

Columban Mission

The Magazine of the Missionary Society of St. Columban

December 2024



Christmas

C O N T E N T S

Issue Theme – 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 Fr. Barry Cairns

A Christmas Present from St. Joseph

It was the second week of December! That especially busy season before Christmas was upon me. Besides that, the winter heavy grey skies were getting to me. I first came to Japan in 1956 from the Southern Hemisphere, New Zealand to be precise! Even after all those years, while adapting to Japan in most areas, I have never really got used to cold weather at Christmas! For so many of my youthful years, Christmas was a time of sun and beach swimming. I have never, ever dreamed of a white Christmas! So as the shepherd Psalm puts it so vividly, my spirit was drooping.

My lifelong hobby has been woodwork. At middle school my highest marks were for a class called “woodwork.” For those who might be curious, my lowest marks were for what was then called “arithmetic.” I like making things, but as a priest I have lived in aging rectories, so I tend to mend more than make.

Recently on Amazon, I looked at a carpenter’s bench with envy. But all I did was to put it into the wish list. The bench was selling at \$197. Is this too expensive for me? And if I did buy it, how many years, at 92, have I left to use it? So, I went to St. Joseph the carpenter, asking him to guide me. Joseph had Jesus as his apprentice.



St. Joseph had arranged a Christmas present for the birthday of his foster child and later his apprentice carpenter, Jesus.

Three weeks later a couple whom I had witnessed their marriage seven years previously came to visit me. At the time of their marriage both were in their 70s. In both cases their former partner had died. They came to tell me that their senior second marriage had given both of them a wonderful and refreshing happiness. Then they handed me an envelope saying: “Here is a gift in gratitude to God. Buy yourself a Christmas present.”

Later when I opened the envelope there was the yen amounting to exactly \$197. So, St. Joseph had arranged a Christmas present for the birthday of his foster child and later his apprentice carpenter, Jesus. These events had the Good Shepherd reviving my drooping spirit.

As a postscript I add that the carpenter’s bench was delivered to the door in a big parcel. The bench was in many parts to be assembled. A parishioner seeing me gaze at the many parts with a worried look said: “Let’s assemble it.” While his wife read the instructions, four of us put the bench together. We had fun doing it which was another gift.

So, I thank the carpenters, Jesus and Joseph for their thoughtful Christmas present.

Columban Fr. Barry Cairns lives and works in Japan.

Peace and Understanding

Fr. Des Hartford

By Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan



A bomb went off during the celebration of Mass on the first Sunday of Advent last year in Marawi in the Philippines. Three people were killed and a number of others injured. The perpetrators were unknown, but it probably had been done by a local rebel group. It reminded me of what happened to Columban Fr. Des Hartford who ministered in that city 25 years ago. He worked with Muslims and Christians in the city trying to bring peace and understanding between those communities whose relationship had been fragile for some time. Then Fr. Des was kidnapped by a group of Muslim guerrillas.

Fr. Des was held hostage by the group for twelve days. He was forced to sleep out in the open in corn fields and swamps of pampas grass. He and his captors kept on the move in difficult terrain to avoid detection. It was quite an ordeal which makes his statement on being released remarkable. He said, "To those who betrayed my trust and kindness and used me as a hostage, I would like to remind you that what you did is against the true spirit of Islam. It was un-Islamic."


Previous to the kidnapping there had been two other attempts to kidnap Fr. Des. On another occasion he happened to be away when a grenade thrown into his house killed a two people. You might think he would be angry with and distrustful of Muslims. On the contrary, his missionary life was about trying to establish good relationships with Muslims. After his release he went on to say, "although my being taken hostage was a very painful

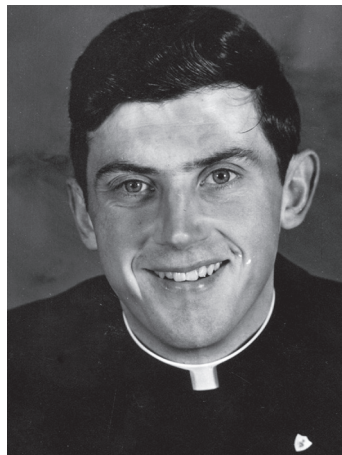
experience and contrary to freedom and other human rights, I still believe that good will come from it. I encourage Muslims and Christians to goodwill, at all levels, to enter into a genuine dialogue with each other, so that together, we can build a lasting peace here in Mindanao and Sulu that is based on justice truth and love."

Fr. Des could say what his captors did to him was un-Islamic because he respected and understood Islam. Of course, he could also point out to Christians what was un-Christian. But his energy went into believing in the possibilities that can emerge when as he observed, "Muslims and Christians of goodwill enter into dialogue."

Fr. Des and other Columbans continued to devote themselves to working with Muslims despite being aware of the dangers and lack of success they might have.

Reflecting on all this sometime later Fr. Des, a deeply spiritual person, said that he, "experienced that powerlessness is often the occasion of the Lord's strength."

Just a few years after these events Fr. Des fell ill with cancer. In his final illness those who accompanied him were impressed with his acceptance of his situation and said that Fr. Des "gave an eloquent witness of patience, courage and serenity." That was not a surprise. He did just that during and after his ordeal. 



Fr. Des Hartford

Columban Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan lives and works at St. Columbans, Nebraska.



Happy Christmas

Christmas Lights

By Fr. Trevor Trotter

I like Christmas lights. In many suburbs of Australia where I live there are marvelous displays of Christmas lights. In the northern hemisphere I enjoyed the lights with the snow and the cold. They bring a wonderful feel to the whole season.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” Is this our experience? When we see all the confusion and darkness of our world, do we think of Jesus as being the light? What could He mean?

There is the darkness of ignorance, of oppression by others and depression suffered by many. There are many people who have no hope and ask whether they should keep going on with life. Many also suffer with the tedium of the regular routines of life. What does it mean to say that Jesus is the light of the world, when we think about the many dark things of life?

