

# Columban Mission

The Magazine of the Missionary Society of St. Columban

December 2025



# MERRY CHRISTMAS

# C O N T E N T S

Issue Theme – Christmas



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PUBLISHED BY THE COLUMBAN FATHERS

**COLUMBAN MISSION** (Issn 0095-4438) is published eight times a year. A minimum donation of \$15 a year is required to receive a subscription. Send address and other contact information changes by calling our toll-free number, by sending the information to our mailing address or by emailing us at [MISSIONOFFICE@COLUMBAN.ORG](mailto:MISSIONOFFICE@COLUMBAN.ORG).

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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. Kathleen Geaney

## Longing for Light

As I reflect in our small Columban community of three sisters living in the heart of Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest city, the words of the hymn, "Longing for light, we wait in darkness" come to mind. We live in a situation where this longing for light is very real and where both the longing and the hope are given vibrant expression all around us.

Beginning in October with Thaningyut, the end of Buddhist Lent and in November with Diwali, we participate with our neighbors from different faith communities in celebrating our belief and hope that light always overcomes darkness. Then in our Catholic community, we move towards Christmas.

A number of years ago, I was teaching English in a Buddhist monastery school. The majority of the students were Buddhist monks. One day the students asked me to tell them the story of Christmas. I began to tell the story of a young girl from a small village who was visited by a heavenly messenger. This was familiar territory for my students, who are very tuned into the world of the spirit. I described how this young woman was asked to make space in her heart and mind and body for the birth of a child.

I told of the bewilderment of this simple young woman and of her question, "how can this be?" Then the answer: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." And then of her "yes," her surrender to and trust in a Mystery, a presence, a reality beyond human understanding. "Here am I, let it be done to me," I told them of the birth of Jesus in a humble dwelling place, of the heavens opening and being filled with light, of the joy and amazement of the shepherds who were the poorest and most alienated in that society and yet were the first to recognize the birth of this King of Kings.

I told of the wise people who came from the East, these men who studied the stars and who followed the star until "they found the child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger." Yet they recognized Him and, falling down, they worshipped Him. As I finished the story these young monks put their hands together in reverence and said this is truly a noble person and we pay respect to Him.

As I told this story I was caught up in the wonder and amazement of my listeners. The story, so familiar to me began to radiate with life and light. I began to hear with new ears and see with new eyes. My prayer is that this Christmas we may experience a new something of the wonder and radiance I saw on the faces of those young monks. May we experience the Word who became flesh living among us now, a light shining in the darkness of our world, a light that can never be extinguished.

*Columban Sr. Kathleen Geaney lives and works in Myanmar (formerly Burma).*



# A Visit to the Tsukiji Church

## Heroic Suffering

By Fr. John Burger

**A** New Zealand Columban, Father Leo Schumacher, has been pastor of St. Joseph's Church in the Tsukiji neighborhood of central Tokyo, Japan, for the last several years. It is quite near St. Luke's International Hospital and only two subway stops away from the Ginza. With the relocation of the famous Tokyo fish market and the construction of the Olympic Village and a couple of other Olympic venues, the area has been seeing a lot of redevelopment.

The Church, which looks like a classical Greek temple, was constructed a hundred years ago, after the previous church building was wrecked by the 1923 Kanto earthquake and fire. The church survived the war and has served the parish well for ten decades, but a one-hundred-year-old building is hardly constructed with the most recent techniques to prevent destruction by earthquakes. So, in the last few years, the Church has been strengthened and almost entirely rebuilt.

Because of its convenient location, a good number of Catholic tourists who happen to be staying in hotels in the central business district of Tokyo find their way to St. Joseph's. There really are not that many Catholic Churches in the area. And, apart from St. Ignatius at the entrance to Sophia University, most of them are not in prominent locations. Although the Catholic Church in Japan is still relatively small, it does have an amazing and glorious history dating all the way back to August 15, 1549, when St. Francis Xavier stepped onto Japanese soil at Kagoshima. He spent less than two years in Japan but had a major impact. Other Jesuits took up the mission in Japan, and the first church was constructed at Nagasaki in 1569. Progress was quick, but there was pushback. In 1587 there an edict was issued that restricted Christianity and all missionaries were ordered to leave the country. But even with the growing oppression of Christians, the number of Catholics in the country continued to increase and surpassed 300,000 people. The authorities feared they would pave the way for European colonialism.

On February 5, 1597, 26 men and boys were martyred by crucifixion on a hill in Nagasaki. In 1614, an edict banning Christianity was proclaimed, and systematic persecution began up and down the country. Notice boards announcing the ban were set up at the entrances to towns from 1618 and were not removed until 1873. Included on the notice boards



St. Joseph's Church

were bounties being offered for reporting Christians to the authorities:


- Priest: 500 silver pieces
- Brother/seminarian: 300 silver pieces
- Lay Christian: 100 silver pieces
- Former Christian who has returned to the faith: 300 silver pieces

At that time, fifty silver pieces would have been enough to buy enough rice to feed one person for one year.

Then on December 4, 1623, 50 more people were martyred at Edo (now Tokyo). Fourteen years later, the so-called Christian era came to a violent end with 37,000 people killed by the Shogun regime at Shimabara near Nagasaki. From that point, Christian practice in Japan went underground for the next two and a half centuries.

During the period of persecution, outlawed Christians created statues of the Virgin Mary disguised as the Buddhist deity Kannon holding a child. Such an image appeared to be Kannon, the goddess of mercy, but could also be Mary and the infant Jesus. A cross would sometimes be carved in the back of the statue.

