

# Columban Mission

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Earth, Wind, Sand & Sea

# C O N T E N T S

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## Columban Mission

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### MAILING ADDRESS:

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

**TOLL-FREE PHONE:** 877/299-1920

**WEBSITE:** [WWW.COLUMBAN.ORG](http://WWW.COLUMBAN.ORG)

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### PUBLISHER

FR. CHRIS SAENZ

[DIRECTORUSA@COLUMBAN.ORG](mailto:DIRECTORUSA@COLUMBAN.ORG)

### EDITOR

KATE KENNY

[KKENNY@COLUMBAN.ORG](mailto:KKENNY@COLUMBAN.ORG)

### EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

MARCI ANDERSON

[MANDERSON@COLUMBAN.ORG](mailto:MANDERSON@COLUMBAN.ORG)

RENEA STEELE

[RSTEELE@COLUMBAN.ORG](mailto:RSTEELE@COLUMBAN.ORG)

DYANNE WENDLING

[DWENDLING@COLUMBAN.ORG](mailto:DWENDLING@COLUMBAN.ORG)

### GRAPHIC DESIGNER

KRISTIN ASHLEY

### EDITORIAL BOARD

DAN EMINGER

KATE KENNY

ERNIE MAY

JEFF NORTON

FR. CHRIS SAENZ



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

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



# In So Many Words

By Sr. Caroline Vaitkunas RSM

## Greater Good for All

This year International World Ocean's Day (June 8) focused attention on the theme *Revitalization: Collective Action for the Ocean*. Columban missionaries worldwide are collaborating to raise awareness, share stories and inspire change in local communities and at international events, for the protection and care of oceans.

Oceans form the biggest surface of Earth and contain immense biodiversity of life. Oceans provide food, help to regulate Earth's weather and climate, and produce vast amounts of oxygen. However, the world's oceans are groaning from the impacts of over-fishing, coastal development, exploitative mining and pollution. Columban Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Coordinator in Fiji, Tevita Naikasowalu says, "for us when we see the sea, we see ourselves, when we see the river, we see ourselves, when we see the land, we see ourselves. That is why we cry out very much. For us, wellbeing is about relationship. It's not an 'I' but a 'we,' it's always plural." Tevita says the challenges we face are not served by attitudes that are self-seeking, that put up barriers between peoples and are not focused on the common good for all God's creation.

The call to regeneration, therefore, sets our vision higher and is more transformational. It involves deeper commitments to reflect upon and integrate broad wisdom and knowledge traditions and address underlying causes in many activities that involve and benefit all. In our Christian tradition, ecological conversion involves turning to our foundations and responding to the cries of Earth and all peoples and particularly those who are disadvantaged. It includes listening to, taking heed of and helping to raise voices for the greater good of all.

In May, Columban missionaries in Australia participated in the webinar event *Ecology and Economics, Everything is Connected*, hosted by Catholic Religious Australia. The webinar focused on economic decision-making in the light of ecological conversion, one of the goals of the Laudato Si Action Platform. In words that echo broadly with leaders from all walks of life, Michelle Moloney, Co-Founder and National Convenor of Australian Earth Laws Alliance (AELA) and one of the keynote speakers stated, "we are stuck on ideas of prosperity and economics." Michelle explained the term sustainability, often applied to individual and organizational efforts to care for creation, is limited to seeking to do no further harm. However, this is not enough. The global community is collectively living outside safe Earthly boundaries and the capacity of living systems to replenish from what is taken are left depleted. We cannot assume to go on with unlimited growth.

The call to regeneration, therefore, sets our vision higher and is more transformational. It involves deeper commitments to reflect upon and integrate broad wisdom and knowledge traditions and address underlying causes in many activities that involve and benefit all. In our Christian tradition, ecological conversion involves turning to our foundations and responding to the cries of Earth and all peoples and particularly those who are disadvantaged. It includes listening to, taking heed of and helping to raise voices for the greater good of all.

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*Columban missionaries worldwide are collaborating to raise awareness, share stories and inspire change in local communities and at international events, for the protection and care of oceans.*

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Sr. Caroline Vaitkunas RSM  
Peace, Ecology and Justice Office  
Columban Mission Center, Essendon, Australia

# Resettling God's People

## The Fullness of Humanity

By Sophia Chee Tzu Ting



As the coronavirus pandemic sweeps across the globe for over two years now, it does not seem to deter the fear of thousands of people wanting to flee their own country for a better future and a better life.

“Coronavirus is nothing compared to the war in my country,” an asylum seeker from Africa said to me on one quiet afternoon during the first national lockdown. “People are not afraid of the virus—they are more afraid of the war.” She said this with a sad tone. She must have felt so helpless that she could not do anything to help her family back home nor be there with them during the difficult times. She herself has been stuck in the asylum claiming process in this country for many years without any certainty of progress in getting her “papers” processed. “There is too much stress here.” She would hold

her head everytime she talked about her situation, “I can only pray,” and would normally end the conversation with this hopeful statement that seemed appropriate and gave her much consolation.

Derek, a young man with a good job and perspective of life in his country, decided to flee Iran to seek a safer place to live where he could freely express his thoughts and religion. He walked thousands of miles, day and night for months, leaving everything behind, readily risking his life on the journey in order to find a new life. He is just another person whom I met who is caught in the same situation as many other asylum seekers are.

Derek is not alone. There are thousands more like him, losing hope in their country and leaving home behind. Some were trying to save their own lives. Many have hoped to join their family while others hope to bring

over their family for reunion once they have settled in the country.

Those who have successfully crossed the English Channel would go on to seek asylum. It may seem to be a joyous moment stepping foot on the new land. Yet to live in the next minute and hour in the unknown, the fate to claim a legal document to stay in the country remains uncertain. They live on a paltry allowance of \$25 per week merely relying on donations and charities. Many waited for years to be able get their “papers” and then to find a job.

The recent Nationality and Borders Bill that tackles illegal immigration and enables citizenship to be removed without notice if it would “not reasonably practicable” are just adding fuel to the fire. Despite the new legislation, people are still willing to take the risk, including the 27 souls that were tragically lost in the sea while

crossing the English Channel in recent months.

