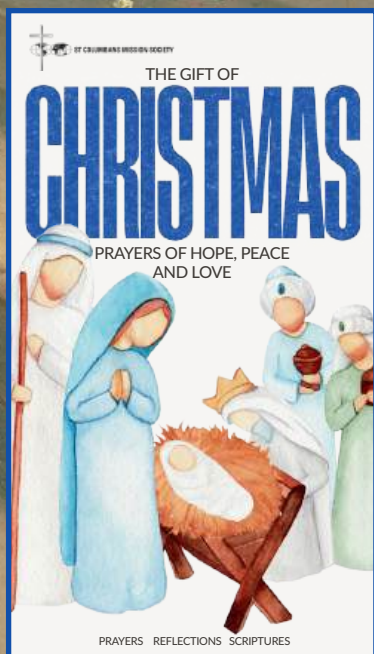




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CONTENTS

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- 3 **FROM THE DIRECTOR
A LIVING HOMILY**
- 4-5 **A HEARTWARMING
CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE IN
PAKISTAN**
Columban student Nhkum Zau Mai gets a glimpse of the needs of internally displaced people.
- 6-7 **TEACHING HOPE:
JOURNEYING WITH
DISPLACED CHILDREN IN
PERU**
- 8-9 **MAKING THE BEST OF
ADVENT**
- 9 **ORDER NOW - PEACE & HOPE
PACK**
- 10-11 **A CHRISTMAS JOURNEY TO
THE FAR SHORE**
- 12-13 **STANDING WITH MIGRANTS
AND CREATION IN TAIWAN**
The Gospel reminds migrants their struggles are seen, their lives valued and their future held in God's hands.
- 13 **DONATE TODAY! 2025
COLUMBAN CHRISTMAS
APPEAL**
- 14-15 **BEING COLUMBAN AND
BEING BROWN**
Celebrating our vulnerability, diversity and smallness.
- 16-17 **ONE CROSS AT A TIME**
Columban student Lydio Mangao Jr learns that mission is less about fixing problems and more about listening and walking alongside.
- 18 **FAITH, FRIENDSHIP AND
MISSION: 70 YEARS WITH
FR BARRY CAIRNS**
- 19 **THE POWER OF SACRED ICONS**
- 20-21 **ON HOLY GROUND: WHERE
CULTURES MEET AND GOD
SPEAKS**



- 22 **DIALOGUE WITH NONES**
- 22 **MISSION INTENTIONS**
November - December 2025
- 23 **COLUMBAN ART
CALENDAR CROSSWORD
PUZZLE**
- 23 **GIFT IN WILL**
Remember the Columbans in your Will.

A LIVING HOMILY

It was a beautiful, calm, starry night. I was driving through the Punjab countryside to celebrate Mass in a village. With me were a catechist and two other Columban priests: Fr John Burger from the United States and Fr Finbar Maxwell from Ireland.

When we arrived in the village, I parked the car under a tree and we entered the small, simple church building. The people were sitting on mats on the floor, singing hymns robustly. I sat in the presider's chair behind the waist-high altar in the centre of a raised platform at the front of the church. During the introductory rites of the Mass and the scripture readings, I felt uncomfortable sitting and standing so high above the people, so when it came to the homily, I sat on the platform step in front of the altar, putting myself at the same level as the congregation. In front of me and slightly to my right was a grandfather with his small granddaughter sitting in his lap.

I don't recall the exact readings from the Mass, but I do remember my homily, not because of my words, which were ordinary enough, but because of the wondrous thing that happened as I spoke.

To show how God is closer to the sinner than to the righteous, I told the following story.

God binds us to God's self with cords of love. When we sin, that cord is broken. But God does not reject us. God does not abandon us. God reaches out and ties a knot in the cord and restores our relationship. And God does this each time we sin. But each time God does this, some of the cord gets tied up in the knot.

The result is that the cord gets shorter and shorter and the sinner is pulled closer and closer to God. Thus, the greatest sinner whose cord of relationship with God has been tied again and again is closer to God than the one who has never sinned and has never had to have his cord re-tied.

As I told this story, sitting on the platform in front of the congregation, I reached out my arms towards the

congregation to show how God reaches out to us. And as I did so, the little child in her grandfather's lap responded and reached out to me, coming to sit on my lap, where she nestled comfortably as I continued the story.

What a wondrous image she presented to the congregation! What a fabulous tableau she formed for my listeners! The child resting contentedly on my lap was a living picture of the story I was telling of my Father in heaven. She was a living witness to how we ought to respond in trust and confidence to God's reaching out to us in kindness, mercy and compassion and how we ought to do the same for each other.

God binds us to God's self with cords of love. When we sin, that cord is broken. But God does not reject us. God does not abandon us. God reaches out and ties a knot in the cord and restores our relationship...

As we drove home under the starry sky that night after Mass, my Columban companions and I reflected on the experience. They commented on how wonderfully appropriate that child's spontaneous response was to my outstretched arms. Her leaning against my chest in perfect tranquillity as I concluded my homily portrayed how we ought to live in the presence of God. She was my homily personified. It was unplanned, perfect. It was sheer grace.

That night was not the 24th or 25th of December, but in truth, the image of the child in my Father's arms was Christmas. We drove on in silence, awed by that moment of grace.

Silent night. Holy night. O night divine! O night when Christ was born!



REV DR PATRICK MCINERNEY
Regional Director of Oceania

A HEARTWARMING CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE IN PAKISTAN

During my one-week Christmas exposure, I got the opportunity to visit some slum areas in the Karachi Diocese, Sindh province, with Columban Fr Dan O'Connor who ministers to the Catholic communities there.

We began in Bhains Colony, Malir, where we visited St Bernadette's and Our Lady of Lourdes Churches. This was followed by a visit to the Parkari Kohli communities at St Thomas' and St Joseph's Churches and the Gari Bit school. We then travelled to various villages, including the Baharo village. I had the privilege of experiencing the rich faith and culture of the Catholic community. Let me share some of the experiences and insights I gained during that meaningful journey.

The journey began at the Joti Centre, from where Columban Fr Tomás King drove me to Hyderabad. Along the way, we discussed the names of new places and enneagram personality types, making the trip enjoyable and enriching. In Hyderabad, I visited for the first time Columban Fr Liam O'Callaghan's ministry of Justice, Peace, Ecology and Inter-religious Dialogue. Afterwards, I travelled with Fr Liam by train to the city of Karachi. This train journey was eye-opening as we interacted with Muslim boys and saw fields, green foliage and small villages. However, we also saw polluted water, degraded earth and dying animals, which deeply saddened me. These sights made me reflect on the harm our lifestyles have caused to the environment. They reminded me that caring for the poor and protecting the earth are interconnected responsibilities.

