even more important than singing hymns.



21 January 1985

HURRICANE! – KANNAN’S STORY

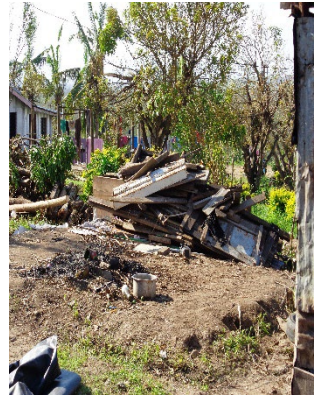
On the night of January 17th 1985 hurricane Eric, with winds of up to 150 mph lashed it way from West to East across Viti Levu, Fiji’s largest island. Two days later hurricane Nigel tracked a similar route. More than 30 people died and millions of dollars’ worth of damage was done to property and crops.

A couple of days later I visited friends in Saweni settlement, five miles from Fiji’s second city Lautoka, near where the eye of the hurricane had passed. Three Hindu married brothers, landless laborers with little formal education, live close together there on a rocky outcrop surrounded by sugar cane fields.

It was dark when I called out to them. One brother welcomed me but I was aware of a subdued silence. All three houses were completely destroyed except for one small kitchen. As I tried to take in what this meant for families struggling to live from day to day, Kannan offered me a bowl of yaqona. I sat down and listened to their stories.

At nine o’clock on the night of the 17th Kannan, the 37-year-old middle brother, and his eldest daughter, Padmani, were desperately shoving the door closed against the pounding storm. It suddenly burst open. The roof of the house was torn from the walls and swept away. The family had no sooner crawled under a bed than one of the walls collapsed on it. They put their two-month-old baby in a small tin case with the lid slightly ajar but the water got in and they had to take the baby out again.

The storm was at its height. The legs of one end of the bed collapsed under the weight of the wall. Kannan climbed out through the window of the fallen wall into the savage night. He lifted out his family into the lashing rain and howling wind. They found shelter behind the raised foundations of the house until driven away by the swirling mud and water. They held hands and, with the help of lightning flashes, managed to reach a nearby fallen tree. They stayed there, lashed by wind and rain for about half an hour, until that place too began to fill up with mud and water.



Kannan struggled to a nearby house. With a torch from there he carried his small children one by one, moving backwards cautiously into the lashing wind and rain, to the shelter of a still-standing neighboring house. Kannan then went out again to find out how his two brothers and their families had fared.

21 January 1985

HURRICANE – BAL KRISHNA’S STORY

Bal Krishna, 33 is the youngest of the three brothers. Like Kannan he is a casual laborer depending mainly on seasonal cane cutting to feed his family. He and his wife have one son and two daughters ranging in age from six to eleven.

As the hurricane gathered momentum he was standing inside his small one roomed house, built of galvanized iron on a concrete foundation. As he sensed the wind changing direction the door blew in and the kerosene lamp smashed as he tried to force the door shut again. In the darkness, there was panic as they lost contact with their smallest girl. Bal Krishna found her by throwing out his arms in a wide circle. By then he realized that the roof was gone.

There were two beds in the room, one old and the other new. The whole family crawled at first under the old bed and listened in terror to the roar of the hurricane. The noise was like a giant train bearing down on them, punctuated by terrifying cracking and crashing noises.

Bal Krishna pushed his wife and children under the new bed. Just then a wall came crashing down on top of the old bed, breaking two of the bed legs and pinning him helplessly to the ground. Even when water gushed into his nose and ears he couldn’t move or escape. He felt certain he was going to die. “Save me” he called in panic. The roar of the wind and rain prevented them from understanding. They thought he was asking how they were and one of them shouted “We’re all right.” Bal Krishna fought back his panic and prayed to the god of the wind, “Peace, peace, peace.” But to no effect.

He was able to move his legs so he kicked Manoj, his son, and shouted again. “I’m caught. Release me.” His two elder children together were able to lift the bed and wall a couple of inches and Bal Krishna crawled out. He then became aware of the galvanized sheets and other debris flying in every direction outside. He was terrified that they would be injured or killed.

He and the two children quickly joined their family under the other bed and huddled there for about an hour, shaking with the cold under a sopping wet blanket. Bal Krishna’s wife had caught hold of a saucepan as it flew by and was using it as a pillow.

By 10.00 p.m. the intensity of the storm had lessened and Kannan arrived with a torch. He and Bal Krishna went together to see what had happened to Hari Krishna, their eldest brother, and his family.

21 January 1985

HURRICANE – HARI KRISHNA’S STORY

Hari Krishna, 42 years old, is a carpenter and painter but is often out of work. He depends then on what his wife can earn as a housemaid and his oldest daughter as a salesgirl. At 8.30 p.m. he had done all that he could to secure his house, including tying down the roof with heavy wire. His son Sanjay lay sleeping on his bed in front of the closed louvered window. Suddenly a flying sheet of galvanized iron crashed into the window embedding glass in Sanjay’s back.

Sanjay leapt up in shock. Just at that moment Sunita, Hari Krishna’s daughter, noticed the door shaking and shouted to her father. Sunita held the piece of wood, Sanjay passed the nails and Hari Krishna’s wife held the lamp as he tried to hammer a brace in place. The nail would not go into the wood. He cursed as he hit his thumb with the hammer.

Just then the whole house was blown away and the family was thrown outside about ten yards away. It was pitch black, the rain was lashing down and the wind was tossing around roofing iron, timber and other debris. Hari Krishna called out and moved around, with outstretched arms, searching for them. He found his wife. She was so shocked that she couldn’t answer his calls. They found the children and crawled over the muddy ground to the raised concrete foundation of the house.

He pushed his family under a nearby bed but only his own torso would fit in with them. He lost hope as he heard sheets of roofing iron smash to the ground. He had lived through other hurricanes and not been afraid, but this one was different. Just after 10.00 p.m. he sat on the bed and called out in the direction of a neighbor’s house, “Johnny, save my children.” Shortly afterwards Kannan and Bal Krishna appeared. Kannan was smoking a damp cigarette. Hari Krishna flung out his hand. “Give me the butt,” he appealed. Despite all they had been through that night, Kannan and Bal Krishna laughed uncontrollably.

Half of their neighbor Johnny’s house was still standing. It was there that the families spent the rest of the night. The men drank *yaqona* and talked intermittently. What would they do now? Where had their few possessions been blown to? No job...no money...no possessions!

Johnny’s family shared whatever rice and *daal* soup was left over from their evening meal. In the morning Bal Krishna had the urge to drink some hot tea. Taking a little tea and sugar in his hand he asked the shopkeeper for credit. The final blow of a devastating experience was when the shopkeeper refused his request and took the tea and sugar out of his hand.

Hurricane Nigel passed through two days later and smashed to pieces the few possessions spared by Eric. The family picked up some plates and the few kitchen utensils they could find. They washed their muddy clothes and constructed a rough lean-to shelter. Bal Krishna sat on the rocky outcrop looking around at what was left. He glanced at me and said, “Father, now I know that I will never be able to build a house for my family.”

20 February 1985

HURRICANE - A PERSONAL DILEMMA

Columban benefactors made money available for hurricane relief after Hurricanes Eric and Nigel. I offered money for building materials to the Catholic *mandali* prayer groups on condition that they gave priority to the most damaged houses and would work cooperatively on the rebuilding. There was still some money left when this plan went into operation. I now faced a personal dilemma with my Hindu friends in Saweni.

I had enjoyed our friendly social contact throughout the previous three years. I relished sharing in their celebration of the Hindu festivals. I saw a possibility for dialogue. I looked forward to hearing about their lives and values and in turn sharing with them the gospel message and my own experiences. The possibilities for a fruitful dialogue were there.

My friends were poor and had struggled. Then the hurricane hit them. The shattering of their fragile world and their resignation in the face of it touched chords of empathy in me. Should I offer some of the relief money and encourage in them hope for the future? They certainly deserved assistance. But would a handout cause our relationship to become dependent and unequal and spoil the possibility of real dialogue taking place? That was my dilemma.

I decided to risk the relationship. I offered the brothers money to buy building materials. Bal Krishna, Kannan and their neighbor Johnny came to me and we bought what was needed. They were very happy and began to look again with hope to the future. I was impressed that Hari Krishna, who had more resources of his own, did not come for help. Would dialogue among us happen? Only time would tell.



Visiting the families in 2024

8 March 1985

FATHER FORGIVE THEM

Miriam was married to Raju and they had six children – all girls. I liked Miriam because she was kind and gentle. She always had a cup of tea for a young priest visiting families. I never got to know Raju very much. He looked a bit scary and he hadn't much to say for himself. The girls were all schooling. The family seemed poor.

I called to the house one morning. It was locked on the outside but Miriam was inside. I was puzzled. Later, I returned. As I sat drinking tea I asked her why she was locked inside the house that morning. "Raju locks me in when he goes to another town," she said, "He doesn't trust me." "Have you given him any reason to mistrust you?" I asked. "No," she said. "There is something not right with him. He won't let me visit any of my family or even go to town. Sometime it is really bad. One night last week he sat sharpening his cane knife as I prepared to go to bed. He said to me, 'You won't see the light tomorrow morning.' I was so scared I couldn't sleep all night."

In recent years Raju became weak and sickly. Two of the girls were married and two had gone overseas. Raju was afraid now that Miriam would leave him. She didn't. He was hospitalized. She took him food every day and sat by his side until night fall. When he died, she made sure that his burial took place from church and she observed all the cultural rites. Today I visited her again. She had arrived home just as I got there. "Where were you?" I asked. "I have just come back from the graveyard," she replied. "I go there every day to pray for Raju."



5 May 1985

To Go or not to Go

I dreamt last night of my childhood home. The kitchen led into the back hall. There I wanted to open the door into the back yard where junk was left lying around. But a clocking hen hatching eggs with dogged resistance, blocked my way. I tried



to lift her aside to open the back door. She pecked my hands. I retreated. This happened a few times. Then I woke up.

I had applied to do a psychology course in Rome. I received a letter accepting my application yesterday. From supervising seminarians in cross-cultural training I could recognize some personal difficulties that hindered them. However, I wasn't equipped to help them. So, I hoped this course would equip me.

That helped to explain the dream. I was in two minds about doing the psychology course. I consciously wanted to do it. But it would involve examining my hidden selfish behaviour and motivation. I would be opening a door to the dark side of my personality. It would mean going into the back yard of the unconscious to claim my personal junk.

I shared my ambivalence with an ethnic Indian friend, expecting sympathy and reassurance. Instead, Sunita lectured me about doing my duty, and not coming back to Fiji until I had completed the course. I was taken aback! Then I realized that this was the Indian cultural way of supporting the sense of purpose of a wavering friend. It was time to push aside with courage that pecking hen, that didn't want to be disturbed, and to risk checking the junk!

I said Mass for them,” reported Pundit Bala Krishna Dass, exuding an enthusiastic sense of achievement. “Did you?” said I, a bit doubtfully, “How did you say it?” “The same way as you do,” he replied cheerfully, “except that I didn’t give out communion.”



Pundit Bala Krishna Dass

I was intrigued by this and wondered what the Roman Curia would make of it. “But tell me in detail what you did,” I probed. “Well,” he answered, “we started with a hymn and then a prayer. Then we had a reading from the bible and I preached on the reading for about fifteen minutes. Something came over me and I really got engrossed in the sermon. We had another hymn followed by a decade of the rosary. Then we finished with more hymns.”

I smiled as it dawned on me that my Hindu friend, Bala Krishna Dass, had not actually conducted a Eucharist with his Catholic

Indian relatives in Canada but had led them through the format for a prayer meeting. Rome could breathe a sigh of relief!

I was chatting with Bala Krishna in his house near Lautoka, Fiji, shortly after his arrival home from a six month visit to his daughter in Vancouver, Canada. His stay in Vancouver coincided with Pope John Paul’s visit there and his impressive six feet two frame shook with emotion as he described his joy on seeing the Pope. “A lot of people make a big effort to go on pilgrimage,” he remarked, “but it seemed to me that I had been given an opportunity to make a pilgrimage and accomplish something with my life when I saw the Pope.”



Archbishop Mataka with Bala Dass

The Pope had passed so close to Bala Dass that, if he had stretched out his arm, he could almost touch him. He softly pronounced the traditional salutation, *Namaskaram* (I bow before you) in his own Telugu language, as tears of joy trickled down his cheeks. These two incidents show us something of the man that Bala Krishna is: deeply religious, proud of his own culture and amazingly open to religions different from his own.

“I don’t know where the inspiration came from,” Bala Krishna told me. “But I freely promised to have all my children baptized and brought up as Catholics though I myself would remain a Hindu.” Bala Krishna was speaking of the preparation for his Catholic marriage to Mary Poligar. Pressed further he said, “Firstly, all religions are one – there is no essential dichotomy between them. But secondly, I saw that Christianity was more zealous in religious instruction than Hinduism. So, I felt that my children would have a light to direct their steps through life if they were Christian.



The acceptance of Indian cultural symbols into Catholic worship and sacraments made Bala Krishna very happy. His neighbors slapped him on the back in congratulations after seeing Fr Sean Rainey MSSC perform the wedding of his eldest daughter, Nirmala, according to the inculturated Catholic rite, which has traditional Indian rituals and symbols. “They told me that I had taken a blindfold away from their eyes,” he said.

When his daughter Rosema told him that she wished to remain single and become a consecrated person to work for the Church he gladly gave her his blessing. “It is a genuine service,” he explained to me, “a person who lives only for self, wastes a life, but a person who lives for others becomes a full human being.

Bala Krishna gives recitals of the Bhagavad Gita during the thirteen days of mourning following a Hindu death. One evening he invited me to say a few words to the people gathered there. Afterwards he surprised me by inviting them to join in singing a Christian hymn, which he led. When celebrating a Hindu marriage, unlike other pundits, Bala Krishna insists that both spouses have equal responsibility to love and respect one another. “You can’t clap with only one hand,” he says. This could be entirely due to the fairmindedness of a good man, but it might also indicate the influence that Christian teaching has had on him.

During Hindi Mass on special occasions like Diwali, the festival of lights, Bala Krishna would sit with the choir and lead the hymns. At a religious convention in Lautoka in 1981 he was up at 4.00 a.m. to cook lunch for 400 people attending. He wants everyone to be faithful to their own religion and to promote together the search for true humanity. Some Catholics pray that he will become a Catholic. But then he would no longer be Christ’s Hindu missionary.

"Father Frank, you are a good friend of mine. But if you ever ask me to take that girl back again we will be friends no more!" I was stunned. I had merely listened to Sant Ram, a court clerk in Suva, tell how his daughter Roshini had shamed him by eloping with a workmate. He had planned to send her to university in New Zealand. While he was saving money for this, Roshini got a job in the city with an import/export company.

Roshini attracted the notice of Jagdish at work. One evening she didn't return home. She disappeared. Her family was distraught. They searched among relatives and friends. Sant Ram's wife wept continuously. A few days later Sant Ram located Roshini at Jagdish's house. She refused to return home so that her father could arrange a simple wedding for her. Then pained, frustrated and angry Sant Ram pointed at his daughter. "From now on you are nothing to us. We don't know you. If you die, none of us will come to your funeral; and if your mother should die, I will not let you into the house to cry for her. Never come to my house again!"

I heard all this from Sant Ram when I went to visit the family. After telling the story he issued me with the warning. Later that night he dropped me back to the presbytery. As the car came to a halt I was silent for a while. "I'm sorry, my friend. I can't do what you said. You know that I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger one said to him..." Slowly and quietly I related to Sant Ram the parable of the prodigal son. When I finished he was weeping openly. I sat for a while in silence, then wished him good night and got out of the car.

A few months later Roshini met her mother by chance in the city. She reported that the romance had soured. Jagdish was going out with other girls and when she remonstrated with him he beat her. Roshini told her mother how unhappy she was. She wanted to return home. That evening when Sant Ram returned from work Roshini ran to him and threw herself at his feet weeping and begging for pardon. He lifted her up and said to his wife, "Give her something to eat."



5. MINISTRY IN POST-COUP FIJI 1989 - 1995

I went to Italy to study Italian in Florence and Psychology in Rome in Autumn 1985. After finishing a 3-year course in Psychology I was given the opportunity to study Social Anthropology for one year in London.

A coup d'état was effected by the Fijian army in 1987 one month after an election was won by a party supported mainly by the Indo-Fijian people. I arrived back in Fiji at a tense time towards the end of 1989, just as the deposed Prime Minister died. I was assigned to teach and do psychological assessments at the Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva.

The Columban Society in Fiji decided that reconciliation between the ethnic groups in Fiji (particularly between the indigenous Fijians and the Indo-Fijians) would be our missionary priority. I rented a small house in a working class parish in Suva and later rented a room in a Fijian home. So as well as my work in the seminary I could stay close to the people, be involved in intercultural dialogue and reconciliation, and be able to help in the parish at weekends.

9 March 1989 **MARRIAGE IN THE HIERARCHICAL FIJIAN SOCIETY**

I am studying social anthropology at London University. Yesterday I attended a talk given by an anthropologist, who did her field work in a village on an island in Lomaiviti, Fiji.

One day she was sitting at the edge of the village green with a respected villager. He told her that when he got married he continued to behave as he had done when single. He went out every night to drink *yaqona* and chat and joke with his friends until early morning. He would get up at 11.00 a.m. and sit for his wife to serve him breakfast. On the first day she handed him a cup of tea. It was cold! He immediately threw the tea into her face. The same thing happened on the next few days – late night out, late rising, cold tea thrown at his wife.

Then one morning he got up, late as usual, and sat for breakfast. His wife handed him a cup of tea. It was hot! They both then laughed. The villager said to the anthropologist, "*Sa qai tekivu kina na veilomani dina.*" [That is when real love began between us].

The anthropologist gave an interesting analysis. Sexual attraction (*veidomoni*) traditionally occurs between cross-cousins (mother's brother's daughter or father's sister's daughter). This is a relationship of equality and freedom in Fijian culture. However the cultural paradigm for relationship between a Fijian husband and wife is hierarchical (similar to the hierarchical relationship between chief and people). So, there is a structural problem with how an equal relationship between lovers can become a hierarchical relationship between husband and wife.

