

# Marriage and Family in Papua New Guinea: A Conversation with the Country's Bishops

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In December, I received an e-mail from the general secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea inviting me to give a workshop in medical ethics. Earlier that year, I had answered a few medical ethical questions for the bishops, never imagining that those answers would lead to such an invitation. However, in light of bioethical questions discussed in a just-released Vatican document, *Dignitas Personae*,<sup>1</sup> combined with concerns about possible changes in government population policy, the bishops wanted to discuss the ethics of population control and family planning.

I accepted their invitation and after 28 hours of travel, spent the week of Feb. 22 in Port Moresby, the nation's capital, as part of a seven-person team giving a workshop sponsored by Caritas Australia. The island of New Guinea is situated just north of Australia and east of Indonesia. Papua New Guinea, independent since 1975, occupies the eastern half of the island and is a union of two former colonies. The northern part of the island had been under German control from 1884 until after World War I, when it became a protectorate of Australia. The southern part of the country, Papua, had been a British colony. (The western part of the island at one time was a Dutch colony and is now part of Indonesia.) Although Papua New Guinea remains part of the British Commonwealth, it is very much a developing country with a subsistence economy.

Despite its relatively small size, Papua New Guinea's population of approximately 6 million is one of the most heterogeneous in the world. For example, more than 800 distinct languages are spoken, and closely neighboring peoples can

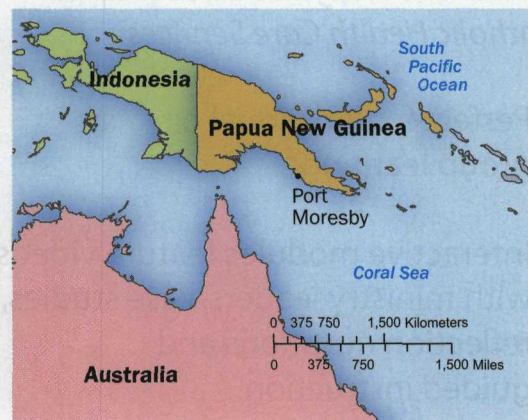


exhibit huge cultural differences. Historic conflicts related to those differences have been further exacerbated by recent migration into cities.

The Catholic Church has been part of Papua New Guinea since the mid-19th century. Early missionaries suffered from starvation and sickness (especially malaria), and many were killed by hostile natives. In 1881, Pope Leo XIII entrusted missionary activity on the island to a French congregation, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. In 1896, the Divine Word Missionaries began a mission in what was then the German area. The local hierarchy was finally established in 1966, nine years before the country became independent. At that time, all bishops were foreigners and only nine priests were natives. Today, 28 active bishops, about 40 percent of them natives, oversee a population of 1.6 million Catholics in 19 dioceses.

Some 22 bishops took part in the workshop where I was listed as a speaker, along with a sociologist and two physicians. Two others served as facilitators: Sr. Rose Bernard and Fr. Jan Jaworski, both known to the bishops because of their work with AIDS patients in the tiny developing nation. The team was led by an Australian philosopher, Elizabeth Reid, Ph.D., who had



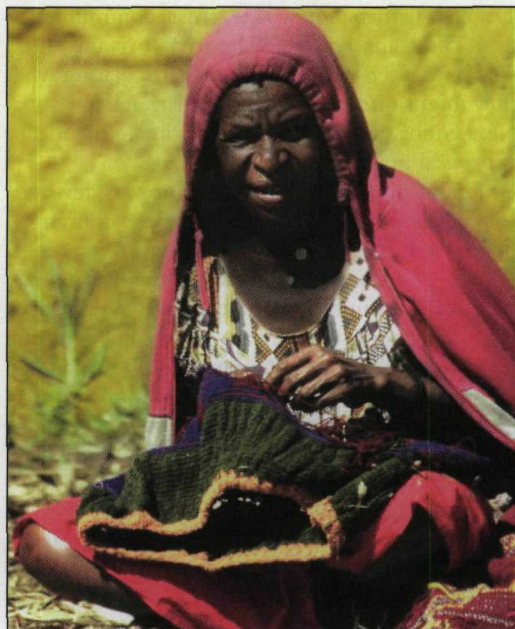
previously worked with bishops.

With the approval of the conference's executive committee, the workshop team placed the issue of family planning into the larger cultural context of marriage and parenting. Without that context, given the realities the bishops are dealing with, we believed the workshop would become overly abstract.

The first day of the workshop was therefore dedicated to the question of marriage. It began with a listening session in which the bishops described cultural clashes rooted in their own experiences. Those who had come to the country as missionaries had struggled to understand the nation's traditional concept of marriage; others who came to the church as natives had struggled with the Catholic understanding of marriage as a sacrament. Generally speaking, marriage in Papua New Guinea is not an event but rather a three-stage process. It involves not simply a bride and groom but the coming together of two families to agree on the union, the groom's family's payment of the "bride price," and the birth of a child. In fact, according to traditional norms, a marriage that does not result in the birth of a child, especially a son, can be dissolved.

