Ministry of presence

Ministry begins with involvement in and identifying with the activities people are pursuing in their daily lives, showing interest and offering to share all available talent and ability.
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God is the Creator

I was sitting in a lecture about ‘Prayer and St Thomas Aquinas’ when I had ‘a conversion’. It was not a big moment, but it has stuck in my mind for quite a few years now. The lecturer said that when Thomas ran into a difficulty while writing one of his books, he would get down on his knees and ask God for help. When I heard this, I thought, “That is cheating”. As a student, who had to write assignments for the course, I felt that it was up to me to know the answers. To be asking God to help with the answers seemed to be not right. This was to upset the standard way of doing things.

To learn and come to know things and remember them was the way we were all brought up. Then of course, after school we had to learn other skills in order to find our way in the world. This was the journey for all of us. That was what others were doing and this was the way to become grown up. It depended very much on each of us as an individual. Getting help from God to do all these things was not part of the script. Now and again, we heard that we could pray to God, but somehow that did not lead to the expectation that God would do much for us. Actually, we had to do stuff for God.

Now my thinking has changed. When we say God is our Creator, it means just that. God is the one who brings us into life. God is the one who keeps the blood circulating through our bodies and guides us each and every day of our lives.

God continues to create us, not just us as body plus soul, but in the situations we find ourselves in. God creates the answers that come our way. God provides us with solutions and the people we need to help us. Thomas Aquinas was one of the smartest people you could ever meet, so getting down on his knees and asking for God’s help was smart. He was asking God to create an answer and put it into his head. The thing is, God did.

This idea of God continuing to work in our world, in our small lives, and in our cosmos takes some absorbing. The Church in Australia is in the final stages of the Plenary Council. Here again, there are a lot of people praying, asking God to keep on creating. We are asking God to guide us, inspire us and help us be better missionary disciples. This is what God wants us to be. Our desire and God’s desire are for the same things. We want the People of God to be a sign of unity for the whole world and for the whole world to know that we will find that unity by being in God.

Now my thinking has changed. When we say God is our Creator, it means just that. God is the one who brings us into life. God is the one who keeps the blood circulating through our bodies and guides us each and every day of our lives.

To talk about God like this is not normal in our society in Australia or in New Zealand. For many people it is normal, but somehow most of us have this idea that spiritual things are not real. God is not real in the sense that God is not involved in politics, economics, science or even football.

In our countries, most people are unaware or barely mindful of the fact that the biggest and most important relationship that they have is with the God who created them. They probably did not hear my philosophy professor say that one of the biggest tasks of our lives is to become conscious of the relationships that we are born with.

Yes, we become aware of our relationships with our families, our country and even our earth, but the strongest relationship we are born into is with the one who created and still creates us.

God is a creating God. God is a missionary God. To be a missionary is to be God-like. Jesus came to us with his message of love. He then picked people to be with him so they could learn the message and then send them out. God continues today to pick people to be part of the People of God, which is committed to letting the world know of the creative love of our God.

To be on a mission means that we get out of our chairs and go out to meet people. Maybe we do not need to get on our knees to know this, but praying to our Creator God might help us to do it better. The Spirit is with us, thank God.

Fr Trevor Trotter
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It was a beautiful Sunday morning with blue skies in the Chilean capital of Santiago. I was with Columban Fr Dan Harding visiting some of the churches that make up his parish. The truth is I was not expecting anything special. How many times do we not expect anything in particular when we go to Mass? We often go to Mass each week just out of habit, without preparing our hearts to witness heaven on earth.

In the United States, I am used to arriving at Mass, then sitting in silence and waiting for the entrance hymn to begin. I know we should be silent and meditate, but after a while, this silence can seem cold and lonely, especially for those seeking a living God who dwells with his people. However, this is not always reflected in the community.

In my mind this was what I was expecting to find at Sunday Mass in Santiago. What a great surprise it was when we arrived at the church. There were people to greet me, to hug me and kiss me on the cheek. Not only that, they wanted to know my name and asked about my family.

During this warm welcome, someone was listing the prayer intentions of those arriving for Mass. If a person in the family was sick, then their name was added to the list for the Prayers of the Faithful. I was not accustomed to this. As it was my first time at this church, I was introduced to many people. In conversation, they asked me about my family, my wife, my children, my parents and my brothers and sisters. The most surprising thing of all was when a woman asked me, “And you, how are you? How are you feeling? What would you like to receive from God today?”

No one had ever asked me this at Mass before.

The entrance hymn began and Fr Dan entered the church in procession. Even though the music was simple with only one guitar, each note was a prayer. People were united as they sang in thanksgiving to God.

Nevertheless, after a little while, something grabbed my attention. A baby just a few months old started to cry and did not stop. The mother, an immigrant from Haiti, took the baby outside to console her. As time passed, you could still hear the baby crying inconsolably. Then during the Eucharistic Prayer, I saw a woman go outside to see how the baby was. Was the baby hungry? Did the mother need milk for her child?
Clearly, this woman was living the Mass in action. How many times do we go to Mass and get upset with parents whose children are crying. We are not worried whether the child is well or not, but rather focus on our own distraction because of the crying child.

On that day, this did not happen! During the most solemn part of the Mass, this woman went to see whether this baby was okay and in this, I can say with certainty, that through her action, she was really living the Mass.

In the humility of this woman, I saw the face of God hearing the suffering of this Haitian woman and her baby, and responding to that suffering. She went to console a worried mother and to see whether she could help with this beautiful baby girl, who, it seemed, was hungry.

How many times do we hear the cry of suffering and do nothing? The spirit of this woman that went out to help the mother and baby is the spirit of mission, of service to others and of understanding the situation. God is present in the cry seeking help.

