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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.
The Secret of Life

In our modern world many people who were born Catholic and Christian proclaim that they are now atheist. On the other hand, many who never embraced the Christian faith have severed all ties with atheism and Marxism and suffered and endured prison and torture because of their conversion and immersion into a powerful witness of faith and love. There have been many heroic converts to Christianity over the centuries. One of these was Tatiana Goricheva. She lived during the Soviet Era in Russia. She was a very capable lecturer in electronics at the University of Leningrad.

In her autobiography, Tatiana relates the story of her exceptional discovery and her conversion to the Christian faith. She describes how she gave up the Marxism/Leninism which she learned in her youth once she discovered the existence of God and His self-revelation in Jesus Christ and in His Church.

For this she was dismissed from her university lectureship and interned in a work camp in Kazakhstan, after which she was deported. But Tatiana wasn’t put down by this treatment. On the contrary, she radiated new life because of her newfound belief in a loving God, which gave her new impetus and transformed her whole life. Why did she suffer so much and abandon the way of life she was educated in and lived up to then? She herself said, “My aim was to be cleverer, more capable and stronger than others. But no one had told me that the supreme thing in life is not to overtake or get the better of others but to love.” Isn’t that the secret of life no matter what one believes?

“My aim was to be cleverer, more capable and stronger than others. But no one had told me that the supreme thing in life is not to overtake or get the better of others but to love.”

—Tatiana Goricheva

In the Gospels, Jesus left us two great commandments: to love God above all things and to love others as we love ourselves. It sounds simple but may not be easy to do. At times we can find many reasons why we feel we can’t love God because we can’t see Him. And at times it may be too much of an effort to love others because when we look at them or live with them, we only see the differences between us. But the way of the Gospels moves in rhythm with the heartbeat of the Man-God who brought the culture of mutual love and self-gift even to death into our world. The truth of every other person lies in the fact that each one is my brother or sister for whom Christ died.

Our modern world is mostly the product of science and technology. Faith in many cases has been reduced to probable opinions. But what is this Faith? What is the Good News? It is the wonder of humankind risen in the Resurrection of Christ as the victory of God. St. Paul exhorted the new believers, “to walk in love as Christ loved you and gave Himself for you.” He also reminded them of their deepest identity as ‘God’s work of art’ created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning He had meant us to live it.
When I am at home, I say Mass in our barrio chapel (kapilya) on Sundays. One Sunday, I noticed that there were some new faces in the community, and I thought to myself that I had been away a long way from this place. I have been a Columban missionary for twenty years and was assigned in other countries. Now, I work in Manila in our formation program for Columban students and get a chance to have a frequent and longer home vacation.

I am from the Diocese of Ipil which is in the South of the Philippines in Mindanao, in the province of Zamboanga Sibugay. Recently I have been working in Manila for the formation of our students, I have also begun to reconnect with my home BEC (basic ecclesial community). Our barrio chapel does not have Mass every Sunday, but the community has their own Sunday liturgy presided by the kaabag (which means in English a helper, deputy or trustee). The main church of a typical parish in the Philippines is located in the town center and the far-flung barrios within the parish have their own chapel (kapilya) visited by a priest once or twice a month when he also celebrates the Holy Mass and other sacraments.

One of the new faces that stood out for me was a new convert to the community. Her name is Regina. I eventually got to know her and her family who faithfully come to the Sunday liturgy. Regina used to belong a local Christian sect but was not really at home there. She started to search for a Christian community where she feels welcome and has a space and time to deepen her faith in Jesus. She started coming to our kapilya on Sundays and attended Catechism classes, and she felt that this was the right community for her. She decided to be baptized first, and then her two daughters were also baptized who were eleven and nine years old at that time. Now, she is preparing her youngest child (an 8-year old boy) for baptism.

I find her story quite moving, because it is not common in the Philippines to have adult converts to Catholicism in a country where majority of the people are Catholics. We kind of just take for granted that we have plenty of people going to Mass every Sunday and the others simply belong to their own Christian churches. This might make us oblivious to the fact that there are other people out there who are genuinely in search for a community where they can belong.

Every time I am home for a break and get a chance to celebrate the Holy Mass in our barrio chapel, I make sure that I talk to Regina and her children after Mass. The two daughters now are altar servers and very happy to come with their mom to the kapilya on Sundays. The children are also actively involved with the youth activities in the parish. I am just happy that they have found a community where they feel welcome, safe, joyful and have a sense of belonging.

I remember Pope Francis saying that the Gospel is proclaimed effectively not by force but through tenderness and mercy. We attract people to our community when we try to live out the Gospel in words and deeds. May Regina and her family, through the grace and mercy of God, deepen their faith in Jesus and able to experience true joy in their newly-found Christian community.

Columban Fr. Cireneo Matulac lives and works in the Philippines.

Regina
A Story of Conversion
By Fr. Cireneo Matulac
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
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- 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.
Columban co-worker Sarah MacDonald speaks to Korean seminarian John Paul Seung-Jun Ro about finding his missionary path with the Columbans.

