Columban Mission

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Relationship Between Missionaries and Indigenous Communities

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Issue Theme – Relationship between Missionaries and Indigenous Communities



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Mailing Address:
Missionary Society of St. Columban
1902 N. Calhoun St.
St. Columbans, NE 68056-2000

Toll-Free Phone: 877/299-1920
Website: https://columban.org
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PUBLISHER
FR. ALBERT UTZIG
DIRECTORUSA@COLUMBAN.ORG

EDITOR
KATE KENNY
KKENNY@COLUMBAN.ORG

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS
MARCI ANDERSON
MANDERSON@COLUMBAN.ORG

RENEA STEELE
RSTEELE@COLUMBAN.ORG

DYANNE WENDLING
DWENDLING@COLUMBAN.ORG

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
KRISTIN ASHLEY

EDITORIAL BOARD
DAN EMINGER
KATE KENNY
ERNIE MAY
FR. ALBERT UTZIG

The Missionary Society of St. Columban was founded in 1918 to proclaim and witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Society seeks to establish the Catholic Church where the Gospel has not been preached, help local churches evangelize their laity, promote dialogue with other faiths, and foster among all baptized people an awareness of their missionary responsibility.



In So Many Words

By Columban Missionaries

Shared Hope for a Better World

The relationship between Columban missionaries and the communities they serve is rooted in a spirit of partnership, respect, compassion, and shared faith. While missionaries may travel across borders and cultures, their purpose is not simply to bring assistance to others. At their best, missionaries enter communities with humility, listen to local people, learn from their experiences, and work alongside them to build a stronger and more hopeful future.

Columban missionaries often serve communities facing poverty, limited access to education and health care, displacement, or other significant challenges. Their work can include pastoral ministry, schools, medical programs, agricultural development, social services, and support for families and vulnerable individuals. Yet the most meaningful part of missionary service is often the relationship that develops between the missionary and the people.

Effective missionary work begins with listening. Every community has its own history, traditions, values, needs, and hopes. Missionaries who take time to understand these realities are better able to serve in ways that respect local knowledge and dignity. Rather than assuming they have all the answers, they learn from the people they encounter. Local community members become partners whose insights and leadership are essential to the success of any mission.

Effective missionary work begins with listening. Every community has its own history, traditions, values, needs, and hopes.

This relationship is also one of mutual enrichment. Missionaries bring their faith, experience, education, and resources, but they also receive much from the communities they serve. They encounter extraordinary examples of courage, generosity, perseverance, hospitality, and faith. Living and working among people from different cultures can deepen a missionary's own understanding of the Gospel and remind them that Christian faith is expressed in many beautiful and diverse ways.

The Catholic missionary tradition emphasizes the dignity of every human person. Service is therefore not simply about providing material assistance. It is about recognizing the God-given worth of every individual and helping communities develop opportunities for people to flourish. A school can provide education, but it can also give children confidence and hope. A health clinic can treat illness, but it can also communicate that every person's life matters. A parish can provide spiritual guidance while also becoming a place where people find friendship, solidarity, and support.

Sustainable missionary work depends increasingly on local leadership. Missionaries can help provide resources, training, encouragement, and connections, but lasting progress comes when local people have the opportunity and ability to guide their own communities. The goal is not dependence upon outsiders but empowerment through partnership.



At the heart of this relationship is the Gospel's call to love one's neighbor. Jesus reminds His followers, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). For Catholic missionaries, this teaching transforms service from a charitable activity into an expression of faith.

International missionaries and the communities they serve ultimately share something greater than geography or culture: a common human dignity and a shared hope for a better world. Through friendship, faith, listening, and cooperation, missionary relationships can become lasting partnerships that strengthen individuals, families, and communities. In giving of themselves, missionaries discover that they, too, are transformed by the people they are privileged to serve.



A Link

Path of Renewal

By John Din

I am a link. A link to what? A link between what began decades ago and the imagined future of a recovered and restored forest. Decades ago, San Columbano de Bantolinao was just a dream. It was a dream of a future in which organic farming is enhanced and the forest is restored on a bald mountain considered a watershed for Kabankalan City, Negros Occidental.

It all started with some members of the Negros Nine. They are a group of nine people, six lay and three priests, who were falsely accused of murdering a mayor in 1983. From there, a dream of integral human development and societal transformation was envisioned, where human rights and the plight of the poor are recognized. Living on an island heavily dependent on sugar cane, the protagonists—the poor—realized that the call for human transformation is not situated in a vacuum; it calls for a greater understanding of integral human development, as Pope Francis called for in Laudato Si'. This journey towards an expanded understanding of integral human development led to the birth of Santuario de San Columbano, a forest restoration project of the Negros Nine.

What seemed impossible many years ago is made possible by the countless people who have been part of this enormous task.

Over the years, hundreds of people have been involved in efforts to reforest and stonewall an area of around sixty hectares of land. Mostly planted with native trees, the project has survived a series of typhoons that damaged the planted trees, the threat of charcoal-making by people trying to survive during the lean months while waiting for the sugar cane harvest, a spell of drought and the La Niña phenomenon.

Yet, despite it all, and with little government support, the forest restoration thrives. It withstood the climatic challenges and human stupidity. Most sections of the forest are now able to sustain themselves with less human intervention. The different species of birds are now doing their job to bring more seeds to an ever-welcoming environment for growth. I presume many species in the area are still to be known and discovered.

I moved to San Columbano de Bantolinao in June 2025. The past few months have been dedicated to observation, understanding and knowing the dynamics and patterns of this place.







John Din (left) and program participants

This means regular walks around the reforestation area while enhancing the organic farm. Almost a decade of advocacy work in Manila has awakened in me the need to go back to the land to complement the advocacy work through care for people and creation.

I must recognize that there are many things that I still do not know and understand about the place. Having spent years in a busy city of Manila, each day on the farm seems to be like any other day, but growth is happening in everything around here. It's hard to see the invisible little growth that can only be recognized after a certain time.

