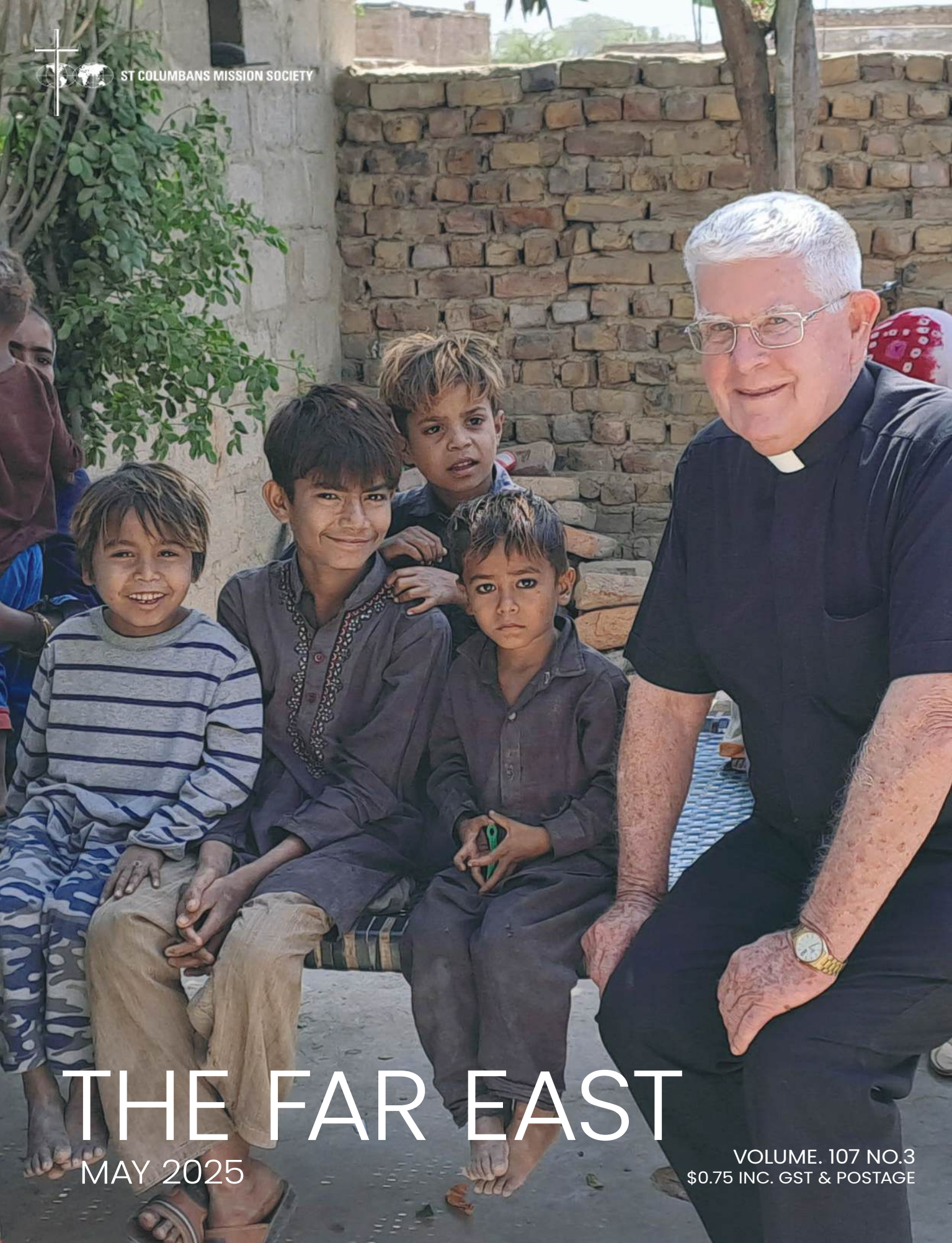




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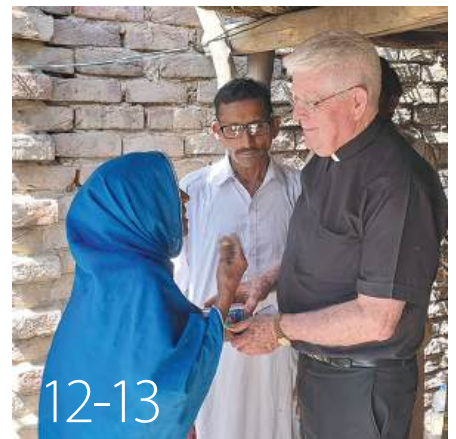
Cover photo: Columban Fr Robert McCulloch with Hindu children whose mothers are waiting to see the doctors. Only one boy in this village of 70 families goes to school.

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A JUBILEE YEAR OF GRACE, MERCY, AND TRANSFORMATION



This year, 2025, is a Jubilee Year, a time of grace and trust, of penitence and forgiveness, of journey and pilgrimage. The opening of the “Holy Doors” in designated cathedrals and places of pilgrimage around the world symbolises opening our minds and hearts. The welcome and hospitality we receive draw us in, inviting us to come closer to God, each other, and our world.

The theme of the 2025 Jubilee Year is “Pilgrims of Hope”. In a world where there is hatred, conflict, violence and war, this theme invites us to hope that forgiveness, mercy, and healing are possible, that truth, justice, and peace will prevail, and that, even if for a time, things seem to get worse, God is nonetheless at work, so we can be confident that God will bring about a transformation of ourselves and our world beyond anything we could ask or imagine.

Pilgrimage is about letting go, not settling down, but moving on, and despite missteps, constantly going forward. This drive is fuelled by the expectation of a deep and lasting peace, of a justice that rightly reckons all things. It hungers and thirsts for a fulfilment that the present cannot give, for what is beyond the horizon, for what will satisfy our deepest yearnings.

A point worth reflecting on is that we are not alone on this pilgrimage.

We are pilgrims with other Catholics. Based on our common ecclesial affiliation, we support our fellow Catholics by showing love and kindness and by participating in and contributing to the life and mission of our local, diocesan, and international Catholic community.

We are pilgrims with other Christians. Based on our common baptism, which makes us members of the body of Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit, and sons and daughters of the Father, together we witness to Christ, who has claimed us for Himself, and with Him, and in Him, and through Him, we show forth the love of God made known in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

We are pilgrims with believers of other religions. Based on our common respect for the Transcendent, however named, we share our life journey with people of all faiths, building fraternity among all peoples, being enriched by the different ways God has called us, and encouraging one another on the pilgrim path of life.

We are pilgrims with holders of secular world-views. Based on our common humanity and the many values we share, we participate in civil society and work together for peace, justice, and the common good.

We are pilgrims with all creatures. Based on our common origin in God, we share this Earth with all other creatures in myriad ecosystems of interconnection and mutual dependence, which make life possible and without which there would be death and extinction.

We are pilgrims with all those who have gone before us, including our ancestors in the faith and our family and friends who have died and are now in God’s presence. We pray for them in gratitude for their part in our lives and ask them to intercede for us in God’s presence.