When his wife accepts that her husband is the boss, they both relax because they have accepted the cultural norm. This accounts for their laughter and the man's belief that real love can then begin.

15 January 1990

BEING A CHRISTIAN AFTER THE COUP

After the 1987 coups the Columban missionaries decided that their priority was to be reconciliation. With this in mind Fr Dick Keelan and I founded People for Intercultural Awareness. Rev. Paula Niukula, ex-President of the Methodist Church, was a strong partner. We held courses and workshops in many parts of Fiji during the 1990s.

During one such workshop I was shocked when an indigenous Fijian religious Brother announced, "I am Fijian first and Christian second." I then realized that confusion around identity challenged many people at that time. But his passionate embrace of ethnic identity put into greater relief some very different responses.

Sr Theresa Naidu, after hearing the news of the coup, was sitting despondently in the diocesan Education Office. Fr Leone Raselala passed by. He came to her and placed his hand sympathetically on her shoulder. At Votua some angry villagers wanted to invade the home of a Sikh neighbor whom they felt had cheated them. Another villager said, "We can't do that. We are Christians."

A gang chased some Indo-Fijians at the bus stand intending to beat them up. Sunia Cama, a former heavyweight boxing champion, stepped out in front of it. He said, "Anyone who wants to attack one of these people must get by me first." The gang retreated.



Participants of the First Intercultural Course

THE WAY THE WORLD SHOULD BE

In 1986 while visiting Fiji, St. Pope John Paul II pronounced Fiji ‘the way the world should be’ – a country with different ethnic and religious communities living together in peace. However one year later the peace was shattered by a coup d’etat led by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. This was the first of four coups, the last of which occurred at the end of 2006. The coups had disastrous consequences for the economic and political life of Fiji and social relations between the ethnic communities.

Columban missionaries in Fiji decided in February 1990, in response to the 1987 coups and their aftermath, to prioritize work for justice and reconciliation. We tried to act as missionary peace builders. The coups involved complicated political intrigues and personalities. But ethnic prejudice, based on stereotypes, is a source of social division, available for manipulation by political and military leaders for their own purposes.

Ethnic prejudice in Fiji is based on stereotypes held by the main ethnic groups about each other. Hard-working ethnic Indians are dismissed as selfish, mean individualists by others and the relaxed communitarian Indigenous Fijians are condemned as lazy and irresponsible by people with a different perspective.

This “us and them” division between ethnic groups becomes a negative emotional prejudice when used to incite competition, fear and suspicion in ordinary people by those seeking leadership and power. Ethnic prejudice, stirred up in this way, leads to discrimination and hostility.

Columbans are missionaries. We experience the letting go of stereotypes and prejudices through our efforts to understand and live in other cultures. In Fiji we learn both Hindi and Indigenous Fijian languages. We try to adapt to both indigenous Fijian and ethnic Indian culture with gospel universalism. So, we are positioned to be bridge builders in Fiji.

After the first coup Fr Dick Keelan and I, with strong backing from Rev. Paula Niukula, a former President of the Methodist Church, started People for Intercultural Awareness to work for mutual respect between ethnic communities. We held two week courses for indigenous Fijian and

ethnic leaders. We conducted many weekend workshops for parishes, schools and colleges. We targeted young leaders such as teachers and

A shadow drama of the crucifixion at an intercultural course.



seminarians. I wrote two short books of intercultural exercises to help students, teachers and parishioners to have an experience of intercultural dialogue. Columbans continued to arrange for Indigenous Fijian seminarians to live during their pastoral year with Indian families for 4 to 5 months. We facilitated reflection to ensure the participants learned from them.

I found the story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger very meaningful (Gen. 32:25-29). Though wounded in the encounter Jacob persevered and won a blessing from the other who proved to be the Other. In struggling to be inclusive of people of other cultures and faiths we come to know and love God better.

I treasure the image of a Columban missionary as a bridge builder. I rejoice when I make friends with people of different cultures and faith. When I am able to deepen the respect and acceptance of people for each other I truly experience myself as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I feel I am working for Fiji to be the way the world should be.

16 June1990

THE SACRED COW

After spending over a year in India from February 1979 to March 1980 I began to understand the reverence that Hindus gave to the cow and the importance for them of not eating beef. In a densely populated country, the cow was very important. It gave nourishing milk. It could be used for ploughing the rice fields. Equipped with a wooden trailer it could transport items too heavy to carry. Its dung was useful as fuel or, mixed with water and clay, as an antiseptic paste for the floor of poor houses. The cow in India is esteemed as a mother. How could one eat one's mother! A religious preacher who ate beef would have no chance of gaining a hearing from Hindus.

Actually, some years previously while on my way for a meal with a Hindu teacher in a local settlement I was discretely approached by a temple priest. He invited me to eat with him and his family. "We are having beef!" he whispered conspiratorially, thinking that for a European this would be an invitation impossible to refuse. Though shocked that this was happening in the grounds of a Hindu temple I politely explained that I had a prior invitation.

Then, a couple of years after my return from India I was assigned to work primarily among the Indo-Fijian people. I decided to become vegetarian. We had a good cook in the Lautoka presbytery who was able to cope with this situation. I found vegetarian curry very tasty and so had no problem.

But then while studying for three years in Rome in the late eighties I used to spend my holidays at home in Ireland. My mother was not used to having a vegetarian on her hands but she made great efforts to adapt. My counsellor in Rome, however, challenged me about giving my mother this trouble. So I reverted to eating everything.

Now back in Fiji, I participated last night in a prayer meeting in a rural Catholic Indo-Fijian home. A very open Hindu family had been attending the regular prayer meeting at this home for many years. After the prayers a young man of the family who knew about my time in India asked whether I was still a vegetarian. I told him that I had to give up being vegetarian while at home in Ireland. "Do you eat everything?" he asked. "Yes, I do," I answered. "Father eats EVERYTHING!" he reported to his Hindu family members. His emphatic report indicated that I now ate beef. Once again, I was reminded how repugnant beef-eating is to Hindus. So, I have now decided that I will eat meat but not beef.

9 January 1991

THE SPOKESPERSON

Many of us passengers gathered on deck as our boat neared the port of Levuka, the old capital of Fiji. I had ministered for some weeks in a Catholic village, part of Levuka parish, on a nearby island. I intended to stay the night at the presbytery and return to Suva by boat next morning. A young girl I recognized slightly sidled up to me. She greeted me politely and then asked if her friend could leave some luggage at the Levuka presbytery. I replied that I could not give that permission as I didn't belong to the parish. "Why didn't your friend come directly to ask me?" I added. The girl smiled and said, "Thank you."

Thinking about it afterwards, I realized that I had actually experienced the reason the girl's friend did not approach me directly. A direct refusal of her request would have been more embarrassing than having the refusal conveyed by another person.

Requests can be sensitive. They can put a relationship in jeopardy. Therefore, the Fijian culture gives an important place to the *mata ni vanua* or spokesperson. The spokesperson learns from the elders how to approach a person of higher status with information or requests. S/he is the go-between who can explain the situation to both parties so that, whatever the outcome, there is no break in the relationship.



8 March 1991

SAYING MASS IN HOMES

Worship for ethnic Indians is based on the home. Hindus pray in their homes or worship at the shrines in their compounds. They sometimes hold *katha* readings i.e. nightly readings from a sacred book at their home, with food for all on the last night.

Catholic Indo-Fijians request Mass in the home on special occasions too e.g. to celebrate anniversaries, special birthdays or family successes. After Mass *yaqona* and a meal is provided. As a young priest, I used to enjoy saying Mass on those occasions.

However, in later years I noticed that quite a few invited people were arriving later and later. It seemed that for some the Mass was not important. They were coming for the *yaqona*, food and social occasion. By driving noisily into the compound in the middle of Mass they also became a distracting nuisance for others.

For some hosts too the Mass seemed to be no more than a sign that “this family is Important.” That hit me strongly when I met a man who never attended Sunday Mass or weekly prayer meetings. He announced, “I am going to have Mass at my home to celebrate the graduation of my son as a teacher.” In my mind I said, “I wonder who is going to celebrate that Mass. It certainly won’t be me.”

But how to distinguish between “good Catholics” and others? To solve that problem I stopped saying Masses for private family occasions in homes. I would offer the choice of saying Mass in the church, with food and drink afterwards at the home, or leading a prayer meeting with scripture readings, homily and hymns at the home. Some people were not happy with this and discussed it with me.

If I was wrong, at least, it led to discussion and reflection.

14 May 1991

A MARIAN PROCESSION IN THE CITY

I attended a Marian procession in Newtown, a suburb of Suva city, tonight. About 50 people, mainly women and children, walked behind the statue of our Lady of Fatima as it was carried from one family home to another. Many candles lit up the cool dark night. The devotees sang hymns and one of the ladies led the rosary.

It was a folk religious event. No priest led the prayers. There were no symbols of Christ and no reading from the bible. The hymns were to Mary and about Mary. It was devotional but, with the children jostling the statue, it was not formal. The group was multi-racial and multi-religious. A Hindu lady near me was searching for a candle. A Tongan lady, deserted by her husband, told me that she came to pray for her delinquent son. In the host house, Mary's statue was enthroned on a table set with white cloth and flowers. Everyone squatting inside and outside the house gazed at the statue absorbed by their own private intentions. Afterwards tea was served to all.

There was something very attractive about the evening. Wounded people found a mediator through whom to touch the supernatural power of God. The community setting, the participative rituals, the prominence of the feminine, the longing for the healing of relationships and faith in the Virgin's care for us stood out. Some of these needs do not seem to be met in our official religion. It would certainly be good to add an appropriate bible reading and to place Christ with his mother. But the devotion and the feeling must be recognized and affirmed.

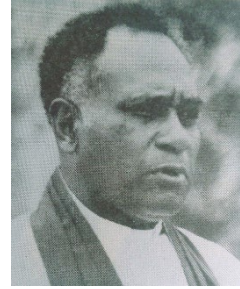


Marian Procession at Labasa

19 December 1991

ECUMENISM IN ACTION

"That is the first time I have ever seen him washing dishes!" said Mrs Sai Niukula, indicating her husband Rev. Paula Niukula, a past president of the Methodist Church. This little bit of family politics happened during a two week course for Methodists and Catholics, indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian, at Pacific Regional Seminary, Suva in 1991.



Rev. Paula Niukula

This course explored ways to bridge the ethnic gap between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians and it also explored the faith of Methodists and Catholics. 26 participants from different parts of Fiji lived at the seminary, prayed together, did role plays, shared their beliefs and practices, engaged in a reconciliation ritual and spent time informally getting to know each other. Staff and participants washing the dishes and doing other chores together was part of the program.

Admitting prejudices was difficult. But derogatory sayings and incidents of hurt and discrimination were gradually shared in a safe environment. We were surprised to see indigenous Fijians weep as Indo-Fijians dramatized the situation of near slavery that their ancestors experienced as indentured laborers. Indo-Fijians discovered the deep emotional identity with the communally owned land that indigenous Fijians have. Seeing through the eyes of the other was a constant theme. A reconciliation service combined regret for prejudice or discrimination, with a shadow play of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, with silence and music, and with darkness and light. It was an emotional high point.

We discovered common inspiration in Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God and in the social teaching of both churches. We learned about the official dialogue between the two Churches. We hit a rough patch when the group attended first a Methodist service and then on another day a Catholic Eucharist. Methodists invite all who believe in Christ to receive Holy Communion at their service. When at the Catholic Eucharist they did not receive a reciprocal invitation some of them felt hurt and angry. Rev. Paula gently explained the Catholic point of view.

One of the participants reported, "The workshop was very challenging and helped a lot in the reforming of my behavior, feelings and attitudes about Indians and Fijians and about Methodists and Catholics." I discovered that ecumenism is fruitful when the partners are committed to a common effort to bring about some dimension of the kingdom of God in the concrete situation of life.

21 February 1992

DEATH OF LOVE

Mani Ram told me today that he had just had a terrifying experience. He was in love with a girl in the settlement but her parents rejected him and arranged a marriage for her with another young man. Mani Ram said that he then began to have dreams every night of a female ghost coming to him and extracting his life source with his semen. He began to get thinner and thinner. It seemed to him that he was going to die. He was very worried.

Mani Ram was ashamed to tell anyone about this but eventually he confided in a friend. His friend listened sympathetically. When he had understood the problem he told Mani Ram not to worry. He knew who could put an end to this life-threatening process. "Go to the old lady who lives up the hill there," he said. "She will be able to help you."

It was even more embarrassing for Mani Ram to have to explain his problem to the old lady. She took it in her stride, however. "I'll tell you how to get rid of that pesky female ghost," she said confidently. You buy a packet of biscuits and take them with you to the toilet. While you are sitting there doing your job, begin eating the biscuits. That female ghost will be so disgusted at you for mixing two functions that should be strictly kept separate that she will leave you and never return."

Mani Ram did as he was told. His dreams stopped and he began to gain weight again. On hearing his story I thought, "What a fascinating interaction that is between human experience, psychology and culture."

4 March 1992

FINDING A BRIDGE

I am teaching seminarians at the Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva. One of the senior students, Joe, lives in a small group of students under the direction of a priest. The students ignored some rules. The priest confronted the group. The students reacted with indignation and refused to apologize. A conflict ensued.

Joe admitted that the priest's challenge reminded him of his father criticizing and punishing him severely. He also admitted privately that most of the priest's demands were correct and just. However, he could not admit this publicly out of loyalty to the group. Hence the impasse. The tight unyielding solidarity of the group made rational arguments by the priest fruitless. The power struggle was tied up with transference of unresolved issues from family in the past. Cultural values and group dynamics were operative in the present.

I challenged Joe to accept his responsibility, as a senior member of the group, to become a bridge between the priest and seminarians. He spoke with both sides. The standoff was freed up and they celebrated the reconciliation by drinking kava together.



Pacific Regional Seminary Suva

19 March 1992

THE BOGEY MAN

When I was growing up in Ireland we used to hear about the bogey man – who would snatch naughty children and spirit them away. In the dark days of racial prejudice in Fiji the two major races here in Fiji used to identify the “bogey man” as someone of the other race. *I Taukei* (indigenous) children were told that, if disobedient, they would be given away to the Indian man in the settlement nearby. Indo-Fijian children were warned that, if naughty, a big Fijian man would eat them.

Today at an intercultural workshop, to undo the harm unleashed by Rabuka’s coup, we had personal sharing about racial prejudice in a mixed cultural group. Lalita, a school teacher, shared her experience in the group. Her mother used to threaten her, as a 6-year-old girl, with being eaten by a big Fijian man if she didn’t do what she was told. One day she was sent to the nearby shop to buy some *sukhi* (leaf) tobacco for her father.

A large indigenous Fijian man was there ahead of her. She eyed him nervously. He bought a loaf of bread and a large tin of fish. He opened the tin of fish and cut the loaf of bread right down the middle. Putting the fish in the split bread he put it in his mouth and bit off half the loaf. Little Lalita couldn’t stand it any longer! She turned and ran home. Her mother had to go herself to the shop to buy the *sukhi* tobacco. Served her right! No way was Lalita going back there again!

1 April 1992

BEWARE OF A HOLY MAN'S CURSE

"I'm sorry Father, please forgive me. I did wrong but you must not hold it against me," pleaded Michael Rangu Raj insistently as he grabbed my hand. We met on the street today, after about 20 years. I was staggered. In view of our previous meetings, I would have expected him to ignore me or to treat me coldly. Instead here he was appealing for mercy.

In my early days in that parish I used to say Mass for Michael and his family about once every two months. I would teach some basics of the faith to the family, stay the night and return to base the following day. Michael had become a convert to Catholicism while being cared for by the Missionary Sisters of Mary on the leprosy island of Makogai.

One evening I arrived at his home unexpectedly. As I sat drinking a cup of tea, I caught sight of the equipment for Hindu worship under a bed. I challenged Michael and his wife about this. They admitted, without explanation or apology, to having done Hindu worship earlier in the day. I was angry with what to me seemed like syncretism and hypocrisy. I was annoyed that I had been fooled into believing that they were sincere Catholics. I expressed my disappointment and left.

Sometime later Michael came to the presbytery in the town. I had calmed down emotionally. But I warned him against standing with a leg in two boats in danger of falling between them. I told him that he was walking a dangerous path along a cliff and could easily fall into a chasm. Michael was not impressed and left without any sign of compunction.

When I met him again today I was surprised at his humble and repentant reaction. Later I heard that he had had a number of setbacks in previous years - a car accident while he was driving, the loss of a job and problems with his children. Then it dawned on me. He must have thought that I had cursed him.

How we see ourselves and how others see us can be two very different things.



A Street in Labasa town

22 April 1992

MIXED-UP HOSPITALITY

Renting a small neat house set on a grassy mound in Vesivesi Road, Kinoya was perfect for me. It was just a 15-minute drive to the Pacific Regional Seminary where I was teaching during the week. It was also just a 5-minute drive to the large parish church of Nadera where the local Parish Priest was happy to have help for Sunday Masses.

I was friendly with a Fijian family that lived nearby. Three or four of the children came to help me clean the house one Saturday and I cooked a meal for them that evening. A catechist living nearby had planted some *dalo ni Tana* root crop behind the house. I told a couple of the older children to uproot a few plants, peel and cook them.

I made a light stew and served up bowls of soup from it as a first course. The younger kids looked puzzled but the oldest girl told them that this was the Vavalagi (European) custom. The Fijian way is to select from all available food at the same time. We polished off the stew and *dalo* and the children returned home content.

The next morning the catechist burst in. "Someone has uprooted some of the *dalo*," he said, "but the strange thing is that they only took the upper part of this *dalo*, which we only feed to pigs, and left the main part in the soil." Oi Lei. We all survived, though.



Dalo or Taro root crops

6 May 1992 **MENTAL ILLNESS OR SPIRIT POSSESSION**

Kate came from an old Catholic family. Her younger brother had left his wife, Mona, for another woman. Mona blamed Kate. Not long afterwards, Kate's 12-year-old daughter returned from a visit to Mona's house. She reported seeing Mona and her mother cracking their fingers over their heads with sorcery materials laid out in front and bidding evil on her husband's family.