“I found the Columban missionaries through the internet,” John Paul Seung-Jun Ro recalls. He was at a crossroads in his life. Working in an Italian restaurant in Korea, he had completed his obligatory two-year military service, and he had also spent some time with the Salesians, but that had not worked out. As he worked away as a chef, his desire to serve the poor and work overseas as a missionary priest still tugged at him. “I had a lot of time for thinking while I was making the food. I thought about the missionary experience I had when I was seventeen. The Diocese of Cheongju sent me to the Philippines as part of a youth program. There I helped some of Manila’s poor who tried to make enough money to buy food each day by recycling trash from the rubbish mound known as Smokey Mountain.”

With a name like John Paul, it is not hard to guess that the 26-year-old was born during the pontificate of the late Polish Saint, John Paul II, who led the church between 1979 and 2005. “I was born in 1996. My father died when I was three years old. After that, my mother took care of me and my older sisters. She was very hardworking, but when I was twelve years old, she got depressed and wanted to die. She had been a Catholic but was non practicing. The local parish priest used to visit our home, and he gently encouraged my mother. Later she re-found God and her depression improved. She wanted to live more and found some hope. She wanted to know more about who God is. The priest helped to strengthen my mother’s faith. I saw this priest’s ministry, and I wanted to become a diocesan priest like him, helping poor, depressed people to survive. I especially wanted to help young people who live with parents suffering from depression. I made contact with the vocations office in Cheongju diocese.”

As a South Korean teenager, he felt unable to talk to his friends about God. “Some of my friends do not believe in anything, some are Protestant, and some are Buddhist.” The opportunity to participate in a youth missionary experience in the Philippines was an ideal way to explore his faith in a deeper way. “I was very shocked by the poverty I witnessed there. After that experience I began to research the different missionary congregations working abroad with the poor and marginalized. I decided to join the Salesians when I was twenty. I felt I could serve the poor in a more focused way as a missionary than as a school teacher. Offering spiritual nourishment to others, I felt, was more fulfilling and the right path for me.” However, having made this weighty decision, it was not all plain sailing. He experienced the Salesians as “hard working” and the formation program as “busy.” But there was so much exposure to different things that it left him with “little time for my inner journey. My prayer life began to suffer, and I was not finding the space I needed to ask myself the big questions in life. I was not able to pray, and I became depressed. There was no time for self-care, and I had little understanding of myself and my journey.” Then his formation studies were interrupted by two years of mandatory military service. When he returned to the Salesians, they felt he needed to take time out. That was in 2019. He was 24 years old.

While John Paul was working in the Italian restaurant in Seoul, he came across the Missionary Society of St. Columban on the internet. “When I
went to the vocations gathering hosted by the Columbans, it was different.” The Columban missionaries did not spend their time revealing their ‘achievements.’ Yet, when he heard Columban Fr. Lee Je-hoon, who is working in Myanmar, speaking about ministry there, he was “very impressed” and it “rekindled my passion for mission aboard. After that, I decided to join the Columbans, and I began formation in 2020 when I was 25 years old.”

In August 2022, John Paul left for the Philippines where he will undertake a Spiritual Year along with five other Columban seminarians. After his spiritual year ends, he will begin his theology studies in Manila. Speaking to the Far East magazine in Dalgan Park while he was studying English in Ireland, he said he felt he had found the space he needs to explore his faith and journey towards priesthood, “The first step in this mission is to know who I am,” he explained.

He also believes too many people nowadays are working so hard that they cannot really relax. Even holidays are spent “doing” because of the pressure to be always busy – going somewhere, watching something or socializing with someone. He has learned to find space and spend time with himself, searching and learning about who he is. For John Paul, the Irish are more laid-back than the Koreans, and it is something he is anxious to learn from. His encounter with older Columban missionaries in Dalgan also taught him about missionary hospitality.

He paid tribute to Fr. Donal O’Keeffe, Rector of the Columban Formation House in Seoul, during his studies there. The program combined study with collaborative work and one-to-one spiritual direction which allowed him to “slowly face myself, look at my weaknesses, and meet Jesus who accompanies me even in my weaknesses.” He used to think that, “God was only in certain special experiences or places. But God was waiting for me in my weakest part. In other words, God had always been with me. I have become more human little by little, but I am still a work in progress. This is a journey that Jesus and I walk together with the countless people I am meeting now and will meet in the future.”

Columban co-worker Sarah MacDonald works in Dalgan Park on The Far East magazine.
Praying with the Priests

Retreat in Tarawa

By Fr. Donal McIlraith

From Jan 8 to 14, 2023, I had the privilege of leading the diocesan priest’s retreat in Tarawa, the chief island of Kiribati. It was a joyous occasion for me as nearly all of the priests in attendance were my former students, some going back thirty years. I seem to be invited to do this in Kiribati every 10 years.

The last time I was invited was in 2013. At that time, Columban Fr. Taaemon Matauea of Rabi, with family links to Kiribati, had just been ordained and was waiting in Fiji to take up his mission appointment in Taiwan. I invited him to come with me to Kiribati and while I lead the retreat, he caught up with members of the family he had never met before.