However, the most important point about pilgrimage is not *whom we accompany* on the pilgrim path of life but *who accompanies us!*

Jesus Christ is Emmanuel, “God-with-us” (Mt 1:23), who accompanies us on our pilgrim journey, encouraging and sustaining us, feeding us with the Eucharist, and leading us through suffering towards the fullness of life, truth, and grace. The Holy Spirit, poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5), is God-within-us, who also accompanies us on our pilgrim journey, inspiring and empowering us, present in the people and circumstances of our lives, drawing us out of ourselves and into ever deeper communion with others, with Jesus, and with the Father.

REV DR PATRICK MCINERNEY
Regional Director of Oceania

WHEN ALL YOU HEAR IS **THUNDER** AND NO **RAIN**

It is two years since we last hosted the Student Leadership Camp. In that time, many things have changed. Most parts of the world have already recovered from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Myanmar (formerly Burma) has not.

While the world is slowly recovering, Myanmar is now facing another crisis - a deadly war between one of the most vicious military regimes and the people of Myanmar led by young people and different armed ethnic groups.

On our second day of the camp, we started hearing bomb shelling during the day as we prepared for the outdoor team-building games. The set-up was more like a training camp. The participants had to crawl under some ropes tied across each other. Then, the teams had to bring each member into a circle. After that, each member carried water to fill up a big bottle. Then, the two teams had to compete in the tug-of-war game. One volunteer shared, "Wajau (Father), this is like the training I went through just early this year." I was curious and asked about the training. He mentioned that in the town where he lives, most young men enlisted to join the training of the KIA (Kachin Independent Army). "Were you scared?" I asked him. He answered, "I am no longer afraid to die, Wajau."

Many young men and women volunteer and enlist in many armed ethnic groups like the KIA. But some choose to remain and serve in a different way. Many of the students I used to work with in the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina (CSAM) movement are now working in church-based organisations or non-government organisations. But there is also an ongoing exodus of many young people, particularly young men, because of the new conscription law that requires all young men between the ages of 18 and 35 to serve in the Burmese military.



Students enjoying the leadership camps in Myanmar, building skills and friendships. Photos: Fr Kurt Zion Pala SSC

After preparing the grounds for the outdoor team-building activities, we returned to the main hall to listen to the lectures given by one of the newly ordained priests in the diocese. The whole camp is designed to allow the young people to discover who they are as a person, as a Catholic, and as a member of the CSAM.

From the first camp we hosted to this one, among the many topics covered in the two camps are the following: Leadership and Communication Skills, Baptism and Eucharist, Catholic Social Teachings, See-Judge-Act Review of Life Method, and *Laudato Si'*. For the Catholic Social Teachings I invited Chris, who had two months of military training, to talk on the topic. He is one of the original members of the movement and has been taking part in the Student Leadership Camps first as a participant and now as one of the speakers. I was very proud listening to and watching him as he interacted with the new group of students.

This year we invited students between the ages of 15 and 18 still attending "government schools". Because of the conscription law many young people over 18 have left Myanmar or are not active in parish activities. This age group is also often left out of parish activities. They do not join the Holy Childhood movement because they feel they are too old for it, but they are too shy to join the older youth group in their parish.

After the intense team-building activities, the participants shared a meal they had prepared together. During the evening they were introduced to the concept of servant leadership. Every one of the participants took part in the washing of the feet. Many were deeply touched by the exercise.

The following day the participants learned about the history of CSAM, its vision, mission and activities. They then selected a new set of leaders for the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina Juniors. That night, we ended the camp with a talent show showcasing the participants' and volunteers' talents in singing, dancing, and drama skits.

This year's Student Leadership Camp gathered about 36 students, ten volunteers and seven resource speakers at the CLAY Centre, Palana, Myitkyina, Kachin State in Myanmar. In the future, with a new set of officers and members, we hope to gather more students from government schools and start school-based groups of CSAM Juniors.

The day after the end of the camp, the new set of CSAM Juniors leaders met and decided to conduct a fundraising campaign called "Option for the Poor" to help provide basic needs like cooking oil, potatoes, onions, garlic and rice plus clothes for families displaced by the ongoing war.



As I write this article, it continues to thunder but not rain. The Burmese Army continues to shell villages across the river. But even with this in our background, help us continue to animate young people here in Myanmar through the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina. Help us also continue to provide much-needed alternative educational services through our Student Learning Resources Centre.

FR KURT ZION PALA

Columban Fr Kurt Zion Pala lives and works in Myanmar.

THE FAR EAST MAGAZINE

Below is a short sharing from **Chris**, one of our camp volunteers and speakers and a CSAM alumni:

MYANMAR

"Before I joined the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina (CSAM) movement, I was just a simple, ordinary teenager and university student. I spent my time doing nothing useful and had no interest in society, community, church or other people. I was only interested in the progress of my studies and lived like a blind man. I did not have confidence. I was afraid to speak to others. Even if I wanted to participate, I didn't know where to go, and there was no one to guide me. When I became an active member of CSAM, my attitude completely changed, and I was reminded that I needed to change my lifestyle. By participating in CSAM programmes and activities, I gained a lot of experience and knowledge. I was one of the first to attend the Student Leadership Camp, which I will treasure for life.

In the leadership camp, I have learned many useful skills like leadership, team building, public speaking and facilitation, and Catholic Social Teachings. The team-building activities were my favourite. After I attended the leadership camp, I learned how to participate in my community and how to live out Catholic Social Teachings. I also learned that we need to care for our common home and act now.

Through CSAM, I got to make more friends, which helped me build a strong network. Now I can also speak bravely in public, and I feel more confident about myself. I have team spirit and can work well with others. As a result of participating in CSAM, I have become a youth leader in my parish in Mogaung. If I had not participated in CSAM, I would not be brave enough to be a youth leader. I believe that. The experiences and knowledge I gained from CSAM continue to influence my leadership style and my life. Now I can share that knowledge and those skills with my younger friends."

I was one of the first to attend the Student Leadership Camp, which I will treasure for life.



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Columban Fr Donal McIlraith (left) enjoying lunch with villagers of Saliadrau in Fiji.

FATIMA TO MACROOM TO SALIADRAU: A PILGRIMAGE FOR CHRIST

It has been four years since I last visited Saliadrau in Fiji. When I left, some villagers asked me to bring back a statue of Our Lady of Fatima. This past summer, while in Ireland, the opportunity arose.

During my time there, I ministered in my home parish of Macroom, the capital of Muskerry, where I was raised and ordained in 1971 by Bishop John Ahern of Cloyne. Surrounded by relatives, friends, and classmates, my ministry there is always a joyful experience.

A friend and fellow member of the Marian Movement of Priests (MMP) in Macroom, who was a few years behind me in school, asked if I would take care of a statue he had recently brought back from Fatima.

I gladly accepted, knowing it would make its way to Saliadrau. Travelling halfway around the world with a statue is no challenge in the age of air travel.

Fr Rogasiano Raikivi, the parish priest of Namosi and my former student, whose parish includes Saliadrau, invited me to celebrate the last Sunday Mass of 2024 there.

I left Suva at 7 am with my frequent MMP travelling companion, Bill Rogoiwaqa. After forty minutes on a tar-sealed road, we turned onto a dirt road leading into the highest mountains of Viti Levu. Well-maintained despite steep gradients, the road posed no major obstacles. We arrived in Saliadrau shortly after 9 am.