Arriving in Karachi, I travelled with Fr Dan to a village to celebrate Christmas Mass. Although many moments were memorable, a few stood out, such as the ceremony of welcoming baby Jesus. The parishioners

creatively celebrated Christmas by lighting the Advent candles of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. A family with children stood before the altar. The youth served at the altar. There was a choir and scripture readers and you could sense the community's active participation. This inclusivity beautifully symbolised the true meaning of Christmas, as they welcomed the arrival of baby Jesus through acts of love, offering their gifts and talents in the celebration of the Eucharist.

During Mass, Fr Dan sprinkled holy water on the congregation as he, in turn, invited them to bless him too. Afterwards, he invited the children to gather around the manger so he could explain the roles of the kings, shepherds and animals. The children brought their own small figures, making the Christmas story more relatable and exciting for them.

In the cold breeze, we shared a simple yet heartwarming Christmas meal. Large pots of rice with yellow beans, along with sweets, were served. About 50 of us, both children and adults, shared the food, using our hands and eating together from shared plates. Seeing their smiles and warmth revealed the essence of friendship and gratitude. This experience reminded me to count God's blessings and be grateful for what we have.

On our visit to Baharo village, I was filled with joy at the sight of the many children and animals, including sheep and goats, as well as the farms with chilli, eggplant, pumpkin and bell peppers. It was a beautiful example of village life and hard work. I was warmly welcomed with Pakistani tea, roti, chicken and vegetable curry. These simple acts of hospitality met my needs and left a lasting impression.

Through these experiences, I learned profound lessons about friendship, gratitude and the true spirit of Christmas. This journey was more than just a Christmas celebration - it was an opportunity to grow in understanding, faith, culture and compassion. The life of simplicity I learned from the people of God on this journey will stay with me as I strive to live with greater



Columban Fr Dan O'Connor (right) with the Parkari Kohli community at Christmas time in Pakistan. Photo: Fr Dan O'Connor SSC

awareness of the needs of internally displaced people who live closely with polluted water and a grieving Mother Earth.

After returning from the villages, Fr Dan and I visited the Christian compound beside the Monastery of the Angels. We brought Christmas gifts, including various toys for the children and the disabled. Later, carrying water in a basket on the groaning wheel, watering the small trees and planting two more trees, gave me a sense of stewardship and responsibility for our common home.

Staying at the Monastery of the Angels was a blessing. The Sisters provided Christmas cake and a safe shelter, adding further joy to my journey. On Christmas Eve, I visited slum villages outside Karachi, witnessing the harsh realities of life there. I also took a solo train journey from Karachi to Mirpur Khas, encountering some challenges along the way. Questions arose in my

mind: Why are the carcasses of dead animals left to rot on the roads and spread noxious smells? Does our health not hold the same importance as our cultural values? What do people think about this?

The life of simplicity I learned from the people of God on this journey will stay with me as I strive to live with greater awareness of the needs of internally displaced people who live closely with polluted water and a grieving Mother Earth.

NHKUM ZAU MAI PETER

Columban student Nhkum Zau Mai Peter is on his First Mission Assignment in Pakistan.

TEACHING HOPE

JOURNEYING WITH DISPLACED CHILDREN IN PERU



Columban lay missionary Ana Flores (right) working with Peruvian and Venezuelan children in Peru.

After several years since my last home holiday, I was finally able to travel to my homeland of Peru. It was a time of uncertainty and hardship, as the country was still in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families were struggling and the most vulnerable - especially displaced women and children - were bearing the brunt of the crisis. Yet it was also a time of rediscovery and renewed mission.

Soon after arriving, I visited the Columban mission site in Rimac, Lima. There, I was welcomed into a space of hope and resilience. I saw women and young people - at least thirty of them - working together in an organic vegetable garden. They were part of a

broader community effort supported by the Warmi Huasi Project, directed by Columban Fr Edward O'Connell. Alongside the Columbans, partners such as UNICEF and the local Department of Education were involved, showing the strength that can come from collaboration.

During my time at home, I was invited to help with a children's learning activity. The pandemic had kept many of them away from school and this initiative aimed to reintroduce them to education in a nurturing and safe environment. As a teacher by profession, I was offered a role. At first, I declined due to my commitment to return to the Philippines, where I was on mission. A few weeks later, however, the Warmi Huasi coordinator called again, asking if I could reconsider. This time, I said yes - on the proviso that I could teach four days a week. That way, I could still maintain my other responsibilities.

What followed was a deeply moving experience: four days a week, over the course of four months, I

In their innocence, they taught me profound lessons in kindness, mutual understanding and the human capacity to embrace others as family. Some of them shared their stories - of journeys across borders, of nights spent hungry, of missing loved ones, of hope and heartbreak.

re-entered the world of teaching in a way I had never quite experienced before. The challenge was not only educational but physical - we had to maintain a one-metre distance and wear masks at all times. Teaching children to read and write under those restrictions was incredibly difficult. But as we got to know each other, trust began to grow. They started offering me bits of their snacks. I was invited to share meals with them. Through these small gestures, a bond formed.

I taught children aged four, five and six at first. Their enthusiasm reminded me of my early days as a teacher. While my experience helped, I had to be extra patient and creative. Each child had different needs and planning lessons that could engage them all required both energy and heart. As time passed, I was asked to work with a group of third graders who had not yet learned how to read or write. Most of them were Venezuelan refugees who had fled their country in search of safety and a better future.

This new group presented a different kind of challenge. I needed to break distancing protocols just to guide their hands as they learned to form letters. But it was in this closeness that the most human connections were made. One day, one of the Venezuelan children used the word "chamo". I asked what it meant and the child laughed - apparently, it's a term used affectionately to mean "friend" or "buddy". What struck me was how naturally they bonded, regardless of nationality. For these children, being Peruvian or Venezuelan didn't matter. They were just "chamos" - friends.

In their innocence, they taught me profound lessons in kindness, mutual understanding and the human capacity to embrace others as family. Some of them shared their stories - of journeys across borders, of nights spent hungry, of missing loved ones, of hope and heartbreak. Many had come through Colombia, Ecuador, eventually arriving in Peru. In their words, I heard echoes of the Holy Family's own journey - Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem, facing hardship, uncertainty and the search for a place to stay.

Just as the Christ Child was born in a humble stable, these children and their families have found refuge in modest homes, sometimes in makeshift shelters - but always with the hope that something better is possible. Their courage reminded me that displacement is not just a political or social issue - it's a deeply human one.

