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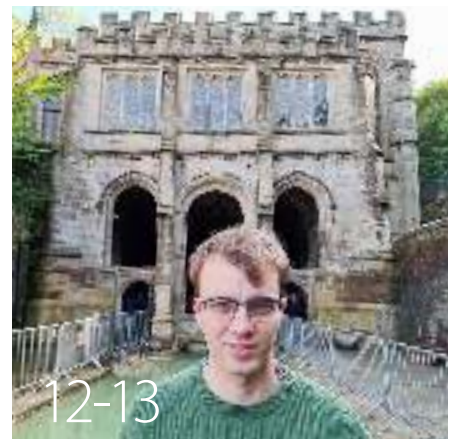
Cover photo: Manuel Duato, special needs school in Peru, where Columban Fr Ed O'Connell was working.

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TRUSTING IN GOD IN 2025

In the myths of ancient Rome, the god Janus – from whom we get the name “January” for the first month of the year - has two faces, one looking backward, and the other looking forward. It is an appropriate image for the start of a new year.

We look back on the past year to learn from it, to savour and to give thanks for the many good things we received, and to repent missed opportunities and failings. We can't change that past, but we can change the future. We look forward to the new year in hope, planning changes in relationships, work, location, making resolutions – to eat better, to do more exercise – resolutions we have probably already broken!

2024 has been a challenging year, with violence, wars, increased cost of living, uncertainties facing migrants and refugees, fire and flood, extremes of heat and cold, and myriad other issues. There have also been happy moments with family and friends, births, weddings, graduations, and new opportunities opening new possibilities. Let us both repent and rejoice.

We do not know what 2025 holds for us. It is an unknown. It will unfold over time, hour-by-hour, day-by-day, week-by-week, slowly revealing its joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties. We must be patient as the passing of time discloses its secrets. But there is one known, one certainty, one surety, that whatever may happen in this new year, God will be with us. The Prophet Isaiah gave this assurance to the ancient people of Israel who were in captivity in Babylon at that time: For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, ‘Do not fear, I will help you.’ (Is 41:13)

As Christians, we confess that this ancient promise has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrated at Christmas. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us, God become-one-of-us, the eternal Word of God entering into time, the second divine Person of the

Blessed Trinity assuming a human nature, sharing our DNA, our history, our flesh, our lives, even our death, and being raised to new life and lifting all peoples and all creation with him to participate in his divine life.

This is Good News. We do not need to be afraid. No matter what happens to us, as St Julian of Norwich affirmed, “all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” We can share this good news in our positive attitudes to and relations with others, with family and friends, with strangers, migrants, refugees, and especially the poor and those who are suffering. We can be confident in reaching out to them and accompanying them on the pilgrim path of life, knowing that God is with us in our present trials and joys, God supports and guides us, and God is our destination and our home.

Pope Francis is encouraging Catholics to walk the path of synodality, ordained and lay, young and old, men and women, journeying with each other, with other Christians, with believers in other religions and world views, and with all creatures. He envisions a universal solidarity, where all live together as sisters and brothers, one human family, caring for each other and our common home. May we respond generously to this invitation to discover new life and opportunities for ourselves, our families, our churches, our societies, and our world.

As we stand at the start of this new Jubilee Year of 2025, I wish you and your families every blessing. I conclude with a quote from a 1908 poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, who was working as a missionary in India at that time: I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown”. And he replied, “Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That will be better to you than light, and safer than a known way.”

REV DR PATRICK MCINERNEY
Regional Director of Oceania



THE COMMON GOOD



Children from Warimi Huasi in Peru. Photo: Fr Ed O'Connell SSC

It certainly has become a small world! I was talking recently on Zoom, with young adults from the parish where I worked in Peru. I asked them about the political situation and what could be done to improve the life of the ordinary folk. Their reply was stark.

They were and are disenchanted with politicians who are caught up with their own interests or the interests of those who put up the money for them to be politicians. These young people are not interested in getting involved, other than individually showing solidarity to those in need or maybe signing petitions in defence of those suffering human rights abuses.

Then the other week, in South London, I was talking to an old school friend from the early sixties. When I

asked him about the forthcoming elections, he said he thought he would not vote, as he sees no difference between the parties and little chance of change. In both cases, Peru, and Britain, it is not so much a case of apathy but rather that democracy in practice seems to have let them down. Politicians seem to be behaving more according to their own needs and interests and have lost contact with the sufferings of ordinary folk. In short, there is little to no confidence in them.

I have had an interest in politics since my days in the Young Christian Workers (YCW) in Brixton, way back in the sixties. Many YCW members in the fifties and sixties formed in a “see, judge and act” methodology and went on to be local councillors and active trade unionists and for me, I discovered my vocation to be a missionary priest. They, like me, got their strength and direction from their faith. The use of Gospel reflection and a study of the Social Teaching of the Church gave us our lead. I have always been drawn to the concept

We can gain insight and strength from the struggles Jesus faced in getting to know His Father's Will. The Temptations showed Jesus turning down power, wealth, and self-importance for Himself. He chose the path of humility, poverty in the form of a simple lifestyle and the service of others instead of self-serving.

of the Common Good, defined by the Bishops of England and Wales as "the whole network of social conditions which enable humans - individuals and groups - to flourish and live a fully, genuinely human life." This comes about by implementing the need to respect the human dignity of all and using the values of solidarity and subsidiarity to guide decision-making.

Many countries around the world are having elections in these times. I can only hope that people will take time to review the meaning of the Common Good, and, to achieve it, see the need to be active citizens in some way or another within their societies.

And when the time comes to vote, to look out not only for their own interests and needs but those of others too, especially the most vulnerable. It is not just about tax cuts, it is also about investing to improve our services: health, education, public housing, social services, as well as demanding meaningful action on climate change and fair and just treatment of migrants and refugees.

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Our call to follow Jesus, as Christians, no matter our age, is an invitation to assume His attitudes and Way of life. How we do it is a challenge each must face and do so in the context of our relationship with God, with others and with our common home, the planet.

May the Spirit of Jesus Christ be with each of us, as we discern how to play an active part in society, as the responsibility for politics is not just with the politicians. In recent years in Peru, I worked with the head teacher of Manuel Duato special needs school to help prepare parents to get involved in advocacy work: for the parents to talk with officials, councillors, and mayors

about the need for support of their special-needs children and how the councils can help provide facilities, training programmes and leisure activities for their children.