The final stretch required a river crossing. Anticipating this, I had worn swimming shorts under my trousers and packed a knapsack. Removing my shoes but keeping on two pairs of socks to navigate the stones, I donned a sulu (a Fijian cotton skirt) over my shorts

and waded into the river. The recent rains had swollen the waters, making the crossing trickier than before. A Catholic from a neighbouring village, Farasiko (Francis) Koroimara, was also en route to Mass. Identifying himself, he guided me safely across. After changing into dry shoes and regaining some semblance of dignity, we proceeded to the Catechist's house to prepare for Mass.

The Mass began at 10 am with the newly arrived Fatima statue leading the procession. Since the community had already completed their Christmas confessions this visit did not include the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As is customary in Fiji, the entire congregation sang throughout the liturgy. Being Holy Family Sunday and the Year of Luke, the Gospel reading was the Fifth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary - the finding of Jesus in the temple. The unity of Mary and Joseph in their search for Jesus was striking. I reminded the people of Saliadrau to pray that they never lose Jesus in their lives.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' first recorded words were, "Why did you seek me? Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?" Later in the Gospel, whenever Jesus used the word "must", it foreshadowed His death and resurrection. Mary and Joseph, however, did not understand this, as the text tells us. Nevertheless, Jesus returned to Nazareth and obeyed them - a lesson in obedience for children today.

After Mass, I led a cenacle in the chapel, which included the rosary, prayers for Pope Francis, and the Act of Consecration to Mary. This was followed by a delicious lunch of chicken and taro, eaten while sitting on the ground.

In Fiji, visiting priests are traditionally welcomed with a Sevusevu, an offering of kava as a gesture of gratitude. The rosary had delayed this, but soon after lunch, several elders arrived with a Tanoa, the ceremonial kava bowl, and the Sevusevu took place.

(Once, many years ago, while visiting Fred Giblin in New Zealand, a young friend of his son arrived with a bag of kava, announcing, "Mr Giblin, I have brought you a 'save you, save you.'" A useful anecdote for homilies in Fiji!)

Following the ceremony, I was offered pillows and invited to rest. A short, refreshing sleep on the matted

floor prepared me for the return journey - including another river crossing.

Two days later, I found myself on a drip in the hospital. I suspect it was the river water in the kava that did me in, but who knows? It is all part of the bargain in peregrinari pro Christo -pilgrimage for Christ.

This was my first pilgrimage for the Holy Year. I pray it will not be my last.

FR DONAL MCILRAITH

Columban Fr Donal McIlraith lives and works in Fiji.



Columban Fr Donal McIlraith (centre) with the catechists after Mass. Photos: Fr Donal McIlraith SSC

DARKNESS WOULD NOT BE DARK TO YOU



Last April, I sowed wildflower seeds - I just raked the ground and scattered the seeds, as did the Sower whom Jesus talks about in the Gospels. As I let them go, the seeds sank into the dark earth where I would not be able to see what was happening to them. It was a simple act of faith and trust in Mother Earth.

Those seeds were on a journey - a journey of waiting in the dark, and I found myself challenged by the words of American Carmelite nun and poet, Jessica Powers: *"Joy waits with me. I think of the marvelous flower that is to come and how the light will hover over it. Now and again, though, is the message blurred by brief uncertainties."*

As the weeks passed, I wondered - would those seeds take root? Would they flower? Or would they die in the dark? And then, the first minuscule shoots began to appear, to grow in strength as they reached out to the light of the sun, and my precarious hope began to strengthen.

"Who would have thought my shriveled heart could have recovered greenness? It was gone quite underground as flowers depart to feed their mother root when they have blown." (George Herbert, *"The Flower"*)

Not all my seeds survived, of course, but I was filled with wonder at the resilience of those tiny shoots that did continue to mature - so fragile and yet seemingly so determined to grow.

Today, our world seems to be filled with darkness and uncertainties - war, starvation, unnecessary death in so many countries, destruction of so much of our planet. In all this darkness and suffering, as we wonder where God is, it seems impossible to experience the seeds of hope that we can nurture into blossoming. We need to be as convinced as Desmond Tutu was that *"Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness"*.

With all of this in mind, in springtime this year, I will once again sow wild-flower seeds, and I will again sense the challenge to my faith and hope. Will they take root? Will they flower? Or will they die? I will watch and wait for the flowers to appear on the tiniest shoots, struggling upwards, preparing to bring joy and wonder.

As I pray for all those who are suffering in the darkness of our world today, I ask myself to be like the seeds and be consoled and encouraged with the words of the psalm: *"If I asked darkness to cover me, and the light to become night around me, that darkness would not be dark to you, night would be as light as day."* (Psalm 139)

SR ANN GRAY

Columban Sr Ann Gray lives and works in Ireland.

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ECHOES OF THE ATOM BOMB

JAPAN

It is 80 years since two atomic bombs were detonated in Japan, one over Hiroshima and another over Nagasaki.

On August 6, 1945, at 8.15 am, the first of these bombs, dubbed the Enola Gay, fell on Hiroshima and left an estimated 69,000 dead bodies. Then on 19 August, at 11.02 am, the second bomb, called Fat Man, was dropped on Nagasaki, taking 39,000 lives. At the epicentre, in 3000 C degree heat, human beings like us were incinerated alive. Dying of burns is an excruciating way to die. I came to Japan as a Columban priest-missionary in 1956, 69 years ago. I met A-bomb survivors, some of them suffering from radiation sickness. Their faces had an unhealthy yellow tinge. Some spoke of the guilt they still felt more than a decade after the war had ended for not answering the desperate cries for water of the more seriously wounded and dying.

A survivor asked me to offer Mass for some of his family members who died because of the bomb. At the prayers of the faithful, he read out the names of 19 relatives. An estimated 10,000 Catholics in Nagasaki died from the bomb. The city has been the centre of the old Christians since St Francis Xavier's time.

In recent decades, Japan has joined the prosperous developed countries of the world. And most people, Japanese included, have forgotten the desperate post-war conditions in the country. When I first came to Japan, the people were still much affected by the trauma of war and the death, destruction, and poverty that had come in its wake. Poverty was prevalent, especially outside the big cities. In my first mission assignment, as an assistant pastor in Chiba prefecture, I would distribute food and clothing each Friday to the poorest of the poor. There were seven tuberculosis sanatoriums in the area. Limbless former soldiers dressed in white begged for help outside the railway stations.

I went to Nagasaki and visited the Atom Bomb Memorial Museum. The photos of burned victims were horrendous, of course. But what really touched me was a small child's tricycle, burnt and twisted. It personalised the destructiveness and lethality of ONE bomb. I left the museum sickened and indeed angry. In that turbulent mood, I walked a short distance

to a small wooden hut. For three years after the war, Doctor Takashi Paul Nagai lived there with his two children. He later became bedridden with radiation sickness affecting his liver. From that tiny wooden hut, Doctor Nagai campaigned for peace and reconciliation, not recrimination. Behind Nagai's hut, there is now a small, tasteful museum. Doctor Nagai's son, Makoto, guided me through the exhibits. On later visits, I was shown around by his grandson, Tokusaburo.

