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CONTENTS

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Cover photo: Columban Sr Enda Im working with special need children in Myitkyina, Myanmar.

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3 **FROM THE DIRECTOR**
THE HEART OF THE NICENE CREED

4-5 **THE GOLDEN LAND**
Columban Sr Enda Im from South Korea writes about the Columban Sisters' mission to Myanmar, a country beset by problems and challenges.

6-7 **RETURNING, REMEMBERING, RENEWED**
Chrissie Fitzpatrick recalls an unforgettable period in her life as a Columban lay missionary in South Korea.

8-9 **FROM FAR TO NEAR: EGYPT AND GOD'S TRANSFORMING PRESENCE**

10-11 **MESSING ABOUT IN BOATS**
Columban Fr John Burger mulls over his years "happily afloat" and how sailing can bring people together - a goal of every missionary.

12-13 **GOLD IN THE GRAVEL**

14-15 **MEMORIES THAT INSPIRE MISSION**

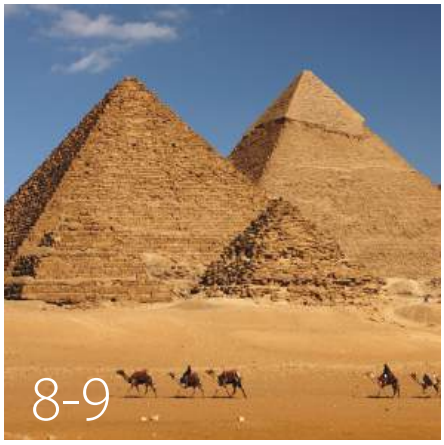
16 **FR ROBERT BRENNAN'S DIAMOND JUBILEE: A LIFE POURED OUT WITH THE POOR IN KOREA**

17 **FR PAUL MCGEE'S DIAMOND JUBILEE: CELEBRATING A FAITHFUL JOURNEY**

18-19 **MIRRIHUE ALTO**
Columban Fr Alvaro Martinez describes the realisation of his long-term dream to reintroduce native species and thus revitalise the ecosystem.

19 **PEACE WITH CREATION**
Season of Creation - 2025 Columban School Competition

20-21 **CHINA FORMATION COMMITTEE PROGRAMS**



22 **GOOD NEWS FROM AFAR**

22 **MISSION INTENTIONS**
July 2025

23 **COLUMBAN ART CALENDAR CROSSWORD PUZZLE**

23 **GIFT IN WILL**
Remember the Columbans in your Will.

THE HEART OF THE NICENE CREED

Marking the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea

Seventeen hundred years ago, the Church was torn by intense debates about the identity and nature of Jesus Christ. Arius and his followers, seeking to safeguard the strict monotheism of ancient Israel, claimed that Christ was subordinate to the Father - not eternal, but created in time and later "divinised." Others insisted that Christ was co-equal with the Father, the eternal Word of God "made flesh" (Jn 1:14). Still others proposed that Christ was neither fully divine nor fully human but a unique hybrid. Some argued that Father, Son, and Spirit were merely different "modes" of God's activity in the world.

These theological disputes were not just intellectual disagreements - they stirred deep passions and at times even violence. Concerned by the disruption, Emperor Constantine convened the first ecumenical council in 325 AD, bringing 318 bishops together in the city of Nicaea (modern-day Iznik, Turkey). Their goal: to restore unity and clarify the Church's faith.

Rising above division, the bishops solemnly affirmed core truths of the faith. Their work laid the foundation for the doctrine of the Trinity which was further refined at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, giving us the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed - now simply called the *Nicene Creed*, recited at Sunday Mass.

This creed contains ten core statements of faith about God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, incarnation, paschal mystery, final judgment, church, baptism, resurrection, and eternal life. These truths became a beacon of unity then - and remain so today. For a deeper treatment, the Vatican's *International Theological Commission* has produced an excellent resource: *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour,* marking this milestone anniversary. But here, I want to focus on the Creed's affirmation of Jesus Christ.

To some, the original theological disputes may seem like abstract hair-splitting. In fact, they matter eternally. If Jesus is only human, we are not saved - we have no access to the divine. But if Jesus is only divine, we are still not saved - he has not become one of us, entered our human story, suffered with us and for us. Only if Jesus is fully divine and fully human can he truly be Emmanuel, "God-with-us" (Mt 1:23), the mediator between God and humanity.

The Nicene Creed powerfully affirms both truths. First, Christ's divinity: *I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.*

Then, Christ's humanity: *For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.*

This dual affirmation grounds our salvation and new identity in Christ. At every Mass, the priest prays: *"May we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." This mystery empowers the missionary discipleship of all the baptised.*

The Creed also assures us that all creation has meaning and value: *Through him all things were made. God is present to all peoples, every culture and religion, to the entire natural world.*

It summarises Christ's earthly life: *He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered death and was buried, rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*

That is, Jesus understands our human experience - our joys and sufferings, griefs and anxieties. He shows mercy and compassion and invites us to do the same.

It affirms his victory: *He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

This gives us hope. Despite life's challenges, we trust that his kingdom will prevail. In all, the Nicene Creed proclaims the timeless truth of Jesus Christ - Saviour, Lord, Friend, Brother, Companion, our Way, our Truth, and our Life (Jn 14:6). May we proclaim it each Sunday with renewed faith and fervour.

REV DR PATRICK MCINERNEY
Regional Director of Oceania

THE GOLDEN LAND

On May 13, 1947, four Missionary Sisters of St Columban left Ireland for our first foundation in what was then known as Burma (now known as Myanmar), a country once dubbed the rice bowl of Asia. As it was only a couple of years after World War II, ships were scarce. So, the Sisters had to travel in a troop ship on which conditions and amenities were austere, to say the least. The ship called at no ports along the route because of strikes in all the ports.

The Sisters arrived in Rangoon three weeks after departing Ireland. On landing, they saw a city devastated by war and now lying in shambles. Where there had previously been prosperity, the people now flocked to the streets searching for something to eat.

Before long, the Sisters found themselves on an army plane bound for Myitkyina in the north. Here, as was the experience of the first Columban Sisters arriving in China, no house was ready for them, so they stayed in the priest's house until their own house was built. With the urgent need for education very apparent to the Sisters, they immediately assumed responsibility for the school begun by the Columban Fathers.

When the school opened, the roll call numbered 125 and included Burmans, Shans, Karens, and Kachins. As no school had operated during the war years, the opening of the Sisters' school was a truly exciting event. A few years later, a boarding school was opened to focus on developing the Kachin youth, who were the hope for the future development of the Church in Burma.