Over the years Kate became aware of a succession of problems in her family – rebellious daughters, pregnancies before marriage, and her husband's unfair dismissal from work. Her younger son, Sonny, began to smoke marijuana and he was treated for mental problems in St Giles' Mental Hospital a number of times.

Now, Kate was back in Suva to support Sonny who was due in court for possession of marijuana. It wasn't easy. He slept irregularly, stared at the walls, shouted and swore at her, unscrewed the plug sockets from the wall. It then occurred to Kate, for the first time, that Sonny might be possessed by a devil. A few days later a trembling Sonny said he was afraid 'because the black power was leaving him.' Kate remembered her daughter's report and other stories about Mona's family dabbling in sorcery. She had called me to let me know that God had shown her the source of her troubles.

I tried to show Kate the danger of believing in sorcery: 1) Sonny might discontinue his medicine believing that sorcery was the cause of his problems. 2) Kate's and her family's faith would be weakened. Sorcery suspicions could plague them in the future also. 3) They could easily accuse people wrongly of sorcery, destroying people's good name and turning others against them.

Kate did not seem convinced. However, she said that she would not speak of this to many people.

10 August 1992

KEEPING THE LORD'S DAY

This Sunday morning I attended Mass in the Cathedral in Skibbereen, where I am on holiday with my father. This has been a really bad summer in Ireland – constant rain. That doesn't improve the humor of us holiday makers but it is catastrophic for the farmers who need some dry sunny weather to save the hay for their animals' winter fodder.

The local parish priest said the Mass. As usual there was no singing and no one went up to read the scripture readings so the celebrant read all three. He also read the prayers of the faithful. Not very many people around me answered the responses of the Mass. I was disheartened by those things but the homily was the worst of all.

He said that he had been out driving the previous weekend and he was shocked to see farmers saving their hay on the Lord's Day. He quoted the third commandment and insisted that it must be a day of rest and no excuse could be found for not keeping it so. Not much sympathy there for the poor farmers trying to rescue something from a rotten summer.

After Mass I met a local friend. "How does anyone continue to come to Mass here to listen to homilies like that?" I asked. "Yerra, half the people from this parish go to the next parish for Mass because of him," he said. "But the fellow over there is just as bad. So, half of his parish comes here for Sunday Mass!"



It had been a busy day and I was tired. Returning in darkness from the shop to my rented house I hoped that none of my neighbors would see me. "There's Father passing by" shouted a child from the door of his house. A pressing invitation from Mareta, the owner, to enter could not be refused.

Methodist niece, Anna, was visiting. She was unwell. Some nights she used to see a black figure approach her bed to choke her. On those nights Anna could not sleep at all. Could I do anything to help her? "When did the black figure last appear to you?"

"Two nights ago".

"Did anything out of the ordinary happen the day before?"

"I'll tell you what happened, Father," Mareta broke in, "She had her tubes tied. I told her that it was wrong but her husband signed for the operation and she had it done".

I had a hunch now that the black figure was a projection of guilt feelings.

"When did the figure first appear to you," I asked.

"About two years ago," she replied.

"Did you do something wrong at that time?"

"I had a row with my mother-in-law. I was attending a week-long church program and she complained because I was leaving the children with her each night. I answered her rudely."

"Did anything more serious happen? A mistake or fault you regretted but could not undo?"

Anna burst into tears and sobbed for a while.

"I gave birth to twins at that time, but one died some months later without baptism."

I asked Mareta to light a candle and to bring holy water and a bible. I read Saint Luke's gospel chapter 7, verses 36 to 50, the story of the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

"Anna, listen, 'her many sins must have been forgiven or she would not have shown such great love.' Jesus speaks these words now to you."

I explained the different kinds of baptism - baptism by water, by blood and by desire. Anna agreed that she had really desired baptism for her infant. I assured her that God counted that as faith on behalf of her child and had accepted her child into eternal life.

Anna held the lighted candle. Her aunt Mareta laid hands on her and prayed for her. I sprinkled Anna with the holy water and we prayed the Our Father together. I then excused myself and slipped away. Somehow the tiredness was gone. Anna was not troubled again.

“My daughter can marry a Chinese, a European, a Pacific Islander, anyone except an Indian so take your gifts and go,” roared the Fijian villager. Daniel gathered the whale’s tooth, the bundle of yaqona roots and the kerosene drums into the waiting taxi and sadly returned home. Daniel, an Indo-Fijian and Maria, an indigenous Fijian had met at a dance and had fallen in love. As a boy he had often visited Fijian villages with a Columban priest. He made friends easily with them and admired their relaxed fun-loving attitudes and the way they shared everything with each other.

Daniel’s mother was strict. She ruled her household with rigid discipline. He wondered whether the girl he married would be able to put up with her. He worried that he would be caught in a tug-of-war between them. He had been touched by Maria’s bubbly and loving personality. After dating for some months she agreed to marry him. But would she be able to live with a mother-in-law who had fixed views on everything? Maria said that her love for him would help her to be patient with his mother but first he would have to face her father! Daniel realized now what she had meant. Later Maria consulted her mother who said that it was her life, her decision. Maria left home and village and married Daniel.

On Sunday mornings when they slept later than usual, Daniel’s mother would slam saucepans together or bang a brush against a wall as she grumbled about the laziness of the young generation. But the kitchen was where she wielded absolute authority. Maria made a mistake in cooking *daal* once. Dan’s mother threw it out shrieking, “This is only fit for the animals.”

Daniel’s mother liked to drink *yaqona*. Often after a day of disputes she would strain the pounded roots through a cloth and call Maria to join her in her evening happy hour. A temporary truce was declared. In time the old lady grew weak and ill. For the last eighteen months of her life, she was bedridden and Maria cared for her, carrying her to the toilet, feeding and bathing her. Her own daughters could not have done more.



In the past the British colonial power forced a marriage of the Fijian and Indian people in these Pacific islands. Today cooperation and mutual concern is the only way that the different ethnic groups in Fiji can prosper. No one believes that it will be easy. The example of Daniel and Maria’s marriage is surely a sign of hope.

27 June 1993

LENDING MONEY

Renting a small house in Kinoya while teaching at Pacific Regional Seminary is ideal. I can participate in the local parish sector and help in the parish by celebrating Sunday Mass. There are many Indo-Fijian Catholics here to visit. I encourage the *mandali* (Hindi prayer group) to continue gospel sharing. A catechist who lives a couple of houses away planted *dalo* (a root crop) for me in the space behind the house.

I invited my near neighbors for a *yaqona* session one Saturday night – a kind of house warming. The catechist was my *mata ni vanua* or spokesman. Early on, I regretted my choice of evening because I hadn't completed my homily for the early Sunday Mass. Around mid-night the catechist, without checking with me, mixed another full basin of *yaqona* while I was talking to someone. There were only a few of us left to finish it. To make matters worse he left long gaps between each round. As my sleep time got increasingly shorter I was getting more anxious. "*Talo!*" (serve it) – The words escaped from my lips. I noticed the catechist making a startled jump. Later he explained to me that if I wanted the drinking to be speeded up I only had to mention it to him, and not overcall him.

One of my neighbors, a non-Catholic teacher, has an irritating habit. He regularly wakes me up before 6.00 a.m. by calling from the window to ask for his bus fare. I used to give it with bad grace wondering why, since he has a good job, he hadn't his own bus fare. He always returned the borrowed money a few days later.

Last Saturday, he approached me later in the morning explaining that he needed about \$300 to buy mats to take to a *reguregu* (funeral gathering) of a close relative who had died suddenly. The bank was closed for the weekend but he promised to repay me on Monday. I happened to have that much money with me but I needed some money myself that day. So I reluctantly handed over \$200.00.

Yesterday was Monday but there was no sign of my friend. I'm afraid I can wave goodbye to that money. I see now how carefully he groomed me. But, at least, I won't be disturbed early in the morning anymore!



19 July 1993

IF REINCARNATION WERE POSSIBLE

Fr David Arms is our Columban linguist. He is an expert in Fijian and in translation work. He also spent some months studying ethnic languages in the southern Philippines and in Pakistan. He helped the Columban missionaries in those places by writing the grammar and a word list of the languages for them. Early this month he went to a settlement to study Fiji Hindi with a view to helping the Columbans in Fiji learn the local Hindi.

He used to squat on a mat in the shade each day with a farmer who had no formal schooling. He knew that he would hear only Fiji Hindi from him, without any mixture of standard Hindi from the books or from school. The farmer, Rishi Ram, was delighted to oblige. Having a priest with a doctorate come to learn from him raised his status in the settlement. He happily mixed the *yaqona* every morning and told his wife to have a nice curry ready for lunch.

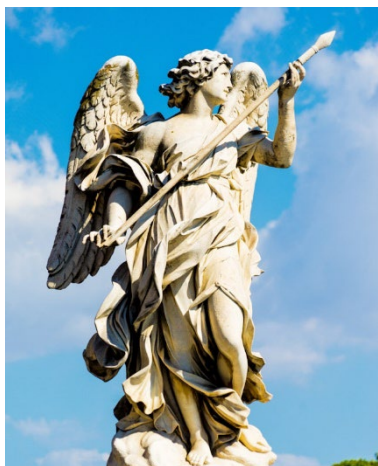
Rishi Ram liked to smoke *sukhi* (dried leaf) tobacco while drinking *yaqona*. Today he found that he had left his tin of tobacco at the edge of the mat on which he and Fr David were squatting. It was just outside his reach. His wife was busy inside preparing and cooking the meal. He shouted for her. She came out. "Hand me my tobacco," he barked. She obediently stooped down, picked up the tin of tobacco and put it in his hand. "Now carry on with the cooking," he ordered.

When I met Fr David this evening, he told me the story. "If I am ever reincarnated," he said to me, "I want to come back as an Indian man!"

Fr Leone Raselala is a senior Fijian diocesan priest. The ancestral spirit of his clan has the characteristic of turning his back when present. Fr Leone told me that as a child eating a meal with his family, he would sometimes unconsciously turn his back to the others who would then signal to each other that 'Grandfather' was present. Later he noticed his niece doing the same thing.

When Leone was studying in a seminary in New Zealand he lay on his bed one afternoon in a drowsy state, though not asleep. He saw the door open and a seated figure come backwards into the room. After a short while it left in the same way. Fr Leone recognized that this could be explained in psychological terms as fantasy or projection in an altered state of consciousness springing from the loneliness of being in a foreign country. However, he felt more at home with accepting that his ancestral spirit became present to him in a comforting and protecting way. That sort of experience happened to him on a couple of other occasions.

I asked Fr Leone how he, as a Christian and a priest, understands the ancestral spirit. He told me that he had asked the same question of his father, a village catechist, who said, "Maybe the time will come when we Fijians won't need our beliefs in ancestral spirits. But for now, I think of them as guardian angels, messengers of God to help us in our need".



This is an example of a dynamic equivalence, a process which results in a translation model of local theology. The connotations of guardian angel in Western theology and of ancestral spirit in Fijian culture would need to be further examined to see if they formed an adequate mutual translation. However, we can see here the beginnings of a process of Christian theologizing in local cultural categories. Hopefully this kind of reflection will continue and develop in Fiji so that Fijian culture and Christian faith can enrich each other.

31 May 1994 **MY HOME IS YOUR HOME**

I have been renting a room from a Fijian family in Kinoya for the last few months while I continue to teach Psychology at the Pacific Regional Seminary. My landlady is a widow with two daughters and a son in the background. The younger daughter is 5 years old and always speaks English to me. At breakfast as I put marmalade on my toast, she watches me like a hawk and as soon as I go for a second helping of marmalade she shouts, "Enough, enough!" I retire ashamed.

On Saturday I can laze over breakfast and chat with my landlady. One Saturday she was going to a wedding later that morning. "I always cry at weddings," she admitted. "Why?" "Because when I see the bride all dressed up and radiant with joy, I think to myself, 'You don't realize the problems and troubles that are waiting to ambush you!'"

My landlady has a guava tree in the small patch in front of her house. Beyond that there is a bus stand. This year the guava crop has been good and she sells them to the people waiting at the bus stop. I asked her one evening how much money she had made that day. "Nineteen dollars" she said. "But some days I can make



twenty-four or twenty-five dollars." You know," she said, "Yesterday I went out and hugged the guava tree and said to it, 'You are great! It is because of you that I can feed Father!'"

9 May 1995

THE PLAY'S THE THING

We conducted an intercultural workshop here in Ba parish this past weekend. About 50 people attended, mainly indigenous Fijians and ethnic Indians. Scripture input was followed by mixed group discussions. Role plays about each community's history were performed. The self-stereotype and other-stereotype were elicited for each ethnic group. A reconciliation ritual was performed towards the end. Prayer and Mass together strengthened unity in diversity.

A young married teacher agreed to perform a role play about conflict. I took the role of priest and he of a parishioner. He was to challenge the priest's demands. The interaction would include lack of listening, bringing up old hurts, becoming personal and other elements of a clash. The role play was building to a climax when we noticed that his wife in the audience had begun to cry profusely. We stopped and asked her what was wrong. "I knew he would do something like this," she blurted, "I know that he never gives in." She hadn't realized that it was a role play. She had thought it was for real!

Maybe it triggered a reality of their married life because afterwards they came for marriage counselling. The sessions went well. The wife said after one session, "We come here each evening thinking that we will be talking about a particular topic. But each session takes its own course, we can never predict where it will go." They are still happily married, thank God.



Youth at an intercultural workshop

26 July 1995

SAVENACA ON PILGRIMAGE

Savenaca Momo from Nakoroboya in Ba Province is the epitome of a gentle giant. He joined the first team of lay missionaries to leave Fiji. They were appointed to Ireland. He was assigned to Newbridge, a town about 25 miles from Dublin. He became well known by playing rugby for the local team. A great horse lover, he was very fortunate to live within a few miles of the Curragh, the home of horse racing in Ireland. He used to often cycle there on Saturdays. Using his Fijian charm, he was usually let into the racetrack for free.



Savenaca came on a four day pilgrimage walk. It was from Knock (where Our Lady appeared in 1869) to Croagh Patrick, the sacred mountain and great pilgrimage place in Ireland since St Patrick's time. We finished our pilgrimage by climbing the mountain with about 25,000 other people on the traditional pilgrimage day, the last Sunday in July. Savenaca



The Pilgrim Path up Croagh Patrick

with his big long legs and years of practice on the mountains at home had no trouble climbing the steep slopes. The last part of the climb near the summit was dangerous because we were climbing over unstable shale which would often slide back when stepped on. I saw Savenaca reach out to elderly people nearby to help them avoid slipping or falling.

On reaching the summit we attended Mass and walked around the little church there saying the set prayers. As we sat then on the brow of the mountain top looking down at the hundred islands in the bay below, Savenaca stretched out his arms and said, "I could sleep here now." But we had to climb back down the mountain. As we neared the bottom, cameras from the Irish TV station were filming the crowds and interviewing the occasional pilgrim. Savenaca had a microphone thrust in front of him. He was asked what he, as a missionary, was doing in Ireland. "Well," he said, "St Patrick came to Ireland and began to convert the people to Christianity. I have come to finish the job!"

6. MISSIONARY WORK 1995-2006

After my home holiday in the middle of 1995 I was appointed Assistant Priest in Christ the King parish, Ba in the West of Fiji. The parish center is in Ba town but the parish serves villages in the mountainous interior and along the coast and has one small community of Indo-Fijian Catholics in a sugarcane settlement.

I remained committed to the work of intercultural understanding and reconciliation and it fitted well with the context of a multi-ethnic parish. After 3 years there, the wooden parish church accidentally burnt down and the parishioners then raised funds for a new church as other work continued.

I was elected onto the Columban General Council at the 2000 General Assembly and moved back to our Generalate in Dublin, Ireland. However I had the opportunity of visiting Fiji four or five times for a few weeks during the six years I was a member of the Council.

May 8, 1996

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Sukh Deo is a Hindu married to a Catholic wife. They live in an interior settlement far from town. As we chatted, he told me of an incident when he was a boy. In those days there were very few doctors, transport to town was difficult and money was hard to come by.

At that time his uncle was very tired and yawned so much that his jaws locked with his mouth wide open. He couldn't close it. Neighbors suggested massage, herbs, the witchdoctor but nothing worked. A stranger came to the settlement and announced that he could cure the uncle if the family would do whatever he told them. They agreed.

The next morning the stranger had a very hot fire kindled beside the porch of the house. He put the sick man sitting on the porch beside him. Then he began to heat a branding iron in the fire taking it out occasionally to check. The lock-jawed man grew pale and tried to move

back. Orders were given to hold him firmly in place.

The stranger suddenly pulled the red hot iron out of the fire and thrust it forward to within a few inches of the sick man's mouth. He jumped back with all his strength and at the same time opened his mouth wider

with fear. The locked jaw was freed and he could close his mouth again.

It was the talk of the settlement for months.





A fund-raising bazaar took place at Raviravi church today. A large multi-ethnic crowd attended and there were different cultural items presented. We enjoyed a couple of *mekes* (traditional Fijian dances). Then a young Hindu lady, specially invited by the organizers, performed a classical South Indian dance. As she danced, an indigenous Fijian lady approached her and did a *fakawela* by placing a two dollar note on her ear, knelt, did the *cobo* (clap of respect) and returned to her place.

Then an indigenous Fijian youth sauntered up to the dancer. He threw a *sulu* (wraparound cloth) over her head and while holding her in it he began to dance in a mocking erotic style in front of her. After a while he returned to his place laughing. When the dancer finished her dance some organizers and I approached her. We apologized for the young man's ignorance and gave her a gift. She graciously accepted both.

I was really angry with that young man for the way he insulted the dancer. Classical Indian dances are religious dances and are never interrupted, let alone treated with contempt. As an invited visitor doing a religious dance, she would have expected a more respectful reception. I was also angry with myself for not intercepting and leading the youth back to his place as soon as I saw what he intended to do.

