

Columban Mission

The Magazine of the Missionary Society of St. Columban

December 2022



Eus m ad
utiorum
mēriten

Domine ad adiu
uandum me festina
Gloria patri et filio
et spiritui sancto.

Merry Christmas

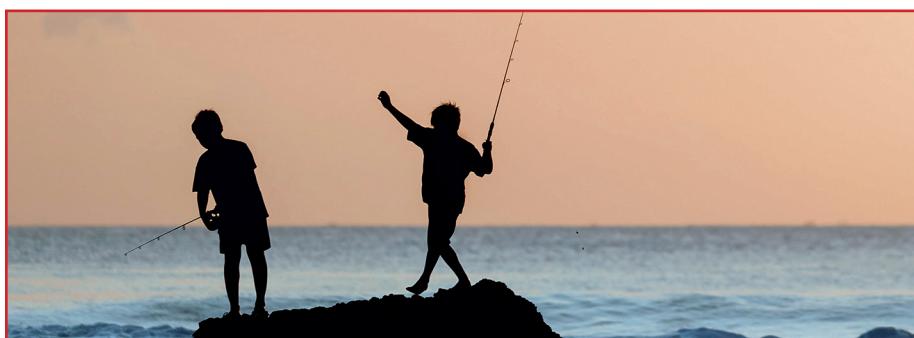
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The Missionary Society of St. Columban was founded in 1918 to proclaim and witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

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. Abbie O'Sullivan

Faith That Risks All

She was a young Jewish girl who was engaged to the young village carpenter. Her parents, Anna and Joachim, were very happy with her choice. Mary loved Joseph who was an upright man, gentle, well known and well-liked in the village. He made the best furniture and farm implements. But God had other plans for them.

Mary was a woman saturated in the Scriptures and steeped in the stories of her ancestors. St. Augustine said, "Mary conceived Christ the Word in her heart before she conceived Him in her womb." The God she knew was a God full of compassion and love. He had freed her people and brought them out of bondage.

So when the Angel Gabriel came to her and asked her to become the Mother of the Savior, she did not ask for a sign as Zechariah did. For Mary acceptance and willingness to cooperate with the plan of God was enough. She responded, "Be it done to me according to Your word." (Luke 1:38) Mary didn't fully understand the implications of what she agreed to, but she made herself available for the plan of God.

Isn't that what faith is? It is a leap from what is rational to what is beyond understanding. All her life Mary had to ponder and reflect on the events of her life and the meaning of her Son's life and His role in the salvation of the human race. Like Him she too grew in "wisdom, age and grace." Jesus Himself said, "No one knows the Son except the Father."

The faith of His Mother had to embrace the mystery of His divine origin. Through the events of their lives Mary came to understand her own divine vocation more deeply. She wrote no books nor did she leave us any recorded messages. How we would love to be able to read the record of the lives of the Holy Family! She never made the headlines or stood out in the crowd. Hers was an ordinary life hidden away as she lived it out in Nazareth. The Evangelists give no details of her life throughout the formative years of Jesus.

Her faith, ever unwavering, encourages us as we go on our earthly journey. To give of oneself all throughout one's life to the truth of God's Word and to suffer the trials and pains of life is to model oneself on Mary the perfect model and faithful disciple. An elderly woman was once overheard saying, as she stood before the Statue of Mary, "You beat them all, Mother of God. You beat them all."

Blessed are you who believe. It seems that faith creates a space in us to receive the gifts of God. He did great things for Mary. He can do great things for us too if we believe. He can take away our meanness and our selfishness and give us a heart that's full of compassion and love.

All we need is to have the faith that risks all. It is no easy thing so we need Mary's help to keep going. She is our loving Mother and her concern is for our wellbeing and happiness. Who knows better than Mary the cost of faithfulness?

After many years of missionary service, Columban Sr. Abbie O'Sullivan entered eternal life in June 2022.





A Land of Dreams

Sharing Gifts

By Fr. Michael Hoban

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

These words were spoken by Pope Francis as part of his homily during the open air celebration of the Eucharist on January 18, 2018. The Mass was celebrated near a desert beach outside the city of Iquique on a hot, sunny morning. As a visiting priest, I did not appreciate fully the importance of his words. At the end of November 2020, I returned to the diocese of Iquique to

work in our parish, Sagrado Corazón de Jesús. Since then, I have come to realize the truth of the Holy Father’s words. I am ministering in the desert, in a land of dreams.

The Columban parish of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús is located on the “pampa” (desert plains) above the port city of Iquique in a municipality called Alto Hospicio. When the Columbans first came to the diocese of Iquique more than forty years ago, there were only a few scattered temporary wooden dwellings, a couple of truck stops and an explosives factory. Today, it is estimated that more than a 150,000 people live in Alto Hospicio. There are fourteen *tomas* (squatter camps) located in our parish. There is plenty of empty space in the huge Atacama desert. Groups of people organize and invade empty sectors of Alto Hospicio. They take a piece of ground and build a temporary dwelling.

In time, these makeshift dwellings are replaced with something more permanent.

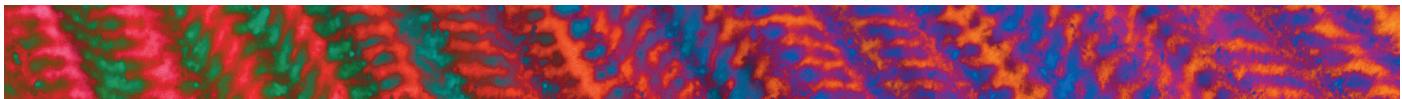
In the beginning, the families must live without electricity, water, sewage, garbage collection or paved streets. Over the course of a few years, the municipality and the Chilean government will provide those essential services. However, there is no guarantee that they will be allowed to settle permanently.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

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



Children enjoying their new school supplies





their dreams, although normally it is easier for Chileans.