It is impossible to experience what these people have gone through mentally and physically. Hearing their stories has been emotional and dramatic. It is difficult to keep up with their worries, fear, and traumatized experiences. They have gone through a complete change of life in a completely new country, new language and culture. The feeling of homelessness has never been so real.

Despite the feeling of gloom and doom, the Columban missionaries in Britain, in partnership with local charities and Archdiocese of Birmingham, work to provide shelter and sanctuary to women asylum seekers. One of the projects, Fatima House, where I work, has hosted almost forty women asylum seekers since its establishment five years ago.

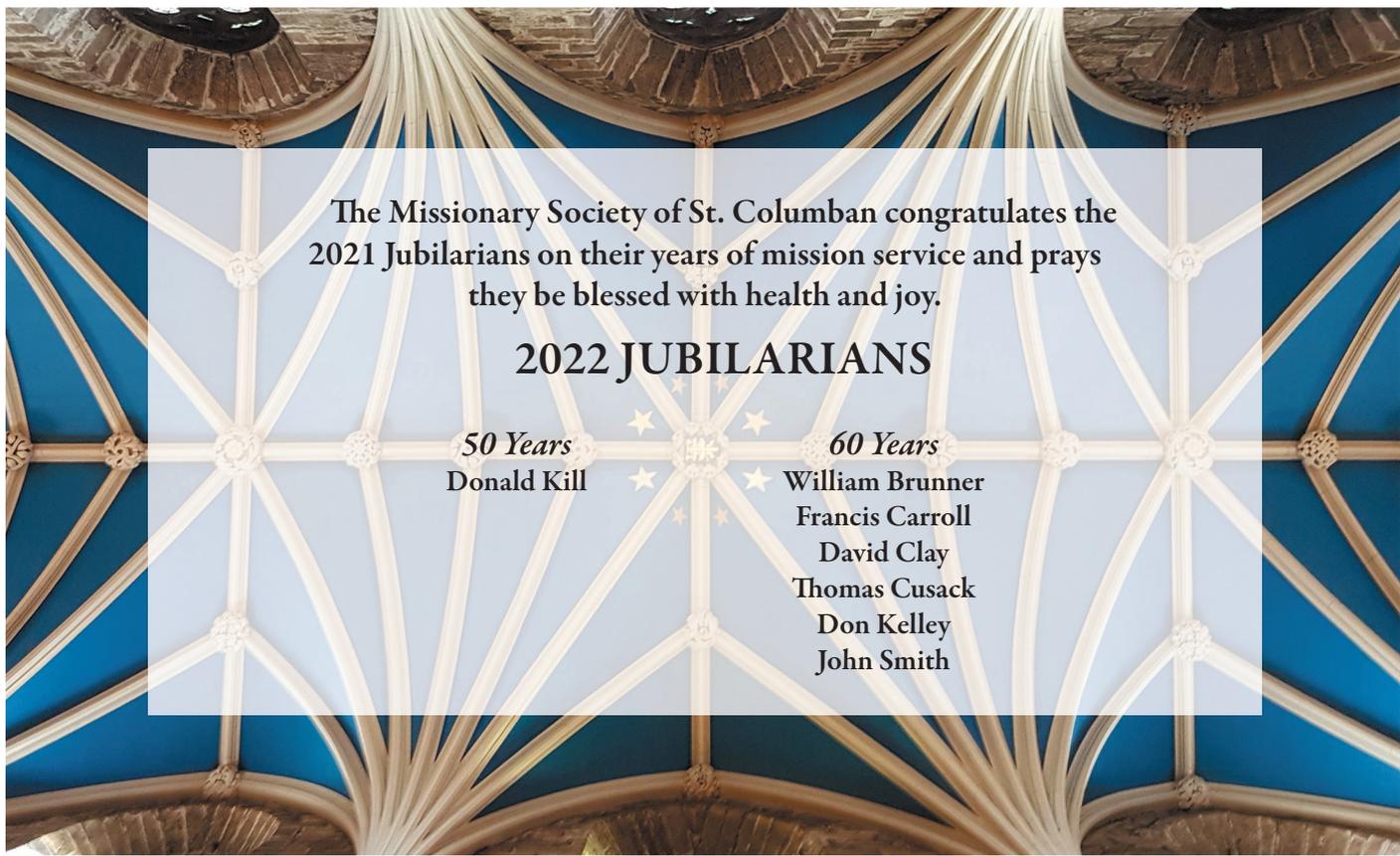
I am privileged to be part of the volunteering team of Fatima House where I accompany these women and become part of their family. It is a place of hope and of welcoming where we establish friendship that does not look for a return. Many women have received their “papers,” moved on and became successful in life. They never cease to be grateful for the support and care that has been provided to them at Fatima House. “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12) is what I have experienced through the faith of the women at Fatima House.

Christ is in all of this. Like the Holy Family who were called by the Angel of God to flee home and take refuge in foreign lands, they too have experienced poverty, suffering, flight and exile. Courage, strength and faith

are the glories I attribute to those who have taken flight to follow their dreams. They have shown me the courage to embrace realities and the unknowns, the strength to stretch beyond limitations and resilience, faith to envision new hopes and dreams. They have taught me what faith is about. They stay connected to their dreams and to their gods. They have brought heaven closer to earth where God never fails to attend to any person who is in despair, not even a person who is considered a stranger and a non-believer. To know them and to listen to them is to better understand and know God, who is love. They have taught me to partake in the fullness of humanity and of life because “We too were once asylum seekers.” CM

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Columban lay missionary Sophia Chee Tzu Ting lives and works in Britain.



The Missionary Society of St. Columban congratulates the  
2021 Jubilarians on their years of mission service and prays  
they be blessed with health and joy.