While the mission was developing for the Sisters, the political situation in the country became very precarious. In 1947, just as the British were handing over the government of Burma to the Burmese people, General Aung San and his government were assassinated by a rival group. At this time, it was also becoming difficult to secure visas for new Sisters joining the first group, which resulted in long delays before they arrived. But this did not deter the Sisters from expanding their service to the people.

As the number of pupils and the educational standards grew in the schools, the Sisters were also developing strong bonds of love and friendship with the people. This resulted in a few local young women being attracted to the Columban Sisters' way of life.

Given the political unrest in the country, however, plans to build a novitiate were suspended. As the Sisters continued to grow closer to the people, they became more aware of the need for medical services. The arrival of two Sisters who were nurses led to the setting up of a clinic in a new area, which was in the Kachin Independent Army's (KIA) territory. Tragically, due to the fighting between the KIA and the Burmese Army, the clinic and convent had to be closed.

As the number of pupils and the educational standards grew in the schools, the Sisters were also developing strong bonds of love and friendship with the people. This resulted in a few local young women being attracted to the Columban Sisters' way of life.

Over the next few years, the political situation continued to deteriorate, and the atmosphere in which the Sisters were living became more and more tense. Soon, as foreigners, they were not allowed to continue administering the school. Undaunted, they then spent their time among the people, travelling by bicycle to visit families. This afforded them unforgettable opportunities to enter more deeply into the lives of the people and to grow even closer to them. At the same time, it was becoming clear that their situation was unstable. So, preparations began in 1966 for a quiet departure after nineteen years from the land and people they had come to love.

Columban Srs Theresa Kim (left - right), Kathleen Geaney and Cris de Leon with the Mandalay Interfaith group. Photo: Sr Enda Im SSC

But it was with great joy that in 2003, five Columban Sisters responded to the call to return to Burma (renamed Myanmar in 1989). Both the people in Myitkyina and the Columban Sisters were so happy to meet again after a long separation. As the Sisters settled into life once again, they courageously engaged in various areas of ministry where people needed our presence and accompaniment. These included running a language school, caring for people with HIV, community health in rural areas, religious/priestly formation, drug rehabilitation, and youth and biblical ministry. After a few years, we began to reach out in the Mandalay diocese to respond to the call to live "unity in diversity". Here, the Sisters became engaged in inter-faith dialogue at every level of life in the Mandalay community.

Sadly, a few years ago, the people of Myanmar found themselves once again struggling against the military. The hope for a better future that they once had in their hearts disappeared like an illusion. The country once again fell into great confusion and suffering. Cities, villages and rural areas were exposed to armed conflict, and temples and churches were targeted and destroyed. Many people had to leave their homes behind and hide in the jungle or find shelter in refugee camps.

Amid this uncertainty, our presence as Columban Missionaries continues as we live and work with the people and seek hope in the midst of despair. We continue to work actively in various areas of need. As suffering continues to wound people's lives, we respond to the call to accompany them in their struggle by collaborating in psychotherapy programs for those who are experiencing psychological or physical difficulties, for women who experience domestic violence, and trauma-healing processes that aim to support young people and children in refugee camps. Just like our early Sisters, we believe empowering young people and the next generation is the way to build up the country for a better future.

SR ENDA IM
Columban Sister Enda Im lives and works in Myanmar.

Photo: canva.com/u_whytwjfk7b

RETURNING, REMEMBERING, RENEWED

I served as a Columban Lay Missionary in Korea from 1994 to 2000. Our team was the first lay missionary team received in Korea, and five of us Irish lay missionaries arrived at the end of May 1994 to a very hot summer in Korea.

There was so much to learn in a country so different from our home in Ireland, but we all settled in and found our respective ministries in Korea without too much trouble. There were a lot of Columban priests and sisters in Korea at that time. The Korean Church appeared, to us, to be thriving with lots of vocations and the churches full. I lived and worked in Jeollanamdo Gwangju and loved the more rural feel of Gwangju.

The lay missionary training we received in Dalgan Park, Ireland, gave us a good grounding in prayer and reading scripture as well as confidence in our baptismal call to mission and service. After our first term of three years finished, we went home, and I returned for a second term alone. During that second term, I worked with women involved in the sex industry in Gwangju.

After my second term of three years, I returned home, intent on finding my place in the Church in Ireland. I also needed to work. While holding down a paying job, I volunteered with Ruhama (a Dublin-based non-government organisation that works with women affected by prostitution and other forms of commercial exploitation) and studied theology part-time at All Hallows College. I got busy with family life, but that sense of call to mission never left. I was always involved in some voluntary work besides my day job. I never lost touch with Columbans, even though I was no longer a Columban lay missionary in Korea. I got involved in ecological groups in my local parish, the green schools programme, mental health support groups, and teaching literacy. More recently,

We all have challenges and victories in work, family, faith, health, and life choices, but as Church members, we are part of a bigger community of support for living life well.

I volunteered at the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. I also do technical work with my church community to make our weekly liturgy available on Zoom and YouTube.

Through it all, I've never forgotten my experience in Korea, where I got to know many Korean women of all ages. I learned a lot from them about endurance and patience and had a lot of fun, too, which all helped me in my own life afterwards. I learned how valuable it is to be present to others in their joy and their pain.

This year, when I made the journey back to Korea after almost 25 years, I had many concerns about what it would be like. It turned out to be fantastic. I felt completely at home in Korea in many ways and loved just listening to the people speak. My Korean language came back bit by bit. It was just wonderful to meet so many people I had known back then and catch up on life and all that has happened in the last 25 years, trading stories of work, family, church, and friends. It was wonderful to meet so many people who have continued the mission in Korea, to see some of the Columbans engaging in mission in the Korean Church in different ways, to see people who were in formation as seminarians and novices back in the 90s and active in Columban mission, and to be at the ordination of young Columban missionaries. It was great to chat about the mission of the Church in Korea and the Church in Ireland and to discuss developments and changes in both places. I really believe the people we meet and choose to align ourselves with become part of the colourful tapestry that is our life to date.

Reflecting on 25 years of life together covers dreams fulfilled and forgotten, sadness, joy, pain, grief, and laughter. We all have challenges and victories in work, family, faith, health, and life choices, but as Church members, we are part of a bigger community of support for living life well. I particularly notice in Dublin that since the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer people come to church, but those that do come seem to want more and are willing to do more. I am probably more hopeful about faith and the Church in Ireland nowadays than for a long time, and I'm happy and curious to see what unfolds next both in Korea and Ireland.

