

A Synod and a Pastoral Plan: The Reception of *Ecclesia in Oceania* in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

The reception by the Church of the decisions or statements of a Synod contribute to their eventual authority. It is commonly understood that a Council or Synod is divinely guided in its deliberations, yet the people of God, sharing in the prophetic role of Christ, play a part in recognising the guidance of the Spirit when “the whole people ‘from the bishops to the last of the faithful laity’ expresses the consent of all in matters of faith and morals” (*Lumen gentium* 12). The process may take a long time. This paper concentrates on the Apostolic Letter *Ecclesia in Oceania* (*EIO*) and consent being expressed in the local Church of PNG. While a Synod document is written for the universal Church, a document such as *EIO* puts the local Churches of Oceania on show as part of a global picture. The paper will trace the history of the document as part of an event, through to the impact and reception of the Letter, particularly in the Church of Papua New Guinea.¹

1. The Synod for Oceania

The Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for Oceania very nearly did not take place. The original plan in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000 envisaged only four regional synods. Oceania was to be subsumed under Asia. However, the appeal of the Oceania Cardinals for a specifically Oceania Synod was supported by the 1995 Consistory of Cardinals and accepted by Pope John Paul II (Williams 2005). Thus planning began, with a preparatory committee, the circulation of a Preliminary Document (*Lineamenta*) in 1997, followed by the Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) in 1998.

In November 1998, the Catholic bishops of Oceania, from Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, travelled to Rome to attend the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Oceania. The focus of the Synod was the person of Jesus Christ and how to walk his way, tell his truth and live his life. There had been Synods previous to this: for the bishops of Africa, Asia and America; and Synod for Europe was in the final stages of preparation, however, this Synod was special in a number of aspects. It was the shortest in duration, and the smallest of the Synods in terms of numbers: with 117 members, plus the Pope, 19 auditors and 14 additional personnel. This was the only Synod in which all the bishops of the region had been invited, in fact, all except three of the bishops from the region participated. Most of the bishops already knew one another, many having met at the Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO) assembly in Auckland in 1994. There were others included as fraternal delegates, such as Lutheran Head-Bishop Wesley Kigasung of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea.

The impressive opening mass in St Peter's Basilica included dancing and music from the Pacific, notably Samoa. It seems that some Roman officials were rather critical of tattooed Samoan men in traditional dress dancing in the Basilica. Perhaps it is symbolic of a cultural gulf when sights that are quite "normal" in the Pacific appear so scandalous to some members of the Roman Curia?

Talks presented by the bishops during the first week were pastorally oriented and very frank. For example, in his presentation referring to the shortage of priests, Bishop Kiapseni of Kavieng, PNG, said that it seems the community's right to celebrate the Eucharist has become a rare privilege and celebrations of the Word with Holy Communion distributed by a catechist or non-ordained brother or sister are no substitute for the celebration of the Eucharist (Kiapseni 1998, 10). These are bold words in a Roman aula. Unfortunately, so often, courageous solutions to such problems are easily dismissed by people outside of the region. Realising this, at the end of the Synod, Cardinal Williams, from New Zealand, as spokesman for the whole of Oceania said,

May I make one plea, Holy Father? It is that not only the propositions but also the interventions of the Synod's first week be a constant source of reference when the Apostolic Letter is being prepared. We tried our hardest and gave of our best in addressing themes close to our hearts and to the hearts of our priests and people. We succeeded, I think, in creating a kind of stained glass window for the light of the Gospel to shine through. But its sharp and radiant colours inevitably fade in the process of group discussion and consensus propositions (Williams 1998: 9).

Were Cardinal Williams' words heeded? How was the Letter *Ecclesia in Oceania* composed? What has the Church made of it? Answering questions such as these requires interpretation, viewing the document as part of a process. To simply read the Papal Letter without knowing the process that led up to it would be like listening to one end of a telephone conversation only. By taking into account the Interventions and Propositions, one may gain new insights to better understand *EIO* itself. Ultimately, in enquiring about the reception of the Letter we need to ask what has the Church found good and retained, and what has been found wanting and ignored or discarded? What has been the effect of *EIO* on the Church – in this case the Church in Papua New Guinea?