One thought that comes to me is that light helps us to see what is already there. With the coming of Jesus, we can see what is already there. Jesus

came to tell us and show us what is true about God. The story of Jesus casts light on the truth of God’s wonderful love for each and every one of us.

The early followers of Jesus came to see the truth that God is intertwined with the whole universe. God’s ongoing creating of us, of the trees, the animals, the earth and everything we can think of, is an amazing truth that is

Christ is the light that helps us to see that God’s love embraces and sustains the whole of creation.


wonderful for us to take in.

The message of Jesus brings light to a solely scientific understanding of the world. Christ is the light that helps us to see that God’s love embraces and sustains the whole of creation. To ponder this truth helps us to know more deeply the power of love.

Jesus is the light, but He also spoke

of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has been at work since the very beginning of time. The Spirit hovers over the chaos of our world and brings forth form and beauty, but would we have come to know this if Jesus had not been the one to reveal the truth of God and the universe? If Jesus had not been the light, we would be much poorer.

Like our Columban friends and supporters, we missionaries have also seen that Christ is the light that overcomes the darkness. This is the missionary impulse. We want others to see what we see.

As we celebrate and remember that baby in Bethlehem, the light of the world, we remember all those who are still searching for the light wherever they may be. Let us pray for them. Let us continue our missionary effort. In this way we continue the work of God the Father who sent his only Son, the light of the world. 

Columban Fr. Trevor Trotter lives and works in Australia.



Preda Christmas Update

Helping the Most Vulnerable

By Fr. Shay Cullen

Christmas is really the time to celebrate children's rights and to renew our commitment and determination to continue taking a stand for them, protecting, rescuing and saving them from harm and advocating protection for all vulnerable children. That's the mission of Preda Foundation, and we thank you for the help, support and donations that you have contributed to help many children. From the first days of His birth, Jesus of Nazareth was born a very vulnerable child. He was threatened with death by King Herod and escaped with His life when His parents fled into Egypt.

Preda has helped thousands of youth to be released from sub-human detention cells, healed and educated since 1974 when Preda first started 50 years ago.

Happy Days

The last year has been another successful, positive and happy year for 150 children/survivors who were helped in the Preda home for girls and recovered strongly from the trauma of their abuse. The children that flee their abusers find refuge and protection in the Preda homes. Here, they get a new lease on life, thanks to your donations and support and help. They are happy and content but wish for a happy future.

When rescued from their houses or sex bars of their abusers or traffickers, Preda staff and the other children give them a warm welcome, affirmation, encouragement, support, understanding, friendship, and reassurance which is a great start to their recovery. They feel safe and well-protected where their abusers can't get them. Please continue your support all the more and help us



The Preda center

save more because there are many more frightened children in hiding, scared to tell anyone. They need to be rescued from their abusers and human traffickers and supported by the Preda family. There are at present 64 girls from the ages of 6 to 17 in the Preda home at different stages of healing and empowerment and recovery. Their dignity and self-confidence are restored, their lost childhood is recovered and they experience, perhaps for the first time, freedom, happiness and joy.

Rose Anne was 14 when she was first abused by her uncle and a cousin. They threatened to kill her if she told anyone, just like Jesus was threatened by King Herod. She lived in fear every day until she told a classmate of her ordeal who told a teacher. It was then that Rose Anne was rescued by Preda and a government social worker. She recovered at the Preda home for girls with the help of caring staff and freely joined the Emotional Release Therapy where she cried, shouted and released her pain and anger at her abusers. Today, she is recovered and has bravely

testified against her abusers and convicted them both to life in prison. Rose Anne is enrolled now in college with the help of Preda supporters and is strongly outspoken and will be a great policewoman one day.

This year, eighteen child sex abusers were convicted with testimony from Preda children. Victories continue month by month. Since the girls' home first opened in 1996, as many as 400 plus abusers and traffickers have been convicted and are serving life sentences, thanks to the brave and courageous children who told their story convincingly and truthfully to the court and were believed.

Many more Preda children are on their way to a similar happy future as Rose Anne's, including the 85 children that were reintegrated this year to safe, supportive families. They will join the 47 other children who were reintegrated in the previous year. They continue their education through the Preda aftercare educational financial support program and are visited and cared for by a Preda outreach social worker.

Boys Deprived of Liberty

Preda continues to campaign for the release of boys deprived of liberty by advocating on social media for the proper implementation of the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Law. This law, Republic Act No. 9344, which Preda campaigned to be enacted, says youth age 15 years and younger cannot be deprived of liberty and cannot be charged with a crime or held in detention. Yet, the children are still being arrested and locked up in detention centers. Some are street children, seriously at risk of abuse. The boys older than 15 and charged with wrongdoing are treated like criminals and held behind bars in large jail cells, sometimes twenty to a barred cell.

They are called children in conflict with the law. They are rescued by Preda and others are referred by local social workers and family court judges to the Preda homes for boys.

Preda has helped thousands of youth to be released from sub-human detention cells, healed and educated since 1974 when Preda first started 50 years ago. Preda celebrated this anniversary on February 22, 2024, at the Preda Octagon building in Subic town. That rescue and release work continues today in the Preda therapeutic homes for boys deprived of freedom.

A total of 38 young boys were rescued this year and lived at an open Preda home in a spacious countryside home in Nagbayan, Castillejos, Zambales. There, they enjoy a life free from abuse and are accepted, encouraged, reaffirmed and given emotional therapy to deal with the pains of childhood suffering, rejection, punishment and abuse. Now, they have a happier life and a better chance in life through Preda which provides education, therapy and values formation, sports, fun and games in an open center where the dignity of every child is respected.



Preda kids

The work raising awareness of human rights and children's rights to prevent abuse and exploitation continue to be implemented after the pause during the lock-downs of Covid years.

