

# Columban Mission

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## Living Out the Faith in Modern Times

# C O N T E N T S

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## Columban Mission

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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.



By Arlene Villahermosa

# A Journey from the Head to the Heart

**M**y sabbatical, October 2022 to September 2023, brought me to do the Ignatian Training Program (Phase 1), the Full Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and the Spiritual Directors' Workshop at the Ignatian Jesuit Center in Guelph, Canada; and to two other short courses in Jerusalem at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute.

It was a graced moment, a blessed time of surprises and wonder, joy and thanksgiving, learning and unlearning, exploring and reconnecting, listening and sharing, letting go and trusting. It was an opportune time for me to look back, especially during my 40-day retreat, at what had been after 20 years as a Columban lay missionary, and to take stock of the now, and look forward to a future with an open mind and a heart renewed with hope. It was a golden time to say, "THANK YOU!"

The presentations, sharings, workshops and activities (inside and outside the program), as well as the time given for silence and reflection, invited me to look beyond my fears and vulnerabilities, and be open to the leadings of the Spirit, to trust in the goodness of God, and to have faith in the unfolding of life's processes.

Being in the company of participants from other faith denominations during the Ignatian Training Program led me to a deeper insight and rich experience of interconnectedness and oneness in the One God amidst our diverse backgrounds. There was no division among us, only appreciation and the eagerness to learn, grow in faith, and deepen one's spirituality.

In Israel, being able to walk in the land where Jesus walked was an experience beyond words. Despite the complications and conflicts in the Holy Land, God's promise stays in both the lives of the Jews and the Palestinians, though received and

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*Being in the company of participants from other faith denominations during the Ignatian Training Program led me to a deeper insight and rich experience of interconnectedness and oneness in the One God amidst our diverse backgrounds.*

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lived differently. How they can journey together in peace remains a mystery. This led me to more questions than answers. But then again, God's love is beyond human understanding. All along, I found myself simply immersing into the experience, just being there, listening and absorbing the unfolding of events. It was a journey with Jesus on the land where He walked. It was a journey from the head to the heart. Thanking God for all that I have been blessed with and blessed for.

*Columban lay missionary Arlene Villahermosa lives and works in the Philippines.*



# All Thunder and No Rain

## Another Crisis for Youth in Myanmar

By Fr. Kurt Zion Pala



Student Leadership Camp participants

It's been two years since we hosted the last Student Leadership Camp. In the last two years, many things have changed. Most parts of the world have already recovered from the impact of the Covid pandemic but Myanmar, formerly Burma, has not. While the world is slowly recovering, Myanmar is now facing another crisis — a deadly war between one of the most vicious military regimes and the people of Myanmar led by young people and different ethnic armed groups.

On our second day of the camp, we started hearing bomb shelling during the day as we prepared for the outdoor team-building games.

The setup was more like a training camp. The participants had to crawl under some ropes tied across each other. Then teams will have to bring each member into a circle. After that, each member of the team will carry water to fill up a big bottle. Then the two teams will have to fight each other in the tug-of-war game. One volunteer shared, “Wajau, this is like the training I went through just early this year.” I was curious and asked about the training. He mentioned that in the town where he lives, the majority of the young men enlisted to join the training of the KIA (Kachin Independent Army). “Were you

scared,” I asked him. He answered, “I am no longer afraid to die, Wajau.”

Many young men and women volunteered and enlisted in many of the ethnic armed groups like KIA. But there are also those who chose to remain and serve in a different way. Many of the students I used to work with in the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina (CSAM) movement are now working in Church-based organizations or non-government organizations. But there is also an ongoing exodus of many of the young people particularly young men because of the new conscription law passed that requires all young men between



*“Before I joined the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina movement, I was just a simple and ordinary teenager and university student. I spent my time doing nothing useful, and I didn’t have any interest in things about society, community, church and others. I was only*

*interested in the progress of my studies and lived like a blind man. I did not have confidence. I was really afraid to speak with others. Even if I want to participate, I don’t know where I have to go and there was no one to guide me.*

*When I became an active member of CSAM, I completely changed in terms of my attitude, and I was reminded that I need to change my lifestyle. By participating in CSAM programs and activities, I got a lot of experience and knowledge. I was one of the first to attend the Student Leadership Camp which I treasure for life. In the leadership camp, I have learned many useful topics and skills like leadership, team building, public speaking, facilitation and the Catholic Social Teachings. The team building activities were my favorite.*

*After I attended leadership camp I learned how to participate in my own community, how to live out the Catholic Social Teachings. I also learned we need to care for our common home and act now. Through CSAM I also got to know more friends and it helped me build my own strong network. Now I can also speak bravely in public and I feel more confident about myself. I have team spirit and can work well with others. As a result of participating in CSAM, I became a youth leader in my parish in Mogaung. If I didn’t participate in CSAM I would not be brave enough to be a youth leader, I believed that. The experiences and knowledge I gained from CSAM continues to influence my leadership life and style. Now I’m able to share some of those skills and knowledge to my younger friends.”*

*– Chris*



18 and 35 years old to serve the Burmese military.

After we finished preparing the grounds for the outdoor team-building activities, we returned to the main hall to listen to the lectures given by one of the newly ordained priests in the Diocese. The whole camp is designed to allow the young person to discover who he is as a person, as a Catholic and as a member of the CSAM.