What inspires me is to see the great leap from the beginning of the project to the present. After two decades, the fruits of community labor against all odds are unimaginable, turning a bald mountain into an Amazon-like forest. From a view above the canopy, one can easily mistake it for any tropical forest somewhere on the globe. What seemed impossible many years ago is made possible by the countless people who have been part of this enormous task.

It is both a graced moment and a challenge to be part of the link between the past and the present, between the generation before us and those who will come after us.

For me as a missionary in the context of where I am living and working now, it is both a graced moment and a challenge to be part of the link between the past and the present, between the generation before us and those who will come after us.

We are in a crucial context where life in its immense journey, which has brought out everything in all its forms, is now threatened with extinction because of our way of living. A way of living that estranges us from the truth that we are part of the whole of creation. This calls for a lifetime path of renewal—recovering that age-old wisdom and truth present in the worldviews of most indigenous people around the world and supported by science, that everything comes from the same source, is mutually interdependent, and shares a common future. The restoration of the forest, mindfulness of the rhythm of nature, and organic farming are pathways for what Laudato Si′ calls "to tread on the long path to renewal." CM

John Din is a Columban lay missionary living and working in the Philippines.



Columban Mission in Negros at 75

Honoring the Past, Embracing the Future

By Arlenne Villahermosa

The 75th anniversary of the Columban mission in Negros (1950–2025), celebrated November 22–24, 2025, commemorates a legacy of "integral evangelization" that has deeply shaped the island's spiritual, social, and ecological landscape. Celebrating 75 years of presence marks a transition from building the local church to a renewed, audacious mission focused on contemporary crises, including biodiversity loss and social inequality.

The celebration was simple yet meaningful, marked by gratitude, joy, and hope. It became a time to rekindle friendships, honor the Columbans who helped build the local Church, and open pathways to new relationships and a more synodal way of being Church together.

Activities began with a tree-planting initiative at the Santuario de San Columbano-Bantolinao, where around 750 native trees were planted to mark 75 years of mission. About 100 participants from various sectors—including community schools, Columban missionaries, Negros Nine, mission partners, diocesan representatives, government agencies, and civic groups—joined the effort.

On November 23, Christ the King Sunday and the feast day of St. Columban, the local community in Batang gathered for a Eucharistic Celebration with the Columban missionaries, mission partners from Luzon and Mindanao on pilgrimage, the Amigo Columbano group, the Presentation Sisters and some friends. This was followed by a shared meal, reinforcing community bonds.

The following day featured a conference on "Laudato Si and the Island of Negros," highlighting the Columban commitment to listening to the "cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." The resource speaker was Bishop Gerry Alminaza, Bishop of the Diocese of San Carlos, Chairman of the Episcopal Commission on Social Action, Justice and Peace of the Catholic Bishops Conference-Philippines, and President of Caritas-Philippines. This was followed by Mass presided by Bishop Louie Galbines DD, the Bishop of Kabankalan, and concelebrated by Bishop Gerry Alminaza and the Kabankalan diocesan clergy.

The event concluded with a thanksgiving meal shared by everyone who journeyed with the Columban missionaries over the years.

The anniversary was not just a celebration of the past; it marked a turning point that reflected:

- gratitude for a rich missionary legacy
- recognition of the Church's role in social transformation
- and a bold commitment to face today's challenges with renewed hope and purpose.

In essence, it is both a culmination and a commissioning—honoring what has been built while embracing what still needs to be done. CM

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

The Missionary Society of St. Columban

Help Future Generations with a Donation Today

Your gift helps people break the chains of addiction through Columban programs like the Rebirth Rehabilitation Center in Myanmar (formerly Burma).







Thanks to the generosity of the Columban donors we were able to complete and open the first residential center in the country for women suffering from addiction. In addition, the program provides vocational education training to help young men obtain jobs. We hope to expand this program and offer the men and women who come here a path productive employment and ongoing recovery.

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If you want to make help the Missionary Society of St. Columban spread the Light of Christ around the world, a gift from your IRA will make a tremendous impact on our mission. If you are 70½ or older you may also be interested in a way to lower the income and taxes from your IRA withdrawals.

An IRA charitable rollover is a way you can help continue our work and benefit this year.

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- Reduce your taxable income, even if you do not itemize deductions
- Make a gift that is not subject to the deduction limits on charitable gifts
- Help further the work and mission of our organization

If you are 70½ or older, you can use your IRA to fulfill your charitable goals. You can use the "Make a Gift from My IRA" tool to contact your IRA custodian and make a qualified charitable distribution. We will acknowledge your generous gifts as a qualified charitable distribution, which may satisfy your RMD, if applicable.

For more information, please contact us at donorrelations@columban.org, call us toll-free at (877) 299-1920, or visit columban.org. The Missionary Society of St. Columban treasures your support and is committed to the stewardship of your gifts.

The Nanuku Nine

A Heartbreaking Tragedy

By Fr. Frank Hoare



We're Going Fishing

One morning at the beginning of May, nine men ranging in age from 20 years to 57 years said goodbye to their families in Nanuku, an informal settlement in Suva, Fiji. They readied the boat they had hired from a local lady and set out towards the island of Kadavu to fish in waters frequented by them. They rested at a lighthouse on the way. One of them phoned a friend from there who advised him to get permission from the local owners of the area they would fish in. "No, we don't need to do that because we often come to this place to fish," was the answer. None of them have been heard from since. The boat was found in waters off the main island of Viti Levu a few days later. There has been no sign of the men.

They are being accompanied and supported by a community spirit that remains strong in Fiji.

The Families

The nine men were closely related. The eldest was Osea and with him were his three sons, a nephew and other relatives. All the men except the youngest of Osea's sons were married. Two of the wives are pregnant. Other wives have multiple children. Nanuku is an informal settlement in low-lying marshy ground close to the sea. The houses are mostly tin shacks built close together. A few people who have electricity share it with their neighbors.

The Fiji naval service and a helicopter searched the area where the men were last heard from and the area towards which they were going for three days. They had no success and regretfully gave up.