New Dawn Home for Boys in Cebu

There are now 28 boys in conflict with the law in the Preda New Dawn Home in Liloan, Cebu. These youth have pending court cases and have been released from the severe subhuman jail conditions in government youth detention centers. There, they suffered greatly. Preda convinces judges to use the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Law to release them and transfer them to the Preda home for boys in Liloan, Cebu. Here, they have a new life, with therapy, education and a great chance to start life anew. The Preda aftercare program looks after them also. The boys are very grateful for their love and concern.

Raising Awareness

The work raising awareness of human rights and children's rights to prevent abuse and exploitation continues to be implemented after the pause during the lockdowns of Covid years. Now, it is back and a new phase of this important program is focused on teachers, students and their parents to prevent

child abuse and encourage children to report victimization.

The seminars teach the correct procedure for parents and teachers to follow when they suspect or know of child abuse anywhere. Preda conducts these seminars and gets the audience actively involved. Some of the Preda scholars who are victim-survivors of abuse are guest speakers. They freely tell their stories and give great advice from their personal experiences of abuse and human trafficking.

Preda Fair Trade

Preda Fair Trade helped 561 indigenous Aeta farmers this year in Zambales. After three years of almost no harvest due to climate change, there was a better organic mango harvest of Pico mango this year. Thirty-five tons of fresh, organic Pico mangoes were gathered in June. The project has achieved the EU standard for an Organic Certificate issued by the Control Union. The farmers were paid high prices and dividends. In addition, Preda Fair Trade implemented six

major development projects in the villages, providing water supply with long hoses from the uphill source to stainless tanks in the villages.

The Aeta children also gained increased awareness about their rights, especially the importance of protecting women and children from early and forced marriages that is now prohibited by the new law forbidding "child marriage." Preda also helped lobby for the anti-child marriage law.

Preda Fair Trade in Mindanao has helped many small farmers in the Preda Farmers Association by paying high prices for their carabao mangoes. These are processed into dried mangos by the Preda Fair Trade project and the Preda Fair Trade distribution of cash bonus (dividend) payments and school supplies are given to many families.

Advocacy Work and Cooperation

Preda advocates children's rights and the human rights of all through social media—Preda Foundation's Facebook and website www.preda.org and articles are published in The Manila Times on Sunday (The Sunday Times) and other magazines and newspapers.

This year, Preda maintained its status as a registered, licensed and accredited social welfare and development agency by complying with hundreds of indicators in a tedious evaluation process by the Department of Social Welfare and Development. Preda is one of only two non-government organizations in Central Luzon that is currently accredited by the Philippine Council for NGO Certification. This means that Preda has very high standards of NGO operation and management in fulfilling its services for children.

Thank you for reading this and we wish you a blessed Christmas and a New Year filled with positive happy experiences. **EM**

Columban Fr. Shay Cullen and the whole Preda team.



Help Future Generations with a Donation Today

Your gift helps people break the chains of addiction through Columban programs like the Rebirth Rehabilitation Center in Myanmar (formerly Burma).



Thanks to 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. In addition, the program provides vocational education training to help young men obtain jobs. We hope to expand this program and offer the men and women who come here a path productive employment and ongoing recovery.

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

If you want to make help the Missionary Society of St. Columban spread the Light of Christ around the world, a gift from your IRA will make a tremendous impact on our mission. If you are 70½ or older you may also be interested in a way to lower the income and taxes from your IRA withdrawals.

An IRA charitable rollover is a way you can help continue our work and benefit this year.

- Avoid taxes on transfers of up to \$100,000 from your IRA to our organization
- May satisfy your required minimum distribution (RMD) for the year
- Reduce your taxable income, even if you do not itemize deductions
- Make a gift that is not subject to the deduction limits on charitable gifts
- Help further the work and mission of our organization

If you are 70½ or older, you can use your IRA to fulfill your charitable goals. You can use the "Make a Gift from My IRA" tool to contact your IRA custodian and make a qualified charitable distribution. We will acknowledge your generous gifts as a qualified charitable distribution, which may satisfy your RMD, if applicable.

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

Let Heaven and Nature Sing!

Shouting for Joy

By Fr. Timothy Mulroy

Here in Hong Kong, during the final week of Advent, so much of my time and attention is divided between two things: preparing for the Christmas Mass and planning hiking activities for the holidays between Christmas and the New Year.

Each year, as I prepare the homily for the Christmas Mass, I try to find a new insight or develop a fresh perspective on the Christmas story. Likewise, while researching hiking trails, I look for paths that I have not yet explored, for interesting places awaiting my discovery. To my surprise, I came to realize during Advent last year that there was a close link between my preparations for both of these activities.

As I reflected on the psalm in preparation for midnight Mass, I was struck by these verses:

*Let the heavens rejoice and earth be glad,
let the sea and all within it thunder praise,
let the land and all it bears rejoice,
all the trees of the wood shout for joy,
At the presence of the Lord for he comes,
he comes to rule the earth.*

(Psalm 95: 11,12)

Here was a heartfelt invitation from God not just to all creatures, but to everything in the heavens, in the seas and on the earth to join in the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Closing my eyes, I tried to visualize myself standing on a nearby mountain peak and listening to the sea that surrounds the island of Hong Kong thundering with praise of God. I tried to imagine the dense forests that cover the hills on the edge of this city shouting for joy at the coming of Christ.

A few days later, the following verses from a morning prayer psalm startled me.

*Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.*

(Psalm 98: 8,9)

No matter which direction one looks in Hong Kong, a mountain or hill comes quickly into view. Moreover, thanks to such steep terrain, there are more than two-hundred rivers and streams with several spectacular waterfalls. Just imagine then the festive joy that spreads across Hong Kong when all those rivers clap their hands, and the mountains sing together for joy at the coming of the Lord!

Since some animals can hear very high notes and very quiet sounds that



City view



Columban lay missionaries Vida and Sai

are not accessible to the human ear, perhaps the wild boars, monkeys and water buffalos that roam the large parklands that surround this city enjoy open-air concerts provided by the forest and streams throughout the Christmas season!

