

I have been asked by Sr. Theresia Tina, Vicar and now a/Leader of the Sisters of Mercy PNG Region, to write a profile of the life of Sr. Petronia Gawi, and having consulted with PNG and Australian Sisters of Mercy, I am privileged to present this brief summary.

*Teresa A. Flaherty rsm* (Sisters of Mercy PNG, 1964 – 2003)



## Petronia's Childhood

Gabasaki Gawi was born in the Ambunti District at Avatip Village along the Sepik River in 1958. Petronia Maree were christian names she later adopted prior to her Baptism in 1972. Her father was the Headman of the tribal 'Haus Tambaran' and the Gawi family followed strong, religious traditions. The mighty eagle, soaring high above the tallest trees with all the strength and power of the river spirits, was their tribal emblem. During her childhood Petronia was taught to be independent, courageous, spiritual and knowledgable. She received her primary education (1966-71) at Avatip Community School where the Headmaster, Mr Christopher Voivoi, encouraged her in her education and Christian life. When the School Inspector, Sr Dominique Coles SSPS arrived at the school by seaplane and spoke to the students, Petronia was so impressed she dreamt of one day becoming a sister / inspector! Although she kept this secret, family expectations for her future were high, and when tragically, two of her brothers, Matthias and later Daniel, met early deaths, each made a dying wish for their little sister to advance in her education.

Accepted for secondary school at Mercy College Yrapos (1972-75) in the Wewak Diocese, Petronia asked to be baptized into the Catholic Church, and Sr. Denise Coghlan prepared her for this. The next steps on her journey were teacher training at St Benedict's Teachers College and teaching at St. Therese's Primary school, Yrapos (1978). During these years she deepened her desire to lead a Christian life of service through education and experienced a strong call to religious life. She applied to the Sisters of Mercy she had come to know and love during her teenage years and Sr Irene Callanan walked closely with her as she considered taking this step. With two other young women, Veronica Lokalyo from Enga in the Highlands and Theresia Gongi from Burui in the East Sepik, she entered the postulancy program at Pumakos in Enga. This was a very significant step for the Sisters as the call of these three young women proved a strong motivation for the different Australian foundations of the Sisters of Mercy in Papua New Guinea to unite. This took place in July, 1981 as the Sisters of Mercy PNG, with Sr. Helen O'Brien as leader, united as part of what was to become the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy Australia (December, 1981).



*First PNG Postulants: Veronica Lokalyo, Petronia Gawi (Centre) and Theresia Gongi*

When her two companions delayed to spend more time on their education, Petronia, with Sr. Ursula Gilbert as Novice Mistress, proceeded to the novitiate at St. Benedict's, Kaindi, in Wewak. Although this decisive step was particularly painful to her father, he gave his final blessing on his deathbed the following year, anointing his daughter in a traditional ritual by calling her all the names he had given her at birth. Petronia saw this as her father missioning her because he knew he would not live to witness her as she continued to make the brave decisions required on her Mercy journey. In this way Petronia had the blessing of her family as she made her first vows at St Benedict's Chapel, Kaindi, (31<sup>st</sup> Jan, 1984), being the first national Sister of Mercy to be

professed in PNG. Her two companions were professed a year later. Thus began the branch of the Papua New Guinean Sisters of Mercy, who in the intervening years have increased and

now number nineteen professed sisters and two novices, and are in community and ministry with six Sisters of Mercy and other Sisters on periodic Mercy ministries from Australia.

### **Petronia's Ministry of Teaching and Love of Learning**



*Petronia with her family at her Final Vows Ceremony, 28/12/1988*

(1995-1998).

As a Sister of Mercy and member of the Teaching Service, Petronia, after teaching at Yarapos, taught in remote rural primary schools at Dreikir and Kunjingini (in the East Sepik) and Pumasos (at Enga in the Highlands), eventually returning to St. Benedict's Demonstration School at Kaindi. With the introduction of matriculation classes, the Christian Brothers' school at Banz in the Highlands developed into Fatima Secondary School, and Petronia eagerly took up teaching and the position of Dean of Women there because she felt that 'care of girls and women was a traditional Mercy ministry'

Meanwhile, Petronia's thirst for further education grew and, with encouragement from her close friend and mentor, Sr. Joan O'Toole at the Staff Development Unit in Port Moresby, she completed her Diploma in Teaching - Primary (UPNG, 1992), and Bachelor in Teaching - Primary (UPNG, 1993). This educational achievement, despite some health problems, shows Petronia's remarkable commitment and perseverance. It seems this experience reassured her that women, who were often disadvantaged in Papua New Guinea, could succeed in improving their educational qualifications. Consequently, she was a source of encouragement to her own nieces (Irene, Helen and Maryanne), other family members and young women struggling to further their education.