From the first camp we hosted to this one, among the many topics covered in the camp are the following: Leadership and communication skills, Baptism and Eucharist, Catholic Social Teachings, See-Judge-Act

Review of Life Method, and *Laudato Si’*. For the Catholic Social Teachings, I invited Chris, who had two months of military training, to give input on the topic. He is one of the original members of the movement and has been taking part in the Student Leadership Camps first as a participant then now as one of the speakers. I was very proud listening and watching him interacting with the new group of students.

This year we invited young students between the ages 15-18 years old who are still attending “government schools.” Because of the conscription law, many young people over 18 years



old have left Myanmar or are not active in parish activities. This age group is also often left out of parish activities. They do not join the Holy Childhood movement because they feel they are too old to join their activities, but they are too shy to join the older youth group of the parish.

After the intense team-building activities, the participants shared the meal they all prepared. During the evening, the participants were introduced to the concept of servant leadership. Every one of the participants participated in the washing of the feet activity. Many were deeply touched by the exercise.

The following day the participants learned about the history of CSAM, its vision, mission and activities. Then they selected the new set of leaders for the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina Juniors. That night we ended the camp with a talent show showcasing the participants' and volunteers' talents in singing, dancing and drama skits.

This year's edition of Student Leadership Camp gathered about 36 students, ten volunteers and seven resource speakers at the CLAY Center,

Palana, Myiktyina, Kachin State in Myanmar. With a new set of officers and members, we hope to gather more students from government schools and start school-based groups of CSAM Juniors. The day after the end of the camp, the new set of CSAM Juniors leaders met and decided to conduct a fund-raising campaign "Option for the Poor," to help and provide basic needs like cooking oil, potatoes, onions, garlic and rice plus clothes for families displaced by the on-going war.

As I am writing this article, it continues to thunder but not rain. The Burmese Army continues to shell villages across the river. But even with this in our background, help us continue to animate young people here in Myanmar through the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina. Help us also continue to provide much-needed alternative educational services through our Student Learning Resources Center.

Above is a short sharing of Chris, one of our camp volunteers, speaker and a CSAM alumni. CM

Fr. Kurt Zion Pala lives and works in Myanmar.





# 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](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.



# Sewing for the Future

## Relying on Their Own Resources

By Ana Flores

The first super typhoon, Sendong (international name: Washi), tore over Cagayan de Oro (CDO), Iligan City, and certain areas of Lanao del Norte in December 2011. Houses were destroyed, infrastructure was damaged, and a number of people were killed. As a result, a number of families from CDO and other Misamis Oriental municipalities had to relocate to new locations, one of which is the Divine Mercy Village, which is located in Barangay Patag, Opol, Misamis Oriental. Various humanitarian groups and religious congregations helped set up the new village and provided in-kind support interventions, the majority of which

stopped in five years due to resource depletion.

Fourteen years later, the Columban missionaries have kept up its accompanying commitment, particularly for the women and young people. Columban support also facilitated direct support to ten families, and with those whose members are hospitalized, whose students were problematic as regards their educational needs, and those living in unfavorable situations. The community has been working with Columban lay missionary Ana Flores, a Peruvian by birth.

Ten (10) women participated in a bag-making workshop on January 15, 2015. Starting was challenging,

especially since they lacked a location where they could carry on their livelihood activities. Fortunately, one of the houses was shared by one of the village officers, and it is still being used for the program.

A number of women indicated interest in joining the organization, but finding supplies or materials and sewing machines for them was a challenge. Marketing of the women's products was likewise a complete nightmare.

The sewing effort was briefly suspended during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was reopened with more members in June 2022. It is regrettable that the sewing machines' damage occurred so quickly that repairs were required. And despite repairs, three machines recently failed. The trained women also desired to produce t-shirts and jogging bottoms, noting the necessity for a new type of machine as well as training sessions in skill development for the new members. In addition, marketing strategies need to be explored.

**What have been the biggest successes (thus far) of the project/program?**

A breakthrough was made after seven years of working on the project. The women frequently had no customers, no materials, malfunctioning equipment that hadn't been fixed, and members who had decided to stop working, but the majority persisted. The largest accomplishment is having a small daily income; that really benefited each household. Also, women's sewing abilities have improved to include making ethnic clothing, curtains, blouses, togas and graduation gowns, band uniforms, party costumes, bedsheets, sala set coverings, rags, and foot mats.

**Has there been any radical re-visioning of the project/program since it started to better serve the needs of people?**



The project's initial goal was to assist each family of women members with basic needs including food, daily transportation for the children who were attending school and parents working outside the village, as well as defray expenses for water and electricity bills. As the years passed, the demand for more sewing machines and supplies gradually became an issue as more and more women joined. This development pushed for the re-visioning of the project.

The women subsequently held meetings to discuss how to further raise the caliber of their output, how to handle all neighborhood sewing-related needs, and how to make sure that the women members would personally profit from their labor. One of the top priorities they thought about is increasing the viability of their sewing project, improving quality of their products, and ensuring higher demand for their items.

Since this is a small enterprise with a local focus rather than just a livelihood project, it was necessary for the women to familiarize themselves with the idea even more.

In order to increase collaboration with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), TESDA, and DTI, the women must be more practical in their planning and resource mobilization.

**Who provides oversight into the day-to-day operation? Is there any independent governance like a board, or committee?**

The organization has complied with the Cooperative Code of the Philippines' requirements for the typical organizational structure. The officers oversee managing the membership, and committees have been established to handle the numerous organizational issues. Columban lay missionary Ana Flores also assists the group in carrying out daily tasks.