Community Prayer

Ten days later, a special commemorative Mass was held in the Columban parish of St. Pius X, Raiwaqa. All the wives, children and families of the nine men were present, bringing framed photos of their lost ones. The large congregation heard Fr. Vincent Ratnam, the parish priest, speak words of consolation and hope. The choir and people sang touching hymns from their hearts. Afterwards, a large crowd packed the Methodist Hall in Nanuku to drink kava, the traditional drink, and eat together as a community.

The parish community invited the grieving relatives to the parish hall for a commemorative function about a week later, and parishioners gave generously to a collection for the families. Some parishioners requested a team from the Department of Social Welfare to visit them.

Trauma Counseling

I invited a group of counselors to visit the families in Nanuku with me on two successive Saturdays. The trauma counseling was to support each other by sharing their grief. The wives, some with babies in their arms, shared in one group. Three men, two of them brothers and fathers of some of the missing men, shared in another group. The third group was made up of supportive relatives and friends.

Some of the wives cherish the hope that their husbands are still alive. Others told of neighbors speculating about what traditional taboos the men might have broken for this tragedy to have happened. Grandparents spoke of the pain of seeing the effect on the children—some young ones waking up asking where their dads are. The three men said that they no longer felt like attending social functions. They just drank kava and shared it among themselves.



Kelemete mourning his son and another relative

A week later, I listed some of the common signs of trauma to normalize their experience. I advised them to pay no attention to speculations about why the tragedy had happened. The wives all shared about how they were trying to cope. Some said they prayed a lot; others said they cannot pray. One twelve-year-old girl, with tears in her eyes, asked who would now help her through secondary school.

Hardship and Love

With their breadwinners gone, the families are finding it hard to survive. Osea's wife told me that she is selling her husband's tools in order to provide food for her children. We distributed some money to the men's wives. I wrote to the Minister of Women, Children and Social Protection, who is a friend of mine, asking her help to encourage a speedy registration of the families. She replied immediately, assuring me that she has a team working on it.

What brought most joy to the faces of the women was the gift of a beautiful handmade rosary in a pouch, which one of the counselors gave to each one. The rosaries were made during the previous week by her aunt. This aunt is suffering from stage four cancer, is barely able to walk, and spends her time making rosaries from materials bought on the internet. Her only condition in giving out the rosaries is that they are not sold.

The families of the Nanuku Nine are going through a heartbreaking journey. But they are being accompanied and supported by a community spirit that remains strong in Fiji. They need and deserve this support. CM

Columban Fr. Frank Hoare lives and works in Fiji.

“Ephphatha!” (Mk 7:34)

New Meanings

By Ro Seungjun John Paul, Chile

For a very long time, humanity has pondered a single question: “What is the difference between humans and animals?” Countless scholars have offered various answers. The Catholic faith posits a “spiritual and immortal soul” (the rational soul) as the most fundamental distinction. If so, how does this “soul” operate within our concrete lives, beyond merely being the life force that animates our physical bodies?

What does the sun mean to me? What meaning do flowers and family hold for me? An intriguing fact is that creatures like plants and animals are merely physical beings that remain for their allotted time and then disappear. To an animal, the sun is simply heat, and a flower is merely a means of survival. However, only humans look beyond what simply “is” and endow it with meaning. We long for unseen values and breathe a spiritual breath into matter.

For instance, if a friend and I meet after a long time, embrace, and shed tears, it is not a biological discharge of moisture, but a “trembling of the soul” where joy and longing intersect. If I give my mother a flower, it is not simply about transferring a plant; it is about expressing my love and gratitude in a tangible form. In this way, we bestow meaning upon ordinary objects and every simple action.

When we give them meaning, they finally bloom into true existence within our lives. By passing through the entity of me, a simple burning star becomes the sun that shares life with the earth, and a fleeting emotion becomes eternal joy and love. It is a deep sanctuary where we bestow meaning beyond matter and long for an unseen eternity. This is precisely our soul.

Last January, Columban Frs. Darwin Bayaca and Martin Koroiciri left Alto Hospicio, Chile, where I am staying, and went to the Philippines for a month to attend



the young Columbans gathering in Baguio. Although I still faced various restrictions as a Columban student on my First Mission Assignment, I looked after the parish during that month by leading the Liturgy of the Word and taking Holy Communion to the sick.

Then one day, a Minister of the Eucharist from my parish, the Parroquia de Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, rang me. He asked if I could attend and preside over a funeral service that had suddenly come up. In Chile, the great majority of funeral services are usually done by the parish funeral team of lay persons, who ask the priest or deacon to accompany them, if possible. After much deliberation, I made my way to the funeral.

During the service, I had to offer a short reflection after the Gospel. Knowing nothing of the deceased besides his name, I invited family and friends to share their memories. One by one, they offered beautiful tributes and final goodbyes, revealing how deeply loved the deceased had been. Laughing and crying alongside them, I soon felt I was dwelling within their precious memories. Though the physical body had departed, the meanings of love he left behind would live on forever in their souls.

This was the first time in my life as a seminarian that I had personally presided over a funeral. Being so inexperienced and, above all, facing a language barrier, I had no choice but to cling to God and plead for His help. I prayed earnestly that it would not be my own meagre abilities, but God's mercy and love that would guide the service. Ironically, because I was so profoundly lacking, I was able to experience His presence so much more fully whilst there.

Returning home with a heavy heart, I spent time in reflection. Memories of my own family came to mind, leading me to realize that the past, present, and future are all grace-filled times



Today, in deep silence, I earnestly ask Jesus: that through His command of "Ephphatha," my soul may open its eyes and ears, allowing me to carefully retrace the precious time He has granted me here in Chile.

permitted by God. Recalling my 30-day retreat during my Spiritual Year in formation, I was reminded of the overwhelming truth that God has been with me in every single moment. Therefore, no matter how ordinary or exhausting, every moment holds a profound, unfading meaning.

It has already been nearly two years since I arrived in Chile for my First Mission Assignment. Before long, I will leave Chile and return to the Columban international formation house in the Philippines to continue my studies. Hence, this present moment, as I prepare for the end of my First Mission Assignment, is incredibly precious and important to me. I am currently in the process of recalling the myriad good things God has given me over the past two years, and wrapping up what the experiences in this mission field have meant for me.