Towards the close of Advent, the organist sent me the list of hymns that she had prepared for our Christmas Mass. She had chosen ones that were familiar to most people so that the entire congregation could join in singing them. However, as I glanced over them, I quickly realized that not only the congregation, but the surrounding world of nature was also called to join in the festive joy of Christmas.

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,*



*And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.
Joy to the world, the Savior reigns
Let all their songs employ
While fields and floods
Rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

*(Lyrics composed by Isaac Watts,
1674 – 1748)*

After reading these verses, I knew right away what the theme of my homily for the Christmas Mass was

going to be — since the coming of Christ into our world is a source of joy for all creation, the entire universe celebrates the Christmas season. Therefore, during our Christmas Mass we are called to rejoice with everyone and everything on earth in welcoming our Saviour.

Between Christmas and the New Year, as some of my Columban companions and I hiked through the hills and valleys of Hong Kong, we rejoiced in the magnificence of the streams, the coastline and the islands. At intervals, we rested on a rock and listened attentively to the wind whistle a Christmas melody as it moved through the forest and stirred the trees into a graceful dance. **CM**

After six years on the General Council in Hong Kong, Columban Fr. Timothy Mulroy is now living and working in Ireland.



Sai



Vida



Healing Body and Spirit

Jemuel's Story

By Fr. Vincent Busch



Jemuel crafting

The Subanens are an indigenous people whose ancestral homeland is in the mountains of northwest Mindanao, Philippines. Like other indigenous peoples in the Philippines, the Subanens have a spiritual bond with their habitat and relate to that habitat through their dance, music, and rituals. And, like other indigenous peoples, the Subanens learned to interact with their habitat in mutually enhancing ways.

Traditional Subanen livelihoods were interlinked with the bounty of their forested habitat. In past decades logging operations were allowed to enter and freely plunder the Subanens' homeland. As a result of deforestation, the Subanen people quickly lost their bountiful habitat and needed to find new livelihoods. Many Subanens left their homeland to look for work in cities as laborers or domestics.

Early in 2017 Jemuel Rote, a 20-year-old Subanen, left home on a six-hour bus trip to Marawi City to work in a small grocery store. Marawi City is on the shores of Lake Lanao and is part of the homeland of the Maranao people. The Maranao People are Muslim and along with other Muslim peoples make up about one quarter of Mindanao's 26 million



Jemuel with Columban Sr. Kathleen



A Subanen crafter carries her baby in a sling.



Jemuel with Fr. Busch

people. Maranao shopkeepers have a reputation among Subanens for treating their workers well.

One month after Jemuel started work, a violent Jihadist group called “Maute” invaded Marawi City and held hostage the residents. What followed would be a five-month battle during which time the Philippine army surrounded the city and rained bombs on buildings where the Jihadists hid with their hostages.

For a few weeks, Jemuel along with three Subanen workmates avoided discovery by the Jihadists. They hid in a bakery which was near the grocery store where they worked. At the bakery, they survived by eating the bread and flour that was stored there. Eventually, a Jihadist patrol passed through their area looking for people hiding in houses and shops. Jemuel and his companions heard them coming so they quietly crept out the back entrance and hid behind a wall.

Without shelter, Jemuel and his companions decided to flee the city that night. They remained behind the wall until about 3 in the morning, then they crawled through dark, muddy streets to the edge of the city. They saw a rice field nearby where they could continue their escape, but they had to get there without being seen by the

Jihadist patrols. Tragically a Jihadists patrol spotted them and opened fire. Jemuel’s companions were killed. Jemuel was shot in the leg but managed to reach the cover of the rice field.

Jemuel could not move because of his wounded leg. He survived in the rice field for six days by drinking the dirty water in an irrigation ditch. After six days soldiers of the Philippine army found Jemuel and took him to a nearby hospital where his infected leg was treated with antibiotics. After three months he was strong enough to return home, but his leg remained deeply infected.

After he got home, the Columban Sisters, who have been working with the Subanen people for more than 40 years, heard about Jemuel’s condition and got him into a large government hospital whose doctors soon realized that antibiotics were not helping his infected leg. To save his leg he needed a major operation that would remove

two inches of his infected shin bone. With the help of Columban donors, Jemuel had the operation after which he spent six months in a leg brace while waiting for his leg bone to regenerate.

During his long convalescence, the Subanen crafters taught Jemuel the art of making their Christmas cards. Their cards show how Mary and Joseph had to flee into the desert to escape Herod’s soldiers who were sent to kill Jesus. Jemuel saw that, like himself, Mary and Joseph had narrowly escaped death.

It has been seven years since Jemuel’s traumatic experience in Marawi. He is now a skilled Subanen crafter and has benefitted — in body and spirit — by being in a supportive community in his homeland habitat. He hopes to get another operation soon to restore more movement to his leg.

Jemuel has kept in touch with the Maranao owner of the store where he worked. He knows that many Maranao families, at great risk to themselves, helped their Christian and Subanen friends and workers escape from the Jihadists. Jemuel will never forget the night he and his three companions tried to escape. It was on his 21st birthday. **EM**

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

Subanen Crafters Celebrate Christmas

Merry Christmas!

By Fr. Vincent Busch



Queen of the toilet paper gown

Every year the Subanen crafters and their families hold our annual Christmas reunion.

The occasion has its usual games and food. We crown a queen after a competition where the contestants make toilet paper gowns!

The audience always enjoys the toilet paper gown competition! One of the other games was a karaoke contest. The karaoke winner was Jemuel Rote. Jemuel is a Subanen Crafter and continues to make our Christmas cards.

In our Christmas cards we place Mary and Joseph within our Earthly homeland and its solar system. Mary and Joseph sought refuge in a stable in Bethlehem and later on an oasis in the desert. Our Christmas cards remind us that all humans and, indeed, all living things share one tiny God-given oasis in the lifeless expanse of the Universe.