*Sr. Joan O'Toole and Sr Petronia in Port Moresby (approx 1993)*

At this stage of her life, a close friend of the Gawi family who had been parish priest at Ambunti during Petronia's young adult years, Fr Jan Czuba, svd, was now President of the new Divine Word University, Madang. He realised the special gifts Petronia had to offer in the Christian development of the young women and men tertiary students. Thus it happened that, in accepting his initial request, Petronia eventually worked at DWU for nine years, first as lecturer in PNG Studies, then as Dean of Women Students, and finally as a pioneer involved in setting up the DWU Flexible Learning Centre at Holy Trinity Teachers College, Mount Hagen, and the Centre for Matriculation Studies and Flexible Learning at St. Benedict's Campus – DWU. She completed her Master's Degree in Educational Leadership in the flexible learning mode at DWU Madang in 2005.

Petronia valued these studies which enriched her spiritual, cultural and intellectual life and



was commended by her lecturers for the high standard of her thesis. As with her previous studies, Petronia saw what she learnt as being of value to pass on to others, particularly in times of rapid social change. She was to draw on these personal resources when elected to Leadership of the PNG Region of the Sisters of Mercy, a service which she began in January 2008, then in her fiftieth year.

### **Petronia's Silver Jubilee Celebrations**

The first of Petronia's jubilee celebrations was held in Parramatta on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, where she was attending a meeting with the Institute Plenary Council. This was a lovely opportunity for all the other Mercy leaders to mark the occasion, along with Karon Donnellon, a member of the Institute Leadership Team, who was also celebrating her Silver Jubilee.



*Petronia, Karon Donnellon and Fr Geoff King SJ at their Jubilee Celebration in Parramatta.*

Petronia prepared thoroughly with her family on her father's side (the Gawi clan) and her mother's side (the Yambui clan) for her Silver Jubilee celebrations at her birthplace at Avatip on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2009. As Sisters from the Region - ten PNG sisters and Sr. Maura O'Shaughnessy - and Petronia's firm friend and mentor from Australia, Sr. Irene Callanan, alighted from their canoes, they were greeted by the joyful and traditional welcome of the family and village community who led them into a clearing lined with bamboo benches and chairs. In the nearby Catholic Church, Mass was concelebrated by Bishop Anthony Burgess and four priests,

including the Parish Priest, Fr Alphonse Nogoru. Petronia renewed her vows, expressing her commitment to follow *"the principal path of Mercy, pointed out by Jesus... and to do so, sustained by the fidelity and prayer of Mary, Woman of Mercy, and following the way of Venerable Catherine McAuley... gratefully, cheerfully and with integrity"*.



*Petronia during the Eucharistic Celebration of her Silver Jubilee. (above left)*

*Petronia, Irene Callanan and sisters are welcomed at Avatip. (above right)*

The second Silver Jubilee Celebration in Papua New Guinea was held at St Benedict's Chapel, Kaindi, Wewak, on 31<sup>st</sup> Jan, 2009. This too was a wonderful occasion, with the Eucharist being concelebrated, in the absence of Bishop Anthony Burgess in Australia, by the Vicar of the Diocese, Fr. Lawrence Tanu, Bishop Michael Marai who gave the homily, and

priests of the Diocese. Mass was attended by the pro-Vice President of the St. Benedict's Campus, DWU, Mr Michael Kapari, senior staff and student college choir. The religious orders of the Diocese were also represented as the Jubilee coincided with the Wewak diocesan celebration of Consecrated Life. Sisters of Mercy from Australia were Sr. Berneice Loch, representing the Institute, and former missionaries and companions on her journey, Irene Callanan, Joan O'Toole, Ann O'Regan and Vonnie Clarke. Members of Sr. Petronia's family had made the arduous journey from the Sepik. Sr. Angeline Singiat of the PNG leadership team and lecturer of St. Benedict's gave an outline of Petronia's life.

Immediately after the celebrations, Petronia, who had not been well, was admitted to Wewak Provincial Hospital, diagnosed with malaria and pneumonia. She was lovingly and tenderly cared for by the Mercy sister nurses, Philomena Waira, Margaret Roni, and Terry Gongi (her early Mercy companion) and her Mercy community, and seemed to be responding to treatment. She rallied on Wednesday evening, eating a little food, talking with the sisters, and showing concern that those tending her have a mat to sleep on. Early on Thursday morning she suffered respiratory failure. Despite all medical attempts to revive her, Petronia died at about 8.15 that morning (5<sup>th</sup> February), before a medical evacuation could be finalised. Her sister Doris, stayed by her bedside throughout her illness.

### **Petronia's Funeral and Burial**

Petronia's sudden death was a great shock and Sisters, family and friends near and far deeply felt her loss. Every Mercy sister within PNG who could make the difficult flight bookings came to express their love and support. Also present were Nerida Tinkler, the President of the Institute, and Sandra Lupi of Brisbane and Faye Kelly of Cairns, representing the leadership of the four Queensland congregations, with whom Petronia, as leader of the PNG Region, met regularly to share matters of mutual concern. Sr. Ursula Gilbert, Petronia's former Novice Mistress, and several Sisters who had worked in PNG, came on behalf of their Australian Congregations – North Sydney (Jenny Bailey and Margaret Shakeshaft), Melbourne (Agnes Murphy, Julie Anne Ryan, RoseMary Baker) and Adelaide (Teresa Flaherty).