One method of enforcing the prohibition of Christianity was what were called *fumi-e* or step pictures. These were images of Christ or the Blessed Mother, which the authorities of the Tokugawa military government required any suspected Christians to step on to prove they were not adherents of the prohibited religion. At first, paper drawings of Jesus or Mary were used, but as these were easily damaged, wooden plaques and metal reliefs were eventually employed.

To share some of that history with foreign visitors to the parish, St. Joseph's in Tsukiji has placed several objects on display to tell the story of the hidden Christians and their heroic suffering. 

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Columban Fr. John Burger lives and works in the U.S.



# 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.***

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# Eco-Christmas Crib

## Merry and Blessed

By Fr. John McEvoy

People still ask me, “Do you miss it (Fiji), Father?” The answer is always “of course I do.” The reason why I do, is not always easy to explain. However, coming up to Christmas and parish preparations for the Holy Season stand out in my mind.

During my last few years as a Columban missionary in Fiji, I was pastor of St. Pius X, Parish Raiwaqa. Raiwaqa Parish is the most densely populated, smallest and economically poorest parish in the Archdiocese of Suva. Raiwaqa, a parish on the outskirts of Suva City, grew out of the felt need by the housing authority and dynamic Columban missionaries like Fr. Dermot Hurley to provide affordable housing for low wage earners and for people coming into the city for work and for the education of their children back in the late 1960s. Living conditions haven’t improved much over the years, but more and more people kept coming. There are now five large squatter settlements within the confines of the Parish boundaries. I loved the four years that

I spent there before returning home to Ireland.

I was assisted by a team of well-trained lay leaders and a Columban lay missionary, Marjorie Engcoy from the Philippines. Marjorie was a creative and skilled person in recycling waste material into beautiful works of art. She trained the youth and the ladies of the parish to produce useful and usable products from things like plastic bottles and old newspapers, etc. She started a small organization called Sema for the women of the parish, which means “we together.” After sending their children off to school, these women had nothing to do in their homes — so they came along to the parish for companionship and to be taught new skills which would help them to be more sustainable and improve family standards in their homes. They also became efficient in backyard gardening, growing their own vegetables and plants for sale. The purpose of the Seme Project was to increase awareness and ecological conversion, after the call of Laudato Si.



Christmas 2016 was special when Marjorie and the youth of the parish undertook to create an outdoor Eco Christmas Crib. This challenged the parish to hear the call for ecological conversion even louder. Ninety-five percent (95%) of the crib was made from eco-friendly and recycled materials. Marjorie, with the youth of St. Pius X, spent over a month creating the papier-mache statues, which were the main highlight of the eco-crib. The rest was built with scrap and used timber and bamboo strips; the statues were made of old newspapers; the Star was made from recycled plastic bottle cups adorned with LED lights.

Of course, another aim and purpose of the eco-crib was to evangelize and proclaim a deeper meaning of Christmas as opposed to what is advertised commercially. The crib was built outdoors to catch the attention of passers-by, inviting reflection on what humanity has done to its only home and pray for an open mind and heart to look for alternatives to halt the harm already done to our common home, the earth, so that the next generation may have a planet that they can call their home. The eco-crib got widespread attention and appeared in





the local newspapers, as well as airtime on the local radio and television channels.

The eco-crib was blessed and lit on the day the parish held its parish carol night. A child was chosen to turn the lights on after the solemn blessing.

The parish carol service night is huge and is looked forward to by the entire parish. Each community or sector in the parish dressed in Christmas attire performs a few carols and brings along presents of foodstuffs for the members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society to distribute later to poor families around the parish and to those dwelling in the squatter settlements.


The parish choir can be heard practicing Christmas hymns and carols for weeks beforehand. The Christmas spirit is in the air long before Christmas night. The men of the parish spend at least a week cleaning the church from top to bottom – inside and outside in readiness for the Holy Night. The CCD (Catechism) teachers are busy training the children for their Christmas play — to be dramatized during the liturgy on Christmas Eve night, replacing the Gospel and sometimes even the homily!



The last few days before Christmas, I visit the sick and house-bound — many of them not living in comfortable conditions. They receive the sacrament of Reconciliation, and Christ will be born to them anew in the Eucharist. I am often accompanied by members of the St. Vincent de Paul with substantial food parcels, so they can also have a merry and blessed Christmas with the rest of us.

Christmas is family time, a time when absent members are remembered and when many return to be at home for Christmas. Raiwaqa is no exception. To prepare for the return of absent members, every small household erects a “vakatunaloa,” a makeshift lean-to covered with tarpaulin or galvanized sheeting to enlarge their small homes to make room and welcome for returning

sons, daughters, and grandchildren. Turkey and ham will not be on the menu for the Christmas dinner, but every house will have a Lovo — where foodstuff, chickens, fish, beef and root crops are wrapped in tinfoil and coconut leaves placed on hot stones in an earth-type oven — covered again with more banana leaves and buried in the earth for about three hours. When it is dug out again, everything is perfectly cooked, and all the natural juices are contained in each dish served. Families sit around in their vakatunaloa or just outdoors under swaying palm trees, enjoying the season’s family feast of Christmas.

Do I still miss it? Of course I do! 

Columban Fr. John McEvoy lives and works in Australia.



# Christmas Cards That Make Love Visible

Great Joy

By Fr. Vincent Busch

**T**he Subanens are an indigenous people whose ancestral habitat is in the highlands of western Mindanao in the Philippines. I have worked with Subanen artists for 25 years with the help of the Columban Sisters who have been living and working with the Subanen people since 1983. Over time I came to appreciate just how deeply the Subanen people revere their mountainous homeland and how closely they interact with the forest, streams, and soil of their habitat through their music, dance, and rituals.