The children I met through the Warmi Huasi Project are more than victims of circumstance. They are resilient, bright and full of promise. They carry the weight of their past but also the light of hope. Teaching them was more than a job - it was a calling. They reminded me of the purpose of mission: to accompany, to uplift and to learn alongside those we serve.

As I reflect on those months, I am grateful - not just for the chance to teach, but for the grace of walking with these young "chamos," who taught me how love, faith and joy persist even in the most challenging of times.

ANA FLORES

Columban lay missionary Ana Flores is currently on sabbatical from her mission in the Philippines.





REFLECTION

MAKING THE BEST OF ADVENT

There are two distinct approaches to the Advent season. We can let it pass us by as we await the family or communal gatherings at Christmas, or we can allow it to shape our Christmas.

The following suggestions, derived from the Bible readings of the four Sundays of Advent, propose making Advent a time of personal and communal renewal.

1ST SUNDAY

In the second reading from 2 Thessalonians, Paul urges the Greek community of Thessalonica to respond to God's urging of them "to increase and abound in love to one another and to all men and women, as we do to you".

In the Gospel reading from Luke 21, 34: "Watch yourselves or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life."

REFLECTION

Love is not the same as like. We can dislike someone while at the same time loving him or her. Love is primarily about being life-giving, encouraging, helping and supporting. Like is about being attracted to the other. Attraction might be the beginning of a life-long friendship or the beginning of being trapped in a negative relationship.

"Watch yourselves or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life."

Parents or personal experience should (but maybe not always) teach us to move cautiously into a genuine relationship of friendship. Amorous relationships may be either very simple or extremely fraught. Our instinct to survive may save us from disaster, or a disaster may teach us to be more cautious. Nothing is certain! Risk is inevitable, or, as the saying goes, no pain, no gain. Adventure is a key element of life - exploring the unknown.

2ND SUNDAY

In the second reading from Philippians 1, 3, Paul writes, "Every time I pray for all of you, I pray with joy, remembering how you have helped to spread the Good News from the day you first heard it right up to the present."

In the responsorial psalm 125, 3: "The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy."

REFLECTION

The apostle Paul spent quite some time with this community, sharing with them his Christian faith. Previously, he had persecuted Christians, in the belief that faith in Jesus of Nazareth was an attack on the Jewish faith. He was on the road from one town to another, where he planned to ferret out and identify Christians. It dawned on him that he was quite mistaken, so, with help, he gradually worked out the consequences of this discovery and became a Christian missionary. He put his whole heart into whatever he took on.

"The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy."

Paul attributes his Christian faith and missionary vocation to God and this fills him with joy. What can we say about the joy of sharing this same faith? We are called to mission at Baptism. This may appear to make little sense in cases where the decision to be baptised was taken by our parents, but as adults, we renew our baptismal promises annually at the Easter Vigil (Holy Saturday night). Do we make this public ritual of renewal in a meaningful way?

3RD SUNDAY

In the Gospel acclamation from Isaiah 62, 1 (Lk 4,18):
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he sent me to bring Good News to the poor."

The communion antiphon says: "Say to the anxious: be strong and fear not and God will come to save us."

REFLECTION

Our parishes usually initiate and support groups of parishioners, focusing on support and solidarity with the poor. Sometimes, laypeople take the initiative to create and animate such groups.

"Say to the anxious: be strong and fear not and God will come to save us."

As often as not, things don't work out as we had hoped or planned. Plugging into our power to endure adversity is often demanded by Christ's call to mission.

4TH SUNDAY

In the Gospel acclamation from Luke 1:38: "I am the servant of the Lord: may his will for me be done."

In the Gospel reading from Luke: 1: 41-42: "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the child leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'"

REFLECTION

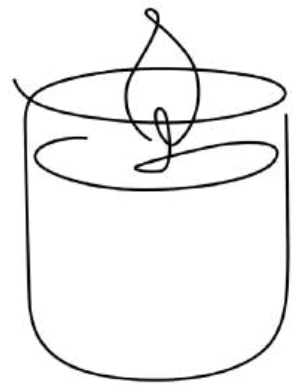
It is often difficult to know what God's will is. Paul eventually discovered what it was for him, but it cost him a lot to follow up on that - a courageous and honest man.

"And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the child leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'"

Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, seem to understand each other. True friendship is a gift from God that deserves gratitude.

FR PETER WOODRUFF

Columban Fr Peter Woodruff lives and works in Australia.



In the Gospel acclamation from Isaiah 62, 1 (Lk 4,18): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he sent me to bring Good News to the poor."

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A CHRISTMAS JOURNEY TO THE FAR SHORE

"How do you plan to celebrate Christmas?" I asked Fr Peter, who, having spent more than fifty years on mission, was then in need of ongoing nursing care due to various age-related ailments.

"I suppose I'll celebrate it in the same quiet way as I have done these past several years. Growing up, there were nine of us; now we're down to three. My younger sister has dementia and my older brother has all kinds of health problems. And, as you can see, I'm just hanging in, so the best place for me to spend Christmas is here in my own room, where I won't be any trouble to anyone."

"Since returning home from mission a few years ago, my world has become smaller and smaller. I had been away so long that I didn't know the younger generations back in my hometown. Besides, my mind and my memory are not nearly as sharp as they used to be. Then, when my eyesight declined, I had to give up driving. Now my balance is poor, so I'm generally confined to this place. I seldom go out and when I do, I don't know anyone."

Then, after a pause during which he adopts a mischievous smile, Fr Peter continues, "No matter, every year, I look forward to Christmas - for several weeks, I make a grand tour around this country and across the world to meet my family and neighbours, as well as parishioners and friends from my missionary days."

"It's a strange thing to say, but I begin my preparations for Christmas at Halloween. During the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls, we bring to mind the deceased, but I need more than two days to remember all those who have crossed my path and have already gone home to God ... so throughout the month of November, I spend a few minutes each day recalling the names of four or five people who are deceased and I jot down their names and say a little prayer for them, so that by the end of November I might have

150 or even 200 names on that list. The truth is, at this stage of my life, I know a lot of people who have crossed over to the far shore - and those whom I know on this shore are becoming fewer and fewer! Anyway, it helps me to look back over my life, remember those that meant so much to me and are now on that far shore - maybe they can help me on the last leg of my journey so that I can cross over safely and join them."

"No matter, every year, I look forward to Christmas - for several weeks, I make a grand tour around this country and across the world to meet my family and neighbours, as well as parishioners and friends from my missionary days."