The Holy Family survived their escape by getting water at a desert



Enjoying the festivities

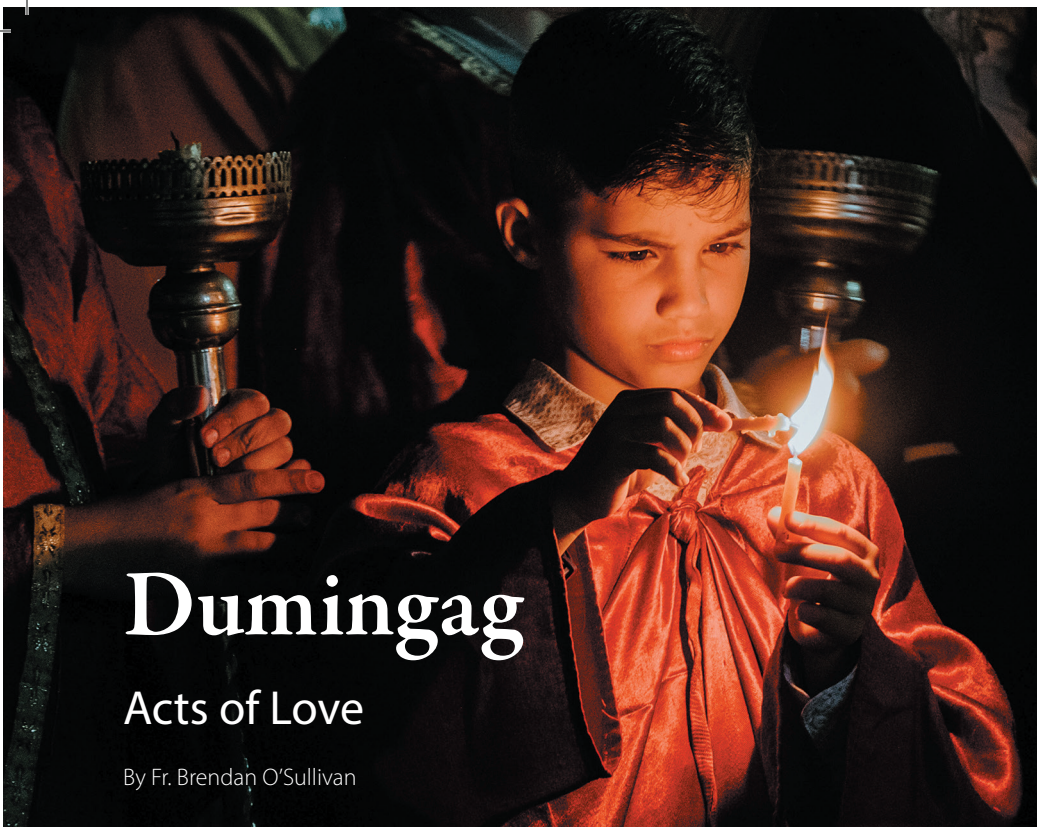


Crafters at the Christmas party

oasis. The mountainous homeland of the Subanen People is their nurturing oasis. After his traumatic experience in Marawi and after his long convalescence, Jemuel returned to his nurturing homeland where

he has clearly benefited in mind and body by working with a group of supportive crafters. CM

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



Dumingag

Acts of Love

By Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan

The novena of Masses is a wonderful expression of faith, tradition and community spirit in Filipino culture. It is a symbol of devotion and gratitude in anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Families develop their own unique ways to celebrate Christmas. Many have vivid memories of Christmas family rituals. The warmth and joy may even acquire an extra glow over the years. A Christmas I remember well is one that has acquired that increased glow over the years for me. It was over 50 years ago and my first Christmas in the Philippines.

Now I am more familiar with Posadas celebrated by Latinos and other novena celebrations before Christmas Day. Fifty years ago, I wasn't.

I had just arrived in Dumingag, a rural town in Mindanao in the Philippines. The Aguinaldo Masses (Simbang Gabi in other parts of the Philippines) were to begin the next day. This is a novena of Masses beginning December 16.

The pastor gave me the honor of celebrating the first Mass the next morning. "By the way, Mass begins at 4:30," he said nonchalantly. Half hoping he would volunteer to celebrate the Mass himself, I said, "I hope I wake up in time." "Don't worry, you will hear the bells," he replied. With that we retired.

The next thing I heard were two loud blasts. This was followed by three solid minutes of clanging sounds. It was 4 A.M. and time to get ready for Mass. The two loud blasts I later discovered came from firecrackers and the clanging sounds were produced by altar boys sledge hammering an empty gas can that served as the church bell. All this took place right outside my window.

I proceeded to make a quick five-minute meditation praying that somehow the merciful Lord would find it in His heart to forgive that Spaniard that started this custom of rousing a whole nation at such an ungodly hour.

Sufficiently renewed by this, I added a little thought of Christmas forgiveness for whoever had failed to fix our generator, leaving me to grope around in the dark. Light or no light I felt I had to shave. That meant frantically feeling around for a candle and searching various drawers for a match.

I shaved and then bandaged myself and headed over to the church wondering if anyone would actually be there braving the chill of early morning.

As Mass began at 4:30 A.M. there was only one gas lamp to give light to


the altar. But the church was almost full.

After Mass we had breakfast. By now the sun had risen. I was handed a long green object that had the shape of a banana. So, I dug in. Right away I figured something was wrong. On closer inspection I discovered that the green part was leaves which covered the edible part of the rice inside. Feeling a bit sheepish I noticed that everyone was consciously not looking.

Finally, around 6 A.M. I finally returned back to our house.

It took me a while to put the pieces together, and when I did it all made sense. The novena of Masses is a wonderful expression of faith, tradition and community spirit in Filipino culture. It is a symbol of devotion and gratitude in anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ.

As we turn to our own traditions during Advent and Christmas, let's remember why they matter.

They matter because they are founded on acts of love by those who have gone before us. The story continues and we all have a role to play. 

Columban Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan lives and works at St. Columbans, Nebraska.

The Light that Overcomes the Night

The Gift of Christ

By Columban Fr. Bob Mosher



Christmas night in 1983, Father Leo and I trudged up the long street bringing us up to our house in a working-class neighborhood of the capital city of Chile, Santiago. When we finally arrived at our street, children began running toward us.