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More recently the team at Warmi Huasi, a small NGO I set up with others in Lima to accompany families living in poverty, accompanies and enables children and young people to have a voice at local council level, so that the local mayor and councillors hear the needs of the young and their proposed plans to help improve their lives and that of their communities.

It is slowly working, local councils are beginning to see the value of young people's involvement. And maybe it is also the first step to breaking apathy and getting a new generation involved in politics, which in the end is about achieving for all the basics of life.

SEE • JUDGE • ACT

FR ED O'CONNELL

Columban Fr Ed O'Connell lives and works in Britain.

A LITTLE WISH

"WE WANT TO HANG OUR WASHING OUT IN FRONT."

In March, there was a two-day event in Myitkyina for International Women's Day (IWD) 2024. The theme was "Invest in Women - Accelerate Progress". Although I was interested, I was a little nervous about attending the event because of my language difficulties. Nonetheless, I decided to go because I thought it would be a great opportunity to hear the voices of women in Kachin State and that this would help me understand their lives better.

The organiser kindly asked a participant, an NGO worker with fluent English, to sit next to me and translate for me. She was very friendly, but unfortunately, she had to leave for another meeting before lunch. Then, a 22-year-old Buddhist girl, Mumu, approached me and tried to help me by speaking Korean, which she had learnt from watching Korean dramas. Although her Korean was limited, we were able to communicate, and Mumu became a good friend and translator for me over those two days.

There were about fifteen young women from Myitkyina, mostly Kachin, but also some from other tribes, and Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians. Because of this variety, the workshop was conducted in Burmese, the official language of Myanmar. We talked about the history of IWD and community activities and made our own art - paintings, bouquets, hair pins and bracelets, and hand-sewn sanitary napkin pouches. The women were all very talented and participated in all the programs.

In small groups, we talked about gender - the differences between women and men, what women and men usually do, etc. It was a great opportunity to hear what they thought about their culture and the status of women in society. A common response from

each group was that men play games, go out, and socialise with friends, while women stay home to clean the house and take care of their family members.

The facilitator asked if I could talk about women and men in Korea. There was a time when the roles and responsibilities of the sexes in Korea were very different. For example, women were expected to be housewives and do housework regardless of their profession, and girls were expected to take care of their younger siblings instead of continuing their studies. Men were expected to be the head of the family and thought that housework was not their job. But now, the status of women in Korean society has changed greatly.

The concept of "male supremacy" has disappeared, and women's voices have become stronger. It is socially recognised that women have the same rights and abilities as men. I stressed that we need to encourage and support each other and continue to work towards women's empowerment in this world.

We then shared what changes we would like to see in society. One of the participants said that she would like to see a change where women's clothes were "put out in the front like men's clothes". This was puzzling to me, but I assumed it referred to the current position of women in Myanmar society. There is a traditional superstition that touching or walking under female garments brings bad luck and reduces male strength. I recalled watching the news when the military coup started in Myanmar and seeing women protesting by hanging their traditional skirts in the streets to stop the military from passing by.

As a foreigner, I think it is important to understand the culture the people grew up in to understand them and learn how to work with them. This is not to judge the culture. Rather, I believe that understanding the cultural background always helps me to find ways to live with and accompany people.

After arriving in Myitkyina last year, I was waiting to return to Banmaw, where we Columban lay missionaries used to work. However, with the civil war showing no signs of ending and the situation in



International Women's Day arts and crafts. Photo: Catharina Son Seon Young

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Banmaw becoming more serious, we Columbans in Myanmar decided that the Columban lay missionaries would remain in Myitkyina and work together with the Columban priests. Over recent months, we lay missionaries have been preparing for new ministries in Myitkyina.

I have recently started the Visio Divina (sacred seeing – an ancient form of Christian prayer in which we allow our hearts and imaginations to enter a sacred image) with young women and often meet girls like Mu-mu, who have a lot of dreams. Mu-mu hopes to have more opportunities to learn and forge a career.

Meeting young people like Mu-mu, who have a passion for learning and personal growth, always makes me think about how I can encourage them and help them dream of a bright future and continue to strive for it despite the grim reality of Myanmar right now. I hope the day will come when women can hang out their laundry as naturally as men do - that it will be a reality and not just a dream.

CATHARINA SON SEON YOUNG

Columban lay missionary Catharina Son Seon Young lives and works in Myanmar.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a light blue ceramic mug filled with a frothy, light-colored beverage, likely coffee or tea. The hand is wearing a thick, orange-brown knitted sweater. The background is a light-colored, marbled surface. Overlaid on the center of the mug is the text "MUGS OF HOPE" in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

MUGS OF HOPE

When I first arrived in Chile as a seminarian, I was fresh from four months at the Maryknoll language school in Bolivia. There, I not only immersed myself in Spanish grammar and pronunciation but also witnessed the aftermath of one of the bloodiest military coups in Bolivia's history. It was a harsh introduction to the realities of political upheaval in South America, a reality that followed me to Chile.

It was 1980, seven years after Chile's own coup d'état. The country was still deeply scarred. Streets were subdued, people wary of strangers, their spirits dampened by fear. Yet, in the parish of San Gabriel in Santiago, where I joined three Columban priests, there was a light. The parish was alive with energy,

hope, and faith, an antidote to the trauma that loomed beyond its walls.

Our mission was simple yet profound: to walk with the people in their struggles, as Jesus walked with the marginalized of His time. The neighbourhood surrounding the parish was a working-class area, built on land once occupied by squatters who had claimed it decades earlier. Their boldness in those days had led to permanent homes and communities. But under the oppressive military regime of the 1980s, such acts of defiance were no longer possible.

One cold, rainy evening, I accompanied one of the priests to a nearby encampment of squatters. The scene was heartbreaking. Families lived in makeshift tents of plastic and cardboard, huddled together on muddy ground. Children coughed in the damp air, and parents worked tirelessly to keep small fires alive. Despite their dire circumstances, they welcomed us with warmth, offering mugs of tea from battered metal cups.

As we crouched on wooden boxes, sipping tea and listening, they shared their stories. Many of

Our mission was simple yet profound: to walk with the people in their struggles, as Jesus walked with the marginalized of His time. The neighbourhood surrounding the parish was a working-class area, built on land once occupied by squatters who had claimed it decades earlier.

these families were allegados - young couples and children living with relatives in overcrowded homes, unable to afford a space of their own. Their dream of independence was stifled by poverty, worsened by a dictatorship that seemed indifferent to their plight.