When I noticed this, I realised that this community was one with a missionary spirit. The parishioners did not come to Mass just to receive, but with the spirit of giving to all, no matter what they ask.

I also saw this missionary spirit during the Prayers of the Faithful. Fr Dan had asked the parishioners to pray in a loud voice for their needs and the needs of others. A woman alongside me prayed, “I pray for my neighbour who is sick in her home.” Almost everyone prayed for someone else. They also prayed for those who were absent, for whatever reason.

I would like to ask my parish community in the United States, “Am I aware when someone is absent from Sunday Mass and do I pray for them? When I greet someone at Mass, do I do it just out of habit or do I really want to know how that person is feeling?”

I thank God for allowing me to get to know the loving people of Chile.

Juan Carlos Garcia works in the Columban Hispanic ministry in the United States. He is editor of Misión Columbana, the Spanish language Columban magazine in the United States.
It looks like a barn!
A ‘barn church’ built during the days of the Penal Laws in England provides a lesson in history

I had passed the church three times before recognising it. The voice on the satellite navigation guide kept insisting, “You have arrived at your destination”, but all I could see was a collection of farm buildings set in open fields. Then I noticed a cross on top of one of the constructions. That is how I finally came upon the church of the Catholic parish of St. Mary’s, near the Lancashire village of Aughton, England.

I was welcomed by the parish priest, Fr Des, and after opening pleasantries, explained the reason for my delayed arrival. “It is your church,” I said. “It looks like a barn!”

“It looks like a barn because it is supposed to look like a barn,” came the reply. “It was built that way.”

Over a hot cuppa, Fr Des explained the background. St Mary’s is unusual in that it was built during the era of the Penal Laws that deprived Catholics of their right to practise their faith. To avoid upsetting local sensibilities and not attract too much attention, the barn church was constructed away from the village. Set back from the road, trees shield it from sight and its design gives it the look of a farm shed. “Camouflaged, in other words.” The church itself was built in the style of a barn. “That is why it has no windows.” The presbytery looks like a farmhouse.

“There are a few of these barn churches around,” Fr Des continued. “Not all of them are Catholic. Some are Nonconformist chapels. The Dissenters had to be discreet in those days as well.”

I had come to St Mary’s as part of a Columban mission promotion and fundraising programme, and spent the weekend celebrating with the people. The parishioners are proud of their history and eager to give more detail. It became clear that what had happened in Aughton was a reflection of events that occurred throughout south Lancashire during the Reformation that swept through England in the 16th century.

In 1534, the Act of Supremacy declared Henry VIII head of the Church of England. Soon, Aughton’s beautiful old parish church of St Michael’s was following the Church of England rite, leaving Catholics with nowhere to celebrate Mass. In fact, it had become illegal to celebrate Mass.

Fortunately, much of the local gentry in south Lancashire kept to the old faith of their forebears. They protected fellow Catholics and often arranged for secret Masses. Geography was an important factor. Many villages, such as Aughton, were isolated from their surroundings by bogs and marshes, known locally as mosses.

In Aughton’s case, the lords of the manor were members of the famous Stanley family (see postscript). Their home at Moor Hall became a Catholic haven and extensive renovation work carried out recently uncovered traces of a small chapel, where the sacraments had probably been celebrated in secret.

Nobility, isolation and some well-directed bribes kept the Stanleys free from arrest, although as popish recusants they were not immune from punishment. Local records indicate that in 1584, because his “family adhered to the old...
Columban Fr John Boles spent over 25 years in South America. He now lives and works in England.

**The Stanley Family**

The Stanley name is one of the best known in northwest England. Most notable of all was Thomas Stanley, first Earl of Derby. He famously tipped the scales against Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 by changing sides at the last minute. Shakespeare has him finding the crown under a hawthorn bush and handing it to Henry Tudor, thus ending the Wars of the Roses. The new king rewarded Thomas and his younger brother William for their support. Thomas died a natural death in 1505 and is buried in the parish church of Ormskirk, just four miles down the road from Aughton. His brother William was less fortunate. He was executed by King Henry VII in 1495 for siding with a conspiracy against the king.

James Stanley, seventh Earl of Derby, also came to a sticky end. He served as a prominent commander of the defeated Royalist army during the English Civil War. He remained loyal to Charles I and, for his trouble, was executed by the Parliamentarians in 1651 at the nearby Lancashire town of Bolton. His father, another William Stanley (sixth Earl of Derby), lies at the centre of a long-standing controversy that contends William was the real author of many of Shakespeare’s works.

Peter Stanley fought with James during the Civil War. He must have feared he would suffer a similar fate after capture by Cromwell’s Roundheads. However, he escaped with a spell in prison and recovered his estates after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660.

“**It looks like a barn because it is supposed to look like a barn,**” came the reply. “**It was built that way.**”
The upcoming 16th Synod of Bishops in October 2023 will run under the theme, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*. Reflecting on the theme of participation, I believe it is an invitation to the worldwide Church to “create the space for Grace”, where we can heal, grow and encounter: to give voice to our thoughts through a period of personal reflection, discussion and expression. Here we are encouraged by the words of Jesus, “Where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them” (Matthew 18:20).

Just as gardeners don’t just observe the pretty flowers in their garden, but get their hands dirty examining the soil and take time to nurture their charges, we too are called to play our part, to dig deep and examine what we love and appreciate in our Catholic faith. As the former Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr Pedro Arrupe, said, “What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.”

Any member of a Church will participate to the extent that they feel they belong to that Church and that their contribution will be appreciated. But what can really stop us from participating is not only our own negative experience of Church, but the stories we hear of how others were excluded and not valued. Therefore, let us not be afraid of
the difficult topics. A human body, in order to be healed, must first acknowledge its wounds. It is the same with the Church.