"At the start of Advent, my focus changes from the deceased to the living. Each day, I recall a few people to whom I write a Christmas card or make a phone call - and as I jot down their names on my list, I say a little prayer for each one of them and their family. I do the same after I open each Christmas card - I ask God to bless the sender and their loved ones with peace and joy during the Christmas season. Again, I have 150 or maybe 200 on that list, though many of the younger generations, including my great-grandnephews and nieces, I know only by name."

"I try to keep the Christmas spirit alive until the Feast of the Epiphany. It helps that a few nephews and nieces drop by to visit me after they have celebrated Christmas with their own families. And then there are always a few Christmas cards that arrive after the New Year. I add them to my display of Christmas cards here in my room as they remind me not only of those who sent them, but also of places and events in my past life."

"Even though I spend my days here in my bedroom, between the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of the Epiphany, it feels as if my world expands as I recall



When I pray with all those faded memories, I come to think that there is no such thing as near or far, no such thing as past or future, because everything and everyone is being held together in the heart of God - and that belief gives me great consolation and joy throughout the Christmas season."

each day some people and places from my life's journey. I am grateful that I have lived in various places, met many people and have had all kinds of experiences, both happy and sad. I have some regrets, but my overwhelming feeling is one of gratitude. When I pray with all those faded memories, I come to think that there is no such thing as near or far, no such thing as past or future, because everything and everyone is being held together in the heart of God - and that belief gives me great consolation and joy throughout the Christmas season."

A few months after this conversation with Fr Peter, a sudden, serious illness resulted in him crossing over to the far shore. There, he no longer dimly recalls people

and places, but rather sees face to face all those whom he had encountered in various locations along the path of life; there he no longer has just a partial grasp of all the twists and turns on his life's journey but rather sees and appreciates how God guided and cared for him at every stage of the road. What a delightful homecoming!

And what a joyous Christmas season Fr Peter must now be experiencing, not just between the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of the Epiphany, but all year round!

FR TIM MULROY

Columban Fr Tim Mulroy lives and works in Britain.

STANDING WITH MIGRANTS AND CREATION IN TAIWAN



Columban Fr Ryu Sunjong with shelter residents at the Hope Workers' Center in Taiwan. Photo: Hope Workers' Center Taiwan

Every year, thousands of migrant workers arrive in Taiwan, leaving behind their families and familiar surroundings in search of a livelihood. They come from the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia and other parts of Asia, often with hope in their hearts but also with fear of exploitation and uncertainty. For many, their experience in Taiwan is not just about employment - it is about survival, dignity and faith.

At the heart of this mission is Columban Fr Nguyen Van Hung, Director of the Vietnamese Migrant Workers and Immigrants Office (VMWIO). For more than two decades, Fr Hung has been a tireless advocate for migrants, accompanying them spiritually, socially and emotionally. His ministry encompasses three essential areas: pastoral care, social services and adult mental health support.

As Parish Priest of Our Lady of the Assumption in Bade, Taoyuan, Fr Hung ministers to a diverse parish where the pews are filled with the faces of migrants far from home. He celebrates the Eucharist, administers the sacraments and is a source of comfort to those who long for connection. Beyond the parish, he serves as a Migrants Chaplain in the Hsinchu Diocese, reaching out to migrant communities scattered across the region. Sunday masses, catechesis, retreats and leadership seminars become more than liturgical functions - they are lifelines for workers who find a sense of belonging and dignity in faith. The Gospel becomes real in these gatherings, reminding migrants that their struggles are seen, their lives valued and their future held in God's hands.

Fr Hung's mission goes well beyond the sanctuary. As Director of the VMWIO, he leads a team of eight staff members who work daily with migrants experiencing injustice. Whether it is unpaid wages, physical or sexual abuse, human trafficking, or unlawful deductions, the office stands as an advocate and a refuge. The VMWIO provides temporary shelter to those who have been abused, including pregnant women and victims of trafficking. Many arrive traumatised, uncertain of their next steps. In these moments, the office becomes not just a safe house but a beacon of hope.

The advocacy does not stop at immediate care. Fr Hung and his team engage with local NGOs, legislators and human rights advocates in Taiwan and Vietnam. They campaign for legal reforms that will protect workers and speak out on issues of environmental justice, recognising that migrant workers are often among the most affected by ecological degradation. He also coordinates the work of the three diocesan offices serving migrants and immigrants, ensuring their combined efforts reflect the Church's mission of compassion and justice.

The isolation and stress faced by migrant workers can take a heavy toll on mental health. Recognising this reality, Fr Hung has developed programs for adult mental health, organising seminars for migrant leaders and providing psychotherapy himself. His ministry

extends to parishioners, priests and religious sisters who also turn to him for support. "Pastoral care cannot be separated from psychological care," he explains. "When people carry wounds in their minds and hearts, the Gospel message of hope can only reach them if we also help them heal from within."

Former Columban lay missionary, Jhoanna (Jao) Resari, from the Philippines, works part-time with the Hsinchu Diocese Migrants Chaplains Office, coordinating a ministry across the diocese that addresses one of the most sensitive challenges among migrants: HIV and AIDS. As the Coordinator of the Agape Centre for HIV Education and Outreach Ministry, Jao leads prevention, education and pastoral care efforts. Many migrant workers face conditions of vulnerability that increase their risk of infection. The Centre provides HIV prevention training, distributes self-test kits and accompanies those living with HIV. In collaboration with priests, pastoral coordinators, NGOs and lay leaders, Jao works to dismantle stigma and build communities of acceptance and care. "HIV is not only a medical issue," Jao notes. "It is also about dignity, justice and compassion. Our mission is to ensure no one feels abandoned by illness or prejudice."

Looking to the future, another dimension of mission is taking root. In July 2025, Columban lay missionary Febie Gonzales, from the Philippines, began her ministry in Biodiversity Restoration and Protection. Inspired by Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, she plans to form a network of *Laudato Si'* animators in Taiwan and to lead activities during the Church's annual Season of Creation (September 1 to October 4). Her work will include building connections with

NGOs, researching Taiwan's environmental challenges and developing grassroots education initiatives. From urban greening projects to diocesan training, Febie hopes to awaken ecological awareness and action within migrant and local communities. "Caring for migrants and caring for creation are not separate missions," she reflects. "Both are about protecting life, dignity and the future of our shared home."

Together, these ministries - pastoral care, social protection, mental health, HIV education and ecological advocacy - paint a portrait of a Church deeply engaged in today's realities. For Fr Hung, the call is simple but demanding: to witness to the God of compassion and justice. "The Gospel is lived on the margins," he says. "When we stand with the poor, the vulnerable, the sick and the Earth itself, we proclaim the Kingdom of God."