For these families, squatting on unused land was an act of desperation. In the past, such land seizures had been a path to a better future. But under a regime obsessed with control, even this avenue was blocked. The stories they told were not just about the struggle for housing - they were about survival, resilience, and the courage to hope when all seemed lost.

In those moments, I began to understand the mission of Jesus Christ in a new way. It wasn't about bringing answers or solutions. It was about presence - being there, listening, and standing in solidarity with those the world often forgets.

As we sat with these families, it was clear that Christ was already present among them. Their dignity, their hospitality, their strength in adversity - all of it spoke of God's Spirit at work. Our role was not to lead but to accompany, to bear witness to their lives and join them on their journey.

Over time, I learned more about the challenges they faced. Many families lived in tension-filled homes, where lack of space and privacy bred conflict. Others endured the humiliation of poverty in a country rich in natural resources like copper, but whose wealth never seemed to reach the workers.

In those moments, I began to understand the mission of Jesus Christ in a new way. It wasn't about bringing answers or solutions. It was about presence - being there, listening, and standing in solidarity with those the world often forgets.

Yet, despite their struggles, these communities displayed remarkable resilience. They organized themselves, supported one another, and sought justice, embodying the Gospel message of hope and transformation. As missionaries, we became companions in their fight for dignity, reflecting together on faith and its meaning in their lives.

Years later, Chile began to heal. The dictatorship fell, democracy returned, and issues like economic inequality and justice for victims of the regime came to the forefront. Progress was slow, but the seeds of hope planted in those muddy encampments began to grow.

As missionaries, we became companions in their fight for dignity, reflecting together on faith and its meaning in their lives.

Reflecting on those early days in Chile, I am struck by the lessons I learned. Mission is not about fixing or teaching - it is about walking alongside, sharing in the joys and sorrows of those we serve. It is about finding Christ in the most unexpected places: in the faces of struggling families, in the warmth of a shared cup of tea, and in the quiet resilience of a community refusing to give up.

Those battered mugs of tea, offered with such generosity, remain a symbol of hope for me. They remind me that even in the darkest times, the light of Christ shines brightly, calling us to draw near, listen, and believe in the transformative power of love and solidarity.

FR ROBERT MOSHER

Columban Fr Robert Mosher lived for many years in Chile, and later in El Paso, Texas, before arriving at his present assignment in Bristol, Rhode Island, USA.



WORDS AND DEEDS

After waiting for several months, I finally got my religious worker (R-1) visa. I must admit that returning to the United States with a missionary visa has given me more confidence to move around, especially here in the borderlands. And being allowed to cross the bridge to serve in Juarez, Mexico, is a blessing because it allows me to maximise my presence in the border ministry.

I continue serving in the migrant ministry based in Annunciation House, El Paso, four days a week and two days a week in Juarez. Crossing the bridge every week gives me a weird feeling (in the want of a better word) because I am working with people who find it hard to get out of Juarez. I was on a flight back to the Philippines last March to finalise my visa application. While on that long-haul flight from Los Angeles to Hong Kong, I was seated beside a “kababayan” (fellow Filipino). As we chatted, she asked the inevitable question, “What is your work?” I replied that I was a Catholic Columban Missionary. Excitedly, she exclaimed, “I am a missionary too.” She was unstoppable in sharing what she did and where she came from. I learned that she was from one of the Evangelical groups and a preacher. Then she asked, “How about you?” I said, “I serve in a refugee shelter in El Paso, Texas.” She replied, “But that’s a dangerous place. A lot of them are coming to the US and are involved in the drug trade. Most of them are criminals with tattoos all over their bodies.”

Hearing the preacher’s judgment, I was speechless. I just sighed ... for a moment. This was such a common perception. Then I responded, “I have been at the border for over a year but have not encountered nor experienced anything so bad. Every day, the people knocking at the door of the shelter are mothers, fathers and children. They are people like us who have stories of struggles and challenges. Yes, some of them have tattoos, but we cannot use the amount of ink on their skin to gauge whether they are good or bad. If the people who are crossing the borders are dangerous, they need us so we can put the words we preach into deeds.” She looked at me. Then I handed her my mobile number with an open invitation to visit me at the border so she could experience the ministry there. She needs to see for herself.

Recently, the Columban Mission Centre in El Paso, Texas, hosted a group from the Mercy Sisters of the Americas, joined by their Investment Community. The invited speaker, Mr Ruben Garcia (Director of Annunciation House), said, “The problem of migration is not the people trying to cross the borders, but our neighbours.” He explained further, “Our neighbours, even families, relatives, and friends, are the ones electing political leaders who are responsible for promulgating laws that affect the whole nation, especially the poor who are entering the country.” He added that instead of putting our trust in God, humans are acting like gods. They want to be in control by constructing high fences, installing barbed wire, and detailing hundreds of armed men in the name of securing the borders. “We no longer trust God,” Ruben said. “With His help, we can welcome and meet the needs of however many refugees and migrants might come.”

He challenged the group by saying, “After this experience, go home and talk to your neighbours; ask their opinion of the migrant situation and then tell them what you have seen and heard.” The gap between the rich and the poor and the powerful and the powerless is widening. Reflecting on my own journey here as a migrant, I can relate to some of the challenges of leaving home and trying to secure a space in this part of the country. As I listen, I reserve a space in my heart for their stories to keep me inspired to speak and advocate for them. As Mother Teresa said, “Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love!”

LILIBETH SABADO

Columban lay missionary Lilibeth Sabado lives and works at the US/Mexico border.



A SWEATY SUNDAY

I spent two weeks in Ba Parish over Christmas, assisting the Parish Priest. On the Sunday before Christmas, under a blazing sun and a brilliant blue sky, I left Ba town at 8:00 am for a 40-minute drive into the mountains to Navala village. The day's Mass included a wedding - a joyous occasion with a couple of minor hiccups.

The groom, a teacher from Navala, and his bride from Vanua Levu were united in the eyes of God and the Church. Afterward, I had a quick cup of tea while a couple of adults handed out sweets I'd brought for the children. Before leaving, I was touched to receive beautifully woven mats from the women as a gift to the parish in honor of the wedding.