In the Bomb Museum, it had been that tricycle that touched me; here, it was a tiny, melted pile that had once been a rosary. This rosary had often been in the hands of Doctor Nagai's beloved wife, Midori, who was killed instantly in the atomic blast.

Accompanying this exhibit was a poignant sketch by Doctor Nagai himself, showing his wife going to heaven on a mushroom-shaped atomic cloud. By the time I left that small museum, my anger had been replaced by hope. Thanks to Doctor Nagai, I felt and still feel motivated to be an instrument of Christ's peace.

All these years later, the number of atomic bomb survivors (hibakusha in Japanese) has dwindled to only a few. But these few have continued to raise their voices and were awarded the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize.

In the interviews afterwards, the survivor representatives emphasised that a nuclear bomb is radically different from a conventional bomb. Just one nuclear bomb kills a massive number of people indiscriminately. There is no distinction made between military and civilian targets. The International Peace Research Institute of Stockholm estimates that the nine nuclear-armed nations possess 12,121 nuclear weapons among them.

The prayerful plea of Doctor Nagai was: "May there be peace! Let Nagasaki be the last atomic bomb."

FR BARRY CAIRNS

Columban Fr Barry Cairns lives and works in Japan.



The small child's tricycle, burnt and twisted.
Photo: Fr Barry Cairns SSC

EXPERIENCING FIRST-HAND THE WONDERS OF GOD'S CREATION

COLUMBAN WINTER SCHOOL HOLIDAY PROGRAMME 2025

Nestled on the southern boundary of Santiago, the Columban parish of San Matias exists in one of the city's most socially and economically disadvantaged areas. It is a region frequently highlighted in the evening news for violent crime, daily murders, and clashes between rival drug trafficking gangs.

Safety concerns restrict movement, even during the day, and employment opportunities remain scarce, forcing workers to travel up to two hours each way for jobs in distant parts of the city.

For parents working long hours, school holidays present an additional burden: finding someone to care for their children. In response, the Catholic Church initiated school holiday programmes in the 1970s to support children from marginalised communities. Known as *Colonias Urbanas* (Urban Colonies), these programmes provided a safe space for recreation, education, and nourishment. Over time, they have evolved to incorporate child rights awareness, safeguarding practices, and abuse prevention protocols.

In July 2023, around 60 children from San Matias participated in a week-long school holiday programme. Each day began with breakfast, morning prayer, and engaging workshops. After a nutritious lunch, the children rotated to different afternoon workshops before concluding the day with evening prayer and a light meal.

Among the highlights were workshops led by Korean Columban seminarians Ambrosio Shim and Pepe Seung, who introduced the children to Korean cooking. Short-term mission volunteers Danny Sweeney (Manchester, England), Josh Egan (County Tipperary, Ireland), and youth leader Francisco Martinez (San Columbano Parish, Santiago) conducted

self-defence, ball skills, Irish football, general fitness, and rugby union workshops, which proved extremely popular.

A field trip to the *Natural History Museum* and *Our Lady of Lourdes Basilica and Sanctuary* was particularly memorable for the children - many of whom were visiting such places for the first time. The week ended with a special Eucharistic celebration, during which parents and children expressed their eagerness for a similar event in the future. Encouraged by its success, San Matias parish priest Fr Genovio Cho enthusiastically supported another programme for 2025.

In July 2025, the children of San Matias Parish will embark on a new school holiday programme under the theme "*Caring for God's Creation - Our Home, with All Its Biodiversity*". This theme resonates deeply with the Missionary Society of St Columban, aligning with one of our key mission priorities.

Most of the children come from neighbourhoods characterised by overcrowded, deteriorating apartment buildings or small, tightly packed houses. Green spaces are almost non-existent, and waste management is a pressing issue. However, alongside these urban hardships, the children live near breathtaking natural landscapes.

To the east, less than 10 kilometres away, rise the snow-capped Andes Mountains - the second-highest mountain range in the world, after the Himalayas. To the west, 15 kilometres away, lies the Coastal Mountain Range. These areas are home to Chile's remarkable wildlife, including pumas, foxes, chinchillas, condors, and native marsupials. This diverse environment will serve as inspiration for art workshops, where children will create drawings, paintings, paper mâché models, and biodiversity charts.

The programme will take place at one of the nine chapel communities of San Matias Parish, which offers ample facilities, including classrooms, a large kitchen, and outdoor areas. It was successfully used for the 2023 holiday programme and remains an ideal venue for the upcoming initiative.

In a world where many of them face daily hardships, this programme will offer hope, inspiration, and the chance to discover beauty beyond their immediate surroundings.

Two Columban seminarians, one from the Philippines and another from Korea, will take part in the programme. Their presence will enrich the children's learning experience and foster a deeper connection with the global Columban community.

A key feature of the 2025 programme will be two major excursions that allow the children to witness first-hand the beauty and biodiversity of God's creation.

The first excursion will be a day at the Bato Wetlands, located north of Santiago, a sanctuary for numerous species of waterfowl, amphibians, and reptiles. The children will hike along boardwalks surrounding the lagoon, observing freshwater fish, mammals such as the *Coipo* and *Quique*, and Chile's iconic, black-necked swans. They will document their observations through sketches and photography. Additionally, local ecological groups will conduct workshops on the importance of wetland conservation and the threats faced by this delicate ecosystem.

The second excursion will take the children to the coastal town of Algarrobo, where they will experience the rich biodiversity of the Pacific Ocean. Here, they will encounter Humboldt and Magellanic penguins, sea lions, dolphins, otters, and numerous seabirds. As with the wetland visit, local ecological groups will lead workshops on marine conservation and ecosystem protection.

Throughout the week, morning and evening prayers will be dedicated to giving thanks for the beauty of creation. These moments of reflection will emphasise the responsibility we all share in caring for God's Earth.

The 2025 school holiday programme at San Matias Parish promises to be an unforgettable journey, blending faith, education, and environmental awareness. Through hands-on experiences and immersive learning, the children will not only explore the wonders of God's creation but also develop a deeper appreciation for their role in safeguarding our planet. In a world where many of them face daily hardships, this programme will offer hope, inspiration,

and the chance to discover beauty beyond their immediate surroundings.

With the enthusiastic support of Fr Genovio Cho and the Columban community, this initiative will once again provide a safe, enriching, and faith-filled experience for the children of San Matias Parish - one that they will carry with them for a lifetime.

FR DAN HARDING

Columban Fr Dan Harding lives and works in Chile.



Columban Fr Dan Harding with participants of the Columban Winter School Holiday Programme in Chile, fostering faith and environmental stewardship. Photo: Fr Dan Harding SSC

THE COST OF COMPASSION



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

Annual medical statistics are useless for a person who is illiterate and sick and wants pain relief. It's a fact that last year, Pakistan spent only 1% of its GDP on health, but what's the point in telling that to a grindingly poor mother whose husband is an illiterate agricultural labourer and whose child is desperately ill?

Sitting over a minimal meal with him and the other children, she says: "Oh, I walked to the local clinic. But they told me that all the doctors are in the big cities so there is no healthcare for us. Our child is going to die."

Australia has a well-publicised crisis in public and private healthcare, which affects delivering realistic

and affordable health care. Is this due to prioritising the costly advice of consultants, "over the top" building plans and equipment purchase agendas, lack of qualified staff, or government over-regulation?