It had been a rough, but hope-filled year. Christmas that year had the feel of ending a very long and dark time of fear, and of courage, a time of dark confusion, but also luminous hope. Everyone seemed weighed down, at the end of a year that we wanted to leave behind us for good.

Areas like our residential district of Peñalolén, rising on the foothills of the Andes Mountain range, were vulnerable to invasions of the small tanks and water-cannon vehicles of security forces, since most of our homes there were made of wood, with corrugated metal roofs. Bullets and tear-gas canisters easily pierced the walls.

The cat-and-mouse racing about of protestors and police during the long nights of bonfires and the banging of empty kitchen pots that year were exhausting. Searches through hospital emergency rooms and holding cells at police stations was a regular practice, along with funerals here and there throughout the city, which also

The neighbors came over and shook our hands, and we all wished each other “Feliz Navidad!”

often devolved into confrontations between masses of helmeted police and mourners.

We priests were often caught up in the middle of such events, observing the protests, witnessing the violence, providing first-aid stations at many chapels, accompanying the mourning

families of victims. I grew accustomed to the sound of machine-gun fire at close range, to holding a desk lamp over the scalp of a beaten protestor without fainting, while a doctor sutured a wound from a police baton, and other such tense moments.

This summer night, though, the children ran and screamed with glee that we were—finally!—arriving. The neighbors came over and shook our hands, and we all wished each other “Feliz Navidad!”

Small glass jars were used for glasses, filled with good Chilean red wine, and were raised in welcome, as the thickly wired grates over the hot coals were loaded with the pieces of chicken and beef, sausages and hot dogs, and the sliced rolls (just to toast them a little).

The sausages cooked more quickly and were placed in the rolls for passing around to everyone as appetizers before the main meal. Potato salad by

the buckets and thinly-sliced, soaked onions with cilantro on top were set out on the tables, covered with the tablecloths of a dozen different houses, and set with all the forks, knives and spoons that could be rounded up from up and down the street.

It was all in the open air, in the middle of a Southern Hemispheric summer night, and we all were happy to have the time to talk to one another, after the hectic year that was coming to a close.

The children were anxious to receive their festively-wrapped gifts, piled up near the Christmas tree—a bush, really, that had grown a sparse coat of pine needles, natural to the warm climate of central Chile, and was festooned with handmade paper ornaments, and an angel on top. The setting was perfect to accommodate

It was all in the open air, in the middle of a Southern Hemispheric summer night, and we all were happy to have the time to talk to one another, after the hectic year that was coming to a close.

everyone in the neighborhood, with a darkness that allowed for the stars to really shine out beautifully—a hall with a celestial ceiling, fit for a king’s birthday party.

The laughter and shouting, with Papa Noel (identical to our Santa Claus) distributing the gifts, rang out. The gifts were carefully calculated in number and size for every child, two gifts each, after collections were taken up among the neighbors weeks before by the organizing committee. Of course, extra gifts were on hand for any latecomers or young visitors casually invited at the last minute from other nearby neighborhoods—there were always a few unexpected guests to attend to at such gatherings.




The pieces of grilled chicken and slices of meat were plentiful, and we quickly gave thanks for this rare bounty. Father Leo spoke quietly in the hushed moment, of the God who was born among the poorest of the human family, living in solidarity with the homeless, the least regarded and those on the margins of society. A great “Amen!” went up, and the music from a pile of cassette tapes began to blare out from the portable stereo someone brought out, as we began the meal at the makeshift tables, benches and nearby rocks that were just right for sitting on.

Father Leo and I sat among the family members of the retired couple we rented our small home from. Don Juanito and Doña Raquel, using the customary honorific titles that their ages called for, were at the table as were their daughters and son, and their respective spouses.

The children didn’t stay seated for long, and were running around

with the other children. Theirs was probably the largest family at the gathering. The elderly couple had come to the area and built the first house, before there was a street or a neighborhood, the same thick adobe home Leo and I rented from them many years later.

We thus gently and warmly closed our celebrations that Christmas night, and as the rays of sunrise began to pierce through the peaks of the Andes above us, we beheld the glory of a people reconciled with God, with one another, and with all of Creation, in an endless new festivity of a hope-filled existence, content and open to gratefully accept the gift of Christ among them, with a future of greater justice and peace, hallmarks of God’s Reign. 

Columban Father Bob Mosher lived and worked in Chile for 30 years, and is now assigned to St. Columban’s Residence in Bristol, Rhode Island.

Children Are the Most Important of All

A Peaceful Revolution

By Fr. Shay Cullen



Christmas is to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the greatest man who ever lived, the one man that gives meaning and purpose and values to a more and more secular, materialistic life-style that has alienated children from their parents. Christmas is about children too, and it will be a lonely time for some families. Today many children live much of their childhood surfing on the internet, playing video games and entering dark digital forests where dangerous monsters lurk.

The internet can be a source of knowledge but for many more it is the source of mindless entertainment that estranges youth from family and friends and distracts them from engaging with society around them. Many are unable to understand the truth and the social realities of life. Few can talk openly heart to heart with their parents.

They exist in a world apart, silent and withdrawn. They can be negatively influenced, groomed for sexual abuse, or become victims of online abuse and sextortion. What young people need today is a blameless ideal superhero, a model they can believe in, one that performs miracles by helping humanity by doing good, standing for justice, teaching the truth, saving the children and inspiring others to help and protect them too. Spiderman or Superman lives in the imagination, but a human involved in direct action helping the poor or youth cope with the frustrations of life is a real hero.

That is a person doing good who believes with conviction that taking

actions like speaking the truth to power will challenge the leaders to change. The hero stands for the truth and knows and believes that justice and goodness will conquer and overpower the forces of evil and oppression. We need more heroes to set people free from poverty, from jails and from the oppressive controlling power of the ruling elite. They will be agents of change and, like Jesus of Nazareth, they will change the world from darkness to light. It is His birthday we celebrate because His words, deeds and His life and death have revolutionized the world.