2. Oceania

How did a Synod for Oceania come about? Because of its size and relatively low population density many consider people of the Pacific to be insignificant and helpless, dotted about on little islands on a massive expanse of empty sea – for some, a sea useful for dumping nuclear and other waste. Dr. Epeli Hau'ofa, in his landmark essay "Rediscovering our Sea of Islands" has shown how the world of Oceania is not small (Hau'ofa 1993). On the contrary, it is huge and with modern means of communication, growing ever larger. The Pacific Ocean covers 181 million Sq. km., which is about one third of the earth's surface. The population is relatively low. In the year 2000, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific had a total population of 34,082,000, which was only 1.8% of the world population of 6,142,000,000 people. Yet there is a unique diversity in

the region. For example, there are (or were) almost 1400 distinct languages spoken in the Pacific. If each language represents a diverse culture, then one can only imagine the cultural richness of Oceania, comprising a unique part of humanity in a distinctive region. Papua New Guinea hosts more than half of those cultural-linguistic groups. The cultural richness and immense distances are important factors to consider for understanding the input of the Oceania representatives at the Synod.

3. Consultations and Interventions

Having chosen to hold a Synod, the Preparatory Commission made choices in developing the Preparatory Document (*Lineamenta*), and people in the various dioceses throughout the region were asked their opinion which was fed back to Rome so as to prepare the Working Document. In most cases people's opinions were filtered through committee meetings, however the opinions of the seminarians from the then, Holy Spirit Seminary, Bomana, somehow got to Rome without being censored. Rome's negative reaction to some of the students' frank responses was passed on to the seminary authorities through the Apostolic Nuncio.

Bishops and others attending the Synod had to make choices about the topic of their "Intervention". The Papua New Guinea Bishops decided to leave each Bishop free to choose a topic in his own sphere of interest. (For the full texts of the interventions from PNG bishops, see Gibbs 2006: 78-120.)²

After a week of Interventions in the first week of the Synod, and discussion groups in the second week, fifty Propositions were prepared and voted upon. (For the texts of the Propositions, see Gibbs 2006: 121-159). It seems, at this point, choices were somewhat limited because some topics were clearly taboo, and also it was possible to reduce support for a certain point by linking it in the same proposition with another less acceptable item. This was one reason why Cardinal Williams pleaded that the Interventions from the first week be a constant source of reference when preparing the Apostolic Letter.

Are some points from the interventions missing from the Propositions? One example might be where Bishop Stephen Reichert, in his intervention, called for strong and prophetic moral leadership in PNG beginning at the level of the family as well as the village Christian community and extending throughout all of society. He noted how priests, motivated by a spirit of pastoral charity, should provide such leadership for the people entrusted to them. Apart from references in Proposition 17, to pastors "accompanying" their communities, references to prophetic leadership seem absent from the Propositions. It does not appear in *EIO* either, except for the call that Bishops be "audacious" witnesses to Christ (*EIO* 19).

Again, Bishop Ambrose Kiapseni, without mentioning it explicitly in his Intervention, touched on the issue of ordination of mature married men (*virī probati*). It seems that this was one of the "taboo" topics, and Proposition 39 on "Communities without the Eucharist", asks that the "Holy Father continue to dialogue with the Bishops." In *EIO* 40 referring to communities without the

celebration of the Eucharist, the only solution proposed is to make greater efforts to awaken vocations to the (celibate) priestly life.³

Some points raised in the Interventions and appearing in the Propositions, attracted considerable opposition when it came the voting. Bishop Henri van Lieshout, in his Intervention, questioned how liturgy could take root and be meaningful, when the liturgical texts have to be literally translated from the official one in Latin, a language alien to the people's terminology and conceptual expression. The point was taken up in Proposition 47 about liturgical translations and norms, which received nineteen negative (*non placet*) votes. A further example is where Bishop Paul Marx, pleaded that the Church not only teach social justice, but also demonstrate it in having the nomination process of Bishops be revised, accelerated and more decentralised. Proposition 46 containing this point received twenty one negative votes. With Rome-based delegates present, including sixteen heads of the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia and others, it is difficult to know whether such negative votes represent the opinion of the Bishops of Oceania or not.

4. Ecclesia in Oceania

Having voted on the fifty Propositions and sent out a "Message to the People of God," the Bishops from Oceania returned home, leaving a committee to prepare a draft of the Letter, which would be finalised by Pope John Paul II.⁴ The original plan was for the Pope to come to the Pacific to present the Letter personally. However, as his health failed, this became impossible, and three years after the Synod the message was sent out through the internet.

The Apostolic Letter *EIO* refers in the footnotes to forty three out of the fifty Propositions.⁵ Four of the topics are dealt with in the text even though not footnoted.⁶ Some topics receive frequent mention in the text and footnotes, for example, Evangelisation, with ten footnote references in *EIO*, and Inculturation, with eight.