We went by speed boat to North Tarawa, a rough journey, to the Sychar Retreat Center, named after the well of Jacob. This was where Jesus met the woman of Samaria. This had been a deserted island, a reputed place of suicide and was believed to be haunted. The Diocese owned the land and the late Bishop Elect Dr. Koru Tito had a dream of building a retreat center here. He asked the Charismatic Community of Kiribati of which he was the Chaplain to take on the project. They transformed it into a tiny city of prayer. Alas, Dr. Tito did not live either to be consecrated or to see his dream come true.

This was the first major retreat at the center. Three large halls, actually traditional Kiribati Manebas, dominate the center. These are used for Mass, lectures and meals. Sleeping quarters are individual Kiakia or traditional sleeping houses. Each retreatant has his own. They are small, for sitting and sleeping in but each, thanks to solar power has its own source of light. The entire center is eco-friendly. It faces the beach, and the roar of the ocean provides a wonderful background. There are concrete blocks of toilets and showers.

The nearby villages showered us with food for every meal. A group of Charismatic people took care of the logistics and accompanied the retreat with their prayer. They were led by Mrs. Margarita Baara, the retired Kiribati Ambassador to the United States who had also overseen the building of Sychar.

We prayed about the priesthood of Jesus as the Epistle to the Hebrews presents it. Sacrificing Himself, Jesus, our true High Priest established the new Covenant, the Marriage of the Lamb. We then looked at how we all share Christ’s priesthood through our baptism. As part of the New Covenant and the wife and bride of Christ, we all share in Jesus’ priesthood. He has given us His Holy Spirit, removed our sins and given us the knowledge and love of God. Thus, we too, in Him, can
sacrifice ourselves to the Father and live lives of love.

We then prayed about the sharing in Christ’s priesthood that we priests receive through our sacrament of Holy Orders, being united through our sacramental character with Jesus the eternally loving bridegroom for the service of His bride. As St. John Vianney says, priests are the love of the Heart of Jesus for His people.

Following Jesus’ example, our task is to wash the feet of His disciples. We ended by spending some time on the issue of Synodality. With the spirit of encounter, listening and discerning before acting that we learn from this, the relationship between priests and people can be enriched.

The Diocese of Kiribati has been through a rough patch with the successive deaths both of the Bishop, the Most Rev. Paul Mea, MSC and of his successor, Bishop-Elect Dr. Koru Tito. Presently the Diocese has an Apostolic Administrator, Fr. Iona Tatau, a canon lawyer and head of the tribunal.

It was Fr. Iona who invited me to lead the retreat. We had nineteen retreatants in all, most of the diocesan priests including two deacons. It was great joy for me to take on this retreat as almost all of them, including Fr. Iona were my former students. It was a wonderful experience for me to meet them all again and catch up where we left off. They didn’t mind being “back in class” with me, and we prayed well together, I think. Currently the Columbans have two seminarians from Kiribati.

The visit had an unexpected ending. On the following Monday night, I was invited — with all the priests — to a banquet in my honor by the President of Kiribati, the Honorable Taneti Mamau and the first Lady, Madame Teiraeng Mamau. In his welcoming speech the President thanked me for my service to the Kiribati priests.

This whole event was unexpected and surprising. In my words of thanks, I mentioned the Irish sisters who had worked here and remembered people like Sr. Mella McLaughey of Monaghan, Ireland, who are buried here.

Please pray for Kiribati and its priests and people.

Columban Fr. Donal McIlraith lives and works in Fiji.

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Earlier this year the Columban Sisters looked back to February 1922 when a group of young women came together in Cahiracon in County Clare. These women became the first group of postulants who were the foundation of the new Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of St. Columban.

Now, in 2023, we have Sisters on mission in Ireland, the United Kingdom, United States, China, Myanmar, Pakistan and the Philippines. This is quite an expansion when we consider those early days when thirteen young women answered a call to respond to the needs of the people of China. Thankfully, we still have young women ready to respond to the call of mission. Today we have two novices, Marianna from Korea and Annalyn from the Philippines, as well as two postulants from Myanmar. None of this, of course, would have been possible without the prayers and financial support of our many faithful benefactors. In our early days, the Columban Fathers, under the leadership of Fr. John Blowick, made provision for the upkeep of the Sisters in Cahiracon. Gradually, this resulted in a strain on finances. In July 1926, when the first group of Sisters were preparing to set out for China, Fr. Blowick made his first appeal for support in the Far East magazine on behalf of the Sisters. This resulted in a tremendous outpouring of generosity.

Responding to this generosity, Fr. Blowick wrote in the Far East: “Little did you think as you sent us your donation — small or great as it may have been — what a burden you raised off our shoulders. Little did you think that the combined efforts of our army of friends in Ireland made it possible for us to come to the aid of our immense family, young and old, priests, students and Brothers and Sisters at home in the college and away in the lonely plains of China.”

In the years following 1926, a small trickle of donations, some totalling up to £10, which was a large sum of money at that time, reached Cahiracon from the four corners of Ireland. One small donation was accompanied by a request for prayers because of “struggles with unemployment and the availability of part time work only.”