## 2022 JUBILARIANS

*50 Years*  
Donald Kill

*60 Years*  
William Brunner  
Francis Carroll  
David Clay  
Thomas Cusack  
Don Kelley  
John Smith



# A Meal that Comforts

## Feeding Bodies and Souls

By Kim Sunhee Sunny

**I**t was in November 2020 that I first met Mike (not his real name). I was going to my office after home visitation in the urban areas of the Malate parish (Philippines) to interview candidates for the parish Soup Kitchen (aka. Feeding Program). While waiting for the walk sign to cross at the traffic lights he caught my attention, and as soon as I saw him the staff and I naturally approached him. It is a road that I take several times a day but strangely this was the first time he caught my attention. He was sitting in a small space at the corner of the condominium building where he stays and sleeps. His appearance reflected his tough life in its entirety: a thin face,

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*Whenever I gave a lunch box to him, he always makes eye contact and expresses his gratitude: "Thank you for allowing me to eat one proper meal a day."*

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skinny body, rough hands, and feet with several traces of wounds that had been infected.

Mike was born on Samar Island (East-central Philippines), and when his parents passed away he came to Manila with his brother to make a living. At that time, he was only 15

years old, and the door to employment sadly did not open for him because he didn't finish his education. While he went from place to place, he came to Malate. He lived and survived on begging from the tourists.

When the tourists stopped visiting in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, Mike made a living by collecting and selling wastepaper and junk. He had beside him a stroller containing wastepaper on that day I saw him. He sometimes receives some products with imminent expiration dates from nearby stores, and he eats it. Anyone can tell that Mike is in need, and he has become a beneficiary of the feeding program. It was a day to thank God for His providence in

my recognizing Mike in that short moment of waiting at the crosswalk.

The soup kitchen is one of the long-lasting social service development ministry programs of the Malate parish. With the outbreak of coronavirus and the enhanced community quarantine implemented by the government, we had no choice but to stop the program. However, when the regulations were slightly eased a few months later, the first program that the parish resumed was this soup kitchen.

During the pandemic many changes have happened—not just in the soup kitchen program, but also in our lives. The biggest changes were the increase in the numbers of beneficiaries. Many people from the urban poor areas suffered hunger and poverty in the midst of the pandemic. They lost their means of livelihood and their jobs. As a result, it was not easy for them to have meals each day. We are hoping to help them save their lives and begin to provide meals to more people.

We serve 100 people every day for lunch, from Monday to Sunday. Our beneficiaries are the vulnerable from the urban poor areas: the elderly, the children, the sick, and the street dwellers like Mike. The food we provide for them is not much, it is not a special dish, but for some beneficiaries that I know, this food can be the first and the last meal of the day. I am paying more attention to food: organizing a different menu every day so that they can taste a variety of food, buying fresh ingredients and taking care in my cooking as well. I pray while preparing the food so those who eat this food can be comforted for a while with a warm meal during this trying time and not get sick and stay healthy.

Mike comes to the center for lunch every day. I was expecting that he would gain weight and improve his health through the feeding program. There is, however, no such dramatic



change. My thought of expecting this through just one meal may have been ambitious. More than a year later, he is still underweight and is often sick. Whenever I gave a lunch box to him, he always makes eye contact and expresses his gratitude: “Thank you for allowing me to eat one proper meal a day.” It hurts to see his bloodshot eyes due to his tiredness, but his sincerity is conveyed through his eyes.

It is the same for others, they always say “thank you” when they receive the food. At first, I felt kind of shy to receive a thank you greeting because I just do what I have to do. However, I realized that their “thank you” includes gratitude to volunteers, staff and

benefactors who sponsor the feeding program so that it is able to continue, I answer to them “thank you, too,” “take care” or “enjoy your meal.”

The beneficiaries of the program who know how to appreciate even the small things and express gratitude from their hearts are mirrors that reflect life for me and good teachers who prevent me from becoming numb to my daily life. I am heading to the kitchen again to prepare for lunch today for our beneficiaries, hoping that a meal will fill not only their physical hunger but also their spiritual hunger. **CM**

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Columban lay missionary Kim Sunhee Sunny lives and works in the Philippines.



# Farewell Fr. J.J.

...And Thank You!

By Fr. Donal McIlraith

**I**t was just before midday on Holy Thursday when the Archbishop called to say he would be around shortly to say farewell to Fr. J.J. Some time later, he arrived. The Archbishop of Suva is Dr. Peter Loy Chong, and he was accompanied by his Vicar General, Fr. Sulio Turagakadivi and some others. They proceeded to honor Fr. J.J. with a traditional Fijian farewell, offering him a *tabua*, a whale's tooth, the most precious Fijian cultural symbol of respect, and *kava* to drink. Fr. Sulio acted as the Archbishop's Herald and spoke for him. Those in higher positions do not speak in the Fijian – and Pacifican – culture but have a herald to represent them. In presenting the *tabua*, Fr. Sulio mentioned the thirty years' service

Fr. J.J. had given to Fiji, both at the seminary and as parish priest of Labasa and thanked him for his tireless service to the people of Fiji and the Pacific. It was a very moving moment for us all and particularly for Fr. J.J.

Born in Limerick, Fr. John Joseph Ryan was ordained in Dalgan, Ireland, in 1961. He was immediately dispatched to Spain to study Canon Law. He was then moved to Rome to complete his doctorate in this subject. The next few years were teaching in Dalgan, the Columban seminary in Ireland. There we older Columbans had him as lecturer. Fr. J.J. then went to Tübingen in Germany and did another doctorate, this time in systematic theology under the well-known theologian Fr. Walter Kasper,

now a Curial Cardinal in Rome. On completion of his doctorate, he was offered the possibility of teaching in Tübingen, it seems, and on writing to the Columban central administration for instructions was told rather to go to Suva and teach there.

The Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva had been set up in 1972. Fr. J.J. arrived in 1973 to teach and be the first Dean of the Seminary. He taught there for ten years. Fr. Fred Kado SM, one of the first group of seminarians and now a Parish Priest in Suva says of Fr. J.J., "He brought an academic rigor to our lives that woke us all up." During these years he also set up the Marriage Tribunal for CEPAC, the bishop's conference of the South Pacific based in Suva.

His next stop was Sydney, Australia. He was asked to move there to teach at both the Columban seminary in Turramurra and the Marist Seminary at Hunter's Hill. He also taught at the Pacific Mission Institute or PMI. This offered renewal courses for returning missionaries from Australia and all over the Pacific. He eventually became the Director of PMI. These Institutes all closed just before the millennium, and Fr. J.J. opted to return to Fiji but this time to Labasa. He left behind him a lot of contented students as indicated by the numbers who still keep in contact with him.

