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My name is Fr. Joe Ruys, and I live and work in the parish of San Andres de Checca in a small district high up in the Southern Andes of Peru.

The greatest issue here is poverty. Not only poverty in relation to money but also poverty of education, poverty in organizational skills, poverty in health care, poverty in nutrition, poverty in construction and maintenance. In other words, poverty in nearly all aspects of life.

Education here is of extremely poor standard. The system is rote memorization without needing to understand the material. Only exceptional teachers are fluent in the subjects they have been asked to teach. Many local primary and secondary students have dropped out of the education system during the Covid pandemic as many of our students do not have access to internet.

Health support exists in Checca but at a basic level. We have an excellent team of medics but unfortunately the state does not provide sufficient or adequate equipment or medicines. Our local health post is located on the second floor of a community building since the older center has been on the point of collapse for about ten years.

As the District of Checca is one of the poorest in Peru, we also have a very high rate of anemia especially amongst infants and young children. In 2020, we had around 26% of infants and young children suffering from anemia. However, in January 2021 our district was awarded third prize in the whole province of Cusco, for being able to reduce this percentage by 9% (the national target was a reduction of 3%) to 16.3% in 2021.

Indeed, the main project in which I am involved here in Checca is that of working alongside our town’s medical team. Along with them we are trying to reduce the level of anemia in the district with the provision of around 130 food hampers each month. Some people are regular recipients each month while others receive hampers when in a situation of short-term emergency.

I try to accompany our people in any variety of ways. Maybe a home Mass to remember a loved one who has died, sometimes a little bit of food, help with transport for market day, often taking people somewhere for medical care or providing emergency transport from an accident scene.

Life here is directly affected by the rain and the dry seasons. At present the clouds are increasing and the promise of rain is becoming reality. People are preparing the soil. Cow, llama or sheep manure is being sought and added to the soil. Rain water is in the Lord’s hands as we have no irrigation system here. Very shortly people will be visiting our parish office to buy their pasture seeds which we sell as an agency of CARITAS Peru. And with that begins a whole new cycle.

Fr. Joe Ruys is an Australian priest working as a Columban associate.
Top: A young Fr. Frank Hoare singing with Indo-Fijian parishioners; Middle: Fr. Frank Hoare; Bottom: Labasa Confirmation June 2009
I was standing by the bed of a Hindu ascetic dying of cancer in a monastery in North India. He shared with me the call he heard from God to leave behind his university degree, a girl his parents had chosen to be his bride, and even the monastery he had joined. He felt called to search for God in meditation in a small hut in the high Himalayas where the Ganges River rises. During the 20 years he lived in Gangotri he and a half dozen hermits scattered throughout the snow-filled valley were completely cut off from the rest of the world for 6 months of each year. “If you were 21 years old again would you still choose that life,” I asked. “Yes, I would,” he replied, “I’m mature in this life now. I am saturated in spirituality. There would be no other way I could live.”

Recalling this, I remember as a 17-year-old student trying to decide what to do with my life. I wanted to do something so that, when old and preparing to die, I could feel that my life had been worthwhile — of service to God and to people. Pictures of African babies on a collection box in a local shop touched me. Money was needed to send missionaries to baptize the children so they could reach heaven. The theology was pre-Vatican II, but my concern was genuine. Later I heard of the millions of Catholics in Latin America who, because of a shortage of priests, could only receive the Sacraments once a year. So I thought of joining the Columban missionaries.

But celibacy raised a red flag. It hit me one day at a football game as I noticed a young lady nestling in the arms of her boyfriend in front of me. Would I be lonely for life? Could I live without a wife and family, without a home of my own? Would my life be deprived of warm intimacy with people because of the role, the uniform and the exile from homeland?

I obsessed over the decision for some weeks. Then one evening at dusk, having despaired of thinking through the conflicting ideas, I sat limp at the back of my parish church. The red light in front of the Blessed Sacrament seemed to reach me in the darkening church. I discovered an unexpected peace envelope me. Yes, I would give it a go.

Years later I met Fr. Philip Manthara, an Indian Jesuit priest, who was totally committed to justice for the impoverished Dalit (or outcaste) people in North India. He was out most nights at meetings helping them to analyse their problems and to overcome the injustices they endured. I asked him if he missed not being married and having a family. “I couldn’t ask any woman to put up with my way of living,” he said. I was surprised to hear myself say, “I feel the same.”

Of course, if we are generous with God, God is more generous with us.

“Then Peter spoke up, ’Look,’ he said, ’we have left everything and followed you. What will we have?’ Jesus said to them, ‘...And everyone who has left houses, or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake, will receive a hundred times more and will be given eternal life.’” I have experienced the truth of Jesus’ promise in many fulfilling relationships with people in Fiji. They have enriched me greatly.

Life is a journey in search of God and of our true selves. Missionaries leave home to share the love of God in Jesus Christ. In meeting the other I come to know myself, and I get a glimpse of the Other. Love is experienced in both the giving and the receiving. Human love points to the greater love of God to which we are privileged to witness.