This is a local project that deals with the real, immediate problems that women and their families are facing. Being forced to relocate is difficult, and it is never simple to find the will to live again while everyone is still reeling from the trauma. Along with being a source of income, this also aids in stress relief or trauma healing. As this

goes on, it is also good to link up the role of women in the promotion and protection of the environment.

The Columban missionaries' charism of promoting economic justice is in line with this.

**How much funding is required to run the project/program on an annual basis? What is the breakdown of the costs (salaries, materials, food, etc.)?**

Is there a possibility that the project/program will be locally funded once it is established? Will it become self-sustaining and is that an objective.

This campaign is expected to continue. Members who are financially literate will also aid the other women members in managing their incomes more effectively. Given a regular market and the ability to enhance their output, this will eventually transform the organization into one that is self-sustaining and self-nourishing, meaning they will rely entirely on their own resources instead of any outside assistance. **CM**

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Columban lay missionary Ana Flores lives and works in the Philippines.



# Better Together

## A Pilgrimage of Friendship

By Fr. Kurt Zion Pala



Fr. Kurt and a Buddhist monk

“Better Together,” was the theme for this year’s Interfaith Youth Leadership Camp 2024. It was conducted from June 7-9, 2024. It gathered about 43 youths from the five major religions present in Myitkyina, Myanmar. The Christian participants were the largest group with 20 participants (two from the Kachin Baptist Church, five from the Anglican Church and thirteen from the Roman Catholic Church). The Buddhist participants were the second biggest group with nine participants. The Hindu and Sikh communities had five participants each. The Islamic community had four participants.

We started the camp with inputs on conflict resolution. On the first day, a training on Social Cohesion was given. In the evening of the same day, Yaw Mon Kyaw, who is also a member of the Myitkyina Youth Mental Health Advocates group facilitated a mental health session. The following day our guest U Sethila, a Buddhist monk, gave a talk on Buddhism and later led a meditation exercise. After lunch, I presented a personal sharing of my own journey in interfaith dialogue where the ideas of friendship, food and faith were highlighted. We also

introduced the Golden Rule presented by Michael Javier, a Filipino Columban lay missionary and the See-Judge-Act method presented by Philip Naw Seng, one of the leaders of the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina (CSAM).

Myitkyina is a beautifully diverse city but without social cohesion and dialogue this diversity can also lead to conflicts between communities within communities. It is important that we continue to find ways to work together because it is better together. The pilgrimage of interfaith dialogue among young people here in Myanmar continues until we reach our destination—a place of hope and peace for all the people of Myanmar.

On the last day of our camp, we went on a pilgrimage to five important places of worship here in Myitkyina, the St. Columban’s Church (Roman Catholic), Ram Janki Mandir (Hindu), Sikh Gurdwara (Temple), Panthay Masjid (Muslim), and lastly the Pain Nay Gauwng Monastery. Pilgrimage is an important ritual of many groups like Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. Often it is a pilgrimage to a holy place to seek God’s blessings and forgiveness.

At the Buddhist monastery, we

were greeted by U Ukkahtar Bhiwata the head monk, whom I have met a few times in the past. He welcomed us to the monastery and mentioned that everyone was welcome in his monastery. Then the participants asked him some questions regarding Buddhism. One particular question was asked regarding the status of women in Buddhism in Myanmar. In many temples, women are forbidden to come up to the image of Buddha or touch the image. He mentioned that this is influenced by the culture and not necessarily a teaching of Buddha. In his monastery, he explained that everyone is welcome and that they do not discriminate. The Buddhist nuns then prepared tea and salad for the group.

We sat down and chatted for a while before heading to our next destination, the Ram Janki Mandir also known as the Golden Temple. At the temple, we were greeted by two young Hindu ladies who mentioned that the Hindu priest or pundit and the community leader would arrive later. U Sanjay Kumar, the Hindu priest, explained the images found inside the temple. As he approached every image, he would ring the bell. He said this is to disengage the mind from ongoing thoughts thus



Fr. Kurt with program participants

making the mind more receptive. Bell ringing during prayer is said to help in controlling the ever-wandering mind and focusing on the deity. The sound of the bell is considered auspicious which welcomes divinity and dispels evil. It is also said that the bell produces the sound of “Om,” which Min Khant Tu, one of the participants shared as the universal name of the Lord.

Straight after lunch, the group headed to the Muslim masjid which locals call the “Panthay Balee” which is actually the name of Chinese Muslims in Myanmar. We were met by their leaders at the Hall because only men were allowed to enter the main masjid or prayer hall of the Muslims. Women worship and pray in a separate room. I was glad to see Mufti Irfaan, a good friend among the leaders present. “Hkam kaja ai kun?” I asked him in the Kachin language. “Hkam kaja nga ai,” he responded. Mufti Irfaan is one of the few indigenous Kachins who is a Muslim. He is a Muslim scholar who studied in Egypt. He now teaches about Islam and the Arabic language. After the short interaction with the participants, the men followed to join him inside the mosque where he demonstrated the different prayer positions. Before


entering the mosque, we all had to properly wash our feet and hands. This is called ablution or spiritual purification. After we said our thank you and goodbyes, he invited us to join them for the Eid al-Adha feast next week.