I resolved that in future, on such multiethnic occasions, I would request onlookers to understand that cultural practices are different and to show respect for other cultures in that culture's way.

30 July 1996

DRAMA CAN BE REAL

Intercultural dialogue is vital for Fiji – both Church and country. Ethnic stereotypes and prejudice have persisted under (and sometimes above) the surface here for decades. Four military coups brought them to the surface. For mutual understanding communities need to know each other's history and values. They have to be able to empathize with each other's aspirations and problems.

Sketches or role plays, which the audience then discusses, can spark a shared understanding. But, occasionally the unexpected happens. While in Ba Parish I developed a role play. We filmed it yesterday as an educational tool. The setting was a school typical in Fiji where both teachers and students are of different ethnicities and are unaware of taboos in the other culture.

Scene one had a frustrated Indian teacher grab a male Fijian student by the hair (a strong taboo for Fijians) and threaten him. In the second scene a Fijian teacher was going to punish an Indian female student by hitting her legs with a *sasa* (coconut leaf-rib) broom. However, on hearing the instructions, the young Indian girl began to cry and refused to participate. To be beaten with a dirty broom is so humiliating in Indian culture that she could not allow it. We had to change the instructions so that she was only threatened with the broom.

In the third scene, the parents of both children accidentally met outside the head-teacher's office while waiting to complain about the teachers. They shared the cultural insults inflicted on their children by the teachers. Then realizing their sensitivity to taboos of their own culture but ignorant of those of the other culture they decided there and then that they too needed to learn more from each other.



Mr. John Rao, Manju and Angeline

12 August 1996

MATA NI GASAU – A FORMAL FIJIAN APOLOGY

I was preparing to say the monthly Mass at Votua village in Western Fiji. A family approached and requested that I accept a whale's tooth at the beginning of Mass as an apology to the Church. A member of the clan had "borrowed" some Church money years before and had neglected to return it. A series of misfortunes which befell the family was interpreted as a punishment. I accepted the traditional apology (*i soro*) and hoped that it would bring peace to the family.

The *mata ni gasau* or *isoro* is a traditional apology done to atone for a wrong doing that in some way injured the person or position of another. It is widely believed that misfortune indicates that a person has done some wrong which needs to be apologized for.

Soon afterwards, the parish council and we two priests planned a new building for our parish church which had accidentally burnt down. We consulted an architect, got our drawings, began collecting money and prepared the ground for the new church.

Then someone remembered that we hadn't consulted the Archbishop about our plans nor received his permission and advice before proceeding. It was a big gaffe. There was nothing to do but take a whale's tooth and *yaqona* to the Archbishop. Our spokesperson, holding aloft the whale's tooth, contritely admitted our mistake and asked forgiveness. The Archbishop graciously accepted it and he treated us kindly when we discussed the project with him afterwards. It probably helped that we approached him in the traditional way.



Christ the King Church Ba

3 September 1996

A SEMINARIAN SPEAKS UP

I am enjoying being in Ba Parish as assistant priest to Fr Tom Daly. Fr Tom was known as a strict disciplinarian when he was Principal of Xavier College but here in the parish, he is very gentle and hard-working. He likes doing sacramental instruction and he prepares his homilies very well.

We have a seminarian on pastoral year with us too. At present he works in the town area visiting families and prayer groups and helping with the youth. Today he surprised us at lunch by saying, "I couldn't live like you two priests."

Why, what is the matter with us," I asked.

"Well you get up early in the morning and work all morning. Then we eat lunch and after your rest you both work all afternoon. Then after dinner you again work until bed-time. That is a very severe life-style which I couldn't follow."

"So what would help you to feel more at home?"

"Well, if we drank *yaqona* before lunch or dinner we could relax and enjoy things."

So now we drink *yaqona* every day before lunch. It is true, it makes for a more relaxed life!

6 October 1996

GETTING A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

Our pastoral year seminarian confided in me today. I'm not sure why. Maybe it is because his time here is nearly finished and he is getting ready to leave.

He told me that he sometimes couldn't sleep well because he could hear Fr Tom Daly's snoring coming through the wooden walls from the room next door. He said that he had discovered a way to solve this problem. He would leave his room, walk along the corridor and go through a wooden door into the bathroom area of the presbytery. The wooden door was at right angles to a door to Fr Daly's room. So our seminarian would open this door and then let it bang shut. Fr Daly would wake and return to sleep quickly but without snoring. Smart!

But I am sleeping on the other side of the seminarian's room and I snore – louder than Fr Daly, I think. I am wondering what solution he might have to this problem!

This is great! I had been told of a place in Ba parish where indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians get on well and relate easily. It was said that they attended each other's weddings and funerals and mixed well together. I decided to investigate.

At an Indo-Fijian home, I asked about how they saw the indigenous Fijian land-owners from the nearby village. "We are not afraid to walk by that village. There are other villages where we wouldn't feel safe," the Indian women answered. "But we don't like the way some of the men come asking for a chicken. We pay our rent so why do they come asking for our chickens."

Later that evening I asked the Fijian villagers how they got on with their ethnic Indian tenants. "Quite well," one said. "But when they ask us to renew a land lease their spokesman presents *yaqona* according to our custom. He says that if we ever need anything they will be glad to help us. Words spoken in the *yaqona* presentation are sacred to us. But if we ask a chicken to feed our guests, they are reluctant to give. We don't like that."

Here is a clash of cultural assumptions. Both communities felt aggrieved because they judged the situation from their own cultural expectations and they didn't understand the cultural expectations of the other community.

Ethnic Indians, like Westerners, have a contractual understanding of relationships. One expects to fulfill a contract and perhaps help out in exceptional circumstances. Social rituals are not felt to be as important, except as a help to achieve a goal. And rhetoric is not taken literally. Indigenous Fijians are a communal people and sharing is second nature to them. Mutual gift-giving expresses and strengthens a relationship. Rituals are very important and words spoken during rituals have a power that should be respected.

Our world, like Fiji, needs link people, bridge builders, who can empathize with the needs and logic of the other community and explain it to their own. We don't easily walk in the shoes of the other. Thank God for the prophets who challenge us to see that only a win/win strategy can achieve justice for all. Jesus told us to take the beam out of our own eye so that we could properly see the splinter in the other's eye. Jesus "broke down the dividing wall of enmity" (Eph. 2:14) between humans and God and between Jews and Gentiles. This is a spirituality for Christian healing and reconciliation today.

3 March 1997

A STORY AT NATANUKU VILLAGE

I always enjoyed the *yaqona* drinking session after Mass at Natanuku village. In most other villages it was very formal – the priest sitting in front with the elders forming a semi-circle facing him and the young men serving the *yaqona*. The women would be absent – preparing the Sunday meal. But in Natanuku the women sat around with the men and youths and joined in the conversation and story-telling.

Today we had a few Catholics from the next village. We don't see them too often so it was good to meet them. One of them, Aquila, had been to New Zealand picking fruit a few years previously. He told us that his flight there was the first time he was ever on an airplane. He was fascinated by the experience. There was the insecurity of leaving mother earth and looking out at the clouds drifting by. It was nice to be served his food – though the quantity left a lot to be desired!

However, his worst experience was when he went to the toilet. Having passed motion, he had to search for the right toilet paper – there were at least three different kinds half hidden in the tight space. Then he had to find the flush button. When he pressed what he thought was the right button he heard a massive noisy rush of air.

He panicked. "I must have put a hole in the airplane," he thought. Turning in terror he smashed the toilet door outwards to escape back into the cabin of the plane. He had forgotten that the door opens inwards. Now he had to explain to the hostess how it happened that he had broken the toilet door! An unforgettable journey!



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I was tidying up the sacristy after Mass in Raviravi. A Fijian man, named Jale, arrived to present a large hand-woven mat to the church. I thanked him and said a prayer. An Indo-Fijian Church member, who could speak Fijian, made an emotional acceptance speech. People were very happy. The new mat would replace an old worn one.

Jale began coming to Raviravi about once a month, arriving usually halfway through the Mass. He lived in a Fijian village in the next parish. He was from the chiefly mataqali (sub-clan), and had a stake in the pine plantation. He said that he liked the simple worship at Raviravi. But he didn't understand Hindi.

The small Raviravi Catholic community was rent by divisions at that time. Some people refused to visit or speak with other families. The weekly *mandali* prayer meeting had broken down. Jale, who had a car, began to visit the Indo-Fijian families on weekday evenings with Timoci as a guide. They chatted with each family and suggested a short prayer. Then they invited one family to come in their car to visit another family.

A few days before Easter one of the families suffered a break-in at 4.00 a.m. Six masked men, armed with cane knives and iron bars, broke down the door and terrorized the family. The intruders spoke Fijian (although when caught later the gang included two Indo-Fijians). One of them held a knife to the throat of the owner's daughter and demanded jewelry and money. The family were left reeling with shock and fear. Jale organized a group to visit, make a donation and pray with the family.

A Catholic lady in the settlement was often sick. Jale and his sister began to bring herbal medicine to her, sometimes arriving after the family had gone to bed. The family would offer tea to the visitors who, in turn, would hand over the medicine they had brought. The sickly lady said that even her own family couldn't show as much concern for her as her new Fijian friends.

On Easter Sunday I met Jale's wife, a young doctor, for the first time. She confided in me her belief that Jale is not a good Catholic. He used to drive her to the city church and pick her up after Sunday Mass but never entered the church himself. Nor would he pray at home. The mat that he donated to Raviravi church was intended for their new home. He thought that she would not object to it being given to the Church.

As for me, Jale remained a bit of a mystery. I wish I knew how he got so interested in the Raviravi community.

11 May 1997 **FIJIAN WITCHCRAFT AT AN INDIAN SETTLEMENT**

We were seated on the ground in the compound of a Hindu family. Saras, the female diviner, was seated beside a wide wooden bowl (*tanoa*) filled with *yaqona*, the Fiji traditional ritual drink. She had a lighted cigarette and a bottle of beer on the side for the Indigenous Fijian spirit for whom the *yaqona* was prepared. The strange thing was that Saras and her client were both Indo-Fijians, whose culture seemed so different from that of Indigenous Fijians.

Saras heard the client's petition. She explained that the spirit she was invoking would give an indication as to the cause of the problem and its resolution by the direction in which a small enamel drinking bowl, placed in the *yaqona*, would move. She outlined the causes and responses connected with each of the four major directions.

She stirred the *yaqona* and when the liquid had settled she placed the enamel bowl in the middle of the large bowl of *yaqona*. Little by little it began to move to one side of the bowl. She repeated the procedure and again the enamel bowl moved to the same place. She explained again the significance of the bowl resting in this position. The client gave her a gift and returned, satisfied, to his home.

In India the godlings of a place or of some distinguishing aspects of a place (such as a tree or rock) are feared as sources of sickness. For instance, smallpox is thought to be one such illness caused by them. So these local godlings must be appeased with offering to escape their enmity. Ethnic Indians then are wary of Fijian spirits which are native to their locality. They feel that they much be appeased with the type of things that Fijians like such as cigarettes and beer. Then, of course, if someone can display an ability to harness the power of the local spirit to reveal the source of the evil afflicting them then some people will patronize them,

7 July 1997

A MISSION PILGRIMAGE WALK

We began at the Tagitagi Sikh temple about twelve miles from Ba town. Bearded turbaned men hesitantly greeted the two dozen young Catholics and me. With shoes left outside and heads covered with scarves we sat on the floor inside the temple. A Sikh priest swished a fly whisk in front of the *Guru Granth Sahib* scriptures which were placed on a large lectern under a baldachin. The President of the community explained the Sikh teachings and symbols. We were served a tasty lunch before leaving.

After two hours walking we arrived at the Varavu Muslim Mosque. Some committee members invited us to sit on the porch. They were happy to tell us about their beliefs and worship. I was presented with a copy of the Holy Koran afterwards and again we were offered refreshments before we continued on our journey.

An hour later we reached a Hindu temple at the edge of Ba town. The temple priest was speaking with a Muslim lady, whose arm was shaking uncontrollably and had come for healing. On returning to the temple the next morning the temple priest and a lady devotee explained the different statues. The images of the high male gods, Vishnu and Shiva, were at a back porch outside the main temple. The goddess inside was believed to cure female infertility. Some small dolls lay in thanksgiving for children conceived.

As we were leaving a Muslim female bank official arrived to consult the priest about a facial skin problem. He told her to bring certain materials. The temple seemed to cater for problems of life reserved to the female deities which was why they were center stage. It seemed that the mosque didn't cater for these.

That evening we celebrated Diwali, the festival of lights, with Sai Baba devotees. We joined in lighting candles around the periphery of the temple. Then we sat inside for an hour as devotees sung hymns in Hindi and English. Our group sang a hymn on request and I explained our mission pilgrimage.

The interfaith pilgrimage helped us to develop friendly and respectful links with fellow believers in God. Fiji is a multi-religious country where such links are important for peace and progress. The pilgrimage also challenged us to a deeper faith and practice of Catholicism.

Maria, an 18-year-old Fijian village girl, graduated from secondary school. Her father wanted her to help out at the village primary school as an unpaid teacher's aide hoping it might help get her a place in the teachers' training college. Maria wanted to go to agricultural college but reluctantly accepted her father's wishes.

Within a few weeks Maria began to go into a daily trance at school. She would speak with a man's voice, claiming to be the ancestral spirit of the clan. The headmaster used question her. The spirit denounced the village leader, Maria's grandfather, who had built a spirit house a few years previously. The spirit (speaking through Maria) insisted that reconciliation be effected with the Archbishop for three long-standing offenses against the Church to do with respect, morals and land. The spirit threatened that if the present chief and elders did not atone for these offenses within two weeks Maria would die.

Maria's family was stunned. Meetings were held and a deputation of elders traveled to Suva to atone traditionally to the Archbishop for the offenses by offering a number of whale's teeth. The archdiocesan authorities duly accepted this reconciliation offering and the delegation returned home satisfied.

The catechist had previously arranged a one-week Lenten retreat that took place at this time. A local diocesan priest was the preacher. The people, stirred by the recent happenings, attended in large numbers. The retreat came to a climax with rituals of reconciliation within the families, within the *mataqali* (sub-clans), within the whole *yavusa* (clan) and with God. Many tears were shed.

Then came another thunderbolt. The spirit possessing Maria accused the chief, her grandfather, of having caused the death of four villagers in previous years. The headmaster relayed this startling accusation to Maria's father who, in fear and trembling, conveyed it to his father, the chief. The chief admitted the accusation. He said that his anger had been aroused during disputes. So he had offered oblations of *yaqona* in the spirit house requesting the ancestral spirit to punish the offenders. His opponents died some time afterwards.

The catechist, whose elder brother was among those who had died, called a meeting of the families involved. He pointed out that revenge was unchristian and that it would not bring back their dead relatives. The only power they had was to forgive the old chief and, in that way, bring him to reconciliation and peace. They all accepted that.

So, on Holy Saturday night I began the Easter ceremonies by blessing a massive paschal fire on the compound in front of the spirit house. The chief and elders then placed the *yaqona* basin and floor mats from the spirit house on the Easter fire. They blazed noisily and lit up the faces of hundreds of villagers gathered around.

The catechist, carrying the cross, and the chief, carrying the lighted paschal candle, led the candle-light procession. We moved under a starry night and full moon from the spirit house at the base of the village through rows of thatched houses on either side to the church at the top of the village. We entered to celebrate baptism and the Eucharist as a renewed Christian community.

Afterwards as we sat around drinking *yaqona* together the chief said how much he appreciated recent events. He felt free of the bonds that had imprisoned him over many years. I felt happy that a conversion had taken place and that our celebration of Easter had been special.

Two weeks later I returned to the village to say Mass. I heard that many villagers were treating Maria as a seer or shaman and consulting her about their illnesses and worries. While she told people that she was not God and could not respond to all their needs she raised the hopes of people with prophecies of imminent material blessings. Even the members of the rugby team, aware they had neglected training for a competition, asked Maria to accompany them so as to win by means of her power.

I began to have doubts about what I had conceived as a Christian conversion. I realized that, while some practices had been renounced, the cosmology and basic world-view of the people remained the same and was quite different from my world-view. It seemed an important moment for deeper reflection and intensive dialogue.

However, I was about to leave the parish for holidays in Ireland. The timing was unfortunate as it was an opportunity for me to understand better the Fijian world-view and for the villagers to ask new questions about old problems in the light of the gospel. Too often Christian faith and religious preaching can seem an abstract and somewhat irrelevant system of answers to questions which people are not asking. Here was a chance to take a step towards understanding the culture and the gospel more deeply. Later, I understood that it was a chance missed.

8 May 1999

A RURAL MARIAN PROCESSION

As the assistant priest in Ba parish I often visit Votua village, ten miles from Ba town. It sits on the banks of the Ba River and has many ethnic Indian Sikh and Hindu cane farmers living nearby. During May, the month of Mary, the Fijian people of Votua carry the statue of the Virgin Mary from house to house. Last night I decided to join them.

I parked the parish van and caught up with the group walking along the gravel road. An organizer announced that on the way we would take the statue to a Hindu family which had requested it. We entered and were shown into a large room in the middle of the house. The statue was placed on a table prepared by the family. For this brief stop everyone remained standing. The group sang a hymn and the leader prayed in Fijian.

The organizer then invited me to say a few words in Hindi. I thanked the Hindu family for their sense of God and for their open welcome to us Catholics who, though different in religion, also believe in the one God. I asked God to bless the meeting of neighbors of different faiths and ethnicity with harmony and peace. I prayed that God would look kindly on the family, hear their prayers and fulfill their needs. As we left, I reflected that popular religion can be a bridge between members of different religions.

29 May 2000

MIRRORING THE PRIEST

Fiji had its third *coup d'état* in May 2000. Ba parish, where I was stationed, was one of the quietest and least affected parts of Fiji.

I played tennis only occasionally but was delighted to be invited to play a doubles game with a Fijian married couple and a friend. I was enjoying the game as I moved across the court to hit a forehand. Suddenly I felt as if a bullet had smashed my ankle. I collapsed to the ground. My Achilles tendon had snapped. I was brought to the hospital in Lautoka, my leg and foot were put in a cast and I was given a pair of crutches to use.