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

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

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

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

The parish of Sagrado Corazón de Jesús has always welcomed the immigrants and tried to provide some material help for them. A soup kitchen has functioned for many years. Despite the restrictions of the pandemic, a delivery system was set up to bring food parcels to the families. Last year, we teamed up with the Daughters of Charity to provide assistance in a new *toma* known as *El paso de la mula* (the mule's trail). This squatter camp is located on the southern boundary of the parish, and it is huge. Immigrant families from Venezuela and Bolivia continue to pour into the *toma*. Families take over a plot of desert land, put up some sort of fencing and a makeshift dwelling. Sometimes, they just pitch a tent until they can build a better shelter.

The Daughters of Charity were able to get a cement truck to pour the foundation of floors for some dwellings. There is no electricity nor water or sewage; "aljibes" (water tank trucks) come several times during the week. But, there was a problem! The plastic water containers are too small for the hose of the water truck. With a donation from their congregation in France, the Sisters bought ten plastic water tanks with a capacity of a 1,000 liters of water which means that families can fill their water containers. The social apostolate of the parish regularly provides food packets and



The campaign for blankets

used clothing. A Christmas supper of chicken, rice and salad was prepared for 280 immigrants. Columban benefactors provided the chicken! Local benefactors donated toys and Caritas Chile donated food.

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

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

Columban Fr. Michael Hoban lives and works in Chile.

A Christmas Surprise

An Unpopular Santa Claus?

By Fr. Frank Hoare

Maybe it was because I wasn't wearing the required red robes or lacked a white beard, but the reaction of the male children to being offered a soft toy animal was not what I expected. Or perhaps these items were too esoteric to the small boys in Tamaquto village in the interior hills of Ba Parish, Fiji.

As I drew a soft toy out of my sack and offered it to a little boy, I was surprised by the suspicious look, the turning away in disdain or the clinging to his parent's neck in utter rejection.

It was the Sunday before Christmas. I had offered to help Columban Fr. Patrick Colgan who was on his own in the large extensive parish of Ba in the west of Fiji. For me, it was a break from life in the capital, Suva, and a return to a parish in which I had worked years before.

I was happy to get the opportunity to return to Tamaquto in the hills, a village of which I had happy memories from my previous stay. This village had Mass only once every three or four months and sometimes even less when the rivers on the way there were flooded in the rainy season.

In the absence of a priest, their catechist, Semesa, led the liturgy of the Word and distributed Holy Communion on Sundays. A couple of other catechists from villages fairly near would also help out when needed. Catechists are very important in Fiji. They also prepare couples for marriage and the baptism of their children. They often instruct children also for the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confirmation.

Catechists are unpaid volunteers who give their time willingly to God and the Church. Their wives are a



Fr. Frank Hoare playing Santa Claus



Fr. Frank Hoare with catechists

big support to them and assist them in their work. The Archbishop has recently begun to commission female catechists too, but it is taking a while for them to be fully accepted. I was delighted to meet four catechists in Tamaquto after Mass and sit and chat with them.

Someone, who came from overseas, had given Fr. Pat a large bag full of soft toys for distribution among children for Christmas. Fr. Pat suggested that I take them to the small village of Tamaquto rather than leave a lot of disappointed children in one of the larger villages.

I believed that I would be a very popular priest by playing the role of Santa Claus. Not so, at least among the male children. The reaction of the young girls was different. They directed a big smile and outreaching arms my way. That was more like what I had expected!

It seems to me that gender behavior in Tamaquto originates more from genetics than from environmental conditioning. Well, maybe from both. **CM**

Columban Fr. Frank Hoare lives and works in Fiji.



LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

1% of Your Estate Continues the Mission Work

*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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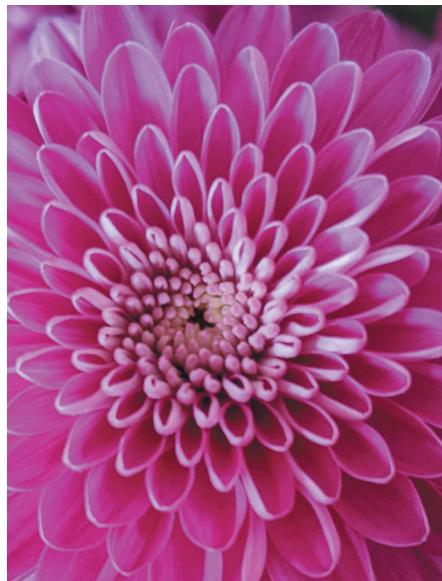
Columban lay missionary Noh Hyein, better known as Anna (pronounced En-na), a teacher by profession, lives and works in the Philippines. After getting to know the women in her parish, and realizing how desperately poor they were, Anna, with the help of Columban benefactors, launched a candle making livelihood 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.

Contact us to learn about the many different ways you can give to the Missionary Society of St. Columban.



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Christmas with a Hindu Flavor

Celebrating Together

Fr. Euikyun Carlo Jung

I received a letter at the beginning of Advent last year inviting me, along with the youth of the parish, to "a Christmas feast to commemorate Christmas." Fijian people are always ready and willing to attend a feast, and I too read the invitation with delight. However, on careful scrutiny, I discovered this was not to be a simple afternoon of eating and drinking, as the small print described the theme of the day as inter-religious dialogue.

Now I had always thought that Christmas is a time for Christians to celebrate the birth of Jesus, so I was left wondering how this could be combined with inter-religious dialogue. Nevertheless, since we had been invited, we decided to go. So together with the parish youth, I set out for the cathedral in Suva, Fiji, where the event was to be held. A large crowd had already assembled by the time we arrived. I recognized many young people from neighboring parishes, but I was also seeing many faces for the first time. The show got under way and in their turn, groups

from each of the parishes mounted the stage to perform their prepared pieces. There were Biblical plays with a Christmas theme, choirs singing carols and our Fijian Columban seminarians doing their bit in explaining the true meaning of Christmas. Up until then, I figured it was a normal, artistic celebration of Christmas.

We were still asking ourselves how this young group of Hindu people would grace our Christmas, when they began singing Silent night, holy night. The gathering gasped in surprise, before joining in.

Then without warning, the emcee announced that a Hindu group would take its turn on stage. There was a bit of a commotion in the gathering as the group made its way to the stage, but then people quietened as the expectation grew that the group would simply congratulate us on the birth

of Jesus with the usual Christmas greetings.