Together they gathered to mourn Petronia's passing, to celebrate her life, and to support the Sisters of the PNG Region in their profound grief. Members of the extended family of the Gawi and Yambui clans, Petronia's brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews came to grieve their beloved 'wanblut' (blood relation), and showed, by the significant step of allowing Petronia's body to be buried in Wewak rather than in their home village, that they continued to honour the sacrifice her parents had made in giving their daughter to God.

The Vicar, Theresia Tina, assumed the Mercy leadership, and together with the Sisters and the family, represented particularly by Petronia's brothers, Andrew and Max Gawi, quietly supported by her sisters, Lucy and Doris, made the arrangements for the one week mourning period. During this time, the family wholeheartedly and respectfully entrusted all decision-making to the Sisters, emphasising that as she had given her life to God in the Sisters of Mercy, this is what Petronia would have wanted. The Sisters, conscious of the traditional customs and of the family's need to mourn their beloved sister, arranged the ceremonies to include family, Mercy sisters and the wider community.

Bishop Michael Marai concelebrated the funeral Eucharist with the main celebrant, Fr Lawrence Tanu, Vicar of the Diocese, and clergy of the Wewak Diocese. It was Bishop Michael's sad task to give the farewell homily for Petronia, whom he had known well since novitiate days when, as a young priest, he had regularly come to celebrate the Eucharist there. Petronia's body was laid to rest in the Catholic cemetery on the outskirts of the Diocesan

Centre at Wirui. Situated in a peaceful tropical setting, and framed by low-lying distant mountains, the 'holy ground' of Petronia's grave has its place, surrounded by the final resting places of the 'flying' Archbishop of Wewak, Leo Arkfeld svd, missionaries of the Divine Word and Holy Spirit Sisters, former companions among the Rosary Sisters and the faithful departed of Wewak.



*The funeral Mass in St. Benedict's Chapel (above left)*

*Pall bearers from Petronia's family (above right)*

During the traditional mourning period, duties were willingly taken up, without prompting, by the various community and religious (eg Christian Brothers and Sacred Heart Brothers) groups on or near the Campus. The 'Haus Krai' was erected by the St. Benedict's College staff and students. The gatherings for grieving, prayer, and memories, the preparation of food, including the traditional 'mumu' (of Philomena Waira's final vows family gift of a young pig, which had since been fattened at Kunjingini), and closing with the feeding of over 250 people who had participated in the mourning - everything was arranged with all the correctness of melanesian ceremony. The Institute Formation team of Kaye Evans and Barbara Broad, and candidate, Elizabeth Young, in PNG for a combined formation program with the PNG candidates, turned their hands to many diverse chores. Sr. Kaye Bolwell and her students of the Mercy Education Centre were wholeheartedly involved. Everything was done, led by the Sisters of the PNG Region, in a spirit of consideration, love and service.



*Petronia's former Novice Mistriss, Sr. Ursula Gilbert, blesses the coffin.*



## Memories and Tributes – Sr. Petronia Maree Gabasaki Gawi

Petronia's commitment to the Church as a Sister of Mercy was shown by word and action. Supported by a loving family and religious community, she was a person of strong character, firm in her commitment and convictions, with a deep sense of purpose, a keen desire for the truth and a willingness to be true to herself and the call of God within her spirit. Catherine McAuley was a familiar friend. In the light of faith in Christ, she constantly faced the struggle to find ways of crossing between the ancient PNG cultures and the new and rapidly changing world. From early 'Mercy Pacific' experiences she counted some of the Sisters of Mercy of the Pacific nations as her friends, and lovingly corresponded with them. Elected to Mercy leadership at the chapter of the PNG Region for 2008, she showed her firm belief in the education of women, particularly by arranging for some of the junior sisters to resume their full time studies, so as to prepare them for more effective Mercy ministry.



*Sisters of Mercy farewell Petronia (from Left) - Cathy Jambet, Margaret Roni, Philomena Waira, Theresia Tina (Vicar), Rachel Waisman and Kunnie Kalango.*

Many of her Sisters, now in Australia, former teachers, colleagues and students from the Coast to the Highlands of Papua New Guinea and other friends overseas, mourn Petronia's passing. The Sisters of the PNG Region have received many tributes by word, phone, email, fax, card and letter expressing prayers and sadness and their appreciation for Petronia's life of faith, courage, commitment and Mercy service. The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy Australia, with its national office in Sydney, has also received many expressions of condolence from around the world.

Petronia recently emailed Sr. Valda Cervetto, who was at Kaindi during her novitiate days and had walked with her on her Mercy journey, about one of her last painful journeys. Suffering a serious bout of illness while on the plane from Port Moresby to Mount Hagen, she called on God: *"If I have walked humbly with You, get me to my destination". And sure enough He did. Isn't God amazing!* The Sisters of Mercy of the Papua New Guinea Region within the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia deeply miss and mourn the passing of their sister, but also, in faith, celebrate the arrival of Sr. Petronia Maree Gabasaki Gawi, safely and joyfully at her eternal destination, with her amazing God.



*Petronia's earthly resting place in Wirui Cemetery.*