Labasa is the second city on the second largest of Fiji's 330 islands, Vanua Levu. There he joined, Fr. Martin Dobey. Fr. Dobey was one of the pioneers, those who had started the Fiji mission in 1952 and was

a Director of the Region several times. Eventually he took over as parish priest of Labasa and labored tirelessly there for 20 years. He most faithful helper in these years was Mr. Joseva Vasakula who stood valiantly at his side in good times and in bad. Eventually he moved on to Emeritus status when Fr. Paul Tierney took over as parish priest.

Early in 2021, he moved to Suva for a short break but became locked down here due to Covid. Inter-island travel was forbidden. We celebrated his Diamond Jubilee on Dec 20, 2021. His health had become precarious with a touch of pneumonia, and we were extremely worried for him. With the help of a dedicated full-time caregiver, Maria Turagaulu, he regained his health and is now able to travel to Ireland.

The Archbishop shared lunch with Fr. J.J. after the *kava* ceremony. Years ago, they were neighboring parish priests in Vanua Levu and had much in common to discuss. The Archdiocesan media crew interviewed Fr. J.J. "What abiding memory have you of Fiji," They asked. His answer came quickly, "The amazing resilience of the Fijian people."

On Easter Monday, the eve of his departure, the chairman of the Labasa parish, Fr. Iosafu Raonu, arrived with a delegation from Labasa to farewell Fr. J.J. A happy time followed.

As we farewell Fr. J.J. from the South Pacific, we are reminded of Mk 10:45: "For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many." **CM**

Fr. Donal McIlraith lives and works in Fiji.



Fr. J.J. celebrates with cake



Presenting the tabua



Sharing kava



Fr. J.J. and friends



Spending time with friends



# An Unnoticed Displacement Crisis

## The Flight from Repression

By Fr. Daniel Harding

*During October 2021, several Venezuelan women living in Casa Betania, a House of Hospitality for female migrants in the Columban parish of San Columbano, in Santiago, Chile, offered to tell their stories. Their identities have been changed. The parish also operates a House of Hospitality for men.*

### Why leave Venezuela?

According to recent reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 5.9 million people have fled Venezuela in the last few years. This flight from repression,

hyperinflation, shortages of food and medical supplies, as well as essential services represents one of the largest displacement crises in the world.

The nutrition assistance World Food Program of the United Nations says one out of every three Venezuelans, or 9.3 million people, is classified as food insecure. Children are increasingly dying from hunger and malnutrition-related illnesses. Diseases, formerly eradicated, such as malaria and cholera, have returned.

The majority of Venezuelans arriving in neighboring countries

are families with children, pregnant women, elderly people and those with disabilities. Their journeys across more than one national border to safety are often made over irregular routes that leave them at the mercy of human traffickers, smugglers and illegally armed groups.

The displaced Venezuelans arrive with precious few possessions, completely exhausted and in urgent need of help. In many cases, they are in a precarious situation, as they lack the official documentation that would give them security of

residency and access to services in the host country. They are, therefore, particularly susceptible to xenophobic attitudes, as well as sexual and labor exploitation, trafficking, violence and discrimination.

Host countries across Latin America have been generous in receiving the Venezuelans, but their ability to receive is rapidly reaching saturation point, their resources overstretched.

### Ana Maria's Story

"In Venezuela, we had to wait in long queues to try to get some food or gas, or anything. There was no work. It was extremely difficult to obtain medicine. So my husband and I, with our small daughter, decided to leave. We left in April 2018 and journeyed first to Peru, where we barely survived for three years."

"In May 2021, we decided to move to Argentina. Due to economic problems there, we then decided to move to Chile, arriving in September 2021. We give thanks to God for the welcoming reception here in the parish Migrant Hospitality Houses."

### María Eugenia's Story

"When I left Venezuela in 2019, I was reunited with my husband in the Peruvian province of Trujillo. He had gone before me to find a place to live. The work we obtained had long hours each day and an extremely low salary. We could barely pay for food and rent. As we were treated badly and experienced a lot of prejudice and xenophobia, we decided to migrate to Chile."

"My husband arrived in Chile two months ago, staying at Casa San Columbano, the House of Hospitality for men. I arrived in Chile only five days ago and am so grateful to be able to stay at Casa Betania. We are so grateful to God and to the Columbans

for all the help we have been given. Already, we feel like we are a part of the parish family."

"On my journey here, first to Peru and then onto Chile, I suffered days of hunger, with very little to eat. I felt united with my fellow Venezuelans in our suffering, who had left behind families and often children with grandparents, while we sought work in other countries. We do not know when, or if, we will see our loved ones again."

"On the way here, especially as we crossed the desert and mountains, I saw families with small children having



to throw away the few belongings they had. We arrived with just the clothes we are wearing, hungry and exhausted."

"But, we have a really strong desire to work hard, to persevere at all costs and take advantage of any opportunities that become available. May God bless the work of the two migrant Houses of Hospitality in this parish."

### Marcela's Story

"This is my story since leaving Venezuela. My three children had no food, nothing to eat, no nappies [diapers] and there was no work. With my three children, we crossed

into Colombia and from there began a seven-day trip to Peru. We suffered cold, heat and hunger during those seven days in order to arrive in Peru."

"I was highly emotional when I arrived in Peru, with great expectations of having a much better quality of life there. However, a great feeling of deception soon took over. My children could not even study in public schools, because they were undocumented foreigners."

"My eldest daughter suffered greatly, victimized by the xenophobia, and refused to leave our rented quarters for fear of abuse. We were called bad people, who had come to take away jobs from the locals, and thieves."

"After three years of surviving all of this in Peru, I decided to leave my three children with their father in Peru and go onto Chile, to try to find a better quality of life for us there. Once established in Chile, my husband and three children would then reunite with me."

"The journey from Peru to Chile was very difficult and it is a good thing that my children were not with me. Many people took advantage of the few possessions that we, as a group of Venezuelan migrants, had with us. We were tricked, lied to and swindled. We were sold bus tickets that never existed. We had to walk through the Atacama Desert in the full sun of day and the freezing cold of night."

"But when you have faith, you can do many things and even greater things yet. God never abandons us. I am highly motivated about getting ahead and bringing my husband and three children here. Faith can move mountains and everything in this life is possible." 