Finally, our last destination was the Sikh Gurdwara (Temple). Before entering we were asked to wear the headscarf for men and the veil for the women. We were welcomed by the Sikh Community leader U Raja. Ko Veve Singh, who is one of the focal persons of the Sikh youth community, explained some matters about the Sikh religion. He mentioned that in a Sikh *gurdwara* or temple, you will not find any images or statues. One will only find the sacred book called “Guru Granth Sahib.” U Raja with another youth started to play the tabla (drums) and the harmonium to sing a “kirtan” hymn to honor and worship the Lord. This brought me back to my days in Fiji, living among the Indo-Fijians. I was very happy.

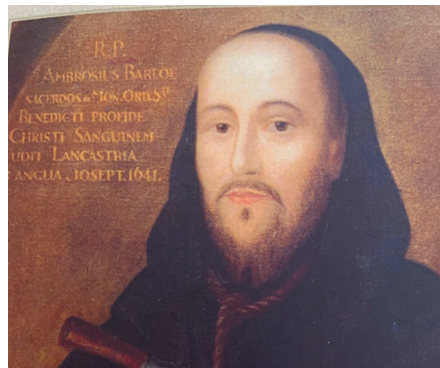
Having visited all five sacred places, we all headed back to our camp venue and prepared for the final night of cultural food exchange and entertainment. The participants prepared various food and snacks. The Burmese Buddhists prepared dried fish

salad, bean soup and pickled cabbage. The Kachin Christians prepared steamed lemon fish, fried rice and jam *htu* (pounded chilies). The combined Indian Hindus and the Punjabi Sikhs group prepared puri (deep-fried bread), “dal” or lentil soup and *gulab jamon* (dessert). The Indian Muslims prepare “samay,” a vermicelli pudding which is also a dessert usually offered during the Eid celebrations. After the delicious supper and having enjoyed the tastes of the different food and snacks, the group gradually started preparing for the closing program to show their different dancing and singing skills.

The night was long and fun as each group presented song and dance items highlighting the beautiful diversity in Myanmar. The last group to present was the Kachin Christians who led the participants in dancing the Manau. We danced in one line following one person at the head of the line.

Please continue to pray for the people of Myanmar and support our young people so we can continue to facilitate activities like this for our young people. 

Columban Fr. Kurt Zion Pala lives and works in Myanmar.



# From Death to Life in Salford

## A Sixteenth-Century Saint Presides Over the Resurrection of Nature

By Fr. John Boles

“Before you do anything, you must go and greet Ambrose Barlow.” So said Marie, secretary to Bishop John Arnold of Salford, as she opened the door to us, a visiting group of Columban missionaries. Now, as a rule, going to greet an esteemed resident would just be a case of common courtesy — until you realize that the gentleman in question was executed nearly four hundred years ago.

Intrigued, we were directed to the main staircase of Wardley Hall, the Tudor manor which today serves as the bishop’s house, and there, set in a glass case, we were confronted with the skull of St. Ambrose Barlow, serenely gazing out at the grounds.

For non-believers, this sort of thing could appear somewhat macabre. However, from the Catholic point of view, relics are a source of inspiration. They remind us of great and holy people from the past who are NOT dead, but very much alive, enjoying eternal happiness with the Lord and interceding for our efforts in the here and now.

One effort in particular had brought this Columban delegation to

Wardley Hall. We were there to see the “Laudato Si’ Center,” which occupies the gardens and woods around the building, and is described by the diocese as, “a flagship for effective action on climate change.”

The Diocese of Salford (which covers much of the Greater Manchester conurbation in the north of England), under the guidance of Bishop John,

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*Now, as a rule, going to greet an esteemed resident would just be a case of common courtesy — until you realize that the gentleman in question was executed nearly four hundred years ago.*

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established the center in 2019 in response to the recently published *Laudato Si’* papal encyclical. In that document, Pope Francis had warned that the planet — our “common home” — was being destroyed by irresponsible human action and had urged the world and the Church to adopt radical measures to combat the

evils of environmental catastrophe and increasing world poverty.

The Columban missionaries also rose to the Pope’s challenge, and we’d come to Salford to see what their initiative could teach us.

First, though, we wanted to know more about the remarkable connections between the saint, the hall, the diocese and the center.

Ambrose was born in 1585 on the banks of the River Mersey in what is now the Manchester suburb of Chorlton. His birthplace, Barlow Hall, still stands. Although, as a sign of how times have changed, it is now the clubhouse of the local golf course!

This was the high point of the English Reformation and Ambrose Barlow grew up as an Anglican, but in 1607 he converted to Catholicism, traveled to France to study for the priesthood, was ordained as a Benedictine and returned home secretly on a mission in 1617. For the next 24 years, he ministered to the Catholic population of Lancashire, moving covertly between the houses of the Catholic gentry. One of these houses was none other than Wardley

Hall, at that time the home of his cousin Francis Downes. Finally in 1641, with Civil War looming and tensions rising, Ambrose's luck ran out. He was arrested while celebrating Mass on Easter Sunday and taken in chains to Lancaster Castle, where he was imprisoned, tried, condemned and subsequently hanged, drawn and quartered on September 10, 1641.

His loyal cousin Francis Downes managed to recover the head from the dismembered body and spirited it away to Wardley Hall, little suspecting that almost 300 years later, in 1930, quite independent of all this background, a new owner would be moved to donate the hall to the diocese as the seat of its bishop.

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*It seems Ambrose Barlow had worked a miracle. What we went on to see in the grounds of the hall suggested he was working another one.*

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It seems Ambrose Barlow had worked a miracle. What we went on to see in the grounds of the hall suggested he was working another one.