In Taiwan, the mission of the Columbans and their collaborators continues to evolve. With each Mass celebrated, each worker sheltered, each law challenged and each tree planted, the Church becomes what it is called to be: a community of hope. For migrants who arrive uncertain and afraid, the presence of people like Fr Hung, Jao and Febie reminds them that God has not forgotten them. In their struggles, they find a family of faith, solidarity and love.

ST COLUMBANS MISSION SOCIETY TAIWAN



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Vietnamese Migrant Workers and Immigrants Office of the Catholic Church in Taiwan celebrates the New Year with joy, care, and a shared sense of home.
Photo: Fr Nguyen Van Hung SSC

BEING COLUMBAN AND BEING BROWN

We started from a group of diocesan priests from Ireland who saw the great mission to bring the Good News to China. It grew from the dream of our founders, Frs Edward Galvin and John Blowick.

St Columbans Mission Society built churches, schools and communities. Wherever Columbans went, they brought and shared Gospel joy. In the eighties in the Philippines, they started accepting local vocations from the parishes where they served. In the past, there was great reluctance to accept and start the formation of local vocations to become Columbans, even if there were already many showing interest in joining.

I am the “first fruit” of the Columbans from my diocese, as my ordaining bishop put it. I had my very first missionary experience on the islands of Fiji. After ordination, I was sent to Myanmar (formerly Burma), but I fully intended to return to the Fiji islands - my first love. I wanted to live and die in Fiji. This, I realised later on in my missionary life, was the wrong ideal. As Columbans, we must all be open to where the Columban mission calls us, not just to our personal missionary goals. When assigned to Myanmar, I was reluctant and sad to go but also open and excited to explore a new mission. I fell in love with the country despite the difficult Burmese language.

Myanmar has for a very long time suffered from an ongoing conflict. As missionaries, we are challenged with visa applications and the constant uncertainties around us. And that is what mission is all about. I believe when we have become so comfortable, we need to be shaken and reawakened to something even greater - the call to be small and vulnerable.

On my first few nights in a parish in the Diocese of Myitkyina, I could hear what sounded like fireworks, but I thought to myself, it is too early for New Year celebrations. I realised they were gunshots and not fireworks. There was a time when I had to anoint one of the young people I work with, who was shot during one of the many youth protests in the city after the coup. Just days after the coup, young people, including members of the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina, joined the many protests in the city.

Every day, I would receive invitations to join them, but it would be dangerous for me, as a foreigner, to join and it would endanger the others. Columbans have a long history in Kachin land in the north of Myanmar. We have built great friendships with the Kachin people. And the Kachin people are very grateful to the early Columbans who arrived in the area. They stationed themselves in remote hills and mountains, living and struggling alongside the people.

To help vulnerable and helpless young people, we organised a movement of Catholic students studying in the government schools and universities in the Diocese of Myitkyina. The movement allowed many young Catholic students to build friendships and gave them opportunities to meet students from other universities or even within their own university. We also reached out to students and youth of other Christian churches and even other religions.

After the coup, it became harder to visit the universities. Also, many students and teachers decided to protest and not return to school or university. Many others felt they had lost their way, experiencing traumatic memories and anxiety. Together with some members of the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina and with the support and help of teachers, we opened an alternative student centre, the Student Learning Resources Centre (SLRC), which offers skills development training, mental health awareness interventions and an internship program for students. Being a Columban, I want to respond to the needs of these young people. Thanks to our generous benefactors, we can provide these alternative programs that benefit many young people in the diocese.

I joined the Columbans as a high school graduate in 1999. I had dreams of serving and living in foreign lands just like my mentor and recruiter, Fr Dick Pankratz, an American Columban priest who spoke Cebuano with an accent. During those years, many Columbans from Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and the US still lived and worked in the Philippines. At gatherings, the number of Columbans from the these “home regions” would always outnumber us members of the “mission region.” That rapidly changed.

In 2018, I attended my first Society General Assembly in Taiwan. I was very excited but also anxious as a



Columban Fr Kurt Zion Pala with parishioners in Myanmar, 2025.

delegate. I took it seriously as a big responsibility to be the representative of my Myanmar Mission Unit. During one of the meetings of the assembly, we were asked to look around the room. The facilitator asked, "How many of you come from the Asia-Pacific region or the South American region? How many of you come from Ireland, the US, Australia, New Zealand, or Great Britain?"

We are changing. There is more diversity among us Columbans in terms of skin colour, culture and even gender. We are now truly representative of the universal Church.

But lately, the talk of our diminishing numbers and resources has brought some of us to question our very existence and purpose. The recent survey and discussions also affected me a lot, adding more to my own anxieties living and working here in Myanmar. We are now smaller, just like in the past. The first Columbans were no more than what we are now. We were small back then, just like how Jesus started with a group of twelve. We should live more with faith and hope. We are messengers of the Good News! "Be brave, be generous and above all be joyful!" Pope Francis reminded the young people of Myanmar during his visit here. We, too, must also pay heed to these words.

Being Columban means doing what I can to respond to the signs of the times - that includes finding resources and writing project proposals and using these resources to respond to the needs of the young people that I work with closely. When I feel helpless, I remind myself how much more helpless these young people must feel.

But I am different from the Columbans that many of the older Kachin people grew up with. They were tall, fair-skinned, with bright blue eyes. I am quite the

opposite. I am Filipino and brown. Being different has allowed me to visit and reach places my other Columban brothers could not. I can easily blend with the people.

When I meet local people, they often mistake me for a local priest or a local person. They will immediately speak to me in their language and be relaxed. This allows me to enter any space quite easily without attracting attention.

But am I Columban enough? Who is a Columban? What is our Columban identity now? Do I get to take part in the major decisions of the St Columbans Mission Society?

Starting a ministry can also be quite a challenge. I do not have all the resources and support I have back at home in the Philippines. But I try to appeal for support. I speak to the people at home and tell them stories of the lives of the young people in Myanmar. Many of them have responded by sharing some of their financial resources. I am grateful for the generosity of Filipinos who are touched by the suffering of the young people of Myanmar.

Being Columban and being brown may have been two different realities in the past. But today we are seeing the fruits of the first Columban priests who left their homes to bring and share Gospel joy to the islands of the Philippines and other parts of the world.

I thank the Columbans of the earlier years who helped share Gospel joy with our lands. As a Filipino Columban, I am very grateful to the many Columbans who lived and worked in Mindanao, where I come from. As a Columban today, I continue their tradition and mission to bring that same faith and Gospel joy to the people of Myanmar as a Columban missionary priest.