In the pluralistic world of today, most of us have the opportunity to journey with others who have different rays of the divine truth. Moreover, supporting missionaries in any way makes us part of the missionary outreach of God and the Church. We share in its graces.

I administered the Sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick to an old Fijian man. He sat up in his bed then and announced, “Father, I have done my duty to the community, to the government and to the Church.” He was looking back on a life in which he had been faithful to his responsibilities.

I hope I can say at the end, “I have done what I could. There is no other way I could live.”

Columban Fr. Frank Hoare lives and works in Fiji.
Manau dance is a dance of diversity and unity. The Kachin peoples, composed of seven different groups, usually perform the Manau dance for different purposes: to celebrate victory in a war or to mourn a death. Taking its inspiration from the circular movements of animals, legend has it that man learned how to dance from the birds, animals and insects. On the last night of the camp, the youth ended the program with the Manau Dance led by the Kachin Christian youths.

Last September 32 young persons from five major religions (sixteen Christians, five Muslims, five Hindus, four Sikhs, and two Buddhists) in Myanmar, formerly Burma, participated in the first Interfaith Youth Camp facilitated by the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina (CSAM). The camp was held at the beautiful Nawng Nang Center in Myitkyina, Kachin State, Myanmar.

The diversity of the people is also a reflection of the diversity in Myanmar’s natural treasure — its flora and fauna.

Myanmar has been for a long time facing numerous internal conflicts and national crisis. The country is host to the longest ongoing civil war in the world at sixty years plus. With over 135 recognized ethnic groups which call Myanmar home, these cultural differences and identities play an important role in this protracted civil war. And often to every culture or tribal group is attached a particular religion or spiritual practice which makes religion an important aspect of the ongoing struggle in the country.

The diversity of the people is also a reflection of the diversity in Myanmar’s natural treasure — its flora and fauna. But the ongoing internal conflicts has intensified the destruction of its natural environment. Given this ongoing reality, the Interfaith Youth Camp was organized with the theme “Let there be Peace on Earth. Let it begin with Me.”
The camp provided input not only on interreligious dialogue but also on mental health. Many young people are suffering from some form of mental health problems or issues. The experts provided simple and practical suggestions on managing stress and self-care. They also clarified many facts and myths about mental health. The interreligious dialogue session helped the participants understand the definition of true dialogue, the values and different ways of doing dialogue.

The camp also allowed the participants to share about their own religion through a 15-minute long presentation bringing along some items or symbols from their religion. On the last night during the Cultural Show, each group showed off their cultural dances and songs — Indian-inspired dances, Lisu tribal dance, Burmese songs, finishing off with the Kachin Manau dance.

There was also a cultural food exchange on the last night where each group prepared and shared traditional food with everyone. The Muslims prepared samai, a dish of sweet fine vermicelli noodles mixed with warm milk. The Sikhs brought barfi or burfi, a basic fudge made using full fat milk, sugar and ghee. The Gurkhas, mostly Hindus, also brought with them different kinds of Indian sweets. While the Kachin/Lisu Christians prepared traditional “jap htu,” pounded ginger, chilies, dried fish and other spices. They also prepared a traditional rice wine called “tsa pi.” As they presented their different dishes, they also explained the meaning and significance of each dish.

Every morning we also learned different meditation traditions like the Buddhist and Indian Yoga meditation. Meditating or praying together is also a form of dialogue.

The original design of the camp was to have a pilgrimage to the different places of worship — Muslim mosque, Hindu mandir, Sikh gurdwara, Buddhist temple — monastery and Christian churches. But the political situation in the country makes it dangerous and difficult to facilitate. So the participants were only able to visit a Buddhist temple-monastery, which is quite near the camp venue.

At the Buddhist monastery, the participants met the head monk and his novices. The headman spoke to the participants encouraging them. Then the participants and the Buddhist monks planted some trees.

The camp also introduced to the participants the Golden Rule and the Review of Life method (See-Judge-Act). Participants were taught to use the method to look at their present situation. The participants identified climate change-related issues like drought, damaged farms, gold mining and other environmental disasters. They asserted that it is wrong to only look at the economic benefits that the natural environment brings and not their innate value. Greed for profit led to many companies coming to Myanmar to steal its natural resources. People also throw their wastes anywhere and everywhere.

Through the cultural night and the food exchange we have learned to share faith, food and friendship. For me, faith, food and friendship are practical ways to do dialogue. The camp ended with the cultural night where each group was able to present traditional dances. Dialogue is like a dance. It is a movement. In dance we can have unity but also diversity. When we run out of words, body language speaks a lot. We can speak through our bodies. Through dance, we can come together with our different identities but still able to have a conversation through the dance.

Columban Fr. Kurt Zion Pala lives and works in Myanmar, formerly Burma.
My name is Letawa, and my parents are Naaiti and Raakai. I’m 25 years old, and I was born on the island of Aranuka, which is in the Republic of Kiribati, an island chain (Gilbert Island). Thirty-three islands make up Kiribati, which is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Because of its small size and inability to afford a modern lifestyle, as in Asia or Europe, the country where I was raised has a terrible quality of life. But despite its poverty, the people there always seem to be happy.

