

# PONTIFICAL MISSION SOCIETIES

## The Church in Fiji



**By Rev. Patrick L. Posey, Diocesan Director**  
Pontifical Mission Societies and  
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Chair of Propagation of the Faith Mission Board

After seventeen hours of flying, crossing the international dateline, and losing a day, our pilot informed us that he was landing the plane in Fiji amidst preparations for a typhoon, which was to hit in two days. It would be a Category IV when it hit the island. Needless to say, we all suffered from anxiety.

This anxiety dissipated when Sr. Merieti Riiki, the new Regional Director for the South Pacific Islands, one of only two female Directors in the whole world, greeted us with a warm smile and hug. She was born on the Tarawa Island, which is one of the islands in the Gilbert Island chain, where over 1600 American Marines and sailors lost their lives during World War II. Sr. Riiki said, "My people are very grateful to the Americans for liberating us from the Japanese...we will never forget."

Sister brought us to Fr. Roger McCarrick, SM, a Marist priest from Ireland who has served in Pakistan for five years, Papua New Guinea for sixteen years, and in Fiji for nineteen years. Currently he is the Secretary General of the Bishop's Conference for the South Pacific, and until this year, was the Regional Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies. His responsibility is to help the bishops of the South Pacific region that covers one quarter of the globe in circumference, north and south of the equator and east and west of the dateline.

We had planned to visit the remote island of Taveuni the following day where the Church has a very active 100-year-old mission at Wairiki. Instead, the typhoon was to hit this island head on and no planes were leaving for the island. In addition, a curfew was issued because of the concern that looting and damage would occur once the typhoon hit our island. No one was allowed to leave home for the duration of the storm.

We were looking for the "mission experience" and were disappointed that we could not visit the island of Taveuni and other mission sites. Instead, we had

sister's love, compassion and concern for these children was simply awe-inspiring. We had dinner with the Sisters who joyfully told me about their ministry to the children and to those suffering from abuse. It did not bother them that they were robbed six times! One school we visited had students overflowing to a covered classroom outside.

We started our trip in Fiji disappointed that we were not able to go out and find great mission stories to bring back to the parishioners of the Arlington Diocese. We



**Children at St Joseph The Worker's School**

lived the reality that missionaries have to work through typhoons, tensions with other religious groups, political events like the four coups, lack of electricity and educational support, to bring the Word of God to the people. Mass must still be celebrated, human needs must still be met, and the responsibility to bring Christ to the people in word and deed must never end. We discovered that we did not need an hour plane ride to an island to find the mission; the mission was right in front of us all the time in the dedication, commitment, sacrifices and faith of those that had heard the call of Christ to "Feed my lambs and tend my sheep" and had answered yes.

We ended our trip with a visit to Archbishop Petero Mataka who reminded us just how small the world really is when he asked if we knew Bishop Keating. When Fr. Posey related that he was ordained by Bishop Keating, Bishop Mataka mentioned that he had visited the diocese several times while Bishop Keating was bishop. We truly are one family in mission.

**Fr. Posey says Mass at the home for the handicapped**

to wait out the typhoon and hope for the best. We spent our first day putting up wooden grates over the windows of the house where we were staying.

After the typhoon, we spent the next two days visiting with sisters who take care of the elderly abandoned by their families. We visited a school where handicapped and blind children are learning life skills. To see the

## The Master



**Principal Paulo Lala of St. Joseph's School**

If there was ever a man who loves his job, it's Paulo Lala. Master Paulo Lala, that is.

He's the master (principal) of the St. Joseph the Worker School just outside Suva, the capital city of Fiji in the South Pacific.

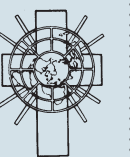
He is typical of the devoted native Fijians that we encountered during a recent mission visit to this island nation. Although a devout Catholic, and the fact that this is a Catholic diocesan school, he accepts everyone, including other Christians, Hindus and Muslims who make up this nation's population. "We turn none away," he says. "We have 809 children, mostly urban poor, ages 6 to 14, and with 19 teachers reporting to me, I fill my day".

In addition to running the school, he also teaches full time, and maintains a beautiful family life with four children and 4 grandchildren. "I grew up on the nearby island of Tavuni, a simple village boy, and I struggled whether to be a teacher or a farmer", he relates. "But one of my teachers was an excellent role model, so here I am".

You could feel his charisma, his enthusiasm, his energy! Children flock around him between classes, teachers fire pleas for advice. He is building additions to his school since it's in one of the highest population growth areas in Fiji. Loaded with talent, experience, and love, he is indeed a master!

**Mike Mele**  
Chair, Propagation of the Faith Mission Board

If you have been touched in some way to help the Pontifical Mission Societies continue its mission, please consider mailing a gift to:



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