We must celebrate being "small", just as Christ Jesus celebrates the "smallness" of a child. Maybe God wants to remind us again to trust Him, just like a child trusts. "Small is beautiful," an economist once said.

We are Columbans. We are small in number but beautiful in our mission. I am grateful for this gift to be a member of the Columban Missionaries.

FR KURT ZION PALA

Columban Fr Kurt Zion Pala lives and works in Myanmar.

Photo: Fr Kurt Zion Pala SSC



Chapel in Bajos de Mena, Santiago, Chile.

ONE CROSS AT A TIME

Each week, I hop on a borrowed bicycle and venture through the winding streets of Bajos de Mena in Santiago, Chile. My mission is simple yet deeply personal: to visit one of the nine chapels of San Mathias Parish, where I've been assigned as part of my First Mission Assignment with the Columbans. With each ride, I'm slowly learning the geography of this vibrant and often challenging neighbourhood. And when I sense that I'm near my destination, I always look up - searching the rooftops for a familiar sign: the cross.

That cross, sometimes small and hidden among buildings, is more than just a landmark. It's a spiritual guidepost, reminding me that I am on sacred ground. It speaks to the presence of a gathered community, to people who come together in faith despite hardship and to the mystery of Christ who walks among them.

On the Fifth Sunday of Easter, I reflected deeply on this symbol. While the season of Easter proclaims the victory of the resurrection, the cross remains central to our faith. It is not a contradiction, but a profound truth: the cross is where love devours death. It is where pain, injustice and betrayal are not the final word. We experience the resurrection when we choose to love - freely, courageously, even sacrificially. Jesus gave us a new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you." That love is not theoretical; it is painfully real and possible in our daily lives.

As a Columban missionary in formation, I've come to appreciate that mission is not a romantic adventure. It is a path shaped by vulnerability, risk and trust. On the Vigil of Pentecost, I was reminded of this in a very tangible way. While on my way to one of the chapels, a man on a bicycle suddenly overtook me and cut me off. It was a tense moment and I feared for my safety. But in a twist of providence, a car honked loudly, distracting the man long enough for me to ride away. I thanked the Holy Spirit for that unexpected intervention.

These kinds of encounters remind me of the dangers here - not just of theft or violence, but also of the elements. The weather in Bajos de Mena can be harsh and I am often exposed on my bike. But these crosses - real as they are, are not the heaviest ones I carry.

What moves me far more deeply is the invitation to be present to others, to listen to their sacred stories and to witness their lived experience of faith. I have met parents and grandparents who pour love into their families despite poverty and illness. I've heard from children who care for aging parents and neighbours who reach out to each other amid conflict and need. These are stories of the cross - and of resurrection.

Some people share experiences of betrayal by those they trusted, even by Church leaders. And yet, they continue to show up. They still attend Mass, still prepare tea and coffee for visitors, still share the warmth of Hass avocados and homemade bread. In these acts of hospitality, I encounter the living Christ.

I have met parents and grandparents who pour love into their families despite poverty and illness. I've heard from children who care for aging parents and neighbours who reach out to each other amid conflict and need. These are stories of the cross - and of resurrection.

At first, I looked for the cross to find the chapels. Now, I see the cross in the lives of the people I meet. Their wounds and their resilience, their pain and their joy, speak of a faith that refuses to give up. They choose to love - despite everything. They love because they know they were loved first.

These encounters are not just touching; they are transforming. I carry these stories with me as I pedal from one chapel to another. I place them in the sacred space of my heart, knowing that only God fully understands the weight they bear. These are not just personal struggles - they are communal testimonies of grace.

As I continue this journey, I find myself slowly entering more deeply into the interior life of the Church in Bajos de Mena. It's not just about arriving at buildings - it's about being present to a people. My next assignment will bring me into closer contact with three basic ecclesial communities across three chapels. I don't yet know what awaits me there, but I ride with hope, with prayer and with an open heart.

In all of this, I am reminded that the mission is not about fixing every problem. It's about walking alongside, listening, sharing and bearing witness to the love that overcomes all things. It is about journeying - one cross at a time, one conversation at a time, one act of love at a time.

Your prayers and support are part of this mission too. Please continue to keep us in your thoughts. Let us pray for one another and remain united in the spirit of love and solidarity.

LYDIO MANGAO JR

Columban student Lydio Mangao Jr is on his First Mission Assignment in Chile.



Columban student Lydio Mangao Jr on his venture through the streets of Bajos de Mena in Santiago, Chile.

Your prayers and support are part of this mission too. Please continue to keep us in your thoughts.

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FAITH, FRIENDSHIP AND MISSION: 70 YEARS WITH FR BARRY CAIRNS



This year, we give thanks for the remarkable milestone reached by Columban missionary, Fr Barry Cairns: 70 years of priestly ordination. A New Zealander, Fr Barry has poured his life out in service, faith and mission.

Born in 1931, Barry Cairns grew up in Lower Hutt, Aotearoa-New Zealand. In 1949, sensing God's call, he entered the Columban seminary. Ordained in 1955 at his home parish of Saints Peter and Paul, he was assigned to Japan - a country still scarred by war but rich in tradition and largely unfamiliar to him.

Fr Barry arrived in Japan in 1956 and began parish ministry in rural fishing villages. Life was tough: poverty and illness were widespread and he himself endured serious sickness. Yet these trials deepened his conviction that Christ walks with us even in suffering. His curiosity about the culture and his respect for the people helped him to belong, not as an outsider but as a brother.

After 11 years in Japan, poor health led him to nine months in hospital. Once recovered, he was assigned to the Columban seminary in Sydney as a spiritual director, guiding young men preparing for mission.

In 1983, he returned to Japan, where he has ministered ever since in busy urban parishes and, more recently, in a small parish in Kanagawa ward, Yokohama city.

Today, even in his nineties, Fr Barry continues pastoral work. He visits sick parishioners, tends a vegetable garden and joins parishioners in social activities. His ministry is marked by simple presence - praying, listening and encouraging. He believes that the very presence of a foreign missionary reminds the Church in Japan of its universality.

Reflecting on his journey, Fr Barry often speaks of *ikigai*, a Japanese word meaning "a reason for being". For him, that reason has always been to share Christ's love with others. Illness, cultural adaptation and long years abroad have not dimmed his zeal. Instead, he sees suffering and challenge as shaping the soul, helping it to shine more brightly.

As we mark his 70th anniversary, we give thanks for Fr Barry's faith, humility and perseverance. His life reminds us that mission is not only about grand projects but about steadfast love lived daily, through small acts of kindness over many years. Congratulations, Fr Barry and thank you for 70 years of faithful service!