Our journey continued deeper into the hills, another 40 minutes by van. The dry weather was a blessing, as the rain-soaked roads had previously carved deep furrows into the steep paths. The heat, however, was relentless. By the time we arrived at the stream in front of Tabalai village, it was well past midday.

In the host's home, Catholics from two neighboring villages gathered with two extended families from Tabalai. The room was filled with laughter and chatter, with others spilling out onto the verandahs. After Mass, I sat outside on the verandah, enjoying the breeze as the men mixed yaqona and I shared more sweets with the children.

A catechist's daughter who married into the village 40 years ago had helped introduce Catholicism to

her husband and another family. Today, their faith continues to grow.

The local catechist will soon be joined by a younger man, eager to begin his three-year training at the catechist school. A hopeful sign for the community's future.

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Later, back in Navala, I was grateful for a refreshing shower and a brief rest. That evening, we shared more yaqona, accompanied by the rhythmic snores of a visiting woman hidden behind a curtain. The locals jokingly called it "an electric saw."

The next morning, after a simple breakfast, I was invited to the groom's home for a formal farewell yaqona ceremony.

With happy memories of the warm hospitality in Navala and Tabalai, my companions and I made our way back to town, hearts full of the experience.

FR FRANK HOARE

Columban Fr Frank Hoare lives and works in Fiji.



Adam at the ruins of Basingwerk Abbey, Holywell, a 12th Century Cistercian foundation abandoned during the Reformation. Photos: Fr John Boles SSC

THE COLUMBAN, THE SAINT AND THE HERMIT

Croeso y Cymru ("Welcome to Wales") announced the sign as we crossed the River Severn, reminding us that the Principality of Wales has a language, history and faith tradition quite distinct from those of neighbouring England.

Ostensibly, we were on a routine Columban ministry, undertaking a weekend mission-awareness visit to a local parish - my colleague, Mr Adam Williams, as our Mission Appeals Coordinator for Britain, and me in my capacity as a Columban priest. However, we had an ulterior motive. Our destination was the North Welsh town of Holywell, the former home of Adam's ancestors. While there, we were hoping to discover something of his family roots.

Little did we suspect that a series of adventures awaited us.

As we turned inland from the coast road, we were stopped in our tracks by the great, brooding presence of Flint Castle, which guards the approach to Holywell. Dating from 1277, Flint was the first of many fortresses Edward I erected during his brutal conquest of Wales.

Further up the valley, we came across another, but rather more comforting, mediaeval relic - that of Basingwerk Abbey. Built by the Cistercians in 1132, it stood as a testimony to the deep-seated faith of the Welsh people, who'd clung to their Christian beliefs since Roman times. Unfortunately, like all such foundations, Basingwerk eventually fell foul of Henry VIII's policy of monastic dissolution and was left in ruins. On a happier note, we then spied an ecclesiastical jewel that had miraculously escaped the ravages of the sixteenth-century Reformation - the Chapel Shrine of St Winefride's "holy well" (giving its name to the surrounding town of Holywell).

Winefride is one of those notable Celtic holy figures of the so-called Dark Ages. She was active in the

seventh century (and, therefore, a near contemporary of St Columban). According to a colourful legend, Winefride fled to the church of her uncle, St Bueno (pron. "Bayno") to defend her virtue against a violent suitor. She wasn't quick enough, and her pursuer proceeded to cut off her head, but as the severed head struck the ground, a spring of water gushed forth. Fortunately for Winefride, Uncle Bueno then dashed out and miraculously restored her to life by placing the dismembered head back on her torso. She then enjoyed many years as a holy and much-revered nun.

Whatever the truth of this tale, Holywell became a great place of pilgrimage, first for the Welsh, then for the conquering English. The present structure is an unusual two-storey affair, a magnificent example of late-mediaeval Perpendicular-style architecture. An upper chapel protects a well crypt below, where gorgeous fan vaulting covers the famous spring and pilgrims' bathing pool. The fact that the shrine was able to "re-brand" itself as a parish church saved it from the attention of the Reformers.

The Bridgettine Sisters at the Pilgrims' Hostel royally entertained Adam and me before we celebrated the weekend Masses and set off to seek evidence of Adam's family roots. The Sisters directed us to Holywell Cemetery, perched on a hillside overlooking an impressive stretch of the North Welsh Coast. This graveyard is as beautiful as it is peaceful. There, we traced the resting places of many members of the Williams family and got to kneel and pray awhile by the graves of Noel and Edith, Adam's great-grandparents. However, our search was not over. In fact, the best was yet to come.

Adam was anxious to locate the last family home the Williamses had lived in before emigrating to England. Tantalisingly, the kind Sisters at the hostel recognised Adam's description of the place as the one currently serving as a modern-day hermitage, occupied by a Poor Clare Sister duly registered as a hermit by the Bishop of Wrexham.

Knowing roughly where the house lay, we proceeded to knock on doors in and around the vicinity, eliciting some rather bemused reactions from the neighbours as we asked in turn, "Excuse me - but, by any chance, does a hermit live here?" Fortunately, the lady in question was fairly well known, and we soon found ourselves being greeted by an overwhelmingly active



Adam with Poor Clare Sr Seraphim, the Hermit of Holywell.

and cheerful 80-year-old nun who - by an incredible coincidence - had chosen the former residence of the Williams family as her hermitage some forty years ago.

Delighted to see us, Sr Seraphim recounted her remarkable life history. As a child, she'd been given to an orphanage and raised by nuns. Sensing she had a religious vocation herself, she later asked to join them but was turned down because of doubts regarding her academic ability. Determined to prove them wrong, she left the convent, got a job, arranged further education for herself, and reapplied to the Poor Clares, now armed with outstanding academic qualifications. After serving her Order in a "conventional" manner, she then felt God was calling her to serve Him in a less orthodox fashion as a hermit. She now joyfully lives out her calling through prayer and as a renowned scholar of ancient Hebrew literature and the Jewish Scriptures.

It is true that God has a plan for all of us down the generations. Sometimes, those plans reveal themselves to be fascinating, varied and faith-filled, like that of Columban Co-Worker Adam Williams.

It is true that God has a plan for all of us down the generations.

FR JOHN BOLES

Columban Fr John Boles is the Director of the Region of Britain.

"GO YE AFAR"



Sisters offering shelter during the floods.