Initial media attention focused on two explicit apologies in *EIO*. The first apology, in section 28 on "Indigenous People", referred to the so-called "stolen generation" in Australia. Earlier in the twentieth century aboriginal children had been separated from their families and placed in boarding institutions, many of them run by the Church. Murray Ryan Jupita, one of the stolen generation, interviewed afterwards on the ABC Darwin, said that it was a justified apology to the indigenous people of Australia. He was surprised and glad about the statement.⁷ Secondly, in section 49, on "The life of the ordained", the Pope apologised for the involvement of clergy and some members of religious orders in sexual abuse.

After the initial comments there was silence. Jim Neilan, writing from New Zealand in *Tui Motu*, calls *Ecclesia in Oceania* "a very disappointing document" (Neilan: 7). Chris McGillion, the Herald's religious affairs columnist in Australia said that Pope John Paul's response to the Synod was "a tiny drop in Oceania."⁸

There was little response at first in PNG. Perhaps, in Melanesian terms, three years is not such a long time to wait. In the meantime the Bishops had received the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio*

Ineunte “The Beginning of the New Millennium” (*NMI*) and this had inspired some to try to continue the spirit of the Jubilee Year. *EIO* explicitly mentions *NMI* as a source of insight for implementing the experience of the Synod (*EIO* 9). *NMI* also states that the rich legacy of reflection in the Synods must not be allowed to disappear, but must be implemented in practical ways (*NMI* 29).

In many respects, *NMI* comes across as more practical than *EIO*. It calls for the Church to set up a post-Jubilee pastoral plan (*NMI* 15). At one stage it uses the appealing image of the new millennium as “opening before the Church like a vast ocean upon which we shall venture” (*NMI* 58).⁹ The call for pastoral planning was an opportunity for the positive reception of *EIO* in PNG.

5. General Assembly

Archbishop Douglas Young, calls the General Assembly of the Catholic Church in PNG a “kairos” (Young 2006: 189). For a number of years Fr Jan Szweda SVD, director of the Liturgical Catechetical Institute had been trying to have the Bishops adopt a process for finding a national vision and mission. In 2001, at its Annual General Meeting, the CBC decided to hold a General Assembly. It established a Committee which would be responsible for preparing the process.

The opening gathering of bishops, priests and representatives, took place at Banz in the Western Highlands Province for seven days in January 2003. The ninety one participants having read and studied *EIO*, agreed on thirty six topics. Discussion books containing these topics were prepared in English and Tok Pisin -- the booklets following the structure of the sections in *EIO*. Discussion booklets were distributed throughout the dioceses and the focus then shifted to the dioceses, parishes, communities, and organizations. Groups generally selected topics that were of greater concern to them. Parish Assemblies fed into Diocesan Assemblies, which made suggestions for a national vision and mission as well as setting priorities and objectives for the next five years. The closing gathering took place at Vunapope in the East New Britain Province for seven days in July 2004. A vision, mission, and pastoral priorities were discussed and decided upon.

In Papua New Guinea nowadays one hears talk of the “Assembly” but little mention of *EIO*. The Roman document provided a stimulus, and a structure upon which to build the General Assembly. Workshops were held to enable national secretariats to work towards a common national plan, and also to allow dioceses to share their resources and experiences. A National Pastoral Plan for the Catholic Church was launched at Pentecost 2006.

Table 1 below shows the relationship between topics in the discussion booklets for the General Assembly (2003), Synod Interventions (1998), Synod Propositions (1998), the Apostolic Exhortation (2001), and Priorities assigned at the closing of the General Assembly 2004).

Table 1: Topics in the General Assembly Discussion Booklet, and Relation to Other Documents

