

## Homily: Oct 24, 2021

By Fr. Virgil Petermeier, osc

Thanks to Fr. Jude, who invited me, so I can make my first visit here with you wonderful people at Vi Grayhawk in Scottsdale! Today is World Mission Sunday, when all dioceses around the world gather funds to be allocated to the world's central mission office in the Vatican, to help dioceses that are poorest in the world. That includes the diocese I lived in and served—the Diocese of Agats, Indonesia. In light of Mission Sunday, I will tie my homily reflections to our Crosier mission work.

I just published a book, “Encountering God in a Rainforest.” It’s a book about our Crosier mission in eastern Indonesia—a rainforest world—in the only diocese in the world, two-thirds of which goes under tide water for several hours of several days each month. It’s a diocese on stilts. Homes, stores, streets, churches, hospitals are 4–to 6–ft off the ground. Rivers and creeks serve as highways and by-ways. It’s the only diocese in the world with 95% of its people living as hunters and gatherers.

God calls all of us to be hearers of God’s Word and simultaneously, also missionaries. Pope Francis reminds us repeatedly about this. We must proclaim the good news of God from this sacred book, our Bible, with our lives—especially our deeds, attitudes and words. We know that not all of our words, deeds and attitudes proclaim God’s love, and so we call upon our compassionate God—“Lord, have mercy.”

I am absolutely amazed how this brief story about Jesus healing Bartimaeus contains some of the essential elements needed for good mission work—for good evangelization. Jesus was a great missionary. So, I will use this gospel story as a connector with our Crosier mission experience.

Bartimaeus—was a blind beggar, who heard that Jesus was passing by. So he calls out, even though shushed by others, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

The rainforest people were blind, too, in a way. They were cannibalistic headhunters, blind to the fact that their warfare had trapped them into fear and isolation. Eventually they heard about neighboring peoples living without war, due to missionaries telling Bible stories. They heard about their neighbors getting axes, fishing hooks and lines, etc. So, they began to call for missionaries to come to their village and bring a catechist who could open a simple school.

Back to Jesus: he heard Bartimaeus’ insistent call and cry. Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” Jesus was attentive and didn’t presume what the blind man needed—He asked. Every missionary must be attentive, listen and ask. Initially, we Catholic missionaries only wanted people to listen to us and do Christianity as we had been doing it for centuries in the West. So, all over the world, indigenous Catholics had to learn Latin mass songs and give up their old culture. Then in the early 1960s all the world’s bishops gathered for the Second Vatican Council. Through them, the Holy Spirit called the Church to pay attention to what was good in each culture and to use those good elements to proclaim the Gospel and celebrate Catholic liturgies.

We Crosiers invited people to use their drums in church, sing with their traditional melodies, pray in their own language and even dance in church. We would also say, “We came to New Guinea not to bring God there, but to discover God there.” So where did we discover God—our God of love? The rainforest people’s highest value was sharing. When a hunter managed to kill a jungle pig or get a big catch of fish,

he divided it among several families. They had wonderful peace ceremonies—where they exchanged food to stop fights among themselves, even though they were headhunters and cannibals.

My next-door neighbor, in my first parish in Papua, was a former war chieftain. When I would visit him, I would see his five human trophy skulls hanging over the fireplace. But these wonderful old men later thanked the bishop for sending missionaries who brought them out of darkness into light, as they would say. Yes, based on the commandment to love, we missionaries helped them stop their warfare. Now they could go fishing without fearing attack. They could visit other villages. Just as Bartimaeus threw off the cloak of his old way of life, they threw off killing and warfare. They went from blindness into seeing the real truth about themselves as loving human beings.

Back to Jesus: His final words to Bartimaeus were, “Your faith has saved you.” We missionaries in New Guinea acknowledge the peoples’ belief in many spirits—including spirits of the dead. They, like we Christians, also believe in the goodness of the spirits and presence of saints and of their own deceased friends and relatives. They also believe in an over-all chief spirit, they called “Father” in their language. One time I witnessed a woman, holding up to the sun, a piece of bark from the sago palm tree they were harvesting for flour. She called out, “Dia” – “Father,” help us so that this tree will produce much flour for us. That belief helped them understand our Christian God.

Back to Bartimaeus, “Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the way.” In our mission area of eastern Indonesia, we now have more than 60,000 Catholic rainforest people, trying to follow the WAY OF JESUS. Yes, the Bible has made a huge impact on these people. It has and still can make a huge impact on our lives today, too.

So, I close this homily with two questions for you and me, “From what kinds of blindness has Jesus healed me? and How am I following Jesus’ WAY of life?”

*(NB—My book about our mission endeavor, which I alluded to in this homily, will be available widely through an email promotion in the next couple weeks.)*