We were still asking ourselves how this young group of Hindu people would grace our Christmas, when they began singing *Silent night, holy night*. The gathering gasped in surprise, before joining in. Next, the group launched into a Hindu-style dance, its movements choreographed to the tune of the age-old carol. Even though our religions are quite different, it was a time when we could feel we had become one.

While initially I was somewhat perplexed, I then remembered that in my predominantly Buddhist home country of South Korea it is common for Catholic parishes to display big banners on the first day of April in the Lunar Year acknowledging the birthday of Buddha, which, like Christmas for Christians, is an important feast day in Buddhism.

In the same way, some Buddhist temples display banners announcing their congratulations to Christians on the birth of the Christ Child at



Christmas time. In South Korea, it is customary to honor each other's festive occasions and, at the cathedral in Suva, I was experiencing the same thing in Fiji. People from different faith traditions sharing food and celebrating with each other at Christmas holds a special meaning for me.

Among the many reasons concocted in the justification of war, one is the disparity of religious belief. Fiji has a total population of about 900,000 people, around 65% of whom are Christian and 30% Hindu. This roughly equates to its ethnic division, as most indigenous Fijians are Christian and descendants of

People from different faith traditions sharing food and celebrating with each other at Christmas holds a special meaning for me.

Indian indentured workers *blackbirded* (coerced into slavery or servitude) by colonial enterprises during the 19th century are Hindu.

Both religious and ethnic tensions have led to violence, discrimination and political upheaval in the past. However, I think that if we were to accept our differences and seek peace, as we did at

our Christmas feast on that day in Suva, we would realize that the real reason Jesus came amongst us was to bring peace on earth. I pray for those, who through no fault of their own, are dying in different parts of the world simply because of their religious beliefs.

The young people's inter-religious dialogue Christmas party was a strong sign that we are capable of engendering trust among the different groupings that can produce a more harmonious future. However, it does take imagination, commitment and effort. **CM**

Columban Fr. Euikyun Carlo Jung lives and works in Fiji.



The Full Story of Christmas

Receive the Joy

By Fr. Trevor Trotter

The liturgical life of the Church tells the story of what God is doing in the world. This may seem like a strange thing to say. Most of us grew up thinking that Mass was something we attended on Sunday because we had to. It seems to me that it takes a long time for us to see the connection between what we do on Sunday and what we do for the rest of the week.

Take Christmas, for example. What does the liturgical celebration of Christmas tell us about the world? It tells us the truth. It tells us that God so loved the world that He sent His only beloved Son. It tells us that God

Even if we do remember what happened in Bethlehem, we have not necessarily absorbed the full story of Christmas.

and the world and everything and everybody in it are united in love. If we go to Mass on Christmas and praise and thank God for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, we have done a good thing. It celebrates a great truth about our lives and history as human beings. By Boxing Day (December 26), maybe, we forget this most basic truth of our lives. This is why we repeat liturgical actions, and the

repetition helps us remember and more deeply live into this deep story of our lives.

Even if we do remember what happened in Bethlehem, we have not necessarily absorbed the full story of Christmas. This is that God not only came and embraced us once over two thousand years ago, but the same loving God is still embracing us. The liturgy tells the story of what God is doing all the time. It is an eternal truth.

I have had a minor light bulb moment recently. Sometimes we have major light bulb moments, but this is only a minor one but still illuminating. I attended a conference



recently where Fr. Kevin O'Neill, a Columban from Geelong, was one of the keynote speakers, and his topic was “Intercultural Living.” As Columban missionaries, we, like all Christians, see sharing the Gospel of Jesus as the best thing we can do with our lives. We believe that the Spirit has invited us to go overseas and share the Gospel of Jesus with people there. What happens to us in this process is that we learn that the Gospel of Jesus can be lived in multiple ways. We also come to see that there are many more challenges to living the Gospel than we ever imagined.

Fr. Kevin, from being on mission in Taiwan and China, came to see the importance of culture. That we cannot understand each other, that we have different foods and different customs, are all challenges if we wish to live in communion with the people of other cultures. The commandments, love God and love your neighbor, may sound great but cultural differences are obstacles to living this way. On the other hand, if we take time and make an effort, we can grow to like the food and speak something of the language.

Living interculturally is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Again, the liturgy tells us this truth. In The Preface for Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation

2, this is stated clearly. “By your Spirit, you move human hearts ... and peoples seek to meet together.” The liturgy tells the story of God’s action in the world. God is working in our hearts and minds to bring us together. What else would a God of love do? When we try to overcome the barriers of culture, when we strive to understand someone else from another culture, when we feel empathy and compassion for those from other countries, we are not doing this alone. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. The Spirit is working in the other person and in us so that we

What does the liturgical celebration of Christmas tell us about the world? It tells us the truth. It tells us that God so loved the world that He sent His only beloved Son. It tells us that God and the world and everything and everybody in it are united in love.

can come together in friendship and mutual understanding. The Spirit is the love between the Father and the Son, and the Spirit has the same effect on us. We are brought together, and this is the source of our hope for our divided world.

The coming of Jesus into the world is the source of all the communion that our hearts long for. May each of us receive the joy and the peace that are his gifts to us not only now but always. **CM**

Columban Fr. Trevor Trotter is the Regional Director of Oceania.





Weaving Community

Embroidering Dreams

By Fr. Bill Morton, Cristina Coronado, Wesley Cocozello and Cynthia Gonzalez

For more than 25 years, the Missionary Society of St. Columban has worked in one of the most impoverished areas of the U.S./Mexico border: Rancho Anapra, located on the far western edge of Cd. Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. Many of its streets remain unpaved; the water is undrinkable, and the electric service is deficient.

Geographically, Anapra's northern border is Sunland Park, New Mexico, from which it is separated by an 18-foot high, steel barrier. Rather than being an advantage, its proximity to the United States is a curse because it attracts the drug traffickers as well as the human traffickers which has made it a very high-risk area of violence, kidnapping and the recruitment of its youth into this criminal mayhem.