For centuries their bountiful habitat provided the Subanens with food, water, herbal medicines, and materials for their household needs. Using resources from their habitat they cleverly shaped wood, grass, rattan, bamboo, and palm leaves into baskets, tools, furniture, mats, hats,

musical instruments as well as the walls and roofs of their homes. Impressed by their crafting skill I worked with Subanen artists to form a ministry called Subanen Crafts.

As part of our ministry, we craft Christmas cards whose images link the Nativity story with the life of the Subanen people. We do so by showing Mary and Joseph doing things that Subanen parents do every day for their each other and their families ... carrying babies in shoulder slings up steep hills, gathering and cutting firewood, cooking over open fires, fetching water in buckets, washing clothes in basins, sharing food while sitting on the floor, washing their babies and putting them to sleep.

Such ordinary acts of kindness make love visible, especially when people have to do them in dangerous

circumstances like those faced by Mary and Joseph, giving birth in the harsh conditions of a stable and then fleeing into a desert to escape a death squad.

Subanen families are accustomed to dangerous situations. Like Mary, Subanen mothers give birth in rudimentary conditions. And, like the Holy Family, Subanen families have had to quickly flee from their homes to escape armed groups during times of conflict.

More recently, Subanens have had to leave their homeland because their habitat has been so degraded by unregulated logging and subsequent soil erosion that it can no longer provide them with adequate water, fuel, building materials and arable land.

Global warming and degraded ecosystems are displacing people worldwide. Columban Fr. Teakare



Christmas cards by the  
Subanan Crafters

Betero, who works with us here in Mindanao, was born on the island nation of Kiribati. He tells us that whole islands in Kiribati are being engulfed by severe storms and rising sea levels due to climate change. Like the Subanens, families in Kiribati will be forced to seek homes and livelihoods elsewhere.


The islands of Kiribati are vanishing. The forests, rivers, and farmlands of the Subanens are vanishing. The Earth's tropical forests, coral reefs, wetlands, grasslands, river systems, and arable lands are vanishing. Even desert oases are rapidly disappearing.

These endangered habitats are the wellsprings of the Earth's beauty and bounty. In our Christmas cards, we framed the caring work of Mary and Joseph within the Earth and its Solar System to show how God's caring Love embraces and nurtures us within the ecosystems of our graced planet — our tiny oasis in the desert of space.

With the birth of Jesus, God's Love became flesh and dwelt among us. The caring life and death of Jesus made God's love visible to His followers. After His Resurrection, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to form His followers into

communities that continue to make God's Love visible to the world.

The Christmas Star guided the Magi to Jesus. As followers of Jesus, we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit and so we pray...

"Come, Holy Spirit. Guide us, in our work and prayer, to build communities that care for each other and the wounded Earth, ... communities that proclaim tidings of great joy for all people, our caring God is with us." 

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



# The Birth of Jesus

Trust and Courage

By Fr. Malachy Hanratty

## Joseph and Mary Set Out in Trust

Let us increase our thanks and pray for courage as we think about Joseph and Mary setting out in trust into the unfamiliar and unknown. I pause at, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” I ponder the implications. Augustus, a peace-loving Emperor, controlled so many diverse and distant countries and peoples.

Thus, communications, travel, and interaction were advanced. But seeing “All went to their own towns to be registered” makes me realize it causes hardship for Joseph and Mary. They “went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David, called Bethlehem.” Joseph will not leave Mary’s side. But I imagine hardships on that difficult journey, especially for a pregnant woman away from family, friends, and surroundings. Yet here we see them journeying on doggedly in trust. Next, finding the shock of “no place for them in the inn,” I see them with trustful prayer and stamina searching for a place to stay.

And finally, they find a stable that they are allowed to use. In it, Mary gives birth to Jesus, the Savior of the World. With loving care, she “wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.”

## Sharing the Good News

Next, I ponder God again doing the unthinkable. He does not show special signs of His power and presence. The chosen messengers of this “Good News” are Shepherds who lived rough in the fields. In their ragged, smelly, grubby clothes, they were always treated with suspicion and unwelcome in towns. They were even forbidden to enter



synagogues. However, here we see them as attentive, reliable workers “keeping watch over their flock by night.” But they lacked every other quality for an ideal messenger. An “angel of the Lord stood before them,” and “the glory of the Lord shone around them,” and “they were terrified.” The angel gives them this message: “Do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”


## Meeting the Baby

So with trust and courage, they step out: “Let us go and see.” They go searching. I imagine them quietly looking here and there and then cautiously approaching a possible place — a stable. I hear a shepherd diffidently, politely call out, “Excuse us, but we have been sent.” Mary and Joseph, with awe, gratitude, trust and happiness, are prayerfully trying to face the mystery this special child brings. Now they are surprised by the shepherds’ arrival. But they welcome them. They listen with wonder to the shepherds’ story and usher them up close around the baby. I notice the shepherds’ awkward shyness and embarrassment at their own unkempt

appearance disappearing. They are so reverent in their approach to the baby. This also increases the wonder, gratitude and joy in Mary and Joseph. The shepherds’ presence is a sign of God’s mysterious working in hearts quietly behind the scenes. And as the shepherds gaze at the baby, Mary and Joseph see the change that is taking place in these rough, awkward men — a new softness, a deepening

gratitude and desire to help. I see them gradually filling with excitement, thankfulness and the desire to run out and spread the news.

## Reflection

This reminds me of a memorable experience. In Japan, I had a “praying Scripture” group of mostly newly baptized Christians. For fifteen minutes, I would tell them of the awareness I got from pondering and praying a section of Scripture. Then we would all, in silence, ponder and reflect on it for another fifteen minutes. Then, in groups of about three, they would share for fifteen minutes on discoveries each had experienced. Finally, the whole group was invited to recount an unusually impressive experience or an unusually impressive experience or discovery that pondering this Scripture had generated. I remember one rather shy and quiet lady excitedly exclaiming, “But He had to be born in a stable. How else could the shepherds visit Him; they would not have been allowed into the Inn.” I had never myself thought or even heard it expressed like that before. Pondering and sharing with others always helps. This is what the Scripture said to me: but what is it saying to you? 