Another benefactor sent “a small donation towards the flood victims of Hanyang” and added, “I am only a working man and I am sorry this gift is so small,” while from another we heard, “I joined with a friend in selling cattle which did not do well, but we
promised to send you some money no matter how it would go.” Our hearts were equally deeply touched by messages such as, “When starting my career, I promised three pence a week out of my small salary of 5s to go to the Missions and any little extras I got in the way of tips.”

By 1930, the response to the appeals for support had become so generous and numerous that, in order to keep pace with all the correspondence and donations, the Sisters in Cahiracon had to set aside a special room as an office from which to correspond with the many people who had become our generous benefactors.

This past year here in Ireland, I have been opening the envelopes which, since 1926, have continued to come to us with support for our missionary work and, like our Sisters in our early days, I have been overwhelmed and inspired by the generous assistance and the concern for our Sisters and the people among whom we live and work which supporters from around the world give us.

Some of these envelopes contain a check for a large amount of money, others contain a few Euros or Pounds which, in the eyes of the world today, would be considered a small amount of money but, for we Columban Sisters, each of these envelopes contains a treasure — not only in money but a treasure of faithfulness to us which stretches over many years, a treasure of concern for our safety and well-being, and that of the people whom we serve — treasures of great value indeed.

Today, throughout the world, we are all living in uncertain and precarious times as we learn to live with the virus that has disrupted so much of our lives and caused so much suffering. Many of us are living in fear and worry over the war in Ukraine and the spiralling cost of living. And yet, the people continue to respond with great generosity, supporting us with their prayer and donations.

At a recent meeting of Apostolic Workers, I heard it said that we missionaries “give by going” and that others “go by giving.” For me, that is a perfect description of the partnership between we missionaries and our benefactors. Both the going and the giving are intertwined and equally necessary and for both we give thanks to God.

Columban missionary Sr. Ann Gray is the new Assistant Editor of the Far East magazine. She is based in Ireland.
The seafront at Ramsey on the Isle of Man boasts some impressive structures, but pride of place must go to the Catholic church. Dating from 1910, it is legally protected as a scheduled “listed building” due to its beauty and architectural merit.

Yet, take a closer look and you’ll notice something odd. Next to its side wall stands a classic 1935 K6 telephone box. The “red box” is recognized the world over as a symbol of Britain. Although de-commissioned in 1985, it has retained a place in the public imagination.

But why is it here? Has it just “materialized” like Dr. Who’s “Tardis?” The answer lies in the identity of the church’s architect.

“Our Lady, Star of the Sea” is the work of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, part of the renowned Gilbert Scott architectural dynasty. His more famous grandfather, Sir George Gilbert Scott, produced many notable buildings in the Victorian era, chief among them London’s Albert Memorial. Giles himself was responsible for such works as Battersea Power Station by the River Thames and Liverpool’s Anglican Cathedral.

However, he is probably best known for having won the 1924 competition for the design of a national telephone box. Crafted in a classical style, topped by a dome and painted red, the box became standard issue throughout the country. The population immediately took it to their hearts.

One of those who retained an affection for it was Ramsey Parish Priest Fr. Brian O’Mahony. Struck by the link between it and the church, he decided it’d be a good idea to have them side by side.

The problem was, how was he to obtain one? Since disappearing from the streets they had become collectors’ items and increasingly difficult to find.

While conducting an appeal on behalf of the Columban missionaries in his parish, Fr. Brian told me what happened next.

“I asked the telephone company if I could buy one, but they said they didn’t have any left. Then, I received a tip-off, telling me that someone had two of them. I went over and talked to the owner. Maybe he’d sell me one?
But that is God for you. How often He manifests Himself in life’s connections. Connections between missionaries. Connections between Christians. Connections, even, between a church, an architect and a red telephone box.

He said ‘yes, maybe...for £4,000!’” But that was impossible. Fr. Brian was walking away, when suddenly the gentleman called him back. “‘What’s your interest?’, he asked. I explained the situation and he said, ’look, I’m a Christian too. I help support an orphanage in Belarus. Tell you what. Give a contribution to the orphanage and you’ve got the box.’ So I did.”

Fr. Brian needed a crane to lift the call box into place, but he assured me the effort was worth it. The connection had been made.

Funnily enough, as we talked, it became clear that there were connections between him and I as well. As a Columban, I am a missionary priest, and it turns out he is as well. He is a Spiritan, a Member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (formerly known as the “Holy Ghost Fathers”). I’d served in South America; he’d ministered in Africa. More remarkably still, an early inspiration for him back home in Liverpool had been a Columban — Fr. Hugh Bennet. Fr. Hugh was one of our old “China hands,” who’d gone to China in 1934, stayed there during the war years and suffered expulsion by the new regime in 1951.

But that is God for you. How often He manifests Himself in life’s connections. Connections between missionaries. Connections between Christians. Connections, even, between a church, an architect and a red telephone box.

Columban Fr. John Boles lives and works in Britain.
Creating Hope

Finding Purpose

By Fr. Ed O'Connell

When things are not going well, like the situation of Peru in these present years, people can lose hope. During the pandemic, a lot of people lost their jobs, although disproportionally the poor lost their jobs at higher rates. Plus global inflation has pushed up prices, and now there is a political crisis that has brought overall instability and fear.

