

FOREWORD

It is a great honor to be asked to contribute a foreword to this book by Paul B. Steffen, Divine Word Missionary and professor of pastoral mission concerns at the Urbaniana University in Rome. I have followed Fr. Steffen's work for many years and have found it always insightful. His 1995 work, *Missionsbeginn in Neuguinea: Die Anfänge der Rheinischen, Neuendettelsauer und Steyler Missionsarbeit in Neuguinea*, for example, is full of comparative insights on the way in which members of the Society of the Divine Word and two Lutheran missionary societies worked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It offers many important insights into the pastoral-missiological strategies and practices of these missionary societies.

The present work continues Steffen's tradition of exhaustive study and clear thinking, this time on the contributions of three major pastoral and missiological institutes to the process of contextualizing Christianity in Papua New Guinea (Melanesian Institute), East Africa (AMECEA Pastoral Institute), and South Africa (Lumko Institute).

Of special value in the book is the way in which Steffen sorts out the history of the Gaba/Eldoret Institute, which was founded in 1967 and began work in 1968 under the wing of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA), whose members were Churches in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Sudan, and Zambia. Begun at Gaba, Uganda and later moved to Eldoret, Kenya, the AMECEA Pastoral Institute (API) became the locus for dialogue on how to promote the transformation from being missions to local Churches. Besides offering renewal courses and theological discussions patterned on the model of the East Asia Pastoral Institute in the Philippines, the API became the locus of serious reflections on the Church in Africa that eventuated in an emphasis on Small Christian Communities and the notion of the "Church as Family" that would become the leading motif of the 1994 Synod of African Bishops in Rome.

My acquaintance with the API and Lumko is with their materials and, in the case of Lumko, from extensive correspondence with Bishop Fritz Lobinger (Bishop Emeritus of Aliwal in South Africa). The founders and most of the first and second generation staff of the Melanesian Institute (MI) in Goroka, Papua New Guinea were all my friends. When I arrived in PNG in 1972, the MI had recently been founded as an ecumenical institute dedicated to providing pastoral and socio-cultural services to both Catholic and Protestant Churches. The MI frequently offered courses at the Holy Spirit Seminary in Bomana (near Port Moresby) and later sponsored encounters in which teachers from the four

tertiary-level Catholic and Protestant seminaries in PNG met to discuss curriculum, formation, and contextualization issues, which I was privileged to be part of. At that time (the 1970s) the API was the most developed of the three institutes studied in this volume, and the questions we were asking in PNG about making our work relevant to our students and their sending Churches were being reflected on in API publications. We studied them assiduously and the MI's founder visited Gaba.

The reader should recall that at precisely this period of time – as decolonization movements were gathering steam throughout Africa and the Pacific – each of Father Steffen's three institutes was coming into its own. They were the key to illuminating the intense debates occurring both within Churches and between missionary organizations and indigenous local communities. These discussions revolved around such questions as whether local Churches could be truly contextual while foreign missionaries retained power by controlling the flow of money for salaries and projects or by retaining supervisory roles in the young Churches. The matter was brought to a head when the Reverend John G. Gatu, at that time the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, proposed a "moratorium" on sending foreign missionaries and money in a speech to a Reformed Church in America mission conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1971.¹ That speech crystallized issues that post-colonial missionaries had to face.

Mainline Protestant Churches, such as the Lutheran, Anglican, and Presbyterian, were already reducing their expatriate staff in much of Africa and Melanesia, and it is hard to know whether Gatu's call hastened that movement or whether it would have occurred anyway as a result of growing ambivalence to the traditional missionary enterprise on the part of liberal branches of Protestantism associated with the World Council of Churches.

For Catholics, the issue was more complex. First, in most missions, they did not yet have sufficient numbers of indigenous priests, brothers, sisters, and trained laity to replace expatriate pastors, teachers, and directors of social services. Nor was there any prospect for replacing them absent major changes in Roman Catholic regulations in areas like mandatory celibacy for priests. Second, Catholics were also in the process of absorbing changes mandated by the Second Vatican Council. Catholics who were working in places like PNG and Kenya from the late 1960s through the early 1980s remember well the controversies stirred up by both decolonization and the implementation of the Council's teaching. In the end, it is clear that the Melanesian, Gaba/Eldoret, and

¹ John Gatu, Missionary Go Home: *Church Herald* 28:37 (Nov. 5, 1971).

Lumko Institutes were instrumental in helping us implement the Council's vision, although the question of structures of ministry remained difficult to resolve.