For different reasons, Pakistan also has a serious healthcare crisis. Government expenditure on healthcare is low, and most of that goes to the cities, where the big voter bases are, with little remaining for the rural areas. There was an increase in doctors, but many of these new doctors were women who were seen as "good catches" in the arranged marriage system and ceased to be healthcare professionals.

The number of midwives decreased. But the statistics don't connect poverty and illiteracy with the healthcare that should be available to all but isn't.

St Elizabeth's Mobile Medical Outreach makes a huge difference by giving free primary healthcare with free medicines to more than 50,000 people in rural areas of

Sindh province every year. In 2024, 52,921 were cared for, of whom 23,814 were female, 15,876 were male, and 13,230 were children under five. Most are illiterate, and all are poor agricultural labourers and their families. They are Muslim, Christian and Hindu.

In 2009, I proposed and urged as chairman of St Elizabeth Hospital that we should do something to give healthcare to these totally poor and isolated people even though St Elizabeth was then in a crushing financial crisis and had little income. We had no money, but we had a conscience.

I was motivated by two things. I had worked amongst marginalised Hindu tribal people in the Thar Desert at Badin, 100 kilometres from Hyderabad. I saw that they had no medical care. In 1985, with the help of Irish and Australian St John of God Sisters in Punjab, I began a vaccination programme for tribal infants and children who were neglected by government health officials due to religious discrimination. Immediately, the serious diseases of measles and whooping cough were conquered. Fr David Kenneally, an Irish Columban priest in the next mission station 50 kilometres from Badin, extended the successful TB mobile control from there, and our vaccination programme spread to that area. It was the beginning of preventative healthcare. But we both knew that it didn't cover enough. That led to my determination to make better healthcare available to the poorest who had nothing and were on the fringes.

St Mary MacKillop, the founder of the heroic congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph and the first Australian saint, was my other inspiration. She said to never see a need without doing something about it.

And so we began: no money, a broken-down vehicle, committed Muslim doctors, and enthusiastic Christian male and female nurses.

"Father, it's never been done before."

"Yes", I replied, "and we have no money, so start praying!"

The Columban benefactors came to our aid. Very slowly, they came, but we knew we were doing the right thing at the right time. One donor funded the purchase of a new vehicle in 2016.

We know we make a difference. During the recurring monsoon floods near Hyderabad in south Pakistan in 2023, one of our 24-hour Mobile Clinics met a Pakistan



Columban Fr Robert McCulloch with Fariyad Inayat, a Catholic nurse who is coordinator of the Mobile Medical Outreach.

Photos: Fr Robert McCulloch SSC

military truck loaded with food supplies. The soldiers said: "We don't have the planning for medical care. You keep doing the medicals. We will look after the food supplies." It was a great collaboration. It shows how much the Mobile Medical Outreach at St Elizabeth Hospital integrates the Catholic Church and Catholic values of care into the wider aspects of Pakistan.

There is a positive and harmonious interfaith context to the work of the Mobile Medical Outreach (MMOP). The patients are Muslim, Hindu and Christian, and the MMOP health team are Muslim and Christian. Nirmala Shivjaj is a qualified midwife and belongs to one of the tribal communities in Sindh for whom MMOP has a special focus on giving healthcare. She is pleased that through St Elizabeth she can help her own people while speaking to them in their tribal languages. She focuses on maternal care during the MMOP visits.

Fariyad Inayat, the MMOP team leader, says, "The people we go to are happy that we have come. We are welcomed, and they say: 'You are the only ones that care about our needs'. I'm happy to be a Christian caring for Muslims, Hindus and Christians." Dr Syed Sajid Hussain Naqvi says that he has an inner satisfaction and feels blessed by God that through MMOP he can treat patients in such need. They both speak of their anger that ordinary Pakistani people do not get any healthcare from the government, so they are pleased to be part of this caring medical team from St Elizabeth Hospital.

FR ROBERT MCCULLOCH

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

VOCATIONAL TRAINING: A PATH TO HOPE AND RECOVERY IN KACHIN STATE

As readers of *The Far East* will know, drug addiction has reached epidemic proportions in Kachin State, Myanmar. It is no exaggeration to say that nearly every family has at least one member - often more - who is addicted to heroin. This highly addictive substance is both easily accessible and incredibly cheap, making it a widespread crisis. The impact of addiction is devastating, tearing families apart and claiming countless lives.

At the Rebirth Rehabilitation Centre, we see the tragic consequences of this epidemic every day. Recently, we welcomed two brothers into the centre, accompanied by their grieving mother. She tearfully told us that two of her other sons had already lost their lives to heroin overdoses. These heartbreaking stories are not uncommon. The work we do at the centre is not just about rehabilitation - it is literally about saving lives.

For many of our clients, finding stable employment after completing their treatment is a major challenge. Without a reliable source of income, many relapse into old habits or return to environments where drug use is rampant. A significant number of them head back to the jade and gold mines in northern Kachin State, the epicentre of Myanmar's drug trade. These mines operate in brutal conditions where drug use is deeply ingrained. Heroin is the substance of choice, but in some places, employers distribute methamphetamines to workers to keep them awake for long shifts. For someone fresh out of rehab, remaining sober in such an environment is an enormous struggle.

Recognising this challenge, we felt a strong call to establish a Vocational Training Programme to help our clients rebuild their lives. The idea was simple: if we could equip them with skills and meaningful work opportunities, we could offer them a real alternative to returning to the mines and falling back into addiction.

Our vocational training initiative started small, focusing on basic but valuable skills that could lead to self-sufficiency. We began teaching our after-care clients and volunteers various trades, including carpentry, haircutting, flower arranging, soap making, and rosary bead production. These skills offer not only practical benefits but also a sense of purpose and dignity. Whenever someone expresses interest in a particular trade, we strive to connect them with an apprenticeship that can provide further training and hands-on experience.

Today, our initiative has grown significantly. We now operate two carpentry workshops, which provide stable employment for six individuals while also serving as training centres for our after-care clients and volunteers. These workshops have become places of learning, mentorship, and hope, where people can rediscover their abilities and find a renewed sense of purpose.



Columban Fr Eamon Sheridan receiving a haircut by an after-care client from the Vocational Training Programme in Myanmar. Photos: Fr Eamon Sheridan SSC



Men at the Columban Vocational Training Programme in Myanmar learn carpentry, empowering themselves with skills for a brighter future.

Recovery happens one day at a time, one person at a time. And with your continued support, we can help even more individuals find their path to healing, dignity, and hope.

In February 2025, we took another step forward by opening a barber shop. This project employs three people while also serving as a training ground for others who wish to learn the trade. We were fortunate to receive some financial support from USAID, but much of the funding came from The Far East readers who generously donated to support our work at the centre. This outpouring of kindness has allowed us to continue expanding our efforts and reaching more individuals in need.

Over the past two years, we have successfully placed ten individuals into apprenticeships. While this number may seem small in the face of such a vast crisis, the impact is profound. Each person who finds stability and purpose through vocational training is one less person lost to addiction. They, in turn, influence their families and communities, creating ripples of change that extend far beyond the walls of our rehabilitation centre.

