

## **The Catholic Church and Fiji's Independence (1944-1976)**

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This article which part of my doctoral dissertation, explains the Catholic Church's mission in the context of Fiji's transition to independence.

#### **2.5.1 Historical Context**

Bishop Foley headed the Vicariate of Fiji when the country was making its transition from colonialism to independence. This was an era of political changes as old colonial systems were abolished and the country prepared for independence. Sukuna and Mara were the most influential political actors in this era. Sukuna re-established the indirect rule system and became the leading advocate of the Fiji Administration. Sukuna played a significant role in Mara's political career. Mara, on the other hand, led the *I Taukeis*' transition from colonialism to independence.<sup>1</sup> Sukuna adamantly believed that the Fijian Administration was essential to the economic and political development of the *I Taukeis*.<sup>2</sup> However, some colonial governors and *I Taukeis* criticized the effectiveness of the Fijian Administration. As a result, the colonial government established two commissions of enquiry to investigate and evaluate the economic progress of the *I Taukeis*. These were the Commission of Enquiry into the Natural Resources and Population Trends of the Colony of Fiji (1959)<sup>3</sup> and the Commission of Enquiry into the Economic Problems and Prospects (1960).<sup>4</sup> Both

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<sup>1</sup> West, 103.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>3</sup> O.H.K. Spate, *The Fijian People: Economic Problems and Prospects*, Legislative Council of Fiji, Colony of Fiji (Suva, Fiji: Government Press, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> Alan Burns, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Resources and Population Trends of the Colony of Fiji, Report 1959*, Legislative Council Paper N0.1 of 1960 (Suva: Crown Agents of Overseas Governments and Administrations, 1960).

commissions verified that the Fijian Administration and the *I Taukeis*' communal system hindered economic and political development of *I Taukeis*. Although the colonial government accepted the reports of these commissions, *I Taukei* leaders and the Great Council of Chiefs responded apprehensively. The colonial government eventually abolished the Fijian Administration in 1960.<sup>5</sup>

Two main political parties emerged as Fiji prepared for its independence, the National Federation Party and the Alliance Party. In 1963, a loose confederation of Indo-Fijian cane growers associations formed the National Federation Party. The Alliance Party led by Mara was formed in 1965.<sup>6</sup> Political affiliation during this era was mainly along racial lines. Although the Alliance Party claimed to promote multiracialism, *I Taukei* politicians and ideologies dominated the party. Robbie Robertson and William Sutherland pointed out that *I Taukei* political leaders had tactically put aside their main political ideology, namely the paramountcy of *I Taukei*' interests, to embrace multiracialism and secure power.<sup>7</sup> The Alliance party won the first general election in 1972 and maintained political authority for the next seventeen years.

### 2.5.2 Religious Context

The Second Vatican Council (1962) stands as the background to this missionary stage.<sup>8</sup> Developments in the Fijian Catholic Church reflected the Council's ecclesiology.

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<sup>5</sup> Lal, *Broken Waves*, 185-186.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson and Sutherland, 73.

<sup>8</sup> The Second Vatican Council was summoned by Pope John XXIII. He called together the 2,500 Catholic Bishops of the world to Rome to modernize the Church. In his great opening discourse, he set out a vast vision for ecclesial renewal that was meant not merely to restore the Church to a form more consistent with the spirit of Christ, its founder. It was intended to be a challenge to the world that would invade the

Bishop Victor Foley (1944-1966), succeeded Bishop Nicolas and was appointed the first bishop of the Diocese of Suva.<sup>9</sup> In 1966, the Holy See declared the Fijian Catholic Church a diocese and Foley shifted the Fiji Catholic Church's self-understanding from that of a missionary Church to a local Church. Foley was an ardent believer in the potentiality of local resources and was less dependent of overseas resources. He believed that the Fijian Catholic Church and Fijian society needed educated lay people. He insisted that all Catholic schools become diocesan schools. This meant that schools were to come under the local Church's administration rather than those of the religious orders.<sup>10</sup>

Important demographic changes took place during Foley's term. The influenza epidemic had reduced the *I Taukei* population, making the Indo-Fijians the majority. The Indo-Fijians advanced in almost every sphere of life. In response to the increasing number of Indo-Fijians, Foley made further developments to the Indian apostolate. He requested the Missionary Society of St. Columban (Columban Fathers) from Ireland to work specifically among the Indo-Fijians and supplement Marist missionaries.<sup>11</sup>

In 1967, Archbishop George Pearce succeeded Foley. Pearce continued the vision set by his predecessor and began working on the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council regarding the translation of the liturgy and sacraments. He also made further developments to the Indian apostolate. Pearce went to India to learn Hindi where he also recruited Indian seminarians who would later work in Fiji among the Indo-Fijians. Pearce's term of office ended in 1976 due to illness.<sup>12</sup>

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consciousness, and hence the conscience, of all humankind. Xavier Rynne, *Vatican Council II* (New York: Orbis Books, 1968), vii.

<sup>9</sup> Leone Raselala, "Our Church Today," (Lecture, Archdiocese of Suva Archive, January 18, 1992), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Archbishop Petero Mataca, interview by author, Suva, Fiji, January 11, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Fischer, *Fiji Revisited: A Columban Father's Memories of Twenty-eight Years in the Islands* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 13. Frank Hoare, "The Arrival of the Columbans," in *Columbans in Fiji: Fifty Years of Missionary Service 1952-2002*, ed. Charles O'Mahony (Suva, Columban Education Office: 2002), 12.

### 2.5.3 Model of Church

Foley and Pearce shifted Fijian Catholic Church's self-understanding from a missionary church to one that is local. They perceived the Church as the local community. The local church model believes in the goodness and potentiality of the local community rather than a church dependent on foreign resources for its welfare. Dulles indicates that the Second Vatican Council's principle image of Church is that of the people of God.<sup>13</sup> "The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" uses the analogy of the human body to describe the Church. Like the human body, the Church is made up of diverse communities and members who are gifted with various gifts and riches for the welfare of the Church.<sup>14</sup> The Council teaches that God has allotted his people with gifts and special graces that make them ready and fit to undertake the various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church. The Council understands that the People of God is present in all the nations of the earth, gifted with the resources, abilities, and customs that contribute to the Church. This diversity within the people of God contributes to the whole Church. The Council therefore highlights the rightful place and the unique contributions of particular or local Churches to the whole Church.<sup>15</sup> The Second Vatican Council's vision regarding the local Church was implemented in Fiji when the Holy See declared the Fijian Catholic Church a diocese in 1966.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Archbishop Petero Mataca, interview by author, Suva, Fiji, January 11, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Dulles, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Second Vatican Council: *Lumen Gentium*, no. 7

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> "1844: The Catholic Church mission in Fiji started in Lau in 1844 with the arrival of Bishop Bataillon," *Levuka History and Timeline*, January 13, 2008, [levuka.wordpress.com/2008/01/13/1844the-catholic-church-mission-in-fiji-started-lau-in-1844-with-the-arrival-of-bishop-bataillon/](http://levuka.wordpress.com/2008/01/13/1844the-catholic-church-mission-in-fiji-started-lau-in-1844-with-the-arrival-of-bishop-bataillon/) (accessed February 2,

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2012). According to Canon Law, a diocese is a portion of the people of God, entrusted to a Bishop to be nurtured by him, with the cooperation of the presbyterium, in such a way that, remaining close to its pastor and gathered by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular Church. In this Church, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ truly exists and functions. Canon 369.