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Columban Fr. Malachy Hanratty lives in Ireland.



The Christmas party

# Christmas Hopes and Fears

## Supporting the Subanen

By Fr. Vincent Busch

*“O little town of Bethlehem  
How still we see thee lie  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The Everlasting Light  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight”*

This Christmas carol proclaims that “the hopes and fears” of all human history met when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Each year, the hopes and fears of the Subanen crafters meet at our annual Christmas gathering.

I have been working with Subanen crafters for 25 years, and every year we gather at Christmas time to share food, fun, and simple gifts. Our yearly gathering brings to mind our Christmas cards, whose images depict how Mary and Joseph cared for each other and for Jesus. Our cards show the Holy Family experiencing the same hopes and fears that Subanen families face.

One fear faced by Subanen parents is the likelihood of having to leave their families and homeland to find work. The major cause of that fear can be traced to the plunderous exploitation of their forested habitat by unregulated logging operations. Without their forest and its streams, the Subanen people were deprived of a steady source of food, housing, water, medicines, and income.

One of the Subanen crafters is Janelyn Musdan. She has two daughters, Bebe, age 10, and Chenchen, age 8. Two years ago, Janelyn made the hard decision to leave her children to become a domestic worker for a family in Qatar. During her stay there, she worked 18 hours a day, every day, with no days off. She came home for Christmas but will return soon to Qatar.

Like Janelyn, many Filipinos work overseas as nurses, caregivers, and domestics in the hope of giving their

families a better future. In two years, Janelyn was able to save enough money to buy a tiny plot of land in her barrio. Over the next two years, Janelyn hopes to make enough to build a small house on that plot.

Jemuel Rote also came to our Christmas gathering. In 2017, he hoped to help his parents and siblings by working in Marawi City in Mindanao, Philippines. Soon after Jemuel arrived in Marawi, his hope turned into fear for his life. He found himself caught up in the conflict between a violent jihadist group and the Philippine Army. He was shot in the leg while trying to escape that conflict. His wounded leg became so deeply infected that it needed to be amputated. Fortunately, the Columban Sisters and their staff found a good doctor who was able to save his leg. He is now helping his family by working as a Subanen crafter.



Jemuel crafting



Subanen crafters creating cards



Juvelyn with Rhea Hope and Rhea Faith.



Juvelyn and the twins in 2019



Andonie

Juvelyn Vargas has been a Subanen crafter for 16 years. In 2019, she gave birth to two tiny girls long before they were due. Juvelyn then spent weeks in the hospital watching her babies struggle for life in an incubator. During her anxious vigil, her fellow crafters provided Juvelyn with food and clean clothing. Upon their release, Juvelyn and her husband Raffy finally got to hold their two tiny girls.

Juvelyn attended our latest Christmas gathering with her daughter Angel and her healthy twin girls. Her twins are fittingly named Rhea Faith and Rhea Hope.

During our gathering, we remembered Andonie Balives, one of the four original Subanen crafters. Last year, Andonie died with her

unborn child during a difficult childbirth.

Twenty-four years ago, Andonie hiked for hours from her remote hillside home to attend our first crafting workshop. It was during that workshop that I noticed her smiling in front of an electric fan. She was surprised by a device that could create the wind.

Andonie's children, Barnebe, 9 and Melanie, 14 are now cared for by their extended family, which includes Subanen crafters. Andonie was building their tiny hillside home when she died.

For decades, Columban missionaries have experienced first-hand the fears of the Subanen People and have worked with them to fulfill their hopes for their families and for their homeland. Their hopes and fears apply to all who live in

Mindanao. We need to embrace their ability to live within the limits of their habitat if we hope to restore the beauty and bounty of our damaged island.

And so together with all who seek the fullness of life here in Mindanao, we pray to the Holy Spirit to enkindle in us a love that cares for our families and for the God-given habitat we all share:

*"Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful*

*And enkindle in us the fire of your love.*

*Send forth your spirit, and all things shall be created*

*And you will renew the face of the Earth."*

(Psalm 104) **CM**

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



# Joyous Christmas Season

## Held Together in the Heart of God

By Fr. Timothy Mulroy

“How do you plan to celebrate Christmas?” I asked Fr. Peter, who having spent more than fifty years on mission, was then in need of ongoing nursing care due to various age-related ailments.

“I suppose I’ll celebrate it in the same quiet way as I have done these past several years. Growing up there were nine of us, now we’re down to three. My younger sister has dementia, and my older brother has all kinds of health problems. And, as you can see, I’m just hanging in, so the best place for me to spend Christmas is here in my own room where I won’t be any trouble to anyone.”

“Since returning home from mission a few years ago, my world has become smaller and smaller. I had been away so long that I didn’t know the younger generations back in my hometown. Besides, my mind and my memory are not nearly as sharp as they used to be. Then, when my eyesight declined, I had to give up driving. Now my balance is poor, so I’m generally confined to this place. I seldom go out, and when I do, I don’t know anyone.”

Then, after a pause during which he adopts a mischievous smile, Fr. Peter continues, “No matter, every

year, I look forward to Christmas — for several weeks I make a grand tour around this country and across the world to meet my family and neighbors, as well as parishioners and friends from my missionary days.”