Chrissie Fitzpatrick (centre) with former Columban lay missionaries Victoria Cho Puni (left) and Emanuella Kim Hyunsook (right). Photo: Chrissie Fitzpatrick

I am eternally grateful that I had the chance to be a Columban lay missionary in Korea. It gave me the understanding and patience to find ways to be on mission wherever I am in the world, and that's a nice feeling indeed! The mission continues even when the cast changes.

CHRISSIE FITZPATRICK
Columban lay missionary Chrissie Fitzpatrick lives in Ireland.

REFLECTION

FROM FAR TO NEAR: EGYPT AND GOD'S TRANSFORMING PRESENCE

Photo: canva.com/sculpies

During the Sunday homily last week, the priest shared a reflection that stayed with me long after Mass. He spoke about Egypt in the Bible, not just as a physical place but as a symbol of a deep spiritual journey.

As I pondered this, I discovered that Egypt - my country of birth - is mentioned 659 times in Scripture, the second most-referenced country after Israel. That number alone caught my attention, but even more striking is how Egypt's story mirrors the path many of us take in our faith: from being far from God to coming to know Him and ultimately learning to dwell with Him.

In the early books of the Bible, Egypt represents a place of bondage, idolatry, and spiritual resistance. It was in Egypt that the Israelites suffered under the harsh rule of Pharaoh, their lives made bitter by forced labour. Egypt, with all its grandeur and might, stood as a nation that did not know or honour the God of Israel. Pharaoh's hardened heart is often seen as a warning against pride and self-reliance, which block us from receiving God's grace. The prophet Ezekiel even speaks of God standing against Pharaoh, likening him to a monster of the Nile, powerful but ultimately accountable to the Sovereign Lord. In its early biblical role, Egypt represents the world turned inward, distant from the trustworthy source of life.

Yet Egypt was not cast off. What touched me most in the homily was the reminder that God reveals

BLESS EGYPT

Himself even to those far from Him. Through the signs and wonders of the Exodus, God's intention was not simply to free Israel but also to make Himself known to the Egyptians. "The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord," God says in Exodus. These words echo throughout the biblical narrative as a promise of revelation. Even in judgment, God's desire is not to punish but to transform. This is a God who reaches out, who speaks through plagues, prophets, and miracles to awaken even the most hardened hearts.

The prophet Isaiah offers one of the most beautiful visions of this transformation. He speaks of a time when Egypt, once opposed to God, will worship Him with offerings and keep vows in His name. The same people who once enslaved God's chosen ones are pictured kneeling before the altar in sincere worship. This reversal is not forced - it is born out of recognition and reverence.

"Blessed be Egypt, my people." (Isaiah 19:25). This stunning phrase reminds us that no one is beyond God's embrace.

Alongside Assyria and Israel, Egypt is called a blessing on the earth. It's a complete re-imagining of identity: from stranger to family, from oppressor to blessed.

What does this mean for us today? Sitting with these scriptures, I saw that Egypt's journey is deeply personal. At some point, each of us finds ourselves in a spiritual Egypt - distant from God, perhaps even unknowingly resisting Him. But God is never far. He comes to us in our places of confusion, stubbornness, and fear. He reveals Himself in unexpected ways through moments of grace, acts of kindness, the voice of a friend, or the stirring of our conscience. And when we respond, however imperfectly, He draws us near and calls us His own.

This journey from far to near is not just Egypt's story - it is ours. It is the story of how God takes what was broken, makes it whole, and turns hearts of stone into hearts that worship. It is the story of grace that never gives up, of a God who desires all nations, peoples, and individuals to know Him and live in His love.

May we be encouraged by Egypt's transformation. If God could speak to Pharaoh, bless Egypt, and call them His people, surely there is hope for all of us? Let us open our hearts anew to the One who reaches across every border, breaks every chain, and calls each of us by name.

May the God of Egypt, Assyria, and Israel be with you today and always.

MAHA SHAWKY
Maha Shawky, Columban Mission Centre CEO, Australia.

Yet Egypt was not cast off. What touched me most in the homily was the reminder that God reveals Himself even to those far from Him. Through the signs and wonders of the Exodus, God's intention was not simply to free Israel but also to make Himself known to the Egyptians. "The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord," God says in Exodus. These words echo throughout the biblical narrative as a promise of revelation. Even in judgment, God's desire is not to punish but to transform.

MESSING ABOUT IN **BOATS**

For most of my life, I have agreed with the water rat in *The Wind in the Willows:* "Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats."

I have always enjoyed being on a boat and feel happy when afloat.

When I was growing up, we lived near the Delaware River in the United States. I looked forward to a special day each summer. It involved spending a day on the river with one of my dad's cousins who owned a cabin cruiser. We enjoyed seeing some landmarks from an entirely different angle.

Some years later, in 1972, toward the end of my seminary training, when I was getting ready for ordination as a priest, I was assigned as a deacon to a Columban parish on St Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The harbour of Charlotte Amalie was a busy place with cruise ships bringing tourists and sail boats, while small vessels brought produce from the other islands. At first, I thought all those white-painted cruise ships in the harbour were indistinguishable. But after a few months, instead of checking a calendar, I noticed myself glancing at the harbour to tell the day of the week: "Today is Friday since the *Ambassador* and the *Adventurer* are in."

During the 1980s, while living in Chicago, I learned to enjoy sailing in a catboat on Lake Michigan. You only had to be a few hundred yards offshore to exchange the noise and traffic of Lake Shore Drive for fresh air and quiet. I also learned about all the work it takes to keep a sail boat "shipshape."

Inside the ship. Photos: Fr John Burger SSC

About 20 years later, during the time I was living in Dublin, Ireland, I was an occasional volunteer at the Apostleship of the Sea. They had a large old town-house on the north bank of the River Liffey in the city centre and a van that used to collect crewmen from the ships in the outer harbour and bring them into the centre where they could relax and get phone cards to contact their families in their home countries. Some of them would shop for things to take home or send home.

When I was Regional Director of the Columban Fathers in Nebraska - far from salt water - I was going through my mail and received a brochure from the Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America, recruiting priests to join their ministry to people of the sea. I passed along their request through the regional newsletter, but there was not much response. While some priests may like the idea of a week or more on a cruise ship, I know others who remember being seasick. For that or other reasons, they would consider the prospect about as attractive as jail time.

