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One Hundred Years with the Jesuits in British Guiana

1857, – 1957

Part X: The Rupununi Mission

The Rupununi Mission



Fr. CUTHBERT CARY-ELWES, S.J.
1909 to 1923.

THE greatest "Missionary" achievement of the century has been the evangelisation of the Amerindians of the Interior. This was started by Bishop Galton. Father Cary-Elwes offered himself for the task and in November, 1909, he and Bishop Galton set out by river on the long journey through uninhabited forest land to found this mission. In those days and for years afterwards it was only by undertaking a three week journey along the Essequibo and Rupununi Rivers with all the accompanying hazards in getting over the rapids that the mission could be reached. Bishop Galton and Father Cary-Elwes selected a site on the Takatu River which separates British Guiana from Brazil. There they established the church of St. Ignatius, headquarters of the work. Right at the start in 1910, the Sisters of Mercy, at Bishop Galton's call, attempted to set up a convent here. But conditions were too difficult and the Bishop withdrew them for other work.

There are distinct tribes of Indians, the

Makushis and the Patamonians in the north and the Wapisianas and the Wai Wai's in the south savannahs.

Working from St. Ignatius on foot, on horseback and by canoe, Father Cary-Elwes penetrated first the north and later the south, laying the foundations of a mission which today spreads in an arc of over 200 miles. The difficulties involved were almost unbelievable.

PROBLEMS

First there was the initial difficulty (and danger) of the journey. Starting out from Georgetown, the Missionary had to take supplies to last him for a year as well as materials for barter with the Indians - the only means of trade or paying for work. Such materials would be cloth, fishing lines, hooks, tools and mirrors. All these had to be negotiated over some 12 rapids in the three-week journey, the mission boat having to be continually unloaded and goods portaged for long distances while the Indians steered the empty boat up the river in order to arrive at their destination. (On the return journey to town with a light boat, they would "shoot" the rapids, the Indian steersman skilfully manoeuvring the submerged rocks).

Once arrived, the Missionary was to be cut off from Georgetown for at least a year. Owing to the seasonal rainfall he was to be 'marooned' at St. Ignatius for several months at a time. The flooding of the savannahs makes it impossible to visit the Indian villages in the North more than once or twice a year.

Housing was of the most primitive. The Missionary shared the life of his people - mud walls and floors and grass roofs, and hammocks for beds.

Then there was the, at first sight overwhelming, problem of the languages. There are two completely distinct languages to be mastered, Makushi (the most difficult) and Wapisiana. The Patamonian tongue appears to have been a dialect of Makushi.

Despite all this, in his span of work from 1909 to 1923 Father Cary-Elwes succeeded in reaching practically every point covered today. Years later, when succeeding missionaries came to villages where he had first taught, they found the Indians still saying the prayers he had taught them, and they could still answer some of the Latin responses of the Mass. Father Cary Elwes was assisted in his work at different times by Father Robinson, Father Lickert, Father Gough and Father Mayo.

SHIPWRECKED

Bishop Galton's concern for the **mission** was great. It was on the occasion of his visit in 1918 that he was wrecked in shooting a rapid on the Ireng River. The Bishop managed to swim to safety. His belongings and all his regalia were at first given up as lost but, extraordinarily enough, much of it was recovered later floating down the river. Even the Bishop's ring was found by an Indian in a niche of a rock. This accident, which very nearly proved fatal, served to point the real dangers regularly undertaken by the Fathers. In 1923 Father Cary-Elwes suffered a serious breakdown in health. He left for England in the following year, where, to the end of his life, he continued giving talks on the mission.

A NEW START

In February, 1928, Father Keary and Father Mather were sent to take up residence at St. Ignatius in succession to Father Cary-Elwes. Again as an indication of the still present dangers of the journey, they only got as far as the Potaro mouth when their boat went down with all their belongings. Two of their party were drowned and the mission boat was wrecked. The two priests returned to town, only to start out again by Easter of the same year with another boat and completely new equipment.

From now on, Father Mather took care of the headquarters at St. Ignatius while Father Keary went out on the missionary journeys.

The first problem again was that of language. Father Cary-Elwes had begun to compile a Makushi dictionary but unfortunately during his illness much of this was lost. Father Keary found one section comprising some eighty words. He then started to produce a dictionary, which today contains some 2,000 Makushi words, as well as a grammar of the language. Later he did the same thing with the Wapisiana language.

NINE YEARS LATER

By the end of the first two years Father Keary was giving simple instructions in the language of the people. There were baptisms and marriages, but it was not until after nine years that he attempted to hear confessions. As he went his rounds from village to village he gave his final instructions on the sacrament, and then announced that he would be ready to hear the confession of anyone who wished to come to him. Telling the tale himself, he said it was then brought home as never before what it meant to be a priest. In each village the whole population came to confession. Next morning in each village they all made their first Communion. In that first year Father Keary said he heard over 1,000

confessions. Year by year after that, on his annual visit to each village, it was the same - everyone came to confession, everyone came to Holy Communion. So the work continued. Father Keary would start out on the long tour of the villages each year on January 2nd, continuing until May when the rains start and he would return to St. Ignatius.