In contrast to its reality of violence, for decades, Anapra has been a place of welcome for internal immigration. Mexicans displaced by poverty, natural disasters and drug violence have

migrated to Ciudad Juarez in the hope of better jobs, pay, and sense of security. The arrival in Juárez of the maquiladoras (foreign factories) industry and the growth of the job offer in the city, attracted thousands of people in search of a better life. Anapra, little by little, became "a bedroom" community for those who were employed in the "maquila" system.

Corpus Christi, a Sanctuary in the Desert

One of the few places where Anapra residents can find support and comfort is Corpus Christi Parish, which is administered by the St. Columban Missionary Society, under the pastoral care of Fr. Bill Morton. People come to Corpus Christi to talk to God about their joys, hopes, sorrows and anxieties. The parish is a place of encounter; here they can baptize their children and access training to receive the sacraments of first communion and confirmation.

It is also a space for the Catholic celebration of their quinceañeras and weddings. In this rural community, the people know what it means to ask God for "their daily bread." Here they learn to live together in the name of God, celebrating the Eucharist, praising God and studying the Holy Scriptures.

Attentive to Reality and Available to God's Call

In September 2018, the first groups of migrants from Cuba and Central America began to arrive in Ciudad Juarez, only to be followed by a great wave of people fleeing the violence and poverty generated, in their countries, by corruption, greed and by the structures of government at the service of the most powerful. They arrived at the border between Mexico and the United States, hoping to receive political asylum, to reunite with their families who were already in the United States and achieve the "dream" of a better life.

They ran into a wall...

Former U.S. President Donald Trump's anti-immigrant policy gave rise to one of the most controversial programs in the history of world migration.

When former President Trump was forced to end his family separation policy, after public backlash, he changed tactics and in January 2019 implemented the so-called Migrant Protection Protocols (or MPPs). The MPP situation forced hundreds of thousands of women, children and men to be returned to Mexico in cruel and inhuman conditions and under a "protection" law, put the lives of these people who were exercising their right to request asylum in a high degree of vulnerability and risk. Housing conditions and access to shelters are very limited and precarious. Many shelters have become unhealthy and overcrowded places that further harm the lives of these pilgrims.

As a team from the Ministry of Migrants of the Columbans on the border of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, we started a support network for the migrant brothers and sisters who arrived by the hundreds on the Mexican side and who were being returned under the MPP.

On September 5, 2019, we opened the “House of Welcome” as a response to the humanitarian crisis and the urgent need for spaces to receive and protect women with their children who were at risk of being left on the street. We didn’t have a plan.

Providence and the Organic Growth of God’s Kingdom

While immigration advocates and people of faith in the United States, including our Columban advocates in Washington, D.C., pressed former President Trump and Congress to end MPP, in Ciudad Juárez, migrants simply had to wait. And wait. As the months passed, the women of Casa Acogida learned in community to embrace their vulnerability and their anguish. Little by little, they realized the need to have an “ordinary” life so that waiting for their asylum appointments would not be so heavy and desperation would not force them to take dangerous paths. In the search for alternatives to avoid sinking into depression, the Embroidery Project was born.

The Embroidery Project is Born in the House of Welcome

An old dream of a cooperative or alternative employment community project resurfaced in the midst of this humanitarian crisis. And, providentially, Casa Acogida’s response to migrant women in vulnerable situations was weaving its own dynamics and networks, that gave way to a community of women embroidering their dreams who combined their work with spiritual growth and healing through faith.

In March 2021, with Joe Biden as the U.S. President, the termination of the MPP Program put an end to the wait for thousands of migrants on the Mexican side of the border and the women of Casa Acogida were able to cross over to the U.S. and to meet with their families.

In a natural way, the Embroidery Project was adopted in the Corpus Christi Parish and today, more than fifteen women and girls, between the ages of 15 and 60 years old, build community and weave their hopes, their dreams and their desires for a world with justice, with dignity, without violence. They work and embroider the Dream of God. Every Tuesday and Saturday they meet in the parish hall to embroider together, share a meal and build community among themselves.

As they embroider together, around several large tables, they not only share tips and techniques on how to improve their embroidery skills, but also offer advice and tell stories about the different situations they face in their daily lives.

Mary, a member of the Corpus Christi community, says that the Embroidery Project: “is the only space

and moment in which I can feel I am myself. I am not a mother, I am not a wife, but simply myself.”

The Embroidery Project seeks to expand its work to include more women. It is still under construction of its own internal process and growth. There is interest from other groups to support the project, and we need enough demand for the products to continue to strengthen our reception space and community.

Whatever the future of the Embroidery Project, this community process is an example of what is possible when people affected by injustice come together to heal themselves. “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.” CM

Fr. Bill Morton, Cristina Coronado, Wesley Cocozello, and Cynthia Gonzalez are part of the Columban missionaries border ministries team.



Migrants with their finished work

In the Shadow of the Peaky Blinders Gang

Preventing a Repeat of History

By Fr. John Boles



Columban co-worker Mauricio Silva and a friend

Columban lay missionary Mauricio Silva stands in the shadow of a giant mural featuring Cillian Murphy, star of the television show “Peaky Blinders” which has captivated audiences worldwide for the last few years. The series charts the rise of a gang from the level of petty criminals to that of international gangsters at the end of the nineteenth century. The program is based on fact, but what many people don’t know is that the Peaky Blinders grew out of racial tensions between English Protestants and Irish Catholics in the back streets of Birmingham, England.

Birmingham in the mid-1800s was a booming center of the Industrial Revolution. The city’s success brought great wealth to the factory owners but left many of the workers in abject poverty. The situation was further complicated by a massive influx of people from Ireland, forced to leave their native land by famine and disease. The English workers often resented these migrants. They feared they’d take their jobs or, at the very least, drive down wages. Even worse, the newcomers were Catholic!