The challenges we face in Kachin State are immense. Myanmar continues to struggle under the weight of civil conflict, further complicating our efforts to support those in recovery. At times, the sheer scale of the problem can feel overwhelming. However, amid this turmoil, we have seen countless signs of hope.

God has guided us on this journey, providing us with the strength, resources, and support to continue our mission.

There is no greater blessing than witnessing the transformation of someone freed from the shackles of addiction. The joy of seeing a former addict find stability, purpose, and a renewed sense of dignity is indescribable. These moments remind us that recovery is possible - even during war and uncertainty.

To all who have supported our work through prayers, donations, and encouragement, we extend our heartfelt gratitude. Your generosity is making a real and lasting difference. Our clients, after-care volunteers, and staff are deeply grateful for the lifeline you provide. As we continue this journey, we remain committed to expanding our vocational training efforts and empowering more people to build new, addiction-free lives.

Recovery happens one day at a time, one person at a time. And with your continued support, we can help even more individuals find their path to healing, dignity, and hope.

FR EAMON SHERIDAN

Columban Fr Eamon Sheridan lives and works in Myanmar.

FROM RIVERINA TO THE PHILIPPINES: **THE MISSIONARY JOURNEY** OF FR PAUL OXLEY

Columban Fr Paul Oxley was born in Narrandera on the Murrumbidgee River in the Riverina of New South Wales. He did his primary schooling there and then in Leeton. For the final two years of secondary school, Paul attended Chevalier College in Bowral.

In 1969, Paul chose to enter the Missionary Society of St Columban at Turramurra. Seven years later, he returned to Narrandera, where he was ordained in St Mel's Church. (As an aside, St Mel was a nephew of St Patrick who returned with him to Ireland to evangelise the Irish. It seems to me that the notion of mission was never too far from Paul's life.)

The now newly minted Fr Paul Oxley was assigned to the Philippines and went to the language school in leafy Catadman in Ozamis City in Mindanao, where he studied Cebuano in 1976.

His first assignment from language school was in Tukuran, Zamboanga del Sur. At that time, there was a lot of social unrest, murder and mayhem in Mindanao, and Paul had firsthand knowledge of what was happening in the newly formed Diocese of Pagadian.

In 1982, Paul was asked to do research on the Tribal Apostolate in the Pagadian area. Later, he worked in Panaon in Misamis Occidental.

For the ten years that followed, Paul worked in an apostolate for indigenous people and, more specifically, with the Subanon people. They are known as “peace-loving people” and tend to move away from conflict and live in mountainous areas. However, land-grabbers and exploiters of various sorts tend to catch up with them. Witnessing their plight moved Paul to take an interest in reforestation and ecology.

In 1993, he became the director of a programme in the Philippines to prepare Columban students for cross-cultural ministry by giving them an experience overseas.



For the ten years that followed, Paul worked in an apostolate for indigenous people and, more specifically, with the Subanon people.

Then, in 1996, he returned to Australia for sabbatical studies at the Pacific Mission Institute in Turrumurra. With that training under his belt, he returned to the Regional Theologate in Ozamis in the Philippines as a lecturer in systematic theology.

Paul returned to Australia for a couple of years and did more theological studies at the Sydney College of Divinity.

He has held several portfolios in St Columbans Mission Society. He went from the Manager of the House at Catadman, where he had earlier done his language study, to the District Bursar for Mindanao, then the Regional Bursar in the Philippines, and finally, the Bursar General for the Society in Hong Kong.

In 2016, Paul returned to his home country and began well-earned retirement in Sydney.

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF PRIESTHOOD: HONORING FR PAUL FINLAYSON

This year marks a remarkable milestone in the life of Fr Paul Finlayson - a golden jubilee of priesthood celebrating 50 years of dedication, faith, and service to the Church and community. Fr Paul's journey has been one of unwavering commitment, touching countless lives and leaving an enduring legacy of compassion and leadership.

Ordained in 1974, Fr Paul embarked on his mission with a heart full of faith and a vision to serve others. Over the past five decades, his priesthood has been characterized by a deep sense of pastoral care, guiding communities through spiritual growth, social justice, and missionary outreach.

Fr Paul's dedication to the Church has never wavered from his early assignments to his recent roles. His work has spanned across different regions, including the Philippines and New Zealand, demonstrating his adaptability and willingness to meet people where they are, ministering to their needs with grace and humility.

Throughout his priesthood, Fr Paul has been a mentor, a counsellor, and a shepherd to many. His commitment to fostering faith and community spirit has led him to serve in various capacities, always with a focus on building relationships and strengthening the Church's mission.

Whether leading parish initiatives, working in mission fields, or supporting the development of young priests, Fr Paul has been an inspiring presence. His wisdom, kindness, and sense of humour have endeared him to all who have known him.

We recognise Fr Paul's immeasurable contributions as we celebrate this momentous occasion. His 50 years of priesthood testify to his faithfulness to God's calling.



On behalf of the entire community, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to Fr Paul for his years of dedicated service. May his journey be filled with abundant blessings, good health, and the joy of witnessing the fruits of his lifelong ministry. Congratulations, Fr Paul, on this extraordinary achievement! May you continue to inspire and lead with the same passion and devotion that have defined your priesthood for the past 50 years.

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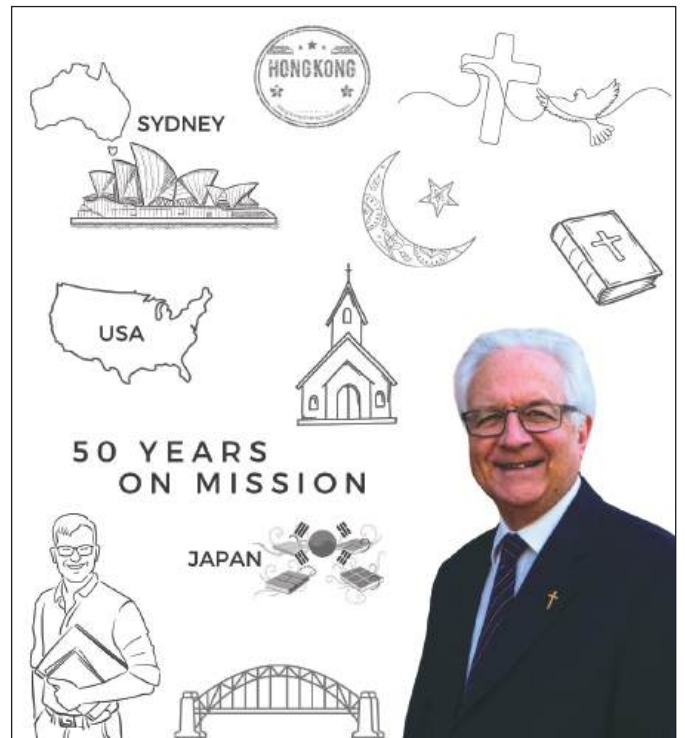
A LIFE OF FAITH, SERVICE, AND MISSION: 50TH ANNIVERSARY FR BRIAN VALE

This year marks fifty years as a priest for Brian Vale, so it is fitting to summarise his life and contributions thus far. Brian was born in New Plymouth, New Zealand, on March 3, 1951. His parents, Jim and Mary, had two other children, Kieran and Clare. Brian often spoke of his father's gift for telling jokes and stories.