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Columban Fr. Daniel Harding is the parish priest of San Columbano parish, Santiago, Chile.

# God's Architects

## A Tale of Two Catholic Architects

By Fr. John Boles

*Renowned Victorian architect Augustus Pugin helped design the Houses of Parliament. He also built St. Joseph's in Birmingham, home to some of our Columban Lay Missionaries. Therein lies a tale...*

**A**ugustus Welby Pugin (1812-1852) was arguably the greatest architect-designer of 19<sup>th</sup> century England. The son of a refugee from the French Revolution, he pioneered the Gothic Revival form of architecture. It was in this style that he and collaborator Charles Barry rebuilt the Houses of Parliament at Westminster after the disastrous fire of 1834.

Following his conversion to Catholicism, Pugin devoted himself to ecclesiastical buildings. The Act of Emancipation in 1829 legalized the building of Catholic churches, and

the influx of huge numbers of Irish immigrants from the 1840s onwards swelled demand for them, especially in the great industrial cities. Pugin's output was prolific. He became, in a sense, "God's Architect."

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*Not only do they share the same faith, but also the same profession. [Lay Missionary Gertrude C. Samson] was an architect before joining the Columbans.*

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Among the churches he built in Birmingham was St. Joseph's, completed in 1850. His son Edward added a priests' house in 1872, and in 2022, exactly 150 years later, this house became the home of a group of Columban Lay Missionaries.

One of these is Gertrudes C. Samson. Gertrudes (or Ger as she prefers to be known) professes a great affinity with Pugin. Not only do they share the same faith, but also the same profession. She was an architect before joining the Columbans.

Like Pugin's father, she is an immigrant, having come to Britain from her native Philippines in 2010. She feels privileged to be living now in a restored Pugin masterpiece. "I like the preservation of old buildings," she told me. "I'm glad they've done so much to keep this one."

St. Joseph's lies in the Nechells area of the city, where many of the Irish newcomers settled in the years after the Great Famine. Currently, it remains a magnet for migrant communities, and since her arrival in Birmingham twelve years ago, Ger's pastoral efforts have been focussed on serving them. However, there is one crucial difference. "In those days the migrants came from just one place: Ireland," she explains. "Now,

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*"In those days the migrants came from just one place: Ireland," she explains. "Now, they come from many places, and have many religions. They're not just Christians. They're also Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs."*

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~ GERTRUDE C. SAMSON

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Ger at St. Joseph's



Ger



Fr. John Boles and Ger

they come from many places, and have many religions. They're not just Christians. They're also Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs." The parish priest of St. Joseph's is himself from Eritrea in the Horn of Africa and encourages joint use of the church by the Eritrean Orthodox communion.

"I used to work in the sanctuary at St. Chad's Cathedral," she adds. "The Sanctuary is a drop-in center for asylum-seekers and migrants. Every nationality pins up the name of their country on the wall. When I was there I counted over one hundred!"

"It was funny. Sometimes I make mistakes. One sign said 'Chad'. I understood they meant the name of the cathedral. I didn't know there was a country called Chad. Another time a man puts up a sign which I believe says, 'to go'. I think he wants to leave. No. It was the name of his country – Togo!"

(Incidentally, St. Chad's Birmingham Cathedral is another Pugin gem. It was the first Catholic

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*"...Every nationality pins up the name of their country on the wall. When I was there I counted over one hundred!"*

~ GERTRUDE C. SAMSON

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cathedral to be built in England since the Reformation.)

Perhaps the most fascinating of Ger's stories concerns the way in which she and her colleagues came to be living at St. Joseph's in the first place.

The tale has a saintly twist!

The missionaries were renting a house in another part of the city when their landlord suddenly announced he'd run into financial difficulties and was going to have to sell the property at once. He gave them the minimum notice to vacate the premises and move.

"When I know we are moving I get very worried. I tell the people at church and a lady says I should pray to St. Joseph to help us find a new home.

Then, a Columban priest, Fr. Bernie McDermott, rings me and says, 'Ger, a parish house has just become available, next to the church of St. Joseph's. I can't believe it. I'm praying to St. Joseph, and we're being offered a house called after him!' As so often happens in England nowadays, the bishop had decided to amalgamate two parishes, leaving just one priest in charge, and this priest had chosen the house in the other parish as his base.

"Even more incredible, I see when our lease is expiring, the date when we must move is March 19. March 19 is the Feast of St. Joseph! So, I think St. Joseph is really looking after us."

St. Joseph, certainly. But, maybe with a little assistance as well from old Augustus Pugin? For, after all, isn't he "God's Architect"? 

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Gertrudes (Ger) Samson is a Columban Lay Missionary from Manila in the Philippines. She has worked in Britain since 2010. Fr. John Boles is the Regional Director of the Columban Missionaries in Britain. He formerly worked in Lima, Peru.

# All the Fish Died



## Empowering Myanmar Youth

By Fr. Kurt Zion Pala

**T**he Kachins love to fish. During the rainy season, when the river and stream waters are high and when empty dry ponds are filled with water, the fish seem to grow in number. You will find many Kachins, both young and old, gathered at some spots even along the roads with their fishing rods, patiently waiting to catch fish. But fishing is no longer an enjoyable activity. Many of the streams and rivers are now polluted by human activities like mining and banana plantations. Environmental degradation is worsening with the current political crisis in the country.

“All the Fish Died,” was the headline of one magazine in Myanmar (formerly Burma). The fish were dying from two streams where chemical runoffs from a Chinese banana plantation mixed with the water. From these streams the villagers also get their water for drinking and washing. These days it is not just fishes dying but also young people and their dreams.

“*Masha langai hpe lani mi sha* ‘Nga’ (fish) *jaw sha na malai, shi prat tup, Nga’ hkwi sha chye na matu sharin ya u.*” This Kachin proverb literally means: “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.”

A popular adage many of us heard reminds us that helping another person is more than just giving the person materials things and resources but giving the person the opportunity learn the skill to provide for himself or herself. Many of the young people these days are struggling with life. Some are just surviving and not finding joy and meaning in their lives.