Photo: canva.com/welcomia

Columban Fr John Burger.

A long cruise can be an opportunity to meet new people. One of my favourite quotations is something I heard the famous Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez say: "If you want to be a missionary, make friends." Even afloat, one can be making friends.

Today's cruise ships are like floating resort towns. The most recently constructed ships carry thousands of passengers and crew and offer plenty of entertainment and dining options, shops, casinos, and theatres.

Like the social classes on land, there are two groups of people on a ship - passengers and crew, separate and unequal. The chaplain is in a category somewhere in between.

Some of the other problems we face on land also face us at sea. For example, reducing the carbon footprint is a serious issue, as is preventing diseases from being transmitted in a somewhat confined environment.

The passengers are, of course, on vacation and seeking relaxation. They don't have to do the usual daily chores or think about what to cook for dinner. Instead, they can attend shows, lectures, fitness presentations, cooking classes, and movies. Or they can lounge on the deck with a good book and a view of the horizon (my favourite).

There are several cruise lines that cater to people who would not consider cruising at Christmas or Easter unless they knew there would be services on board. A few lines even try to provide daily mass for those whose day would not be complete without attending mass. Apostleship of the Sea-USA priests are on-board for the spiritual and pastoral care of passengers. They provide the sacraments to Catholics and do an ecumenical service for Protestants who want to do participate in Sunday worship. And, of course, priests are present if an emergency were to develop.

Columban Fr Ron Kelso and I have been friends since our first year in the seminary. We were ordained together and both went on mission to Japan and last year, we celebrated our 50th anniversary of ordination together. Fr Ron received an Apostleship of the Sea chaplaincy assignment that allowed him to take a guest on a voyage to Spain, and he invited me to join him. Because it was a long, slow crossing, there were a good few days to get to know the people who attended the daily masses. There was a couple who were friends of a Columban. Usually, there are a few people among the passengers who are used to serving as lectors or cantors in their home parishes and are happy to take on those roles at the masses.

A long cruise can be an opportunity to meet new people. One of my favourite quotations is something I heard the famous Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, say: "If you want to be a missionary, make friends." Even afloat, one can be making friends.

FR JOHN BURGER
Columban Fr John Burger lives and works in the United States.

APOSTLESHIP OF THE SEA USA

GOLD IN THE GRAVEL

Students from the Catholic Centre of Academic Excellence (CCAE).

Everyone in Pakistan says that "education is the key" for young people to escape from poverty and for the country to develop. This is a comforting platitude for the "everyone" who sit in offices and plan but the reality is different in the slum areas of the big cities in Pakistan where people worry about surviving on meagre incomes.

Columban Fr Robert McCulloch with Maheer Shalal Hashbaz when he was in Grade 8 at St Bonaventure High School, Issa Nagri.

Photos: Fr Robert McCulloch SSC

Pakistan spends only 0.8% of GDP on education. International aid to Pakistan makes education a priority but how does this explain that only 27% of children complete high school and that the national literacy rate is only 60.6%. Another educational planning platitude is that "education of girls has to be the priority" but how does this take into account the fact that in the Catholic community in Pakistan there is a higher percentage of girls being educated while their brothers are illiterate or have only been to school for a few years.

Since the late 1970s there has been a huge social change among Pakistani Catholics. Tens of thousands of families left the Punjab where they were working as agricultural labourers and moved to the south of the country hoping to get land in the desert areas in the Sindh province where irrigation canals connected to the Indus River were being built. But most ended up in the big cities of Karachi and Hyderabad as menial labourers or street sweepers.

For some, however, leaving the Punjab and moving to the south of Pakistan was successful. The positive results of the tough decision made by grandparents and parents to pull up roots and move can be seen in their children. A good example is Eric Siraj who is the administrator of St Elizabeth Hospital in Hyderabad. In 1975 his parents left the Punjab. They were able to get some good land and build a small family home in a nearby town. They were totally illiterate but they realized that moving brought new opportunities for their children. They made sure that all of them went to school, stayed in school, and continued into higher education. Eric's parents have the contentment that their children and grandchildren have moved up and beyond from being illiterate and impoverished farm labourers as they were 50 years ago as a newly-married couple in the Punjab.

This is the success story of some. Many others have not been as fortunate and this very often has been due to bad family decisions. Religious discrimination against

Eric Siraj, administrator (fourth from the left), Columban Fr Robert McCulloch (right) amongst the staff at St Elizabeth's Hospital in Pakistan.

Christians which is an entrenched and inescapable reality in Pakistan is a major issue but it is not the full story and is often used as the excuse. The situation of more than 400 Christian families living in Issa Nagri, a slum area Hyderabad, is a typical place to see this.

Issa Nagri is in the cathedral parish in Hyderabad. I took on pastoral care of Issa Nagri in 2001 at the same time as lecturing at the National Catholic Institute of Theology in Karachi and being its academic dean and having administrative responsibilities at St Elizabeth Hospital in Hyderabad.

Although Hyderabad is nearly 200kms from Karachi, I managed to be in Issa Nagri on Tuesday evenings and the weekends. There was already a church there and a Catholic school owned and managed by the Diocesan Board of Education.

Few Catholic children were in the school. Most pupils were Muslim. The social and economic situation of the Christians in Issa Nagri was pathetic. Poorly-built houses which reflected the poverty of the people, no sewerage or made roads or drains, intermittent electricity supply, alcohol abuse, proliferation of drugs, family instability and broken marriages. The after-work occupation of many of the men was gambling. It was a disaster environment for getting Catholic children to go to school or to remain in school. Little parental interest, no encouragement for the children, and an unreadiness or inability to pay the very low monthly school fees.

I felt that it was like a barren gravel pit; but ten years ago, it seemed that gold nuggets began to shine in the gravel. And this started what is now like an educational gold rush in Issa Nagri.

This is the result of hopes and planning and the generosity of donors coming together. Flickers of family stability among Catholics emerged from the darkness; a new dedicated principal was appointed to the Catholic school; in 2007 I began the Catholic Centre of Academic Excellence CCAE which enables Catholic boys in high school to overcome the barriers of religious discrimination through academic achievement and to obtain university admission on merit; and generous donors were ready to help. The previous desperate situation in Issa Nagri for Catholic children has been changed into one of achievement and hope. As is the case of Maheer Shalal Hashbaz.

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Maheer is 19 years old, and is the eldest of four children. His parents are solid Catholics. When he was in Grade 6 it seemed that his family financial situation meant he would have to leave school. Columban donors in Australia came to the rescue and began to support Maheer and eight other children in Issa Nagri.