For the following two months I hobbled up the church hall on my crutches to say Mass each Sunday. The most difficult thing I faced was carrying things from the cooker or fridge to the table. Luckily, I had a thoughtful and helpful companion Columban.

I didn't do much visiting during that time but when I next visited my tennis friends I laughed when I saw their 5-year-old-son hobbling into the room with a tennis racquet under each arm!

Alena was a 24-year-old unmarried sickly girl. She lived with her parents in her village. She had previously worked as a shop attendant in a town for eighteen months until, after an appendix operation, her father took her home. She said that she wanted to work in town, as her two older sisters did, in order to help her family. Her mother seemed harsh and restrictive to her in not welcoming other girls to their home. She felt lonely and dissatisfied. However, according to two other girls, Alena was disobedient to her mother and used to swear and spit at passers-by at times.

Alena had a disagreement with her family in December and left home. Her first experience of spirit possession happened in her aunt's house in a nearby town before Christmas.

Alena's cousin Paterisio told me that, in January, he witnessed Alena in a trance speaking with a male voice. The spirit, speaking through Alena, said that it was an ancestor spirit from her paternal grandmother's village. It accused her uncle Toma (father's elder cousin) of offering *yaqona* to it to kill Alena. The village charismatic group was called. The charismatic members decided that it must have been Toma's father (who was widely believed to offer *yaqona* to ancestor spirits) who sent it.

The spirit, in Alena, reacted with anger towards the charismatic group for not believing its message. It again threatened Alena's life and demanded that Toma be called. On his arrival, the spirit accused Toma of killing two of his relatives' babies. Toma admitted to this and offered a traditional apology to Alena's father who accepted it.

Some people gave Alena water blessed by a priest to drink and opened a bible in front of her. She spat on both sides of the bible and below it but did not spit on the bible. She then drank four bottles of holy water. This proved to the villagers that it was a "good" spirit. They decided to return the spirit to its own people. A group went, Alena among them, did a ritual of *vakasukai* (returning of the spirit) to the chief of that village. He ritually accepted the spirit's return and warned Toma not to invoke the spirit again.

Some days later Alena again went into a trance and announced that her name was Grace. She understood the local dialect but would only speak in English. Her spirit said that it was sent by God to clean the 'dirt' i.e., to purify the village from evil habits. Alena then began acting as a medium/seer prescribing remedies for people who came to her with illnesses.

I was informed of these events when I went to say Mass in the village a few days later. Alena, though not in a trance, was in a manic



A Fijian Village

mood and informed me in English that her name was Grace. I questioned Toma. He said that he had not requested evil of the ancestor spirit with *yaqona*. He had admitted to it, he said, because he was terrified by the fearsome flashing of Alena's eyes when her spirit accused him.

I was worried about the sorcery accusations Alena had made while in the trance and her claims now to be acting as a channel for good spirits. I took her, with permission, to the parish center where I placed her with a mature Fijian family with whom she could rest and share her experiences. Later that week I had a long conversation with her and administered a psychological projective test to her. The test scores were extremely atypical of other Fijians I had tested. They suggested that Alena had a histrionic personality with dissociation (some split-off partial selves, very different from her normal self, appearing at times).

In my Sunday homily and in her village the following evening I explained Mt. 24:23-27 to warn against immediate acceptance of claimed prophetic gifts and I emphasized careful discernment. Alena's father asked me publicly if Alena was possessed by a good spirit. He seemed disapproving when I didn't authenticate this. I spoke of three kinds of spirits – good, bad and a person's own spirit.

I asked Alena to refrain from acting as a medium. I suggested that she join the youth group, but not the charismatic group. She nominated her aunt Alafina as an advisor with whom she would share. I continued to encourage her on subsequent monthly visits. She returned to living as a normal young villager then.

“Mass is boring. Why should I go”? This has been a recent refrain in the Western world. Mass readings and homilies seem wordy. Organ music and Church hymns conjure up a past age, incomprehensible to modern tastes and rhythms. They are not cool.

But Mass need not be a museum piece from the past. When we join with others on the side of life in the struggles of the world around us we rediscover a need for ritual and symbols. We yearn for an experience of ultimate truth to give hope and meaning to our efforts. We need worship and religious celebration. Take Fiji for example.

Life in Fiji was blighted by ethnic prejudice and, at times, by open conflict and violence. A communal indigenous Fijian people and a more individualist ethnic Indian community felt threatened by each other. Military coups in 1987 and in 2000 ripped asunder the façade of democracy that existed since independence from Britain in 1970. The coups left a legacy of criminality, distrust and fear.

Fr Kusitino Cobona, a Fijian priest, learned Hindi as a seminarian and lived for some months with an Indian family. He came to appreciate the hospitality, spirituality and diligence of Indo-Fijian people by sharing in their worries and hopes. He began to see life through their eyes.

After ordination he learned to sing the Mass, with great feeling, in Hindi. He learned to use the Indian symbols of profound bows, placing 8 flowers around the offertory gifts, waving lighted camphor in a brass tray to bestow God’s blessing. When Fr Kusitino sings Mass in Hindi with Indian cultural symbols it touches the hearts of all.

Fijians are proud of him and struck by the solemnity of the sung Hindi mass that reminds them of their own cultural rituals of respect. Indians are touched to the core by the Mass celebrated in their own cultural idiom with such sensitivity. It draws them into a deep inner communion with the mystery of God mediated by a Fijian priest. I have seen elderly Indian ladies seek out Fr Kusitino after such a Mass to embrace him tenderly.

Hindi Mass celebrated by Fr Kusitino symbolizes and effects reconciliation between antagonistic peoples. Saint Paul perceived this as one of the fruits of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. “By his death on the cross Christ destroyed their enmity; by means of the cross he united both races into one body and brought them back to God.” (Eph. 2:16). The Eucharist is the banquet of peace and reconciliation for all nations and



Indian lady greeting Fr Kustino with aarti

peoples. The intercultural Mass in Fiji shows how life must be brought to Eucharist and how such a Eucharist is a catalyst for reconciliation in ordinary life. When we fully relate to Christ we commit to his project for the world – justice, reconciliation and love. Life and worship become two sides of the same coin. Maybe Mass is not so boring after all.

14 November 2000

REQUESTING THE NAME

I was preparing to leave Fiji for at least 6 years to serve on our Columban General Council which was then based in Ireland. I had in my possession a *tabua* (whales' tooth) which is prized in Fiji. It is used to honor a chief and also to make important requests. One of the requests it was required for is requesting to have a baby named after a person.

I was friendly with a Fijian family. The lady was pregnant. She was quite a social *yaqona* drinker. Watching her pour large bowls of *yaqona* down her throat I suggested that her baby might be born with a noise ailment in the ear.

I approached the family and offered the *tabua* requesting that the child to be born be given my name. The father received it in the traditional way and then declared that this meant that the child would be a boy. "No," I said, "If it turns out to be a boy then Francis will be fine, but, if a girl, perhaps you could call her Frances."

The baby was a girl and now bears the name Frances.

Fiji has been teetering on a slippery slope of decline since the mid-1980s. Sitiveni Rabuka's coup d'état of 14 May, 1987 was a watershed. It was an example of abuse of power for sectional interests. It provided an inspiration for much that followed subsequently: increase in crime, ethnic discrimination in employment and public policies, as well as arrogant incompetence and corruption in Government and public service which wasted hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayers' money.

On 19 May, 2000 Parliament was again taken over by armed indigenous Fijians and the Labor Government led by Mahendra Chaudhry was held hostage for 57 days. The police leadership was seen to be incompetent or, more likely, in connivance with the ethno-nationalists. The army was split and initially uncertain. Many indigenous Fijians said they were for the aims, but not the methods, of the ethno-nationalists.

During the hostage crisis and for some weeks afterwards Fiji experienced a decline into anarchy. The heart of the capital, Suva was torched and an orgy of looting occurred unmolested by police or army. A section of the army on Vanua Levu, mutinied and took over the army barracks and police stations. Worst of all, hundreds of isolated Indo-Fijian families on both main islands were terrorized, assaulted, robbed and in some cases raped, and had their homes burnt by indigenous Fijian neighbors with whom they had had good relations for decades before.

Gradually the Fiji military forces reestablished control over the country and an uneasy calm returned. But it was far from real peace. Thousands of people were out of work and others worked for reduced pay. By the end of 2001, thousands of Indo-Fijian sugar cane farmers were turned off the land as their 30-year leases came to an end. The sugar industry, cornerstone of the economy, fell into serious crisis.

The indigenous Fijian coalition government elected in August 2001, headed by Mr. Laisenia Qarase, wants changes in the constitution to strengthen the position of indigenous Fijians. Many others saw his proposed "policy blueprint" as a return to racism. The judiciary was divided and the Chief Justice lost the trust of most in the legal profession, which itself became manifestly divided by ethnicity too. Further scams in agriculture and fisheries added to the sense of a nation falling apart.

One sign of hope in all this rot was the robust contribution of civil society organizations. One of these is the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy (ECEA). It is an organization connected with the Christian Churches, with links also to other major religions. ECEA applies the social teaching of Christianity to society in Fiji. At the beginning of

2001 ECREA launched a national long term comprehensive program of peace building with each phase feeding into the following phase.

Stage 1 was a community research project, led by a University of the South Pacific sociologist, to find areas of conflict and of cultural and religious resources for peaceful dialogue.

Stage 2 was a week-long National Workshop for Building a Culture of Peace held in Suva in October 2001 with over 50 participants from Fiji and the Pacific region. A three day Training of Trainers followed for 20 participants, most of whom had participated in the national workshop. A training manual for peace building and a training video were developed.

Stage 3 consisted of eight follow-up peace building workshops, run by participants of the two national workshops, in different parts of Fiji in 2002. Stage 4 was an evaluation of the impact of the total program.

ECREA intends publishing the results of the research and peace building efforts in popular form such as comics and storybooks, and making these available in different languages.

ECREA invited me to be team leader for the Culture of Peace workshop, the fulcrum of the program. Dr Lisa Schirch from the Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Pennsylvania was co-facilitator and there were three local members of the team. Participants were from government departments, security services (army and police), church leaders and members of civil society organizations. An ethnic mix of Fiji Islander participants proportionate to the national ratio was envisaged.

The goals of the workshop were to help participants to become aware of the complex roots of conflict in Fiji, to experience, if necessary, a conversion to an inclusive vision for a future Fiji and to commit to working on multicultural teams for peace education and conflict mediation.

A mixture of processes was used in the workshop. Invited church leaders, academics and youth leaders gave inputs. An adult education model of experience, reflection and analysis was a feature of most sessions. Story and drama, ritual and socializing also contributed at times to a varied educational experience.

The content of the workshop moved from the roots of conflict through a vision for a future peaceful Fiji to resources in the participants and their cultures with which to strategize a path forward.

The keynote speakers on the first day were Rev. Jovili Meo, Methodist Principal of the Pacific Theological College and Archbishop Mataka, leader of the Catholic Church in Fiji. The workshop objectives, the participants' expectations, and the ground rules for participation were clarified. A small-group sharing exercise in the afternoon revealed a good

deal of anxiety among the participants as they shared their feelings about the conflictual social reality of Fiji.

The second morning explored the different perceptions of history by different ethnic groups. The three groups wrote out the key dates and events of the previous two centuries and laid these sheets of paper along a timeline on the ground. Then all walked slowly along the timeline reading the different events noted. Afterwards small groups shared reactions to the exercise. The afternoon session explored culture and ethnocentrism. The sociologist then presented the results of research he and his team carried out. On Tuesday evening participants enjoyed a social of *yaqona*, a meal and singing and dancing.

On Wednesday morning three well-known speakers of different ethnicities presented their critique of present day Fiji and their vision for a future more inclusive nation. On Wednesday afternoon the three ethnic groupings put questions to the other two groupings and answered questions put to their group. This was the most highly charged part of the workshop. Stereotypes, historical myths, and lack of understanding of culture or acceptance of diversity emerged in some of the questions. Feelings of anxiety, shame, fear, anger and hurt resulted. We facilitators did some soul searching that evening.

Thursday began with a ritual to allow participants share the feelings experienced on the previous afternoon and to let go of any remaining negativity. That led naturally into an exercise to understand the conditions for reconciliation. After this we discussed resources for conflict transformation and reconciliation in the different cultures of Fiji. We analyzed case studies on intercultural misunderstandings and approaches to peace building. A professional drama group then dramatized, through playback theatre, some conflicts the participants had experienced. We finished an eventful day with another social evening of *yaqona*, chat, food, singing and dancing.

On Friday morning the drama group leader led a session of forum theatre. She had some members act out one participant's experience of intercultural conflict and then elicited the wisdom of the different cultures present on how to resolve the situation successfully. This exercise touched everyone deeply and opened our eyes to how cultures approach situations very differently. The National Workshop on Building a Culture of Peace in Fiji closed with an address by the Secretary of Interfaith Search, a group which conducts interfaith dialogue.

The participants had a roller-coaster week full of emotional insight and cultural dialogue that they will not easily forget.

I have been attending a training of trainers at the Methodist Conference Centre in Cadaver. This is a spin off from the ECREA National Peace Conference held recently. Members of different faiths are present and most of the participants are strangers to me. Yesterday I was very impressed by a small Indo-Fijian woman who courageously stood up to a massive *I Taukei* man who was quite prejudiced in his arguments.

I was unhappy with the sleeping arrangements. I had hoped to have a private room because previous companions have told me that I snore. On one occasion in Ireland a group of about 50 of us were doing a pilgrimage walk. After 20 miles walk on the first day I didn't sleep a wink on the floor of the community center. The next night after 18 miles walk I had a great sleep and woke refreshed. I did notice that the youth beside me was a bit embarrassed when I told him how well I slept. It seems that I snored so loudly that no one else in the hall was able to sleep. I was banished to sleep in the toilet on the following night.

Last night I was enjoying a good sleep until I was awoken by loud radio music from the other side of the flimsy partition. I was annoyed. "You would expect people to be more considerate in the middle of the night," I mused. I was about to request that the music be turned off or at least turned down when suddenly it stopped. Then it hit me. I must have been snoring. Turning the radio volume up was the indirect way that my companions had used to get some quiet so that they could sleep! This goes to show that people in Fiji are smarter and gentler than in Ireland!



19 March 2004

PLANTING POTATOES

While in Fiji I had never turned my hand to growing anything. However back in Dublin while a member of the Columban General Council I planted a small garden behind our house. I enjoyed seeing the beans and cabbages sprout and grow. Digging potatoes for dinner gave me a sense of pride.

Traditionally, in Ireland, the seed potatoes should be sown before March 17, St Patrick's Day. However, this year the month of March has been very cold. Most nights have been freezing. So I could not sow the seed potatoes. However, I have to leave Ireland for a month-long trip to the Philippines tomorrow so today was my last chance to do the sowing. I was busy with meetings and other last minute jobs during the day. Darkness fell but no potatoes had been sown. The drills were dug and all I needed to do was to place the seed potato in the drills about eighteen inches apart and fill the drill with shoveled earth.

I placed my car in line with the drills and shone the headlights on them. I was half way through planting the potatoes when our Society Leader arrived and parked his car in the garage. He approached. When he saw what I was doing he laughed. "I have often heard about scrupulous priests on a journey trying to finish reading their breviaries before midnight by the lights of their car. But this is the first time I have come across someone planting potatoes with the help of his headlights!"

18 May 2005

THE QUESTION OF GOD

I have been back in Fiji attending a meeting of our Columban leaders from around the world. After the meeting I returned for a visit to Ba Parish from where I left Fiji to return to Ireland to serve on our General Council. A Fijian friend invited me to accompany his family for the weekend to a house by the sea at Cuvu near Sigatoka town. I gladly accepted.

This Sunday morning I celebrated Mass with the family. Four of the older children, two girls Asilika and Susana, and two younger boys Api and Semi, sat in front. I decided to have a dialogue homily with them. "Tell me this," I asked the girls who were about 13 and 11 years old, "Is God a man or a woman?" Both Asilika and Susana were startled by a question they had never heard before. With a look of confusion they both shook their heads.

I turned to the Api and Semi, aged about 9 and 7 years and asked the same question. They both answered confidently and without any trace of a doubt, "God is a man." Patriarchy, it seems, starts young.

8 April 2008

RATU JONE ON FIJIAN CULTURE

In the Fiji election of 1984, the then Prime Minister was interviewed on Australian television. The introduction stated that his ancestors “clubbed and ate their way to power.” He was very angry at the disrespect shown. An opposition political party made copies of this program and circulated them in Fiji. Indigenous Fijians made strong protests against this insult to their high chief.

In a 2006 *coup d’etat* the army ousted the elected government. It disbanded the Great Council of Chiefs (which had been set up by the Colonial government to advise on indigenous affairs). I was shocked when I read that the coup leader, himself an indigenous Fijian, advised the chiefs to sit under a mango tree and drink home brew. A provincial chief appealed to his subjects in the army to leave the army and return to their land. This had little or no effect on the soldiers from his province.

Ratu Jone Madraiwiwi is a high chief, a lawyer, a judge and former Acting President of Fiji. He is a highly respected, balanced and moderate thinker who has been an invited speaker in many forums and is a prolific writer.

I had the opportunity to speak with him in his office in a law firm after his resignation from the Fiji judiciary in the wake of the 2006 *coup d’etat*. I asked him if the comments about chiefs drinking home brew and the lack of response to the appeal for soldiers to return to their communities showed that the authority and status of chiefs in Fiji is diminishing.

He replied that the loss of status of chiefs was not of concern to him but he would be very concerned if the major Fijian values of *solisolivaki* (community solidarity and collaboration), *veirokovi* (mutual respect) and *veirogorogoci* (mutual listening) were to diminish.



7. PASSING THE TORCH 2009 - 2024

After my six years serving on the Columban General Council I was given a two-year sabbatical to study at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois. Then I was happy to return to Fiji in 2009 and work for two years in Holy Family Parish, Labasa, where I could refresh my knowledge of Fijian and Hindi languages.