I had no idea how I came to be a Columban seminarian, but I always believed that God constantly loves me. Back home, there is only the diocese and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. There are no Columban missionaries. My desire to become a priest was strong right after I finished my secondary studies. I had considered joining the diocese, but for some reason, I was not been successful until I met Columban Fr. William Lee and learned about the Columban missionaries. I joined the formation group in 2019, studied for two years at the Pacific Regional Seminary, and then relocated to the formation house in Manila, the Philippines, in August 2022. Living in Manila, where I can observe and experience a variety of lifestyles, is a blessing for me. Before moving to Manila, I always thought it would be beyond my capabilities to leave my small country and go live a new life, but I think this is the opportunity that God has given me to experience. I hope God does the rest for me in my future discernment.

Scripture is one of my favorite study topics because I am curious about the Bible and how it relates to my life today. I am currently in my first year in the formation here in Manila. I appreciate being a part of the formation and am eager to learn more. God is consistently good.
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.

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Tradition has it the Saint Maughold, Patron Saint of the Isle of Man, was a contemporary of Saint Patrick and a forerunner of St. Columban.

On a recent Columban promotional visit to the Isle of Man I chanced upon a line of holy statues outside the Catholic church in Ramsey. I recognized all the images apart from one, a small empty boat. “That’s the sign of Saint Maughold, co-patron of the parish and patron saint of the whole Isle of Man,” explained Fr. Philip Gillespie. When not attending to his duties as Rector of the Beda College in Rome, Fr. Phillip helps serve the Catholic population on Man, and is well versed in the island’s culture. He went on to relate the tradition of St. Maughold (normally pronounced “Makeld”).

When St. Patrick arrives in Ireland he comes across this brigand and freebooter called Maughold, who eventually repents of his evil ways and confesses his sins to the Saint. Patrick pardons him, but as a penance pushes him out in a coracle with neither sail nor oars, saying, “wherever you land will be your place of mission.”

Eventually, he makes landfall on the Isle of Man, just down the coast from Ramsey at what is called St. Maughold’s Head. The castaway drinks from a spring (still known as “Maughold’s Well”), and then stumbles upon two Irish monks (earlier disciples of Patrick) who have founded a small monastery nearby. Maughold joins them, later becomes abbot, and is finally invited to be Bishop of the Isle of Man in around A.D. 500.

Whatever the historical truth of the tale might be, the fact is that by this time Irish missionaries HAD succeeded in converting the inhabitants of the island (thereafter known as the “Manx” people) to Christianity. Moreover, this venture was just a small part of the great missionary wave which would carry Irish monks to much of northwest Europe, be it Columba (“Columcille”) to Iona in Scotland or our own St. Columban (“Columbanus”) to France, Switzerland and Italy.

Fr. Phillip filled me in on a little more of Isle of Man’s story. Incidentally, the name “Man” has nothing to do with gender! It probably comes from “mannin,” a corruption of the Celtic Manx word for “island.” Sitting as it does more or less equidistant from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the territory was considered fair game by any potential invader during the Middle Ages. It fell prey to the
I refreshed myself at St. Maughold’s Well. The local Anglican church still draws its baptismal waters from the spring, a moving example of Manx adherence to tradition.

Finally, I scaled the summit of St. Maughold’s Head. Looking out to where the currents of the North Atlantic churn into those of the Irish Sea, I imagined I could spot Maughold, tossed about in his tiny oar-less craft, approaching the shore to evangelize a people and inspire an island.

Columban Fr. John Boles lives and works in Britain.
One of most intriguing yet mysterious images that Jesus uses in His proclamation of the Good News is, “The Kingdom of God!” It is within you! It is among you! It is already but not yet! And how does it grow? Like a seed sown by the farmer that matures and sprouts during the night without the farmer knowing how! And it always grows like the smallest and most simple things in our daily lives. A pinch of leaven causes the whole loaf to rise. The tiny mustard seed grows into the huge bush where even the birds can nest. It is mysterious but not really that difficult to grasp. What Jesus teaches us is real and achievable if we have faith. If we are obedient. If we work together humbly as brothers and sisters of one family. If we truly believe, God can achieve things through us that will go far beyond our wildest imaginings.

In January 2019, when the Remain in Mexico policy of the Trump administration forced thousands of Central American refugees seeking asylum in the U.S. to remain in Mexico, the Columban missionaries became concerned for their emotional and physical well-being as they waited, at first for weeks, then months and for some, over a year to present their cases in the U.S. Immigration Court. There were families living in the streets as the various migrant shelters became filled, over-crowded, and were often poorly managed. By the grace of God, an empty building near the Columban

Fr. Bill and program participants
parish in Anapra was loaned to us by the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, to create a shelter for refugee women and their children. Thus, in September of 2019 the “Casa de Acogida” or “House of Welcome” was born.

