



An Exclusive Interview with Bishop Gilles Côté, SMM

ROME, Italy - Bishop Gilles Côté, SMM of Daru-Kiunga diocese in Papua New Guinea, recently attended the Anglophone Conference for the Safeguarding of Children. The conference hosted by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Episcopal Conference of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Centre for Child Protection of the Gregorian University was held in Rome at the Gregorian University from Monday, 18th June to Thursday, 21st June this year. In this Exclusive Interview, Bishop Gilles talks to Fr. Jailos Mpina, SMM about the conference at the General House of the Montfort Missionaries.

Your Lordship, may you briefly share with us the life of the church in Daru-Kiunga diocese?

Bishop Gilles (laughing): Call me Bishop, don't call me Your Lordship (laughing). We started the work of the evangelisation to establish the church during the Vatican Council II. Two Montfort missionaries from Canada arrived in Western Province in Kiunga, on 28th June 1959.

There was no church there, it was jungle everywhere and many believed in spirits and animism. Many people said we can't manage to stay there, but we stayed there.

The secret of mission work especially in areas with different cultures is to respect the people and the people will respect you.

When Bishop Gerald by then the Prefect Apostolate at the age of 22 was invited to the Vatican Council II, it's where we got the idea of building the church of the Second Vatican Council; a church of communion and participation; a church that is not pyramidal but circular; a church of dialogue, listening, taking decisions together and doing together. I was there in 1971, we started meeting the church leaders every year, prepare them for ministry and in 1980s we established small Christian communities.

What brought you here in Rome this time around?

What has brought me to Rome is about the abuse of children, a conference about awareness, safeguarding and protecting children. The theme this time was about working together to transform the society (and the Church is part of the society, isn't it) so that we do away with barriers that stop us from safeguarding the children and we increase the strength that enables us to protect them. As the church, we must take action and decision against any barrier in safeguarding the children so that they may be loved, protected and cared for as Jesus wants.

May you share with us the main topics you discussed?

We had an important talk about abuse in religious life, we don't think about that. A Reverend Sister who presented the topic stated that among the Religious Women congregations, 1 out of 3 Sisters [one-in-three Sisters] have been abused. Some of these abuses happen while they are still children, some are done by their superiors in communities, by the parish priests, etc.

We had also a session about the Voice of the Children, talking about their rights and awareness, about the types of abuse they may experience. Then we had the last topic on Child Cyber harassment. There are almost 4 million blogs in the world and 2 million blogs alone in USA that are illegally operating online on child Cyber abuse.

Last year, you attended similar workshop of the Anglophone Conference for the Safeguarding of children, what are you doing so far to walk the talk?

I am the Bishop in-charge of Safeguarding and Child Protection in PNG since 2005. I have led [spearheaded] the writing of the protocols and policies for child protection. My diocese was the first one to have the Child Protection policy. I also appointed one lay person who is the Diocesan Child Protection Officer. He goes to each village of the diocese and in schools, sharing with villagers, teachers, boys and girls in schools in creating awareness about child protection and forms of abuse.

There are cases of incest and gender-based violence reports that are now presented in the office. The only barrier is that we cannot prosecute them, and the government through the Child Welfare is weak despite having a beautiful policy on protecting and caring the children.

As a Bishop, each year when we have an annual retreat, I advise my priests to read and read the child protection policy and the code of conduct. And they know that if any priest is involved or accused, straight away, I will give him an administrative leave for investigation. You can be sure that I will not keep silence, I will protect the victim for sure.

How will this conference benefit the Diocese of Daru-Kiunga in Papua New Guinea?

I am also the Bishop Deputy for the Religious and I am thinking that for the next AGM (Annual General Meeting) for the Religious, we will talk about the abuse in religious life. I have already shared this with my colleague, the chairperson for the Religious. About the topics on the Voice of the Children, Trauma and about Child Cyber abuse and pornography - even in the bush they look at their mobile phones and see the pornographic photos etc, [laughing] - I have requested for all materials which I will give to my priests, so that they can read and implement them in the parishes. Without reading, they will think that everything is okay, while it's not.

You have been a missionary in the Western Province in PNG for over 40 years, what keeps you going despite the challenges that the church in PNG faces?

Let me tell you a little story. Six or seven months ago, I was driving for 150 km journey for my medical attention and I was with a Brother and a couple for family life counselling who asked me to drop them mid-way. They said to me: "Bishop Gilles, when you go, we will put a house cry [people weeping with rage and mourning] everywhere." I told them: "I am sorry my friends, I don't like house cry, I ate house cry. When I will go there, I will do what they will do. I will tell them, I will celebrate with you the beautiful life of participation and communion, promoting listening, dialogue, trust and making decisions together." I am also a member of a Small Christian Community (SCC), just like any Christian.

Do you have something more to share?

I really admire the Montfort missionaries who joined us. They work hard, they make sacrifice and not one of them is a loser because they are in the bush. We learn so much and we leave something that is very rich in terms of love, faith and hope. I wish that more Montfort missionaries will join us in PNG, why not one from Malawi, why not one from Haiti, why not one from the Philippines?

-Fr. Jaiilos Mpina, SMM