Under professional horticultural guidance, these grounds have been transformed. The gardens and woods have been seeded, planted and renewed with native species of flowers, plants, trees and shrubs. Habitats have been revived, soil conservation improved and water features introduced. Furthermore, the center has been opened to the public and developed as an "open air classroom," in this way (as our guide Emily enthusiastically explained) "creating a space for all to learn how to take practical action to tackle climate change" and so "work towards a sustainable world."


In the first half of 2024 alone, some 2,300 people have visited the center,

from schools, parishes and community groups, taking part in workshops, retreats and (as in the case of us Columban missionaries) "how to do it yourself" seminars.

Where Salford has led, we are following. Already we are engaging in a major project around our Columban house and offices in Solihull, West Midlands, where we are reintroducing natural meadowland, planting up to 6,000 trees and opening the property to groups. We hope to go much further over the coming years.

Ambrose Barlow must surely be proud of us. They thought they'd killed

him, but he's alive, and instrumental in fostering new life — spiritual and natural — from the local Church in Salford, to the Columban missionaries in Solihull, and far, far beyond.

Postscript: In June 2024 the worldwide Columban General Assembly adopted as a priority of the Society the care of our common home, and specifically committed the Columbans to promoting the protection and restoration of biodiversity. 

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Columban Fr. John Boles lives and works in Britain.



Fr. John Boles (right) and two members of the Columban group that visited the Salford Laudato Si' Center

# A Visit to Kiribati

## Hospitality Abounds

By Columban Fr. Frank Hoare



Lining up for juice at Santa Maria College, Tarawa

**K**iribati is a nation of 100,000 people whose existence is threatened by climate change. The rising sea is making inroads on the low-lying islands. Tarawa Atoll, made up of 30 islets, is the capital and accommodates more than 50% of the population.

### Where is Kiribati?

I was having breakfast with a group of Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart on Tarawa. They spoke about their experience of immigration officials when traveling abroad. One Sister, who had been a missionary in the Sudan, said that the Immigration officer there scrutinized her passport and asked, “Where is Kiribati? I

have been in immigration for 30 years. I have never seen this country’s passport before.” He examined each page.

“Our Kiribati passport is passed from one official to another,” said another Sister. “They ask us to point out on the map where our country is. They look strangely at the passport. ‘We never heard of that place’ is a regular comment.”

“And how do you feel about all that?” I asked.

“We are sorry for them!” she replied.

Surprised, I laughed, as she continued, “They just look stupidly at our passport. We know about their countries, but they don’t know anything about ours.”

### Kiribati hospitality

I visited Kiribati in the middle of February 2024 to interview Jakobwa, a young man who had asked to join the Columbans. After lunch two days before I was to leave, my friend Matang drove me to visit Jakobwa’s family. I had asked him to prepare only a cup of tea for our mid-afternoon visit. Arriving at his house I was shocked to see the big feast that was prepared. “Kiribati hospitality,” whispered Matang. Jakobwa’s extended family was present. His sister, the MC, guided us through prayer, introductions, eating and discussion. At the end, I was asked to give them my blessing.

Matang and I continued on to the house of another young man,



IMC maneaba



Constructing a sea wall, Kiribati



Dance troop performs on Kiribati Independence at Bairiki

Tione, who had also enquired about the Columbans. On arrival, we were guided to the inner room which was raised three feet above ground level. His parents and some siblings arrived. After a prayer, introductions and a short talk about Columban missionaries, I answered their questions, with translations done by Matang. In crossing the room for a group photo I was almost decapitated by the low ceiling fan. A combined shouted warning just gave me time to duck.

Just before dark, Matang and I arrived at the family which had invited us for dinner. My host spoke about some important aspects of Kiribati life. He first mentioned the canoe — used for travel, fishing, and racing. Then he cited the *maneaba* (a communal house with a roof and floor but no walls). It is used for meetings, celebrations, and as a place for guests to stay. It is also a sanctuary for women. If the husband of a woman fleeing from domestic violence follows her to the maneaba, the villagers present will attack the man. It is a sacred place, and proper behavior is required.

Columban companions and the family of Iotobina, wife of Betero

Ataniboro, a member of parliament and friend of the Columbans, hosted me for a magnificent dinner on my last night. Their young son is named Columban. Betero was visiting New Caledonia on government business, but he made a video call to speak to us.

### Prayer for Protection

Sr. Marie-Therese, the new Provincial of the Sisters, was my hostess during my weeklong stay in South Tarawa. She told me about going by motor bike to a parish at the end of another atoll a year previously. Her 11-year-old niece begged to go too. They stayed there for 4 days. Heavy rain fell and left the dirt road full of pools of water.

As they began the return journey on the motor bike, they said a prayer for protection. Not far from the village, they came suddenly on a large pool of water and the bike skidded. Sister and her young passenger were thrown into the dirty water. They picked themselves up but were covered in mud.

The niece said “But, Sister, what about our prayer?”

Sister Maria-Therese had to think fast. “Are you hurt?” She asked. “No,”


answered the little girl. “Neither am I,” said Sister. “That is the result of our prayer!”

### The Majestic Coconut

Although I have been living in the Pacific for more than 40 years, I learned new things about coconuts in Kiribati on this visit. Coconut is ubiquitous in Kiribati. Grated coconut is shaken on rice and morning cereals. Slices of coconut are eaten with a lunch of fish and rice. Today, the sap of the coconut tree is drunk with every meal.