"Ephphatha!" (Mark 7:34). My favorite verse in the Bible is the word spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark when He heals the deaf man who had an impediment in his speech. This signifies more than the mere healing of a physical disability; it means the opening of spiritual ears and tongues. In other words, it is a true healing wherein one does not merely hear physical sounds again, but gains ears that fully comprehend the Word of God and a tongue that boldly proclaims the truth, rather than one's own desires.

Today, in deep silence, I earnestly ask Jesus: that through His command of "Ephphatha," my soul may open its eyes and ears, allowing me to carefully retrace the precious time He has granted me here in Chile—to retrace the countless neighbors I have encountered, the tears shed at that faltering first funeral service, and the warm touch of God that came to me with fresh meaning in every moment.

Furthermore, I pray that my stiff tongue may be loosened, so that I might faithfully live out God's love and proclaim the truth. I earnestly hope that He will lead me to the place of spiritual awakening—the miracle where all the hours of my life continuously bloom into new meanings within the grace of God. CM

Columban seminarian Ro Seungjun John Paul recently completed his first missionary assignment in Chile and has returned to his studies in the Philippines.

Walking with the Saints

A Pilgrimage to Lindisfarne

By Fr. John Boles



"Lindisfarne is magical, especially when you're going there barefoot." This advice from local pilgrimage organizer Rachel to Columban Frs. Kevin McDonagh, Tim Mulroy and I had a double meaning. While pilgrimages worldwide tend to have stretches where participants go barefoot as a sign of faith or penance, in this case pilgrims have a very practical reason for shedding their footwear: Lindisfarne, in England's Northeast, sits on an island...and there is no bridge!

Nowadays, traffic can pass over a causeway visible at low tide, but pilgrims traditionally prefer to go the way used by Christians for nearly one-and-a-half thousand years, treading a route that leads straight across a couple of miles of wet sands, following a line of posts that often rise eerily above the all-too-common coastal mists.

We Columbans had a threefold motivation for joining this unique, semi-aquatic pilgrim trail, given our close friendships with the three participating groups: the Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle (one of the dioceses kind enough to facilitate Columban mission appeals); the Archbishop Romero Trust (St. Oscar Romero being very close to the hearts of so many Columbans); CAFOD (the Catholic Association for Overseas Development), a vital partner in countless Columban social welfare initiatives.

Also, for me, this was personal.

Back in my days as a student at the University of Hull, I'd spent many a glorious day hiking the hills, coasts and pilgrim trails of the Northeast. During my years as a local government officer and committed young Catholic adult in the 1970s, my hero and role model had been Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador in the Central American country of El Salvador. It was his murder on March 24, 1980, that inspired me to become a missionary in Latin America, first as a lay volunteer in Nicaragua and later as a Columban priest in Chile and Peru. Finally, just before joining the Columban missionaries, I'd spent two enriching years doing voluntary promotional work with CAFOD.

All this came back to me as my fellow pilgrims and I wove our way through the coastal shallows from the mainland to the Holy Isle. It was easy to feel you were walking in the company of saints as the silence descended, broken only by the lapping of waves, call of seabirds, squelching of feet and occasional low hum of prayer and conversation. As for saints, Lindisfarne has had more than its fair share of them. Indeed, the Christian conversion of much of Northern England sprang from here.

By the early Middle Ages, the east and south of Britain had been carved up between competing non-Christian



Modern image of St. Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral



Frs. John Boles and Kevin McDonagh at the ruins of Lindisfarne Abbey

Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (an area becoming known as "Angle-land," or England). However, at some stage, a young prince of the Kingdom of Northumbria named Oswald spent a period of exile amongst the Irish and became Christian. On acceding to the throne, he decided to Christianise his kingdom and confided the task to an Irish monk from Iona named Aidan, whom he established in a monastery on Lindisfarne Island in 634 as abbot, bishop and missionary, with Aidan proving to be spectacularly successful in all three roles up to his death in 651. An equally charismatic individual followed him in 665—Cuthbert, who variously served as monk, abbot, bishop and hermit until his death in 687. By now, Christianity was spreading throughout the region, and monasteries were appearing all along the coast, the most notable being the two established by Biscop on Wearside and at Jarrow, both of which served as home for Bede the Venerable (673–735)—the "Father of English History."

Saints Oswald, Aidan, Cuthbert, Biscop and Bede—incredible spiritual heavyweights in a tiny area over a mere century: an impressive saintly array by any standard. Yet it wasn't prayers of and by any of them we heard along the way, but readings connected to the twentieth-century Latin American St. Oscar Romero. Why?

Well, because the story of Lindisfarne is not just one of triumph but also of suffering. In 651, King St. Oswald was brutally killed and dismembered by Offa, the pagan monarch of neighboring Mercia. Tradition has it that his head lies in Durham Cathedral. Near the spot, there is a statue of a decapitated man holding a crowned head under his arm! Then, in 793, Lindisfarne became the first English settlement to fall victim to the Vikings. The monastery was rebuilt but continued to be attacked and its monks slain until, in 875, the monks eventually abandoned the site and carried away the body of St. Cuthbert, which also found a final resting place in Durham Cathedral.

The deaths of Oswald and the Lindisfarne monks echo the sacrifice of Christ before them, and of all who come after them and suffer for the cause of justice and truth—represented in our times by the martyrdom of St. Oscar Romero.

Romero knew he was putting himself in danger when he accepted the role of Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977 and would inevitably clash with the cruel militarized regime that was oppressing El Salvador at the time. His weekly radio homilies denouncing human rights abuses enraged the authorities just as the parables of Jesus enraged the Chief Priests and Pharisees. His calls for the U.S. to suspend arms sales to his country, and for soldiers not to fire on civilians, effectively sealed his death warrant, yet even before they shot him while celebrating Mass, he'd forgiven his would-be murderers, while foreseeing he'd rise again in the hearts of the people.

It was for this reason, as I walked out of our closing Mass at Lindisfarne's St. Mary's Church, that I felt that Oswald, Aidan, Cuthbert, Biscop and Bede were walking with us and accompanying the pilgrims as we sang, "Like Romero we will serve you and whatever may befall, we'll devote ourselves to justice and the common good of all." CM

Columban Fr. John Boles lives and works in Britain.