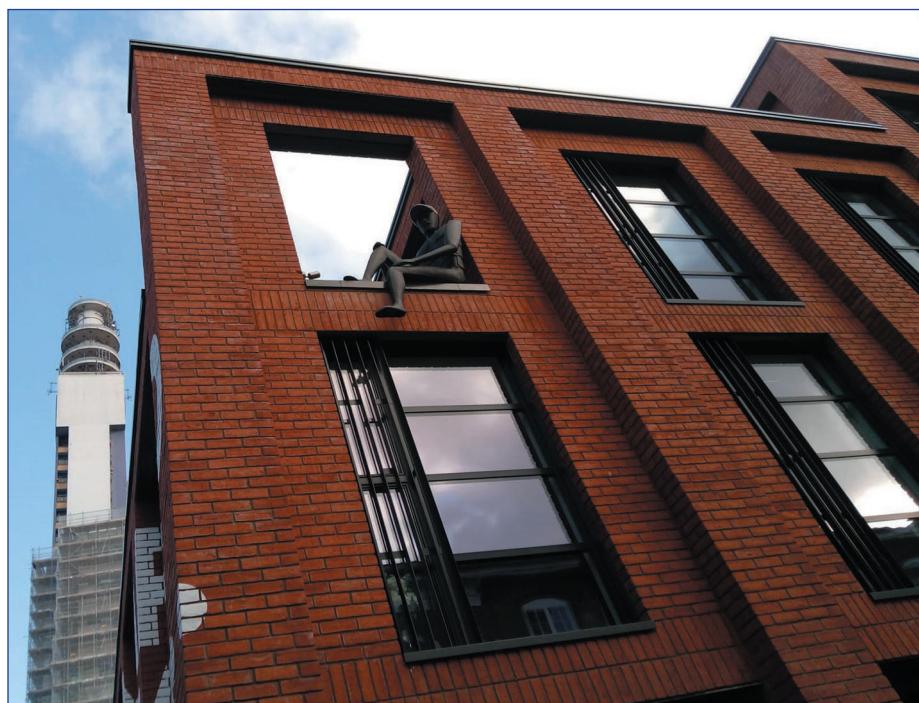
Rabble-rousers capitalized on these tensions, and the 1850s and 1860s saw race riots erupting in several cities, with English Protestant mobs attacking Catholic Irish ghettos. In Birmingham, the Irish responded by forming self-defense groups. As the violence subsided, some of these groups turned to crime. One of them became known as the Peaky Blinders.

The unusual name comes from two sources. “Peaky” refers to the peaked caps the gang members wore, often at jaunty angles. They also tended to dress in an ostentatious manner, taking care to be well-groomed and sporting brightly colored scarves. In local slang, anyone or anything that catches the eye like this is called “a blinder,” hence, “Peaky Blinders.”

Today, inter-Christian rivalry in England is thankfully a thing of the past. The Irish have long since been integrated into wider society and have largely moved out from the city centers to the suburbs. But history is threatening to repeat itself as a new wave of immigration takes place, this time involving not Irish Catholics but Asian Muslims.

This is where Mauricio and the Columban missionaries come in.

Mauricio Silva and wife Nathalie are from Chile. They arrived in Britain as Columban lay missionaries in 2001, just as racial tensions were



A Peaky Blinders statue



Faith encounter group gatherings

boiling over in precisely the same areas where Catholics and Protestants had clashed some 150 years earlier. There had been serious urban rioting in 1981 and would be again in 2011. The Columban missionaries have long seen inter-religious and inter-racial dialogue as part of our mission, and so invited Mauricio and Nathalie to settle in a predominantly Muslim district of Birmingham and devote themselves to bringing together people of different races and religions.

"We are doing the work of easing tensions," explains Mauricio. "This happens when there is no interaction. People don't know one another and so don't understand one another. They get suspicious. Misunderstandings happen. We overcome this by getting to know our neighbors. By getting to know Muslims! Immigration must be followed by integration."

Over the years Mauricio has built up an impressive portfolio. He belongs to a host of projects, initiatives and committees, all aimed

at fostering racial and religious harmony. They include "Restore" (where people befriend asylum seekers and train others to do the same), the Birmingham Faith Encounter Program, the Birmingham Churches Together group, the Diocesan Inter-Religious Dialogue Committee...the list goes on.

He is convinced that as racial integration grows, so crime and other social problems decline. In the end, everyone has the same aspirations. "We all need healthcare, security, education." He is sure that God is in this work, and that we'll all profit from its success.

Mauricio is encouraged by recalling how the Peaky Blinders' story finally ended. As the nineteenth century drew to a close the violent turf wars between the "Peakies" and rival street gangs reached a crescendo. As far as the authorities were concerned, the final straw occurred in 1897 when a particularly brutal confrontation cost the life of Police Constable George

Snipe. Two years later the Birmingham city fathers appointed top lawman Charles Haughton Rafter as Chief Constable. He patiently built up an honest and efficient police force which gradually won the trust of Catholics and Protestants alike. Gangs like the Peaky Blinders were methodically broken up. Ringleaders were arrested or fled to join crime syndicates in other cities.

By the time of Constable Rafter's death in 1935, Birmingham was reputedly the safest large city in Britain. His funeral attracted one of the largest public gatherings in the town's history.

And Rafter had been an Irishman and a Catholic! **CM**

Columban Fr. John Boles is the regional director of the Columbans in Britain. Mauricio Silva is from Chile. He and his wife Nathalie came to Britain as Columban Lay Missionaries in 2001. They live in Birmingham with their two children. Mauricio now serves our mission as a Columban coworker.



When God Speaks Through the Bush

Bloom and Grow

By Gertudes Samson

In the Bible God spoke to Moses through the Burning Bush in Exodus Chapter 3 giving him a special message. I never thought that God would also relay His message to me through a bush at this present modern time, but He did! It was not through a Burning Bush, but through a yellow rose bush. You may ask, how and what makes God choose a bush again to relay a message? Let me tell you the story.

The year 2020 was the 30th anniversary of the Columban Lay Missionaries (CLM), a great celebration across the society. The CLM here in the Region of Britain, with the support of the Regional Council, were so excited to mark it by celebrating it. We first thought of planting a tree that would grow tall that people could look up, or plants that could grow flowers that could climb up so people could

easily see it too. Then, suddenly the coronavirus pandemic struck the world and affected many countries including United Kingdom.