From 2011 to 2016 I was appointed Columban Vocation Director and Vicar for Evangelization for the Archdiocese of Suva. This saw me visiting many schools in Fiji and other Pacific Islands on Columban promotion. I was also active with the Evangelization Commission in promoting Small Christian Communities throughout Fiji.

I was asked to become Columban Rector (later Coordinator) of Formation from 2018 until 2024. This meant living in our Formation House in Suva with up to 7 Columban seminarians who studied at Pacific Regional Seminary. I was also asked to do psychological assessments of the diocesan students at the seminary.



Adi Vasu Levu

“Give me a good reason why the Canada Fund should finance your facilitation project here in Labasa, Fiji. And don’t say that it is to facilitate a development project for poor women. That is what everyone says. Give me a unique angle that will convince my boss.

Adi Vasu of the Pacific Centre for Peace-building (PCP) thought for a moment and said, “Here in Fiji, indigenous Fijian women’s groups can connect with government through their provinces. Our hierarchical culture demands that the leader has to be a chiefly woman. But if she is not committed to the group the other women can’t offend by

bypassing her so nothing happens.

On the other hand the more egalitarian Indo-Fijian women have a freedom to discuss and act but they don’t have a clear route to the government. A multi-racial women’s group would pool the strengths of both. That is why you should fund our PCP program to facilitate the Vunicuicui Multi-racial Women’s Forum in their cooperative store and seed bank projects. “O.K. that’s it,” said the Canada Fund lady, “I think we can buy that.”

The Vunicuicui Women’s Forum was unique. The women shared their knowledge and skills with each other. The Fijian women were Methodist and the Indo-Fijian women were Hindu. Prayers at the beginning of each meeting alternated between religions. With Adi Vasu’s help they sent a petition to the government through the Provincial Office. They made plans for a shop and a seed bank. They did short business courses and got small grants for individual projects as well as for their cooperative projects.

I was delighted to facilitate a two-day intercultural workshop for the Forum. I tried to help the indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian ladies to understand how their different cultural values and communication style could affect their work together. I was also honored to bless the shop site at the soil cutting ceremony. Another seed of hope was planted.

Vilimone, aged six, was preparing to go to primary school. His mother, Sofia, decided it was time to explain. "You are Farida's son and Asif is my real child. You were born to an Indian family but you were switched in the hospital with my child by mistake," she said gently. Vilimone was listening intently. "You mean, like mistaking a container of sugar for a container of salt?" he said, puzzled. "How did that happen?" "The nurse switched you by mistake," Sofia answered. "What a stupid nurse!" cried Vilimone.

In August 1994 Sofia, an indigenous Fijian, from the village of Koromakawa in Labasa parish gave birth to her first child in Labasa Hospital. She suffered as villagers noticed that the child had Indian features. Sofia was suspected of having been unfaithful to her husband. Fourteen months later she heard about a little boy in an Indo-Fijian family 30 miles away in Seaqqa who looked Fijian. Could he be her son?

Sofia introduced herself to Farida and asked how many children she had. "Three," said Farida, "But one of them looks Fijian. Please come to my house and see him." On the way, Sofia found out that they had both given birth on the same day in August 1994 in Labasa Hospital. "You have my baby and I have yours," Sofia blurted. Farida was shocked. She cried.

Sometime later Sofia and her husband Tevita brought Vilimone from the village to Farida's house and the two families sat down to talk. "We discussed swapping the children so that we would both have our rightful sons but it was too difficult," Sofia said later. "We both wanted to take our real son but neither of us could part with the child we had been rearing." However, the families continued to visit each other occasionally.

"I used to feel lonely being called an Indian because I wanted to be the same as the other children," Vilimone explained. "But they do like me. We play touch rugby or soccer together. We swim. We plant cassava."

Last December the two families spent Christmas together on the island of Taveuni, where Khan, Farida and their family had moved. "I got on well with Asif and my Indian parents," remarked Vilimone. The happiest time in my life was last Christmas when we were all together.

Vilimone's story is also a parable about Fiji. British colonialists were the midwife who took 60,000 people from India to a new motherland in the Pacific. There have been bad times and also good times. There is still a journey to be made to live together happily.

I did a funeral in a small village near Dogoru a few months ago. The villagers very generously offered me a thanksgiving *vesu waka* (bundle of *yaqona* roots) and with it some mats, *dalo* and a live piglet. The mats could be sold for the Labasa Parish and the priests and sisters could eat the *dalo*, but what to do with the piglet?

One of the catechists volunteered to take it home and fatten it up for me. About three months later he told me that, no matter what he did, the piglet wasn't growing and I had better take it and sell it. I asked him what price I should ask. He said that \$60.00 would be about right.

A few days later I said Mass in Naleba and while drinking *yaqona* afterwards I mentioned to the men there that I had a piglet that wouldn't grow and that I was going to sell it. Babu pricked up his ears immediately and asked me how much I would want for the piglet. "\$60.00," I said casually."

"I'll buy it from you," he responded.

"O.K." said I, "I'll bring it next Sunday when I come for Mass. You have the money ready."

"It's a deal," he agreed. So we completed the bargain the following Sunday.

Now today, six weeks later, I have come back from Naleba where I met Babu again.

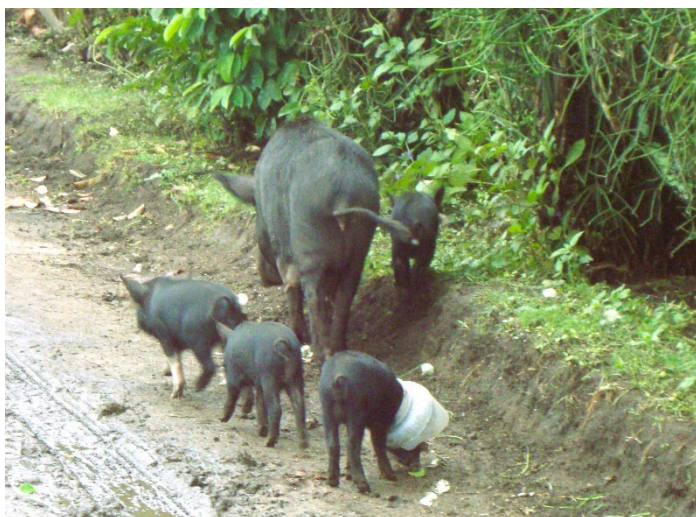
"How is the piglet?"

I asked him.

"Oh, I sold it a couple of weeks ago," he answered.

"How much did you get for it?" I enquired.

"\$120.00," said he with a great big grin! I don't know how he managed it. That piglet must have liked curry!





“We didn’t realize that they were this good’, “We will have to invite them back here again so that more people can be informed and attend”. This was the reaction of the Indo-Fijian Catholics in Naleba at the end of a recent evening of evangelization.

The visiting group were Fijian Methodists who played the Indian instruments (drums, harmonium, etc.) and sang Hindi hymns as well as most Indo-Fijian singers. One of the best was an 8 year old Fijian boy who played the harmonium and sang like an expert. The Methodist group is led by a lay preacher, Apekuki, who preaches very well in Hindi.

I had heard the Fijian group sing and preach a few months previously. I was very impressed by the excellent singing and by how Apekuki gave apt examples of Indo-Fijian thinking and behavior. The listeners smiled at the way he captured Indo-Fijian attitudes so well.

So I, with the support of the Indo-Fijian community, invited the Methodist group for a joint evangelization evening to which people of all ethnicities and religions in Naleba would be invited. On that Friday evening our shed was full of both Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians. Most were Christian but there were Hindus and Moslems there too.

The local Naleba group began with a Hindi and Fijian hymn. Then the Methodist group sang two hymns in Hindi. Apekuki asked an Indo-Fijian lady to read Ephesians 2:14-16. In his preaching he emphasized that we must put on Christ and live a completely new life, different from the group instincts which divide us. Then those present were invited to go for healing prayer to one of three prayer groups if they had any needs.

After some more hymns, I preached on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Lk 10:25-37. This story of Jesus challenges us to be open to God being revealed to us through people of other ethnicities and religions. The Methodist group’s example of crossing barriers of language and culture was clear and the Indo-Fijian Catholics admitted their failings.

Even when the formal program finished the Fijian singers continued to thrill the crowd with different styles of Hindi hymns. Food was provided for the visitors and yaqona, tea and refreshments for all who attended. It was a new experience for us all.

On Saturday August 8th 2010, after morning mass about 70 Catholics, young and old, set out from Labasa church praying and singing hymns through the town. We had all abstained from meat and fish that day. The South Indian *Sangam* temple was our first stop. We left our footwear outside. The temple committee president and priest welcomed us. They explained the need for self-purification, and the meaning of the statues of the guardian gods at the door, and the statues and pictures of gods and goddesses inside. The images of Vishnu and Lakshmi dominated the central sanctuary. A small group of Hindus were singing a devotional hymn with accompanying instruments.

Our hosts asked us not to sit along the main axis from the door to the sanctuary as this is believed to be a pathway for spiritual energy. The temple priest offered fruit and sweetmeats, brought by devotees, while waving a lamp in front of the statues and chanting sacred verses. Devotees often come to the temple to ask for God's blessing before beginning a new project.

Our group asked many questions – the significance of the cow to Hindus; why images of gods and goddesses are depicted with four arms; the financial maintenance of the temple, the main festivals celebrated in the temple, and spiritual experience of Hindus. Before we left our hosts invited us to enjoy the tea and sweetmeats they had prepared for us in their refectory. They explained that many poor people are fed there free each day.

The Vanua Levu Sunni Muslim headquarters was our next stop. This was a breakaway group from the main Sunni Muslim Mosque in town. Their President and the *maulana* (priest), who came from India, spoke to us. They stressed that they refuse to have any relationship with Muslims who practice violence. Our group was interested in asking questions, especially about the status of women in Islam but after a few queries we had to leave to continue our journey.

We returned through the main street of the town praying and singing hymns to bemused looks from some passers-by. We reached the Sikh Gurudwara (temple) about one hour behind schedule. The Sikh priest's wife received us warmly. She was a little nervous and had a mobile phone handy in case she needed to phone her husband for the answer to a difficult question. Leaving footwear outside and donning scarves as a sign of respect for the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh scripture we sat inside.

Our hostess gave a brief history of the ten *gurus* (teachers) of the Sikh community. The tenth *guru* – Govind Singh, instructed Sikhs that from

then on the Guru Granth Sahab would be their only teacher. Sikh worship consists of prayers, devotional hymn singing and readings from the scripture with explanation of its meaning and application.

Sikhs emphasize honesty, hard work and hospitality. The men wear their long hair in a turban, an iron bracelet symbolizes their dedication to their faith and a ritual dagger shows that they are prepared to defend the truth with their lives. Before we left, our hostess treated us to sweetmeats she had prepared.

We then returned to our own church nearby to eat a vegetarian lunch and we discussed what we had experienced that morning. We then reiterated the purpose of our pilgrimage – to understand and respect other religions, to learn from their devotion and more zealously practice our Christian faith. We then set out again.

We came to another Hindu temple governed by Rajesh, a *guru*. On arrival we met poor people coming out of the temple with rations of rice and food. The guru explained that this temple is dedicated to the mother goddess, worshipped under various names and forms – Durga, Kali, Shakti etc. Images of the planets there are also propitiated by devotees so as to reduce the evil influences on their lives.

Hindus believe that the sound of bells ringing, drums being beaten, the waving of lights and the chanting of mantras all combine with incense to produce divine energy. The *guru* said that the red mark on his forehead was to help focus his mind on prayer. He explained how everything that contributes to human life is sacred and worshipped – water, soil, trees, plants and animals.

Rajesh was a young teacher of the Tamil language. He responded enthusiastically to a visiting *guru's* suggestion to become a priest. He went to South India for training. On his return, Rajesh served as a priest for 12 years in the Labasa *Sangam* temple. Because of differences among the *Sangam* committee members Rajesh, with the support of some business people, set up a temple of his own six years previously.

We then dispersed, after more sweetmeats, happy and inspired by the devotion of our non-Christian citizens. Some of our Catholic pilgrims promised to recount their experiences to others in their prayer meetings. We hope to continue to connect with believers from other religions.

12 April 2011

LETTING GO OF DAD

My Dad was 100 years old two years ago. I was able to get back from Fiji to celebrate his birthday. He was in great form. He pulled a pint of porter in a pub before a family lunch after Mass. He was presented with 1,000 euros and a letter from the President of Ireland at a dinner with over 100 guests that night. He danced with my sister Maria after dinner, and when I took him home around midnight he said, as he took off his shoes to go to bed, "I'll have to practice my dancing." After my return to Fiji we chatted regularly on skype.

Now two years later, I had flown from Fiji to Bangkok to Yangon to Mandalay in Myanmar. I travelled by road with two Columban companions to Pyin Oo Lwin to conduct a training program for Myanmar formators. We stopped in the town to check emails. I had messages from three of my siblings. They told me that Dad was very sick in hospital. I was in shock! Should I stay to help or immediately travel on to Ireland? One of my companions, Fr Mick McGuire, said to me, "Do you want to see your Dad alive again?" I said, "Yes, of course." "Then travel on to Ireland," he said. What a relief! I travelled back to Mandalay the same day and then continued on to Ireland.

I went to the hospital each day to see him. After a week he was discharged and returned to my sister's home. I was able to help look after him. My sister made him as comfortable as possible. She played songs by his favorite singer, John McCormack, in the background. I said the rosary with him and slept beside his bed in case he needed something during the night. He got weaker gradually. Then as day broke on April 10 he breathed his last. No more dancing practice – or maybe in heaven!



“What is a 65-year-old foreign missionary doing talking about the missionary priest’s vocation to young Fijians?” I ask myself. “Am I still able remember names and travel long journeys to different parts of Fiji and Tonga in all sorts of weather?” Actually, there are not many others queuing up to be the Vocation Director here. And it is a priority apostolate.

I try to have a young Columban seminarian address the youths in schools with me. Pat Visanti, a fourth year Columban student, shared some experiences from his spiritual year in Manila. He was shocked to see young children eating rotten food they found in rubbish dumps. One day he was confronted by the outstretched hand of a grime-covered 8-year-old child in tattered clothes at a railway station. Pat felt that he had no option but to give the boy his fare and walk home. One student told me later that this story brought him to a Columban Come and See day.

These Come and See days, held five or six times a year in different locations around Fiji and Tonga, bring small groups of young men together to learn more about the life of a missionary priest. Here too it is the local Pacifican Columban students who share their vocation stories and explain the stages and processes involved in seminary formation. The youths also view a Columban DVD, read and share their thoughts about Columban Mission articles and speak personally with me or with our formator.

Those who want to discern seriously whether God is calling them to be missionary priests then follow a one year accompaniment program. They meet monthly with a Columban priest or lay missionary to share about different human and spiritual themes. At the end of this accompaniment year those who apply to join the Columbans undergo medical and psychological assessments and appear before the Admissions Board. The successful candidates then join our Fiji formation program, beginning their studies at Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva.

Last year in Fiji we celebrated with prayer, feasting, and island dancing the priestly ordination of Taaremon Matuaea, a young man from the tiny island community of Rabi who reached the end of one journey and began another. I am reminded of God’s words to Samuel about choosing a king for Israel, “God does not see as man sees; man looks at appearances but Yahweh looks at the heart.” (1Sam 16:7)

I feel privileged to be able to meet and speak with young people who are searching for what God wants of them in their lives. It is a joy to witness the unfolding of God’s grace in the lives of the young. Perhaps it even keeps this 65-year-old Columban missionary young at heart.

My mother, Eileen Hoare, nee Mahon, died in Ireland as a result of a stroke in June 1999. On return to mission in Fiji, a few weeks later, Mosese, from Natanuku village asked for permission to name his recently born daughter after my mother. I readily agreed and baptized the child Eileen. At the end of the following year I returned to Ireland as a member of the Columban General Council.

Back in Dublin in 2004 I was surprised to receive a letter from Mosese. He reported that, at a meeting of his subgroup, the members were disheartened to find that they were lagging well behind other subgroups in their fund-raising for a new church. They felt they would be shamed on the day of the gathering which was fast approaching. Then 5 year old Eileen stood up and said to them, “Tell my son in Ireland that we need his help. He will assist.” All present were amazed at this. Mosese didn’t want to put me under any pressure but felt that he should let me know. Naturally, a summons like that has to be responded to. I quickly arranged to send a contribution.

I returned to missionary work in Fiji a few years ago. When I occasionally visit Natanuku I try to remember to bring a present for Eileen. Now 14 years old, she is a bright girl and was Head Prefect in her last year in primary school. Eileen has no memory of referring to me as her son.



Many Africans have a traditional belief that the spirit of a dead person enters the body of a baby who is born at the time of their death and who is named after them. Fijians, whom I have asked, say that they don’t have this traditional belief. This incident however gives an unexpected twist to Jesus’ saying, “Anyone who has left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or land for the sake of my name will be repaid a hundred times over, and also inherit eternal life” (Mt. 19:29).

The new church in Natanuku is now half-built but has stalled at present because the builder died a few months ago. I still feel a call, however, to see it completed.



Natanuku Church on Opening Day

Catechists are the corner stone of the Catholic Church in Fiji. Jakobo epitomizes the generous voluntary service that catechists give to their people and to their Church. He leads the Liturgy of the Word and preaches when there is no Mass in his large village. He conducts funerals. He instructs couples for marriage, parents for the baptism of their children, and young people for confirmation.

Some years ago Jakobo, then in his forties, accompanied me to a Catholic village some distance from his own. The villagers gave us a great welcome. Over the long weekend, we prayed, did some planting in their gardens, washed in the river, drank yaqona, shared stories and feasted with them.

As is common in these situations, some people slept on the soft matted floor of the house where we were being entertained. On the third morning, Jakobo woke up to find that a young girl, Melania, not yet twenty was lying beside him. After exchanging greetings, she said to him, "Are you ever going to get married?"

"I might if I found the right girl," he replied.

"Well, some of us are ready," she said meaningfully.