The fibers of large coconuts are made into dance skirts and twine. Brushes or brooms are made from the ribs of the leaf. Medicine is also obtained from the tree. There are numerous words for all stages of development of the coconut and the tree that springs from it.

I remembered the Fijian saying, “Vinaka vakaniu, sega ni biu” which can be translated “As good as the coconut is, nothing is thrown away!”

Let us pray that the nation and people of Kiribati survive. 

Columban Fr. Frank Hoare lives and works in Fiji.

# A Little Wish

## Hoping for More Opportunities

By Son Seon Young Catharina

In March 2024, there was a two-day event in Myitkyina, Myanmar (formerly Burma), for International Women's Day (IWD) 2024. The theme was "Invest in Women — Accelerate Progress." Although I was interested, I was a little nervous about attending the event because of my language difficulties, but I decided to go because I thought it would be a great opportunity to hear the voices of women in Kachin State and help me understand their lives better.

The organizer kindly asked a participant, who is an NGO worker and speaks very good English, to sit next to me and translate for me. She spoke fluent English and was very friendly but had to leave for another meeting before lunch. Then a 22-year-old Buddhist girl, Mumu, approached me and tried to help me by speaking Korean. She had learned Korean from watching Korean dramas. Although her Korean was limited, we were able to communicate in Korean, and Mumu became a good friend and translator for me over those two days.

There were about fifteen young

women from Myitkyina, mostly Kachin but also some from other tribes, as well as Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians. Because of this variety, the workshop was conducted in Burmese, the official language of Myanmar. We talked about the history of IWD, and community activities, and made our own art — paintings, bouquets, hair pins and bracelets, and hand-sewn sanitary napkin pouches. They were all very

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*Male supremacy has disappeared, women's voices have become stronger, and it is socially recognized that women have the same rights and abilities as men.*

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talented and actively participated in all the programs.

In small group discussions, we talked about gender — the differences between women and men, what women and men usually do, etc. It was a great opportunity to hear what they think about their culture and the

status of women in society. A common response from each group was that men play games, go out and socialize with friends, while women stay at home to clean the house and take care of their family members.

The facilitator asked if I could talk about women and men in Korea. There was a time when the roles and responsibilities of women and men in Korea were very different. For example, women were expected to be housewives and do housework regardless of their profession, and girls were expected to take care of their younger siblings instead of continuing their studies. Men were expected to be the head of the family and thought that housework was not their job. But now the status of women in Korean society has improved greatly. Male supremacy has disappeared, women's voices have become stronger, and it is socially recognized that women have the same rights and abilities as men. I stressed that we need to encourage and support each other and continue to work towards women's empowerment in this world.






We then shared what changes we would like to see in this society. One of the participants said that she would like to see a change where women's clothes are put out in the front like men's clothes. It sounded a bit awkward to me, but I felt it really spoke to the current position of women in Myanmar society.

Then, I remembered that I watched the news when the military coup started in Myanmar and women protested by hanging their traditional skirts in the streets to stop the military from passing by. There is a traditional superstition that touching or walking under women's garments brings bad luck and reduces men's superiority.

As a foreigner, I think it is important to understand the culture

in which they grew up to better understand the people I meet and to learn how to work with them. This is not to judge the culture, but rather, I believe that understanding the cultural background always helps me to find ways to live with and accompany people. After arriving in Myitkyina last year, we were waiting to return to Banmaw, where we Columban lay missionaries used to work. However, with the civil war showing no signs of ending and the situation in Banmaw becoming more serious, the Myanmar Mission Unit has finally decided that lay missionaries will work alongside Columban priests in Myitkyina, and currently, we lay missionaries are preparing for new ministries in Myitkyina.

I have recently started the Visio Divian with young women and often meet young people like Mumu, who had a lot of dreams as a young girl. She hopes to have more opportunities to learn and have a good career. Meeting young people like Mumu, who have a passion for learning and growth, always makes me think about how I can encourage them and help them dream of a bright future and continue to strive for it, despite the grim reality of Myanmar now.

I hope that the day will come when women can hang out their laundry as naturally as men. That it will be a reality and not just a dream. 

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Originally from South Korea, Columban lay missionary Son Seon Young Catharina lives and works in Myanmar.

# A Tribute to an Unsung Hero

## Longing for Freedom

By Michael Javier

When the Covid-19 pandemic and the political conflict happened in Myanmar, formerly Burma, many people suffered economically, physically, mentally and emotionally. Among the most affected were the young people who wanted to finish their education to get a highly-paid job. However, the pandemic and political conflict did not permit them to do what they wanted to do. They had to stop going to school when all the schools were closed as mandated by the government.

Many of these young people lost their hopes and dreams because they could not continue to study. One of them was Henry. I knew him when I was assigned to Banmaw, Kachin State back in 2019. Henry was a very friendly guy. He was an English student of one of my companions. He was also my language interchange student when I was studying the Kachin language.

When I first met Henry, he had already graduated from secondary school and was preparing for the matriculation exam. Although he was a smart guy, Henry failed the examination and could not proceed to college to take his desired course. He had to wait for another year to retake the exam.

