

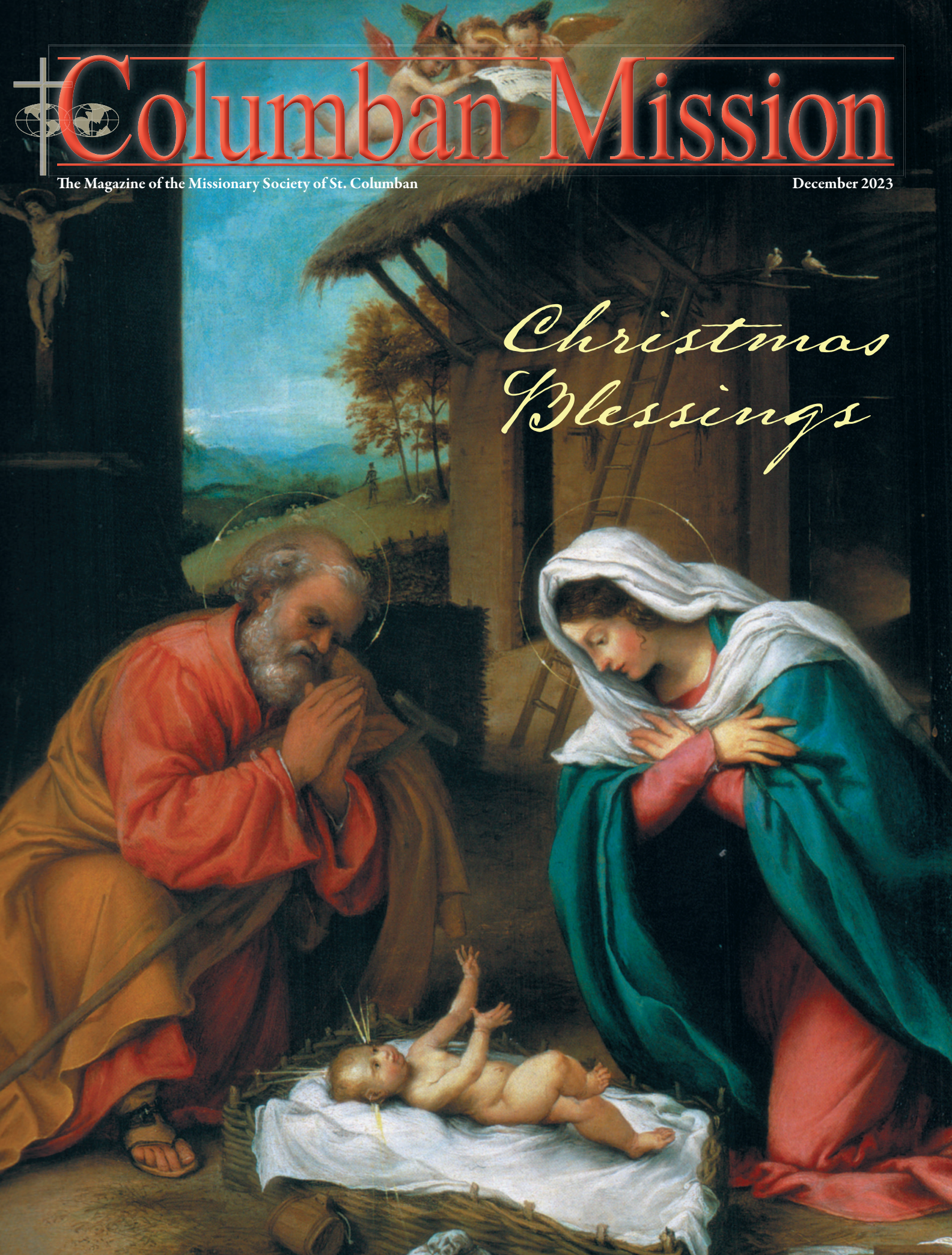


Columban Mission

The Magazine of the Missionary Society of St. Columban

December 2023

Christmas Blessings



C O N T E N T S

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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 Sr. Rebecca Conlon

The Waiting

Advent is a time to pause, listen and look back on the past year. There is much to ponder. Mother Earth is suffering. There have been droughts and famine in some places while in others there have been floods of epic proportions. The poor are the worst affected. Refugees continue to flee from places all over the world seeking shelter and hospitality, but that can be in short supply as the “flight into Egypt” reminds us.

Christmas is the season of hope. It is a light in the darkness of winter, symbolized in the glow of the candle. The Celts honored the winter solstice on December 21, the darkest and longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, as an awesome time and a powerful symbol of light penetrating darkness.

Five thousand years ago in Newgrange (Ireland) a passage burial tomb was built in which the sun, at its lowest point in the sky on the winter solstice, enters the heart of the tomb. As the sun rises higher, the beam widens so that the whole chamber is dramatically illuminated. It is a journey out of darkness to light - a turning point when the sun pauses on its journey north, changes course, and then begins to return on its journey south. It is a powerful symbol of light penetrating darkness.

Many believe that the celebration of Christmas, the birth of Jesus, was set to synchronize with the December solstice when earth was in its darkest moment and so, Jesus, the Light of the World, entered our world at this point bringing hope. Isaiah spoke about: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those who live in a land of deep shadow, a light has shone.”

Irish poet, priest and philosopher, John O'Donoghue wrote once: “At the Winter Solstice the divine presence stirs in the crib of the heart infusing our eyes with the glow of wonder.”

We know what wonder is when we see the light in the eyes of children waiting for Santa. Wonder is linked with faith and

as the children enjoy their wonderland, others sit in wonder at the crib, or gaze at the star, remembering that Jesus, the Son of God, became man to BE our Light. Look at the tree, decorated and lit up, a symbol of light shining on our lives where there may be shadows and darkness.

Let us light our candle of wonder this Christmas and allow the Light of Christ, the Prince of Peace, illuminate every corner of our lives, homes and the whole world with peace and love.

Sr. Rebecca Conlon is a member of the leadership team of the Columban Sisters. She was one of the first group of Columbans Sisters to go to Pakistan in 1990. She has also served on mission in Korea and the Philippines.