I know from counselling that when affected by shame, we can fall into one or more responses, from withdrawal and denial to blaming others or self, or simply avoiding the issue. Therefore, to participate well, I would suggest some spring cleaning of our assumptions and biases. These need to be questioned. We can begin by asking ourselves if they are true, where they come from and if they are helpful in understanding the reality. Finally, we can look at our need to transform some of our ideas and reformulate what we think needs to be changed in the Church.

We can name our feelings about the Church, ask ourselves if we are enthusiastic, disappointed or apathetic, because emotions are like a compass that tell us what direction we are headed in. Then we can name all of our assumptions, our prejudices and biases. These need to be questioned. We can begin by asking ourselves if they are true, where they come from and if they are helpful in understanding the reality. Finally, we can look at our need to transform some of our ideas and reformulate what we think needs to be changed in the Church.

It may also be helpful to acknowledge the stage we are at on our own personal journeys in life. We know from psychologists like Joan Erikson that as we get older we can lose our positivity, creativity and desire to engage socially. Our age may hold us back from getting involved and participating as we might have done at an earlier age.

But as Joan Erikson advocates, try to nurture “basic trust” in ourselves and others. So, let’s trust in ourselves, trust in our Church and trust in the Holy Spirit. This allows us to move to a more expanded participation, the “discussion stage” with others. As we know, thoughts and ideas are the origins of many a good deed, but thoughts shared with others have even greater strength and potential.

Such participation needs to be inclusive of our multicultural society. For our Church, community has been enriched by Catholics of varied cultural expressions of faith. But we also need to reach out to those on the fringes of the Church.

As we know from Scripture, Jesus’ life on earth was bookended by his identification with the shepherds at his birth and the thieves at his crucifixion; the people on the margins of his community. He also encouraged the participation of those on the edge, “Go therefore to the ends of the roads and call everyone whom you find to the wedding feast” (Matthew 22:9) [Aramaic bible].

Having reflected personally and discussed with others, we move now to the “expression stage” when we put voice to our thoughts by sharing them with our respective parishes and dioceses. We need to bring the ideas we have discussed in the park, the pub or the post office to the priest, to ask our parish priest or secretary, “to whom do I write or email? When can we meet? How can I play my part?”

Just as the mighty oceans are made up of tiny drops of water, so each one of us has a significant part to play by participating in the Church Synod and its implementation afterwards.

In Australia, the Church is preparing for the second stage of the Plenary Council that began last year and the worldwide Synod of Bishops will continue its discernment on synodality in Rome during October next year.

The challenge, especially for the leaders of our Church, is how best to encourage participation in preparation. Will it be the “come and see” approach characteristic of the gentle start of the Gospel where all was familiar, or will it be with vitality, excitement and danger characteristic of Christ’s last words to the disciples to go and show, “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8)?

I find it helpful to see such participation as a personal invitation from Pope Francis, “Will you journey with me?” Any journey takes effort and trust but as the Chinese proverb says, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”.

Such participation needs to be inclusive of our multicultural society. For our Church, community has been enriched by Catholics of varied cultural expressions of faith. But we also need to reach out to those on the fringes of the Church.

Columban Fr Paul McMahon lives and works in Ireland.

Any journey takes effort and trust but as the Chinese proverb says, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”
Australia is known as a law-abiding society. In every state across Australia, I need a licence to drive a car, to run a business or to sell liquor. There are licences for all kinds of things. However, when it comes to the hiring of labour across all industrial sectors, only Queensland and Victoria require a licence. Labour hire services include recruiting or placing workers with another person or business to perform work for them, while procuring or providing accommodation and paying wages to those workers.

In 2016, the Australian Government established the Migrant Workers’ Taskforce to identify proposals for improvements in law, law enforcement and investigation, and other practical measures to more quickly identify and rectify any cases of migrant worker exploitation. The Taskforce was established as part of the government’s response to the revelation of significant wage underpayment in certain industrial sectors. At the time there was much publicity concerning 7-Eleven franchises.

The Taskforce, chaired by Professor Allan Fels AO and Dr David Cousins AM, made recommendations aimed at improving workplace protections for vulnerable migrant workers. The then government released the report of the Taskforce and Government Response on 7 March 2019 accepting, in principle, all 22 recommendations.

The report recommended that “in relation to labour hire, the Government establish a National Labour Hire Registration scheme focused on labour hire operators and hosts in four high risk industry sectors – horticulture, meat processing, cleaning and security – across Australia.”

The Government’s Select Committee on Temporary Migration was established by the Senate in December 2019. Its mandate was to inquire into and report on the impact temporary migration has on the Australian economy and on wages and jobs, social cohesion, and workplace rights and conditions.

In its submission to the Select Committee, ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans) recommended that the government implements a national labour hire licencing scheme that covers all industries.
ACRATH stated that “a national licencing scheme would go a long way to protecting the rights of migrant workers in Australia and prevent exploitation by unscrupulous labour hire companies.” ACRATH also recommended that the government introduces stringent penalties for wage theft.

On 1 September 2021, the Senate Select Committee on Temporary Migration presented its report to the Senate. The Committee made 40 recommendations for reform aimed at protecting vulnerable temporary visa holders from exploitation. “The committee recommends that the Australian Government, as a priority, implement a National Labour Hire Licencing Scheme. The National Labour Hire Licencing Scheme should build on existing frameworks, such as those schemes operating in Queensland and Victoria, to provide a nationally consistent framework.”

The committee also recommended “that the Australian Government increase penalties for wage theft and prioritise the re-introduction of legislation to criminalise wage theft in Australia.”

The case of Maroochy Sunshine Pty Ltd, a labour hire provider, and its director, Mr Emmanuel Bani, illustrates the urgency of implementing a National Labour Hire Licencing Scheme. In July 2014, twenty-two seasonal workers from the Pacific came to Australia on the Australian Government Seasonal Worker Programme. I first met two of the workers in Bundaberg in July 2018 when they returned to Australia on a second placement.