In response to the words of an old song, "Go Ye Afar," on November 15, 1926, a group of five Columban Sisters arrived in Hanyang, China, and were soon busy with language study, setting up a house, and responding to sick people who came to the house for treatment. However, their hopes and dreams of ministering to the poor were soon shattered by the tense political situation between the warlords, nationalists, and communists in Hanyang, as well as campaigns against foreigners.

Then the invading Japanese in Central China massacred many Europeans, including some missionaries, and foreigners left on all available boats. As the situation worsened by the hour, the Columban Sisters were also forced to depart for Shanghai less than five months after their arrival in Hanyang.

In a letter written on the riverboat carrying them to Shanghai, Columban Sr Mary Patrick described how she felt:

"How sad it was to ride down the main street of Hanyang in our rickshaws, to see the busy teeming population all intent on their business: the old banker with his nanny-goat beard and silver scales to weigh the silver ounces, the quack doctor with his Materia Medica, the tea houses with those quaint figures sitting at little polished

lacquer tables sipping their bowls of tea or arguing over their games of Chinese chess. So many quaint houses and quaint scenes, down to the coffin house with gaily covered sarcophagi and the busy carver decorating these coveted caskets. The fish lay in baskets and boxes by the side of the road, men sat in chairs being shaved, women washing their babies; such a medley of people, in and out, jostling one another on the road. It was just the same as the day we came, and now we were going away."

Fortunately, the Sisters were able to return to Hanyang by Christmas of that year. They were still without a convent or dispensary. But, as soon as they heard the Sisters were back, the people began to arrive daily in huge numbers, and so began the Sisters' medical ministry - in a makeshift dispensary, serving the sick with whatever medicines they could find.

A few years later, the river Yangtse burst through a vital dyke protecting the city of Wuhan and caused one of the worst natural disasters in history: the Central China Flood of 1931. Thousands of people drowned, and many more were left homeless. The Hanyang area, where the Columban Sisters lived and worked, was one of the places worst affected, with the water level rising to fifteen feet. Refugees from the floods kept coming so that soon the Sisters' newly built convent, in which they had not yet lived, was accommodating more than three hundred refugee women, ranging in age from grandmothers to infants in arms.

The convent was a handsome three-story house fronted by wide verandas. But as it had never been intended for the purpose to which it was now put, it took some ingenuity to pack in three hundred people and feed them. At a later stage, the building housed



Sr Joan O'Connor working with a special needs child in China.

over four hundred women and children. Altogether, the Columban priests and Sisters sheltered and fed about eight hundred people from early August 1931 until the floods began to abate in mid-October 1931.

In the years that followed, marked as they were by war, floods and epidemics, life in China was never easy for the Columban Sisters. In 1951, they were among the foreigners expelled from the country. But our service to and with the Chinese people did not end with this expulsion. Just before their expulsion, while visiting the Sisters in China and the Philippines, Sr M Vianney, the Congregational Leader at the time, had received an invitation for Columban Sisters to run a hospital for treating tuberculosis patients in Hong Kong.

In those early days, Sisters from various parts of the world came and gave great service in the Ruttonjee Sanatorium, gradually leading to the pioneering work of Columban Sisters M. Aquinas Monaghan and M. Gabriel O'Mahony. They both became famous for their treatment of tuberculosis, which, with the rapid influx of refugees from China, was rampant in Hong Kong at the time.

Over the years, our services in Hong Kong expanded to include teaching in two secondary schools, as well as pastoral work in parishes and hospitals. Then, as 1997 approached and Hong Kong prepared to be once again part of China, the Sisters concentrated on preparing lay leaders in our various ministries, which had continued to develop to include hospice care, prison visiting, services to people living with HIV/AIDS, and services to sex workers.

In the 1980s, the Columban Sisters once again had the opportunity to serve in China, even though Chinese law prohibited any missionary work. We began with teaching English in universities and medical establishments in various provinces. Gradually, we were able to expand our work to include services for orphans and children with cerebral palsy who had no hope of going to school.

We also had the opportunity to help those affected by a devastating earthquake in Sichuan province - tending to those injured and participating in the training of local medical professionals. In this, we experienced a good spirit between international and local volunteers, working well together under the umbrella of an international non-government office. With the skills of a qualified occupational therapist, the



Sr Josephine Hong tending to the injured from an earthquake.

Columban Sister living there at that time accompanied earthquake victims and witnessed the harshness of peoples' lives.

Today, the Columban Sisters' presence continues in China so that in more recent years, we have been able to offer spiritual and psychological support to local nuns, priests, and seminarians, currently introducing them to Pope Francis's famous encyclicals on the care of our Mother Earth - *Laudato Si'* and *Laudato Deum*. This exposure has awakened in the local people a deeper awareness of the urgent needs of our planet today and has led to parishes in rural areas planting trees in desert places and becoming involved in organic gardening.

Recently, two Sisters were also able to make a pilgrimage to Hanyang, our first mission. Through the years, the clinic our first Sisters set up in the 1930s has been put to various uses - at one point as a hostel for local nurses and now part of the laboratory of a large hospital. Both the church which Bishop Galvin, co-founder of the Missionary Society of St Columban, built and our old clinic building now bear plaques with a QR code detailing online the history of the buildings, including the Chinese names of our Congregation and mission.

For us, it is an honour to be included in the heritage of the city, cementing our strong bond with the Chinese people, which endures to the present day.

SR ANN GRAY

Columban Sr Ann Gray served on mission in Hong Kong and China. She is now based in Magheramore, Ireland, and is the Assistant Editor of The Far East magazine for Ireland and Britain. Photos: St Columbans Mission Society



My name is Matang. My biological parents are Moaniba Rotitaake and Tokanikaiaatetaanga Tumeka. I was adopted by Maeke Batiata and Eritia Ibeata. I am 24 years of age and come from the island country of the Republic of Kiribati (also known as the Gilbert Islands) in the Micronesian region of the Pacific (Oceania).

The 33 Kiribati islands lie across the equator and are divided into three parts: northern, central, and southern. My life growing up was all about simplicity and was uniquely related to the traditional way of life with my family and friends.

My call to the Columbans happened in this way. While studying at one of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) secondary schools called St Maria College, a Columban priest named Fr Frank Hoare

visited my school to promote vocations among the male students. He shared magazines and showed videos about the Columban missionaries in missions in different parts of the world.