When Covid struck a few months later, the women were forced to remain in the house for long periods of time, trying to attend to their children, communicate with their families and do the daily chores of cooking and cleaning as they learned to live as a community. What could they do that would allow them to pass the time, something creative that could stimulate them and help avoid depression and desperation? Perhaps learning something new, creating something personal and beautiful and even earning a little income?

The Columban Migrant Ministry Coordinator, Cristina Coronado, who had set up “Casa de Acogida,” asked her sister, Maricela, a skilled seamstress, if she could teach the women to embroider. Maricela said, “Sí,” and one of those paths that leads to the Kingdom was opened wide. And like many paths that lead to the Kingdom, this one was not so much anyone’s plan being imposed but, rather, a response to the needs of vulnerable women and their children.

As the embroidering experience began, the women were asked what kind of images they would like to embroider. Eventually they responded—some of them weeping—that they wanted to reproduce the flowers of their native lands, the beautiful, colored parrots and cactiels of Guatemala and other beautiful birds and flowers from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras. Maricela would draw in pencil on the fabric and then patiently instruct the women how to embroider them with bright yellows and reds, blues and browns, greens and magenta. As they continued to improve their skills and grow in confidence as a community, they decided they wanted a name for their group. After some debate and discussion, they came up with the clever title: “NicHonSaGua,” an acronym that employed the first couple letters of each of their Central American countries.

Eventually the Columban Mission Center in El Paso began to return to Anapra with their Border Awareness Education (BAE) groups and one of the top requests was to visit the “House of Welcome,” where the ladies and their children shared their often-harrowing tales of escaping death threats, rape, pressure to join gangs, poverty and corruption. Word spread and other visitors and groups began to come and see the Casa de Acogida and learn about the experiences of these valiant women. The Jesuit Encuentro Program from El Paso, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and one unusual group: The Swiss Embassy from Mexico City. The final moment of the visit was always the presentation, by the women themselves, of their now beautifully embroidered bags, which they happily sold to the group participants. Everyone left with a piece of Central America, a heart moved by human courage and resilience, and the blessed experience of dwelling in a little corner of the Kingdom of God for an hour or two.

Now more confident with their embroidering skills they also began to imagine other creative possibilities of applying their craft. Cristina said Iliana would like to embroider a chasuble with an image of the blessed Sacrament. As a group the ladies would like to embroider a green chasuble for Ordinary time with an image of Central America and then a purple Advent vestment adorned with beautiful Cacti, framed in cream cascading down the front of the chasuble.

Gradually, these Central American refugees—pilgrims and prophets sent
to remind us of who we are and how our politics and lifestyle affect their impoverished countries—received asylum in the United States. With their departure we discerned the value of inviting women from the parish who were at risk, struggling economically or otherwise in need of community support, to become part of this embroidery community that was weaving a new way of life for its members—and our Columban parish!

The now reconfigured group, again took off and began to grow: in embroidering skills, diversity and depth. There were Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Mexicans from various states, Haitians, the young, middle-aged and elderly, some with special needs physically and emotionally, embroidering with their hands and creating a tapestry of relationships with their hearts. The Kingdom was here.

At times their meetings were contemplative, with barely a word spoken. At other times, there was a cacophony of voices and laughter as they shared stories, family problems, personal struggles and the ways their faith had helped them find their way.

One woman shared that in the group she came to discover that she was a person in her own right, that she existed, that apart from all the cooking, cleaning, ironing and caring for her family, she was an individual with thoughts, opinions, her own needs and dreams.

Another one of the women who considered herself to have no faith at all, felt at times moved and inspired by the faith of the migrants who had braved hell and high water to find refuge for themselves and their children. “Gracias a Dios,” “Thanks be to God!” they would say about arriving in a safe place like Casa Acogida.

Expressing their hopes and desires to continue their migrant journey to a better life, “Primero Dios” or “Si Dios quiere,” meaning, “If it is God’s will, so be it!” Lives were enriched, broadened, as new friendships formed and the parish found itself learning how a simple project could bear fruit in so many unexpected ways. The Kingdom of God was growing.

This past June we celebrated the one-year anniversary of the Embroidery Project in the Parish. We had a special Mass with a beautiful banner that the women had created by stitching together several of their embroidered images and titling each one with words that express God’s hope for the human family: Amor—love, Fe—faith, Paz—peace; Comunidad—community, Encuentro—encounter; Esperanza—hope; Libertad—liberty, Justicia—justice, Solidaridad—solidarity hung alongside the altar.