The 22 workers were underpaid by $77,649 over seven weeks while they were employed to pick fruit and vegetables on six farms in the Lockyer Valley, Sunshine Coast and Bundaberg areas. When they asked Mr Bani for their wages, he refused and threatened to refer them to the police and have them deported. On occasions, they were only provided with one meal a day.

The workers reported their labour exploitation and underpayment of salaries to the Fair Work Ombudsman, Department of Employment and Australian Federal Police in September 2014. The Fair Work Ombudsman lodged a Statement of Claim in the Federal Circuit Court in Brisbane in November 2015. Maroochy Sunshine Pty Ltd was penalised $186,000 and Mr Bani a further $41,300 in March 2017. In his judgement, Judge Michael Jarrett stated, “Maroochy Sunshine and Mr Bani treated these employees egregiously.” Maroochy Sunshine and Mr Bani refused to pay these penalties. Mr Bani was never prosecuted for labour exploitation.

In September 2018, the two workers asked ACRATH to follow up the matter with the Fair Work Ombudsman. As a member of ACRATH, I undertook this task and had regular correspondence with the Ombudsman over a period of two years. Eventually Mr Bani was summoned to attend six enforcement hearings at the Federal Circuit Court in Brisbane from June to December 2019. In May 2020, the Ombudsman obtained financial information to establish Mr Bani does not currently have any substantial means to pay the judgement debt. The court closed the proceedings nearly six years after the workers first contacted the Ombudsman.

With the closure of the court case, ACRATH could then proceed to assist the 22 workers to apply for an act of grace payment from the Australian Government. ACRATH sought pro bono legal assistance from a reputable law firm to prepare the detailed submissions. In June 2021, the Australian Government Department of Finance decided to authorise an act of grace payment to each of the workers for their stolen wages plus the $500 that Maroochy Sunshine was required to contribute towards each worker’s international travel expenditure.


The time has come for the Australian Government to implement a National Labour Hire Licencing Scheme covering all industries and to prioritise the re-introduction of legislation to criminalise wage theft to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons.

Fr Peter O’Neill, Columban Leader Australia.
After 13 years as a missionary in the Philippines, I am now back in my own country doing mission work in one of the areas where the Columbans are located: San Martin de Porres and Ventanilla District in the north of Lima. It is my desire to return to the Philippines and continue working there, but because of the uncertainty brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, I cannot predict when that will be.

When I heard from the Philippine Immigration Office that I had to leave the country at short notice, it frightened me to the core that I had to take a long-haul flight back to Lima during a global pandemic, especially given that the cases of COVID-19 in Peru were surging. I had to undergo several bouts of quarantine - twice before leaving the Philippines, then during a layover in Chile, and finally, upon arrival in Lima. A total of four quarantines and a series of RT-PCR tests! It was the longest journey back home.

After my second quarantine, I felt more confident that I could adjust to this new reality. I knew my people were suffering, and many had died an untimely death. I pondered the fragility of life and how I could continue to serve on mission. The question I asked myself was: What can I do to help? These thoughts occupied my mind while I was still halfway home.

In pre-Covid times, families came to the airport to welcome an arriving family member, especially when one had been away for a long time. But when I arrived in Lima, the usually busy and vibrant airport looked like a ghost town. No one was at the airport to welcome me. The place was dead apart from a few taxi drivers; the roads were empty. I had never seen the city of Lima so deserted!

Initially, I found it challenging to re-adjust to my own culture, even to speak my own language, but gradually, I noticed myself reintegrating. While waiting for my return to the Philippines, I have occupied my time visiting and involving myself in the communities of Villa Isolina, Jerusalem and Huertas del Paraiso. These areas have many informal settlers who belong to the San Martin de Porres Municipality.

However, people from these communities prefer to belong to Callao province because there they can access hospitals, schools, and markets, unlike in San Martin de Porres, where the only available facility is a preschool for the whole community. It is disheartening to note that these people

Looking out over the vast shantytowns that make up much of the city of Lima.

Communities in the shantytowns of Lima rely on working, studying and praying together for their survival.

Common kitchens are a regular feature of life in the poorer parts of Peru.
have lived in these communities for more than 30 years and still do not have water and drainage systems. The only source of water is from the water trucks and tanks.

I have been visiting a soup kitchen called *Olla Común Dios Provee* (The Soup Kitchen That God Provides for Those Who Need It). It is a project initiated in March 2021 in response to the dire need of families whose economic situation has been tremendously impacted on by the pandemic.

Almost 65 persons regularly collect lunch, paying a minimal amount for each plate if they can afford it; the elderly, the sick and others who cannot afford to pay can have the lunch packs for free. The Columbans support the Soup Kitchen with groceries. The benefactors take turns in preparing food from early in the morning until noon. The beneficiaries come to collect their food in their own food containers.

The women in the Soup Kitchen are not just focused on preparing food, but also on making a space for recipients to share their struggles and challenges, a place to listen to their health concerns, financial difficulties and other domestic problems. The needs of the children are so palpable that I decided to help them in their studies.

As well as helping the children in the community, it has been a wonderful experience for me, as it feels like going back to being a teacher.

I believe I am not doing a lot, but I am spending my time with my people as much as I can. Being present with them has made me understand and appreciate their presence differently. At times, I help in the cooking and have courageously introduced some recipes I learned in the Philippines.

I try to interact by sharing funny stories that “get us out of the pandemic” if only for a few minutes. I do not know what the future holds for me, but I remember the encouraging words of Pope Francis to be with the people and listen to their experiences and problems as we journey together in SYNODALITY. I shall continue to be present and hope that the best is yet to come.