*Let us light our candle of wonder this Christmas
and allow the Light of Christ, the Prince of Peace,
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whole world with peace and love.*



A Land of Dreams

Helping Migrants

By Fr. Michael Hoban

Brothers and sisters, Iquique is a land of dreams (for so its name means that in the Aymara language). It is a land that has given shelter to men and women of different peoples and cultures who had to leave everything behind and set out. Setting out always with the hope of obtaining a better life, yet, as we know, always with their bags packed with fear and uncertainty about the future. Iquique is a region of immigrants, which reminds us of the greatness of men and women, entire families, who, in the face of adversity, refused to give up and set out in search of life. In search of life.

These words were spoken by Pope Francis as part of his homily during the open-air celebration of the Eucharist on January 18, 2018. The Mass was celebrated near a desert beach outside the city of Iquique, Chile, on a hot, sunny morning. As a visiting priest, I did not fully appreciate the importance of his words. At the end of November 2020, I returned to the diocese of Iquique to work in Columban parish Sagrado Corazón de Jesús. Since then, I have come to realize the truth of the Holy Father's words. I am ministering in the desert, in a land of dreams.

The Columban parish of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús is located on the *pampa* (desert plains) above the port city of Iquique in a municipality called Alto Hospicio. When the Columbans first came to the diocese of Iquique more than forty years ago, there were only a few scattered temporary wooden dwellings, a couple of truck stops and an explosives factory. Today, it is estimated that more than 150,000

people live in Alto Hospicio. There are fourteen *tomas* (squatter camps) located in our parish. There is plenty of empty space in the huge Atacama desert. Groups of people organize and invade empty sectors of Alto Hospicio. They take a piece of ground and build a temporary dwelling. In time, these makeshift dwellings are replaced with something more permanent.

In the beginning, the families must live without electricity, water, sewage, garbage collection or paved streets. Over the course of a few years, the municipality and the Chilean government will provide those essential services. However, there is no guarantee that they will be allowed to settle permanently. In some cases, the families are relocated to apartments built by the government, while in other cases, they are allowed to purchase their piece of land at a very economical price.

Northern Chile has a long history of mining. During the Spanish colonization, there were gold and silver mines here. In the nineteenth century, workers from Chile, Perú and Bolivia came to work in the nitrate mines. Today, they come to work in the copper mines as well as in the salt, iodine and lithium mines. Iquique is a duty-free port and also a center of trade and commerce with Bolivia. So, men and women flock to this "land of dreams" in hopes of building a better life for themselves and their families. And many of them are able to achieve their dreams, although normally, it is easier for Chileans.

It is a different story for the immigrants from Perú, Bolivia,

Colombia and, most recently, Venezuela. There are a series of challenges that they must face and resolve. If they want to get employment, they must have a temporary work visa. To get a temporary work visa, you must enter the country legally. Up until a couple of years ago, all you had to do was enter as a tourist, and once you obtained a work contract, you were eligible for a temporary resident visa. New immigration laws require that in order to get a temporary resident visa you must have a work contract before you enter the country. Most of the Peruvian, Bolivian and Colombian immigrants entered before the changes in the immigration laws and have managed to find work.

Recently, a huge influx of thousands of Venezuelan immigrants has entered Chile. They have travelled from their homes in Venezuela through Colombia, Ecuador, Perú and Bolivia to the borders of Chile. A favorite place to enter illegally is northern Chile. There are dozens of mountain passes in the Andes mountains where they can enter without detection. If they enter the country illegally, as thousands have done, they must register with the *pólice* and accuse themselves of having entered illegally. A legal process begins, which could culminate in expulsion. However, in practice, the Chilean government has been sympathetic to their plight and is therefore reluctant to expel them.

However, they continue to live in legal limbo. They are undocumented, and that means that it is very difficult for them to get regular jobs. Instead,



Helping the migrants celebrate Christmas

they become part of a network of informal work: street vendors, day laborers, windshield washers, candy sellers or beggars on the streets. Most of these immigrants are young couples with small children. Without documents, most schools will not accept their children. However, the local primary health clinics and the hospital will take care of them if they are sick. They can also get vaccinated without any problem.


The parish of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús has always welcomed immigrants and tried to provide some material help for them. A soup kitchen has functioned for many years. Despite the restrictions of the pandemic, a delivery system was set up to bring food parcels to the families. Last year, we teamed up with the Daughters of Charity to aid a new toma known as *El Paso de la Mula* (the mule's trail). This squatter camp is located on the southern boundary of the parish, and it is huge. Immigrant families from Venezuela

and Bolivia continue to pour into the toma. Families take over a plot of desert land, and put up some sort of fencing and a makeshift dwelling. Sometimes, they just pitch a tent until they can build a better shelter.

The Daughters of Charity were able to get a cement truck to pour the foundation of floors for some dwellings. There is no electricity nor water, or sewage; *aljibes* (water tank trucks) come several times during the week. But there was a problem — the plastic water containers were too small for the hose of the water truck. With a donation from their congregation in France, the Sisters bought ten plastic water tanks with a capacity of 1,000 liters of water which means that families can fill their water containers. The social apostolate of the parish regularly provides food packets and used clothing. A Christmas supper of chicken, rice and salad was prepared for 280 immigrants. Columban benefactors provided the chicken. Local benefactors donated toys, and

Caritas Chile donated additional food items.

Some families were lucky enough to get their children into schools. However, they could not buy school supplies for their children. In a special campaign, parish chapels and Columban benefactors came to the rescue, providing the needed supplies. In the desert, it is warm in the daytime but cold at night. In winter, the temperature drops, and you can feel the cold. Right now, we are distributing blankets to families. Thanks to close friends of the Columbans, we have been able to distribute 240 blankets.

We hope to continue providing relief to the immigrants who have come to this very unlikely “land of dreams.” However, we know that the most important gift we have to share with them is our faith in the Risen Lord. 

Columban Fr. Michael Hoban lives and works in Chile.



Celebrate Christmas

Celebrate Kindness

By Fr. Vincent Busch

The Subanens are an indigenous people whose ancestral habitat is in the mountains of the southern Philippines. Inspired and guided by the Columban Sisters, who have been living and working with the Subanens since 1983, I began working with Subanen crafters in the year 2000. Since then, I came to see how the Subanen culture is interconnected with their habitat, and how it is necessary to protect and nurture their God-given habitat so it, in turn, could protect and nurture them as well as their lowland neighbors.