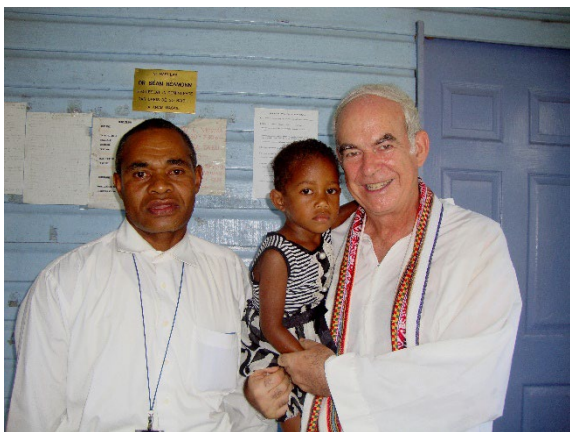
"But I am too old for you," exclaimed Jakobo, surprised.

"I'm not interested in young men," said Melania, "They don't know how to treat a woman properly."

Jakobo thought about it and later arranged for some of his relatives to approach Melania's father. Marriage was agreed. I asked Jakobo about a wedding present. He needed a saddle for the horse for visiting villages. I

duly got him the saddle and left Fiji sometime later.

A few years later I returned on a visit and found Jakobo and Melania very happy. They had a baby girl after ten years of marriage. I asked Jakobo if he still had the saddle I gave him. He said that he had the saddle but added sadly that someone stole



the horse some years ago. Jokingly I said that, for his next marriage, I would get him a new horse. "No," he said. "Things are fine as they are."

“Our people are dispirited. Thirty years ago the former Archbishop accepted our request to establish a parish here but this has not happened. We have been passed around among three different parishes since then and only occasionally has a priest come to say Mass. We had gathered \$86,000 twenty years ago. This was put in an Archdiocesan account but our requests for information about it have not been answered. We planted a lot of yaqona, a good cash crop, to use for building a parish church and presbytery here but over the years, priests came and uprooted some of it for their own purposes,” a catechist from Dogatuki explained sadly. “Quite a few Catholics have joined the Evangelical Churches in recent years,” he added.

Dogatuki is an area of nine villages in the far north west of Vanua Levu, the second largest island of the Fiji group. I challenged our Columban Companions in Mission (CCIM) in Labasa town to visit and encourage their Dogatuki neighbors who had long been neglected. At the beginning of 2013 after consultations with all interested parties a one week evangelization camp in Dogatuki for later that year was agreed. The



Meeting with Companions in Labasa

Companions prepared during the year by conducting and evaluating weekend programs in five nearby villages, did a two-day retreat, and reconciled among themselves. After a sending Mass in the parish church, eighteen Companions travelled by lorry to Dogatuki at the beginning of Advent.

The companions divided into five teams so that each team could stay for the week in a different village. I spent a day in each village providing the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Anointing to the people. I was humbled by the respect and hospitality afforded us in each village.

An unexpected hitch occurred in Vugolei. The village headman, a Catholic, arrived there shortly after the team and announced that he disagreed with the camp and would not attend because young lay people were teaching rather than priests or catechists. The team was shocked. The village catechist was humiliated but he advised avoiding conflict by

withdrawing to Vitina, a nearby village. They joined with the team there and some of the Vugolei families also came.

I arrived in Vitina on day three to find a large crowd attending including many young people. The youth team members challenged the Vitina youth, in a very professional presentation, to be evangelizers themselves. In the evening Mass, Isaiah's message to the dispirited Jews in Babylon spoke deeply to the hurts and doubts of the villagers. At the end of Mass, 4 volunteers spoke of their experience of the camp. The Vugolei catechist said that the welcome received from the Vitina people had healed the hurt he felt by the rejection in his own village.

One of the four catechists in the team, Joape, shared his own research on answering fundamentalist attacks on aspects of the Catholic faith. Some of those attending were former Catholics who had joined Evangelical Churches. Some of them asked Joape for further advice and instruction.

The Dogatuki youths decided to organize CCIM groups in three villages. Their main project would be to dialogue with other Catholic youths who were being influenced by fundamentalist groups and win them back to active participation in the Catholic Church.

The week ended in typical Fijian style with a packed Mass at Vitiina attended by people from the other four villages also. A formal leave-taking by the visitors and thanksgiving ceremony by the hosts (which included gifts of mats, brooms and bottles of coconut oil) were celebrated with yaqona and a communal feast. The Companions felt grateful for what was achieved and confirmed in their identity as missionaries in their own country.

On my return to Suva our new Archbishop unearthed the Dogatuki bank account which then stood at over \$100,000. I returned to Dogatuki with this good news. The Advent theme of waiting in hope on a faithful God was indeed experienced in a new way by all.



Traveling by boat in Dogatuki

21 January 2016

AN INDIAN DAUGHTER

Indian families traditionally prefer sons to daughters. Previously, a girl was seen as an expense to the family rearing her and destined to provide labour and children for another family after an early marriage. This has changed somewhat in Fiji in the last 40 years as girls have done well in education, found jobs and postponed marriage. An educated working lady earns money for her birth family now and is more sought after as a bride. But sons, who are expected to provide for their parents' later years, are still preferred.

I was sitting behind the bus driver of the Ba-Suva bus today when a mother and her daughter got on and sat on the seat beside me. They were relaxed and friendly and we quickly struck up a conversation. Shweeta, the daughter, chatted about her secondary school and told of a classmate who had been murdered a few months before. They asked if I was married and, when I answered in the negative, they wanted to know why not.



Shweeta's mother told me that she and Shweeta, visited places together and shared all their experiences with each other. "We are best friends," she said. "In fact my husband has told me that I

should withdraw more from Shweeta. He says that if we continue to be so close it will be more painful for me to let her go when she gets married. But I can't lessen my love for her now. I will just have to face the separation when the time comes."

I was astounded. In the West, teenage daughters make every effort to get away from their mothers and family in order to hang out with their friends. It struck me that Shweeta was receiving not just a mother's love but a formation in intimacy. She was identifying with her mother and taking on her best attributes.

17 October 2017

THE FIJIAN FOR PHILOSOPHY

Four of our Columban seminarians are studying philosophy at PRS. During our community night one Sunday evening someone asked one of them who was serving the *yaqona* what the Fijian for philosophy would be. Being somewhat at a loss he said “*talo*” (serve it!) and began serving the *yaqona*. We all laughed and then agreed that “*bati ni tanoa*’ (chat around the bowl) would be a possible translation for philosophy.

A few weeks later I was conducting a focus group discussion of single mothers in a village in the West as part of the consultative phase of our diocesan synod preparation. The catechist was present and was serving the *yaqona*. He became so interested in the ladies’ discussion that a long period passed without any *yaqona* being served.

I said, “*I Vakavuvuli* (catechist), recently we had a discussion in Suva about the Fijian word for philosophy. One of the students said that the word, “*talo*” might be a good word for it.” “Oh!” said the startled catechist. He immediately served a round of *yaqona*.



The catechumenate is the period of preparation for baptism that adults go through. The Catholic Church reinstated the catechumenate or Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) after the second Vatican Council. The process takes one year and culminates in the reception by adults of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. Christians baptized previously in other mainline Churches are not baptized again. Instead, they publicly profess the Catholic faith and receive the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist.

Recently, Archbishop Peter Loy Chong brought copies of a book on the catechumenate from Singapore. It contains the principles, rituals and a full program of sessions of the RCIA. He wanted to trial this book for one year. So he arranged a seminar in Suva for the training of catechumenate instructors from the parishes. I was a member of the team giving the training.

On the final day, a young man approached me. "I shouldn't be here at all," he said. "I was supposed to be playing rugby in Taveuni this week." "So, what happened?" I asked. He said, "Our catechist was supposed to come. But the night before this seminar started he phoned the parish priest to say that he couldn't attend. The priest asked him if there were any unmarried men around. Just then, I passed the catechist's house. The catechist called me to the phone. Our priest requested me to come to the seminar. I don't know how I agreed, but I did!

I was a bit late arriving on the first day. I expected to find many young people like myself here. I was shocked when I saw that almost all the participants were elderly. I decided to go straight home again. I turned and went out of the hall. But, just as I left I met Archbishop Chong coming in. He took my arm and redirected me in a friendly way back to the hall.

I have really learned a lot here since and I have enjoyed the three days. I realize now that God wanted me to come here. He chose me for this work. He made sure that I would stay here. I will have to be very dedicated to the catechumenate when I return to my parish."



Archbishop Peter Loy Chong

22 May 2018

AN UNEXPECTED BLESSING

Today I went for my usual weekly swim to the pool in Suva after parking in the nearby carpark. Afterwards I went to borrow some books from the city library nearby. I discovered that it wouldn't open for another 30 minutes. So I decided to go across the road for a cup of coffee.

I ordered the coffee from the Fijian lady who was serving. She made it and handed it to me. I searched my pockets. I knew that I had put a \$5.00 note there before setting out, But now it was missing. I was very embarrassed. "It's O.K.," she said. "I feel blessed today. I will pay for you." I was amazed. Mortified, I sat and drank the coffee. I thanked the lady and returned to the car after collecting the library books.

On opening the car I spied the \$5 note on the floor. It must have fallen out when I took the key from my pocket to drive. I was very happy to return to the café and pay the kind lady for the coffee.

1 September 2018

COMMUNICATION BY AVOIDANCE

When I began a new role as Columban Vocation Director I asked my Fijian predecessor what he did when he decided that an applicant would not qualify. "I avoid him," he responded, "After a while he gets the message and no longer looks for me!"

I experienced the reverse behavior myself. After attending a few vocation seminars a young hotel worker began our accompaniment program, the next stage of discernment. I sent him some topics each month to reflect on and write about. I would try to visit him then to discuss his reflections. Or he would send his reflections to me. After a few months the reflections stopped coming. I phoned him at the hotel, only to be told he wasn't working that day. After a couple of similar attempts I realized that he was indicating a loss of interest.

Some years later myself and another man were asked by the Archbishop to organize an ecumenical program for the month of creation. We accepted. We agreed to meet to organize it. My companion did not turn up. I made a number of attempts to contact him by email and phone but all were futile. With the date fast approaching I was forced to dash around for key speakers, a choir and ways to publicize the event by myself. I found it harder to accept this let down because of the joint agreement to the bishop's request and the time constraints.

It illustrated the frustration of those who value direct communication when faced with indirect communication.

29 May 2019

BECOMING A CELIBATE 'FATHER'

"I discovered a deeper meaning in the Our Father when I became a father myself," said the Anglican vicar to me. I had just invited him to attend my first Mass after ordination in 1973. I believe he was just sharing something of his spiritual experience with me but it reminded me that as a Catholic priest I would never be a father.

Since my ordination I have been a missionary in Fiji. I have worked in parishes, taught in the seminary, evangelized among the ethnic Indian people and organized lay leadership and intercultural courses. I am very grateful for my experiences and my life. A Hindu man who used to often join our little prayer group once surprised me years ago when he said, "It is right that we call you 'Father.' You left your country, you gave up a good job and a family, and you came here to show us the way to God. You are indeed a father to us."



Figure 1 Columban Formation Community 2021

I have been in charge of the Formation Program for seminarians from the Pacific for the past two years. I encourage the seminarians to do their best in their study of philosophy and theology. I try to help them to know themselves

and their motivation more deeply. I guide their prayer and worship so they come closer to God. I organize pastoral placements, help them reflect on their experience and learn the skills to help people spiritually.

I actually feel like a father to these young men – supporting, correcting and caring for them. We have guidelines for living together. But I have to trust them with freedom to make choices, and then help them to reflect on their decisions and learn from the outcomes. I have made mistakes and apologized for them. I enjoyed the banter at the table and around the *yaqona* bowl. I admire their qualities and have great hopes that they will become good missionary priests in the future. I think I can say the Our Father, understanding something of its meaning too.

A couple approached me in the parish hall after Mass.

“Are you Fr Frank Hoare?” the lady asked. Something about the timbre of her voice stirred a memory.

“You used to visit our house 40 years ago,” she said. “We have been searching for you in recent months because we heard you were here in Suva. You named our eldest son, Stephen.”

“Did you live in Vunikavikaloa, near Navunibitu Catholic Mission?” I asked.

“Yes,” they smiled. The curtain of years was drawn back. Astounded, I kissed the lady and embraced her husband.

In 1980, I supplied for six months for a priest on holidays in the rural parish of Navunibitu. I met Shiri, a young Indo-Fijian mother, at the nearby Catholic maternity hospital. Her first born had died and she begged me to pray for her newborn son. Afterwards, I used to visit her poor but welcoming family.

Shiri and her husband Shalesh lived with his widowed mother and his 6 younger siblings. Shalesh cut sugarcane and did odd jobs to support the family. They were Hindus but open to all religions. We would chat,

pray, and sing hymns during my visits.

I was then appointed to Lautoka, Fiji’s second city, about three hours’ drive away. In later years, I could no longer see their house when I passed that way. They had moved. So it was with astonished delight that we met again 40 years later.

I visited their home a couple of weeks later. Shiri showed me old photos from Vunikavikaloa of the family. I was holding her recently born son, Stephen in one of them. Many memories surfaced from the recesses of my mind. Shiri called Stephen in California and I was able to chat with him. Shalesh, now a taxi driver, and I exchanged

Hindi verse poetry. I was introduced to their second son James, also a taxi driver, and his young wife and child. Their married daughter came around with her husband and two young daughters. We took photos, talked and joked and had a fine meal together.

For me, it was an incredible reunion. I was surprised by joy.



A sick and aged man was looked after for many years by his son and daughter-in-law. However, as the years passed their patience waned. One night the son put his father on his shoulders and carried him towards the well behind their house.

"Please don't throw me in that well, anywhere else but not there," said the old man.

"Why not?" asked his son.

"Because that is where I dumped my father."

I have often noticed how the wounds suffered by one generation are passed on to the next generation. But is it possible to break this chain of suffering?

A middle aged Fijian man told me that when he brings produce from his farm to his wife's stall in the market he hands over the vegetables to her. She then takes care of sales and manages the finances. When her husband needs some personal money he asks her for it. This partnership has increased their trust and love for each other. "It wasn't always like that," he admits. "I still often ask her to forgive me for the way I treated her earlier in our marriage."

A single mother was having conflicts with her 17-year-old son. She took my advice to sit and share with him. He asked her to remember her own feelings when she was his age. "That is where my problems began," she said. "I resisted my mother's control and got into trouble. I have had a hard life as a result. I don't want you to make the mistakes I made and suffer as I have." Her son remained silent. He came later and apologized for being disrespectful to her.

After sharing these stories at Mass on the Feast of the Holy Family I met an old friend who was now married with two children. Her husband had mistreated her earlier. "I hope you listened to my homily and will put it into practice," I said to both. "Oh yes," they replied. "Actually we have done Marriage Encounter recently," she reported. "Did it help?" "Yes, it really did," she replied with a smile.

The chain of wounds being passed from one generation to the next can be broken. Communication from the heart can do it!

The marriage ceremony was almost finished. It was time for the civil certificate. The groom's younger brother had informed me that the witness from the bride's side would be Durga Prasad. So to save time I had written this on the certificate before the marriage ceremony. Now the bride looked up from the certificate and gasped, "Durga Prasad was my grandfather. He is dead! Hans Raj here is the witness." I crossed out Durga Prasad and wrote Hans Raj instead.

The wedding was between a Catholic groom from Suva and a Hindu bride at her house in Savusavu on Vanua Levu. Most of the guests were Hindus. The wedding was celebrated under a decorated canopy in the middle of a lean-to shed which was connected to the house. In the middle of the canopy was a small low altar. I sat at one end and the bride and groom sat at right angles to me in front of the altar.

One of the most touching rites is the *kanya daan* – the gift of the young girl. Just before the exchange of vows the bride's parents support their daughter's hands in their cupped hands with the groom's hands below theirs. As the bride's brother pours water over their hands onto a brass plate the parent's tearfully withdraw their supportive hands allowing the bride's hands to fall into the groom's hands.

I had made a point in my homily of emphasizing the words of Genesis 2:24 "...therefore that is why a **man** leaves his father and mother, is attached to his wife and with her becomes one flesh." The young man too must, at least psychologically, leave his parents.

After the exchange of vows the newly-weds, with clothes tied together by a ribbon, stood up to process slowly around the altar seven times. At each round they poured incense on to lighted charcoal in a container. After the circumambulations the couple took seven steps together committing before each step to protect their marriage together. They returned to their place but now the bride sat on her groom's left.

I blessed *sindur* (red powder), a necklace called a *mangal sutra* (thread of joy) and two rings. While their heads were covered with a cloak, the groom traced a red line through the bride's hair and a red spot on her forehead, and hung the necklace around her neck. Then, with the cloak removed, the couple placed a ring on each other's finger. This Western symbol added the mutuality lacking in the other symbols.

Before the nuptial blessing both sets of relatives blessed the couple by sprinkling them with rice mixed with flower petals (the original confetti, I suppose). I called the witnesses to sign the civil certificate. That is when I discovered that I had included a dead man as a witness.



We had to rush our lunch. The young people began a spontaneous dance. Then it was time for the bride to leave her family and friends amidst many tears. We stepped through the rain into the minibuses. We just arrived in time for the flight back to Suva.

Back at the groom's house in Suva there were more photos as the newly-weds entered their home. One of the groom's uncles, in praising my Hindi, said that I must have an Indian girlfriend. Another uncle thanked me for the beautiful ceremony and said that when I visited again I should let him know so that he could come around for a chat.

I was happy that I had been able to share the Word of God and introduce the Church to the groom's extended Hindu family. In the morning I was a stranger. By evening I was a friend.

2 January 2022

MATCH-MAKING

The welcome was warm but the house was rickety. Anil, a Catholic Indo-Fijian, told me that he intended to build a new house soon.

His daughter, Reshmi, brought us tea and cake. She is a polite, pretty girl in her late twenties who works in the nearby town. But she isn't married. Anil explained, "I can't arrange a marriage for her because I would have to invite her prospective husband's family here to the house. But I have to build the new house first.