*Columban lay missionary Ana Flores is assigned to the Philippines but currently lives in Peru.*
Enliven the Church with the full participation of First Nations Peoples

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday (July 3) is the annual acknowledgement of the gifts, leadership and achievements of Australia’s First Nations Peoples in the Church. Australian Catholics across the country have affirmed the Church will be enlivened with a full participation of First Nations Peoples in spirituality, theology, liturgy and missionary discipleship. In October 2021, the First Assembly of the Plenary Council for the Church in Australia declared, “we believe that the Spirit has been saying that it is long past the time for our Church to acknowledge and receive fully the gift of that contribution.” Sabrina Stevens, a Kuku Yalanji and Yidinji woman from Far North Queensland, and First Nations member of the Plenary Council, said, “we want to give glory to God our Father in the ways in which we can understand most, by using our cultural gifts, and we want to share this in relationship with you.”

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples speak of the value of relationships across time immemorial with Creator, land and peoples. Showing respect for sacred connections and keeping culture is foundational to their expression of spirituality and flourishing of community. Sherry Balcombe, a Djabaguy/Okola woman and coordinator of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Victoria, says, “our ancestors are with us always, they strengthen us, they hold us, they are all around us. It is what drives us, it connects us, it embraces our spirit and keeps us strong. We learn the oneness of being at ease without words, just being together. Feel the stillness, connect with God. Remember my people are in this landscape, we are part of it and it is part of us.”

NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) week (July 3 to 10) celebrates the achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that
NAIDOC week encourages everyone to participate in this process. This year’s NAIDOC theme is *Get Up! Stand Up! Show Up!*

have raised awareness and led actions towards justice for First Nations Peoples. NAIDOC week encourages everyone to participate in this process. This year’s NAIDOC theme is *Get Up! Stand Up! Show Up!*

The Uluru Statement from the Heart proclaimed by 250 delegates in May 2017 invites all Australians to walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a movement of the people for the establishment of a First Nations Voice in the Constitution, a process of agreement-making and truth-telling about our history. In May 2022, faith leaders from across Australia, including the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Churches, the Australian Council of Imams, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Australian Sikhs, Buddhists and Hindus, signed a Joint Resolution in support of the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Melbourne Archbishop Peter Comensoli said, “My hope is simply that Catholics will be inspired by Jesus to join the hard work of finding constitutional recognition of the voice of First Peoples into our Parliament and that reconciliation will find new energy and witness at this moment in history.”

The momentum for recognition and reconciliation is growing, but there is need for greater action. Caritas Australia states Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience more disadvantage than other Australians across almost every measurement of wellbeing, including financial, social, physical and mental health. First Nations Peoples are incarcerated at significantly higher rates than other Australians and there are horrendous consequences for children imprisoned as young as 10-years-of-age. The forced removal of children and whole communities from their Country, culture and language, has an ongoing inter-generational impact. First Nations Elder, Agnes Palmer, said, “we have experienced a massive grief on a large scale, as much as that of other Indigenous groups throughout the world, perhaps more.”

Members of the Plenary Council have recommended a process be developed for the Church to acknowledge the “failures in her treatment of and relationship with First Nations peoples and for making a gesture towards healing for those who have experienced trauma, woundedness and suffering.” This would involve a commitment to a pilgrimage of understanding and a process of spiritual growth and engagement.

The key body representing First Nations Catholics, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) has invited all Catholics to make 2022 a year of action to strengthen Australia’s foundation by supporting First Nations Peoples. International Columban Leader, Fr Tim Mulroy, says that in the face of much suffering in our world we need to strengthen solidarity and remain sharpened to mission.

There are many things that everyone can do to address the unfinished business of reconciliation. Supporting the building of rightful relationships and being open to new ways of celebrating our faith in light of the wisdom and experience of First Nations Peoples is an important one. The process of national reconciliation in Australia takes place in everyday life, including commitments to become aware of unconscious bias and to stamp out racism.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council recommends tangible actions towards reconciliation, including signing and showing support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart, seeking out Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members to share stories in parishes and organisations, attending Mass at Aboriginal Catholic Ministries, acknowledging First Nations Peoples at Mass, meetings and in publications, and providing welcoming and inclusive spaces.

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*Sr Caroline Vaitkunas RSM, Peace, Ecology and Justice Office, Columban Mission Centre, Essendon.*

Photo: canva.com/Wayne Quilliam
Mission World

We ask your prayers: The prayers of our readers are requested for the repose of the souls of recently deceased friends and benefactors of St Columbans Mission Society and for the spiritual and the temporal welfare of all our readers, their families and friends.

Pope’s Mission Intention for July

July - Elderly: We pray for the elderly, who represent the roots and memory of a people; may their experience and wisdom help young people to look towards the future with hope and responsibility.

Being a missionary Church

An important dimension of being a missionary Church lies in the connections forged between people who share the same faith, but live it out in vastly different situations and cultures. Annette Heinemann, the director of ministry formation programmes in Adelaide, said a seminar hosted by the parish of San Columbano in Santiago, Chile, for students taking part in training programmes for special ministries she organises proved a real eye-opener.

Three one-hour sessions organised by Columban Fr Dan Harding on being missionary at a parish level were presented by Richard Sepulveda, Adriana Curaqueo and Javier Nuñez. They stressed the importance of keeping a sharp awareness of the need to advocate on global issues like climate change, international trade and migration, while at the same time making strong, concrete responses to local needs.

“They made their input during a segment on being a missionary Church,” Annette explained. “Our students were really surprised at the complexity of the situation they faced, the exploitative influence multinational companies have on poor people and the sheer magnitude of the challenges people face.”