Ancestral Memory and Catholic Liturgy

Heart of Community

By Sihyeon Bae, Taiwan

In the pastoral ministry of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples, ancestors, memory, and ritual are not merely secondary cultural elements. Rather, they lie at the very heart of the community, revealing who the people are and the history and way of life on which they stand. Indigenous communities have preserved their identity through their languages, oral traditions, rituals, and the memory of their ancestors. For them, remembering their ancestors is profoundly important, and the prayers and rituals offered for them are not simply customs, but an integral part of life itself.

When I speak with Indigenous elders, I often hear them say that, in the past, 80 to 90 percent of the Indigenous people living in the mountains were Christians. When I ask how so many were able to embrace the faith, they explain that the way God and God's love were lived out resembled the ancestors they remembered and the teachings those ancestors had passed down.

Every year, July and August are the most important seasons for ancestral remembrance rituals among Indigenous communities. In each village, under the leadership of the chief, families and relatives gather on the same day, dressed in their traditional clothing. They begin the ritual before sunrise, because they believe that once the sun rises, the spirits depart. The ceremony opens with the chief's prayer. First, a ritual is offered for all the ancestors of the community, followed by rites for the ancestors of each individual family. After the ritual at the communal cemetery is completed, the participants jump over a fire lit at the entrance to the burial ground. This is meant to prevent the spirits of the ancestors from crossing the boundary between the other world and this one. Afterwards, back in the village, the elders of each household sit together in a circle to discuss important matters concerning the community, while others share the food they have prepared and spend the day together.

In Indigenous communities, the memory of ancestors is not simply an act of remembrance. Ancestors are not regarded as figures of a distant past, but as a living presence that continues to shape the community through its language, stories, rituals, and moral way of life. I, too, have participated in these rituals and shared in those moments. What I witnessed in the Indigenous community's rites and ways of remembering was deeply reverent, and I could feel the sincerity of their longing for their ancestors. I believe that my participation was not simply that of an observer, but an important act of understanding their culture, accompanying them, and deepening our relationship.

When I began my pastoral ministry in the mountains, I was also given a new name. To receive an Indigenous name means that one has been accepted by the community. Usually, when a child is born, the chief of the village or a respected elder gives the child a name. The name itself does not necessarily carry a particular meaning; rather, it is often given in the hope that the child will live well, following the example of someone from the past who was remembered as having lived a good life.

During Mass, we also sing hymns based on traditional Indigenous melodies. These are songs that were traditionally sung, but whose lyrics have been adapted into words of praise and thanksgiving to God. This is a good example of inculturation, in which Indigenous tradition and



Sihyeon sharing



Family members pray for their ancestors



Place of remembrance





Columban lay missionary Siheyon in the center with Fr. Joe McSweeney (on her left)

Catholic liturgy come together in harmony. Through these songs, Indigenous Catholics can experience their own tradition within the celebration of the Mass while at the same time offering praise to God.

During the Christmas season, although the Catholic liturgical norm is to wear white vestments, red vestments are sometimes worn here instead. This is because red symbolizes joy and hope for the people. One cannot simply judge this as right or wrong. What matters is discerning how the Gospel is alive within these differences, while acknowledging them for what they are.

Ultimately, in the pastoral ministry of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples, the issues of ancestors, memory, and liturgy involve respecting the living memory of Indigenous communities while seeking together how that memory can be newly interpreted in Christ and rightly expressed within the liturgy. Liturgy should not be a form that overwrites Indigenous culture. Rather, it should be a space that sheds new light on their memory and history, allowing them to come alive more fully and fruitfully within the Gospel. CM

Columban lay missionary Sihyeon Bae is from South Korea. She currently lives and works in Taiwan.

A Few Prominent Catholics

Colorful Characters

By Fr. John Burger

My first parish assignment after Japanese language school was at St. Patrick's Parish in Toshima-Ku, Tokyo. The priests lived in a house with a small garden right behind the church. On a hot, humid Saturday afternoon, I decided to cut the grass and attack some of the kudzu vines that were threatening to overwhelm the other plantings. It did not take long for my shirt to become wet with sweat. I looked up from my work and a lady was standing there. She gave her name, "Saionji," and asked for Father Scully, the pastor. I led her to a visitors' parlor and went into the kitchen to tell Oyama-san, the housekeeper, that there was a guest and to alert Fr. Scully. It was only when I heard Mrs. Oyama's reaction that I realized our visitor was also known as Princess Saionji. She had a relative who had been a well-respected Prime Minister of the country, and an elder statesman.

In 1919, former prime minister Marquis Saionji Kinmochi led the Japanese delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, though his role remained largely confined to a symbolic role due to ill health. During the negotiations, Saionji proposed the addition of a "racial equality clause" to the Covenant of the League of Nations, though this met with strong American and Australian resistance (both nations being racially segregated at the time) and was not adopted.

Princess Saionji, despite such a distinguished background, was a totally unpretentious Catholic lady who was a good friend to some of the Columbans who worked in the Shonan area near Sagaimi Bay. And she enjoyed sailing—just one of the colorful people who have been part of the Catholic Church in Japan.



Another was Tanaka Kōtarō, a Japanese jurist, professor of law and politician who served as the last Minister of Education of the Empire of Japan and the second postwar Chief Justice of Japan. Takeda Tomoju, a scholar of Christian literature, asserted in a 1973 book review, "In postwar Japan, the most famous Catholics are Tanaka Kotaro and Fr. S. Candau."

Following studies in Japan, Europe and the United States, in 1924 Tanaka Kotaro married Matsumoto Mineko, a devout Catholic. Through her influence and his own interest in natural law and canon law, he converted to Catholicism and was baptized in April 1926 by Fr. William Hoffman, S.J., the first president of Sophia University. Subsequently, Tanaka worked on a "theory of world law."

In the final months of World War II, Tanaka joined a group of Japanese intellectuals who sought peace with the Allies in opposition to Japan's militarist government. After the war, Tanaka was among the signatories of the new Japanese Constitution, and he was instrumental in drafting the Basic Education Law.