Before the final blessing, several of the women shared how their participation in the group had changed their lives. It was a moment to give thanks for the mysterious way that God was evangelizing all of us in the parish through the presence of this simple project in our community aimed at providing a safe space, some meaning and accompaniment for vulnerable migrants. After the Mass there was a delicious meal prepared by the women, and everyone stayed to enjoy the celebration of life, hope and community that their group had woven together.
We had another milestone on October 18, 2022, when we had the grand opening of a special exhibit at the National Institute of Fine Arts Museum in Juarez. This showing was related to the William Bullock Prize that Cristina received from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) as a result of her work with at-risk women in Juarez. It portrayed the formation and growth of Casa Acogida and the Emboidery Project. It included a beautiful photo-collage of daily life in Casa Acogida, embroidery pieces by the women and original paintings by Yvonne, a young woman from El Salvador who decided to remain in Juarez to serve as a volunteer to other migrants.

I would like to conclude with a few words by Cristina’s son, Pablo, who is doing graduate studies in history at the University of Texas in El Paso, and who composed the introduction that welcomed visitors to the exhibit:

“The Casa de Acogida is not so much a shelter, but a community of faith made up of women from Juarez and migrant women who met as a result of the exodus of thousands of refugees from Central America seeking asylum in the United States. In the midst of a bleak panorama, the community that arose in this space has been like a second family for the participants. Single women and women with small children formed a bond that grew more intimate by sharing stories, dreams and hopes around the table of welcome in the kitchen of Casa de Acogida.

The embroidery project is like a search to capture and transform stories of pain, hope and resilience through art, offering the women of Casa de Acogida the chance to earn some income, but also to connect with the inhabitants of Anapra, one of the most impoverished areas of Ciudad Juárez. Casa de Acogida, begun as a response to the needs of vulnerable migrant women, following its origins of faith and solidarity, will continue to be a space for personal accompaniment and spiritual growth for women and, Lord willing, have a great impact in the community around it.”

Columban Fr. Bill Morton lives and works in Mexico.
St. Agnes Parish, Samabula

A Columban Prospective

By Fr. John McEvoy

It is an honor for me to write a few lines about St. Agnes Parish, Samabula. I do so on behalf of the Columbans and myself. When I arrived in Fiji in 1972, my first appointment was to be the Assistant Priest with Fr. Gerry McNicholas at St. Agnes. The saying goes that one’s first parish as a priest is also one’s first love. This was true for me with St. Agnes Parish.

First and foremost, congratulations to Fr. Augustine Kim MSC, present parish priest, to Sakimi Saverio chairperson of the PPC, heads of Commissions, community leaders, leaders of the various parish organisations and faithful parishioners of St Agnes Parish, Samabula on the 70th Anniversary of the foundation of the parish.

Fr. Rod Hoult founded the parish and built that first small church over the then presbytery which was carved out of soap stone with an adjacent carport to the right side of the church which doubled up as a place for meetings, socializing, sing-a-longs and grog drinking. St. Agnes was the first parish in Suva to be developed after the Sacred Heart Cathedral. It was the first parish in Fiji to be established by the Columbans in 1952-53, and it was the first parish to be handed back to the Archdiocese by the Columbans in 1976.

St. Agnes, Samabula, is also the mother Church of Nausori, Tamavua and later Our Lady of Fatima Nadera. And indeed, opposite the church on Grantham Road two more parishes sprang up in the late 1960s, St. Pius X, Raiwaqa, and Holy Eucharist, Laucala Bay.

The contribution that Columban Fr. Dermot Hurley made in the early development of the parish cannot be ignored. He invited the Home of Compassion Sisters from New Zealand to start and staff St. Agnes Primary School. While building the two new school blocks, classes were conducted in the church for some time. Education was all important and the Home of Compassion Sisters surely played their part in the developing of the parish. Fr. Hurley went on to become chairman of the Housing Authority in Suva and started HART (housing assistance relief trust). Many of the HART villages and houses are in St. Agnes Parish.

Although it has been over 50 years since I was a priest in St. Agnes, I have most vivid memories of my years there, the faces, and names of parishioners from all sectors of the parish, Nabua, Riffle Range, Jittua Estate, Meade Road, Kinoya, Filafou, Manikoso and beyond. It was in St. James Church, Manikoso, that I said my first Fijian Mass. At that time little did I imagine that these areas would become areas of dense population and become part of the greater Suva, known now as the Suva-Nausori corridor. Fr. Gerry McNicholas foresaw that this would happen and talked about it often.

I found the parish an amazing multi-racial, multi-cultural parish. It was lively and thriving. Back then in the early 1970s there was a Parish Constitution and an active Parish Pastoral Council in place.

I have outstanding memories of parish events. I recall a few weeks after I arrived in St. Agnes, that we had Baptisms of fourteen children. At my first Easter Saturday night ceremonies there were seven adults admitted to the church. The Legion of Mary, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Women’s League and the YCW (Young Christian Workers) were active and vibrant. The army camp in Nabua was a part of our parish responsibility (a standing army then of just 300). The Catholic lads could be called on to do anything in the parish, like painting, minor repairs or clearing falling trees from the nearby Irish crossing across the nearby creek — which they did willingly and delightedly to be of help.