Presented by Zoom in Spanish with an English translation, the presenters spoke of the community kitchens the parish sponsored during the coronavirus lockdowns and the work done to ensure they had wide community support. However, the most challenging work the parish has undertaken is providing emergency accommodation and assistance to the vast number of refugees that have arrived in the city.

Millions of people have fled Venezuela, traversing mountains, rivers and deserts on foot. They have survived exploitation and escaped violence. Chile has been the destination of choice for many and today they account for almost 10 percent of its population. The presenters of the seminar said this influx of poor, desperate people issues an enormous challenge to both society and the Church in Chile and their parish decided it wanted to respond.

They explained the parish has opened three houses of hospitality providing emergency accommodation and, although they admit it is only a drop in the bucket in terms of the total need, they consider it a significant contribution. The constructive role they have played is evidenced in the over 100 people who have received support from the parish and are now settled in society. With their experience of welcome still fresh, they have begun forming their own communities and organising support structures out of their own initiative to assist those still arriving on a daily basis in search of a better life and a new home.

Fr Dan said there were lots of questions from the students in Adelaide and Annette explained that the team from Chile helped them look with more analytical eyes at their own situations and search for the hidden dynamics affecting people’s welfare.

She highlighted the importance of becoming acutely aware of people’s strengths and working with them to support them in using those strengths as one of the big takeaways from the exercise.

This article was written on behalf of St Columbans Mission Society.
Walking in faith in Wuhan

The funeral of Xu Yinan took place in Zhang Jia Tai, a village just beyond the sprawling city of Wuhan. The people of this village often hold their heads high when reference is made to their best-known son, Bishop Peter Zhang Boren, the faithful elderly bishop of Hanyang diocese who died in 2005.

Hanyang is one of the three dioceses where Columban missionaries served before having to leave China in the early 1950s. Steeped in the history of the Church, the people gathered for morning Mass at 7.00am, a liturgy celebrated in a modest marquee that had been used as a dining area for people during three days of mourning.

On two occasions, I had the privilege to visit the home of Xu Yinan. Unable to care for herself for the past four years due to the effects of a second stroke, her husband of over 60 years took care of all her needs, assisted on a regular basis by their visiting daughters and son. In many countries, a person living with her physical restrictions would be moved to a nursing home, a setting where full-time care would be available. Xu Yinan’s husband and family did ensure that she had full-time care, albeit in the simplest of homes.

During the day, she sat in her wheelchair at the wide central door that is typical of village homes in central China. The room where she sat facing the street was sparse, its simplicity highlighted by a concrete floor, bare walls, one cupboard and a small table. The main colour in the room was provided by a large poster of Christ the King facing the main door, supplemented by one photo of her mother-in-law on the same wall.

It was easy to see the advantages of her being cared for in her own home. The large open door allowed for regular interaction with those who walked by on the quiet street. Neighbours often sat with her near the door as an occasional hen moved around with a flexible understanding of the boundary between street and home. Visitors also prayed with her.

At the end of four years of severely restricted living, her family gathered around her when they perceived a deterioration in her condition. A few times during her final day she seemed to have breathed her last, only to find strength to continue with some new-found energy. Eventually when she did take her last breath, it was described by her family as the moment “when God received her”.

Unaffected in the village by the COVID-19 regulations in the city, the funeral Mass for Xu Yinan was celebrated in the marquee beside her home. Later, a fine meal was served for all who were there for the early morning liturgy. As Xu Yinan’s cardboard coffin was being moved away from the family home, an outpouring of emotion erupted from her immediate family. Members of the Catholic brass band from a neighbouring village played loudly as the mourners began the procession out of the village, the music eventually competing with the multiple rounds of firecrackers that remain part of such occasions in rural areas.

As the people made their way out of the village, they bade farewell to one of their lifelong members. Villages in many areas of China have already lost large sections of their younger population, the educational and employment opportunities in the cities proving to be a big attraction for them. Like many villages in China, the future of Zhang Jia Tai faces many challenges. While the unity of the people and their immense faith is still seen at funeral gatherings, perhaps it is important to appreciate all that these communities have endured in a world that has changed so rapidly for them. Their ability to endure so many challenges in recent years is likely to help them negotiate their way through whatever will emerge in the next few years.

Without providing any answers to what the future may hold for the community at Zhang Jia Tai, I think they need to be applauded for the way they supported and walked in faith with one of their own people in recent years. In the humblest of settings, and surrounded by family and friends in her time of need, the life of Xu Yinan can help us to understand what is meant by the beautiful line in the Magnificat which says that God “raises the lowly”.

Columban Fr Dan Troy lives and works in China.
Photo: Fr Dan Troy SSC
And still they come
Then, women and children,
In search of peace, freedom and prosperity,
To a dehumanised, disunited European horizon
A porous fortress of moral indifference and hubris,
It’s humanity paralysed on an altar of politically stoked xenophobic opportunism.
(Alan Shatter. And Still They Come)

Migrants are people

No family chooses to exile itself from all that is familiar without desperate cause. However, over several years past, migrants from troubled nations presenting themselves at the international borders of western countries have been looked upon as invading enemies.

Like non-people, they are shunted onto isolated offshore islands, sometimes even prevented from placing their feet on dry land, simply abandoned at sea in rickety boats like unwanted flotsam. Despite arriving from war-torn, debt-colonised, under-developing states, or simply fleeing common violence resulting from failed justice systems, few in western governments are asking why these people are leaving their homes.

A recent cartoon published in a British newspaper depicted a mother backgrounded by the slogan, Control Our

Borders, leaning over the side of a coffin-shaped boat while struggling to hold the head of her child above the waves. The cartoon put a focus on the indifference of government authorities to the human dignity of people exposed to these terrible dangers on the open sea.

