

Eye Witness Account of the Volcanic Eruptions in New Britain 28th May 1937

Edited Copy of a Letter from Sr. Potentiana MSC
MSC Sisters General Archives Rome

Vunapope 21st June, 1937

Dear Mother General, Dear Superiors and Sisters,

It was Friday, 28th May, a day after the Feast of Corpus Christi. About noon we experienced two severe earthquakes. A sister at the beach with the children saw the sea recede a fair distance and return slowly. That afternoon we were occupied with preparation of the altars and roads as the Corpus Christi procession was to take place on the following Sunday. Our two sisters, Mathilde and Luise, who had driven by car to Rabaul had to make a great detour via Taliligap because of landslides and fallen trees.

In the evening Miss Von Zeigler, who was frightened, came to spend the night with us. She was too frightened to stay in her own home as the neighbour's house had been dislodged from the foundations by the earthquake and threatened to collapse. Mrs. Furter, who lived in the house had luckily escaped death. A falling wardrobe had almost squashed the sick lady so the family fled to Rabaul.

The next morning, (Saturday 29th May) at 5.30 a.m., the earthquake commenced again. With very short interruptions it continued until after 3 p.m. At the mission station all went its usual way but people were anxious about what would happen. We watched the sea. The small "Beehives" islands were suddenly obscured by thick clouds, so much so that they were almost invisible. Shortly afterwards the indigenous people told us that in Karavia, an hour's distance from us, a new island had appeared which meant the end of the earthquake but "man proposes and God disposes!"

Everyone went to see the new island. We remained to finish the decorations and altars for the Corpus Christi procession. As usual, the indigenous had decorated the roads and many of them were at the mission station. At 4.30 p.m. (Saturday 29th May) you could see fire running across the sea. A thick cloud, moving towards Karavia could be seen on the water; a second pitch-black cloud followed as smoke, steam, stones rose forcefully towards the sky. Flames of fire could be seen and dangerous lightning in most spectacular forms, broke through the steadily growing black pillar of cloud, a display of "terrible beauty". We were stunned by the overwhelming sight which manifested for us God's power, so much so that we lost consciousness of the great danger which threatened us.

A sailing ship which was anchored in the danger zone suddenly disappeared. Despite that none of us thought of serious danger for ourselves. A mysterious force must have emanated from the indescribable spectacle which continually drew us to admire the Hand of the Almighty which seemed to rise from the powerful force of the sea.

The indigenous were the first to recognize the great danger. "Akaia i variba dat a virua." - "The old volcano spirit is angry, we'll all die." We reminded them of God's power and mercy in times of need and encouraged them to prayers of trust.

In the meantime the first refugees from Valaur and Karavia, villages very close to the place of the eruption, began to arrive. They looked like snowmen covered with a light grey coat. The ashes from the volcano had set on their skin, hair and clothes. These poor people, who were quite frightened and trembling, ran towards the church to find shelter. We too, with our folk as well as all the people from the neighbourhood went into the protection of the large solidly built church. Some of the men watched and observed the direction of the cloud which seemed to be turning towards our mission station. We sisters too, driven now and then by curiosity went outside to see what direction the smoke was taking. Fine, dry ashes settled in the tiniest corners and an ominous sulphurous odour filled the church so that we had to protect our mouths and noses, taking small breaths to be able to stand it.

At 5 p.m. (Saturday 29th May) it was pitch-dark and the lamps were dim. People prayed loudly and uninterruptedly. The sulphurous air became more tolerable, although more ashes penetrated the building. The Kanakas had brought their few necessities in the usual baskets and these filled the small corners of the large room. That evening people prayed earnestly. Now and then, a baby cried aloud because it was too warm and uncomfortable. The time seemed never to come to an end. People covered with loincloth and bowed head prayed louder. This intensified as the danger increased. As the lamps burnt down they could only be relit with great difficulty because of the strong wind. This increased the fear of the poor people. Rev. Fr. Nolen, the leader of the mission station, gave us all General Absolution and we sisters quietly renewed our vows.

Outside, the falling trees and coconut palms tumbled noisily, a good warning for us to stop being curious and thank God for the protective roof. We heard the house collapse outside but no one dared to go out. Already the carpet of ashes measured a few centimetres and increased steadily. A mass of lava mixed with rain covered the altar, statues and communion rail. We too were covered with a thick coat of ashes. A second loud crash followed and this time we knew that the big laundry had been hit. The ashes were piled a foot high in

front of the church door. A few strong men brought shovels to keep the exits free in case the church would fall in.

At 10 p.m. (Saturday 29th May) we went home with the children. It was not too far and we could still walk through the lava. The distressed children slept on our lounge while sisters prepared bread and tea. Afterwards the sisters took a lantern and walked around the mission station. The house where the priests had their meals had collapsed, many of the cocoa palms had fallen down and the flowers and shrubs were buried under masses of lava. Oh, what would our dear home look like? Everything was covered in ashes; the water was dirty and black. The water in the kettle which was on the stove was fairly clean. The water pump was buried under the ruins of the laundry. We were happy to give the children a few drops of water from the kettle. Rice was still there left over from the evening meal so we had something to eat. Everything tasted like ashes.