Christian parents, pastors, priests, teachers and politicians need to cast aside the apathy and usual lifestyles and learn and be superheroes and community leaders for their children and youth by giving positive good examples by standing in solidarity with the poor. This Christmas they could organize youth groups to do good, like visiting innocent children jailed like animals behind bars in the youth jails. They can sit together and write to the politicians demanding the children be freed unless proven guilty of some serious crime. Parents should show the way by good example and be heroes to their children.

There are so many dangerous influences in the world over the internet that can brain-wash people and children into joining cults and allowing them to be enslaved as happened in Surigao Del Norte, Philippines. There are as many as a thousand children who were sexually abused and enslaved in so-called “child marriages,” now outlawed. They were sexually abused by leaders of a “cult” organization that had persuaded their parents to leave home and jobs and live in an enclave community in the remote hills of Surigao del Norte.

If the parents had been empowered and inspired with Gospel values, they would never be influenced to allow the criminals to capture their children and abuse many of them. We need leaders and people who will demand justice for these victims of abuse.

The teaching of Jesus offers us happiness based on caring for each other and the poor, helping the exploited people and lifting up the downtrodden, saving the sexually abused and enslaved. He is the liberator we ought to imitate and follow. He is the bringer of enlightenment, and He challenges all of us to promote and call for a revolution of the heart and mind by all.

That’s a peaceful revolution that will change society from the inside.


Spiderman or Superman lives in the imagination, but a human involved in direct action helping the poor or youth cope with the frustrations of life is a real hero.

He invites us to share the most important values that will transform society and humankind by having solidarity, compassion, empathy and understanding for the poor. He calls us to be working for truth and justice. This is what makes a life of justice and peace, harmony and goodness. We humans can live a life of dignity, respecting human rights, giving love and respect to our wounded neighbors like good Samaritan.

Surely that is what youth and most people desire in their inner hearts. They need to be inspired to reach out for such a life. His mission was to transform society from within, to have a revolution of mind and heart among the people. Every one of us has the

potential and ability to challenge evil in society and to change it by having a conviction that we can win. We have to believe with mind and heart that standing for the truth and doing good we will defeat evil. That is what Christmas should be all about.

Jesus Christ was so influential He persuaded so many people to follow Him, and He inspired people so much it made Him a powerful person of influence and a threat to the status quo and to the leaders like King Herod and the elite rulers of Jerusalem. They executed Jesus as a dangerous rebel. He was dangerous because of His revolutionary talk, like when one day He stood a child in front of a crowd and said that the child was the most important of all in the family of God. . . if we accept and respect a child then we respect and accept Him. That was revolutionary. It was a direct challenge to the arrogant and the powerful elites. They couldn’t accept that kind of transformative thinking and acting. He demanded that child abusers be held accountable; they rejected His teaching.

This is what Christmas is really all about- accepting Jesus of Nazareth and His mission as our own, following Him as our role model and wise teacher of values. We humans have the amazing ability to think independently for ourselves and know and understand the good and bad, and we have the free choice to choose to do good or do nothing to help suffering abused children and adults. How do we show our love to the wounded, abused and needy people? What choice will we make to help the needy this Christmas and into the year ahead? 

Columban Fr. Shay Cullen lives and works in the Philippines.

Nurturing Hope Together

God's Unwavering Presence

By Jao Resari

Every December 1, World AIDS Day is observed globally. Some might wonder why, despite over 40 years since the first reported AIDS cases and significant progress in medical research and effective treatment enabling people with HIV to lead long and healthy lives, we still struggle with this disease as a public health challenge.

In the latest reports from UNAIDS, global efforts to end HIV have achieved major milestones. New HIV infections have been reduced by 59% since the peak in 1995, with a nearly 70% decrease in AIDS-related deaths since 2004 and the lowest new HIV infection rates since the 1980s.

Despite this progress, AIDS still claims a life every minute. In 2022, there were 39 million people living with HIV, and 9.2 million people living with HIV did not have access to life-saving treatment. In the Asia-Pacific region alone, 6.5 million people are living with HIV with 300,000 new infections.

World AIDS Day serves as a reminder that HIV remains a pressing concern. There is an urgent need to prevent the spread of the virus, increase awareness of the impact of HIV on people's lives, fight stigma and discrimination, and improve the quality of life for people living with HIV.

This year, I worked in collaboration with migrant centers and selected

parishes to hold the second art competition for World AIDS Day as part of our ongoing HIV awareness and education campaign in the Hsinchu diocese. This year's theme, "Communities that Lead: Nurturing Hope together," inspired 48 participants from migrant and immigrant communities to share artistic messages of hope. Their artworks were featured in our online art exhibit on social media, receiving a lot of positive response from the online community.

The winning entry was entitled "The Enlightenment," created by Ms. Menchie Manikan. Her artwork depicted the message that "Communities that lead are engaged in the supportive act of nurturing hope for everyone. This is essential in cultivating a positive mindset and fostering resilience in life, especially during challenging times." Elements in the artwork represented knowledge, compassion, and acceptance, which as a whole symbolize enlightenment. These elements are the strongest allies of justice in the fight against HIV. Surrounding the cross is the AIDS Red Ribbon, showing that our hope is in Christ in breaking every chain of stigma that pulls us down. She also emphasized that "together, we can create a world free from stigma where every individual's dignity and rights are upheld."

I am truly humbled and inspired by the response and support our activities have received since we began our campaign. My heart is filled with gratitude in experiencing God's unwavering presence in every person I worked with and encountered throughout the whole experience. I pray that the Holy Spirit continue to guide us in building a community of hope where each person is able to live with dignity and love. **EM**



Columban lay missionary Jao Resari lives and works in Taiwan.