“It’s a strange thing to say but I begin my preparations for Christmas at Halloween. During the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls we bring to mind the deceased, but I need more than two days to remember all those who crossed my path and have already gone home to God ... so throughout the month of November I spend a few minutes each day recalling the

names of four or five people who are deceased, and I jot down their names and say a little prayer for them, so that by the end of November I might have 150 or even 200 names on that list. The truth is, at this stage of my life, I know a lot of people who have crossed over to the far shore — and those whom I know on this shore are becoming fewer! Anyway, it helps me to look back over my life, remember those that meant so much to me and are now on that far shore — maybe they can help me on the last leg of my journey so that I can cross over safely and join them.”

“At the start of Advent, my focus changes from the deceased to the living. Each day, I recall a few people to whom I write a Christmas card or make a phone call— and as I jot down their names on my list, I say a little prayer for each one of them and their family. I do the same after I open each Christmas card — I ask God to bless the sender and their loved ones with peace and joy during the Christmas season. Again, I have 150 or maybe 200 on that list, though many of the

younger generations, including my great-grandnephews and nieces, I know only by name.”

“I try to keep the Christmas spirit alive until the Feast of the Epiphany. It helps that a few nephews and nieces drop by to visit me after they have celebrated Christmas with their own families. And then there are always a few Christmas cards that arrive after the New Year. I add them to my display of Christmas cards here in my room as they remind me not only of those who sent them, but also of places and events in my past life.”

“Even though I spend my days here in my bedroom, between the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of the Epiphany, it feels as if my world expands as I recall each day some people and places from my life’s journey. I am grateful that I have lived in various places, met many people, and have had all kinds of experiences, both happy and sad. I have some regrets, but my overwhelming feeling is one of gratitude. When I pray with all those faded memories, I come to think that there is no such thing as near or

far, no such thing as past or future, because everything and everyone is being held together in the heart of God — and that belief gives me great consolation and joy throughout the Christmas season.”

A few months after this conversation with Fr. Peter, a sudden, serious illness resulted in him crossing over to the far shore. There, he no longer dimly recalls people and places, but rather sees face to face all those whom he had encountered in various locations along the path of life; there he no longer has just a partial grasp of all the twists and turns on his life’s journey, but rather sees and appreciates how God guided and cared for him at every stage of the road. What a delightful homecoming!

And what a joyous Christmas season Fr. Peter must now be experiencing, not just between the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of the Epiphany, but all year round! ❧

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Columban Fr. Timothy Mulroy lives and works in Britain.



# Advent

## A Call to Open the Inn of Our Hearts

By Nathalie Marytsch

Advent, a unique time of waiting and preparation in the liturgical year, can mirror the anticipation Mary felt as she carried the baby Jesus in her womb. For many across the world, this joyful season is marked by family gatherings, festive celebrations, planned meals, and the excitement of children eagerly awaiting their Christmas presents. The vibrant glow of colorful lights, shiny ornamented trees, and the sweet sound of carols fill the air, creating an atmosphere of warmth and festivity. During these four weeks, Christians are invited to reflect on the central themes of Advent: hope, faith, joy, and peace — each bringing deeper meaning to this season.

Undoubtedly, 2024 has been another year when the cry of the poor has been heard loud and clear. But have we, as communities and societies, truly heard it? Have we acted to bring about change or to challenge the structures that perpetuate the oppression and suffering of vulnerable people?

The tragic loss of innocent lives continues in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, a conflict that


has spread beyond Gaza and Israel, affecting neighboring countries. Political instability in parts of Africa, Asia and South America has further contributed to the displacement of millions of people, many forced to flee their homes, while others cross borders in search of sanctuary. The weight of this suffering - the cry of the poor and oppressed migrants - bears heavily upon us all. It raises urgent and difficult questions about personal and societal responsibility to respond — not only with words, but with meaningful actions.

News broadcasts and countless home-made videos continue to document the immense destruction and human suffering in Gaza. Thousands of people have been internally displaced, not just once, but repeatedly. This tragic reality resonates deeply with the stories of so many refugees I have accompanied as a missionary in Britain, as they too have endured uprootedness, pain and uncertainty.

As I reflect on Advent and the role of Mary as a mother-to-be, I can't help but think of Iqra — not her real name

— and her harrowing escape from a war-torn homeland. Her journey took her across scorching deserts, through the perilous waters of the Mediterranean, and across numerous borders in her search for safety. She is not unique; countless others have traveled this treacherous path before and after her. Some have made it to safety, while many others have tragically lost their lives in the journey.

For Iqra, this time of waiting has stretched into years of trying to gather the necessary evidence to present to the authorities, all in the hope of being recognized as a refugee. Her personal Advent has been filled with countless moments of worry and anxiety. Despite her efforts to remain hopeful, the long years of waiting have gradually shattered each hope that she might be granted sanctuary here and eventually be reunited with her son.

There are many Iqras in our world today. As we prepare to enter the Advent season, let us remember those who are suffering. May we never turn a blind eye to their cry, nor allow ourselves to become numb or overwhelmed by the magnitude of their pain. Instead, let us make room in the inn of our hearts, welcoming each of these Iqras, both men and women, who seek refuge in a world often indifferent to their plight. For they too are deserving of celebrating the coming of the great light ... “the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.” (Mt 4:16) 



Nathalie Marytsch (second from left) with her husband Mauricio Silva, former Columban lay missionary Sophia Ting (left), and Faith in Action Volunteer Toby Oyedele.

Columban lay missionary Nathalie Marytsch lives and works in Britain.



# 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.

- Donor Advised Fund Gifts
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- 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](mailto:donorrelations@columban.org), call us toll-free at (877) 299-1920, or visit [www.columban.org](http://www.columban.org). The Missionary Society of St. Columban treasures your support and is committed to the stewardship of your gifts.