In such situations, it is necessary to “create hope,” that is provide the conditions whereby the people can begin to believe in themselves again through participating in a self-help program that also includes improving community life.

Following are three examples of such conditions being created so that people can have reasons to hope again. After the testimonies of the five women, there are the testimonies of two adolescents Lula and Leti, who were somewhat lost. Warmi Huasi provides the welcoming and friendly atmosphere where people feel valued, their dignity respected in a society where often they are mistreated, and the encouragement to believe they can achieve their goals. It makes an enormous difference to them.

In San Benito, a state run Adult Education Program was set up to meet local need. The program provides education for 31 young and adult women so they can finish their primary education. In November 2022, they covered topics such as nutrition and nutritious food. This was an opportunity for mothers in the Health and Environment Committee (organic vegetable gardens) to share their knowledge and what they have learned and to promote the expansion of family or community organic vegetable gardens. These gardens also give them the chance to improve the nutritional value of the food they eat at home or generate income for their families in the future.

Sonia and Danny took part in these programs.

The “Mujeres Empoderadas” (Women Leadership Empowerment Program) initiative set up in 2022 has been well received by mothers in the San Benito and surrounding communities. Discussing topics such as sexuality, gender, self-esteem, emotional control and preventing child abuse and violence has contributed to improving their self-esteem and safety and has empowered them. It has also helped them to update their understanding of these issues and be better equipped to interact with their children and give them emotional support and guidance. This whole process has even motivated them to hold awareness-raising activities in their own community, and enabled more women and mothers to join them.

Jessica, Milagros and Eugenia took part in this program.

In both regions, initiatives to protect children and adolescents and reduce violence against them have progressed successfully. At the local government level, Warmi Huasi is providing technical support to to improve the system for registering and dealing with cases of violence against children and adolescents, both in terms of collecting relevant information, and implementing the operating system/program (referral pathway).

In Carabayllo the Committee for the Safeguarding of Children and Adolescents and Prevention of Violence was set up in 2021. In 2022 it has strengthened its identity and organizational skills. The committee members are interested in and motivated by this issue which is so prevalent in their community. They see the need to continue their training on the subject, and as a committee they also want to run awareness-raising activities in the community and with school parents, mainly on violence prevention.

Eugenia also took part in this program.

Sonya (45 years old)
“I was born in Puno. They brought me to Lima when I was three years old. I don’t remember much because I was very young when I came. I currently live in Los Cipreses township with my husband and my two children. I don’t have close relatives, I haven’t worked since the pandemic but have participated in a communal kitchen and spend my time there until mid-day. My financial support comes from my husband as he works. Warmi Huasi supports us through training, other activities and psychological support, which has helped me a lot. When I go to Warmi Huasi I relax and learn a lot. What I learn motivates me to teach at home. One example is the organic garden. I have one at home, and everything I learn in Warmi Huasi I do at home and pass it on to my children.”

Jessica (47 years old)
“I live with my husband and our four children in San Benito. I am a
Milagros (43 years old)
“I was born in Piura, but now I live in San Benito with my husband and my two children. I work independently selling in the market. This year I participated in the Women Leadership Empowerment Program that Warmi Huasi carried out, at the invitation of some neighbors, and I can say that it was an unforgettable experience. Before participating, I was always doing housework, and I didn’t have much time for myself. Now I have improved a lot. It helps me to have time for myself and thus improve every day as a person, since I have gone through difficult times in the pandemic. My goals and plans are to increase my business, have a prosperous business and as mothers. My goals and plans is to keep well and advise my family in everything I have learned. I have learned to value myself which helps me improve my relationship with my children. My faith has motivated me because I believe in myself, and I believe that I will always achieve what I set my mind to do.”

Danny (45 years old)
“I was born in Cajamarca and at the age of 16 came to Lima. I currently live in San Benito with my family. My husband and I worked before the pandemic, but with the pandemic we lost our jobs. I get temporary jobs but now to maintain our home, we depend on our eldest son. This year I have been very happy because my neighbors told me about Warmi Huasi and the adult education program. I was very scared at first but my eldest son encouraged me, he told me: “Go mommy you will learn a lot there.” Thanks to that, I have participated in the Health and Environment Committee. I have learned to make a garden and harvest my own vegetables and reuse recyclable materials. I can say that I have learned a lot. I value my time more, I am motivated and I want to continue learning. I have even saved money by not buying in the market anymore. My goal is to finish high school, and in my organic garden, I would like to plant vegetables so I can sell them. Now I feel that my faith and my thoughts have given me power, and I believe that I will achieve everything I set my mind to.”

Lula (13 years old)
“I live in San Benito, but I was born in Lima. I live with my mom, my older sister, an aunt and my cousin. The pandemic has been very difficult. With the return to school I feel that my routine has changed, and one of the new things I am doing is participating in Warmi Huasi. On Fridays I had nothing to do, but now I do because I go to my workshops, I have fun and have met children that I like, and I think the workshops are nice. My goal is to first finish all of my high school, go to college, if God allows, and have a career. I am grateful to Warmi Huasi and the team there, because these workshops they give, in which I have a lot of fun, I know that many adolescents do not have this opportunity.”