Their interaction with their habitat led to a long and practical crafting tradition. They developed clever ways to shape rattan, bamboo, grasses and palm leaves into baskets, tools, furniture, mats, hats, musical instruments and even the walls and roofs of their homes. Attracted by

their crafting tradition I worked with Subanen crafters to form a livelihood project called Subanen Crafts.

Over the years our craft project developed greeting cards that honor life-enhancing ways of nurturing the human family and the natural world. Our Christmas cards do this by

Over the years our craft project developed greeting cards that honor life-enhancing ways that of nurturing the human family and the natural world.

highlighting simple acts of kindness. For example, these cards show Joseph repairing the manger, cleaning the stable, heating water, and preparing food while Mary attends to Jesus and prepares his manger bed. One card

shows a thoughtful shepherd who brought firewood to warm the stable.

The kind deeds we highlight in our cards remind us that our craft project has been blessed by the kindness of others. For example, during Covid lockdowns we couldn't travel to get the pencils and paper the crafters needed to continue working. We were saved, fittingly so, by our ambulance service. Whenever an ambulance took a patient from the mountains to a lowland hospital it would return with food and medicine. And, if there was room, the ambulance would also bring us craft supplies. We thank our ambulance service and its drivers for their kindness to us.

We thank, most of all, our kind God who, through our habitat, provides us with food, water and shelter as well as the paper and pencils we use for our livelihood. In designing



our cards, we intentionally placed Mary and Joseph within an image of the Earth to remind us that we are called to protect and nurture our life-giving planet, our common home.

One way that our craft project thanks God is by keeping our habitat in good repair. Both the Subanen people and their lowland neighbors depend on healthy forests, rivers, and soil. Decades ago these life-sustaining gifts were looted by unregulated logging that made quick profits but devastated the land and sea. The

Subanen Craft project promotes the tree-growing and sloping agricultural ministries of the Columban Sisters. These ministries have reduced hillside erosion which, in turn, has helped prevent monsoon rains from flooding lowland rice fields and smothering coastal reefs.

Jesus praised acts of kindness and promised to welcome all into the Kingdom of God who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, sheltered the homeless, visited the imprisoned, and comforted the

sick. Such acts of kindness keep our families, our communities and our habitat healthy.

In the “Our Father” we pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God on “Earth as it is in Heaven.” On Earth, that Kingdom is proclaimed and celebrated through the kindness of people who, sustained by the Holy Spirit, care for each other and for the life-giving gift of God’s creation. **CM**

Columban Fr. Vincent Busch lives and works in the Philippines.

A Subtle Christmas

Yet Spectacular!

A Columban Missionary who lives in a country where a foreigner who professes their faith in Christ can be expelled.

Life is made up of stories, and each of us has a favorite story to tell. Now I will share one of my favorite stories with you!

While enrolled in university classes in 2015, I got the chance to organize an activity in class to celebrate two birthdays — Prophet Mohammad and Jesus. Through the persuasion of my classmates who were experiencing homesickness during the holidays, I finally gave in and thought it would be an interesting opportunity to experience and taste food from the eighteen different cultures represented in the class. It would be a chance for a subtle intercultural and interreligious dialogue, I thought. As the class president of the class (being the oldest), I had to negotiate with our class adviser.

To convince my teacher to support our plan I said, each one will get the chance to introduce their food, how it was prepared, learning at the same time having fun, I added. Thank God it wasn't difficult to convince our teacher, but she did provide a few rules to follow like to close the window blinds, to minimize noise so as not to attract attention and disturb other classes in the building.

We had a week to prepare, and everyone was so excited, energized. We had smiles all over our faces. From the sharing of food, another idea popped up that each of us had to wrap a gift to




exchange. The day came and everything just fell into place as planned except that we need to resume normal classes at 3:00 in the afternoon. I had already thought of asking permission to leave the class early so I could catch the celebration of the Eucharist at 6:00 in the evening. I had to leave class at four so I could secure a good space in church. I gathered the courage to ask permission saying that I have something important to attend to in the afternoon. I was glad she nodded in agreement but when I was in the train on my way to the church I received a text message from my teacher asking me if I am a follower of Christ. All of a sudden, I felt so insecure thinking that it might be my last day and the demise of my missionary journey in the country had come. I managed to collect my thoughts and replied, why do you want to know? She replied, tomorrow I will whisper in your ears why.

I had a sleepless and long night. Arriving in my classroom the following day, Christmas day, I took a deep breath and approached my teacher.

At first I was confused to see her seemingly comforting smile. I bent over and she touched my hand, and whispered, "I am a follower of Christ too." Hearing her say those words made that Christmas so memorable. She further shared how risky it is to show her faith in the open, fearing her being a follower of Christ will jeopardize her work including the safety her family.

I am grateful for the birth of friendship built on mutual trust, a Christmas miracle. Although I must admit that initially I maintained a close but cautious relationship with her. Over the years, the friendship that developed with my teacher provided me venues to know, understand, and experience up close and personal the life of the people in the country.

That December 24th and 25th in 2015 was spectacular! I carry this mission story in my heart and at every opportunity share it so people who are willing to hear it so that they may appreciate and treasure the freedom to express, and live their faith in the open. 



Help Future Generations with a Donation Today

Your gift helps make possible livelihood programs like the Embroidery Project started by Columban Fr. Bill Morton and Columban lay missionaries in Mexico to help female migrants provide for their families.



The Embroidery Project goes beyond a business, it is a humanitarian project. It serves as a network of support and solidarity. It is a space to weave the pain, the memories of their country of origin and to be able to express their emotions, feelings and stories through art, and to be able to weave a hopeful future.

By making a gift from your IRA, you can provide long-lasting support for the Missionary Society of St. Columban while enjoying financial benefits for yourself.

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.

- Avoid taxes on transfers of up to \$100,000 from your IRA to our organization
- May satisfy your required minimum distribution (RMD) for the year
- 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 www.columban.org. The Missionary Society of St. Columban treasures your support and is committed to the stewardship of your gifts.