From 2019-2023, after his school hours, Maheer attended the Catholic Centre of Academic Excellence which is totally supported by generous donors. He was awarded the Founder's Scholarship at CCAE in 2023 as the outstanding student in his graduating class. And he obtained admission on merit to the University of Sindh in 2023 where he is doing BSc in Physics.

Like Maheer, many other Catholic boys in Issa Nagri are becoming young confident Catholic high achievers. What was a gravel pit of desperation has now become a seam of gold of achievement.

FR ROBERT MCCULLOCH
Columban Fr Robert McCulloch worked in Pakistan for 34 years, and currently lives in Rome.

MEMORIES THAT INSPIRE MISSION

More than 95% of the population of the province of Lanao del Sur in the Philippines - where Marawi is situated - are Muslim, while Christians constitute less than 5%. For decades, Columban missionaries have striven to overcome distrust and hostility between these two communities by building bridges of mutual understanding, respect, and friendship. Below is a reflection by a former Columban seminarian from the Philippines, Alito Delos Santos, who continues to nurture the seeds sown by those Columban missionaries.

Fr Ramon Torres (second from left) and Alito Delos Santos (far right) with Muslim women doctors and members of the medical mission team.

On May 14, 2025, I accompanied Fr Ramon Torres to the city of Balabagan to retrieve election returns from the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting. These were required as part of the independent verification of the official election count. Despite reports of election-related violence in Malabang - a town we had to pass through - the roads were quiet and a calm atmosphere prevailed.

Upon arriving at Balabagan parish, I was astonished at seeing a large, vibrant crowd. I had expected a simple religious event on the final day of preparation for the annual parish festival but found instead a marriage ceremony involving ten couples - presided over by Bishop Edwin Dela Peña - as well as a temporary clinic operating on the church grounds. To my surprise, the medical team consisted largely of Muslim female doctors, their hijabs a striking symbol of interfaith generosity as they tended to patients of all faith traditions and none. Yes, that particular morning the "missionary church" in Balabagan had become the recipient of a missionary outreach by the local Muslims, a thought-provoking reversal of how many people think about mission.

The following day, May 15, my wife and I, who are members of Couples for Christ, returned to the same parish to join the local Catholic community for the

Photo: Alito Delos Santos

traditional celebration of the feast day of San Isidro Labrador. En route, we paused at the site where Columban missionary Fr Rufus Halley was martyred in 2001 - since it was his sacrifice for the sake of peace building in that province that had deeply influenced my decision to become a seminarian with the Missionary Society of St Columban.

When we arrived at San Isidro Parish around 9am, preparations for the festival were already well underway with tables, chairs, and a little stage set up in the midst of a Muslim-majority neighbourhood. The Mass in commemoration of San Isidro Labrador, which was led by Bishop Dela Peña, also commemorated the 55th anniversary of the foundation of that parish.

In his homily, the bishop recalled the growth of the parish, crediting the sacrifices of early Christians in that area, notably Fr Martin Dempsey, a Columban missionary and the first parish priest, who was shot dead in 1970 at the nearby Catholic High School where he had been teaching. His martyrdom became the foundation for the parish's enduring presence.

The fragile peace thereafter in Balabagan, particularly during the turbulent 1970s, prevented Fr Dempsey and his contemporary missionaries from witnessing the flourishing of that parish. Yet, their hope for improved Christian–Muslim relations endured. Even though fear of misunderstanding and hostility prevents some clergy from serving in that district up until today, the vision and courage of the Columban missionaries continue to inspire many ordinary Filipino Catholics to follow in their footsteps.

The sacrifices of Fr Dempsey, Fr Halley, and countless other missionaries inspire us Filipino Catholics today to continue Christ's mission through daily outreach and service to our Muslim sisters and brothers.

The word "martyr" - meaning witness - encapsulates their legacy. They bore witness to their faith not only by their deaths but also by their way of living.

Now, we feel called to continue their missionary efforts by fostering mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation between Muslims and Christians in our day-to-day lives.

My experiences in the city of Balabagan revealed a community of Muslims and Christians that is thriving despite some ongoing challenges.

The medical mission led by Muslim doctors and the joyous festival of a Catholic saint in a Muslim neighbourhood both demonstrate that peace-building is possible through courage, dedication, and perseverance.

As a member of Couples for Christ, I continue to value my background as a Columban seminarian and share it with other members of that organisation so that together we can help build a more stable and peaceful society with our Muslim neighbours - thereby becoming an inspiration for all those who live in similar circumstances, not only here in the Philippines but around the world.

ALITO DELOS SANTOS & FR TIM MULROY
Alito Delos Santos is a former Columban seminarian from the Philippines.

FR ROBERT BRENNAN'S DIAMOND JUBILEE:
A LIFE POURED OUT WITH THE POOR IN KOREA

This year, we celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of ordination to Columban missionary priesthood of Fr Robert Brennan, a man whose quiet tenacity and unwavering faith have made a profound impact on the Church and society in Korea.

From the moment he stepped onto Korean soil in 1966, he has lived a life of service, witness and authentic missionary commitment to the Gospel and to the people of Korea.

Born on December 14, 1941, in Auckland, New Zealand, Robert was the eldest of five children to Robert Edward and Sadie Marie. He attended Good Shepherd Parish School in Balmoral and completed his secondary education with the Christian Brothers at St Peter's College, Epsom. Responding to the missionary call, he joined St Columban's in 1959 and completed his formation in Sassafras, Victoria, and Turramurra, NSW.

On July 3, 1965, he was ordained by Archbishop Liston at St Patrick's Cathedral in Auckland and on the following day he celebrated his first Mass at Good Shepherd Church.

Shortly afterwards, Fr Robert was appointed to Korea and arrived there in September 1966. After two years of intensive Korean language study, he began pastoral work in the rugged mountains of Kangwon province. His ministry in parishes like Sajik, Jeongseon and Wonju reflected a deep integration with the Korean Catholic people. He was not only a parish priest but also a community builder, establishing credit unions, supporting local farmers, building a church and later a clinic operated by the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.

In 1979 he proudly handed Jeongseon parish over to a Korean priest as a self-supporting faith community.

Fr Robert's missionary spirituality continued to grow through studies at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, where he earned a Master's Degree in Sacred Theology, focusing on Christology and mission. Back in Seoul, he advocated for the rights of people evicted from their homes due to urban redevelopment. His voice stood out in a society rapidly modernising, often at the expense of its most vulnerable citizens.