St. Agnes’s School Bazaars were a time of excitement and well-supported by parents and parishioners. How about the Altar Boys soccer tournament that was contested on the grounds St. Agnes School on Sunday afternoons for a few years, much to the dislike to Sr. Walburga, the then-Principal of the school! And my starting, perhaps the first ever Youth Folk Group in the Archdiocese, caused a bit of a stir — guitars and other such instruments were not regarded suitable for church liturgies at the time.

But things were changing in liturgy at that time. With the appointment of Fr. Petero Mataca as the first indigenous Bishop in Fiji in 1974, cultural adaptations were gradually being introduced into the liturgy. Fr. McNicholas and I were very sad leaving St. Agnes, but we were glad to be able to hand over a growing parish back to the Archdiocese. Fr. Peter Hsu became the new parish priest when we left. He went on to develop from St. Agnes the Parish of Our Lady of Fatima in Nadera.

It is said that “from small acorns great oaks grow,” and that was the case with St. Agnes Parish for the past 70
Nothing was spared on the day by way of liturgy preparation, traditional ceremonies, the usual feast provided for all present, cultural entertainment and presentation of gifts to many of the invited guests.

I felt grateful and blessed to be present at this celebration on the school grounds of St. Agnes again where, as a young priest I trained and played soccer with the students 50 years ago.

Columban Fr. John McEvoy lives and works in Fiji.
My name is Matang, and my biological parents are Moaniba Rotitaake and Tokanikiaietaanga Tumeka. I was adopted by Macke Batiata and Eritia Ibeata. I am 24 years of age and come from the island of Kiribati known as Gilbert Island under the Micronesian region of the Pacific (Oceania).

The Kiribati islands are located across the equator and have 33 islands which are divided into three parts: northern, central, and southern. The life I lived where I grew up was all about simplicity and was uniquely related to my traditional way of life living with my family and friends.

My call to the Columbans happened when I studied at one of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC) secondary schools called St. Maria College. I remember one of the Columban priests named Fr. Frank Hoare arrived at my school and promoted vocation to all young male students. He shared some of the magazines and played videos about the Columban missionaries where they have missions in different parts of the world.

After Fr. Hoare's presentation, I felt the call to join them when I was moved by their missionary way of life. I feel called because I am very interested to see their missionary way of life or charism where they work for Justice/Peace and Integrity of creation, Inter-religious dialogue, solidarity with the poor, providing education for the poor, and Evangelization. I have hope that my dreams and my calling will come true to become one of the Columban missionary priests for the future mission.

My favorite subject in my studies is philosophy. I have discovered that philosophy is the fundamental nature of knowledge which is trying to expand and enlarge my understanding based on natural things. Therefore, I found that philosophy doesn't need many answers but depends on the questions to think critically about something that is beyond my understanding and it will try to enlarge my knowledge on different matters. However, philosophy is not only a love of wisdom but also a willingness to learn and experience things that will help me to understand more different kinds of phenomena and encourage me to overcome and make meaning of my life. It was very important for me to learn philosophy at the Loyola School of Theology because it will prepared me well before I begin theology courses in upcoming years.

I like to read poems because I have found many important messages and symbolic features related to real life and things that are happening in this world. Moreover, some good movies that I like are religious movies where I learned many aspects of missionary life in preaching the good news. I am in year one of my formation, and it is a great experience for me to recognize very special and important things which have been prepared such as education, physical needs, etc. Lastly, my life in formation is now a big transition for me by experiencing different kinds of people, cultures, and new environments. I have learned a lot from them by living in the formation with my formators and brothers.

Columban seminarian Matang.M.Rotitaake is studying in the Philippines.
Living with the Saints

One of the Believers

By Gertrudes C. Samson

The four of us Columban lay missionaries live in the presbytery attached to the St. Joseph’s church in Nechells which is surrounded by cemetery on all sides. The place is very quiet and peaceful, but honestly speaking, because of the tombstones I see all around us I am often reminded to pray the prayer for souls, “Eternal Rest grant to them oh Lord, let perpetual light shine upon them may they rest in peace. May their souls and the souls of your faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen!”

Many times, people cannot believe that this is the place where we live. The first time we took a taxi home at night, though we told the taxi driver when to turn, he still took the wrong turn. We explained, and the driver asked with uncertainty in his voice, “You live here? Here?” We laughed and assured him, “Don’t worry brother, we are humans!”

Before I joined the Columban lay missionaries, I read an article dated more than twelve years ago, that explained that in the early church, all believers were called saints. This fact was also mentioned in the “Sunday Plus” October 9 issue of the parish magazine, distributed in our current church St. Josephs. Nowadays we only think of saints as those who died and are officially canonized by the Pope, but in the early church it refers to all believers of Jesus Christ, both the living and the dead.

Having that definition of a saint in the early church in my mind, when we were informed that St. Josephs presbytery would be vacant and we were asked if we were willing to live there, I had the courage to raise my hand and to say, “yes!” I’d been praying to St. Joseph for a few months prior to this whilst we were looking for somewhere new to live because the landlord of the house we were renting at that time was planning to sell it. To me, the name of the place itself was a confirmation that St. Joseph indeed helped us and had provided a place for us to stay, in a similar way that he did for Jesus and Mother Mary.

