

Neues aus Papua Neuguinea - Juni 2020

Dear friends of Mariannahill PNG!

Greetings from Lae! We hope you are all OK, even within the limitations and restrictions imposed because of Covid – 19.

You may not want to hear anymore about it, but I can't avoid the topic and have to tell you how we are dealing with the situation in PNG.

Fortunately, and thanks to God, PNG has no trouble with the virus itself. There is no other country in the world of this size and population, free from the virus. This is a unique situation! We are very happy with it, because also the capacity to cope with an eventual entering of the pandemic is a bit unique, namely zero. PNG with its over eight million people has less than 500 doctors (one on 16.000 people) and 3000 nurses (one on 2,650). Intensive care has 200 beds, of which 44 have oxygen ventilators.

In a few lines the history of the virus in PNG developed as follows:

On the 13th of March there was a confirmed case at Bulolo. The man was isolated and afterwards sent to his country, Australia. There were no consequences.

A second case turned up in Rabaul at the beginning of April. It was detected in time, quarantined and cured.

The 17th of April seemed to be the day marking PNG as the latest member of the club of affected countries. There were 5 new cases. It was front page news. However, there were no major consequences and rumours started to go around that PNGers were immune to the virus.

Well, the virus may not have been successful in entering the country, the restrictions imposed by the government affected people, especially in town, although certainly not in the measure as in infected countries.

On the 24th of March started the State of Emergency declared by the Government. It would last two weeks. It was extended for another two weeks, with a slight relaxation of the SOE travel rules. Schools and tertiary studies were allowed to resume their activities.

At the beginning of June the SOE has again been extended for another two weeks.

Open markets, where many families earn their daily bread selling the products of their gardens, were closed. Many people in town suffer really, because their only daily income is being taken away from them. But where there is need, creativity increases and people have started selling and buying wherever they have a chance.

The country as a whole is expected to lose 8% in internal revenue because of the decrease in business.

Church celebrations also have suffered limitations, although not in the measure it happened in other countries.

Our Bishop, Rozario Menezes, SMM, published on the 16th of March a circular letter with instructions, applying “social distancing” to Church life.

Restrictions for the Holy Week were also ordered by the Bishops’ Conference.

The usual devotions of our Lady during the month of May also suffered limitations: no processions, no going from house to house with the statue of our Lady.

A curious note: in Pidgin the rosary is called CORONA. Thus we were praying the CORONA against the coronavirus!

Our work in the parishes is affected in the sense that there is less work. All kinds of meetings have been suspended for the time being.

Even our founder, **Abbot Francis**, suffered the consequences of the restrictions. In our community there was no special celebration this year of the anniversary of his death

on the 24th of May.

Also the **CPS Sisters** were affected in their work and movements. In the second half of April the virus seemed to have reached Lae appearing at the Mercy Center, where our CPS Sisters are working and **Sister Pauline Mpongo, CPS**, who works there, had to go into quarantine for a few days. But no infection had occurred.

There were no courses or meetings at the Diocesan Pastoral Centre and **Sister Pascal Nyadmadzawo, CPS**, responsible for its practical organization, shifted her workplace to the Diocesan Offices where she is now in charge of the office of “Pastoral and Family Life”.

Sister Michaela Kim, CPS, on home-leave in South Korea, should have returned in May, but there are no flights.

A similar fate waited **Sister Knowledge Ndlovu, CPS**, from Zimbabwe. She is a nurse and should have come to join the little CPS community in Lae in March, but no flights.

As to our own **CMM** situation – and forgetting a moment about the pandemic, we have also good news.

On the 19th of March our PNG confrere and Deacon **Wilfred Salhun** came back from Africa, where he had received an important part of his formation.

In January 2014 he went to Mariannahill in South Africa together with our PNG confrere, **Frt. Alois Gende**. It had been decided that after their novitiate in Mariannahill Monastery they should finish their studies in Africa. The choice fell on Zambia, and they became members of our Zambian Province in September 2015. There they went to the St. Dominic’s Major Seminary in Lusaka and finished their theological studies there in June 2019. Frt. Wilfred has been ordained a deacon in May that year. He has been admitted to the priestly ordination which is planned for the next future. But due to the coronavirus, the date has not yet been fixed. Frt. Alois Gende is still in Zambia and was to be ordained a deacon in May this year. But also there the coronavirus made a postponement inevitable. The ordination is now planned for the end of August.

On Monday, the 23rd of March Deacon Wilfred went for a Covid – 19 check-up. But even in Lae they couldn't do more than take his temperature. Fortunately, time showed that he had not brought in any virus.

And PNG in general?

Apart from the coronavirus pandemic, other more constant worries like civil and domestic violence go on afflicting PNG. Like the USA (now in the global news), PNG has also its problems of violent behaviour of police as well as of soldiers. Sometimes they are fighting even each other. It seems that a greater inclination to violence in young men raises their interest in joining the police or defence force, thinking that there they have more opportunity to exercise their favourite sport! If the selection process is not careful, too many violent characters come into both forces.

Violence, also domestic violence, appears frequently in the news. And suspicion of sorcery and witchcraft is often at the root of the violence. In line with traditional magic thinking, sickness and death are normally thought to be caused by the ill-will of other people. These people must have known the victim.

Therefore they use to be of the same village. Thus many times, if you ask for the cause of a sickness the answer is that it is a "sik bilong ples", a home-made sickness.

And, of course, the one who has caused this sickness or death must be punished accordingly. Thus "sorcery-related violence", normally the killing of the one suspected of sorcery, is a hot topic and a continuous worry for the government. Churches are asked to put all their influence to change this part of the local tradition. It may take generations as it did in Europe.

The coronavirus doesn't escape from this reasoning. An affected person can easily infect you just by looking at you. A woman in the Province of East New Britain who had been infected was cured. But that didn't stop her or her family's misery. She got a bad name and had to appeal to the public through the media – everybody knew already her name – in an attempt to return to normal life. People are easily stigmatized.

As in other parts of the world, the threat of the virus has also positive effects. Here it may help the authorities to limit the betelnut spitting. The use and spitting of betelnut is considered to be a possible cause of contagion. And even without the virus being present yet, prohibitions are everywhere.

I see that the corona virus, not even being active in PNG, has managed to occupy this whole TANGET. Its strength seems to be our weakness to be fascinated – as the rabbit by the snake - by anything life-threatening. Let us hope it produces also and even more a lot of positive life-changing effects all around the world!

Blessings and greetings to all of you, and till next time!