His next appointment was to the Korean Columban Formation Program as its inaugural Rector. This involved the establishment of a formation house and a programme of guidance for Korean Columban seminarians and also the production of vocation resources and publications. His leadership helped shape a new generation of Columban missionaries with a strong commitment to the poor and marginalised.

Moving on from the ministry of seminarian formation, in 1992 Fr Robert found another home and challenge in Samyangdong, one of Seoul's poorest hillside neighbourhoods. When the area was cleared for redevelopment, he stood in solidarity with the new homeless and displaced people. He helped to set up the Samyang Citizens' Network, establish the Kangbuk Housing Welfare Centre and founded the Hanbagaji Micro Credit Bank in 2009. His mission was one of advocacy, accompaniment, and creative pastoral care.

His efforts did not go unnoticed. In 2012, Fr Robert received the Seoul City Grand Prize for Welfare and was made an Honorary Citizen of Seoul.

Then in 2014, he was awarded the prestigious Asan Foundation Grand Peace Prize, which recognised his decades of tireless service to Korea's urban poor.

During six decades of Columban missionary priesthood, Fr Robert has walked with those most often left behind. His Diamond Jubilee is not just a recognition of years, but of many lives transformed, systems challenged, and a Gospel truly lived.

We thank Fr Robert and celebrate with him for his life of vision, faithfulness, courage and compassion. May his example continue to inspire Columban missionaries and disciples of Jesus everywhere for generations to come.

Photo: St Columbans Mission Society

FR PAUL MCGEE'S DIAMOND JUBILEE:
CELEBRATING A FAITHFUL JOURNEY

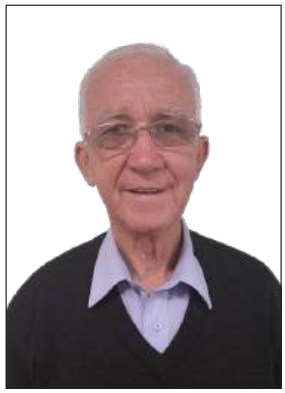
This year, the 2025 Jubilee Year: "Pilgrims of Hope", we give thanks for and celebrate the remarkable priestly jubilee of Fr Paul McGee, a Columban missionary whose life has been one of dedication, cultural immersion, and pastoral compassion across continents.

From the inner suburbs of Sydney to the rural communities of the Philippines and from Filipino families in Australia to Chinese Catholic communities in Sydney, Fr Paul has carried Christ's message of hope with quiet strength and enduring joy.

Born on November 8, 1941, in Camperdown, Sydney, Fr Paul was the fourth of five children to Vincent and Anne McGee. His early education spanned several Catholic schools in Ashbury, Campsie, and Lewisham, culminating at Lewisham High School. Feeling a call to missionary life, he entered the Columban seminary in Sassafras in 1959 and undertook six years of philosophy and theology at Turramurra. He was ordained on July 17, 1965, at St Mary's Cathedral by Cardinal Norman Gilroy and celebrated his first Mass the next day at St Joseph's Church, Rozelle.

Assigned to the Philippines shortly after ordination, Fr Paul arrived in 1966 and immersed himself in Tagalog at the Columban Central House in Manila. Over the next decade, he served in Zambales Province, including the parishes of Iba, Cabangan, and Olongapo City. Despite contracting hepatitis in 1974, he showed unwavering commitment and compassion in his ministry.

Following a brief assignment in Australia (1975–1978), where he assisted at the Far East office and built community with Filipino families, he returned to the Philippines for another 11 years. He ministered in Santa Cruz (Manila) and Botolan and Poonbato (Zambales Province) and provided pastoral support in communities often underserved and affected by poverty and natural disasters. In 1989, Fr Paul returned to Australia to contribute to Columban mission promotion and parish supply work in Queensland and South Australia. A notable chapter of his later ministry began in 1995 when he studied Mandarin and began working with the Chinese Catholic community in Sydney, first in Cabramatta and then at St Dominic's, Flemington.



He was also a founding member of the Columban China Centre in Strathfield, which reflected his deepening engagement with Chinese spirituality and pastoral needs. From 1996 onwards, Fr Paul became a well-known chaplain to the Catholic Asian Students Society at Sydney University. He was a regular and compassionate presence at the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre and often accompanied refugees to their protection visa hearings, embodying the Gospel values of mercy and justice.

We give thanks for Fr Paul McGee's life of missionary zeal, kindness, and cultural bridge-building. His journey reflects the essence of Columban mission - crossing boundaries of language, nation, and circumstance to reveal God's love and presence. May his story continue to inspire us all.

Photo: St Columbans Mission Society

MIRRIHUE ALTO

Mother Earth's gift of water. Photos: Fr Alvaro Martinez SSC

Mirrihue Alto is a rural town five kilometres from the village of Antuco in the Bio-Bio region of southern Chile. Some of its inhabitants work in honey and honey-derived products.

One of the major challenges facing the area is the lack of native trees and wild flora, primarily caused by the proliferation of large monoculture plantations, such as pine and eucalyptus. Trees like eucalyptus can consume between 20 litres of water a day for a three-year-old tree and up to 200 litres for a 20-year-old tree, which damages the ecosystem and renders these hectares highly vulnerable to forest fires. Furthermore, pine trees cause significant harm to the soil and, consequently, to the ecosystems of other wildlife.

Water scarcity is one reason it's difficult to maintain and support native trees and wild flora, leading to the need for deep wells for irrigation. These wells help create floral diversity. Additionally, monoculture directly harms the lives of bees, pollination, honey production, and its byproducts, affecting the area's wildlife.

That's why, years ago, when I first discovered the area, I began dreaming of digging a deep well that would enable the planting of native trees for the direct benefit of the local ecosystem. It has been a long and complex journey because the soil is very rocky, and the water is deep, which makes well construction quite expensive. After years of waiting and searching, a satellite survey revealed that the land where I wanted to dig was unsuitable. This result, although discouraging, didn't deter me from dreaming and continuing my search.

Water scarcity is one reason it's difficult to maintain and support native trees and wild flora, leading to the need for deep wells for irrigation. These wells help create floral diversity. Additionally, monoculture directly harms the lives of bees, pollination, honey production, and its byproducts, affecting the area's wildlife.