Our plan was postponed due to lockdown after lockdown. Then finally in November 2021 after

The meaning of the yellow rose was explained by its breeder: it signifies friendship, love, community, and togetherness of people from different backgrounds.

more than one and a half years, the coronavirus restrictions were relaxed and it was announced that we could finally gather to celebrate the Feast Day of St. Columban. Lay missionaries in Britain got excited

again to resurrect our plan to mark the 30th anniversary of CLM.

On the day we were meeting to finalize what to plant, Columban Fr. Ray asked, have you seen the article in The Guardian UK News online this October that a yellow rose breed was named after the first well-documented Ethnic Minority Briton? So, we all searched the internet and we read it together. It was true. There is a yellow rose named after the first Ethnic Minority Briton, an 18th century gardener who was the first recorded Black person in North Wales.

The meaning of the yellow rose was explained by its breeder: it signifies friendship, love, community, and togetherness of people from different backgrounds. We all agreed that is very Columban. Since most of our outreach ministries deal with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and we are advocating those values too, we

decided to plant a yellow rose to mark the anniversary.

We contacted the distributor of the particular breed of rose several times, but we were informed that the supply is not yet available in the month of November. Just the same, we decided to plant a yellow rose and to adapt those beautiful values that a yellow rose signify. Then we started to combine it with the idea of planting a tree, so we were thinking of planting a yellow rose tree that people could look up to and admire.

Teresa and I happily dug the hole in the ground to prepare for the rose planting. The same day Nathalie called from the Garden Center, telling us that there is no yellow rose tree, only the yellow rose bush. As I spoke with her, I felt sad and thought, "God, why are you giving us a small bush and not a tree?" Teresa's reaction was similar. That very moment too God spoke the message of wisdom from the bush rose to my mind: "Humility... Humility is the reason, Ger."

Then scenes on the life of Jesus started to flash through my mind. Jesus chose to be born in a lowly stable, not in a palace, even though He is the King of Kings. He chose to ride on a small donkey and not on a tall stallion when He entered Jerusalem even though He is The King of the World. God always chose the simple and little things. Our God is a humble God, and He wants us to follow His good example.

God's message of wisdom through the yellow rose bush became clear to me that day: "I would like you to continually learn the wisdom from the yellow rose bush and follow its good example."

Before Nathalie's call ended, she said, "by the way, Ger, the name on the pot of this rose is 'Anniversary Rose.'" "Oh, indeed, it is really the best fit then for the occasion," I remarked. As I shared this with Teresa, she herself



As Jesus said in John 15: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener...every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

became at peace too in having a yellow rose bush. When I called the other lay missionaries Sophia and Roberta they too agreed that we would go for the yellow rose bush, and we finally had a consensus.

On the day of the ceremony as we were planting our yellow rose bush, I sprinkled holy water onto it and these words just came out of my lips: "Hello Yellow Rose, since your symbol very much reflects who we are as Columbans, and because you were planted on the Columbans' ground on St. Columbans Day, from now on we will call you Columban Rose. Perhaps that is the reason why you are a bush rose, God wants us to always follow your good example, always near to the ground. God wants us to always be near to the ground too, at

the grassroots level where the needy people are to whom God sends us. May God make you grow and bloom with many yellow flowers always, to serve as a reminder to us why we are here."

At the end of the ceremony some people said, what you said about the rose is beautiful Ger. Truly, I believed, it is not from me, the message is from God, spoken through the yellow rose bush.

The life of a missionary is like a rose bush—sometimes we can seem invisible, with a very low profile. There are flowers, but there are thorns too, together with our joys and there are also challenges. During winter, the rose has to be trimmed close to the ground so it would flourish more with new leaves in springtime. The same thing happens with us lay missionaries, sometimes a trimming may come which is painful and can leave us bare, but it is necessary so we can bloom more for God. Sometimes, we must let go of the things we are holding on to, to give way to new beginnings or new life. As Jesus said in John 15: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener...every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

The more I continually reflect about the similarity of the life of the rose bush to the life of the lay missionaries, the more I realized the wisdom it brings. Indeed, God helped us find the best rose for us to mark the 30th anniversary of Columban Lay Missionaries. When you visit the Columban House in Solihull, try to have a peep at our Columban Rose near the entrance of the Sunroom. Whatever the season or state of the Columban Rose may be, who knows, God might speak words of wisdom to you, too, through the bush. **CM**

Columban lay missionary Gertrudes (Ger) Samson lives and works in Britain.

A Hope that Transcends

Christmas Eve Mass in Xiantao

By Fr. Dan Troy

Holy Trinity Church in Xiantao, China, was filled to capacity for the vigil Mass on Christmas Eve last year, the presence of face masks a solemn reminder that the previous months had been so different from all others. Nearing the end of a year of uncertainty, the prayerful presence of so many people in the church, the collective singing of Christmas hymns and the joyful atmosphere combined to form spontaneous hope for the people.

The joy of the evening was the news of the birth of the Child Jesus, that marvelous event that can unite whatever signs of hope we have at this time.

As the vigil Mass concluded for this community of Catholics near Wuhan, China, the final moments of the liturgy involved a procession from the altar to the side of the church. All eyes focused on the figure of the Child Jesus as the parish priest held it high. He then stood for a few moments of silence before the crib and carefully placed the figure of the newborn in the center of the simple wooden structure. The continuous singing added to the solemnity of the ceremony.

In a year when many Chinese people joked about trimming back their plans for the coming year for the simple desire to stay alive, the celebration of Christmas was seen by some as a liturgical event coinciding with a revision of their hopes for the coming year.

As the singing died away, the emerging silence of the evening found its natural focus on the crib. Several people gathered to gaze at the scene of Bethlehem, the visual message overcoming all boundaries of time, culture and language to communicate

the wonderful event of the Incarnation, God becoming flesh in a way that unites the infinite dimensions of the divine with our vulnerable human experiences.

In a country where, in previous times, limited educational opportunities left some members of the older generation with a minimal ability to read, the visual message flowing from this Christmas crib took on special importance in announcing the Incarnation to all those gathered around in silence. They echoed in stark contrast to the hive of activity around the church during the preceding hours.