Christmas Carol Contest

Holy Archangels Parish

By Fr. Gabriel Rojas

In the diocese of Carabayllo (Peru) the Christmas carol contest is becoming customary for Christmas holidays. Every parish is invited to participate with its parish choir for these festivities. This is an activity that brings together many ecclesial people and awakens a lot of expectations at local levels through social networks such as Facebook. It is emotional as well as a challenge, a responsibility, and a sacrifice to be able to participate in this contest in a productive way.

This contest consists of two major phases: the first is to deliver the video mix of songs to compete live. This Christmas mix should have three songs of different genres. The video has to reach enough “likes” on social media to qualify and move on to the second phase. The goal is to be among the first

four places, which will have to play and sing live before an audience and a professional jury that will qualify them on the date scheduled by the organizers. In this second phase it is defined which choir reaches first, second, third, and fourth place.

The carol contest allows us to joyfully go out to meet the vulnerable people in our parish.

Our Columban parish “Holy Archangels” has been participating in this Christmas contest in the diocese of Carabayllo for five consecutive years. And every year it occupies one of the top places. To me, this is always a moment of joy and commitment to continue encouraging the musical

talents that exists in our parish, but at the same time the goal is to reach first place in the competition.

This is a musical project because it invites us to think about how are we going to present ourselves for the Christmas contest, the criteria to select the songs, and to find out who is available for the project. All of this takes a while for serious preparation.

At some point, we may experience some discouragement, but we recover our strength and enthusiasm once we realize that the contest is not only to fulfill expectations or win a prize but to help the vulnerable people of our parish.

In the last two years, we have taken second place. Believe me, it is very exciting to be able to hear that the name of our parochial choir has been classified to move on to the second

phase of the competition. And, with the prize money that we acquired from our contest, we support the most vulnerable families in our parish by giving them basic necessities.

In the second phase, it is a great joy to see our choir playing the instruments and singing. And when a financial prize is acquired, we buy the food and each member of our parish choir can deliver the basic basket of food to a vulnerable family. It is a

moment of evangelization to go out to meet the needy.

With the amount obtained in the Christmas holidays of 2022, for the feast of Epiphany or Three Kings year 2023, we have benefited 32 vulnerable families in the area of Tayacaja, Casuarinas, Pan de Azúcar y Girasoles.

For many choir members and as a missionary who has been part of the contest, this experience of caring for

the poor from a social perspective is an experience of joy, but at the same time, it is an invitation to continue sharing our talents by playing instruments or singing in the different chapels or our parish.

The carol contest allows us to joyfully go out to meet the vulnerable people in our parish. **CM**

Columban Fr. Gabriel Rojas Cruzado lives and works in Peru.



Choir members distribute food aid (top two photos and left photo on bottom)



Choir members with prize check

Making Room in the Inn

Celebrating with Joy

By Fr. Michael Hoban

In December 2022, I was getting ready to celebrate Christmas for the third time since I came north to work in Alto Hospicio, a municipality located near the city of Iquique, Chile, in the Atacama desert. I thought that it would be similar to what I had experienced in the past two years marked by the pandemic. However, a couple of weeks before Christmas, I discovered something new about the celebration of Christmas in the north of Chile. Every morning, caravans of trucks and cars appeared on the streets. The trucks had lots of Christmas lights and decorations with Christmas music playing loudly. Standing on a platform of the truck, there was always a man dressed as Santa Claus (*El Viejito Pascuero*) and accompanied by his elves. As the

Another image surfaced in my mind, that of Mary and Joseph not finding a room in the inn of Bethlehem. I realized that it was the responsibility of our parish to make room for the Christ child in the minds and hearts of children.

trucks and cars drove by, the occupants threw out handfuls of candies to the children waiting on the sidewalks. The caravans started circulating through the streets early in the morning and usually finished at dark. I discovered that in the 1950s this tradition began

and the caravans were known as *carros alegóricos* (allegory caravans). My understanding of allegories is that they are stories or poems which are meant to reveal hidden meanings. I suppose that these *carros alegóricos* are meant to help the children to celebrate Christmas with joy. My problem is that they have nothing to do with the birth of Christ. After a few days of listening and watching the caravans, another image surfaced in my mind, that of Mary and Joseph not finding a room in the inn of Bethlehem. I realized that it was the responsibility of our parish to make room for the Christ child in the minds and hearts of children.

The lay pastoral agents, Sisters and priests of the parish of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús organized a series of activities to help families celebrate Christmas in a way which is more faithful to the history of the birth of Christ. Our parish has fourteen *tomas* (squatter settlements). A small group of mothers from the *toma* Santa María helped the children to build their own Christmas *pesebre* (crib) with figures made of cardboard and cloth cuttings. Jorge Mendoza, an experienced carpenter and parish catechist, worked with the children to build the stable. Monica Escalante, Jorge's wife, with the mothers of the children, organized a Christmas fiesta for the children and their parents. When the families were seated, the Christmas crib was blessed. The following Sunday it was placed at the side of the main altar of the chapel. There were small gifts for every child and plenty to eat with 160 hotdogs and hundreds of bowls of ice creams consumed! Benefactors from the city of Iquique provided the gifts, and the



Christmas feast



"Mary and baby"



parish provided the food.

Two other Christmas fiestas were also organized. In the chapel of *Nuestra Señora del Carmen* (Our Lady of Mount Carmel), the Corde Jesus sisters and the pastoral council organized a fiesta for the children and their parents. The families were encouraged to bring their images of the Christ child to be blessed. On Christmas Eve, forty families received a Christmas supper prepared by the Sisters and couples of the chapel.

At the southern end of the parish there is a new *toma* known as *El Paso de la Mula* (the mule's path). Squatter settlements in other parts of Chile are known as *callampas* (mushrooms) because of the speed at which they grow like mushrooms in the ground. *El Paso de la mula* sprung up and grew rapidly within a year and continues to grow. Immigrant families from Bolivia and Venezuela set up makeshift dwellings. They hope that the municipality of Alto Hospicio will install electricity. Water is delivered regularly by trucks from the municipality.

The Daughters of Charity, together with the parish, have reached out to help the Bolivian and Venezuelan families that have settled there. A

Our child actors were able to identify with the stories of the Nativity and the Epiphany, because they too had been forced to leave their homes and travel long distances to come to a country where there was no room in the inn for them.

few weeks before Christmas, our new bishop, Monseñor Isauro Covili, OFM (the Franciscans), blessed the new community center of *Sagrada Familia* (Holy Family) built with the contributions from the parish, the Daughters of Charity and Columban benefactors.