After Fr Hoare's presentation, I was moved by the missionary way of life and felt the call to join the Columbans. However, I could not join them because I had not yet finished my studies. Later, another Columban priest, Fr William Lee, visited Kiribati, and I told him of my interest in joining the Columbans.

I felt called because I was very interested in seeing the missionary way of life or charism first-hand. I wanted to see where and how they work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation, inter-religious dialogue, solidarity with the poor, education for the poorest, and evangelisation.

I hoped my calling would come true and I would become one of the Columban missionary priests in a future mission.

Now that I am in year one as a Columban seminarian at the Loyola School of Theology in the Philippines, my favourite subject is philosophy. Philosophy studies the nature of knowledge, allowing me to expand my understanding of natural things. Philosophy isn't so much about answers as about asking the right questions. It helps me to think critically about things beyond my understanding.

Through it, I will try to enlarge my knowledge. Philosophy requires not only a love of wisdom but also a willingness to learn and experience things. It will help me understand different phenomena and encourage me to overcome difficulties and give meaning to my life. It will prepare me well for the theology courses that will follow.

When not studying, I like to read poems because, in them, I find many messages and symbolic features related to real life and things happening in this world.

I also enjoy well-made religious movies where I can learn more about missionary life and preaching the good news.

My life in formation is a big transition for me, allowing me to experience different kinds of people, cultures, and new environments I haven't experienced before. I have learned a lot from living with my formators and brothers!

MATANG M ROTITAAKE

Columban seminarian Matang M Rotitaake is studying in the Philippines.

Photo: St Columbans Mission Society



I grew up in a family that didn't practice religion. When I was young, I thought there was no God. I am not proud to admit it, but I used to say negative things about religion because I was filled with anger. Yet, I stand before you now as a missionary priest dedicated to spreading the word of God.

One day, when I was young, one of my best friends asked me, "Would you like to go to Church with me?" I had no idea what "Church" was, but I said "yes" because I knew him to be a good person, kind and full of integrity. The first time I attended mass, I did not understand what was being said. I also did not like it when the presider kept telling us to sit down and stand up. I wanted to be seated until the end of the mass. Another time, my friend asked me, "Do you want to be baptized?" Again, I had no idea what being

"baptized" meant or what the catechism was. Nonetheless, I was baptized when I was 15. I don't know why I did not say no. I think God led me into His path little by little. For some reason, I just followed Him, and now I am sure God called me through my friend.

In the Gospels we are told that when Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist he was with a vast crowd and his heart was moved with pity for them. He was with his beloved people and didn't conceal his feelings. However, he did not indulge in mere sentiment. Instead, he acted: he cured the sick and performed miracles. I still remember what Pope Francis said when he visited Manila and met two children who used to live on the streets in Luneta Park. One of them asked the Pope, "Many children are abandoned by their parents. Many children are into prostitution. Why does God allow such things to happen?" I remember Pope Francis answering, "Only when we too can cry about the things that you said are we close to replying to that question."

During my formation to become a Columban priest, I met many good formators. They taught me not to ignore my feelings or to be enslaved by them. They advised me to "Feel it. Reflect on it. Listen to what God is trying to say to you. You can find answers when you are with God and God's people in your area." It is not easy to do this. In fact, sometimes we are tempted not to look into our feelings at all. However, I believe we need to do that. I believe God is always wanting to tell us something through our feelings. And so, I say, "Feel it, reflect on it, and be with God."

FR JI KWANG-KYU

Columban Fr Ji Kwang-kyu is the Vice-Rector of the International Formation Program, Philippines.

Photo: St Columbans Mission Society

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JOHN RAYD - COLUMBAN SEMINARIAN

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TEACHER OU

The first time I heard of Teacher Ou (pronounced *Oh* in English) was when talking to a young Peruvian Columban priest, Fr Henry Amado Servan Vallejos. The way his eyes lit up when he mentioned her struck me; he seemed so enthusiastic.

I did a little investigating, and it turned out that she had been teaching Chinese (Mandarin) to Columbans in Taiwan, including students on their First Missionary Assignment, priests and lay missionaries, for 30 years.

We met in a coffee shop in the city of Hsinchu. Her humour and generosity were immediately evident as she smiled encouragingly at my bumbling attempts at greeting her in Mandarin.

Although Teacher Ou has always been a Buddhist, many of her educational experiences have been in Catholic institutions. As a child, she attended a Catholic school and then went on to teach Chinese to (non-Columban) missionaries at a university in Taipei. Her enthusiasm for teaching foreigners is rooted in her passion for Chinese culture. She studied Chinese literature at university and is keen on Chinese Opera, calligraphy, theatre, music and many other aspects of the culture.

After marrying, she needed to move from Taipei to Hsinchu. For a year, she took the 90 minute commute by train to the capital to teach, but this proved exhausting. At that time, there was no opportunity to teach foreigners in Hsinchu, so she looked for other work. "But nobody would hire me. I'm not a good secretary!" She explained with a huge smile. An introduction via a friend led to her first meeting with the Columbans.

Columban Frs Kevin and Peter O'Neill were planning to move nearby and were looking for a teacher - to start in six months. She remembers that this was agreed at their first meeting, and then there was no communication for half a year. Her friends were concerned and encouraged her to look for other

opportunities. "What if these foreigners don't show up?" they said, but she trusted they would. "Priests don't tell lies!" she said.

Her faith was rewarded, and the rest is history. In fact, her neighbours were amazed. "Teacher Ou," they said, "your student, he really studies hard - he comes twice every day," not realising that Kevin and Peter are identical twins! Teacher Ou is still close to Kevin and Peter. She and her husband have visited them and their family in Australia. This theme of friendship and family runs through the conversation.

Most Columbans continue to learn Chinese throughout their time in Taiwan, so some of her students have been with her for over ten years. She explains that as an educator, she becomes a companion and "When I accompany people, I really feel I use my gifts."

She finds this enjoyable and satisfying and explains that all her teacher friends have gone through times when they wanted to quit, but she never has. She strikes me as someone clearly living her vocation.

Her faith was rewarded, and the rest is history. In fact, her neighbours were amazed. "Teacher Ou," they said, "your student, he really studies hard - he comes twice every day," not realising that Kevin and Peter are identical twins!