Later, as people departed from the church, a few groups formed near the main door, availing themselves of the opportunity to wish each other well for Christmas, the great event of faith that had brought them together on this night. A few were happy to chat for longer than others because they had traveled long distances from villages where there would be no liturgical celebration. Their long journeys necessitated staying overnight at the parish center, their pilgrimage experience supported by our understanding that traveling to witness the great events of the Nativity has been central to the Christmas message ever since the shepherds in fields around Bethlehem set out to witness what was happening so many years ago.

On Christmas Day, a few of us took the opportunity to visit four other parishes in the area around Xiantao, our pilgrimage part of a tradition in the district in the same way people go to see cribs in other churches. At each location, the silence at the crib invited more reflection on the great mystery of Christmas, expressed with its own decoration and style by each community.

On a couple of occasions, we saw a figure of the Child Jesus that was much larger than all others in the crib, the difference in scale not being a distraction to visitors but perhaps magnifying the focus on the child. The infinitely loving and merciful God among us came as a helpless infant in need of loving care.

Returning to the church in Xiantao, preparations were nearing completion for evening Mass. As more members of the Catholic community gathered and began singing on this great day, I began to think about all that had happened during the year of COVID-19. While this area of China was the epicenter of a pandemic that would rock the world, it was reassuring that people of faith here were uniting their hearts with people of faith around the world to celebrate the hope that God brings to our broken world at Christmas.

It is a hope that transcends time and place, a hope that assures us that God remains faithful. This is the message that can be seen when we embrace silence and look at the Christmas crib that shows us a vulnerable family in Bethlehem, a family that was also tossed about on the historical waves of uncertainty but eventually found its way as God opened up new life-giving possibilities.

In a year that has seen China linked with the rest of the world in an unexpected and challenging way, the need for a more positive and understanding engagement seems as important as ever. Perhaps the humility of what we see in the crib can guide us in knowing what is needed, as the peoples of the world move ahead together. CM

Columban Fr Dan Troy lives and works in China.



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Rebirth and Renewal

From Darkness to Light

By Fr. Eamon Sheridan



When I arrived in Myitkyina, Kachin State, Myanmar (formerly Burma) in 2017, I was very conscious that I was following in the footsteps of the early Columban missionaries who ministered here from 1936 to 1979. I was 56 when I arrived here so I was never going to really master the language. However I was inspired by the words of Fr. Usher the leader of that first Columban group. At the end of their first retreat together, he said: "We are a small rather helpless bunch of inexperienced missionaries. We know little of the language and less of the customs of our people. In a human way we have nothing to recommend us or guarantee any measure of success. But we do, or at least we ought to possess a mighty weapon of the spirit – Charity. Love. If we have that God's work here will prosper. If we haven't that, let's pack up our bags and go home."

I decided that perhaps I could help in the area of addiction. If I

approached it with charity and love, then God would do the rest. I asked the Bishop if I could work at the Rebirth Rehabilitation Center (RRC). The center was set up by the Myitkyina Diocese as a response to the drug epidemic. It is no exaggeration to say that every family here has one or two people struggling with drug and/or alcohol addiction. It is the biggest threat facing the Kachin people and is destroying families and the culture.

I knew this would be a difficult ministry made all the more so by the precarious political and economic situation of the country. However I had faith that if I did my part and trusted in God that God would show me the way. This has proved to be the case. Even on the most difficult days when we couldn't leave the compound and could hear shooting and explosions nearby I felt God's presence. Whatever difficulties we faced God provided a solution. Despite all the political turmoil and the coronavirus

pandemic, we did not have to close the center or stop our work of offering recovery to desperate people suffering from addiction. Because of the generosity of the Columban donors we were able to complete and open the first residential center in the country for women suffering from addiction. Our first group of women clients arrived in January 2022. They were just five, but they spoke of many more women who want recovery but who until now had nowhere to go.

We were also able to install an electricity transformer and will be able to buy a badly needed new generator. Thank you so much from the bottom of our hearts for your love and generosity.

My work with recovering addicts here has made me realize that many of these mostly young men and women come from poor backgrounds and have very few skills for getting employment. After they leave the center many are driven back to the jade mines or

languish at home where they quickly fall back into addiction.

When they leave the center those from Myitkyina, they need a place where they can go for ongoing support and to attend Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) meetings. Those from further away sometimes need a place to stay before they transition back to their villages.

Our hope is to set up a vocational training space in the RRC where those who have completed the initial program and the aftercare program (30 weeks) can begin to receive some vocational training. We have identified carpentry, traditional Kachin weaving, sowing working with aluminum and making iron grills as possible initial areas of training.

We also want to build a drop-in recovery center in Myitkyina on land that has been given to us for that use. This will be a place where recovering addicts can feel safe and get the support they need to stay sober outside the rehab center.

I have seen the difference vocational training can make in the life of a recovering addict. Because of your generosity I have been able to sponsor

a number of young men for training in areas that will offer them a future. Our hope is to expand this program by offering onsite training in the center.

Francis (26) beamed with pride as he showed me his certificate. He had just completed his training in mobile phone repair. He will continue to study electronics. He is hopeful now about his future. This is a far cry from two years ago when he first came to the Rebirth Rehabilitation Center. He was broken by his addiction to heroin, and he felt this was his last chance to get recovery. He really embraced the program, and now he is building a future for himself free from the prison of addiction.

Bosco (30) is over two years sober. He is now an apprentice with an air conditioning maintenance firm. His boss will probably offer him a job when his training is over. His boss describes him as one of his best and most reliable trainees. Bosco describes his journey as moving from the darkness of addiction to the light of sobriety and daily recovery.

Peter (25) is over four years sober and has spent the last two years as an apprentice in a car workshop. He hopes shortly to start fulltime work in

this area. He has also become a black belt in karate. He describes it as a journey from hopelessness to hope.