Topic in discussion booklets prepared for the General	Name of person from PNG	Section where topic is found in	Section where topic is found in	Priority from General
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Assembly of the Catholic Church in PNG (2003)	introducing related topic in Synod Interventions (1998)	the Synod Propositions (1998)	the Ecclesia in Oceania (2001)	Assembly in Papua New Guinea (2004)
1. Church in PNG	Bp Kronenberg, Br Hakumin	1	1, 6, 18	4
2. Purification of Memory*		18, 43A	7, 28, 49	5
3. Community	Bp Côté	10, 44	10-12	3
4. Mission		4	13-15	3
5. Collaborative Ministry	Bp Deschamps	44-45	10,	4
6. Face of Christ: Gospel and Culture	Bp Raich	2	3-5, 16-17	3
7. Inculturation	Abp Hesse	2	16-17	3
8. Transformation by Gospel		4	18-21	3
9. Mass Media		5 -7	21	
10. Catechesis	Bp Sarego, Fr Duffey	4	22	3
11. Ecumenism		13	23, 25	6
12. Church and Politics*	Abp Barnes, Bp Marx	17	26	5
13. Corruption*	Abp Barnes	17	26	5
14. Human Rights		18	27	5
15. Caring for nature		19	31	5
16. Work		18	27	5
17. Sanguma*			30	3
18. Sanctity of Life*	Bp Kronenberg, Bp Crapp,	20	6, 30	1
19. Children			22,33,45	1
20. Catholic Education	Br Hakumin	8-9	33	6
21. HIV-AIDS*		20	34	6
22. Marginalized people		3	29, 35	5
23. Family Life	Bp Kalisz	23 - 25	45	1
24. Bible		22	38	3
25. Sacraments		40A-B, 41	36, 39-42	3
26. Forgiveness/ Reconciliation			41	5
27. Easy Money/ Compensation*			27	5
28. Church and Charisms*		11	24, 43	4
29. Youth	Abp Meier	26	44	2
30. Women	Ms Taylor	27	46	1
31. Men*			43	1
32. Spirituality Movements		11, 14	47	3,4
33. Formation of Priests	Bp Bonivento, Abp Kurtz	28, 34, 37-38	48	4
34. Consecrated Life		29	51	3
35. Christian Leadership*	Bp Reichert, Abp Barnes	31	15	4
36. Liturgy	Bp Van Lieshout	47	39-42	4

* Denotes a topic of particular relevance to the PNG context

Several observations derive from Table 1.

1. All of the topics of Interventions by the PNG bishops and other PNG delegates, find a place in the General Assembly booklet.
2. Some topics in the General Assembly booklet are not found in the Synod Propositions. In most cases these are topics were added by the General Assembly because of their specific relevance to PNG.
3. Most of the topics addressed in *EIO* have corresponding references in the General Assembly booklet. A few, such as those referring directly the Synod (*EIO* 2, 8-9) get little mention as they are presumed. The “Spirit of interiority” is not taken as a topic in the General Assembly, perhaps because “holiness” was integrated into all thirty six General Assembly topics. Notably, where *EIO* 3-5 addresses the person of Jesus, the General Assembly booklet makes only a rather weak attempt to refer to the “Face of Christ” in discussion paper 6.
4. At least ten topics chosen for the General Assembly booklet are of special relevance to the PNG context (for example, Purification of memory, Church and Politics, etc). Some PNG dioceses even added topics, beyond the thirty six in the booklet -- topics such as: Health and health workers, prayer and holiness, land, chiefs, economy, money and death, natural and human-caused disasters. These topics are particularly relevant to the PNG context, and compliment the message of *EIO*.
5. After wide consultation and discussion, the delegates at the closing gathering of the General Assembly in 2004 chose priorities for pastoral planning. All six priorities may be found in some form in the Interventions, Propositions and in *EIO*. However during the process of reception and interpretation, they have been redefined for the PNG context.

6. Interpreting the Letter

In his speech at the presentation of *Ecclesia in Oceania*, Cardinal Williams noted that communion, inculturation and a renewed proclamation of the Gospel in ways appropriate for the peoples of Oceania were the key themes and insights which emerged from the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Oceania (Williams, 2001:10). How did the General Assembly, as reflected in the discussion booklet follow the structure of *EIO* and interpreted these principal themes of the Letter for the church in PNG?

a. *Inculturation* was the title of the Intervention by Archbishop Hesse of Rabaul. He pointed out how the Church can only be truly universal when all the believing communities, including those in PNG, have had time and opportunity to receive, digest and proclaim the Gospel message within their culture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Archbishop Kurtz also referred to the challenge of deeply shaping a truly Melanesian Christian culture, relating to Christ in a culturally sensitive and challenging way.

“Inculturation” was given high priority during the Synod. It is the subject of the second of the fifty Propositions approved and given to the Pope. The topic is also addressed in *EIO*.¹⁰ In Section 16, the Letter uses expressions like “Inculturation is born out of respect for both the Gospel and the culture in which it is proclaimed,” and “the word made flesh is foreign to no culture.”

References relevant to inculturation are not limited just to section 16, but occur throughout *EIO*. For example, in *EIO* 28 we read how “it is the Church’s task to help indigenous cultures preserve their identity and maintain their traditions, and about the importance in the liturgy of the appropriate use of symbols drawn from the local cultures so as to avert the cultural alienation of indigenous people (*EIO* 39). Unfortunately sometimes practice is at variance with such statements. Understanding the reality of contemporary life (culture) may be more urgent than preserving traditional culture, or much time and energy may be wasted in dealing with Roman officials over appropriate English language for liturgical texts.