She described seeing her students go through culture shock, a common experience for people living in a culture outside their own. She says that for the first months, everything is enjoyable and interesting: the "honeymoon" period. Then, they cannot hide a period of homesickness, poor sleep and frustration before they settle down. She supports them by listening and through compassionate teaching.

"Because of my relationship with the Columbans, I love HIV patients, I love indigenous peoples, I love migrant workers, I love people with special needs..."

On arriving in Taiwan, a Columban spends a year learning Chinese full-time, after which Teacher Ou focuses on relevant language for their ministries. This involves listening to them, understanding what they do, reflecting on this, and then creating bespoke learning appropriate for their specific mission and ministry. "My living room is like a library," she says. The breadth of her library truly speaks to her commitment and the changing face of the Columban Mission in Taiwan, including English, Korean, HIV/AIDS, and special needs educational materials. It is evident that Teacher Ou admires the Columbans. "They are doing something I could never do." She describes them as open, patient and humble and notes, "They really love the people they serve."

It's not only a job. It's mission - a sentiment I can't help but notice is also true of her. She was particularly impressed with their commitment in the face of the pandemic: "When I saw them adapting during COVID, I felt happy. Nothing can knock them; nothing can stop them. They find a way to fulfil their mission."

My final question is about how knowing the Columbans has affected her. She responds that they have changed her life and expanded her heart. "Because of my relationship with the Columbans, I love HIV patients, I love indigenous peoples, I love migrant workers, I love people with special needs. Their love makes my life richer ... the Columbans are the pen, trying to write something God wants them to write. I'm not the pen. Maybe I'm one kind of ink?"



James and Teacher Ou meet in a coffee shop in the city of Hsinchu.
Photo: James Trewby

On arriving in Taiwan, a Columban spends a year learning Chinese full-time, after which Teacher Ou focuses on relevant language for their ministries.

JAMES TREWBY

James Trewby is the Columban Justice, Peace & Ecology Coordinator in Britain.

2024 Season of Creation School Competition Winners

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WINNERS

1st Place

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SIGNED AND SEALED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

The motto of St Columban was: “We belong to Christ, not ourselves” (*Christi Simus Non Nostri*). St Paul tells us we belong to Christ because, at our baptism, the Holy Spirit impressed God’s seal on our hearts (Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30).

I reflected on this passage from St Paul on the day it was marked as the first reading for Mass. Then, the same week that this reading occurred, I sealed a contract using my personal seal. It was with a sound engineer to install a sound system for our church. (I strongly feel that Scripture read aloud in the church should come over loud and clear, and this is particularly important for the elderly whose hearing has become impaired.) So, a contract was made between the sound engineer and me as the community representative - the document had his red seal and mine. He guaranteed the specified work; I guaranteed payment.

Paul wrote in Greek, and the word used for “seal” means that when two parties make a contract, they promise fulfilment by stamping their personal mark.

This is what our God is doing for us - shades of the Covenant Promise. We belong to Christ; we are a member of God’s family. The Holy Spirit guarantees non-ending love.

My seal was carved from a cow’s horn 60 years ago. The Hanya San (carver of seals) was an elderly craftsman who used a super-fine blade and wore magnifying headgear - the same as jewellers wear. The carving is as distinctive as a signature. My seal has my name in the Japanese syllables “KENZU” (Cairns) and is registered at the city office. I must use it to validate a contract, withdraw money from a bank, receive a registered letter and the like. It takes the place of a signature as used in the West.

Seals have been used in China and Japan for centuries. A seal is part of daily life for me, as it was for St Paul 2000 years ago. My seal is first pressed into a blood-coloured paste that in Japanese is called “Niku” (i.e. flesh). However, there are signs that the seal may vanish from Japan. The Government is vigorously promoting “digitalisation”, which will cast seals into history - except for artists, who will probably continue to put their seals onto their paintings and authorise copies to assure anyone who buys the painting that it is genuinely the artist’s work.

I find it most encouraging to know that I belong to Christ, who is ever at my side and tells me solemnly that he is my brother and friend. This mutual contract between us and the Holy Spirit is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. It has no conditions and lasts in this life and the next.

FR BARRY CAIRNS

Columban Fr Barry Cairns lives and works in Japan.

A LONG AND FRUITFUL LIFE

FR CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH BAKER 1928 – 2024

Columban Fr Christopher Joseph Baker's long and fruitful life was dedicated first to educating future priests and then to hands-on service to the neediest of God's people.

Chris was born on March 14, 1928, in Brighton, Melbourne. His family lived near Tatura, a small town to the north of Melbourne. Most of his early education was at state schools. His family lost their farm in the north during the global depression following the Wall Street Stock Exchange collapse of October 1929. They moved to Cobden in south-eastern Victoria and Chris went to St Patrick's Christian Brothers boarding school for the final two years of high school.

He entered the Columban seminary in Essendon in February 1944 and was ordained on September 23, 1950, by Archbishop Daniel Mannix in St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne. He was then appointed to Rome to do postgraduate studies in theology and scripture, graduating with a doctorate in theology and later with a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture.

On return to Australia, Chris joined the staff at the Columban seminary in Wahroonga, a suburb on the north shore of Sydney Harbour. He remained on staff for many years, followed by a six-year stint as Rector. Then, in 1977, his life took a turn when he was appointed to Peru. Following lessons in the Spanish language in Cochabamba, Bolivia, Chris began parish work as an assistant and later as parish priest of a huge, sprawling parish that was subsequently subdivided into various parishes. He might have thought he'd be left in peace in his parish in Peru, but no such luck.

He kept up to date with his biblical studies and returned to Rome for studies on both the Bible and liberation theology. On his return to Peru, he dedicated a year to writing a book on the five main covenants in the Bible and teaching in his "spare" time.

Chris was appointed to Ireland as editor of *Columban Intercom*, beginning in May 1989 and continuing until June 1997. In 1991, he produced the book *Covenant*



and *Liberation: Giving New Heart to God's Endangered Family*, which was published by Peter Lang in Frankfurt Am Main, Germany.

On signing off from the Intercom job, Chris returned to Australia for a break, but Peru continued to call him. On returning to Lima, he took on the difficult task as the pastor of a poor inner-city parish constructed on an old garbage dump dating back to 1535 when Lima, located on the west coast of South America, was founded by Francisco Pizarro, the leader of the Spanish conquest of South America.