# Come, Lord Jesus, Come

## Listen Mindfully

By Sr. Rebecca Conlon



Advent this year seems to have a different flavor from any other. It seems that we are all confused in a bewildering world as wars escalate despite efforts at peace, including protests, international delegations for ceasefires, and prayer.

In Europe, we have the war between Russia and Ukraine, resulting in meaningless destruction and horror. In the Middle East, the war is escalating between Israel and Palestine and spilling out in all directions.

Refugees all over the world are fleeing and seeking shelter and hospitality, which can be in short supply — as we know from the “flight into Egypt” — and we, too, experience this reality on our own doorsteps today.

Mother Earth is suffering from floods, droughts, and famine of

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*“I wait in Mary — darkness, faith’s walled place, with hope’s expectancy of nativity.”*

~ JESSICA POWERS

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massive proportions due to global warming. Where do we start? Where do we find hope? What kind of future are we handing on?

When I was a novice, the book *The Woman Wrapped in Silence* by Fr. John Lynch was a bestseller — a classic epic poem about Mary’s response to God’s intervention in her life. We sat piously with Mary, wrapped in silence as she walked around the dusty roads of Palestine, wondering about what God had asked of her and pondering many

things in her spacious heart, open to God, while waiting.

I think we can resonate with her now, wondering, pondering and waiting for a glimmer of hope, trying to believe that the light will overcome the darkness in our fractured world. We look helplessly at the women of Palestine on our screens, totally bewildered. Mary was bewildered and “perplexed,” asking, “How can this be?” and then the Scripture tells us that “the angel left her.” Now she had to allow God to lead her outside of her comfort zone onto a countercultural path at great cost.

Jessica Powers wrote about Advent:

“I wait in Mary — darkness, faith’s walled place, with hope’s expectancy of nativity.”

As we approach Advent, we hold our splintered world as the cradle, knowing that the Word who pitched His tent among us promised to be with us always. His presence is everywhere. Let us mindfully listen for His steps.

Richard Rohr constantly reminds us that we are to welcome the Universal Christ, the Cosmic Christ, the Christ who is forever being born in the human soul and into history. This is the mystery we need to make room for and why we need to wrap ourselves in silence, to be quiet enough, as Tagore says: “Have you heard his silent steps? He ever comes, every moment, every age...” Let’s nurture this mystery and be led.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. [CM](#)

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Sr. Rebecca, from Ireland, is a member of the Missionary Sisters of St. Columban. She began her mission in Korea as an occupational therapist before transitioning to congregational services, including formation. After spending 33 years in Pakistan, where she worked pastorally with the Christian community and engaged in a dialogue of life and work with Muslims, she is now adjusting to life in Ireland. Dialogue was central to her mission approach. Additionally, she served on the Congregation Central Team for the past six years while residing in Pakistan.

# The Mystery of Christmas

## Healed in His Presence

By Sr. Susanna Choi



Some years ago, on Christmas morning, I met an old woman in an Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) camp in Myanmar (formerly Burma). This is her story. Three times in her life she was forced to flee for survival.

First, during World War II, when she was just a couple of months old, her parents had to flee with other villagers from Japanese soldiers. They spent a night hiding in a swamp watching their village burn. When she would cry, her parents were terrified that her cries would lead the soldiers to where they and the other villagers were hiding.

The second time she was young married woman and had to flee again, this time with her young children,

deep into the jungle. Her husband had already been killed as civil war raged. She suffered greatly during those years. And finally, she told me, “Here I am in my 80s in this IDP camp. Once again, I have lost everything as my whole village was burnt to the ground. We fled our homes without taking anything.”

I wondered what was going on inside her — perhaps a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. I asked myself, “What does Christmas mean for her?” Similarly, every day we learn from the media and newspapers about the migration of people fighting for their lives and survival due to conflict, war and the global climate crisis.

Countless migrants arrive by various unsafe means — trucks, airlines, ships and boats — with many lives being lost while crossing the seas around our world. Moreover, the human tragedy is that the arrival of migrants is often unwelcome despite their vulnerability, insecurity, and trauma.


They frequently face rejection and discrimination and their dignity as human beings is often not recognized or respected. Considering this, I wonder, “What does the Christmas message tell us?”

“Now it happened that, while they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2: 6-7)

In the same way, those who receive and welcome migrants are often disturbed, discomfited and challenged by their differences, their unfamiliar language, culture, values and lifestyles.

Yet, the courage to reach out with openness, hospitality, and acceptance uncovers feelings of tenderness, compassion and solidarity that nurture, enrich and expand the beauty and sacredness of humanity.

In our fast-changing world — full of complexity, diversity, competitiveness, confusion and busyness — the mystery of Christmas calls each of us into silence and solitude to welcome Jesus, newly born into the manger of our own inmost souls.

It is here we can be healed in the presence of the Prince of Peace and hear in our inmost hearts, “he or she who welcomes you welcomes me.” (Matt 10:40-42) And so hope and love are born again among us. Again, I am challenged to ask, “What does the Christmas message mean to me personally today?” 

Columban Sr. Susanna Choi lives and works in Myanmar.

# Wedding Ceremony in Pakistan

## A Gospel Opportunity

By Fr. Louie Ybañe

In an Islamic country like Pakistan, Christmas doesn't cause much of a stir for the majority of people. However, it does matter to many Christians, as it represents a celebration of profound faith and a proud adherence to their unique religious identity. A wedding is a different story. From December to February, driving to the villages can be slowed down by convoys of cars following a white decorated vehicle, often accompanied by a truck loaded with people dancing to traditional Sindhi music or a drumbeat while traveling along the road. They call this the "barat," or the groom's wedding party, as they head towards the bride for the wedding ceremony. When you see this on the road, the wedding season is on.