The topic of Inculturation was judged so important by those preparing the General Assembly, that it is integrated into all thirty six topics in the discussion booklet. The General Assembly booklet also includes a page with an excerpt from the Opening Address of the Apostolic Nuncio, with the title, “Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency.”¹¹

b. *Community* is the second important topic addressed in the Synod. During the Interventions, Bishop Côté noted the importance of building Church as a mystery of communion with the participation of all. Bishop Deschamps spoke strongly for a Church of communion with a leadership of service. Fr. Austen Crapp noted how the Tsunami in Aitape had brought the Churches together in time of great need. Archbishop Kurtz observed the importance of community, but the slowness to translate this sense of community and sharing from a focus on one’s tribal group into a wider and more universal Christian context and awareness.

Synod Proposition 44 requests “that the Holy Father’s response to the Synod would be expressed in the light of the ecclesiology of *communio*.”¹² The request was taken seriously. The term *communio* occurs thirty times in *EIO*, and “communion” eighteen times.

In *EIO* sections 10-12, we read how *communio* was the spiritual and doctrinal background of all the Synod’s deliberations. Church as *communio* recognises the basic equality of all members of the church, with implications for dialogue, participation and consultation. A Christian community is not meant to be just a comfortable place for its members. They must look beyond their own concerns and reach out to others. *EIO* 12 refers to the way unity in faith is required if reconciliation and love are to replace conflict and hatred.

Community was chosen as the third topic in the General Assembly booklet. It is acknowledged that community is a strong value in PNG Society, but there is a danger that the term could be repeated like a magic slogan. Christians in PNG are called to broaden their sense of community beyond a sense of family solidarity. The Vision: “*We the Catholic Church of Papua New Guinea are alive in Christ witnessing the love of God to the world,*” foresees an inclusive community

where lapsed Catholics, the poor, and those who have not yet truly heard the Word of God might share in that life that God invites us to. Christians are called to live in a way that their ordinary human relationships are healed and enriched by a common commitment to Christ and the Gospel. This is a real challenge for the Church in PNG.

c. *Evangelisation* is a third important topic addressed at the Synod. Cardinal James Stafford, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, and Bishop Paul Mea Kaluea of Kiribati, addressed the topic directly in their Interventions, but no one of the PNG party took the theme as their topic. Most likely those from PNG took it for granted, rather than deliberately omitting it.

At the Synod there was unanimous support for Proposition 4 on Evangelisation, and *EIO* devotes several sections to the topic (*EIO* 18-21). *EIO* 18 defines evangelisation as “the mission of the Church to tell the world the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.” The task is said to face a twofold challenge, on the one hand, the traditional religions and cultures and on the other, the modern processes of secularization. These are seen separately with traditional religions as more applicable to PNG and the Pacific, and secularization to Australia and New Zealand.

The section on evangelisation in the General Assembly booklet does not separate traditional religion and secularization in PNG. It sees the crisis of faith as a crisis of culture. New evangelisation requires a transformation of culture.¹³ The crucial issue is how culture, (both traditional and modern) and Gospel can interact to bring about a transformation in people’s lives today. To do this the Church needs to present a life-giving alternative to the enslaving aspects of both traditional and contemporary culture.

7. Relevance to the PNG Context

Ten of the topics chosen for the General Assembly booklet have a special relevance for the PNG context. They have links to *EIO*, but have been reshaped in their reception by the Church in PNG.

a. *Purification of Memory* refers to healing where missionaries have hurt people. *EIO* 7 states that, “The missionaries ...at times ... sought to impose elements which were culturally alien to the people. So now there is a need for careful discernment to see what is of the Gospel and what is not, what is essential and what is less so.” Early missionaries were doing their best with the theological and missiological tools available to them at the time. Many worked hard to learn the language and culture of the people among whom they lived. However, we have to admit cultural imposition has occurred, intentionally or unintentionally. Yet, it is not too late for evaluation and discernment in the area of the Gospel and culture. The Catholic Church lags behind many other churches in localisation and empowerment of the laity. Despite localisation programs, 74% of the bishops, 57% of the priests and 39 % of the sisters in PNG are expatriate missionaries. Missionaries still have a place, but hopefully those present today can prove to be sensitive and respectful as they find their place in the local church.