Father Keary with his horse, ready to set out on his mission visits.

DICTIONARY

Then from May to October, while the rains poured and the savannahs flooded, he put in his long steady work on his dictionary. In this he had the invaluable help of the "Mission Boy", David Max-i-Hung who, as a lad of nine years, had been brought by Father Cary-Elwes from Morawhanna to Takutu. Already English speaking, he entered into the life of the Makushis so that eventually, their Chief told Father Keary, he could speak the language as well as any Makushi born. With his help,

Father built up the words in his dictionary and arrived at the construction of the language, in which there are four conjugations. It was during this time also that Father wrote down Prayers and short instructions in the language. During his visits to the villages in each succeeding year, he would check his work in conversation with the Indians, making corrections in what he had done.

In between the Priest's visit each year, the faith was kept alive by the people themselves. Each evening the Chief would gather them for night prayers, often repeating the short instructions given by the Priest.

The Priest was regarded as Father, Doctor, Adviser and Judge. On the death of a Chief, they would await his arrival before holding the election of their new Chief who would start on his office with the Priest's blessing.

For years it was always in the home of the Chief that the Priest stayed during his visit. Later, each village took a pride in building its own house for the Priest.

Others who looked forward to the visit of the Priest were the Rupununi ranchers, whose help to the mission through the years has been invaluable.

SCHOOLS

Thus the groundwork was laid for the tremendous development in the opening of a school in each village that began in Bishop Weld's episcopate. Most of the teachers for these schools have come from Santa Rosa Indian Reserve, where they have been trained by the Sisters of mercy.

In 1943 Father Mather returned to Georgetown and Father Banham joined Father Keary. Father Banham's work was to lie mainly in the Pakaraimas – the Patamona country. This meant covering a distance of some 1050 miles from St. Ignatius, involving a journey of six weeks mainly on foot.

On Easter Sunday 1945, Father Keary was thrown from his horse and had to be brought to town. Father Banham had to tarry on the work alone until Father McKenna joined him in 1947. A year after this, a second headquarters was established at Sand Creek in the Southern Savannah, the Wapisiana country, with Father McKenna in charge.

In 1953, Father Quigley joined Father Banham at St. Ignatius, and took over the charge of the mission when Fr. Banham returned to the coastlands in 1955. Fr. Mather now returned to help at St. Ignatius.

A third headquarters followed in 1956 when Father Wilson-Browne became the first resident priest at Kurikabaru in the Pakaraima Mountains.

In recent years the introduction of travel by plane from Georgetown to the Rupununi has been a great advance in cutting out the long and dangerous river journey. Motor transport has also been introduced on the savannahs. Nevertheless the life remains a rigorous one. It has to be experienced to be appreciated.

APOSTOLIC VISITOR

Immediately after his consecration in 1954, Bishop Guilly took Archbishop Raimondi and Bishop Turner by plane to visit the mission. Fr. Edward Moriarty, S.F.M. also accompanied them. It was a great day for the Rupununi thus to be visited by the Apostolic Delegate. The visitors were warmly welcomed by the people and their priests. Just a little earlier that same year, the old Mud presbytery and home of the Fathers at St. Ignatius had been replaced by a building made of fire bricks. Here it was that the people gathered to receive the Archbishop.



Archbishop Raimondi (in white) and Bishop Guilly with a group outside the presbytery at St. Ignatius. In the forefront at right is Fr. Quigley, S.J. and, immediately behind him, Fr. Edward Moriarty, S.F.M.

Early in 1956 Bishop Guilly made a three week Confirmation tour of the area. Following his plane trip from Georgetown, His Lordship covered over 400 miles by foot, mule and landrover. He was accompanied from Georgetown by Fr. Keary and joined on the mission first, by Fr. McKenna at Sand Creek, and then by Fr. Quigley at St. Ignatius. The Bishop visited 14 villages lying over an arc of some 200 miles, administering the Sacrament of Confirmation to 1,048 candidates. He said that it was a wonderful thing to go from one completely Catholic village to another, adding that his first two days on mule back gave him a tiny glimpse of the sacrifices of the Father involved in building up the mission since 1910.

The Priests in charge have for long been appointed by Government as subprotectors of the Indians. Early this year, 1957, the Chief Secretary of the Colony visited the area. On his return to Georgetown he stated in a Press release that he was "much impressed by the work done in this area by the Roman Catholic Mission. Helped by a devoted band of teachers the mission has established unpretentious but effective schools in all the larger villages which act as focal point for community life."

THE FAITH

So for nearly half of their century here, our Jesuit Fathers have been working among the Aboriginal inhabitants of this country. Today in the three sections - St. Ignatius, Sand Creek and the Pakaraima

Mountains - there are nineteen Catholic villages, with their own churches and/or schools, and some 4,500 Catholics. Cut off for so long from the rest of the country, the majority as yet unable to read or write, these people have received and preserved the precious gift of the Faith.

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