Most of the Parkari Kohli people have a modest wedding compared to others, but even the most modest one requires significant effort, considering their economic background. Some families borrow money to meet their expenses. For them, one of the parents' most important responsibilities is to arrange a marriage for their children. It seems to offer security for a person, especially daughters, to secure their future through marriage. Most marriages tend to happen at a young age. Many girls are married off by their parents as soon as they turn 18, and some even attempt to marry them as early as 15. Marriage in Pakistan is always a family affair. It is mostly the parents and some relatives who decide who their children marry.


For the Parkari community, days before the wedding, there is a ritual called "Tapna." It is of Hindu origin, but

the missionaries, with the help of Parkari Kohli Christians, have adapted an enculturated Christian liturgy. Traditional elements and materials that hold significant meaning for the community are blessed and used in the rite. The blessing of a sitting place for the betrothed follows this.

The room would be draped in cloth mats, mostly hand-stitched with geometric patterns, on which the bride or groom will sleep during this rite of passage. As Christianity touches the originally Hindu rite, elements like the cross, the Bible, and religious images are placed in one corner of the room. Traditionally, this practice would continue for fifteen days, but recently, the number of days has been reduced to only a week. It is a special time for the bride and the groom, as it can serve as a period of spiritual and personal preparation for the important change they are about to undergo. The bride or groom will be confined to their houses, most often in a particular room for their protection, allowing them to prepare for this significant rite of passage. The rituals convey affection from the family and also provide protection against evil influences. Family members try to be at their father's house during this time for the rituals and to celebrate the joys of the occasion.

As I officiate at tapnas to commence this sitting-in rite, I often reflect on what occurs during the following days. The young woman or man enters that liminal space, transitioning from single to married life. What do these rites signify for them? And what is their personal and spiritual readiness to accept another person, who in most cases is a stranger?

Moreover, the girl must instantly join a new family and learn to get along with them at a very young age. Most of our girls marry into Hindu families, and likely without visitation from a priest or regular catechism, they may be drawn back to their Hindu roots.

Tapnas and the rites that take place in the days leading up to the marriage rite offer an opportunity for the Gospel values to penetrate the lives of those we prepare, especially at a young age. This requires a greater understanding of the rites and their values, but it is equally significant for ministers of the Gospel to make regular visits to ensure that the Gospel values are preached and sought after within these important rituals. 



Wedding preparation

Columban Fr. Louie Ybañez lives and works in Pakistan.

# A Christmas Greeting to Cherish

As the holiday season wraps its warm embrace around us once again, it's a time to pause, reflect, and embrace the true magic of Christmas. It's a time when the world seems to slow down, and we are reminded of the things that truly matter: love, joy, peace, and togetherness. Christmas is not just a holiday on the calendar, but a season that invites us to connect with one another, to share laughter, and to create memories that will last a lifetime.

For some, Christmas is a time of great celebration — surrounded by family and friends, singing carols, and sharing festive meals. The twinkling lights on the tree, the scent of pine and cinnamon in the air, and the sound of familiar songs filling our homes evoke a sense of nostalgia, taking us back to simpler times. For others, it might be a quieter, more reflective time, where the spirit of the season still shines brightly through acts of kindness, moments of gratitude, and a peaceful sense of hope.

Wherever you find yourself this Christmas, may the season bring you comfort and joy. As the snow gently falls outside, or the warm glow of the fire crackles within, may you feel the presence of love all around you. Christmas is a reminder that no matter what challenges we face, the light of hope is always shining, guiding us toward brighter days.

This is a time to count our blessings and appreciate the small, beautiful things that often go unnoticed in the hustle and bustle of daily life. The laughter of children, the warmth of a cup of cocoa, the simple joy of a good conversation — these are the moments that make life truly special. So often, we get caught up in the pursuit of material things, but Christmas calls us back to the heart of what truly matters: the people we love, the kindness we



share, and the joy we bring to others.

In this season of giving, it's important to remember that the greatest gifts are not always wrapped in shiny paper or tied with ribbons. Sometimes, the best gifts are the ones that come from the heart—the gift of time, a listening ear, a thoughtful gesture. These are the gifts that carry the most weight and the most meaning.

As we celebrate this Christmas, let us also remember those who may be struggling or feeling lonely. Christmas is a time for compassion, and the warmth we share can make a world of difference in someone's life. Whether it's offering a helping hand, sending a heartfelt message, or simply reaching out to someone who could use a little extra cheer, we all have the ability to spread the light of Christmas far and wide.

Let us also reflect on the deeper meaning of the season. Christmas is not just about the festivities, the gifts, or the decorations — it's a celebration of love, a love that transcends all boundaries. It's about the love that was shown to us through the birth of a child, a gift of hope for all humankind. Christmas reminds us to love one another, to forgive, to heal, and to grow together. It is in this spirit of love that the true magic of Christmas is found.

In the coming days, may you find peace in your heart, joy in your soul, and laughter in your home. May the magic of Christmas fill you with renewed hope, and may you carry that hope with you throughout the year ahead. Christmas is a beautiful reminder that no matter how far apart we may be, love has the power to bring us together.

As we approach the end of this year and look forward to the start of a new one, let us remember the blessings of the past and embrace the opportunities that lie ahead. Christmas is not just the end of a season, but a new beginning — a time to reflect, to reset, and to look forward with hope and anticipation.

May your Christmas be filled with light, laughter, and love. May it be a time to cherish the people who mean the most to you and to spread kindness to those around you. And as you gather around the tree, share a meal, or simply sit in quiet reflection, may you feel the presence of peace and joy that this season brings.

Wishing you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. May the coming year be filled with love, adventure, and all the blessings your heart can hold.