Afterwards, we made our way to the girls' dormitory to get some blankets for the children. However, the roof of the hospital, which had also collapsed under the weight of the lava, prevented us. Naturally, we could not think of sleeping that night. We lay down so as to calm the children but the lightning and thunder which was very frightening continued all night. We wanted to get away from the threatening disaster but such a daring flight, especially with the children, would have been unwise as the trees were still falling and the night was dark. We waited for daylight to break otherwise we would have risked death. (Sunday 30th May)

From our windows we looked upon fire. The children's short rest was also over. A thick cloud of fire rose high into the air where it splintered into burning lava masses and seemed to fall back into the crater. A deafening noise accompanied this catastrophe. All this a few minutes away from us! Could this be the end of the world? We believed the end was near. Throughout the whole night, it seemed that the open crater emitted death and catastrophe; lightning lit up the sky and the thunder roared. A heavy tropical rain poured down, splashing wild masses of mud mixed with lava against the window panes and settling on the corrugated iron roofs which sank under the weight and broke.

From our veranda we could see a container boat slowing leaving the Rabaul Harbour to get as far distant as possible from the volcano. A risk of life and death! We heard that it exploded in the harbour. We also noticed how land rose from the sea and disappeared into the Rabaul Harbour. Later we found out that it was masses of lava.

The threatening pillar of smoke was now parallel with our house. Would we see another day? As God wills! We were in His Hands. The waiting was long and

hard. The pelting rain was coming through the roof. We wondered whether it would stand the pressure until we could escape. The building, one of the oldest here was creaking everywhere. Finally, we couldn't stand it any longer and we took the little children with the bigger ones running ahead of us, out of the house and into the big church. We were hardly in the crowded church when our house, which we had just vacated, collapsed. God's protection was with us as we escaped in time.

Later we found that the two verandas of our house were completely wrecked, one side of the house torn open, windows shattered and doors were not able to be opened or closed. The prayers in the crowded church had become more intense. Coming from the nearby mountains, the pelting rain mixed with ashes even invaded the church and filled the sanctuary right up to the middle of the main altar.

Outside, the flood waters, especially towards the mountains and volcano, created deep ravines in the land, uprooted many trees and swept the fallen cocoa nuts, the huts of the indigenous and even the cows into the sea. Probably the rushing water was responsible for the deaths of many people.

In the meantime, it had become lighter. The station leader urged us to flee with the children and find refuge on the north coast. So we hastily grabbed what we could. With each sister holding two children by the hand and with the threatening cloud of smoke behind and above us, we hastened towards Rabaul. (Monday 31st May) The extreme danger encouraged even the smallest children to greater energy. A feeble girl, just three years of age, kept up with the oldest in the front line. In the distance we saw a truck and hoped that help was near. Alas, the driver had to obey orders and keep to the planned route as falling branches would obstruct the road. We hastened along, breathlessly, past empty houses whose inhabitants had obviously left. The thick rising mud and ashes made walking more difficult. Suddenly, new hope came our way. A car came towards us driven by a former pupil from Vunapope. We were taken to Volavolo Station. There the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart gave us a warm welcome. They had heard that our station at Malagunan was safe and that there was no danger for us. The good sisters were distressed when they saw us arrive pale and totally exhausted. The children covered in grey ashes made a frightening impression. The station leader, Rev. Fr. P Nolen and Sr. Placida had stayed behind to help the people until all had escaped. Then Our Dear Lord in the tabernacle escaped, if we can say so. The ciboriums, wrapped in cloth, were carried by the priest and the sister as they hurried round the rubble that was blocking the way

On the way, a small car met the procession and took all to the refuge of Volavolo. The ashes had spread as far as this place but otherwise there was no need to worry as the day was calm. We heard here that the old volcano had

erupted in two places, which we consider was a good sign as the force of the new one would not be so strong.

The night was once more frightful. We were terrified by constant lightning and thunderbolts and the dull noise of a sudden explosion which held the earth in tremours. It was the Feast of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (Monday 31st May) and her help was our hope. This night too came to an end. The next morning (Tuesday 1st June) brought new courage and a boat to save us. The police had directed that all expatriates should be moved to Vunapope. We prepared for the trip but the boat had to sail north along the north coast and did not return. About noon, the mission boat, "Paulus", appeared and was greeted with joy and hope. The superior of the mission chose the island of Vuatom for our next destination. The children from Volavolo and the sisters came with us. Good Fr. Myer, the leader of the Vuatom Station was very kind to us. This was a time of security and calm and we soon forgot the terror amidst the lively youth. The indigenous too did their best. They provided us and the children with sweet fruit and a festive meal which we all enjoyed. The Giver of all good things will certainly reward them richly for their kindness to us. Two of our Sisters left for Vunapope, to give a report, as they thought we were among the victims. They were greeted there with great joy. We were almost seen as beings from another world.

On the Feast of the Sacred Heart (Friday 4th June) we had a quiet solemn Mass in our Chapel for the marvellous protection of God in such great danger. Thus ends my modest report. It can never be possible to describe the experience as we lived it. Please be content with my good will and thank Divine Providence for everything. We hope to be able to return soon and rebuild the stations which were destroyed. The courage is there, new and strong, enlivened by rejuvenated love.

In this love,

I remain dear Mother General

and all dear Superiors and Sisters,

Your grateful,

Sr. Potentiana MSC

(Malagunan)