A few months ago, a small company informed me they could drill the well, so we resumed the hunt for a suitable location. The hunt was carried out using an ancient technique of the local Mapuche people: they once used wooden rods but now employ pieces of copper wire. This method of searching for the "eye of water" or the location of deep water, is called *zahorí*. With this technique, we identified the perfect spot to dig and create the well that would provide the water.

I must admit that the amount of investment involved scared me, but with the help of a few friends, I was able to meet the expenses, inspired by the confidence of the man in charge of the project, who assured me

that the water was 11 metres deep. His calm voice encouraged me to take the risk, even though I hadn't first said a prayer or sprinkled holy water, nor brought a medal of Saint Pius or the Virgin Mary to the chosen spot. The initial metres of digging were challenging and filled with rocks. While we were digging and only encountering rock, a local man - digging a well is a community effort where all the neighbours help - asked me if I had sought Mother Earth's permission to dig for and draw water.

This question lingered in my mind, and early the next day, I returned to the site to pray. I sprinkled holy water and sought Mother Earth's permission to continue digging for water. The ground began to give way, and soon, water gushed from the depths of the earth at nine metres. By 13 metres, a steady flow was ensured for the trees to be planted this winter in southern Chile. These native trees will be donated by those who have learned of our wish to contribute to biodiversity.

This experience teaches me to continue searching even when the "studies" are unfavourable; it encourages me to trust the dream that drives my search. It reveals the wisdom of "asking permission", which implies recognizing our interconnectedness rather than seeing ourselves as owners of Mother Earth (*Ñuke Mapu* in the language of the Mapuche people). It reminds me to trust what others share (small business, the man with the copper rods, the neighbour who came to accompany me) and urges me to delve deeper, motivating me to remove the obstacles through arduous work, but one that enables an encounter with life: water!

FR ALVARO MARTINEZ
Columban Fr Alvaro Martinez is on sabbatical in his home country of Chile before taking up his new assignment in the United States in August.

We invite primary and secondary school students in Australia to participate in our 2025 Season of Creation school competition, which focuses on the theme, 'Peace with Creation.'

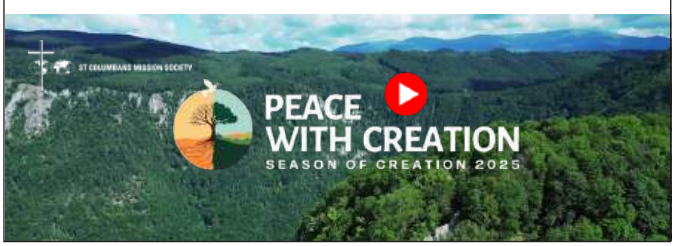
This year, we ask students to reflect on what "Peace with Creation" means by responding to one of the following questions through a drawing, piece of artwork, an essay, or a poem:

1. What does "peace with creation" mean to you?
2. What are some practical ways to be at peace in creation?
3. How can we reconcile our relationship with creation from destruction to peace?

Let this Season of Creation be a time where young voices lead the way, and together we transform today's wilderness into tomorrow's fruitful field of justice, hope and peace. This Season of Creation, help restore God's Shalom. Together, through the Spirit, let's bring peace to our world - one voice, one brushstroke, one word at a time.

Enter submissions by September 1, 2025!

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO WATCH the 2025 Season of Creation Columban School Competition Video SCAN QR



Chinese priests and sisters who study in Ireland standing outside St Columbans Dalgan, Ireland. Photo: St Columbans Mission Society

CHINA FORMATION COMMITTEE PROGRAMS

Since its inception in the summer of 2007, the three-year part-time training program in spiritual direction, established and sponsored by the Columban China Formation Committee (CFC), has successfully conducted its annual four-week summer intensive course at the Beijing National Seminary. It served as an ideal location for the program's summer intensive, and the seminary consistently offered a warm welcome.

Unfortunately, the government has informed the seminary that it can no longer conduct courses during the winter and summer holiday breaks. This news was unwelcome, but as is often the case in China, alternative solutions have been sought. The six Chinese spiritual directors (four sisters and two priests) responsible for the program have worked together to find another suitable venue for the summer intensive course. Luckily, the 32 participants (seven laywomen, a Protestant minister, four priests, and twenty sisters) will be able to gather this year for the second summer intensive of their three-year program.

Another recent change occurred for the CFC-sponsored annual Young Scholars Forum. This forum offers an opportunity for young scholars who have recently completed their doctoral studies in the field of Christianity to come together to share their theses through print and presentation. The three-day forum previously took place in Beijing.

With recent government changes, the likelihood of it being held in Beijing or elsewhere in China diminished. Fortunately, the Catholic University in Macau was keen to host the forum, and so, at the end of last year, the young scholars travelled to Macau to share their research and foster bonds of friendship and support. The annual forum will proceed again later this year under the ongoing guidance of one of the vicars from the Beijing diocese.

Since the early 2000s, the Columbans, through our CFC programs, have provided scholarships and sponsored Chinese priests, sisters, and laity to pursue academic studies abroad. Earlier this year, during my home vacation in Australia, I had the pleasure of visiting Fr John Zhao, who comes from the Liaoning diocese in northern China. The Columbans are sponsoring John as he undertakes a three-year Doctor of Ministry degree at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Brisbane, where he has received a full academic scholarship.

The diocese of Brisbane has warmly welcomed John and offered him accommodation at the parish in Hendra, where he assists with weekday and Sunday Masses. I received a gracious welcome from both John and the parish priest, who hosted me during my visit. I also had the opportunity to meet John's academic supervisor, who spoke very highly of John's progress and academic discipline. John's field of study focuses on lay formation.

Fr John Zhao with parishioners in Brisbane, Australia. Photo: Fr John Zhao

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After his initial three years of sponsorship with the Columbans in Ireland, where he obtained an MA in theology, John returned to his home diocese and established a lay formation and catechist training centre. John hopes to finish his studies at ACU by the end of next year and return to his home diocese, where he will resume work at the centre.

Other CFC students are continuing to enjoy their lives and academic studies in Ireland, Rome, and Taiwan, where they are sponsored by the Columbans.

Students in Ireland and Taiwan also take the opportunity to complete Units of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) during their summer holidays. We hope to hold a reunion in China for returned CFC students later this year. The last reunion took place before the COVID-19 outbreak.

With the ongoing support of our generous benefactors, we can continue our programs of the China Formation Committee both in China and in the countries where the Columbans sponsor CFC students to pursue their academic studies.

FR KEVIN O'NEILL
Columban Fr Kevin O'Neill lives and works in China.