Sometimes people say, “You do not have neighbors where you live.” To me, the saints and the departed faithful that surround us are our neighbors, surely as we pray for them, they are praying for us too. Our house is attached to the church which makes Jesus our next-door neighbor! Jesus resurrected, He and His believers are actually alive, for how can He speak to Moses and Elija in the Mount of Transfiguration if they are dead or sleeping!

For the four of us lay missionaries who live together in the presbytery, with all honesty, we know we may not be saints that will be canonized by the Pope. Just like the apostles of Jesus in the Bible, sometimes we have moments of bliss in our journey together, and sometimes we have challenging moments too, but I trust that in His time, Jesus will complete the good works He started in each of us, though the faith in our heart might be small like a mustard seed. With that thought, and the definition of “saint” in the early church, I believe, I am living with saints inside the house too as well as outside our house.

Reflecting on the tombstones that surround our house, to me is a constant reminder of God and to be humble and embrace my mortality. Therefore, as the missionary Etienne de Grellet, once said, “I shall pass this way but once; any good that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being; let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.” May God give me the grace to consistently apply it in my life before I join the believers of Jesus on the other side.

Columban lay missionary Gertrudes Samsom lives and works in Britain.
Proverbs in Mission

Suffering Makes a Jewel of You

By Fr. Barry Cairns

Proverbs are the ancient wisdom of a country’s culture expressed in pithy sentences — and often with humour. Proverbs give us expatriates an indication of how our adopted people think and act.

To an aged person (I am 90) this proverb gives me courage. “Even an old rope can be useful.” Or as incentive: “Even an aged one can learn calligraphy.” And when I have a “senior moment.” “Even a monkey can fall from a tree.” And after a disappointment or failure: “Fall seven times, get up eight.” Personally, I use proverbs in homilies and instruction but add a Christian nuance to them.

For example, in talks to parents at a church sponsored kindergarten, where many are non-Christian, I tell them that we will teach Christian values in a gentle way. I quote the proverb: “The heart of a three-year-old child lasts till the child is a hundred.”

In a class to those preparing for Baptism I speak of our inbuilt human frailty and our need of a Savior. All of us has some weakness. “Even a new tatami straw mat when beaten will give out dust.”

But not all proverbs express values that are suitable! Such a proverb is: “A nail that stands out gets hammered.” But this proverb also tells me something of Japanese culture. People are reticent to take leadership roles in the parish community, or even read the Scriptures in our Mass. So here we need to emphasize St. Paul’s teaching: “I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength.” (Philippians 4:13)

But perhaps the proverb that I feel most strongly about is: “Suffering makes a jewel of you.” From here I will share with you a very personal experience.

When I was 40 I was missioned in the island fishing village of Sakitsu. My people were descendants of those who had been through 250 years of persecution for their Christian faith. When religious freedom was granted in 1873, French missionaries returned to build a church on the ground where their ancestors had been tried and at times executed. I really delighted in the mission apostolate of Sakitsu. But then sickness hit me. It was diagnosed as beri beri. I was hospitalized as side effects and complications set in. After nine months at the hospital I was sent home.

I was devastated. I had asked God for healing, but I got worse! I felt very bitter against God. With no faith, how could I continue as a priest? My cry, too, was: “My God! Why have you forsaken me?”

It took me two years to realize that in fact Jesus had been at my side all along — especially through the friends he sent me to my bedside.

Looking back, it hit me that the suffering and sickness had matured me as a person, as a follower of Jesus, and as a missionary priest. I had been fashioned as a jewel, but still rough and in need of further polishing! I can now thank God for the experience. One fruit of the hospital bed is expressed in the proverb: “People with sickness can feel empathy.”

Indeed “suffering makes a jewel of you.”

Columban Fr. Barry Cairns lives and works in Japan.
At the beginning of August 2022, Larry Duerme from the Philippines, and Jeongrak Lee (Vera no) from Korea arrived with us in Lima, Peru. Then, during the second week of October, Tu Hkawng (Matthew) arrived from Myanmar. His arrival was delayed due to problems and delays in receiving his Visa to enter Peru.

Larry and Jeongrak are in Cochabamba, Bolivia, studying Spanish at the “CLIMAL” Institute (Linguistic and Intercultural Center), formerly the Maryknoll Institute, and living with Bolivian families. Matthew is taking virtual classes from the Institute and living with the Davila family who have been friends of the Columbans for many years.

Their arrival, and that of Ambrosio, Pepe and Jose from Korea in Chile, represents the beginning of a new chapter in our mission history in Peru and Chile (the Region of South America), with another Society First Mission Assignment (FMA) Program. FMA is a community program. It is a stage of formation for Columban students, but it is also another instance of ongoing formation for all of us as missionary disciples of the Lord, and members of the Missionary Society of St. Columban.