A week later I visited a Catholic Indo-Fijian family in another town. There I met an unmarried Catholic man in his late twenties. He has a good job and his parents are anxious for him to settle down. I mentioned Reshmi and was able to show them her photo. I explained about the house. They were happy to make further enquiries. I took his photo to send to her.

Excited, I phoned Reshmi's family. Her mother listened to my good news. There was a pause. "I'm sorry, Father. Reshmi has a boyfriend!" A match-maker must be a very shrewd man, or else a complete fool!

Western foreign missionaries, beginning with the French Marist Fathers, have nourished the Catholic faith in Fiji since 1844. The first group of 13 Columbans who arrived in 1952 faced many challenges – hot climate, mountainous island, underdevelopment, poverty, and a still colonized multiethnic country. They learnt Fijian and Hindi at a time when there were no language schools, and adjusted to the style and rhythm of the cultures and people.

The Columbans were very impressed by the indigenous Fijian people – their friendliness, ready smile, fine physique and noble appearance, hospitality, politeness, and their relaxed communal life. The solemn Fijian ceremonial was impressive. Imposing, too, was the Fijian *bure* (house) with massive posts and beams lashed together with strong twine made from coconut fiber. They enjoyed the Fijian feasts with food cooked in earth ovens followed by *meke* (dance) performances.

The early Columbans established new parishes and schools. They opened and taught in a secondary school. Later, they became involved in the education of teachers, catechists, and seminarians. From early on they were concerned with the evangelization of non-Christians in Fiji. After the Vatican Council they took on work for justice, peace and safeguarding the environment. Columban missionaries responded to military coups by working for reconciliation through intercultural and interfaith dialogue. They encouraged diocesan seminarians and religious to be partners in this.

The Columbans also empowered the laity to be active Christians in small communities by listening to the Word of God, sharing faith and engaging in works of mercy. In recent decades they invited local young men to join the Society as missionary priests. They also welcomed young lay people to join them for some years on overseas mission.

Although there are only about 80,000 Catholics in Fiji, there are now nine Pacifican Columban priests, eight seminarians and five lay missionaries on mission in different parts of the world. Those who were the subjects of mission are now missionaries. The wheel is turning full circle.

Young Pacifican Columban missionaries can be proud of the missionary inheritance and training they have received. They know the Columban tradition - learning language, respecting cultures, making friends with the people and working with them for the Reign of God by resisting all kinds of oppression. Pacifican Columbans will add to this tradition the richness of their own gifts as the wheel of time moves on.

17 October 2021

THE MIRACLE OF MEMORY

I was shocked when a daughter of close Indo-Fijian friends eloped many years ago. I sought her out at that time begging her, in vain, to return to her family. Her mother was distraught and angry. Her father was even more seriously affected – he spent three days lying on his bed without eating. He was consumed by the disgrace his daughter had brought on him and his family.

I met Rohini again on one or two occasions in recent years and we saluted each other. At a wedding last year she sought me out and invited me to her home. I went there today. Her Hindu husband greeted me warmly and showed me to a seat on his porch. We chatted on either side of an enamel basin of *yaqona*, occasionally drinking a bowl of the earthy liquid. Their eldest son and daughter-in-law were introduced to me and their only daughter, who lived next door, came over to shyly shake hands. After a fine curry lunch I was left alone with Rohini. I took the opportunity to ask her to tell her story of the elopement. She was 18 years old and schooling in town at that time. Her husband-to-be used to follow her after school pleading for her to come with him. She initially resisted but eventually agreed.

As we chatted Rohini laughed at something I said. I was startled. It was exactly like the laugh of her mother at whose funeral I had officiated over twenty years previously. Rohini's laugh made her mother momentarily present again. Old memories and strong feelings of affection and admiration flooded back. For a few moments the years fell away and I felt her presence.

I told Rohini this. She just laughed again.

Memories are such precious things. They connect us vividly with friends from the past. I'm sure that they point to the future too.

20 December 2021 A CHRISTMAS SURPRISE

Maybe it was because I wasn't wearing the required red robes or white beard, - but the reaction of the male children to the offer of a soft toy animal was not what I expected. As I drew a soft toy out of my sack and offered it to a little boy I was surprised by the suspicious look, the turning away in disdain or the clinging to his parent's neck in utter rejection.

It was the Sunday before Christmas. I was helping Fr Pat Colgan who was on his own in the large parish of Ba in the west of Fiji. For me, it was a break from life in the capital, Suva, and a welcome return to a parish I was familiar with from years before.

The village of Tamaquto had Mass only once in three or four months and sometimes even less if the rivers on the way there were flooded in the rainy season. In the absence of a priest, their catechist, Semesa, led the liturgy of the Word and distributed Holy Communion on Sundays. I was delighted to meet four catechists in Tamaquto after Mass and sit and chat with them.



An overseas visitor had given Fr Pat a large bag full of soft toys for distribution among children for Christmas. The small village of Tamaquto seemed ideal,

rather than leave a lot of disappointed children in one of the larger villages.

I expected to be very popular in the role of Santa Claus. Not so! At least among the boys. The reaction of the young girls was different. They directed a big smile and extended their arms towards me. That was more like what I had expected!

Does gender behavior in Tamaquto originate from genetics or from environmental conditioning? Well, maybe from both.

Last week, after 18 months of Covid restrictions, I went again to the Olympic Swimming Pool in central Suva. I had my \$2.85 entrance fee ready. The attendant was new to me though other workers there knew me from previous visits. He asked for \$3.00 so I realized that the fee had gone up. Then I requested a key for a cubicle which I used to be given free. “That will be \$5.00 extra,” he said. He came around and showed me the new pricelist on the wall above. I decided that I didn’t really need a cubicle but would just use the men’s changing room.

A few days later at an orientation session for the seminarians in our formation house I gave a talk about the dangers of clericalism. I explained that some priests can feel special and expect special treatment. Lay people can also be responsible for reinforcing those expectations and practices by treating priests differently from others.

I returned for another swim a few days later. I paid my \$3.00 and was about to go to the changing room. The attendant came out from his booth and introduced himself as Tomasi (apparently a Catholic). He offered me a key. I told him it wasn’t necessary. “And you are Fr...” He asked. “I’m Frank,” I said as I took the key, deciding that this was not the occasion to fight clericalism.

Life is complicated at times!



Four coups-d'état in the last 40 years divided the people of Fiji ethnically and religiously. The mainly Hindu and Muslim Indo-Fijians were fearful of Christian indigenous Fijians. Some suffered injury and trauma. Some of their temples and mosques were desecrated and burnt.

A Columban co-worker, Ms Priscila Magdalin, and I decided to hold interreligious programs for youth and invited representatives of other religions to join an organizing committee. The committee meetings and youth events were held bi-monthly.

We have held programs on many and varied topics including religious festivals, fasting traditions and respect for God's creation. The youth participants make presentations using banners, drama, film, songs and dance to illustrate their themes. We usually included an exercise which enables them to meet ten others, previously unknown, within a short time.

One of the most popular events has been visiting places of worship. Beliefs and rituals are explained and generous hospitality which is at the heart of interreligious understanding and dialogue, is offered. A physical sharing of food and a spiritual sharing of faith go hand in hand.



Explaining Muslim purification rituals

Priscilla and I invited our Columban Companions in Mission in the Columban parish of Raiwaqa to begin regular meetings with women's groups from other religions. We hope that they will work on projects of mutual interest and inspire each other in their faith commitments.

Religious congregations in Suva gather together on Fiji Day, the 10th of October each year. A few years ago a Methodist minister, a lady evangelical, a young Muslim lady and a female Hindu priest each spoke for ten minutes about their experience of faith and afterwards answered questions from the priests, Sisters and seminarians. All found it invaluable.

Columban priests in parishes sometimes invite a Hindu to explain the meaning of Diwali to the parishioners at the end of Sunday Mass a few days before this beloved Hindu feast.

Hans Kung says: "There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions."

The Columban Companions in Mission (CCIM) was founded in 1995. It met recently in Suva for its first Annual General Meeting since the Covid 19 pandemic. CCIM mission comes from the experience of joy in the Risen Christ. With this faith experience Christians reach out to others to share the good news. The CCIM has reached out on mission in different ways.

A Fijian lady from Sigatoka noticed some Hindu ladies coming into the church, lighting a candle and praying. She would sit behind them and pray quietly in her heart for their intention. Afterwards she used to tell them that she had prayed for their intention. Often the Hindu lady would share her worry or problem. Sometimes she would return later and report that God had granted her request.

A CCIM member in a village in Ba told other Companions about a neglected group of Catholics in a distant part of the parish. After their catechist died they hardly ever had Mass or prayer together. The Companions began visiting and inviting the Catholics together for prayer on Sunday afternoons. Later they attended a parish catechists' meeting and told the catechists about the situation. The catechists decided to take turns to bring the liturgy of the Word and Communion to those Catholics.

A group of CCIM members spent a week with a Columban priest presenting faith workshops in Dogatuki in Vanua Levu. Another group spent a week doing similar outreach in a village on Kadavu Island. These places had no Catholic schools or regular service by priests at that time.

After cyclone Winston in 2016 groups of Companions went in turn to Veidrala village which had been devastated. They helped clear up the village, gave the villagers a chain saw for rebuilding the houses and conducted trauma counseling.

The Columban Companions in Mission are zealous Catholics with a passion to share the life of Jesus Christ. They are partners with the Columban missionaries. The Companions adopt and live out Saint Columban's motto, "We belong to Christ, not to ourselves."



Catechist Waisea receives a chainsaw from Ms Naomi Naiubi and Ms Sisi Marama

After six years as a Columban formator in Suva I look back with affection on the Fijian and I Kiribati students with whom I have lived. I take pride in their growth in maturity and their successes. Earlier we had seven students. Now only one senior student remains until he finishes here at Easter.

It was a thrill when a student gained insight into himself in personal accompaniment. I was happy to see someone growing in confidence in presenting a vocation talk or in giving a homily. It was good to see how younger students learned from and were helped by older students. But I was also pleasantly surprised when a younger student challenged an older student on the basis of a Christian or Pacifican value.

Extravert students livened meal conversations. Pacificans have a tradition of not talking at meals. Drinking yaqona is the time for chatting. But living and working in an international Society calls for adaptations. The experience of COVID, too, brought stress and tested adaptability.

The students enjoyed their varied pastoral work – working with juvenile offenders, visiting the elderly, evaluating gospel-sharing prayer groups, programs with youth, observing Sunday services of different Christian denominations, census taking of families in informal settlements, and sacramental instruction. They also enjoyed attending youth interfaith dialogue sessions. Constructive critique of each other was encouraged.

One memorable incident. We organized a march for climate justice with third level lay students for the Saturday in the middle of COP 26 in November 2021. The police, hearing that a well-known youth activist would participate, stopped the march. It wasn't allowed to proceed to the public park where our Archbishop was waiting to speak. Instead, we went to the nearby seminary and held our rally there. We got much more TV, print and social media exposure than if the march had been allowed.

Being a formator helped my spirituality. Saying the divine office in common was more prayerful than praying it alone. Being challenged for my mistakes gave me the opportunity to apologize. I was taught humility and dependence on God's help. I valued spiritual direction.

I finish as a formator at an uncertain time for Columban formation. I thank God, however, to have had the chance of passing on to others what I have been gifted with as a Columban missionary.

LOOKING BACK OVER 50 YEARS OF MISSIONARY WORK

Fiji is a small country of about 18,000 sq. kms., with less than a million people. It is multicultural and multi-religious. Indigenous Fijians are Christians. Ethnic Indians, whose great grandparents were brought from India as indentured laborers, are mostly Hindu or Muslim by religion.

Looking back now, the first two years were probably the hardest. Learning the Hindi language was hard work and I had to get used to rice for dinner instead of potatoes. But what was a missionary supposed to do? Initially I was assigned to work with the Indo-Fijian people. Very few of them were Catholics so Mass and sacraments, the usual work of a priest, didn't take up too much time. They had enough schools and no one appeared to be starving. This was a far cry from my dream of South American Catholics calling out for priests to come and minister to them.

I decided that the first thing to do was learn as much as I could about the Indian way of life in Fiji and do things their way as much as possible. I tried to understand and respect, not just their language but their way of thinking as well. My own cultural ways often got in the way.

I spent those first years in a rural area of Naleba. There I made my first friends of a different race, people like Aimale, his brother Sanmogan and sister-in-law Lila, who asked for instruction and Baptism. We built a special outdoors baptismal font for baptism by immersion.

The only thing of value which I had to offer was the teaching of Jesus Christ. I hoped that it might be good news for the Fiji Indian cane farmers too. So with the help of the Catholic Indians in Naleba we organized outdoor film shows in many of the settlements nearby using the Hindi version of the film *The King of Kings*. Those expeditions were mostly enjoyable and exciting, but one almost ended in disaster when our van got stuck on the railway tracks and we were lucky to get off just before the sugar train came rushing by.

I was eager to meet Hindus and Muslims individually also. So one year just before Christmas I set off with a companion on a one week walking tour explaining the message of Christmas to all.

A couple of years later an all-night Vigil on Holy Saturday night to celebrate Easter in Raviravi was a memorable event, remembered for a long time afterwards by all present, both Christian and non-Christian.

I was delighted to get the chance in 1979 to travel and study for a year in India. While there I met a Hindu monk, Swami Sharadananda, who for twenty-two years had lived the lonely life of an ascetic on the banks of the Ganges in the Himalayas. The short time I had with him convinced me

that he is a saint in heaven to-day.

When I returned to Fiji in 1980 I was based in Lautoka on the main island of Fiji, Viti Levu, but working with Catholic Indo-Fijians throughout Fiji. I spent about five years promoting Small Christian Communities among the Indo-Fijians and, together with Fr Dilasa IMS and Sr Frances Hardiman SMSM, organizing Christian leadership training courses for them. We tried to promote understanding and acceptance between the ethnic Indian and indigenous Fijian people, especially by organizing exposure programs where people of one race lived for a while with people of the other race.

Twelve years in Fiji passed quickly. Then I went to Rome in 1985 to study psychology for three years after which I obtained a degree in Social Anthropology in London.

I arrived back to a changed Fiji in 1989. The first coup d'état in 1987 overthrew an Indo-Fijian led government. Non-Christian Indo-Fijians suffered harassment and violence. The Columban missionaries decided to make reconciliation their priority. Together with Fr Dick Keelan and others I started an organization to promote intercultural understanding. We held training courses and many workshops in different parts of the country. I was also on the staff of the Pacific Regional Seminary teaching the psychology of vocation and doing personality assessments of students.

In the middle of 1994 I was appointed as Assistant priest in the multi-ethnic parish of Ba until 2000. While there I continued to promote the intercultural work in parishes and schools. While attending the Columban General Assembly in 2000 I was elected a member of the Columban General Council, based in Dublin until the end of 2006. While there I was asked to set up, with Fr Michael McGuire SSC and Sr Mary Ita O'Brien MSSC, an annual one month formators' course in Myanmar.

I was blessed with a sabbatical in 2007-08 during which I did a doctorate of ministry course at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. After that I returned to parish ministry at Labasa from 2009-2010. Following this I was appointed Vocation Director for the Columbans in Fiji until 2016. My last major appointment then was as Formation Coordinator from 2018 until 2024.

I feel blessed to have been given so much opportunity to study and such a wide variety of missionary experience in these past 50 years. I thank God for these blessings.

WOULD YOU DO IT ALL AGAIN?

I stood by the bed of a Hindu ascetic dying of cancer in a monastery in North India. He told me about his call from God to leave behind his university degree, a girl his parents had chosen to be his bride, and even the monastery he had joined. He felt called to search for God in meditation in a small hut in the high Himalayas where the Ganges River rises. During his twenty years in Gangotri he lived in a snow-filled valley completely cut off from the rest of the world for 6 months of each year. "If you were 21 years old again would you still choose that life," I asked. "Yes, I would," he replied, "I'm mature in this life now. I am saturated in spirituality. There would be no other way I could live."

Recalling this, I remember, as a 17-year-old student, trying to decide what to do with my life. I wanted to do something so that, when preparing to die, I could feel that my life had been worthwhile, serving God and people. Pictures of African babies on a collection box in a local shop touched me. Missionaries were needed to baptize the children so they could reach heaven. The theology was pre-Vatican II but my concern was genuine. Later I heard of the millions of Catholics in Latin America who, because of a shortage of priests, could only receive the sacraments once a year. I joined the Columban missionaries.

But celibacy raised a red flag. It hit me one day at a football game as I noticed a young lady nestling in the arms of her boyfriend in front of me. Would I be lonely for life? Could I live without a wife and family, without a home of my own? Would my life be deprived of warm intimacy with people because of the role, the uniform and the exile from homeland?

I obsessed over the decision for some weeks. Then one evening at dusk, having despaired of thinking through the conflicting ideas, I sat limp at the back of my parish church. The red light in front of the Blessed Sacrament seemed to reach me in the darkening church. I discovered an unexpected peace envelope me. Yes, I would give it a go.

Years later I met Fr Philip Manthara, an Indian Jesuit priest, who was totally committed to justice for the impoverished Dalit (or outcaste) people in North India. He was out most nights at meetings helping them to analyze their problems and to overcome the injustices they endured. I asked him if he missed not being married and having a family. "I couldn't ask any woman to put up with my way of living," he said. I was surprised to hear myself say, "I feel the same."

Of course, if we are generous with God, God is more generous with us. Jesus said to his apostles "...And everyone who has left houses, or

brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake, will receive a hundred times more and will be given eternal life.” I have experienced the truth of Jesus’ promise in many fulfilling relationships with people. They have enriched me greatly.



Life is a journey in search of

God and of our true selves.

Missionaries leave home to share the love of God in Jesus Christ. In meeting the other I come to know myself and I get a glimpse of the Other. Love is experienced in both the giving and the receiving. Human love points to the greater love of God to which we are privileged to witness.

I remember administering the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick to an old Fijian man. He sat up in his bed then and announced, “Father, I have done my duty to the community, to the government and to the Church.” He was looking back on a life in which he had been faithful to his responsibilities.

I hope I can say at the end, “I have done what I could. There is no other way I could live.”

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