For the Christmas fiesta, the children dressed as angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph and put on a short play of the Nativity. That was followed by a gathering with plenty to eat and gifts for the children. The social apostolate of the parish prepared more than 200 Christmas dinners which were distributed to families in need and to the homeless on Christmas Eve.

The Christmas celebrations did not end the day after Christmas. The children and mothers from the *toma* Santa María started preparing their own Epiphany celebration. The day before the feast of the Epiphany they gathered in the chapel of *Sagrado Corazón de Jesús*. As the story of the appearance of the Magi was read from the Gospel of St. Matthew, the children dressed in costumes and reenacted the encounter of the three Wise Men with the Virgin Mary. What impressed me most was the enthusiasm and joy of the children as they acted out the Epiphany. After a big round of applause, there were hymns and prayers to honor Emmanuel (God with us).

Our child actors were able to identify with the stories of the Nativity and the Epiphany, because they too had been forced to leave their homes and travel long distances to come to a country where there was no room in the inn for them. They brought the gifts of their childlike faith to our parish communities where there will always be a welcome for them. **CM**

Columban Fr. Michael Hoban lives and works in Chile.

A Christmas Gift

Low Income Families Eat Bitterness

By Fr. Dan Troy



Every two weeks, I usually meet Li Qiong at the apartment where she grew up. The second-floor residence is located just 200 meters from the intersection of lines 1 and 7 of Wuhan's Metro system, an ideal location in terms of transport. From the station, the first half of the short walk brings me by a stylish coffee shop on the ground floor of a towering new office block, a recent symbolic benchmark of the city's economic development. The second half of the short journey is like slipping over the edge of an economic cliff — the sleek shine of the skyscraper replaced by old concrete apartment blocks. Under the shadow of the office building, these humble homes still hold a fragile community together, as if counting the days until a pencil stroke on a planning office map will signal their end.

After walking up the dark stairs to the second floor, I knock on the outer

A few days before Christmas 2010, a healthy child — a girl, as hoped for — was born. She is well loved and has brought joy in abundance to a family that has endured so much.

door of rattling metal, which prompts an immediate acknowledgement from inside. Li Qiong opens the door, an action followed by her switching on the room's single light, sparingly used in the windowless living room. As I sit down, Li Qiong pours tea and passes it to me. Following initial greetings, her mother enquires about a topic that is always of interest to them: the price of vegetables. It would seem that information from my area might add to their understanding of economic

trends in the city. When asked the question for the first time a few years ago, I struggled to give a clear answer, which seemed to surprise them. For them, a small price difference decides where they go to buy these essentials.

It was in 2002 that a Catholic friend introduced me to Li Qiong and her mother. Their lives have not been easy. Born in 1976 following a long and difficult delivery for her undernourished mother, Li Qiong was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Ten years later, she took her first sliding, tentative steps. Her speech has been restricted for her entire life. Efforts by her parents to register her at various schools fell on deaf ears in a country where teachers are assessed on the academic performance of their students. A childhood without education and an adult life without employment robbed her of the possibility of having school friends

and work colleagues. When she goes to nearby shops, her struggle to speak and her restricted hand coordination produce more challenges.

A faith-based project initiated in 2006 provided Li Qiong with the opportunity of some work at home and a small income. The social interaction with the visitors every two weeks has probably been the greater benefit as she meets with people who are happy to know her.

In 2007, the traditional Chinese understanding of long-term security came to the fore when she was introduced to a young man with the possibility of marriage. At the end of the year their wedding took place at a nearby hotel. There was no honeymoon. The newly married couple lived in a simple rented apartment near her parents' home, a dark place, as if designed for residents who were allergic to light.

Two years later, there was a joyful announcement. Li Qiong was expecting a child. In China there is a strong preference for a newborn to be a boy. As the pregnancy progressed, Li Qiong's mother said that they were hoping the birth would provide them with a girl, certainly a counter-cultural approach. It was quickly explained that the birth of a girl would mean that she could eventually, as an adult, pick and choose from potential marriage partners, the big discrepancy between male and female numbers being the basis of such logic. A few days before Christmas 2010, a healthy child — a girl, as hoped for — was born. She is well loved and has brought joy in abundance to a family that has endured so much.

The English word "coolie" has its origin in the Chinese language. The Chinese word "ku-li" means bitter strength. In China, a person who can "eat bitterness" is admired as one who

The social interaction with the visitor every two weeks has probably been the greater benefit as she meets with people who are happy to know her.

can persevere through all kinds of adversity. Another serving of bitterness awaited the family around the time of the child's birth.

Li Qiong's father, a kind person, a dedicated husband, a talented cook, a man who swam across the Yangtze River with his friends once a week, was diagnosed with cancer. Having lived to see the birth of his granddaughter, he died when she was just four months old.

More than a decade has passed by since those bittersweet months. Li Qiong's daughter has grown to be a bright, energetic child whose performance in school has placed her near the top of the class. A delightful talent for dancing has emerged — her agile feet and flowing moves — a beautiful sight for a mother consigned to a life of shuffled movement.

As is understandable for a family in their situation, they have hopes that this child will make progress academically with the eventual possibility that she will provide some relief for the family's life on the poverty line. Six years ago, a small, low-rent apartment was made available to the family of three by the local authorities. It is a more comfortable setting, but it means one hour on a bus each morning for the child to go to school.

Li Qiong's husband works as a day laborer, installing and fixing water pumps. During the peak of the coronavirus in Wuhan he had no work and thus little money to support his

family. When funds were running low for Li Qiong's family of three, a timely donation by Sisters at one of the city's convents brought some much-needed relief. Similar charitable efforts in various parts of the country by the Church and other faith groups also took place. While small against a background of tens of millions of disrupted people, it is nonetheless encouraging that charity is reaching some of those who are struggling. It conveys the message that faith groups are concerned for the wellbeing of Chinese people who are suffering at this time even though they can only assist a few.