I have been working with university students the past three years since

arriving in the diocese as chaplain and spiritual director to the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina (CSAM), a ministry to university students. But the pandemic and the coup closed all educational institutions in the country. Many of the students I worked with could not complete their university education. One of them is Philip Hka Naw Seng. He is now the interim CSAM president. Together with the committee, we try to continue to minister to the students and youth.

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*Many of the young people these days are struggling with life.*

*Some are just surviving and not finding joy and meaning in their lives.*

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He was into the second year of his Bachelor of Science in Chemistry program when he like most young people had stopped going to the university in protest of the military coup. The new military regime is very brutal in suppressing protests and resistance especially the youth.

The pandemic and the coup revealed many weaknesses in the education system of the country. Many young people are now not work-ready which means many of the young people even those with university degrees are not readily accepted or employed by organizations and companies because they lack in basic and necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the on-going political crisis in the country has led to increase

in stress and trauma among children and youth. There is an increase in cases of anxiety, worry and other mental health problems among children and youth which is contributing to the anxiety and depression in young people causing loss of interest in life, increase in substance abuse (drugs, alcohol, other substances) among youth.

“Why is education important for you?” I asked Philip. He replied that education means a good future for him. These days many young people are suffering because they do not have access to good education. He shared that in his family he is the only one able to reach university education level. These days he cannot go to the university, but he is finding alternative ways to continue his education. He also wants to become a good teacher so he can also teach his people and improve their lives. He added that most Kachin people rely on the abundant natural resources alone and extract them without considering the impact to the bigger environment like jade and gold mining have. But since the closing of universities and other learning institutes many young people are now working in the many mining fields of Kachin. Many are losing interest in studying because of the situation in Myanmar. Philip shared he also feels lost and depressed.

Mary Ja Seng Lu, another university student and member of the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina shared that the pandemic and the political situation of the country created many challenges for her. Her family could not support her to pursue her studies so she had to struggle to balance university life and work. She was doing well until the



CSAM students



Philip



Preparing candles in entrepreneurship class



Preparing soap in entrepreneurship class

coup happened. These days she feels lost and confused.

Philip and Mary are not alone. There are thousands like them in Myanmar who are hoping for real peace and justice in Myanmar. Many young people these days are lost and uprooted. Some joined the armed resistance. Unfortunately, to pursue studies in other countries can also be a challenge for many young people especially those coming from rural areas who have little to no opportunities and information on scholarships and trainings. These days young people feel their dreams and their future are gone.

But not without hope. When Pope Francis came to Myanmar he met the young people and to them he said, “Be

brave, be generous and above all be joyful.” Many are trying their best and if given the right opportunities to learn and gain new knowledge and skills they will be able to survive and make a difference not just in their lives but also in the lives of many other young people. Mary Seng Lu added that “... we should give them opportunities and platforms to keep learning new things in their lives.”

So together with Philip and other young people, we are opening a Student Resource Center. The center will have a computer laboratory, a library, a counseling room, classrooms and meetings rooms. The center will provide a safe space and an alternative learning center to provide skills training (English

language, Computer, Accounting, Life or soft skills) and also mental health services. Livelihood trainings will also be an essential component of the center to encourage business entrepreneurship among young people. We do not just want to give them fish, but we want to empower them by giving them the right knowledge and skills to succeed in life but also have meaningful lives.

Help us help young people help other young people through supporting this student resource center. The center will be run by the youth, with the youth and for the young people. 

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Columban Fr. Kurt Zion Pala lives and works in Myanmar (formerly Burma).

# Transformation

## Finding Positives in the Pandemic

By Angelica Escarsa

Researching the difference between the words “change” and “transformation” recently, I came across the following statement: “Change is a response to external influences, where modifying day-to-day action achieves desired results. Transformation, on the other hand, is about modifying core beliefs and long-term behavior – sometimes in profound ways to achieve the desired results.”

Transformation is what I would call the experience of many of us, if not all, as we face the reality of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Many things have been shared about how this pandemic is negatively affecting us, but have we ever thought about its transformative potential?

I am still flabbergasted by this virus that has already taken millions of lives. It is transforming my whole sense of life on earth. If I cannot learn something new as a result, then I never will! In Article 35 of his encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes, “If only this may prove not to be just another tragedy of history from which we learn nothing... If only we might rediscover once and for all that we need one another, and that in this way our human family can experience a rebirth.”

For many months, whole cities, even countries, have been in lockdown and peoples movements were severely restricted, with no one permitted to travel internationally or even more than a few kilometers from their home.

I live in a council house (subsidized housing) in Dublin, Ireland, about an hour’s walk from the city center. During lockdown, my ministry and meetings with the diocesan youth ministry and the lay mission group moved online. My own movement

was limited to the house, the park, a local cemetery and the shops. For many months that was my world, and it brought positive changes into my life. The changes included being more connected, through technology, with family, friends and those in my ministry, even though I was physically distant from them. I was also spiritually nourished—not being able to go to the church seemed to bring about a deeper longing for God.

I have become more aware of the vulnerability of life because I have no control over this pandemic. I became especially aware of my mortality when I contracted COVID-19 myself. This brought me to a deeper surrender of my life to God. As I considered each night the possibility that it could be my last, I experienced deeper gratitude for the gift of life. I also formed a deeper spiritual connection with my family, as we prayed the rosary every day, no matter what our situation was.

I have also begun to set aside time for silent prayer. This is not just a change that I see happening now that will later disappear. This is a transformation that is going to remain with me. We need

one another to realize the truth that we are not alone, even if we have been physically isolated while person-to-person gatherings are prohibited.

I truly hope that the worldwide tragedy of the pandemic has strengthened our sense of being a global community.

“...we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another” (*Fratelli Tutti*, Article 35).

I hope this pandemic will bring transformation within all of us and profoundly modify our core beliefs and long term behavior. I hope it will awaken within us the desire to become whole by recognizing our need for connection with others.

“Amid this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about appearances, has fallen away, revealing once more the ineluctable and blessed awareness that we are part of one another, that we are brothers and sisters of one another (*Fratelli Tutti*, Article 32). 

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Columban lay missionary Angelica Escarsa lives and works in Dublin, Ireland.





# LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

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*One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and  
He will repay him for his good deed. Proverbs 19:17*

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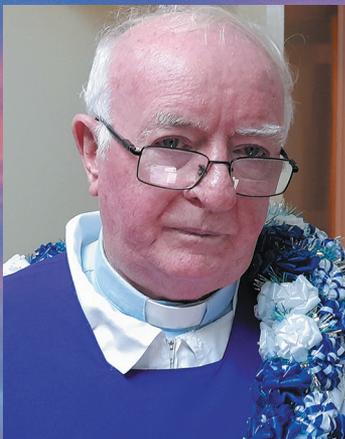
Columban lay missionary Noh Hyein, better known as Anna (pronounced En-na), a teacher by profession, lives and works in the Philippines. After getting to know the women in her parish, and realizing how desperately poor they were, Anna, with the help of Columban benefactors, launched a candle making livelihood project called “Light the Life.” The women make candles and earn income for their families. The program also helps in the holistic development of the women, making them value their own self-worth. The women in the program make candles that light the homes of others, but they are lighting their own paths as well.

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# Fifty Years in Fiji

Fr. John McEvoy Celebrates

By Fr. Donal McIlraith

“Do this in memory of me.” Following Christ’s command, on Easter Sunday, April 2, 1972, Bishop John McCormack of Meath ordained John McEvoy and his nine classmates into the priesthood of Christ as Columban missionary priests in Dalgan Park, Navan, Ireland. Later that year, Fr. John left for Fiji and plunged into the study of the Fijian language. Then came a series of parish appointments. The first one was in the Columban parish of St. Agnes in Suva. His friends from that parish still rally around when he needs them. This was the honeymoon but got him ready for a few tough years in his next Suva appointment, Tamavua. During this time, he had many side trips, at Christmas and Easter, to the outer priestless island of Kadavu.

One of his most taxing parishes was Vanuakula. This stretches for miles

along the Wainimala river. Fr. John recalls crossing the river—by foot, of course—about 100 times each time he did his parish visitation of the villages. They are all scattered along the river. It would take a week to cover all the villages up the Wainimala.

He first stint as parish priest was at Vatukoula, a parish with a large gold mine. These were among his happiest years, he claims. The miners went on strike, and they found a good friend in their parish priest and a home in the presbytery though he was constantly threatened with having his power and water cut off by the mining company!

Then in the 1980s, as often happens with Columbans, Fr. John was invited to do promotion and vocation work in Ireland for four years. The success of this can be gauged by the fact that the current

parish priest of Ba here in Fiji, Columban Fr. Pat Colgan of Belfast, Ireland, was recruited by Fr. John as was the current Philippine Director, Columban Fr. Paul Glynn in addition to the current Columban spokesman in Pakistan—Fr. Tomas King!

And, Fr. John has the distinction of having been to prison! After the Fiji Coup of 1987, he and fellow Columbans, Frs. Paul Tierney and Tom Rouse, happened to be at an anti-coup rally in Suva. Eighteen were arrested and imprisoned in the central Suva police barracks’ jail overnight. This led to about thirteen court appearance during the next twelve months. The verdict was that the eighteen involved were guilty, but the judge dismissed the case.

It was while he was parish priest of the huge parish of Ba that I recall visiting him. It was just after Cyclone



Fr. John with Columban seminarians

Kina had come through Fiji in December-January 1992-1993. This was the second largest cyclone to hit the country, after Cyclone Winston in 2016 with 23 deaths. Unfortunately, it swept through the main island resulting in the damage or destruction of the two major bridges in Ba and Sigatoka. Most of the damage was done in early January 1993.

A few days after this, with a Marist sister, I travelled to Ba to see how Fr. John was faring. The bridge was down, but small boats were ferrying people across the Ba River. When we reached the parish house, it was a mess, presided over by Fr. John who was trying to organize help for those in need in the parish. We were his first outside visitors. He was very happy to see us, and we experienced good Irish hospitality despite his having no electricity or water. We got a

rundown on the damage done to the various villages near the river. After few hours we were ferried back to our car and left him to get on with the organization.

Then in 1996 he was appointed the Columban Director of the Fiji Region. He held this job for two terms, six years in all. During his first term as Director, he purchased a site from the Archdiocese and organized the building of our present Columban Central House here in Nasese. In 1997 we moved here from the parish of Tamavua.

At the end of his second term of office as Director, he was off to Ireland again, first to be the farm manager in Dalgan Park and then to be in charge of the half parish of Mucklagh in the parish of Rahan near Tullamore. While there he was able to spend time with his mother in her final years. Mrs.

McEvoy died in 2013 in her 99<sup>th</sup> year.

He then came back to Fiji in 2015. He was appointed to Raiwaqa, the Suva Columban Parish. He did extraordinary work, renovating the parish, physically and spiritually. Once more he was chosen to be Director for the third and fourth time. He is one of few Columbans, I imagine, who has been Director or leader four times.

He refused any fuss, so we quietly celebrated his Golden Jubilee at the Columban central house. We had Mass and a small celebration with the Columbans in the Suva area. May the Lord give you many more years of fruitful labour in his vineyard, Fr. John—even after you finish this job on November 23. *Ad multos annos.* 

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Columban Fr. Donal McIlraith lives and works in Fiji.

# The Power of Volunteering

## Connecting People with Nature

By Junghae Roberta Kim

Foggy and grey. These are the words that come to my mind when I think of London as in the films or books which I came across in my childhood. They showed me the London of dark and gloomy, foggy streets under the gas light.

However, surprisingly, I have been fascinated by its blue sky with transparent air, and I had forgotten the image I had before I watched “Mary Poppins” recently, which was released in 1965. I enjoyed the songs and imagined what I would feel like if I flew in the sky with her umbrella and thought how much it must have inspired children’s imagination and gave joy to them. I was delighted

to hear the familiar song “Chim Chimney, Chim Chim Cheree” but it was set at the time that I remembered the foggy London. Then, chimney sweeps covered with soot were singing and dancing, jumping over from roof to roof which were belching dark smoke. London was experiencing a great dark smog (merging words of fog and smoke). And I began questioning what happened here in Britain that brought about this big difference.

