

Alphonse Saiho

Papua New Guinea, 2001

Social and economical problems affecting human dignity

Youth in Papua New Guinea

topics:

- socio-economic situation in Papua New Guinea
- problems of youth: education and employment
- family

source: *Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling* No 8, 2001; pp 34-36

Introduction

The life and order we observe in the universe around us is constantly undergoing changes. When that change is in harmony with the creating plan of God, harmony and order are not disturbed. But, when creation is subjected to violent changes and the balance of order is upset, serious environmental disorders are the consequence.

Human kind is the centre place of God's creation and the family is the cradle of human development. Sudden change has vital consequences for the security of that all important cell, the family.

In the 1970's big and sudden changes took place on this side of the world. In the country of Papua New Guinea in the Star Mountains the huge Ok Tedi development started with the exploitation of metals like gold. In the 1980's when I was a recruiter employed by Bechtel-MKI, a joint venture in the Ok Tedi mountains, I went on bush roads, sometimes chopper rides to recruit the locals as casuals. In those days the young people were still naked, uncivilised, they never had seen white men before and never had seen an aeroplane or a motor vehicle before. Their social life did not involve any drinking or taking alcohol or drugs or going to social nights. They lived with their parents only. It is a PNG custom for a man, even if he is 18 years old, that he still lives with his parents. He will go through the normal manhood initiations out in the forest. But he will not be allowed to see his parents or go around with girls for quite sometime during his initiations. In this traditional custom he is examined by the family members and parents of some abilities such as, building a house, hunting or becoming a warrior.

Papua New Guinea is a country with more than 700 languages and 1000 plus customs. In the old days these young men were not allowed to visit other villages or

get out of their own villages or traditional ground boundaries, for of fear of sorcery and fighting.

In the early 70s when the Ok Tedi Mining exploration was under way in the area, it brought many changes to the people and the environment. Youths were looking forward to discover treasures of the white man, they left villages and went out looking for employment.

Reality on the island of Papua New Guinea

With their instable development plans for delivering the important goods and services to the people, the PNG Government has abused the human dignity and rights of the people. There is a dim prospect for education, social and health services to the majority of the population. They haven't seen and enjoyed them over the last ten to twenty years after Independence of PNG in 1975. This created problems which are affecting the human dignity of the young people in PNG. Also the political instability is another cause of problems, too.

PNG is a developing Island Nation in the Pacific and the rapid changes in the life style over the last century has placed an enormous pressure on families. About 40% of PNG's population are youths between 1 and 20 years of age. 80% of the youths can not cope with life and they are engaged in illegal acts. These are acts like taking drugs and 40% of the crimes committed in the country are that of stealing, rape, murder, suicide. Furthermore the infection rate of the HIV virus is growing rapidly.

The problems are:

Politics

One of the major problems affecting the nation's population right now is of political kind. Politically the country is an independent country but economically the country is not independent. We are still relying on overseas aid for financial support. The country's constitution is a Democratic System but it is a guided Democracy.

The Government could not create enough jobs, although we are a rich country in natural resources. We are rich in natural resources like minerals with mining industries and cash crops. The industries and the government do not provide the basic services from their profits.

Politicians are hungry for power and not hungry for basic services to be provided to the people. The government invests a lot in banks and other agencies and makes profits. But yet the government does not help the school drop outs. They should provide loans to young people to help themselves and to set up their own business or to pay school fees.

Education:

50,000 children from Primary Schools to Universities are leaving school every year. One other major problem here is that the government promises full education but it is not honouring its decisions. School fees are very high so that most people in the country can not afford to pay them. As a result children are denied their rights to be educated, they are sent away from school.

The ones who are able to go through high school will face another problem in the end. They complete their education and go back home and look for jobs or do some work. Yet, the government does not provide them any kind of assistance, since there are not enough jobs. The rights of the Child Act which was accepted by PNG Government's Constitution of 1989 convention has now been breached by the government by not looking after the rights of children in the country.

Employment

Where there is no employment there is no substantial help like it is provided in other countries of the world. The PNG government does not have an economical plan for youth, disabled and also for the old people. For example, old people are not provided with any kind of assistance, like monthly allowances, to meet their basic needs.

Out of 50,000, only 10,000 can find employment. 40,000 are thrown out into rural and urban areas without any support from the Government and unemployment rate is very high. And another point: the agricultural development plan does not satisfy the needs of the youths in the rural areas.

Due to the problems of education and unemployment, illegal drug abuse is affecting almost 90% of the youths in the country from the age group of 17 to 21 years. They easily get drugs like cannabis, sativa, marijuana and jungle juice, and end up in criminal activities and in prisons.

Young girls end up with unwanted pregnancies. Sometimes both young girls and boys are infected with HIV positive. Young girls are being raped. Every year 40% of crimes in the country are caused by youths.

The rich become richer and the poor become poorer every day. There is a big gap between the two groups. This will only stop when youths stop abusing drugs and realise the importance of life and do what they are supposed to do.

Health

Malnutrition, Aids, HIV, malaria, TB and maternity deaths, taking illegal drugs, no proper health programmes, no proper food production in the country, no proper health core centres, hospitals are run down with no maintenance... The government has no money to support the Health Services in the country.

Youth and Family

In our days the time of childhood and adolescence with so many important changes going on inside and outside of the young people is a difficult transition time.. In the rapid changes in culture and the developments of technology, the problems are compounded. It might be that parents, who have less education than their children do not understand them. It might be difficult to find the right friends and adults to whom they can entrust their questions, secrets, longings, fears and frustrations. Church and society do not always seem to give them clear guidance and support. Even if their parents fail, remember, some do not know any better. They might have done the best they could. Even if they feel that the church has failed them, they continue to relate to church and seek enlightenment and visions for their lives.

Traditionally, the responsibility for training the young people lay with the parents, the village elders and the grand parents. But that is no longer the case. Especially young couples have a lot of difficulties to rear their children. The result is that there are so many broken families and unwanted orphans, children with no fathers, some without mothers. In our society the future depends on the family. It is the family that determines, what kind of society will grow – a peace loving one or a violent and destructive one.

Conclusion

We have looked at the present changes – and the great losses which have taken place. But some of the changes are improvements, they have brought benefits and basic services especially for young people. We should not overlook them, since many young people are no longer satisfied with the traditional way of life.

The changes brought the outside world into PNG. And they brought so many problems such as rural – urban migration, unemployment, alcoholism, drugs, environmental problems, laziness, prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases including Aids. Therefore it is necessary to strengthen the family life and find new ways for it. The family is the formation centre of the person not only because the child is fed and grows up in the family, but the family is the centre, where opposite and complementary forces interact and finally balance themselves out, shaping the human persona.

Today in Melanesian society, a loving family should keep youths in the process of growing in demanding them, in generating tolerance, faithfulness and creativity, drawing from the past and reaching out to the future, teaching to be spontaneous and free, but respectful of institutions. That will educate mature persons who are able to build a prosperous and peaceful society of our nation, since the traditional boundaries of authority and roles and responsibilities for the building up of the society is no longer there.