Leti (12 years old)
“In my family we are: my father, my mother and my older brother. We all live together in a house that is located in San Benito. I was born in Lima. I participate in the workshops Warmi Huasi runs and also in the Reading Club. I love it! I go to my workshops and the club, because before I only watched televisión. Because of the pandemic I couldn’t see my friends, now I feel that I have more productive time and that I have learned several things. When I finish school I want to study graphic design or psychology, to help other children. I want to thank Warmi Huasi and their team for always helping us to have our workshops.”

Columban Fr. Ed O’Connell lives and works in Peru.
The Challenge
In 1986, St. Pope John Paul II pronounced Fiji “the way the world should be” — a country with different ethnic and religious communities living together in peace. However one year later the peace was shattered by a coup d'état led by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. This was the first of four coups the last of which occurred at the end of 2006.

Columban missionaries in Fiji decided in February 1990, in response to the 1987 coups and their aftermath, to prioritize work for justice and reconciliation. We needed to reflect on the social dynamics of Fiji society to understand the coups. We sought inspiration in the Gospel for becoming catalysts of social understanding. We tried to act as missionary peace builders.

Identifying the Roots of the Problem
The coups involved complicated political intrigues and personalities. But ethnic prejudice is a source of social division, available for manipulation by political and military leaders for their own purposes.

Ethnic prejudice in Fiji is based on stereotypes held by the main ethnic groups about each other. Hard-working ethnic Indians are dismissed as selfish, mean individualists by others and the relaxed communitarian indigenous Fijians are condemned as lazy and irresponsible by people with a different perspective.

To develop as humans we all need to belong to groups. But because we are socialized to accept our culture as normative we easily denigrate cultures that are different. We don’t see them just as different but as inferior.

This “us and them” division becomes a negative emotional prejudice when used to incite competition, fear and suspicion in ordinary people by those seeking leadership and power. Ethnic prejudice, stirred up in this way, leads to discrimination and hostility.

Not everything in a culture is perfect. That is also true of our own cultures. But we usually compare the ideals of our own culture with the failings of other cultures. We must try to understand other ethnic communities in the context of their historical, geographic, social and economic environment. We need to be open to learn how each culture was adaptive in its context. We must widen the spaces in our tent to accept other cultures as different responses to the mystery of life in society.

Inspiration from Jesus’ Teaching
In Jesus’ time strong simmering prejudice, which often boiled over into hostility, existed between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans refused to give hospitality to Jesus and His disciples because they were on their way to Jerusalem (Luke 9:53). Yet Jesus refused to allow His disciples to curse them. Jesus, a Jew, held up a Samaritan as an example of compassion to a wounded...
A blessing from the other who proved to be the Other. I believe that in struggling to be inclusive of people of other cultures and faiths we come to know and love God better. I treasure the image of a Columban missionary as a bridge builder. I am fascinated by culture and captivated by faith. I rejoice when I make friends with people of different cultures and faiths. When I am able to deepen the respect and acceptance of people for each other I truly experience myself as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I feel I am working for Fiji to be the way the world should be.

Columban Fr. Frank Hoare lives and works in Fiji.
After presiding at the Japanese Catholic Community’s Sunday Eucharist February 5, 2023, I attended a celebration of World Religion Day hosted by believers of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Network on Religion and Peace and The New Mindscape. The pandemic had caused the cancellation of the celebration of the day in Hong Kong for three years. The venue was on the 22nd floor of a building overlooking the Hong Kong harbor, but the misty weather outside meant I focused most of my attention with the group gathering in the building. About 100 people of various faiths and people of no faith arrived and listened to recitations of Scriptures, devotions, music. There were quite a few young people who looked like university students attending. We moved into small group discussions to share about our feelings on how we had survived the coronavirus pandemic. The latter part of the program included a panel of faith leaders and young medical students sharing about the pandemic from their faith perspectives.

In my small group another Christian put out his hand in mutual congratulation to me when we shared that we had not yet caught the Covid virus! Much of the sharing was on the topic of how people of faith had found the inner resources from their faith to survive a difficult time. Many shared about the symptoms they had suffered when they caught the virus, and there was a sense of sympathy for those who had suffered.

The theme of the day was “Healing Our World” with the sub-title of “Spiritual Inspirations, Conversations and Actions.” The speakers were in a self-congratulatory mood that our faiths had saved us, and we had helped heal the world by recognizing that people of all faiths were in the same boat and a sense of interdependence that we had somehow come through the pandemic together.

At the end of the day the Bahai host asked for final comments and after a Sikh speaker spoke, I put my hand up for the microphone and suggested that perhaps it was our lack of care for the planet and other creatures which had caused the outbreak of the pandemic. I said: “Perhaps we need to rethink our reliance on extractive industries, show more respect for Nature and realise other alternatives rather than destroying our planet. The university lecturers in the room know Science and we have to develop our dialogue between Faith and Science. Most of the faiths present haveCreation stories which remind us of how our God is still alive in our planet recreating everything. Our Buddhist friends present can teach us so much about oneness with all beings. Perhaps we need to realise that we need to show more respect for our planet and all creatures. Perhaps we are not healing our world but the planet can heal us, if we allow it to do so.”

