

3. ATTIAS, Monica, *Racconti di pace in Oceania. La vicenda dei sette martiri anglicani della Melanesian Brotherhood.* (Missionari nella storia). Città del Vaticano, Urbaniana University Press, 2012. 215 pp.

That the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wrote the preface for this unique book, being published in Italian at the Urbaniana University Press in Rome in 2012, is already very significant. How did it happen or come about that the story of seven martyrs of an Anglican religious congregation from the Solomon Islands, Oceania, caught the attention of a Roman Catholic and Italian author, publications house and readership? Monica Attias, born in 1962 in Rome, Italy, and a member of the Roman St. Egidio community, has extensive experience as a researcher in international cooperation. She has worked on and published the history of the Anglican Communion. As a member of the New Christian Martyrs of the 20th Century Commission established by John Paul II in 2000, she has contributed especially to the dossiers of the witnesses to the faith from the Protestant and Anglican Churches. The author has been studying the ecumenical impact of such contemporary witnesses to the Christian contemporary faith communities. The San Egidio community has made a special effort to make the worldwide and ecumenical community of martyrs known in the old church of S. Bartolomeo on Tiber Island in Rome. In the preface to the book, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, expresses his gratitude to the San Egidio community in Rome. For him martyrdom is powerful witness for the whole Body of Christ.

In her introductory pages the author speaks about the communitarian witness, the Anglican Church in the past and nowadays, and dialogue and martyrdom. The book has two parts. The first part deals with the past. In the first section the history of evangelization of the Anglican Church in the Solomon Islands in all its richness is unfolded.

In 1567 three centuries prior to the arrival of the French Marist missionaries in 1844, Spanish sailors had reached Santa Isabel Island.

Actually they gave the names to the Solomon Island group and to a number of islands they “discovered” or reached in those days. The first Marist missionaries reached the Solomon Islands in 1845, but they had to withdraw and eventually settled on some islands belonging to what is now Papua New Guinea. They gave up their missionary effort in this region in 1852. The Propagation of the Faith convinced the young Milan Mission Society to take up this mission. They came in 1852 and left the mission again after a series of failures in 1855. The Anglican Church in 1842 entrusted its mission in Melanesia to George A. Selwyn, the first bishop of New Zealand. His survey of the South Pacific convinced him that Melanesia required a different missionary approach. Selwyn and his successor J. C. Patteson, therefore, built up an outside base in Auckland and then from 1866 to 1919 on Norfolk Island. Young men from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were recruited for the mission school on Norfolk Island.

This missionary approach gave preference to the training of local men as evangelizers to their own people. The students helped the Anglican missionaries to learn their languages and prepare the needed biblical, catechetical and liturgical translations into the local languages. This Anglican evangelization approach was not geared towards instant success and needed a lot of time. Since no other mission had settled in the Solomon Islands, it was the best way to evangelize gradually and slowly and with their own indigenous evangelizers in the islands of that part of Melanesia. The return of the Catholic Marist missionaries to the Solomon Islands in 1898/99 with a different missionary approach based on mission stations and schools staffed with foreign missionaries forced the Anglican mission to build up similar mission structures in the islands with European missionaries on the mission stations in the Solomon Islands which in 1899 had become a British Protectorate. A year later, in 1899 the Marists started missionary work in the Northern Solomons, which formed a part of the German Protectorate of New Guinea.

In 1902 the Methodist mission arrived in the British Solomon Islands, followed in 1904 by the South Sea Evangelical Mission, and in 1915 by the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) mission. As a

result of these missionary activities of those missions, today 32.8 % of the Solomon Islanders are Anglican, 19 % Catholic, 17% South Sea Evangelical Church Christian, 11.2 % are Seventh-Day Adventist and 10.3 % Methodist Christian.