After finishing high school, Brian travelled to Sydney to begin his seminary studies for the Columban mission. His ordination to the priesthood occurred on May 17, 1975, in St Joseph's Church in his home parish. This was followed by an appointment to Japan, where he began his missionary life by spending two years undertaking language studies.

After ten years of immersion in Japanese culture, Brian was transferred to Australia. By way of preparation for this next stage of his missionary work, he did a year's study at the Institute for Spiritual Leadership in Chicago. As a staff member of the Pacific Mission Institute in Sydney, he lectured on Japanese Buddhism and Mission Spirituality. By 1991, Brian had reached the age of 40. With a broad range of studies and experience behind him, he once again took up missionary work in Japan, where he was asked to undertake many different roles, including Regional Director twice.

Brian's many capabilities were being recognised, so it was time for a stint in his home country. For the next six years, he caught up with family and changes in the Church and New Zealand culture in general. There had also been changes in the Columban mission in Sydney. In 2009, Brian was appointed there to work on dialogue with the Muslim community at our Centre for Christian Muslim Relations. Life sped up for Brian when he became Regional Director for the Australia and New Zealand Region and was elected to the General Council in September 2018.



With a broad range of studies and experience behind him, he once again took up missionary work in Japan, where he was asked to undertake many different roles, including Regional Director twice.

After six years in that position, during which he lived in Hong Kong, Brian has returned to Sydney, where he is again involved with building bridges across different religious communities. His interest in and concern for contemporary ecological spirituality, once again, demonstrates Brian's desire to push the boundaries to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus wherever he finds himself. May your enthusiasm for the mission of God, Brian, continue to fill your life with meaning and fulfilment.

NO WORDS NEEDED

"Preach everywhere you go and, if necessary, use words." St Francis of Assisi

As Columban missionaries, we try to live out the Gospel message by witnessing the love of God to others, especially in our response to the mission priorities of migrants, refugees, and biodiversity protection and restoration.

In my experience, sometimes words are inadequate to convey care and compassion to another person, especially those who speak a different language. Every time I step into the room of Tara, the woman I met in a Dublin City nursing home, I have this profound realisation that witnessing the Gospel message truly knows no boundaries, including those of language.

I got to know Tara, a refugee from Ukraine, through my ministry in two nursing care homes, which I visit every Friday. Tara has no one around as almost all her family have died during the war in Ukraine. She is 73 years old and has no English. She is overweight and suffers from swollen legs and feet. As a result, it is very difficult for her to walk or even to stand up.

When I first went to visit Tara in the nursing home, I had to ask a few people, including the nurses, where her room was as it was quite hard for me to find! When I arrived at her room, I noticed that her door was slightly ajar and had a yellow plastic ribbon attached with the words "Please do not enter".

As I stood at the entrance, I saw a woman lying on the bed. I greeted her and spoke her name to make sure she was the lady I wanted to see. She uttered the word "yes", but there was no sign of a smile on her face. I smiled at her and asked if I could come in. She seemed to understand and nodded her head, so I entered the room.

I told her my name and mentioned the name of her carer (the person who first made me aware of Tara), and her face lit up. I asked how she was. In response, she took out her phone, put the translator on and started speaking into it. Then she showed me the translation.



Columban lay missionary Angie Escarsa (right), with some volunteers at the Ballymun Tidy Towns. Photo: Angie Escars

I now understood that she was waiting for the social worker, and she thought it was me. I told her I was not but had come to see her. She was a bit taken aback and seemed to lose interest in me. I tried to make conversation by telling her I was glad to meet her. She told me it was not easy to talk because she had little English. With nothing to say and her becoming uneasy, I said goodbye, promising to see her again next Friday and left the room.

I felt my visit had been useless because I had not done anything for this woman. The language barrier was too great. I realised how difficult it was for a refugee to be in a place like a nursing home with no family members to talk to. Then, the realisation dawned on me that my presence could be more important than any words I could utter. Now I understood how necessary it was for her to meet people - she was spending too much of her day lying on her bed, alone in her room. Despite the language barrier, the presence of another person trying to connect and show her care was more valuable than any spoken word or conversation.

So, I resolved to continue to visit Tara without being too preoccupied with the difficulties in our verbal communication. It would be a ministry of presence in which I would try to give witness to the compassion of Jesus. By consistently turning up, I could show her I was there for her. Just this week, I had the chance to see Tara again, and she looked much better. Without words, I gently gave her hands and legs a massage. In that way, I could express my care for her.

ANGIE ESCARSA

Columban lay missionary Angie Escarsa lives and works in Ireland.



Women sewing within the Columban program to support their families. Photos: Ana Flores

SEWING FOR THE FUTURE

Super Typhoon Sendong (also known as Tropical Storm Washi) tore over Cagayan de Oro (CDO), Iligan City, and parts of Lanao del Norte in December 2011, destroying houses, damaging infrastructure, and killing several people. As a result, some families from CDO and other Misamis Oriental municipalities had to relocate, one new location being the Divine Mercy Village, located in Barangay Patag, Opol, Misamis Oriental.

Various humanitarian groups and religious congregations helped set up the new village and provided in-kind support interventions, the majority of which stopped within five years due to resource depletion.

Fourteen years later, myself and other Columban missionaries have kept up our accompanying commitment, particularly for women and young people. Columban support facilitates direct support to ten families. It also assists those who are hospitalised, students with problematic educational needs, and those living in unfavourable situations.

On January 15, 2015, a bag-making workshop was established to help women earn money. Getting started was hard because of the lack of a suitable location. Fortunately, a village official offered her house, and it is still being used for the programme. Ten women indicated their interest in joining the workshop, but finding supplies or materials and sewing machines for them was difficult, and marketing the products was even harder.

The sewing effort was briefly suspended during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, reopening with more members in June 2022. Regrettably, damage to the sewing machines occurred, so repairs were soon required. Three more machines have since failed.

The trained women also desired to produce t-shirts and jogging pants, which called for a new type of machine. In addition, the new members required skills training, and marketing strategies needed further development.

Although the group frequently had no customers, no materials, broken equipment, and falling membership, most members persisted. A breakthrough occurred after seven years of working on the project when women started receiving a small daily income, which really benefited each household. Also, women's sewing abilities improved to include the ability to make ethnic clothing, curtains, blouses, togas and graduation gowns, band uniforms, party costumes, bedsheets, sofa coverings, rags, and foot mats.

The project's initial goal was to assist the female members of each family with basic needs, including food and daily transportation for the children attending school and parents working outside the village, as well as to defray expenses for water and electricity bills. As the years passed, the demand for more sewing machines and supplies gradually became an issue as more and more women joined. This development pushed for the re-visioning of the project.

The women held meetings to discuss how to raise the calibre of their output, handle all neighbourhood sewing-related needs, and ensure that the women would personally profit from their labour. Their priorities were to increase the viability of their sewing project, improve the quality of their products, and ensure higher demand for their items.

Since this is a small enterprise with a local focus rather than a livelihood project, the women needed to familiarise themselves with the idea more. To increase collaboration with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the women had to be more practical in planning and resource mobilisation.