Having a lot of dreams for his future, Henry enrolled himself in a short medical course in Yangon. He did not want to be bored by doing nothing and planned to wait for the time when he could retake the college entrance exam. At the time, the government policy was so strict because of the various rallies and

demonstrations staged by the local people. Even the gathering of a few people was not allowed, and those who gathered could be detained. Henry was living in a shelter where the medical course was offered. Those living in the shelter had to be really careful because during that time some injured people came to the shelter to seek help and asked for medication. There was the risk the government would harass them if they were caught helping those who participated in the rally

On one occasion the shelter experienced a surprise check by the military. Luckily, those living in the

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*He was like many young people in Myanmar who did not stop dreaming of living peacefully and simply, despite the greed of those in authority who unjustly took away the best part of their lives.*

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shelter managed it well. A few months after completing the medical course Henry did his “on-the-job” training in some rural areas. These were not ordinary places.

In these places, there were many conflicts between the local civil group and the government armed group. Henry usually encountered conflicts between the two groups and there were times when bombs exploded near where the medical team had their tents. He helped not only the local people but, during the night, also those soldiers from the civil armed group who were wounded.

During his stay in some villages, Henry met people working for various non-government organizations (NGOs) who also helped in providing medical support to the people. He made friends with them, and some of them encouraged him to go abroad. Because of that, he got the courage to take the risk of going out of Myanmar illegally by crossing the border. He eventually reached Thailand to seek asylum and stayed in one of the migrant centers there. He waited for more than two months, but nothing happened about his request for asylum because he did not have all the required documents. He was asked to go back to Myanmar to get the necessary papers. He could not do anything but return to his country of origin. He hesitated to return to his hometown because he was afraid he might get caught by the authorities because of his work. However, he decided to go back to his family and quietly tried to live his life as a normal young man.


When I learned that Henry had returned to Myanmar, I contacted him and asked him if I could write his story. He told me he was happy for me to share it. He even sent me some of his “action photos.” Even now, I still find it hard to accept that that would be my last conversation with him. In March 2024, I got the shock of my life with the sad news that Henry passed away due to a complicated illness. He died in the hospital in Banmaw, along with his dream of living happily in a peaceful country. Sadly, he could never taste the freedom that he longed for.



As a son, a brother, a friend, a servant and a young hero, for me Henry is a great model. He was like many young people in Myanmar who did not stop dreaming of living peacefully and simply, despite the greed of those in authority who unjustly took away the best part of their lives. Indeed, Henry fought

a good fight without resorting to violence. He did it well in his own quiet and humble way. May his soul rest in peace.

At the moment, most of the young people in Myanmar are living in fear because recently the situation is becoming worse and worse every day. They are afraid that they might

be taken forcefully to become either a government military soldier or a member of one of the local armed groups. We keep praying for the peace of the Risen Christ to reign in Myanmar soon. 

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Columban lay missionary Michael Javier lives and works in Myanmar.

# Big Black Water Buffalo

## Bowled and Bought

By Fr. Daniel O'Connor

“BAANS,” yelled out Catechist, Anthony Bhemo. I slammed on the brakes of the Potoho red jeep as I crashed into the big black water buffalo. We were traveling out in the early morning to be present at a “Tupna.” A “Tupna” is a cultural prayer service that is performed about one week before the marriage of a bride and bridegroom. During this period of quiet retreat, the young person has time to prepare for his or her wedding.

I had seen a herd of buffaloes pass over the road in front of me. Then suddenly this one realized that it was well behind the others and so bounded onto the road directly in front of me. It bellowed out “mooo” as I collided with it and rolled it over from the impact of the jeep. I had a sigh of relief when I saw it rise onto its feet again.


Before I joined the Columban missionaries, for several years I was a dairy farmer in the Kokatahi Valley of Westland in the South Island of New Zealand. I therefore should have known better as when a cow is

separated from the herd it reacts and gallops to be re-united with them again. Soon, some people gathered around. When the situation allowed for conversation, we talked with those who cared for the water buffaloes. I told them, “We are going to a prayer service and after a couple of hours on my return, we will come and meet with you.” This gave me the chance to ring for reinforcements and people to help out in the ensuing negotiations. I inspected the concerned animal and noted that it was not badly injured. Therefore, my experience told me that this buffalo would produce good milk after the birth of its calf.

“Offer them 30,000 Rupees for damages, or the price of the animal,” was the advice from my colleagues. I felt relieved when they turned down the 30,000 Rupees and insisted that I purchase the animal. A man in a nearby village stated, “I will care for the buffalo.” When the calf was born this family had the benefit of “pure milk.” Often milk is sold after adding

water to it; this milkman is referred to as “a milkman with no faith.” At times I visited and inspected the cow and calf and found them in good condition. Later I was surprised to receive news that the calf had died. We wondered if this was true, and so I transferred the cow to another family.

Some time passed and I was transferred to be “shepherd” to Parkari Tribal people who had immigrated to Karachi where they worked in factories. I was also responsible to be with Tribal people who lived in villages some distance from the mega city of Karachi as landless peasant farmers who tilled the crops and cared for the animals of the landlords. I arranged for the buffalo and her new calf to be transported to a village in this area. On their arrival, we were surprised to see the buffalo kicking the calf away so that it could not get milk from her. We had understood that the new calf was a heifer yet the one that was sent down was a bull. “What to do!” as we often have to exclaim in Pakistan.

The mother was made to feed the calf and then after a while was pulled away while two women of the village obtained the remaining milk from her udder. The buffalo would never allow me to milk her. Perhaps she recalled that I was the driver of the jeep that hit her. In early 2024 there was great excitement when a healthy heifer calf was born. Once again, we are “share-milking” with this calf and have a good supply of fresh pure milk to brew tasty Pakistani chai (tea leaves brewed with water, milk and much sugar). 