In my opinion, Churches in these areas – taking their clues from programs and studies undertaken by the pastoral institutes – were generally more successful in the task of contextualizing both the message of the Council and insights from renewed biblical studies than the Churches in Europe or North America. The reasons for this are complex, but a plausible case can be made that the Churches of what we now often call the “Global North” were more institution-centered, and the sheer inertia of institutional concerns impeded the process of both *aggiornamento* (“updating”) and *rinnovamento* (“renewal”) envisaged by Pope John XXIII and his Council. Instead, progressives and conservatives – each side convinced it was right – struggled for control of the institutions. The resulting divisions were deep, especially in the United States. They were deep in Europe, too, which also found itself victim of a different set of circumstances that are well documented in insightful books by Grace Davie (*Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, 2000) and Hugh McCleod (*Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789-1989*, 1997; and *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 2007).

In Africa and PNG, by contrast, the phrase “We are the Church” was greeted with enthusiasm by local people, even as the institutes whose stories are told in Father Steffen’s book created materials for grassroots educational ventures and updating of both the clergy and laity to concretize what that phrase meant. Bishop Fritz Lobinger, whose influence on Lumko Institute is recounted here, is one of the most far-seeing and contextually-grounded bishops that the Catholic Church has produced in our time. His vision of how the Aliwal diocese in South Africa (and by implication other local Catholic Churches, *mutatis mutandis*) ought to implement the Council’s vision of a Church in which pastoral and missional concerns were front and center remains impressive. His book *Like His Brothers and Sisters: Ordaining Community Leaders* (Manila, 1998 and New York, 1999) is a vivid testimony to the creative impulses set in motion at Lumko.

Father Steffen tells well the story of all three institutes, and as I read this work I keep coming back to the central question facing the Roman Catholic Church in the twenty-first century. At one level, as *Roman catholic* (the lower case “c” is intentional), the Church is the repository of an immensely rich heritage of theological, spiritual, and liturgical treasures. The great Catholic historian Lamin Sanneh of Yale University, born a Muslim in Gambia, says of the issues at stake:

In its current resurgence outside the West, Catholicism is poised to play a major role in the demand for a new design

of society based on the dignity of human beings as human beings, not simply as consumers or as subjects of the state. ... Catholicism's doctrinal core is arguably more stable than that of many other variants of Christianity. Even if its directives are contested, the church's magisterium is recognized for what it is. The catechism and the instruments of papal encyclicals together have defined Catholic faith just as that faith is enshrined in the church's liturgical life, with Jesus Christ at its core. Against the cultural fragmentation of modern life, that is a considerable advantage.²

Father Steffen's book does not attempt to make an *apologia* for Catholic superiority, but its tale of three pastoral-missionary institutes is the tale of faithful men and women striving to deal with the *vetera* ("ancient elements") of a two-thousand-year Roman Catholic patrimony even as they strive to help Christians in the Global South to bring forward the *nova* ("new elements") that will aid in rooting the faith in much the same way the wise householder of Matthew 13:20 does. For, as Sanneh says in another place, "Several lines converge on the subject of the character of Christianity in Africa. The most significant of these is undoubtedly the contribution of traditional religions to a deepened sense of the religious potential of the message of the Bible."³ Understanding how these three institutes have managed to carry on a dialogue with African and Melanesian cultures, a dialogue that is respectful of Christian tradition, while applying that tradition in ways that learn from the *nova et vetera* of African and Melanesian cultures, has made missiologists and theologians in both Africa and PNG better equipped to deal with the kind of cultural fragmentation Sanneh speaks of.

The adjective "Roman" in Roman Catholicism, however, bespeaks a tension. The word "Roman" itself denotes an entity (the Church as the body of Christ as it grew in the Latin West) with its own history and culture. On the other hand, the word "Catholic" denotes the claim of that entity to have universally valid and important traits. In the missionary process, a deep process of translating the message goes hand-in-hand with integrating Christianity into new ways of thought as well as challenging and learning from the *vetera* of places like Nigeria and the Solomon Islands.

As Joseph Ratzinger puts it, the process of inculturation (perhaps better, intercultural dialogue or contextualization) is not a new incarna-

² Lamin Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2012, 259.

³ Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1983, 242.

tion: “We cannot repeat the process of the Incarnation at will, in the sense of repeatedly taking Christ’s flesh away from him, so to speak, and offering him some other flesh instead. Christ remains the same, even according to his body. But he is drawing us to him.”⁴ He also notes, correctly I believe, that, “Anyone entering the Church has to be aware that he is entering a separate, active cultural entity with her own many-layered intercultural character that has grown up in the course of history.”⁵ The crucial issue for Roman Catholicism, accordingly, is how one balances both the Roman-Latin Church’s traditional *vetera* with the *nova* that Melanesians, Malawians, and Vietnamese bring to the interpretation of the Gospel’s promise.

The story of the institutes whose history and ethos Father Steffen retrieves and analyzes are first and foremost the story of an extraordinary group of individuals who have navigated the tension between tradition and innovation over the two generations since Vatican Council II. Their story is one that Churches globally have a great deal to learn from, and his readers owe Paul Steffen a debt of gratitude for bringing their contribution to light.

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⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 2004, 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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