b. *Church and Politics*. *EIO* 26 states that “The Synod Fathers were one with their people in expressing determination to act against injustices, corruption, threats to life and new forms of

poverty.” This is particularly relevant for PNG because of the high profile of the Catholic Church in Civil Society, and also because of the controversy associated with some priests entering electoral politics. Archbishop Barnes’ Synod Intervention (and his weekly public radio program) attest to the prophetic dimension of faith, which relativises the political realm in the light of the kingdom of God. People in Melanesia are wise to refuse to relegate religion to the private sphere of individual faith and practice. Thus there will always be an important place for religion in public affairs. As noted in the General Assembly booklet, political involvement is part of our Christian vocation. Jesus came to show us a servant model of leadership and we must be wary of leaders who try to strengthen their political position by claiming to be “elected” by God.

c. *Corruption*. Papua New Guinea has received a ranking of 102/146 in Transparency International’s 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index (New Zealand ranks 2, Australia 9, Fiji 55, and the Philippines 117). *EIO* 27 states that, “To be faithful to their calling, politicians, government officials and police must be honest and avoid corruption in all its forms, for it is always a serious injustice to citizens.” The General Assembly booklet uses a vivid image calling corruption a “cancer” in PNG society. This includes: bribery, nepotism, fraud, theft, greed, threats and violence to suppress opposition, destruction of evidence, interest-milking¹⁴, commissions on government contracts, excessive benefits for top people, election fraud and passport scams. The Church has an obligation not only to teach about the moral dimension of corruption, but to be at the forefront of the coalition of groups fighting against it.

d. *Sanguma* appears in PNG in many forms of witchcraft, and sorcery. It generates a great deal of fear and suspicion, and hundreds of people are killed each year having been accused of causing another’s death by *sanguma*. *EIO* 30 refers to the sanctity of life and stresses that life must be promoted and its sanctity defended against every threat of violence in its many forms. The principal emphasis in *EIO* is on the right to life in a “culture of death” where abortion or euthanasia are promoted. The General Assembly in PNG focuses on the issue of forms of sorcery or witchcraft perceived as causes of sickness, death and misfortune. When somebody is sick or dies people will ask who could be behind the trouble. In some places people accused of *sanguma* have been beaten, tortured, their houses and gardens destroyed, and they have been driven into exile. Pastoral solutions include visiting the family when someone is sick or has died, and encouraging healthy discussion about sickness and healing. Yet much more needs to be done.

e. *Sanctity of Life*. With over ten thousand people dead as a result of the Bougainville crisis, tribal fighting in many parts of the country, and widespread domestic violence, the Sanctity of Life is a very important issue for PNG. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference has made frequent public statements about violence and the use of firearms. Their observations have been backed up by Amnesty International and other such organisations. *EIO* 30 refers to the conflict between a culture of life and a culture of death. The General Assembly paper asks people to reflect on how to respond to the culture of violence and death that is so much a part of PNG society.

f. *HIV/AIDS*. There is passing reference to HIV/AIDS in *EIO* 34 in the context of health care. However in PNG, the HIV/AIDS issue is far wider than just health care. PNG is on the threshold of an epidemic that could bring about widespread ruin and misery to every community in the

nation. The Church must be fully involved in awareness, prevention, countering stigma, and care of those infected and affected. The General Assembly booklet calls on Christians to bring Jesus' healing presence to the grave situation by responding in a generous and courageous way.

g. *Compensation*. *EIO 27* refers to economic rationalism and a diminishing sense of distributive justice, but there is no reference to the compensation phenomenon in PNG where people expect to be remunerated for any inconvenience they may suffer, even for receiving a service. This is affecting Church health and educational services. In the General Assembly booklet legitimate compensation claims are acknowledged, but excessive compensation demands are seen as a form of corruption involving fraudulent or excessive demands.

h. *Church and Charisms*. *EIO 24* refers to fundamentalist groups, some of which are hostile to the Catholic Church. Many young people are attracted to such groups. *EIO* sees this as a challenge for the Church to revitalise its pastoral outreach. The PNG Church faces the problem of an excess of religious enthusiasm resulting in competition and disunity both within the Church and without. Different groups are called to exercise their charism -- their particular way of living the gospel. Yet, as the General Assembly booklet notes, while the charism of each group is an important gift to the Church and the world, all are called to live out the spirituality of the church which is "communion."

i. *Men*. *EIO* has a section on women (*EIO 46*), but nothing specifically on men. Traditionally in PNG women and men have complimentary but very different roles in society. Women have rightly received special attention from the Church in terms of education, health services and the support of women's groups. However, it is now realised that there are special tasks for men in the church today also, and that both men and women have rights and responsibilities in the Church. The title of this section in the General Assembly booklet: "Men in the Church: Bystander or Participant?" raises the issue of how the Church can support men in a society where initiation rites and the "men's house" no longer exist, leaving confusing role models of a true man today.