MISSION WORLD

GOOD NEWS FROM AFAR

While global headlines dwell on conflict, division, and ecological collapse, a quieter revolution is underway - a revolution of hope, faith and service. Across continents and cultures, Catholic mission in 2025 is being re-imagined by those at the grassroots: youth, women's cooperatives, migrant chaplaincies and lay leaders. Good news is rising from the margins - from remote villages to bustling cities.

Gone are the days when mission meant sending clergy from the West to the Global South. Today, mission is a two-way street - an exchange of faith, culture, and experience. Missionaries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are now revitalising parishes in Europe, Australia and North America. In Germany, young priests from Nigeria serve multicultural parishes in Berlin and Hamburg, bringing joy, energy and a fresh spirituality rooted in resilience and community. As one parishioner in Munich shared, "They remind us that the Church is truly universal."

This shift isn't just about people - it's about perspective. These missionaries carry stories shaped by poverty, persecution and perseverance. Their witness resonates deeply in increasingly secular or post-Christian societies, offering authenticity and spiritual depth. Young Catholics, too, are at the forefront of mission. In Brazil, youth collectives in Rio's favelas use digital media to share stories of faith and social justice. In Kenya, students lead catechesis in local languages with support from elders. In the Pacific, young people are championing climate justice, inspired by *Laudato Si'*. As one youth leader said, "Our land is sacred. Our voice is our mission." Catholic schools and universities are also transforming how formation is understood. Immersion trips are no longer acts of charity but of mutual encounter. From Manila to Montreal, students meet Christ not just in chapels but in food banks, refugee centres and indigenous communities. These experiences challenge and deepen their understanding of faith, mission and solidarity.

Catholic women are emerging as key protagonists in mission - not substitutes, but leaders. In Myanmar, laywomen are forming trauma support groups for displaced families. In Peru, women's cooperatives link economic justice with spiritual formation. Pope Francis calls women "the beating heart of parishes." In 2025, that heart is thriving in unexpected places.

Digital platforms are also shaping mission. Young Catholic influencers on YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp are bringing Scripture, theology and witness into homes worldwide. Podcasts, music videos, and live-streamed prayers now evangelise beyond parish walls. The digital continent has become a vibrant mission field.

If anything defines mission in 2025, it is this: the margins are becoming the centre. Those once evangelised are now evangelising. The Church is becoming more reciprocal, grounded in real lives and diverse voices. As a migrant Catholic in Paris said, "I didn't come here as a refugee. I came as a Christian, with a mission - to remind this place of the hope we carry."

Mission is no longer just a journey overseas. It is a mutual encounter, a shared calling, and above all, good news from afar - and close to home.

FR TOM ROUSE
Columban Fr Tom Rouse is the Regional Councillor for Aotearoa-New Zealand.

MISSION INTENTIONS
POPE FRANCIS

July - For formation in discernment: Let us pray that we might again learn how to discern, to know how to choose paths of life and reject everything that leads us away from Christ and the Gospel.

COLUMBAN ACTIVITIES Crossword puzzle

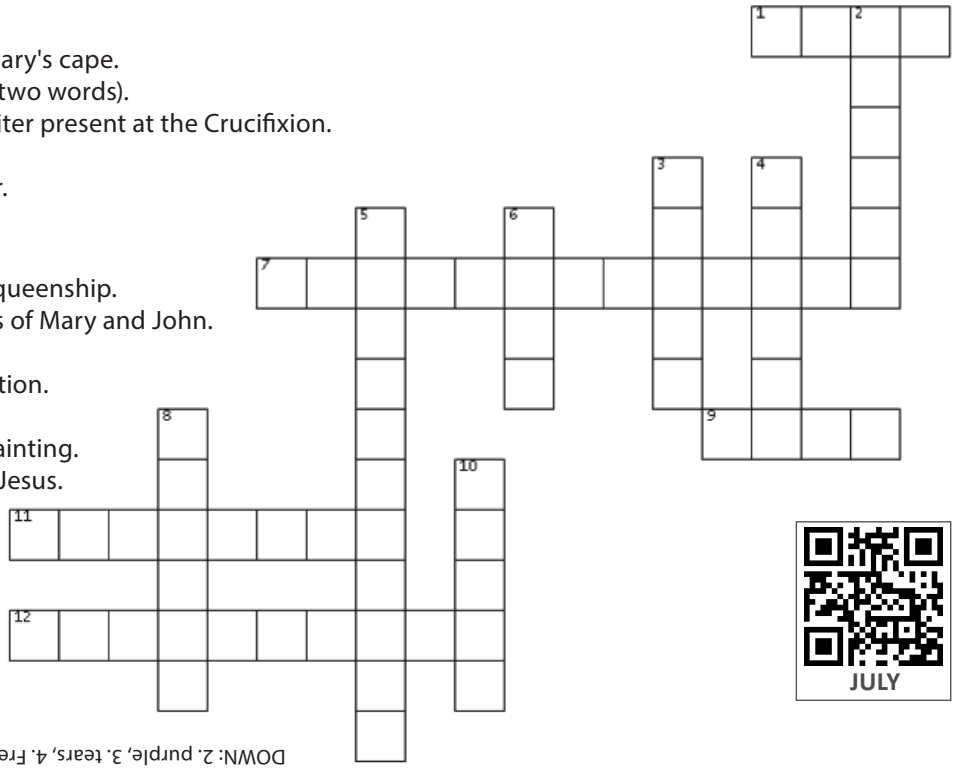
SCAN QR CODE to read the July 2025 Columban Calendar Art Guide and complete the crossword puzzle.

ACROSS

1. Symbolised by the green lining of Mary's cape.
7. The woman present near the Cross (two words).
9. The beloved disciple and Gospel writer present at the Crucifixion.
11. The artist who painted the fresco.
12. Title given to John as Gospel writer.

DOWN

2. Royal colour used to signify Mary's queenship.
3. Expressing grief, shown on the faces of Mary and John.
4. The medium used in the artwork.
5. The event at the centre of the depiction.
6. Mother of Jesus, shown in grief.
8. Part of Jesus' crown, visible in the painting.
10. Representation of Mary mourning Jesus.



JULY

ANSWERS:
ACROSS: 1. hope, 7. Mary Magdalene, 9. John, 11. Caporali, 12. Evangelist
DOWN: 2. purple, 3. tears, 4. Fresco, 5. crucifixion, 6. Mary, 8. thorns, 10. Pietà,

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'Do what you can' Bishop Edward J Galvin

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