We Columban missionaries—along with the people with whom we walk in our apostolates, programs and projects—are challenged to both form ourselves and form others in the three fundamental areas proposed in the preparation for a Synodal Church: Mission, communion and participation.

We are challenged to be proactive participants in the project of Pope Francis to reform and renew the Church, advancing on “the path of pastoral and missionary conversion.” (Evangelii Gaudium #25) We are challenged to make our the Society a “dream” with “a missionary option capable of transforming everything.” (Evangelii Gaudium #27)

Larry, Jeongrak and Matthew come with their “missionary dream” and enrich us with their personal stories, cultures, life experiences, Church and vocational journeys. They make our community and missionary experience more diverse. In a recent gathering at the Central House in Lima to celebrate Fiji’s Independence Day, we were fourteen Columbans of nine nationalities—an expression of the universal missionary Church, and the Missionary Society of St. Columban today.

Welcome Jeongrak, Larry and Matthew. Together with Ambrosio, Pepe and Jose in Chile, may you have a good FMA experience here with us and the peoples of Peru and Chile as companions and disciple-missionaries in the Lord’s mission.

Columban Fr. Bernie Lane lives and works in Peru.
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.

With thoughtful planning, you can choose which ways to support work best for you and your loved ones and make sure your gifts are made in a way that will maximize their total value while minimizing their after tax-cost. There are many planned giving options, including some you may not have considered before. Planned gifts provide a major impact in our missions, and we offer the following suggestions to aid selection of the best giving option for your stage of life.

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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.
Growing up in a Midwestern middle-class family, I was unaware of the economic realities outside of my world. Obviously, my parents worked hard to put a meal on the table and earn a living. My father taught me the value of saving up for a rainy day, and as I got older, explained to me about retirement funds such as the 401k. Often, I would watch new stories of extreme poverty in other parts of the world and was baffled why people, who were so poor, would have large families. After all, feeding all those mouths was costly and if you had little, how could you take the risk of having so many children? This thought was not uncommon among my peer group.

When I went to South America for mission, it was a common sight to see a pregnant young mother holding a child’s hand while pushing a baby carriage with a toddler. My mother, who visited me a few times in Chile, would often comment that she never saw more children in her life. One could bring up the doubts of my childhood of why so many children in a place of poverty?

After living for nearly 20 years in Chile, I developed a different view on this subject. In the United States, we have an infrastructure of Social Security, 401ks, and other retirement resources to aid us as we get older. We expect our children to leave our houses and have independent lives (by our standards). However, many other countries do not have this infrastructure. If there is no Social Security or 401ks, what are the retirement plans? In many traditional cultures, homes are multi-generational where the older generations depend on their children’s success to aid them in the future. The grandparents can be assured of a retirement home to live in. Furthermore, the grandparents are the caretakers of the grandchildren which enables the parents to pursue a full-time career. There is a value of having the grandparents’ wisdom guiding the new generation. To critique the poor for having too many children is akin to critiquing someone in the U.S. for putting too much money in a retirement plan. I came to understand that, in this context, children are not viewed as a liability.

In the Bible, there are over 2,000 references to the poor and poverty. The Biblical understanding of “family” goes beyond blood to the wider community. And, the community’s obligations to the poor is one of the most central themes in the Bible. From my experience above, the Biblical view would be that it shouldn’t be only the immediate family’s concern for the older generation, it should be a concern for all especially for the most vulnerable such as migrants, orphans and widows. Deuteronomy 14:28-29; Matthew 25:35 It is interesting to note that the first sins committed and punished in the early Christian community were sins of greed, those taking more than they need from those who needed it more. Ananias and Sapphira, a married couple who wished to join the Apostolic Church, were punished by Peter for hiding a portion of the money they had made from the sale of their house, rather than completely sharing their wealth with the community. Acts 5: 1-11 Simon the Sorcerer sought to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit from the Apostles so he could manipulate it for personal monetary gain. Acts 8: 9-24 These examples highlight how greed impedes the Biblical mission of aiding the poor and eliminating economic poverty. Timothy 6: 10 Today, we are all challenged to live out this Biblical mission and welcome the poor as our family, thus, confronting the reality of economic poverty.

By Fr. Chris Saenz

From the Director

In the Bible, there are over 2,000 references to the poor and poverty. The Biblical understanding of “family” goes beyond blood to the wider community. And, the community’s obligations to the poor is one of the most central themes in the Bible.
We invite you to join this new generation by becoming a Columban Father or Columban Sister.

Transform the Lives of Others...Enrich the World...Give Hope

Columban Mission magazine is published eight times each year and tells the stories of our missionaries and the people they are called to serve. Columban missionaries live in solidarity with their people and, together, they move forward to improve their social, economic and spiritual lives, always with Our Savior as their guide and their eyes on God's Kingdom.

For a $15 donation or more, you or a friend or loved one can share in our baptismal call to mission and the Columban Fathers' mission work around the world through Columban Mission magazine.

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“I once heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am, send me!”

– Isaiah 6:8

If you are interested in the missionary priesthood, write or call...
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