j. *Christian Leadership*. The chief and "bigman" are styles of leadership in PNG, but these can run counter to Christian leadership as a call to service which is collaborative, participatory, and not concerned with power and wealth. The issue was raised in the Synod Interventions by Archbishop Barnes and Bishop Reichert. They were referring to a forward-thinking prophetic leadership, whereas the Propositions such as Proposition 31, focus mainly on the tradition of catechist as leader in the community. *EIO* adopts an ecclesiocentric approach to leadership. *EIO 15* notes how "the Church needs well-trained leaders and theologians to present Jesus Christ convincingly to the peoples of Oceania." The General Assembly booklet takes a broader perspective, addressing leadership in both the Church and the wider political realm. In a special section on Christian Leadership, the booklet notes the need for good leaders who "walk the talk." What they say must be in line with the witness of their lives.

8. Reception

Our reflection to this point illustrates several elements of the reception process. Firstly, the Church in PNG has found some parts of the Synod event helpful, thus retaining them, while leaving aside other aspects. Secondly the Church has redefined issues for the PNG context. Thirdly, one can discover weaknesses in the outcome. Finally there are theological lessons to be learned from the process.

a. Perhaps the Apostolic Letter *Ecclesia in Oceania* did drop into the Pacific Ocean without causing any tidal waves at the time. However, we have seen how people have been able to utilise the forces of the ebb and flow of daily life in the Church of PNG to profit from the Synod process. People were involved in discussing the Preparatory Document (*Lineamenta*). Bishops chose to present what they considered important topics in their Interventions at the Synod. Later, *EIO* provided the structure for the General Assembly in PNG and within that structure, some topics, such as Family Life rose to prominence, other topics like Evangelisation were redefined, and a “clerical” topic such as the life of the ordained was given less attention. Through the General Assembly, Cardinal Williams’ plea at the end of the Synod bore fruit. Whether included in the *EIO* or not, all the topics of Interventions by Synod participants from PNG find a place in the booklet of the General Assembly of the Church in PNG.

b. This paper has presented examples of ten areas where statements in the Papal Letter have been reshaped to suit the local context. Another significant occasion for reinterpretation of *EIO* for the PNG context is seen in the pastoral priorities decided upon at the close of the Assembly in 2004. They are as follows, in order of priority.

- Family life (men and women)
- Youth
- Evangelization and catechesis (inculturation)
- Training and formation at all levels (leadership)
- Justice and peace and the integrity of creation
- Health, HIV-AIDS, and education.

All six topics follow readily from the analysis so far. All receive mention in *EIO*, but in a theoretical way without any ranking in order of importance. The General Assembly prioritises them and relates these topics to people’s lives today.

Consider the example of family life. *EIO* envisages the family as a “domestic church,” and marriage as a long-term covenant in Christ. These are helpful concepts, but in reality in PNG the “family” extends far beyond the nuclear unit of parents and children, and the sacramental marriage covenant is celebrated by only a minority of couples. There are complexities of “bride-price,” a culture of domestic violence, and thorny gender issues. In some parts of PNG, polygamy is culturally accepted, and increasing AIDS deaths mean that grandparents are having to raise their grandchildren. For these and other reasons, the Family Life apostolate is a most challenging first priority.

The other priorities also have been interpreted in the light of current experience. *Youth* in PNG suffer a very high level of unemployment.¹⁵ Is it any wonder that many are attracted by quick

profits through criminal activities? *Evangelisation* has been reinterpreted in the light of inculturation. How can the Gospel interact with a changing culture for the betterment of people's lives? *Christian leadership* must be considered, not just within the Church but in the context of the wider society. *Peace, justice and the integrity of creation* are of particular importance in a nation with an economy largely dependent on the extraction of primary products like timber and minerals. Catholic *education* urgently needs to find a new identity, and *health* services require radical changes, particularly with the rapid spread of HIV and AIDS. These are realities influencing the choice of pastoral priorities and their redefinition for the local context.

c. There is always the possibility that some themes could be insufficiently received. The Spirit in *EIO* 3-5 receives little prominence in contrast to the high Christology of that section. It is a pity that references to the Holy Spirit, charisms and movements of spirituality in Sections 28 and 32 of the General Assembly booklet focus on the problem areas rather than on the significant contribution of Charismatic Renewal. Moreover the Christology of *EIO* 3-5 on the person of Jesus has not been given sufficient attention in the General Assembly booklet. This could be due to uncertainty in the ongoing search for the Melanesian face of Christ. The Vision of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea includes the term "Alive in Christ". However the expression, while commendable, calls for a great deal more reflection and discernment to realise its profound meaning. What are appropriate ways of presenting Jesus Christ to Melanesian people today? How can Christ be at the centre of Melanesian communities? How are we to see Jesus as a servant leader? Is it possible to go deeper to the level of symbols, rituals, and values, to see the face of Christ more clearly? These are questions raised at a recent meeting of Melanesian formators. Thinking people in PNG are aware of the risk of handing on a colonial Christ or second-hand formulas from someone else's milieu, yet they struggle to discover a relationship with Christ who can set them free for the life promised by the Good News. This is an important ongoing challenge in the follow-up to the General Assembly.