On the way out one person thanked me for my interesting comments and asked to keep in contact. I look forward to more conversations with people of other faiths. Maybe the planet can save us.
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.

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We are fortunate that in our lifetime we enjoy a quality of life which would have been unthinkable just a few generations ago. Thanks to advances in science and technology, we enjoy an abundance of material goods and appreciate the ease of communication that makes the world into a global village. We ought to be the happiest people that ever lived on the face of the earth.

Yet, despite all these stunning developments, we are also in the middle of a cultural decline that is evident in the escalation of violence, random shootings, gross materialism, and hedonism to dull the pain of a meaningless existence. There is a palpable feeling of malaise, aimlessness, depression and rising suicide rates among the younger generations in the Western world.

We encounter God, initially, by paying attention to our experience, since experience has also a spiritual dimension to those who are open to it.

These brief considerations are enough to demonstrate that the problems we face today go right to the heart of who and what we are as human beings. For it is gradually becoming obvious that our future may no longer be one of technological, economic, social, and political progress which we too often take for granted until recently. With the crumbling of organized religion, including Catholicism, we are experiencing a spiritual vacuum and require a broader vision of life to sustain us in the ups and downs of life.

We need to open our minds and hearts to the religious dimension of our lived experience by contacting the God of the Bible. We will then be able to recover both our purpose in life and our true dignity as we journey along the road to our final destiny.
How do we get in touch with the Biblical God who created the world and is active in it? We encounter God, initially, by paying attention to our experience, since experience has also a spiritual dimension to those who are open to it. For this to happen, though, we must feel a need of God and a desire to communicate with him. Apart from this desire, we may find the Biblical message interesting but irrelevant in living our daily lives. Both mind and heart must work together to realize that the Word of God is speaking to me, personally. We need to ask God for the grace to make “a leap of faith” or trust, since God honors our freedom and will not force us in any way. The heart has its own desires, it seeks truth and happiness, and only God has the capacity of responding to these longings.

A return to the Bible is not a revival of a dead past but a living truth that will provide an antidote to modern illusions of self-salvation. In the Old Testament, God intervenes in the life of Abraham to mark a new departure in the history of humanity. Abraham was open and ready to heed God’s interior call to let go of his past and put his trust in this God who revealed a new life of hope for the future. Through Moses, Abraham’s descendants acquired a community expression of his experience, after their escape from slavery in Egypt, in the solemn agreement at Sinai. The prophets helped deepen and interiorize that experience. The wisdom teachers, in turn, pondered the role of God, the Creator, through His providential care in everyday living.

In the centuries before the coming of Christ, a faithful remnant lived and transmitted a profound religious experience that finds expression in the prayers of the Psalter. Those who prayed the Psalms were full of hope and expectation because their God journeyed with them and guided their steps in daily life: “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path” (Ps. 119:105), as they awaited the coming of the Savior-Messiah.

Although Jesus didn’t bring world peace, universal prosperity, or a better world, what He announced was the true God already partially unveiled in the Old Testament. He revealed the true God as a loving Father whom Jesus makes accessible to us in person and through whom God’s power works quietly in our world as a force that saves. Christians believe that Jesus provides the definitive truth about our origin and destiny and the full truth regarding the human condition as we experience it.

The Christian life may then become a joyful pilgrimage to our destination, one that is lived in a faith that works through charity and abides in hope, for Jesus becomes “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” (Jn.14:6). Believers who wish to follow Jesus more closely have the Gospels to guide them through the essential stages of Christian maturity. The Church as a community communicates the Good News of God’s saving plan for all humankind at all times and consequently is missionary of its very nature. It witnesses to the hope of fulfillment beyond history as the final destiny of humanity.

The Church becomes the carrier of a new truth in history through the New Testament writers who offered their stories as a true understanding of the real world. Through conversion, repentance, faith, and baptism, it becomes possible to live this new kind of life guided by the Spirit and strengthened by the Eucharist to enable us to live a morality of love. In this way, we live out the full truth of our humanity witnessed to in an extraordinary way by the saints.

That human living requires spiritual foundations is clear from our contemporary wasteland mired in violence, corruption, and hopelessness, the result of a secularism that denies the existence of God. Christianity offers an illumination of our world that is richer and more satisfying, one that encompasses the relational, emotional, imaginative as well as the rational aspects of living. For it is the Biblical God who is the origin and destiny of each human being and of the whole universe.

Columban Fr. Maurice Hogan served as a missionary in Japan and Hong Kong and taught Sacred Scripture at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth. He is a former Director of World Missions Ireland (Missio Ireland).
A Survival Kit for Life
A Culture of Care
By Mereani Nailevu

During my time of fear, I realized that people around me helped me from the culture of fear to the culture of care...

“Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for am your God. I will strengthen you and help you I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)

During this global pandemic crisis, getting used to a new way of living does come with its challenges. Being confronted with this new reality has caused a lot of difficulties for everyone whereby it is affecting our lifestyle, work, mission, schools and the fear of getting in contact with others. So, the new normal is a crashing wave-like sensation as it comes over a lot of people on hearing the sudden news of their beloved ones departing to a distant sea where there will be on return. As this “new normal” continues its threat millions of people around the globe are facing exactly the same health worries whereby they are being confronted with fear, anxiety, worry, anger and sadness.