With warmest wishes,  
Columban Missionaries

# Consoling Presence

## God with Us

By Fr. Timothy Mulroy

Even though the celebration of morning Mass for the Columban community in our house chapel seemed like a burden for Fr. Jack, he continued to add his name to the rostrum. In his early eighties, he struggled to put on his vestments; he fumbled his way through the missal; and he stumbled through the homily. For these reasons, his Columban confreres discouraged him from celebrating Mass in public in any of the local churches.

However, from time to time, the Korean migrant community invited Fr. Jack to celebrate Mass. Since he had spent many years as a Columban missionary in Korea, such an invitation always delighted him. However, knowing the various difficulties he experienced whenever he celebrated Mass with fellow Columbans in English, I had serious reservations about him celebrating Mass in public in Korean.


On one occasion, I shared those reservations with some members of the Korean migrant community. They readily acknowledged Fr. Jack's difficulties — yes, his movements were generally clumsy, his message was frequently incoherent, and he was easily distracted. Yet, from their manner of speaking, it seemed to me that none of these limitations mattered much to them.

Seeing my puzzled expression, one of them gazed slowly around the group and then thoughtfully explained, "For us, Fr. Jack is like our grandfather. We know that he has various limitations now due to his advanced age, but we can never forget all the ways he supported and cared for us in this strange city over many decades. Even now, he knows what's in our hearts and we know what's in his heart. His presence here among us continues to be a source of encouragement, strength and comfort for us, just like the presence within a

family of a beloved grandfather who has grown frail and forgetful."

While many of us younger and more active missionaries like to think of ourselves as engaged in various projects and programs that bring about changes that visibly impact our world, the truth is that so much of the time, all we can offer those around us is our presence. In several of our mission countries, political instability, corruption and poverty over many decades have resulted in a widespread paralysis within society. While missionaries feel as helpless as the local people in their efforts to bring about much-needed change, our willingness to remain with them, to carry our own burdens alongside them, and to trust that God is ever-present in the messiness of life, provides comfort, strength and hope to many of those around us.

During the Christmas season, as we ponder the manger scene, we come to the renewed realization that Jesus came on mission among us as a helpless baby. He was incapable of doing or accomplishing anything, yet His presence among us as a baby remains an extraordinary gift. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us. His presence itself reassures us that God is among us, and that He shares with us the burdens and joys of this world.

Like a frail and forgetful grandparent, a helpless baby serves to remind us that, when we see others for who they truly are, rather than what they can do, then we catch a glimpse of Emmanuel, God's mysterious and consoling presence with us amid the messiness of our world. 



The Holy Family in Traditional Korean Dress

Columban Fr. Timothy Mulroy lives and works in Britain.

# Christmas

Greetings once again to our faithful readers of *Columban Mission* magazine. I am slowly settling into the role as Regional Director in Omaha. One of the delights I have is to write a letter for each magazine. This being December, we of course look forward to celebrating Christmas.

But we never just jump in with a party on December 25<sup>th</sup>. The Church in her wisdom invites us to prepare with the season of Advent, always four weeks before. This tradition of spending most of December living in darkness and looking forward to new life has very deep European roots, especially northern Europe where hours of sunlight are few, it is very cold, Yule logs burned for 12 days, the beer was ready to drink, cattle were slaughtered because there was not enough to feed them during the winter, etc. In Rome they celebrated the god Saturn when slaves and the poor were treated with food and gift. It was also a time to celebrate young people. And on December 25 they celebrated the infant god Mithra, who was believed to have been born of a rock. All of these traditions influenced in some way how we Christians celebrate Christmas.

But for us, apart from the celebrations, the feast was originally called the Nativity (Birth) and was not initially widely celebrated. Easter was the main celebration. With Christmas we tend to think of an innocent little baby being born in a stable surrounded by animals and shepherds and a star shining above. It's very romantic. But as Christians had time to contemplate this birth, the feast became more

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. Al Utzig



profound and meaningful. The "Birth" is the feast of the Incarnation. That is, God becoming a human being just like us.

The book of Exodus tells us that God's name is "I AM." That is a profound statement. This God was present with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and is present with Moses and will be present with all his children forever. This I AM God is vast, present everywhere, at all times, and everything exists in him. Yet, at Christmas, the Nativity, this all powerful, all possible God, in an act



of infinite humility, becomes a mere human and enters this world with a beginning, a life, and an end like ours — death. This mystery is every bit as great as the mystery of the resurrection (Easter). It is really hard to imagine how it is possible. And God does this because He desires to experience from the inside what it means to be who we are. This experience gives God compassion. Jesus is the face of the compassion of God.

Can we learn compassion? Yes, we can. How? It is

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**Can we learn compassion? Yes, we can.**  
**How? It is necessary to experience life from the other side, to "walk a mile in my shoes."**

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necessary to experience life from the other side, to "walk a mile in my shoes." Those who are ready to point a finger at someone who does things wrong or seems ignorant or is on the outside trying to get in probably never had the struggles that this person has had. They just don't understand or feel the pain of the other.

At this time of year, we celebrate that Jesus has joined us. He probably had all the childhood illnesses, had to work with His father and mother, was misunderstood and ridiculed, abused and spat upon, bullied. This Jesus KNOWS what it is to be one of us. And He never lost His love and concern that we all would be honest and kind and generous with each other. We can be sure of this because we know Him and experience Him. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for honoring us by being with us and for us and one of us. We know we can have faith in your compassion. Amen.

Fr. Al

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*"All who heard it were amazed  
by what had been told  
them by the shepherds"*

– ST. LUKE 2:18

One would think shepherd boys would be unlikely missionaries. The Lord still chooses unlikely people to carry his message, perhaps even you...

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