d. The Synod for Oceania was not just an incidental moment in the history of the Church. It was part of a process, which continues today. Thus the history of a Synod is the history of its on-going effect on the Church. Often the spiritual significance of an event such as a Council or Synod takes time to be realised. The Apostolic Letter *EIO* is a Papal response to the Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for Oceania. However, it remains simply words on paper (or bytes in cyberspace) unless received by the Church community in Oceania. Reception of the Letter is what the Church has made of it. This reflection is an attempt to document part of that process as experienced by the Church of PNG.

The Second Vatican Council refers to the traditional idea of the *sensus fidei* (lit: "sense" of faith) of the whole people of God manifesting a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. In *Lumen gentium* 12 the expression is used in the context of the people of God sharing in the prophetic role of Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. The reference given is to the word of God which is at work in the life of believers (1Th 2:13). It is concerned with the experience of Christian life of all those who welcome the word of God. Some prefer the related term *sensus fidelium* which refers to the "sense" or the "mind" of the faithful. The General Assembly of the Church in PNG is a good example of the *sensus fidelium* at work with the Christian community,

living their faith, advancing “towards the fullness of God’s truth” (*Dei verbum* 8). Utilising their sense of faith, the Catholic Church in PNG has gained new insights from *EIO*, and their reception of that Apostolic Letter has assumed distinctive traits of its own.

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End Notes:

¹ An earlier version of this paper appeared as chapter 6 in Philip Gibbs (ed.) *Alive in Christ. Point* 30. Melanesian Institute, Papua New Guinea, 2006, pp. 160-181.

² The PNG/SI Catholic Bishops’ Conference includes Bishops from both Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (SI). This paper focuses on the Church of PNG and not the SI.

³ Susan Smith asks whether the shortage of priests is indeed a “regrettable situation” or whether it may be the work of the Spirit alerting us to new and complementary ways in which laity and priests can together exercise ministry in the Church (Smith, 2004: 409).

⁴ The draft was translated from English into Italian for the Pope to read and make his contribution, and then translated back to English again. Evidence of the complicated passage may be seen in a language slip in *EIO* 12 (“In the more Westernized cultures of the region, social institutions are under strain and people are hungry for a life more worthy of man.”) Exclusive language such as this would not have come from the drafting committee.

⁵ The Propositions not referred to in footnotes in *EIO* are: 3, 15, 25, 28, 31, 42, 46.

⁶ The propositions not dealt with explicitly in *EIO*, are: 15 on the Jubilee and Indulgence, 42 on Dispensation and Laicisation of priests, and 46 on the appointment of Bishops.

⁷ ABC Darwin, Interview by Fred McCue, 9.07AM AEST, Friday, 23 November, 2001.

⁸ Chris McGillion in the *Herald*, Tuesday, November. 27, 2001. McGillion continued: “Like a general who ignores the reports of his field commanders that ammunition is low, the maps all wrong, and the shoe leather wearing thin, Pope John Paul II is urging his army on to new conquests. It is a short-sighted strategy that ultimately could prove self-defeating.”

⁹ Although *NMI* (6 Jan 2001) was published before *EIO* (22 Nov 2001), there is a possibility that the discussion on planning and communion at the 1998 Synod for Oceania may have influenced the writing of *NMI*.

¹⁰ See Gibbs 2002.

¹¹ Most entries in the General Assembly discussion booklet include references to *EIO*. Thus the booklet is a rich resource for assessing the reception of *EIO* in PNG. This could be a topic of study in itself.

¹² Proposition 44 received 18 negative (*non placet*) votes, indicating that acceptance of the Church as *communio* was not accepted by all at the Synod.

¹³ See Gibbs 199a, 199b.

¹⁴ “Interest milking” refers to politicians or bureaucrats withholding funds until they have earned some interest for themselves.

¹⁵ A study by the Melanesian Institute found that only 10% of youth (aged 15-24) enjoy a regular or occasional paid job (Zocca and de Groot eds. 1997: 217).

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