He was parish priest there for four years, one of his most memorable legacies being to help found an institution that supported people with physical disabilities. He continued to support this institution for 18 years, showing a talent for raising money and spending it wisely in favour of those most in need.

Chris retired to Essendon in 2018 but never stopped reading, writing, and supporting others. He insisted on celebrating in a significant way the 74th anniversary of his ordination, possibly just in case he did not make it to his 75th. He died peacefully in hospital surrounded by the most supportive of nurses.

ST COLUMBANS MISSION SOCIETY

Photos: St Columbans Mission Society



MIGRANTS AS MISSIONARIES



As an initial effort to explore the theme of “migrants as missionaries” I am relying largely on the work by Martha Th. Frederiks entitled “Mission and Migration”, chapter 38 of *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

The argument that underlies my exploration of this theme is that migrant communities have played as significant a role in the spread of Christianity as that of individual missionaries. The story of the initial growth of the Church throughout the Mediterranean world has understandably emphasised the work of Paul of Tarsus and other remarkable individuals who journeyed from place to place throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, setting up communities wherever they went, writing letters and accounts of Jesus’ life, and laying the foundations of the early Church. But there is another parallel story that tells of how groups of Christians, sometimes intentionally and sometimes because of persecution, left their places of origin to find work or safety or new opportunities and, in doing so, were deliberately or accidentally responsible for the steady growth of the Church.

The story of migrants being the instruments of Christian mission includes many further chapters throughout the history of the Church. As Frederiks writes, “Be it Roman soldiers in the British Isles, Syrian traders in China, British Puritans in North America, Portuguese settlers in Cape Verde, or Indian labor migrants in the Gulf States, people on the move have played an important role in the dispersion of Christianity.” (ibid., p. 670)

In my last article, I noted some of the problems that Frederiks raises about the use of the terms “mission” and “migration”.

Here I want to briefly look at the research into the impact of migration on the work of world mission. First, the impact of migration has not always been positive. There are many stories of how migration has resulted in a decline in Christianity, such as when Christians have been forced to leave their homes because of war or natural disasters. Secondly, in most cases migrant communities did not deliberately set out to convert their hosts. Obviously, they sought to live in harmony with their neighbours because they were newcomers desperately looking for safe haven.

Often, migrants would add to the vibrancy and numbers of established churches. The church was often the one place where they could feel at home in a foreign land. Local congregations were also keen to welcome them into their midst because of dwindling numbers and ageing communities. The research into this phenomenon which is called “reverse mission” is quite considerable. It is, as Frederiks explains, the effort of “Africans, Asians and Latin Americans striving to re-evangelise the secularized West”. (ibid., p. 673)

It is important, however, to make clear that this missionary activity by migrant communities is not restricted to the work of conversion or evangelisation. Some of these migrant communities have also engaged in a whole range of activities, such as food-banks, rehabilitation centres, child and health care, language courses and care for undocumented immigrants. In very practical ways, then, migration is helping us to expand our understanding of and appreciation for the broader dimensions of mission.

FR TOM ROUSE

Columban Fr Tom Rouse is the Regional Councillor for New Zealand.

MISSION INTENTIONS

POPE FRANCIS

January - For the right to an education: Let us pray for migrants, refugees and those affected by war, that their right to an education, which is necessary to build a better world, might always be respected.

February - For vocations to the priesthood and religious life: Let us pray that the ecclesial community might welcome the desires and doubts of those young people who feel a call to serve Christ’s mission in the priesthood and religious life.

COLUMBAN ACTIVITIES Crossword puzzle

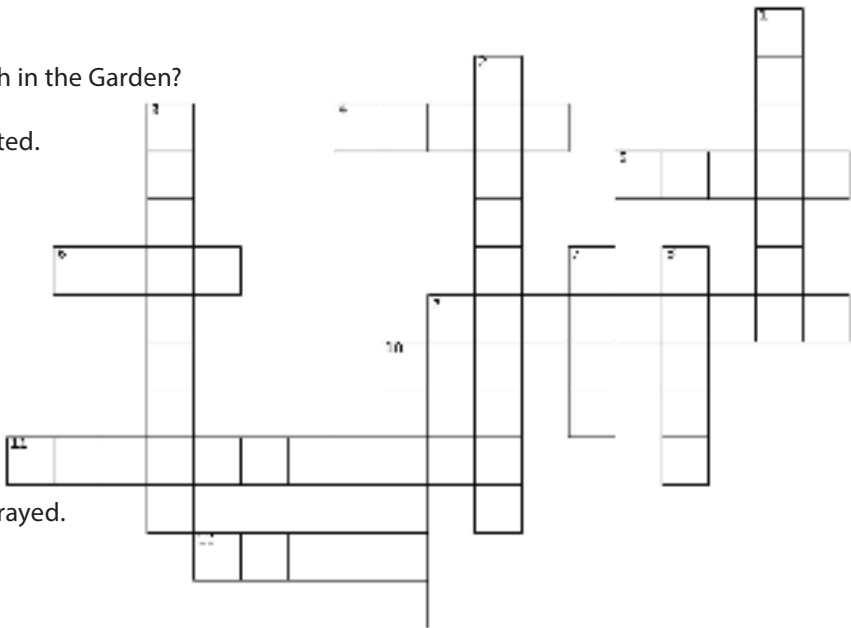
SCAN QR CODE to read the January & February 2025 Columban Calendar Art Guides and complete the crossword puzzle.

ACROSS

- 4. The disciple who denied Jesus three times.
- 5. Who appeared from heaven to give Jesus strength in the Garden?
- 6. Jesus' mother.
- 9. The city where the Garden of Gethsemane is located.
- 11. The event where Jesus was put to death.
- 12. The kind of tree present in the Garden of Gethsemane.

DOWN

- 1. The father of James and John.
- 2. The place where Christ prayed before his arrest.
- 3. The Jewish law requirement for Mary after the birth of Jesus.
- 7. The gospel that mentions the angel giving strength to Jesus.
- 8. One of the disciples who fell asleep while Jesus prayed.
- 10. The hill from which Gethsemane can be seen.



ANSWERS:
ACROSS: 4. Peter, 5. angel, 6. Mary, 9. Jerusalem, 11. Crucifixion, 12. olive
DOWN: 1. Zebedee, 2. Gethsemane, 3. Sacrifice, 7. Luke, 8. James, 10. Olives



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'Do what you can' Bishop Edward J Galvin



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