In 1950, Tanaka was appointed Chief Justice of Japan, serving until 1960. He was the first Christian to hold this position and drew upon his international legal training to interpret the post-war Japanese constitution. In 1961, Tanaka was appointed as a jurist on the International Court of Justice at the Hague.

Tanaka is today most remembered for a 1966 dissenting opinion regarding the South African practice

of apartheid. Tanaka concluded that UN member states had "the legal obligation to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms." Tanaka died in 1974 at age 83 at St. Mary's Hospital in Tokyo, near his home. He was a member of St. Patrick's Parish, Toshima, Tokyo, which was founded and staffed by the Columban Fathers.

Another Catholic legal expert who had a positive influence on the Japanese legal system was Gustave Emile Boissonade. Active during the Meiji period (1868-1910), he became known as the "father of modern Japanese law." He was born in France in 1825 and received a doctorate in law at the University of Paris in 1853.

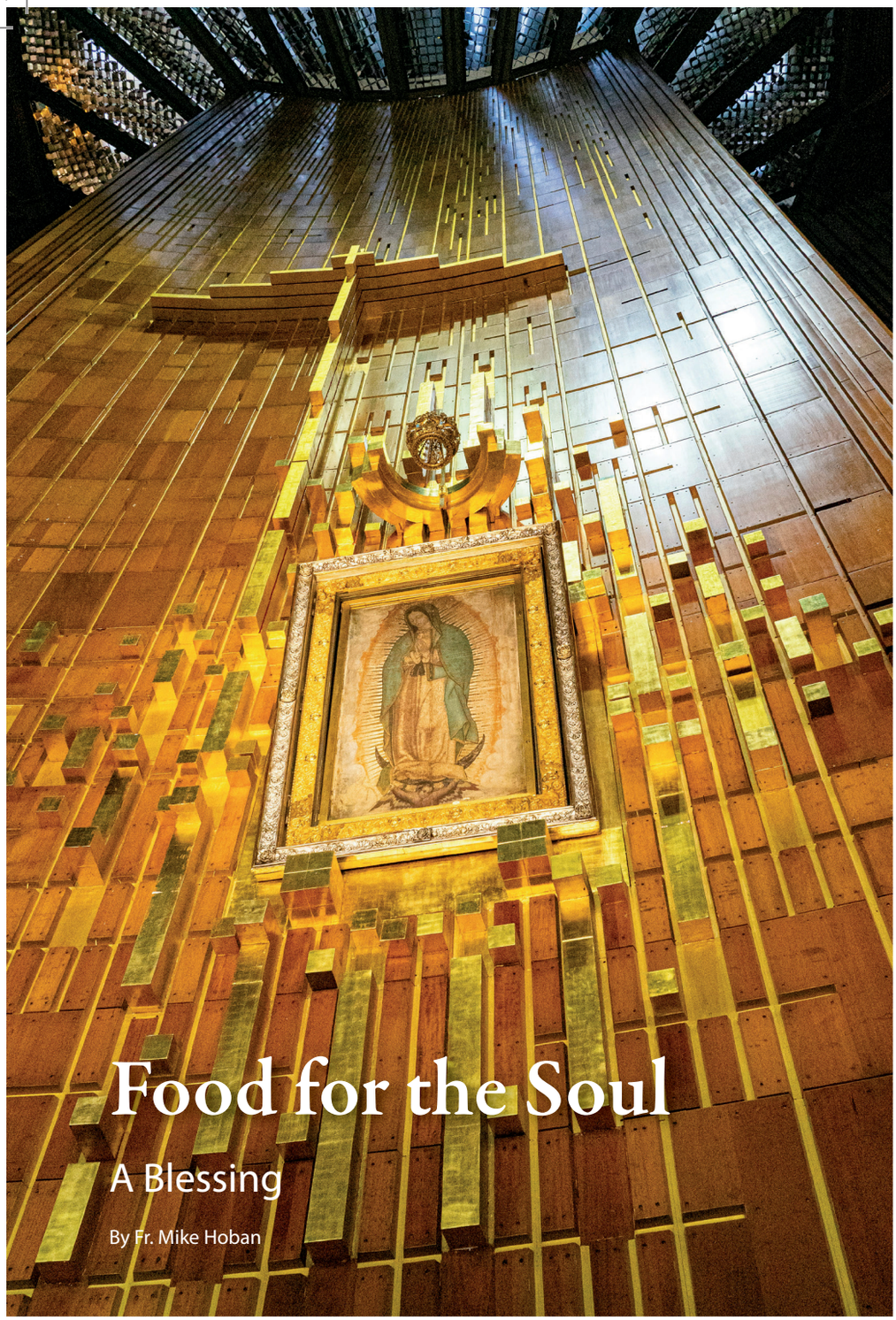
In 1873, he gave lectures on criminal and constitutional law to Japanese officials in Paris. Subsequently, he was invited to Japan to assist in the creation of a modern legal system for the country. He spent 21 years assisting the government and founding the Hosei Law School. He returned to France in 1895 and died in 1910.

Professor Boissonade and his wife Henriette also assisted the French missionaries in the construction of the first parish church, St. Joseph's in Tsukiji, Tokyo, where Columban Fr. Leo Schumacher is parish priest today.

With other members of the French ex-patriot community, the Boissonades donated two French-made bells that rang at the original Church from 1878 until 1920. One of the bells, "Jeanne Louise de Yedo," is still at St. Joseph's, where it is on display. The other, "Adelaide Josephine," is at Tokyo's St. Mary's Cathedral. CM

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





Food for the Soul

A Blessing

By Fr. Mike Hoban

After returning to the United States after many years in Chile, in 2024 I was assigned to the Columban headquarters in St. Columbans, Nebraska. It was a big change. Instead of a parish, I now work (at least some of the time!) in the General Mission Office of the Missionary Society of St. Columban. Over the years, I was supported by the work of my brother Columbans, co-workers and benefactors, who supported our work in Chile. It was my turn to pitch in and share the responsibility of missionary education and promotion. Fortunately, there is a big Hispanic presence in the Archdiocese of Omaha. The State of Nebraska would find it hard to function without the presence of so many hardworking immigrants. I soon discovered several parishes where many of the parishioners are Hispanics, primarily from Central America. One of my favorite churches is dedicated to Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, and I often go there for Sunday Mass.