Ironically, these scenes of indifference are occurring at the same time atrocious events from our own past that saw people treated as non-people are receiving public condemnation.

However, what is most disturbing is the superficiality of discussions taking place between nations whose border doors are being knocked on by people seeking refuge.

Few are questioning why they are arriving in flimsy crafts supplied by people traffickers plying an illegal trade that feeds on the victims of western governments’ inability to formulate or adhere to their own immigration policies.
No family chooses to exile itself from all that is familiar without desperate cause. However, over several years past, migrants from troubled nations presenting themselves at the international borders of western countries have been looked upon as invading enemies.

During the Cold War, people fleeing the Soviet Union were accorded a welcome and resettlement in the west. However, with the collapse of Eastern Europe sympathies died, replaced by indifference and hostility. Xenophobic headlines drip-fed fears of new arrivals. The old enemy of the Soviet Union, the picture frame through which western democracy defined itself, receded. It seemed the west needed a new enemy to redefine itself.

That new enemy appeared. It was immigration. It emerged to the extent it became the centre point of political campaigns in the European Union leading ultimately to the separation of children from their parents and the departure of Britain from the Union.

Some political leaders feed on the carrion of anti-immigrant disinformation, xenophobia and cheap patriotism under the banner of safeguarding culture and tradition. Others in the Union posture as protectors of European Christian culture in their effort to exclude immigrants, although this attitude flies in the face of the fundamental Christian tenet to welcome the stranger.

Nevertheless, there is a beacon of hope on a dismal anti-immigrant horizon coming from a most unexpected source: Ireland. Ireland, a country whose people departed in their millions seeking solace in other parts of the world for more than 150 years has now become a nation that receives migrants. Membership of the Union changed the country. It suddenly became a destination of foreign investment to the extent it needed immigrants to service various areas of the economy.

In a few short years, with its long experience of people leaving the country, Ireland found itself coping with something quite different, people coming to stay. The skylines of its cities and countryside once packed with the crosses of Christian churches began to include the symbols of mosques and temples.

Tensions did arise out of anti-immigrant disinformation that the Irish themselves had been on the receiving end of over the previous century-and-a-half. Most Irish people were aware of the racist colonial images pushed by British periodicals depicting them as needing a civilising hand. However, amnesia can set in quickly and pockets of hostility did emerge over government plans to spend money on housing for those seeking asylum on Irish shores.

Nevertheless, proper preparation among local populations saw asylum seekers mostly welcomed, in spite of the toxic anti-immigrant headlines of tabloids stuck in a bygone era of the racism the Irish had learned from their historic partnering with the British in its empire-building.

The reality of the present world will be not just human migration, but all other types of migration, animal, plant, bird, insect and, of course, invisible pandemics, a wake-up call of an interdependent world. Populist exceptionalism, of whatever variety, is no longer a shield guaranteeing safety. Neither are borders with all the paraphernalia of modern technology.

The global home and a sense of belonging are in the words of Robert Frost: *something we shouldn’t have to deserve*. They are human rights in a global economy. In that scenario, major religions must continually ask global powers and institutions on what basis they think they can exclude people.

*Columban Fr Bobby Gilmore lives and works in Ireland.*

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Language, history and cultural studies formed the first mission challenge when I arrived in South Korea in the late 1960s as one of a group of 10 newly ordained Columbans. A big blessing for us was attending a newly created Franciscan language school. Post Vatican II, the Franciscans set up schools staffed by professional linguists to serve missionaries in many countries.

I was curious about all things cultural. Even though the nation was still suffering the effects of war and social change, in the cities and countryside it held many traditional festivals. Some were for fun, but many were religious in nature.

The first festival I attended was at a temple dedicated to Confucius. The extremely formal offering of various types of food and the recitation of verses formed the heart of the ceremony; ordered and restrained in the spirit of Confucian teaching.

I was surprised when a large group of young men began to dance. They were evenly spaced in the form of a large square. The slow moving choreography was marked by the equally slow beat of hammers on wood. The dance and the percussion were hypnotic.

Visiting a spring festival in a provincial town, I first witnessed the Farmers Dance. Its style and spirit were totally opposite to the Confucian Dance. Tin whistles and brass cymbals, skin covered hourglass drums and tambourines created the music: loud and fast, happy and carrying a strong beat. Young people in traditional farmers dress danced, spinning and leaping. They had a spindle attached tightly to their headgear with bright ribbons streaming. These flashed as the dancers twirled.

Different again was a performance of the Monks Drum Dance. Some Buddhist monasteries use dance as a form of choreographed meditation. The monks form a line
a large two-sided drum between each of them. They spin in a fast dance as they hit the drum on its sides to create controlled, alternatively slow and fast rhythms.

Theatre venues now feature female dancers performing the traditional Monks Drum Dance to the delight of tourists. These retinues often include some formal Court Dancing. They feature colourful courtly dress and circles of swirling dancers carrying fans, all part of the entertainment. The accompanying music features a plucked 12-stringed zither-like instrument placed across the knees called a *kayagum*, accompanied by a small cello-like instrument played with a bow.

Korean religious experience carries distinct layers. Each gives meaning to particular moments in life: connection with the spirits active in nature, a Buddhist way of understanding birth and death, orderly ethical behaviour according to Confucian norms, and to appear modern, an adoption of Christian and secular western ways. These multiple layers often exist in the one person at the same time.

The most basic religious experience for Korean people, expressions of the religion of nature and the rituals of shamans in society, are often the last things that missionaries witness.

In Korea, the *sharman* is a woman. Usually male-like and dressed in colourful robes, she punctuates her ritualised swirling with piercing chants as she talks to the spirits. Her role is to manipulate the spirits: banish the evil ones and invite the benevolent to bring good fortune to the person financing the ritual.