I look forward to meeting Li Qiong and her mother again at the second-floor home where there is restricted light but a warm welcome. Our discussions are likely to continue about the price of vegetables. Li Qiong is likely to continue serving tea and telling me to be careful as she pours it while instructing her daughter to distribute oranges to the visitors.

In the center of the floor, the dislodged rattling grey floor tile, broken at one corner into a few pieces, will still convey the message that its ongoing mosaic presence is as secure as ever in this home of poor residents. As we drink the warm tea and eat the sweet oranges, we will discuss local issues of great importance while Li Qiong's mother, speaking for the family that has no connection with church, will again ask us to pray for them.

As guests among three generations of Chinese women, we will sit eating and drinking in this humble setting where many chapters of China's history have been lived through, believing also that the resurrected Christ is among His suffering faithful people. ☩

Columban Fr. Dan Troy lives and works in China.

Down Memory Lane

Kadavu at Christmas

By Fr. Donal McIlraith



From 1990 to about 2015, I generally served in the priest-less islands of Kadavu at Christmas, Easter and August 15. Kadavu is a set of islands about eight hours out of Suva, Fiji, by boat. Then my prayers were answered, and they got their own priests.

Just before Christmas 2022 the parish priest of Kadavu arrived on my doorstep with a request. “Can you come and help. We are short a priest in Nasalia for Christmas.” Now Nasalia was where I had mainly worked in Kadavu, and I was delighted with the chance to walk down memory lane. I didn’t even mind the eight-hour boat ride and slept right through the night along the other hundred people sleeping

(and with some fairly loud snoring!) on the floor all around me.

Christmas was very wet that year in Kadavu but nothing could take from my joy at being back — and from the people’s enthusiasm as they lustily sang us through our Christmas liturgies. It was marvelous to catch up with people I had known for so long.

Nasalia is an amazing Catholic settlement. Over one hundred years ago a certain Elizabeth Johns married a Daniel Lockington who had freehold land in Nasalia. She insisted on bringing up their children as Catholics. Today there is a thriving village of well over one hundred Catholics there not to mention some Catholic families in nearby villages. The two main families

there are Lockingtons and Seetos. Old Seeto was a Chinese merchant who settled and married in Kadavu and his family eventually ended up in Nasalia. Many became Catholic. His grandson, the late Siga Seeto (whom I buried), built the present chapel of St. Peter Chanel. Before I left, I was able to bless the beautiful tomb the family has erected in memory of Siga and his beloved wife, Bulou Siteri.

On Christmas morning I had the joy of baptizing Joseph Seeto. This was a very moving moment for me as he was held by his father, another Siga Seeto, whom I had baptized right there thirty years earlier! Due to my age, I suppose, they sat me on a low table to preside over the Christmas banquet that we all shared later. Thirty years ago, I sat on the ground with everyone else, but the bones get creaky with age. My week there sped past quickly. The senior catechist, Anare Delaivuna, first anniversary had just passed, and I was able to travel to his nearby village, Ravitaki, and have Mass with his family there. There are two other catechists now, although the older one, Francis Lockington, is in his eighties and no longer very mobile. The younger one, Paul Verebasaga helped me with everything. When I first came, his late father, Pio Verebasaga was my mentor. My first stop is always at his grave which is on the way to Nasalia.

We spent New Years Eve in adoration for peace and concluded with midnight Mass, surely the first in the world for 2023. After this the “Lalis,” the Fijian bells (hollowed tree trunks), were sounded and people sang and enjoyed the start of the New Year. I was sad to leave but delighted with the chance to catch up, see how people had grown in the faith and how the young people had grown beyond my recognition. The mystery of Christ’s birth is taking place in Nasalia. 

Columban Fr. Donal McIlraith lives and works in Fiji.

Christmas in China

The Unexpected

By Fr. Dan Troy



Last Christmas, Fr. Paul began the Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve by gently encouraging the congregation to be grateful for the opportunity to gather to celebrate the Nativity at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Xiantao, China, about 60 miles west of Wuhan. His encouragement to be grateful was made against a backdrop of recently introduced restrictions on churches in many of China's big cities as part of the effort to avoid a new wave of COVID-19, which was still finding a way to emerge across the country.

From where I was sitting in the bright and spacious church, which opened just three years ago, it felt like the congregation understood his message. They had filled all the pews and the entire back of the church. Fr. Paul then said he did not even need to mention the city of Xian, a reference to the city of 12 million residents that had gone into strict lockdown a few days before Christmas to contain a local outbreak. China's ongoing zero-COVID policy is also challenged by a few cases of the Omicron variant slipping through the normally rigid quarantine system for all foreign arrivals.

As the choir led the people in singing Chinese translations of

Christmas hymns that are well known worldwide, a visual feature that stood out for me in the church was the variety of heavy coats that the people were wearing, including the many young children. Snow had been forecast for Christmas Eve.

The low temperatures seemed to indicate that the forecasts were accurate. While the snow did not arrive, the lack of heating within churches and most homes in this area of China meant that people were well prepared for whatever the elements would bring.

The Gospel reading, which announced that Mary and Joseph sought a place to stay in Bethlehem and eventually settled for a stable, seemed to be a story that the people in the church in Xiantao could easily understand in terms of the physical challenge of embracing the cold of the night.

In his homily, Fr. Paul reminded the people that the birth of Jesus is the great news that goes far beyond the illusionary joys offered by much of what is promoted in our modern world. The visual simplicity of the people suggested that many would find some consolation in this message, their basic needs probably on the borderline of being fulfilled.

As the Mass concluded, Fr. Paul led the procession to the nearby crib to place a scaled-up figure of the child Jesus. The disproportionate size of the infant is a well-accepted part of Christmas cribs in this part of China, the practice presumably having special significance for the people. After offering incense and singing a final hymn, the liturgy concluded, and anyone who wished to could move towards the crib and gather in prayerful silence.

It was clear to everyone at that Christmas vigil that challenging times lay ahead for those who make decisions at a national level. There were questions about the effectiveness of the locally produced vaccines if Omicron began spreading here. ICU beds are just a fraction of what is common in many Western countries, and a city of 12 million people was already in lockdown.

Perhaps what is needed is the perseverance and bravery of the Catholics who gathered on Christmas Eve to face the cold temperatures. Also, prayers that those struggling on the margins of society receive the support they need to navigate another year of the unexpected. **CM**

Columban Fr. Dan Troy lives and works in China.