Columban Fr. Daniel O'Connor lives and works in Pakistan.



# 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.***

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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.

# Darkness Would Not Be Dark to You

## Faith and Trust

By Sr. Ann Gray

Last April I sowed wildflower seeds — I just raked the ground and scattered the seeds, as did the Sower whom Jesus talks about in the Gospels. As I let them go, the seeds sank into the dark earth where I would not be able to see what was happening to them. It was a simple act of faith and trust in Mother Earth. Those seeds were on a journey — a journey of waiting in the dark, and I found myself challenged by the words of the poet, Jessica Powers, “Joy waits with me. I think of the marvelous flower that is to come and how the light will hover over it. Now and again, though, is the message blurred by brief uncertainties.”


As the weeks passed, I wondered — would those seeds take root? Would they flower? Would they die in the dark? And then, the first minuscule shoots began to appear, to grow in strength as they reached out to the light, of the sun and my precarious wonder began to strengthen. “Who would have thought my shriveled heart could have recovered greenness? It was gone quite underground as flowers depart to feed their mother root when they have blown.” (George Herbert). Not all of the seeds survived, of course, but I was filled with wonder at the resilience of those tiny shoots that did continue to mature — so fragile and yet seemingly so determined to grow.

Today, our world seems to be filled with darkness and uncertainties — war, starvation, death in so many countries, destruction of so much of our planet. In all this darkness and suffering, as we wonder where God is, it seems impossible to experience the seeds of hope that we can nurture into blossoming. We need to be as convinced as Desmond Tutu was that



“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.”

With all of this in mind, in springtime this year I will once again sow wildflower seeds and I will again sense the challenge to my faith and hope. Would they take root? Would they flower? Would they die? I will watch and wait for the flowers to appear on the tiniest shoots, struggling upwards, preparing to bring joy and wonder.

As I pray for all those who are suffering in the darkness of our world today, I ask myself — can I be like the seeds and be consoled and encouraged with the words of the psalm, “If I asked darkness to cover me, and the light to become night around me, that darkness would not be dark to you, night would be as light as day.” (Psalm 139) 

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Columban Sr. Ann Gray provided this reflection.

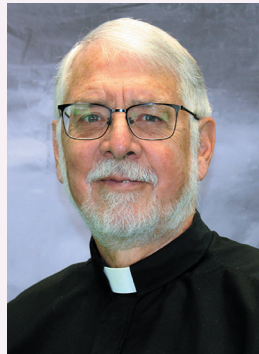
# Living the Faith: A Journey of Community, Love, and Purpose

In a world often characterized by division and uncertainty, living the Catholic faith offers a profound sense of community, purpose, and belonging. It invites individuals not only to deepen their personal relationship with God but also to engage with the wider world through acts of love, service, and compassion. Embracing this faith is a journey that requires commitment, reflection, and a willingness to grow.

At the heart lies the belief in a loving and merciful God. The sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, serve as a vital connection to this divine presence, providing strength and nourishment for our daily lives. Attending Mass is not just a ritual; it is an opportunity to gather with fellow parishioners, to celebrate our shared faith, and to receive spiritual sustenance.

One of the most beautiful aspects of Catholicism is its emphasis on community. The Church is often described as the Body of Christ, where each member has a unique role to play. Engaging in parish life—whether through attending events, joining ministries, or participating in service projects—deepens our sense of belonging. These activities not only strengthen our faith but also foster relationships that can last a lifetime.

Service is a key expression of living the faith. The call to love our neighbors is paramount, and there are countless



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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. Al Utzig

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opportunities to serve those in need. Whether through food drives, visiting the sick, or supporting social justice initiatives, each act of service becomes a manifestation of our faith in action. These efforts remind us that we are all part of something larger than ourselves, connected through a shared commitment to compassion.

Living the faith is also a call to personal growth and transformation. The teachings of Jesus challenge us to reflect on our actions and attitudes continually. Embracing the virtues of humility, patience, and

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***Living the faith is also a call to personal growth and transformation. The teachings of Jesus challenge us to reflect on our actions and attitudes continually.***

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forgiveness can be difficult, but they are essential to living a life that mirrors Christ's love.

Prayer and reflection play significant roles in this growth. Daily prayer, scripture reading, and meditation provide moments of peace and clarity amidst the chaos of life. Engaging with the rich tradition of Catholic spirituality, including saints' lives and writings, can inspire us to cultivate a deeper relationship with God and to model our lives on their examples.

Of course, living the faith is not without its challenges. In an increasingly secular world, holding onto our beliefs can sometimes feel isolating. There may be moments of doubt, frustration, or disillusionment. It's important to remember that faith is a journey—one that includes ups and downs. Seeking support and being open to honest discussions can help us navigate these challenges.

In these moments, returning to the core message of love and forgiveness can be grounding. The teachings of Jesus remind us that every person is worthy of love and grace, and that we, too, are called to extend that love, even when it's difficult.

Ultimately, living the faith is a lifelong journey. It invites us to engage with our beliefs deeply, to grow in our understanding of God's love, and to share that love with others. It is a journey marked by community, service, personal growth, and resilience.

As we continue on this path, let us remember that we are not alone. Together, we can support one another in living out our faith authentically and joyfully, embodying the message of Christ in our everyday lives. In doing so, we contribute to a world that reflects hope, love, and unity—hallmarks of a vibrant Catholic community.

Fr. Al

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