As a result of these norms, which contrast starkly with the Catholic understanding of marriage, many Catholic couples are unable to partake of the sacraments from the time of their traditional marriage until after the birth of their first child. Some couples wait until two or three children are born before asking that their marriages be validated; others never ask. Bishops, both native and non-native, expressed their frustrations with this situation.

One of the presenters, Dr. Anastasia Sai of Divine Word University in Madang, a city on Papua New Guinea's northern shore, spoke about the contemporary sociological and anthropological understanding of marriage in the country, providing the bishops with technical information that confirmed their own experiences. I spoke about the sacramentality of marriage in the Catholic tradition, emphasizing that in Catholic



An older woman from Papua New Guinea crochets a sweater out of used wool from another garment.

theology, the sacramental aspect is intrinsic to all valid Christian marriages and not something added on. I contrasted the notion of marriage as contract, dominant prior to the Second Vatican Council, to that described in *Gaudium et spes* — a covenant in which each spouse bestows upon and receives from the other their entire self.<sup>2</sup> In looking at the history of the sacrament, I also suggested that this is not the first time that the theology of marriage has clashed with cultural norms. I described, for instance, the clash in late antiquity between the then-predominant Roman understanding of marriage as a union involving consent and the Germanic understanding, in which the bride's consent to marry was not required. This clash was not resolved until the Middle Ages.

Taking my cue from *Gaudium et spes*, I concluded by talking about some of the values that

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sustain a Christian marriage: trust, communication, faithfulness, equality, mutual love and faith. The day ended with the bishops articulating what they might undertake to make marriage in Papua New Guinea more closely approximate the ideal expressed in Catholic theology.

The second day of the workshop was devoted to parenting. Dr. Sai addressed several contemporary trends at work in the country's cities and village. As elsewhere, urbanization has brought about a breakdown of traditional ways. Many of the older cultural mores have disappeared. Pre-marital sex and cohabitation are more common than before, with some young people choosing neither traditional nor Christian marriage. Along with general marital breakdown and divorce, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, have been on the rise.

I tried in my presentation to broaden the understanding of "sacrament" and asked whether parenting itself could be considered a sacrament; that is, an outward sign of God's grace. Noting that the Second Vatican Council speaks of marriage and parenting as "a school of deeper humanity,"<sup>3</sup> I reminded the bishops of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*. This document suggests that, as instruments of God's grace, Catholic families are called (1) to form a community of life and love; (2) to serve life; (3) to give social witness to the world; and (4) to be "the church in miniature," a domestic church.<sup>4</sup>

The third element, that of social witness, especially caught the bishops' attention, given that a previous study of marriage in Papua New Guinea, which contrasted Christian and traditional notions, had described the traditional understanding as more communitarian than the Christian understanding of the married couple as a nuclear unit. Yet, as I explained to the bishops, the theological reflection that has taken place since Vatican II suggests that nothing could be further from the truth.

During a facilitated discussion, bishops spoke about the challenges the contemporary situation raises for Catholic parents and discussed ways in which the church might assist them. The bishops proposed efforts to facilitate communication between spouses, to provide better pre-marital education, to engage in more serious education about the responsibilities of married life, especial-

ly for young men, and to further strengthen the family life apostolate, especially in urban settings.

Afterwards, the discussion moved to the issues that the bishops had originally asked to discuss: population control, responsible family planning and medical ethics. Two physicians, Dr. Glen Mola and Dr. Miriam O'Connor, spoke regarding population issues in Papua New Guinea and the variety of techniques currently used for family planning. I then led a discussion about the application of *Dignitas Personae*. Ironically, the bishops soon realized that the document has little relevance to their situation, given the lack of medical technology in the country. Nevertheless, we had a lively discussion about a variety of issues the bishops are facing. These included difficulties in marriages when one partner is HIV-positive, questions related to non-consensual intercourse within marriage, the church's response to government population policies, and what a pastoral approach to all these issues might look like.

The day ended with a final reflection by the bishops. They again discussed how they might best respond to the issues that had been raised. One bishop summarized what many bishops were thinking when he said: "People are living with these issues every day, sometimes without thinking about them, but knowing that they are difficult issues. They need more help and more nurturing."

I left the workshop impressed with the bishops' questions, with their ease in conversing with one another, and with the seriousness with which they take their responsibilities for the life of the church in Papua New Guinea. The bishops were grateful for the opportunity to view their questions in a larger theological and cultural context of marriage and parenting. It is an experience that I won't soon forget. ■



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## NOTES

1. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction *Dignitas Personae*: Bioethical Questions and the Dignity of the Person," *Origins* 38, no. 28 (Dec. 12, 2008): 437.
2. "Gaudium et Spes," par. 48, in Austin Flanery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, vol. 1 (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing, 1975), section 48.
3. "Gaudium et Spes," par. 53.
4. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Nov. 22, 1981. Available online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).



A tabernacle in the Cathedral of Port Moresby. It is shaped like a traditional "yam house." Yams are an agricultural commodity in this nation.