The organisation has complied with the requirements of the Cooperative Code of the Philippines for a typical organisational structure. Officers oversee membership, and committees handle the numerous organisational issues. I also assist the group with daily tasks.



PHILIPPINES



Columban support facilitates direct support to ten families.

This local project deals with the real, immediate problems the women and their families face. Being forced to relocate was difficult; it was not simple to find the will to go on when everyone was still reeling from the trauma of the typhoon. However, along with being a source of income, the project has offered stress relief and psychological healing. As this goes on, in line with the Columban charism of promoting economic justice, it will be good to link the role of the members with the promotion and protection of the environment.

Moving forward, financially literate members will aid the other members in managing their incomes better. Given a regular market and the ability to enhance their output, this will eventually transform the organisation into one that is self-sustaining and self-nourishing, meaning they will rely entirely on their own resources instead of outside assistance.

ANA FLORES

Columban lay missionary Ana Flores lives and works in the Philippines.

REFLECTIONS ON “REVERSE MISSION”



When looking at the Christian mission from a historical point of view, it appears to be a topsy-turvy world.

What used to be called the “home” or “sending” country, such as Ireland, England, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, can now be called the “mission” or “receiving” country. For example, when I left New Zealand for Fiji in 1977, almost all the Catholic priests in Fiji were expatriates. The members of religious congregations who staffed the schools or provided other professional services were also expatriates. But now there are very few expatriate priests or religious in Fiji.

In the New Zealand of 1977, Catholic priests were falling over each other to get into parishes or schools. Likewise, with the religious congregations. Most of the schools were well supplied with sisters, brothers and priests. Now, all the bishops of Aotearoa-New Zealand are looking for priests from overseas to take responsibility for parishes. Even so, the numbers are so few that parishioners in some parts of the country are being told that the time is soon coming when they will only enjoy one celebration of the Eucharist a month. As for Catholic schools, these are now lay-run and staffed. It would be a similar situation in most of the other countries listed above.

From the same traditional perspective of mission, this situation also prevails in many of the other Christian denominations.

The term “reverse mission” is used in recent studies of mission to explain this topsy-turvy world. Matthew Ojo defines “reverse mission” as: “the sending of missionaries to Europe and North America by churches and Christians from the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia and Latin America, which were at the receiving end of Catholic and Protestant missions as mission fields from the sixteenth to the

late twentieth century.

The enterprise is aimed at evangelizing regions that were once the heartlands of Christianity and the vanguard of missionary movements.”¹

I have already spoken about how the term “reverse mission” raises problems with how we define “mission” and “immigration” and the dynamics that operate in the relationship between centre and margin. Where is the centre now, and who lies at the margins?

The term “reverse mission” is used in recent studies of mission to explain this topsy-turvy world.

But going back to our understanding of mission, I believe that, from a Catholic point of view, we are still grappling with the fundamental shift in our understanding of “church” that emerged out of Vatican II. Mission was no longer something that a few people within the Church did. It became central to our definition of “church”.

“The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature ...” (Ad Gentes, the decree on the mission activity of the Church, n. 2)

There are other questions related to what it means to be a church of missionary disciples. I hope to come back to two questions: What is church? What is mission? We’ve still got a long way to go.

FR TOM ROUSE

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

¹ Matthew A. Ojo, “Reverse Mission” in *Encyclopedia of Mission and Missionaries*, ed. Jonathan Bonk [London, Routledge, 2007] and quoted by Martha Th. Frederiks, in chapter 38, “Mission and Migration” of *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, p. 679).

MISSION INTENTIONS

POPE FRANCIS

May - For working conditions: Let us pray that through work, each person might find fulfilment, families might be sustained in dignity, and that society might be humanised.

COLUMBAN ACTIVITIES Crossword puzzle

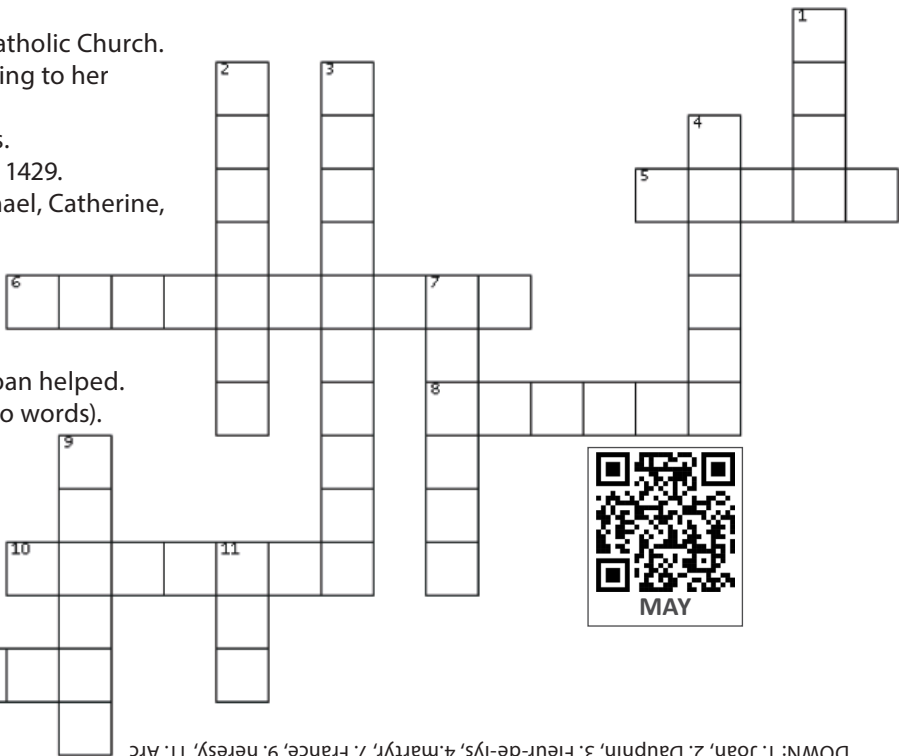
SCAN QR CODE to read the May 2025 Columban Calendar Art Guide and complete the crossword puzzle.

ACROSS

- 5. Joan was canonized as one of these by the Catholic Church.
- 6. The false accusation made against Joan, leading to her execution.
- 8. Joan wore this in battle to lead French troops.
- 10. The city where Joan lifted a famous siege in 1429.
- 12. Joan claimed to hear these from Saints Michael, Catherine, and Margaret.

DOWN

- 1. First name of the French military heroine who led troops to victory.
- 2. The title of the French crown prince whom Joan helped.
- 3. The royal symbol on Joan's white silk flag (two words).
- 4. Someone who dies for their faith; Joan was considered one.
- 7. The country that Joan of Arc fought for.
- 9. Joan was put on trial and condemned for this religious crime.
- 11. The second part of her name, referring to her birthplace, Domrémy?



ANSWERS:
DOWN: 1. Joan, 2. Dauphin, 3. Fleur-de-llys, 4. martyr, 5. saint, 6. armour, 7. France, 8. heresy, 9. heresy, 10. Orléans, 11. Arc
ACROSS: 5. saint, 6. armour, 7. France, 8. heresy, 9. heresy, 10. Orléans, 11. Arc, 12. voices



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'Do what you can' Bishop Edward J Galvin



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Additional calendars NZ\$12.00 each inc. GST & postage

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