The author describes very well the evangelization history of the Catholic Marist mission and especially of the Anglican mission in the Solomon Islands, which was always marked by evangelical witness and martyrdom. The early Catholic Marist missionaries already in 1845 met with martyrdom when their Bishop Jean Baptiste Epalle was killed by local people on Santa Isabel Island. John Coleridge Patteson was born in 1827 in England. In 1855 Bishop Selwyn convinced him to join the Anglican mission work in Melanesia. For five years he travelled on the mission boat Southern Cross to keep in contact with the Melanesian people on the Solomon and Vanuatu Islands, former New Hebrides Islands; he recruited students and brought them back as trained teachers and evangelizers. In 1861 Patteson was ordained the first bishop of Melanesia. He transferred the Melanesian mission school from Auckland to Norfolk Island which allowed the Melanesian students to stay in a much warmer climate and plant their traditional food like sweet potatoes. The so-called “hands off” mission approach of the Anglicans allowed the building up of mutual trust and friendly relationships with the Solomon Islanders. When British sailors started to capture islanders by force to work in sugar plantations in Queensland, Australia, or Fiji, the islanders started to distrust all outsiders coming to their islands. Bishop Patteson became a victim of this human abuse. When he landed alone on 20 September 1871 on the island of Nukapu in the Solomon Islands, local people took him for an invader they could not trust and killed him. Missionary enterprises in the pre-colonial South Pacific were highly vulnerable and without any protection.

Ini Kopuria, born around 1900 on Guadalcanal Island, was one of the first baptized Christians of his region. He was sent by the missionaries to St. Barnaba’s College on Norfolk Island to be trained as an evangelizer. Returning to his homeland in 1924, he joined the police force, a work which did not satisfy him for long. When Ini Kopuria met John M. Steward, the fifth Bishop of Melanesia, his dream to found a local religious congregation of men could be realized. The foundation of the Melanesian Brotherhood in 1925 was something extraordinary for the South Pacific. The Brotherhood allowed Melanesians to become evangelizers of their own people. The Japanese Invasion during the Second World War created a crisis in the Anglican Melanesian Brotherhood. Many local people lost their lives in the Solomon Islands. In neighbouring Papua New Guinea 333 missionary lives were lost during that period.

In the second part of her book, M. Attias describes the situation of the last years in the Solomon Islands, which gained independence in 1978. She describes the simple life style and profound spiritual life of the Melanesian Brothers and their humble service to the islanders. With their apostolic life style and prayer life the Brothers were able to bear witness to gospel values and were seen by the islanders as a credible counterforce to sorcery and witchcraft. When, in 1998, ethnic conflict broke out on Guadalcanal, the main island of the Solomon Islands, the Christian Churches and especially the Anglican and Catholic religious orders started to work for reconciliation.

The members of the Melanesian Brotherhood, locally called the “Tasiu”, dedicated their lives to peace-building and reconciliation among the more and more radicalized fighting groups of the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army and the Malaita Eagle Force. A cease fire was reached and again broken; finally Australia intervened to establish a lasting peaceful solution to the bloody conflict. The local people wanted to end the bloody conflict but were often hijacked by the fighting forces. In this situation the Tasiu showed outstanding dedication to the suffering people of all sides. The people had high regard for the Brothers and their service inspired by the love of Christ for all people. After successful peace negotiations the Tasiu Brothers went from village to village and convinced the people to hand over the arms. When one of their Brothers got lost, seven Tasiu Brothers went to search for him in the area controlled by the Guadalcanal Revolutionary army under the command of their leader Keke. When Keke’s power began to diminish, he became very paranoid. He accused the Brothers of being spies. In 2003 he captured, tortured and killed all seven

Melanesian Brothers. This crime was kept secret for a long time. When the crime became known, the Solomon Islanders were extremely shocked. The funeral became the most outstanding event of reconciliation for the people of the Solomon Islands. The Archbishop of Canterbury, as the spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, paid homage to the sacrifice of the Melanesian Brothers and dedicated a special icon in their honour in his Cathedral in Canterbury. In 2004 the Melanesian Brotherhood received the United Nations Peace Award for the Pacific in recognition of all their efforts at peace and reconciliation during the years of conflict in the Solomon Islands. Monica Attias' book is a precious contribution to the dedicated life and martyrdom of those Melanesian Brothers. The book, as the Archbishop of Canterbury has said, is in itself a witness which underlines the ecumenical and worldwide significance of the martyrdom of the seven members of the Anglican Melanesian Brotherhood in the Solomon Islands. - *Paul B. Steffen, SVD.*