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

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



Recently, a huge influx of thousands of Venezuelan immigrants have entered Chile. Columban parishes have always welcomed the immigrants and tried to provide some material help (school supplies, warm clothing, blankets, and more) for them. We hope to continue providing relief for those who come to this "land of dreams." However, we know that the most important gift we have to share with them is our faith in the Risen Lord.

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

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

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- Direct Gifts of Cash and/or Securities
- Charitable Remainder Unitrust Gifts
- Charitable Bequest Gifts
- Gifts of Life Insurance Policies

The U.S. Treasury Department and Internal Revenue Regulations encourage charitable giving by allowing generous tax savings for individuals who make gifts in accordance with approved giving programs. A planned gift also offers you many potential advantages: the opportunity to increase spendable income, the elimination or reduction of capital gain taxes and possibly federal and state estate tax savings.

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

Wigilia

A Clean Slate

By Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan



During my time as a Columban missionary priest I have spent Christmas in many different places including the Philippines, China, Ireland and of course here in the United States. One Christmas I remember is with a family who invited me to share in their *wigilia*. That is Polish for vigil. It refers to the family meal shared on Christmas eve. For many Polish families *wigilia* is the major focus of the Christmas holiday season.

The meal traditionally is meatless since the Vigil of Christmas was a day of abstinence in former times. Now many families serve meat but with a meatless entrée to recall the past.

Different families develop their own unique customs to accompany the occasion. A door may be left open to welcome the “guest.” There is the extra place setting at the table for the Child Jesus.

It was obvious to me that this was a special time for the family. There was an air of anticipation from the father of the family to the five-year-old grandchild. There were preparations and last-minute adjustments, not the least of which was making room for the “stranger,” in this case me. A new son-in-law had been added the year before, so it was a bit of a squeeze when we finally sat down.

The most significant moment of the evening came at the beginning of the meal with the sharing of the *oplatek* (peace wafer). In Catholic tradition, the wafer surfaces deep memories. It reminds us of events in our religious history from manna in the desert through Jesus’ proclamation, “I am the bread of life.” To the Emmaus disciple’s recognition of Jesus in the “breaking of the bread.”

Beginning with the oldest member of the family, each person at the table shared a piece of their wafer with the other. As the family member broke off a piece and presented it to another, he or she looked back over the past year, apologized for any quarrels, bad behavior, slights and omissions, and promised to do better in the future. The spouse, child or parent was also thanked for the care and love given over the year. Clearly, the breaking and giving of the wafer is about forgiveness, reconciliation and thanksgiving all brought on by the “arrival of baby Jesus,” as the youngest expressed it.

There was a healthy mixture of respectful dignity and humor during the various presentations. Once or twice in a lighthearted fashion, a member of the family was reminded



of a transgression he or she had forgotten to ask forgiveness for. Some promises for the future were met with rolling eyes from others who it seems were going to have to see it to believe it. My host explained that while she was growing up she was amused at the annual reconciliation between a couple of members of her extended family because experience guaranteed that by New Year’s Day, trouble would have arisen. Yet as she pointed out, intermittent reconciliation is better than none, and next Christmas Eve wasn’t that far away.

She went on to say, I can’t remember ever anyone leaving the table on Christmas Eve not feeling better. It is a wonderful way to celebrate Christmas and look to the New Year. It gives everyone a clean slate, a new beginning.

I have no doubt that this family continues this tradition. Those who remember and continue a family tradition, the center of which is the presence of the newborn Child of Bethlehem are truly fortunate.

I have heard people talk about what they used to do to celebrate the birth of Christ when they were growing up. There is a rich variety of customs among different peoples. Sometimes these customs have been lost or forgotten. Perhaps the best gift we can give our families is to return to them. **EM**

Columban Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan lives and works in St. Columbans, Nebraska.

The Act of Giving

As a child growing up in Nebraska, Christmas was always a Winter Wonderland of cold and snow. This was further emphasized through the television Christmas specials such as *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* or *Santa Clause is Coming to Town* that continuously played throughout December. These specials were a “must watch” tradition building up to the celebration of Christmas with a sense of magical awe. Of course, as a child, the culmination of the celebration of Christmas came with the receiving of presents. The more presents, the better.

In December 1995, I first arrived in Chile and was greeted with sunny warm weather. Chile was entering its summer. December is like May in the United States. Schools are finishing their academic year. Families are making plans for summer vacation trips. Although there is joy in the air, it isn't the Christmas air that I was used to. Where was the snow? The cold? There were no lights and decorations in the streets or in front of houses. Also, there was no Christmas music in the stores or radio stations. It was all very subdued. I felt a little deflated to celebrate Christmas. At this point in my life, as an adult, the expectations of receiving presents had mostly gone away. I didn't ask for nor expect any. However, an incident with a teenager and her Christmas present made me deepen the significance of celebrating Christmas.

A few days after Christmas, Carla, who was about 15 years old and was a catechist in the parish, came to me asking for help. She was in an anxious state. Carla told me that she



FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. Al Utzig

lost the only present she received for Christmas from her mother. Carla believed she lost her present in my car when I took a group home after a meeting. We went to the car, and I asked her what we were looking for. Carla said a pen. I was taken aback. I thought of myself as a child and what type of reaction I would have had if my parents gave me a pen as a gift. I wouldn't be so happy and if I lost it, I wouldn't care. However, I looked at Carla and realized the importance of this simple present. For Carla, the pen was more than a simple pen. It




Of course, as a child, the culmination of the celebration of Christmas came with the receiving of presents. The more presents, the better.

symbolized her mother's love for Carla and the sacrifices she made for her. They were a simple humble family that didn't have much. I realized that as a child, I expected to receive numerous presents but did not value what they meant or who gave it to me. In short, I overlooked the relationship behind the act of giving. It made me think of how many times I didn't appreciate all that I had received in life, even with the smallest of things such as the air we breathe.

Sometime ago, I rewatched *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and realized how it embodied Carla's spirit. As the animated feature stated about Grinch's discovery: "Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little more." As for Carla's search, she did not find the pen in my car but did later find it in her house.

Merry Christmas!



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