Yawhan (28) came to the center three years ago a broken person. His wife had left him and taken his young daughter. She couldn't deal with the consequences of his addiction anymore. He admitted his powerlessness and surrendered to the program. Now he is doing barber training. He has discovered that he has a real talent in this area. When he completes his training and if he stays sober, he will be able to start a small barber business in his home village. Not only will he be cutting hair but also spreading the message that recovery is possible.

These young men, because of your generosity, have been able to embrace a program of recovery and get their lives back. With a vocational training space onsite and a recovery drop in center in Myitkyina we hope to expand this program and offer the men and women who come here a path productive employment and ongoing recovery. CM

Columban Fr. Eamon Sheridan lives and works in Myanmar.



Francis and Fr. Eamon



Training at the Center



Yawhan practices on Fr. Eamon

Advent Retreat

Joyful Surprise

By Fr. Timothy Mulroy

Each year, at the beginning of December, as those around him begin preparing their Christmas shopping list, Ben begins preparing his fishing gear. Then, as family members and friends make plans for Christmas parties, Ben heads off with a few close friends to spend a long weekend at a remote lakeside village.

A few years ago, as this group of middle-aged men set out with the light-hearted spirits of schoolboys, Ben turned to me with a big grin, *"It's such a pity that you're not coming with us on this Advent retreat."*

A few weeks later, when I met Ben again at a New Year's party, my first question to him was, *"So how did your Advent retreat go?"* I had expected a witty response, but instead he began talking earnestly about that fishing trip.

For Ben, no other experience can capture the spirit of the Advent season like a fishing expedition. A few days in a boat, with a rod and line, teaches him what it truly means to wait in joyful hope. While he engages in detailed planning and preparation, he can never predict the moment when he will make his first catch.

On some trips that joyful surprise happens within the first hour, but on other occasions he must wait patiently for a day or more. Over the years he has learned to remain alert and vigilant for that moment when a fish nibbles the bait, the line becomes taut, and his heart pounds with excitement.

For Ben, this practice of attentive waiting is similar to the spirit we nurture during the Advent season as



we wait in joyful hope for the return of Christ in glory at an unexpected moment. Part of our attentive waiting means becoming more attuned to the signs of God in the world around us, so that we can recognize Christ when he returns. Again, Ben thinks that there's no better way to develop such an awareness than to go on a fishing trip.

Before setting out he carefully studies the weather patterns for several days. Throughout the trip, he constantly scans the sky and the horizon for subtle changes in the sun and in the clouds. He frequently notes the direction and strength of the wind, as well as the temperature of the air and water. After carefully weighing these various factors, he then propels his boat to that place where the fish are most likely to gather.

Thanks to such careful attention to his natural surroundings, as well as to his comprehensive knowledge of the habits of fish, Ben thinks that he can come close to entering into the mind of a fish! *"The key to fishing,"* he says, *"is to learn to see the world from a fish's standpoint ... and the key to Advent is to*

enter into the mind of Christ so as to see the world from God's standpoint."

As I tried to grapple with this unusual insight, Ben proceeded to remind me that the first group of apostles who were chosen by Jesus at the outset of his public ministry – Peter, Andrew, James and John – had been fishermen. Furthermore, after his resurrection, Jesus returned to Lake Gennesaret to invite those same fishermen to become messengers of the Gospel to the world.

There is no doubt in Ben's mind that, when Christ returns in glory, those who will be ready to welcome him will be those who are vigilant in waiting, filled with a joyful hope, and attentive to the world around them. In short, people with the same mind and heart as those fishermen who became apostles.

Now I understand why, at the beginning of December each year, Ben and his companions head off to that remote lakeside village to do their Advent retreat. **CM**

Columban Fr. Timothy Mulroy lives and works in Hong Kong.

The Great Gift

As a child, I enjoyed Christmas for the presents. Weeks before Christmas, I would be searching the house looking for where my parents hid the presents. Once found, I would take the present out of the box and play with it when I was home alone. Of course, when I heard my parents arriving, I quickly ran to put it back. It was bit of a cat and mouse game that I oddly enjoyed. All I could think of was that one day this football will be completely mine!

When I went on mission to Chile, I came to celebrate Christmas in a different way. In Chile, Christmas was not about receiving presents but celebrating with family and community. Certainly, in the U.S. we hold family important in Christmas, but in Chile it extended beyond family to the wider community. This began, surprisingly, with the lack of build-up to Christmas. There were no colorful decorations in the public streets or on houses (if any, very minimal). Also, no continual Christmas music playing in malls or on radio stations. It was very subdued. Initially, I missed the hype in my early years of mission. However, in time I began to appreciate the quietness of it, much like the humble couple from Nazareth traveling to Bethlehem unnoticed. There was a simplicity in it all.

When Christmas Eve came, the Christmas Vigil Mass was packed with a great amount of people, many of whom didn't attend Church the whole year, very much like the shepherds, who were



FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. Chris Saenz

considered outsiders from the community but gathered to share one joyous moment. After the Mass, people departed to their homes for the meal. It was here that family, neighbors, and others would pass from house to house greeting everyone. Eventually, at midnight, the slow, quiet coming of Christmas erupted with fireworks in the streets, people laughing, hugging and greeting one another in the streets. It was as if the choir of angels broke open the heavens and began singing, announcing the Good News. At that moment, all the



troubles and worries of daily life disappeared. Only joy and contentment were shared. As the priest of the community, I was invited to several houses, and I spent the evening visiting and greeting the parishioners. It was a joy being received and a joy to give a blessing to those I with whom I shared the celebration.

During my many years in Chile, I don't recall presents being exchanged during Christmas. If they were, it was not central to the celebration. In time, I never missed the idea of presents because it became

In time, I never missed the idea of presents because it became something more profound. The present I came to appreciate was not an object but a relationship—my relationship as a priest to a community.

something more profound. The present I came to appreciate was not an object but a relationship—my relationship as a priest to a community. And, that is what Christmas signifies, God's willingness to enter a relationship with His people by the birth of His Son. On this Christmas season, I wish to bless all our readers this great gift of a relationship with Jesus Christ, our brother and Savior. Merry Christmas to all!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Chris Saenz".

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by what had been told
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– St. Luke 2:18

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