Another discovery which I made was Mexican food. There are plenty of Mexican restaurants in South Omaha and I am getting fond of eating tacos, quesadillas, and enchiladas. One of my favorite places to eat is a restaurant called Antarctica. Columban Father Chris Saenz, who also worked in Chile, brought me there. Fr. Chris and I went there for lunch just after Christmas, and I was surprised to see on display a big, beautiful Christmas crib.

This restaurant is unique because the owner, Señora Ana Rodriquez, not only provides good food to eat, but also food for the soul! She does both in a very tasteful way! At the end of her restaurant dining room, she puts up displays featuring the important events of our Catholic faith. Before Christmas, a big Christmas crib with all the protagonists of the Incarnation is put up. The infant Jesus is not placed in the crib until Christmas Eve. During Lent, a large Crucifix is set up with a purple drape in the background. An image of the Risen Christ accompanies diners after Easter. The statue of Our Lady of Fatima is enthroned for the month of Mary. At the end of November, a large tapestry of Our Lady of Guadalupe is hung up. For the season of Advent, customers can take a special Advent prayer card. Last year, that included a special Advent card produced by the Columbans. During the rest of the year, the Crucifix hangs over the place of the displays. Catholic Hymns in Spanish often can be heard in the background.

One evening as the restaurant was closing, I went to see Señora Ana and she sat down with me and shared her story with me. She comes from a city called Guanajuato in central Mexico. She immigrated to the USA and is a legal resident with a green



card. She looks forward to becoming an American citizen. When she first came to Omaha, it was not easy to find work. She sold ice cream in the parks and outside of the city's schools. She and her husband worked hard in whatever jobs were available. That often meant working in restaurants. Eventually, they decided to sell their home so that they could buy their own restaurant. The restaurant is also their home, because the family lives in the basement of the restaurant!

Señora Ana explained to me why she displays her Catholic faith in her restaurant. She told me that she was an ordinary practicing Catholic who attended Sunday Mass in the parish of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.

Like the majority of Mexicans, she also has devotion to Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Fifteen years ago, a friend invited her to a Charismatic Mass of Healing in the parish. At one point in the Mass, a long line of people stood up to receive the imposition of hands for healing. She was reluctant to join them because she thought that she was healthy. Then, something strange happened: she felt that someone had lifted her up and put her in the line to receive the imposition of hands. When she received the imposition of hands, she fainted. She couldn't get up and so someone had to help her. As she returned to her pew, she began to cry and couldn't understand why. This experience brought about a huge conversion (a *metanoia*— a turning to God) in her. She told me that from then on, she looked at things differently. "Mass is beautiful and when I listen to the readings, I feel that the Lord is speaking directly to me. My strength comes from the Mass. I decided that I was going to be a missionary." She hopes that her displays of important events for Catholics awaken in them a hunger for God. She joined a "cofradia Franciscana" (a Franciscan Fraternity).

On January 10, 2026, Pope Leo XIV inaugurated a special Jubilee Year in honor of the 800th anniversary of the passing of St. Francis of Assisi. Ana traveled with her four sons to Assisi and took part in the Holy Year of St. Francis. Her sons are active in the parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe. One of them, Porfirio, carried the Cross through the streets of South Omaha on Good Friday.

When I celebrate Mass in Spanish, I am celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for a congregation of immigrants. Many have been in the United States for decades while others are more recent arrivals. I tell them the same thing that I tell the English-speaking congregation: when we celebrate Mass, there are no foreigners, only members of the Body of Christ. I also remind them that they did not come empty-handed to the USA; they came with their faith and that gift should be shared with others. The presence of so many Catholic immigrants in the USA is a great blessing for our Church. Señora Ana Rodriguez discovered that the Lord sent her as a missionary to her adopted country. CM

Columban Fr. Mike Hoban lives and works in St. Columbans, Nebraska.



A Silent Plague

Responding to the Challenge

By Fr. Frank Hoare

People in Fiji are scared. Drug addiction and an exponential increase in young people testing positive for HIV have frightened the government, churches and communities. It has become a national emergency.

Drugs

There have been massive seizures of drugs in Fiji in the last two years. Almost five tons of methamphetamine were discovered and seized near Nadi in 2024. The police captured F$1 billion worth of cocaine being smuggled ashore on the northern coast of Viti Levu in January 2026. Fiji has become a transit hub for gangs shipping drugs to Australia and New Zealand because of its extensive and poorly policed coastline.

A growing portion of these shipments are being sold to young people in Fiji. Drug use is becoming visible in schools. Children as young as 10 years old have been caught trafficking meth alongside marijuana and becoming users. A whole generation is in danger of being lost. There are drug gangs with connections to overseas syndicates. Some police and customs officials have also been implicated.

HIV

With increasing drug use, a surge of over 700% in three years (2023–2025) of people testing positive for HIV has occurred. This is related to the sharing of needles and blue-toothing among addicts. "Blue-toothing," also known as "flashblooding" or "hot spotting," is a dangerous technique where an addict withdraws blood from his body in a syringe after taking meth and then injects this blood into another person's body.

While sexual intercourse is still the main way of spreading HIV, needle sharing and "blue-toothing" are the causes of the recent massive increase of HIV infection in Fiji. To put the situation in context, there are 3,500 known cases of HIV in New Zealand but 9,000 known cases in Fiji which has only about 1/6th of New Zealand's population.

The Response

The Fiji military are being deployed to support police in the escalating fight against drugs. Unfortunately, a young man, said to be a drug lord, was detained by the army and was found dead recently in the camp. His death was declared by the investigating police to have been murder. The Minister of Defense acknowledged concerns about human rights and accountability and emphasized that law enforcement must remain within the bounds of the law. He added that military involvement will depend on operational needs and legal authority. "The military role will be one of support not substitution," he said.