MAHA SHAWKY

Maha Shawky, Oceania Regional Business Manager.

Photos: St Columbans Mission Society

THE POWER OF SACRED ICONS

I recall 50 years ago, as a student, being introduced to Peruvian, Fr Gustavo Gutierrez's book, *A Theology of Liberation*. The image of the crucified Jesus on the cover has stayed with me ever since. It depicted a Jesus with a craggy face and oversized, gnarled fingers and toes - a man who had suffered and yet there was strength and determination in those features.

The publisher had used an image created by a Peruvian artist who moulded figures of the crucified Christ based on the features of the Quechua farmers in his home province. They were men and women who had spent their lives close to the earth, struggling to eke out a livelihood.

Years later, in 2014, on a visit to South America, I saw first-hand many such images. I recall the image of Our Lady at the Shrine in Tirana in the Atacama Desert, about 70 kilometres from the Columban Parish of Alto Pico, Iquique, Chile. It is an area where, in the past, the people lived as slaves mining nitrate in the harsh desert. Strikes and protests erupted as workers sought better treatment, leading to an infamous massacre in 1907, when the Chilean army suppressed striking workers.

The image of Mary in that shrine is based on an Inca princess, Tirana, who fought against the Spanish conquistadores. It is the image of Mary standing with the miners in their struggles. Mary, with the infant Jesus on one arm, reaches out with her other arm to the miners gathered around her - among them a youth holding the Chilean flag. She is giving them the scapular to wear as a sign that she will protect them. Empowered by her, they rally around her, standing up to begin anew.

Religious images arising from lived and historical experiences are powerful. Tapping into shared religious imagery in Peru and Chile, such images

KOREA



SCAN QR CODE to watch Columban video 'Remembering Gustavo Gutiérrez'.



became potent tools for marginalised, poor people to assert their identity and resist oppression.

Christmas is a time when traditionally religious icons become very visible. Each December, a crib is erected in every Catholic Church. The traditional "feel good" crib will probably dominate the majority of churches - images that evoke nostalgic memories of childhood Christmases: the sheep, the shepherd and the wise men bringing gifts to the baby Jesus in a stable with his parents and some animals. In reality, a truly terrible place to give birth to your first child - but our cribs with the lights, the cotton wool etc. create an ooey-goey feel-good factor for so many that we can miss the message.

However, this year, in different places, we have people who have taken the present reality of Bethlehem on board when creating the crib. For example, in the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, the pastor, Rev. Isaac Munther, has built a very different crib this year. Here, the newborn child lies amid the rubble of a house just bombed and when the shepherds and magi come, they have to search the rubble to drag out the infant! It hits us that Jesus was indeed born when his people were oppressed by an empire and that God chose to identify with them.

Religious icons are powerful. They shape our conversations and form our outlook, our worldview. They can be a domesticating power that dulls our senses, lulling us into accepting the status quo, or else they can be a subversive power, challenging us and inviting us to do something to bring about the Reign of God. In our own personal space, each of us has our favourite religious icon.

The question is: How is that icon shaping me?

FR DONAL O'KEEFFE

Columban Fr Donal O'Keeffe lives and works in Korea.

ON HOLY GROUND

WHERE CULTURES MEET AND GOD SPEAKS



Where Arlenne Villahermosa lived and worked in Korea during her first term as a Columban lay missionary.

“A life unlike your own can be your best teacher.” - St Columban

This wisdom becomes real when we allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, working through people, creation, the universe and the everyday events that unfold before us.

Often, we become comfortable with the familiar - familiar words, ways of thinking, customs and routines. When we remain fixed in our perspective, we block opportunities for grace and growth. We miss out on seeing life through deeper lenses and on experiencing God's vast and boundless love in new ways.

This truth becomes especially profound for those on cross-cultural mission, where each encounter becomes an invitation to deepen faith, broaden horizons and recognise that God is already present in the places we are sent - long before we arrive.

During my mission with the Columban Missionaries, I experienced many “firsts”.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

It was my first time formally learning a foreign language - first in Korea, then in Myanmar. But in the process, I remembered that I had already been speaking other languages: Cebuano, English, Tagalog and some Spanish I learned in college.

What I discovered is that learning a language within its native culture gives words a deeper meaning. Language became more than just words - it became about listening, observing and understanding what lies beyond speech. It connected me with people and brought me closer to God.

CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF KINDNESS: ROUGH GESTURES, GENTLE MEANINGS

In Korea, I found that kindness can take unfamiliar forms. Once, while walking through the snow, an elderly woman living on her own, through the generosity of the community, beckoned me into her home without many words. She gave me a winter coat - one she had received from charity. When I tried to decline, she gently insisted, “You need it more than I do - you're not from Korea.”

Her gesture, though silent and even forceful from my cultural viewpoint, moved me deeply. I held back tears as I hugged her in gratitude. Her kindness transcended language.

On another occasion, a volunteer affirmed me by giving me what felt like a slap on the shoulder. Though surprising to me as a Filipino, it was actually a sign of encouragement. I smiled and bowed in thanks - learning again that kindness wears many faces.

LEARNING ACROSS CULTURES

Justice in Kachin Culture: In the area I served in Myanmar, I saw how justice was practised differently. When a group of children committed a minor theft, the community did not call the police. Instead, the village elders were consulted and the community took part in helping the children correct their actions.

It was restorative, not punitive - deeply rooted in compassion and shared responsibility.

The words of St Columban echo in my heart: "A life unlike your own can be your best teacher."



Columban lay missionary Arlenne Villahermosa carrying the Kachin basket in the traditional way.

Good Intentions, Cultural Missteps: One day, our group assigned in Myanmar received a gift of food from the villagers - a sign of their deep gratitude to the Columban Missionaries. Not wanting it to go to waste, we shared the extra food with others in the village - especially with larger families who had little to spare.

Soon after, the village chief visited. He kindly explained that our gesture, though well-intentioned, offended some villagers. In their culture, sharing the excess of what was given as a gift suggested we did not value their gift.

I was the one who received the message, as I was the only one in the house at the time of the visit. I sincerely apologised and thanked him for helping us understand. He recognised our intention but gently reminded me: "What may seem right in your culture may not be right in ours."

That moment taught me we were walking on sacred ground and that respecting the culture meant honouring the divine presence already there.