When God Weaves a Love Story

God's Appointed Time

By Mavic Mercene



Like any bride should be, she looked radiant and blushing on her special day. Her groom was waiting anxiously for his first love to arrive. Everyone was excited, some perhaps a little jealous, but nevertheless filled with joy that their friend, auntie, colleague, cousin, and niece is finally walking down the aisle with her first, one and only love. No one was expecting this December wedding of two not so very young citizens but no one was upset when it happened. Everyone was in a festive mood.

As I write this story, I can't help but close my eyes and recall the events leading to this beautiful morning. On December 8, I opened my messenger and saw a wedding invitation from my friend Elizabeth Briones, a former Columban lay missionary. I was dumbfounded and I suspected that she was trying to pull a prank on me.

However, knowing Beth to dislike practical jokes, I thought, "What if this is true?" So I called her and asked, "Beth, is this a prank?" Gently, she said no. At first, I felt concerned but all these concerns slowly went away when I heard their love story. I was happy for her. I hold sacred their story which I will share in part with you all.

Beth and Claver were high school classmates in Baguio City, Philippines. Nobody knew among their friends that Claver always had a crush on her. He loved her lady-like and demure ways — the way she talked, the way she laughed, and the way she would sit making sure that her skirt doesn't get creased. He also liked walking behind Beth and her friends because he admired how her skirt swayed as she walked. After high school, she went to Manila to study and later, practice her profession. In 1983, they met again and from then on exchanged letters. In 1984, Claver joined the United States Navy. In 1988, he stopped writing to her.

In 2020, they and their high school friends became active in their



messenger chat group. Unknowingly to their friends, Claver and Beth also reconnected outside their high school chat group. Beth learned that Claver married in 1988 and had three children. In 2014, he got divorced, and in 2019, his former wife passed away.

As their friendship was re-kindled, a special relationship bloomed, and Claver expressed once more his love for Beth. Beth realized that now she had a soft spot for him. As the months went by, she was confused at what kind of feeling she had for him. Was it a special friendship? Was it love? Was it pity?

She sought help from another former Columban lay missionary and a trained psychologist who journeyed with her until she realized that life without Claver was no longer an option. Despite this, Claver and Beth both prayed for God's will to reign. God answered their prayers through affirmations from their family and friends.

But one of the significant conversations she had during this time


was that with the Lord. She listened prayerfully to what God said to her, "I allowed you to do, to be and live the life that you wanted — to become a nun, and to be a Columban lay missionary. But now, you need to listen to me. I want you to spend the rest of your life with Claver." It was a conversation that she will never forget.

On that bright and cool December 15 morning, Beth and Claver made their vows to each other in front of God and their loved ones at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Baguio City. More than just a covenant with Christ in the center, it was also a testament of God's faithfulness and love for them. It was very meaningful how God was telling us that it is He alone who writes our story, whatever or however many our plans are, it is still His purpose that prevails.

The ceremony was also a funny one especially when the priest declared them man and wife. Everyone was at a standstill in eager and joyful anticipation for their first kiss as

husband and wife. His first attempt was not successful since she was shy and tried to shield herself from him using her arms and elbows. The second and third attempts also failed because she averted her face to avoid his kiss. He tried several more times until we stopped hoping it will ever happen. But cupid put his bow and arrow to work that when we least expected it, the wedding was finally sealed with their first kiss.

At the reception, the groom's brother likened the occasion to *kairos*, God's appointed time. God allowed them to experience life away from each other and for Claver, the love of another significant other, but in God's perfect time He led them to find their way towards each other again. He said, "That perfect time is what we are celebrating now."

Finally, Claver and Beth are with the love of their lives. 

Columban lay missionary Mavic Mercene lives and works in the Philippines.



Captivated by an Infant's Gaze

By Columban Fr. Cyril Lovett

In the old days there was a myth
that new-born babies could not see
for some time after birth.

Now we know better:
within hours of being born
a tiny child is focusing its eyes
above all on its mother.

This helpless, vulnerable baby
is fixing its unblinking gaze to draw in,
charm and captivate its only source
of food and protection.

For millennia, God the Father,
who made us in his own image,
had to live with mankind's perverse response:
we made Him in our image!

If the great, the powerful, the rulers
of this world so often turned out to be
remote, capricious, merciless and vindictive
then God was viewed through the same lens.

John wrote, "No one has ever seen God
God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart,
has made him known." The birth at Bethlehem then,
was God's final effort to reveal his true face to us:
to make clear that our God
desperately seeks to captivate each one of us
by appearing in the form of the only creature
that invariably disarms us, and draws from us
such a loving response.

Why did he do this?

To make clear that he needs our love?
That we are infinitely precious to Him?
That there is no measure he will not take
to captivate us and assure us of his love?

So let your face be the unwavering focus
of your baby's gaze. Fall under its spell,
and remember again just how much you are loved
by the Christ-child of Bethlehem.



Help Spread the Light of Christ with a Gift that Costs Nothing During Your Lifetime

You can show your personal compassion and set an example for others by remembering the Missionary Society of St. Columban in your will, trust or other planned gift. No gift has a more lasting impact.



Columban Fr. John Boles was very distressed and worried when the coronavirus pandemic struck Peru. For the already poor, the pandemic was a dual catastrophe. With Peru's vaccination program being painfully slow, they were the ones most at risk from infection and the ones with the greatest responsibility to self-isolate when necessary. However, this meant they couldn't go out onto the streets and earn their meagre living resulting in hunger for them and their families. For many, the reality became "Die from Covid or die from hunger. Not much of a choice." However, with the support of Columban benefactors, miracles like the "kitchens in the sky," communal kitchens serving the poor and hungry, happened to help those most in need.

A planned gift helps the Missionary Society of St. Columban continue God's mission in the poorest areas of the world. And, financially and prayerfully supporting the Missionary Society of St. Columban is an excellent way to participate in the missionary activity of the Church.

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



The Spiritual Message of Causative Verbs

A Language School Experience

By Fr. Barry Cairns

In high school, English grammar was never my thing! Years later, in writing my theology thesis, my director advised me to re-write the text eliminating all the split infinitives! I still do not clearly know what a split infinitive entails.