Air pollution became an issue as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and it reached a crisis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the result of the Industrial Revolution and the growth of London. The five days of the Great Smog (1952) which was caused

by air pollution and weather caused over 10,000 deaths. In the beginning, Winston Churchill denied that it was caused by coal and said it was only fog, but finally passed the Clean Air Act in 1956. Four years after the deaths of many precious lives, the government passed the Act and restricted the burning of coal in domestic and industrial use.

Although it helped improve the air pollution, another smog crisis occurred in 1962, and I still hear about people suffering from air pollution in the UK on the news. Several years ago, Kissi-Debrah, who lost her little girl from asthma sued the Mayor of London for illegal pollution levels.





After a long fight, she won and proved that 9-year-old Ella's death followed several years of suffering caused by the severe air pollution. I have heard that Kissi-Debrah launched a charity in her daughter's name to support the lives of children suffering from asthma.

During the coronavirus lockdown people went for walks to find nature, listen to birds, see new buds, colorful flowers and busy bees... and many people realized how far we have withdrawn from nature. They want to go back to nature to be healed and felt sorry that humans have broken the relationship with nature.

I have been volunteering in community gardens since the end of 2020 when the Covid-19 restrictions were eased. I have seen that more and more people are visiting and participating in volunteer work in gardens for a better life connecting with nature. I see the increase of young volunteers from difficult situations that have been healed and

empowered in the gardens. I also recognize that more and more people are coming out from their own space and having occasional meetings for discussing and seeking a sustainable society. They are unpaid, but they voluntarily do those activities. I see it's the time that ordinary people who were empowered by each other's stories to make a difference to the present and future.

There are many people like Kissi-Deborah and Ella in our society, and they are the ones who bring a brighter future. It's one of my joys to see the young and elderly working together and supporting each other, exchanging their ideas and experiences while we're working on nature. One of my elderly volunteer friends in a community garden told me that she was blessed with such a sustainable lifestyle rather than just sitting back and carrying on as before. I see her on many environmental occasions with her joyful and cheerful smile. Without

peoples' awareness and voluntarily action, we can't see the end of the crisis of ecology.

I was delighted to see that Queen Elizabeth awarded some organizations for their volunteering work every year. Enlightened volunteers, who are humbly serving with their hearts, souls and minds, are powering change and are the source of sustainable communities.

I am happy to see myself working on recovering the relationship with the other creatures and find myself living in cooperation with them. I see that the more I know nature the more I see myself as interconnected, and it helps me to see myself more clearly in the Creator, our God. And I hope I can celebrate God's creation through my small steps in volunteering work, being a connection between human beings and nature. CM

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Columban lay missionary Junghae Roberta Kim lives and works in Britain.



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*They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing  
I also was eager to do. Galatians 2:10*

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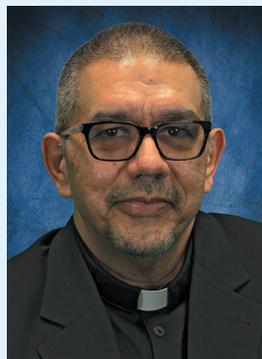
# Earth/Wind/Sand/Sea

“Seek no further concerning God; for those who wish to know the great depth (of God) must first learn about creation.” St. Columban.

Like other early Irish saints, finding God in creation came naturally to St. Columban. Many legends grew up around him in at the monastery he founded in Luxeuil in northeast France. Squirrels and doves were pictured playing in the folds of his cowl. Birds also approached him and nestled in the palms of his hands. Even wild beasts obeyed his commands.

St. Columban’s biographer, the monk Jonas, relates how St. Columban once withdrew to the forest in order to fast and pray. The food ran out and all he and the young monk Chagnoald had to eat were crab apples. However, when Chagnoald went to collect the apples he found a hungry bear eating them. He returned to St. Columban for directions. St. Columban ordered him to go back to the orchard and to divide it in two halves, one for the bear and one for the monks.

In today’s world, we struggle to find the face of God amongst a creation being exploited not for need but for profit. There are many who interpret the biblical verses of Genesis in which God gives humankind the right to “rule over” (Gen 1:26) and “subdue” (Gen 1:28) nature as a free license to do whatever humankind desires from the earth. Yet, the creation texts clearly state that humankind is created in God’s likeness. Although humankind is given the right rule and subdue the creatures of the earth, God also reminds



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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. Chris Saenz

humankind that it must share “every green plant as food” with other creatures (Gen 1: 29-30). Rule and subdue shouldn’t be understood in modern terms but from the biblical understanding that we are to imitate God’s characteristics of creating life and governing with love and peace with all other creatures.

The example of St. Columban sharing the crab apples with the hungry bear highlights this understanding. The bear’s hunger is not secondary to human hunger. It is equal to. This relationship between humankind and rest



of creation continued to be expressed by many spiritual writers over the ages. Centuries after St. Columban, St. Thomas Aquinas expressed the following: “God brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and be represented by them; and because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse creatures so that, what was wanting to one in the manifestation of the divine goodness, might be supplied by another, ... and hence the whole universe

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*Rule and subdue shouldn’t be understood in modern terms but from the biblical understanding that we are to imitate God’s characteristics of creating life and governing with love and peace with all other creatures.*

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together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatsoever”. (Summa Theologica Part 1, Question 47, article 1).

Believing that we, humankind, are above creation is absolute folly. We were commissioned by God to be responsible stewards to creation. To live in peace and harmony with creation. This issue of *Columban Mission* highlights the efforts of many missionaries to recognize God’s face in all forms of creation.



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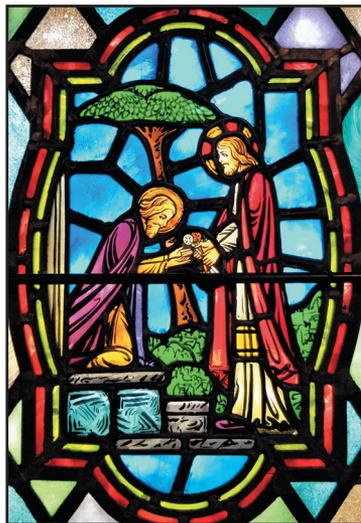
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*"But who do you say that I am?"*  
– St. Matthew 16:15

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