A FINAL REFLECTION

The words of St Columban echo in my heart: "*A life unlike your own can be your best teacher.*"

We are not better or worse than others. We are all good and beautifully created. Just as God intended, with each life carrying stories shaped by our own cultures, faith, families and histories. When we listen to others - especially those different from us - we learn truths not just spoken but lived. When we approach others with humility, we begin to see the sacred in our differences. When we listen deeply, we allow God's Spirit to teach us - through gestures, customs, silence and story. And in doing so, we come closer to the heart of what it means to live in mission: to love, to learn and to walk gently with others on the holy ground of their lives and of their land. And in those sacred encounters, we experience the divine.

ARLENNE VILLAHERMOSA

Columban lay missionary Arlenne Villahermosa lives and works in the Philippines.

DIALOGUE WITH NONES

Who are “nones”? Nones are people who are not affiliated to any recognised religion. They include atheists, agnostics and people who may believe in God or an afterlife but who don’t label themselves as belonging to any faith tradition.

The term is officially recognised by the Pew Research Centre. In its most recent research, Pew claims that “nones” are among the fastest-growing categories of people worldwide. Their research shows that 28 per cent of people in the United States can be classified as Nones.

Among the reasons for the growth in the number of Nones are increasing individualism and secularism. More often, people are choosing to decide their own set of beliefs and refuse to submit to the creed of any organised religion. There is also an increasing move away from religious belief to scientific facts or what can be proven by human experience.

Some object to the term. Interestingly, there is a group in the United States known as “Nuns and Nones” which was begun by a religious congregation of contemplative nuns with the purpose of providing a place for people of no religious denominations to spend time in quiet with them as they prayed together in community.

When some of the Sisters objected to the name because they found it negative and so chose to speak of the movement as “Sisters and Seekers”, some of those who accompanied them objected to this, saying that not all “nones” are “seekers”.

However, Czech Catholic priest and theologian, Tomáš Halík, in his book “The Afternoon of Christianity: The Courage to Change” (University of Notre Dame, 1 March 2024), says, “I am convinced that the future of Christianity will depend primarily on the extent to which Christians relate to the spiritual seekers among the Nones.” (p. 128) Halik claims that a certain number of Nones are those who have left the Church for a variety of reasons. But what Halik would also insist is that people who leave the church “do not, as a rule, become atheists.” (p. 126)

Halik warns against proselytism, however, when it comes to this new dialogue with Nones. I have come across articles by people who occupy executive positions within evangelical institutions set up by the Catholic church who see Nones as “mission territory”. This is almost like reverting back to conversionist approaches in reaching out to those who have left the Church.

Rather than seeking to draw people back into Church in order to fill pews, we need to take our lead from Pope Francis who, on the eve of his election, “quoted Jesus’s words ‘I stand at the door and knock,’ (Revelation 3:20) but he (Cardinal Bergoglio) added that today Jesus knocks from within the Church and wants to go out, especially to all the poor, marginalised and wounded in our world and we must follow him.” (ibid., p. 129)

This would be far more inviting to many of the Nones in our world today and a far better place to begin the dialogue.

FR TOM ROUSE

Regional Councillor of Oceania

MISSION INTENTIONS

POPE FRANCIS

November - For the prevention of suicide: Let us pray that those who are struggling with suicidal thoughts might find the support, care and love they need in their community and be open to the beauty of life.

December - For Christians in areas of conflict: Let us pray that Christians living in areas of war or conflict, especially in the Middle East, might be seeds of peace, reconciliation and hope.

COLUMBAN ACTIVITIES Crossword puzzle

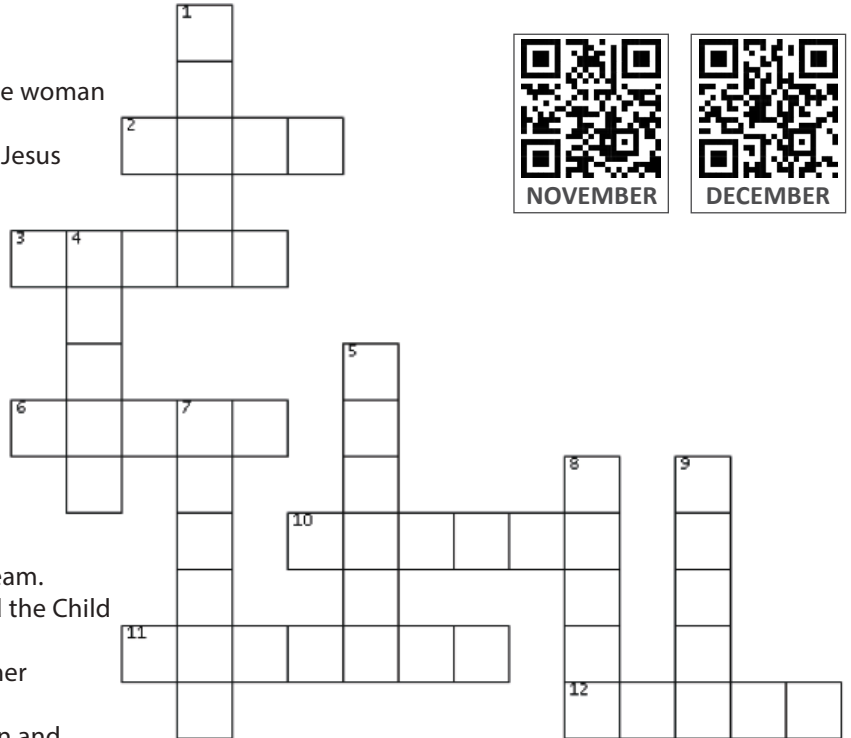
SCAN QR CODE to read the November & December 2025 Columban Calendar Art Guide and complete the crossword puzzle.

ACROSS

2. Ancient seaport near Sidon where the Canaanite woman met Jesus.
3. The virtue of trusting and believing, praised by Jesus in the woman.
6. Compassion shown by Jesus to those who ask with faith.
10. A safe haven, what Egypt represented to the Holy Family.
11. Gospel writer who records both the Canaanite woman and the Flight into Egypt.
12. City paired with Tyre, mentioned in the Gospel story.

DOWN

1. Land where the Holy Family fled for safety.
4. God's messenger who appeared in Joseph's dream.
5. The foster father of Jesus who guided Mary and the Child to safety.
7. Land of the woman who begged Jesus to heal her daughter.
8. Central figure who showed mercy to the woman and healed her child.
9. Ruler who sought to kill the infant Jesus.



ANSWERS:
ACROSS: 2. Tyre, 3. faith, 6. mercy, 10. refuge, 11. Matthew, 12. Sidon
DOWN: 1. Egypt, 4. angel, 5. Joseph, 7. Canaan, 8. Jesus, 9. Herod



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'Do what you can' Bishop Edward J Galvin



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2025 Columban Christmas Appeal

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Pope Leo XIV

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