The Minister for Police, the Pacific Conference of Churches and other social leaders held a two-day National Pastoral Response to the drug crisis in February 2026. The minister said that policing alone could not solve the drug problem. There needs to be a balance between the "black glove" approach (arrests and sentencing) and the "white glove" approach (community awareness and strengthening of family and community care). The majority Methodist Church announced a three-year program of prayer and fasting as well as promotion of drug awareness among its members. The three-day conference of Catholic priests in Fiji this year was focused on the drug challenge and what Catholic parishes and associations could do to remedy it.

Treating Drug Addicts

There are no public drug treatment centers in Fiji yet. One has been built in Suva but not yet opened and another is planned for the western side of the main island. Many young addicts are being held in St. Giles Mental Hospital in Suva. There are also medical services for HIV-infected prisoners within the Fiji Corrections Services. But the medical officers there are worried because some of the infected prisoners refuse to take the medicines they supply. Some prisoners say that the treatment is a conspiracy to harm them and others say that they can be cured by faith in God alone.

I taught pastoral counseling and counseling supervision this year in a program run by Pasifika Communities University. I noticed that about one third of the participants in the counseling program were corrections officers. The Fiji Corrections Services' management and medical officers are hoping that these officers, with training in pastoral counseling, will be able to persuade the prisoners to take the HIV medicine.

The course supervisors working with the trainee counselors noticed a big change in themselves because of their counseling experience. They said that they found themselves listening to and understanding the traumas behind the offending of the prisoners. They recognized their common humanity, and this changed their outlook and behavior towards the prisoners. Other officers want to do the course.

Fr. Eamon Sheridan is a Columban who has been running a drug rehabilitation center in Myanmar (formerly Burma) for many years. We hope that he will be able to come later this year and share his experience of drug rehabilitation with people who are trying to respond to this challenge in Fiji. We are at a tipping point and need all the help and advice we can get to counteract this silent plague. CM

Columban Fr. Frank Hoare lives and works in Fiji.

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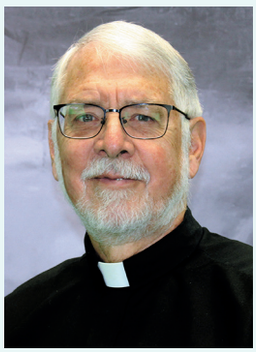
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Columban Missionaries and Communities

I was thinking a little about the relation between Columban missionaries and the communities where we serve. It is so different in each case depending on our own personalities and on what is happening in the community. We've recently had a number of visitors to the Columban house in Omaha—a Korean priest who works in Fiji, a Filipino priest who works in Chile, and a married couple who both were lay missionaries with us in Taiwan, she a Korean and he an American. As we sit around the table talking all kinds of little incidents come up. One priest was saying how his language wasn't that good yet and he was trying to say at a Mass "and Mary kept all these things in her heart," but he actually said, "and Mary kept all these things in her cat." The folks in the pews were too polite to burst out laughing but he could see their shoulders rocking up and down trying to hold it in. These are common experiences for missionaries.

On a more serious note, to work in Fiji means we have to be willing to drink *kava* at every meeting even if it is not easy. Kava is made from the dried root of a plant, beaten to a powder, and mixed with water. Fijians love it and it is very significant that everyone participating in any ritual or meeting drink it. We drink it to be part of the community.

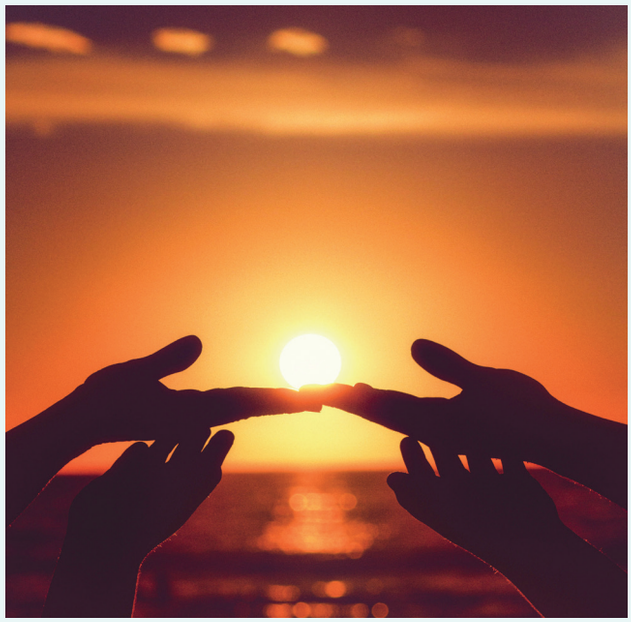
In Korea (and Japan) it is common to drink a lot of *soju* after a meeting, especially if someone's feelings might have gotten hurt. That gives everyone a chance to let it out and celebrate being together. For some of us who are not big drinkers, that can be hard. But again, we do it for the community.



From the Director

By Fr. Al Utzig

Until last summer, I was a pastor of a church in Southern California. For most of the thirteen years I was there, we were raising funds to build a new church. Because it is my style and because my Spanish isn't that good, I usually tried to not be too directive or dictatorial about how we proceeded with anything. We talked things over and moved after discussion. It took more time, but we moved smoothly. Even though they wanted me to make decisions, I wanted to hear them out first.



They were very patient with me and I think they were able to see me as someone struggling with issues just like they were. We got the church built after a lot of work, taco sales, raffles, bingo games, dances, etc. At first many of the ministries were working in competition with each other, but by the end we were working together, helping each other. In the end, having a non-directive form of

At first many of the ministries were working in competition with each other, but by the end we were working together, helping each other.

leadership turned out to be a blessing. I'm not a "soft and cuddly" kind of guy but there seem to be a lot of folks there that genuinely miss me after more than a year away. I certainly do appreciate that and I pray for them.

It's a great thing for a priest to work with a community. We form each other. Sometimes, I have had to be a loving prophet too. That has been painful. But more on that some other time. God bless all who are so faithful to Columban missionaries. May the loving Lord always hold you close to himself.

Fr. Al

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