I faced this feeling when I woke up on a Saturday morning in a state of shock realizing that my body did not feel normal. I woke up sneezing, coughing, with an elevated body temperature, and I started to lose my sense of taste and smell. I started isolating myself from going out into the community and went for a test. The morning after my saliva test, I received an email with my result from the Red Cross laboratory and the first thing that I saw was my result was printed in red. I was so scared and a lot of unanswered questions ran through my mind as I asked myself “what if...” which drained me emotionally. After a while I received a call from the laboratory asking me if I was alright. Although worried and fearful I pretended that everything was alright and I tried to deny the fact that I was sick which was not a good response for my situation and for the people I live with. I think I was afraid that I would be brought to the local isolation unit which is known to be uncomfortable.

My twenty-one days of isolation at home looking at the four corners of my room brought further stress, sadness, worries and other mixed feelings deep within me. I was disconnected from my activities in the ministry, attendance in church and there was nothing I could do except to pray within the four corners of my room. I found a passage from the scriptures in Isaiah 41:10: Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Difficulties do come in life, but to overcome it, I need to be strong and gain strength which only comes through trust in the word of God.

In times of my great stress, anxiety, fear and worry, the best thing I did was to keep myself busy all the time by plowing my energy into something positive. I needed huge positive energy to fight against the negative forces. With prayers, I was able to deepen my self-knowledge and reach into the center of my heart and regenerated that positive energy for survival.

Although I was far away from home, I was so thankful that I was surrounded with people who had skills, ability and a measured approach in getting things done. Their guidance was very helpful to me during this time of uncertainty which helped me to tackle the sickness. During my time of fear, I realized that people around me helped me move from the culture of fear to the culture of care. Their hospitality made me realize when “I” is replaced by “We,” even “illness” becomes “wellness.” Indeed, prayers, faith, trust and support have been my kit for survival.

Columban lay missionary Mereani Nailevu lives and works in the Philippines.
My first contact with people who professed a non-Christian faith was on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. I had done a summer experience and encountered those who still practiced the traditional ways of the Lakota Sioux people. The most vivid memory was participating in a Sun Dance ceremony. The purpose of the Sun Dance ceremony was to reunite and reconnect with the earth and spirits. It calls for a renewal of life and a prayer for life. In the ceremony I attended, there came a moment of great prayer and the raising of the tree. However, the community misjudged the raising of the tree, and it fell over. There was a hush in the crowd. As people mingled around and quietly talked about the next steps, I was called over by an elder. As I was walking towards him, I came across the tree and felt the urge to jump over it instead of taking the longer trek of going around it. Suddenly, I recalled the words of Fr. Roger Shroeder, SVD, a professor of Intercultural Studies and Ministry in my seminary. He had been a missionary in Papua New Guinea. He was explaining his participation in a somewhat similar ceremony with the native peoples there. At one point, someone asked him to hand a towel over. He took the towel and tossed it over the ceremonial pit to the person. This was a no-no. Because of his actions, the women could not partake of the meal after. Obviously, Fr. Roger felt bad but the people assured him that they knew he meant no harm. Fr. Roger than said these words of wisdom, “that experience taught me a lot. Since then, if I was in a new culture with a different faith, and if I came into a situation where I didn’t know what to do, I would consider what I would do in my home culture than do the opposite. I discovered this worked about 75%.” With that insight, I stopped myself from walking over the fallen tree and took the longer walk around. After, I was told that people were watching me and were relieved that I didn’t walk over the tree. Although I know that I would have meant no harm, and I was unaware of their ways, one still needs to have caution and respect when we enter another’s holy ground.

In the creation stories of Genesis (chapters 1 and 2), God creates heaven and earth and all in it. The Spirit of God is in all living creatures. Hence, all cultures have the spirit of God in them. Different faiths and religions can have seeds of God’s spirit. Furthermore, Abraham’s son with Hagar, Ismael, is promised a great nation by God. “God heard the lad [Ismael] crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” (Genesis 21: 17-18) Ismael is considered a forefather and prophet of the Islamic faith. In the New Testament, Jesus praises the faith of non-Jewish people such as the Syrophoenician woman (Mark 7:29), the Roman centurion (Matthew 8: 10-11), and the Samaritan leper (Luke 17: 16-19). There is a tradition of respecting another’s path and faith.

As missionaries we often come into contact with others of another faith. In the past, a missionary paradigm was to convince the other that they needed to convert to our faith. Sadly, most of that history is marked with coercion and war. Today, there is a value to see the spirit of God in another’s faith. To make friendships and share with one another as Jesus did in the Gospel. If conversion comes about, it is a result of friendship and love, not force. Our model is Moses’ first encounter with God on Mount Horeb when God told Moses, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3: 5)

FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. Chris Saenz

Although I know that I would have meant no harm, and I was unaware of their ways, one still needs to have caution and respect when we enter another’s holy ground.

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