But I was suddenly faced with grammar again in Japanese language school. My former high school failure impelled me to make a better effort. There I met something called “a causative verb.” Through conversational practice, guided by a kimono-clad skilled, elderly teacher, I finally got the jist of causative verbs. Her patient verbal practice was far more effective than a technical explanation.

Causative verbs are used when another person moves one to do something. They are used extensively in Japanese translation of the Scriptures, and in our liturgy and hymnal.

In the Mass, in English we have the words: “Make me worthy to share eternal life.” In Japanese this is: “Cause me to enjoy eternal life.” Somehow, to me, rather than the word “make,” “cause” is more fitting for the way the gentle Spirit works in us.

A favorite hymn of Japanese congregation has a verse: “O Lord! Cause me to hear your words of encouragement that you spoke to Peter as he sank in the stormy waves.”

A favorite hymn of Japanese congregations has a verse: “O Lord! Cause me to hear your words of encouragement that you spoke to Peter as he sank in the stormy waves.” And another verse of the same hymn: “O Lord! Cause me also to hear your words of consolation at my death, that you spoke to the thief next to you on his cross.”


Causative verbs have a hidden spirituality beneath them. If is a call to acknowledge our human frailty and rely on the strength of the Lord. We are all called to be missionaries, and as such are instruments of Christ’s love, each in our own milieu. We never ever work alone.

Jesus tells us: “Without me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) Paul has the

same message: “I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.” (Phil 4:13) The last line of Mark’s Gospel stresses this point, “The Eleven went forth and the Lord worked with them.” (Mark 16:28)

Charles Schulz in his Peanuts cartoon strip so often gave us a Christian message. At times he was decidedly Biblical. Framed in my prayer corner I have a strip that depicts Linus with a shovel and the in the final panel cries out: “I need a push.” We all need a gentle causative push from the Spirit!

This attitude of humble dependence and guidance from the Lord makes proclaiming His love a team effort, with the principal partner for mission, Christ Himself.

Of course, this causative way of reliance on God’s strength is valid in every aspect of our daily lives. It sure makes life’s journey more of a joy, and most certainly a journey with less stress. Try it! It works! “O Lord, cause me to grasp the message.” 

Columban Fr. Barry Cairns lives and works in Japan.

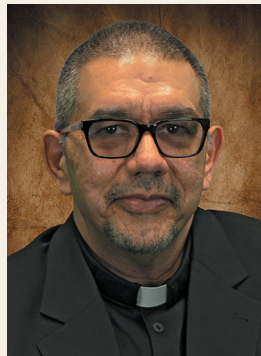
Faith Like a Child

And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, 'Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.' And He took them in his arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them. (Mark 10: 32-16)

When I was a seminarian on my first mission assignment in rural Chile, I experienced strong culture shock that caused me to doubt my missionary vocation. I felt that I wasn't doing enough and couldn't offer more. I customarily went to the church in the mornings to pray, seeking God's guidance, while the sounds of school children outside could be heard. One morning, my prayerful contemplation was stirred by the sounds of the church doors opening and then I heard footsteps. A small schoolgirl entered my peripheral vision. Her backpack was almost as big as her and the sight made me chuckle to myself. It was the first feelings of amusement I had in a couple of months. She quietly went to the foot of the altar, crossed herself, and knelt into a small ball on the floor. She remained there for a few moments, then stood up, crossed herself, and left. I marveled at what I witnessed. Her small offering of herself to God was simple but powerful. This experience enlightened me to what I judged as inadequate was enough for God. God didn't need extravagance but sincere simplicity.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. Chris Saenz



Years later as a priest, while I was celebrating a weekday Mass in Santiago de Chile, a homeless man suddenly arrived at the church. As he walked down the main aisle, it was obvious that he was drunk. The small group of people present cautiously watched him. The man silently came to the foot of the altar and knelt on one knee. As I contemplated on what to do, he remained kneeling, waiting as if expecting something. One may ask, what was I thinking as the drunk man knelt at the foot of the altar? Initially, I was worried that he was

going to cause a disturbance of some type. Worse, I had no idea if he was dangerous or not. Yet, I knew he would remain there until I did something. In good faith, I paused the Mass and stepped

down to where he knelt. The smell of alcohol was strong. I quietly asked him what he wanted. He responded, "A blessing Father." I complied with his request. He crossed himself, stood up, and quietly left the church. Relieved, I continued with the Mass. After that initial visit, the same man would reappear about once a month and repeat the ritual. As before, I simply paused the Mass, gave him a blessing, and resumed the Mass. Although drunk, he never caused a scene, and always left peacefully.

Later, a spiritual insight illuminated my experience with both the young girl and the drunk homeless man. One might consider the girl's offering as purer and more innocent. Obviously, her character was never in question. As for the man, one might judge his actions as lacking respect and decorum for interrupting the Mass. Some might question my compliance with his request given his drunken condition. However, I didn't know what in the man's history brought him to such a sad state. Obviously, his life was stripped of much human dignity but he retained a small kernel of faith in God. Not even alcohol took that away. Therefore, who was I to deny his only sense of access to God? He had the same right to be at the foot of the altar as the small girl. I concluded that both equally gave to God what little they can offer, a faith like a child.

The Christmas season invites us to have a faith like a child by finding God in the unexpected, such as a newborn child born in a manger. Yes, it is easier to see this image of God in a small schoolgirl praying in church. Yet, Christmas also challenges us to also recognize the same image of God in our broken world such as in a drunk homeless man seeking some acknowledgment of his faith.

Fr. Chris Saenz



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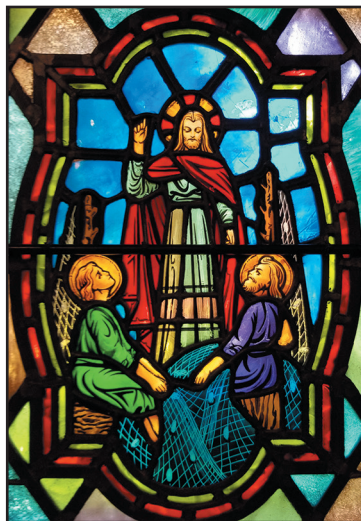
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– Matthew 4:19

*At once they left their nets and
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