Announcements that the Sydney Sacred Music Festival will be back live in 2022 prompted me to recall the experiences of dance and music in Korean religious experience, and to cast my mind back to Catholic life in an Australian country parish half a century ago.

Benediction had music and swirling cloaks, plus prayers of petition; Mass had priest and altar boys ascending and descending steps, swinging thuribles and splashing holy water; processions had singing and movement, carrying of candles and scattering of rose petals. I am inclined to suspect that recent Christian practice in Australia has lost its colour, and the local Church has failed to embrace the religious practices of a multicultural Church.

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St Columbans Mission Society invites primary and secondary school students to participate in our first Season of Creation competition.

During this Season of Creation, the flame which is the symbol of God’s Spirit, calls us to take notice and to listen to the voice of creation. What marvels do we notice when we spend time in nature? We are invited to reflect on our connection to holy ground, within the light of God's healing love that sustains our common home. God promises to be with us and guide us.

2022 Season of Creation School competition - Primary Schools

We invite primary school students to reflect on the theme 'Listen to the Voice of Creation' and submit a drawing, or piece of writing, on the questions:

How do you listen to the voice of creation?
What do you see and what do you hear?
Do you have a favourite place in nature?

2022 Season of Creation School competition - Secondary Schools

We invite secondary school students to reflect on the theme 'Listen to the Voice of Creation' and submit a short piece of writing on the questions:

How do you listen to the voice of creation?
What do you see and what do you hear?
How does your faith and personal experience lead you to action in caring for Earth, our common home?

WIN ONLINE SUBANEN WORKSHOP

Competition winners will have the chance to meet and learn from Columban Fr Vincent Busch and the Subanen women in the Philippines.

Find out more about the Subanen women and their works: [https://bit.ly/3Hl4eN0](https://bit.ly/3Hl4eN0)

Learn more about the meaning and the theme for "Season of Creation 2022" by scanning the QR code.

For more information visit: [www.columban.org.au](http://www.columban.org.au)
Called to be lay missionaries

I am proud to say that three of my eight children became Columban Lay Missionaries. Surely, there is no greater joy for a mother than seeing her children willing to offer their lives in the service of God and neighbour.

When I was young, the Catholic Church in the Philippines was always regarded as a missionary-receiving Church. Later, with my late husband, I worked alongside the Jesuit missionary priests to strengthen the Family Life Apostolate by establishing small communities of people that prayed together and discerned how to make their own decisions about their welfare.

Our local Church in the rather poor and sparsely populated area of Ipil grew in cohesion until it was eventually able to look after its own affairs, putting it well on the way to transforming from an outpost of one diocese to being one in its own right.

In the mentality of the day, missionaries came from overseas. So, as local people describing ourselves as lay missionaries, we introduced a new dimension to the way people thought about mission. My children have now taken this one step further, volunteering to go overseas and be part of a new era of the Philippine Church as a mission-sending body.

When our children were growing up, our missionary work took my husband and me away from home for extended periods, meaning we could not always be physically present for them. We often had to leave them with adult relatives or friends, not just for days but for weeks owing to the distances we had to travel. Our children had to grow up in this peculiar family environment, but we accepted the situation and the sacrifice, relying on the grace of God. There are no regrets.

It is only with God’s grace that we have given all our children the education they need to fulfill their own dreams and aspirations. Some of them even went to big universities and institutions, which was unimaginable on the meagre salary we received as a couple from the Church.

With our love of God and continuous service in the Church, I can proudly say I have seen and felt God’s generosity through the many people we have worked alongside. Indeed, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all things will come to you” has been our lived experience as a couple with our family. We served God wholeheartedly, and God did not let us down, for he provided the things we needed to raise our children.

I believe that our family’s unique situation is why some of my children received the call to mission. As a couple, we made it clear to our children that they could choose to be whatever they wanted to be, and we would give them the support they needed in the best way we could. And it is with great joy that the call of my children to be missionaries came not from external pressure but their own willing and personal spiritual discernment.

I have nothing but joy in my heart that our hard work and sacrifice as a missionary couple have more than paid off. As I recall loving memories of my husband, Lito, who went ahead of me to our Creator on 6 June 2006, I know that he is smiling with me at the knowledge that some of our children have followed our missionary footsteps with our model and guide, who is Jesus. The life of a missionary is never easy. It is a path full of sacrifice, pain and danger, but at the same time, it is a path of self-discovery, adventure and spiritual fulfilment. It is a path that I would not want to exchange for any other in this world, for it is a path that has given me my knowledge of God’s great love. Yes, it will be a path that I will always recommend but not force on anyone else because I know that we each have our own calling to serve our God.
I wish to express my endless gratitude to the Columban family, who embraced my three children as their own and shared their missionary spirit. I hope for more of God’s blessings for the Columban family, so that you will continue to touch many lives and provide them with opportunities to touch others.

Thank you for giving my children a venue for expressing their love of God through service to our brothers and sisters who need both personal and spiritual care. You are an instrument of God’s love, not just to our family but to the world.

Josepha Blaza Yap, fondly known as Mommy Yap, has three children who have joined the Columban Lay Missionaries over the years.

Remember the Columbans in your Will

We cannot take our earthly possessions with us, but we can so dispose of them that our good works will continue after we are gone.

By leaving a gift to Columban Missionaries in your Will you become a partner in our work and you are leaving a lasting legacy for the future.

Why not speak to your lawyer about it?

Form of Will

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Columban Education Development programs work with the local church to help educate children in the rural areas of Myanmar.

Columban Migrant Ministry work in Chile supports the Venezuelan families living in small tents in the city parks and the medium strips in Santiago.

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‘Let us ask the Lord to give us the gentleness to look upon the poor with understanding and love, devoid of human calculation and fear.’ Pope Francis

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