

Columban Mission

The Magazine of the Missionary Society of St. Columban

March/April 2022



Hope and Beauty

C O N T E N T S

Issue Theme – Hope and Beauty



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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 Jhoanna Resari

A New and Living Hope

My ministry work includes providing education, training and assistance to enable church leaders and migrant communities in the Hsinchu diocese to respond to the realities of HIV and AIDS. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, I became more aware of how COVID-19 threatens the progress made over the years in stopping AIDS globally, specifically in prevention, testing and support for people living with HIV and AIDS.

These issues are also experienced by migrant workers who are vulnerable to HIV infection. They've been facing barriers in HIV prevention even before the COVID-19 pandemic. These include low level of knowledge of HIV-related services, low perception of risk to HIV infection, language barriers, confidentiality gaps, low priority to healthcare, cultural and gender norms that discourage individuals from taking HIV tests, and fear of stigma and discrimination.

Just these past months, three migrant workers were diagnosed with HIV in the diocese. Soon after they received immediate medical care and assistance, they were repatriated. And in their home countries, due to lockdowns, restrictions, health care service disruptions, financial problems and unemployment brought about by COVID-19, they would have faced difficulties in accessing tests, antiretroviral treatment and support – all crucial to their health and wellbeing. Facing all these are quite disheartening, not only for the individual, but for their families, too.

During this Easter season, confronted by these realities brought about by two global health issues that have already impacted, and cost, millions of lives, it is more important to reflect more deeply on what hope means during these challenging times.

Pope Francis' homily during Easter vigil last year inspires me to deepen my understanding of hope. He said that because of the resurrection of Jesus, "...we acquire a fundamental right that can never be taken away from us: the right to hope. It is a new and living hope that comes from God. It is not mere optimism; it is not a pat on the back or an empty word of encouragement. It is a gift from heaven, which we could not have earned on our own."

Such hope moves us to action. It is not just up to governments and medical experts to respond during these times of crises. Each one of us has a moral responsibility to take action because, just like ripples caused by a small pebble thrown into the water, our actions can cause ripples of effect that can impact the world around us. Some ways of how we can be people of hope are by being responsible for our own behaviors to lessen and eliminate the risk of infection; by being compassionate to people living with or affected by these illnesses; and by examining our own attitudes and perceptions to be able to fight stigma and discrimination that often times cause more harm than the illnesses themselves.

Sustained by God's gift of this new and living hope we received in Easter, we can leave the darkness caused by our fears and helplessness in these uncertain times. Even as we continue to face dangers that lie ahead, we can move forward with confidence and joy of being witnesses of the risen Christ, who calls us not to be afraid, for God has always been, and will always be, with us.

Columban lay missionary Jhoanna Resari lives and works in Taiwan.

Pope Francis: "...we acquire a fundamental right that can never be taken away from us: the right to hope. It is a new and living hope that comes from God. It is not mere optimism; it is not a pat on the back or an empty word of encouragement. It is a gift from heaven, which we could not have earned on our own."

“Just Tell Them I’ve Gone Fishing”

A Celebration of Life

By Fr. Patrick Colgan



The men return Sonny Boy’s ashes to the sea.

Steven Ram Narayan (universally known as “Sonny Boy” or “Uncle”) was born in April 1947 to Ram Garib and Marion Bennion of Elevuka, Ba, Fiji. That was both an interfaith and inter-racial marriage, not common at the time, and it was to their great credit that eleven children were all brought up as hard-working members of the Catholic parish, as well as the soccer clubs and fishing fraternities of Ba. Sonny Boy lost his wife Lila Wati two years ago, and he would regularly soothe his loneliness by going to sit in his landlocked boat for hours, dreaming of the days his health was good enough to endure the hot days and nights of long-distance fishing. Many of his children migrated overseas due to the political difficulties in Fiji and could not travel home for his funeral due to the COVID closure of the international airport.

Funerals in Fiji are always colorful, but Sonny Boy’s association with the sea made this even more special. Having led prayers at their home, we took “Uncle’s” body for cremation – a common practice for Indo-Fijians – and on the following evening, the Hindi speaking prayer group of Ba parish shared a rosary with the family live online, as government restrictions

Funerals in Fiji are always colorful, but Sonny Boy’s association with the sea made this even more special.

presently allow only gatherings of ten.

Two days later, the men of the extended family returned to the outdoor crematorium to gather his bones and ashes, and from there we

boarded three fishing boats to carry Uncle’s remains to the place where he spent most of his time – on the sea. We followed the Ba River to its estuary with the ocean, past the intra-river island of Delailagi where the French Catholic mission to Western Fiji began in the 1880s. We passed the Catholic villages of Nawaqarua and Votua and the flotilla eventually came to rest at a favourite sandbar of his, about 30 minutes out on the open sea.

We disembarked, the men removed their shirts and clambered into the sea, holding the precious ashes of Sonny Boy, and after final prayers on the sand, they swam him out and returned him to the sea, where the ashes of ten other close family members had been scattered. The boys then joined the men for a swim and games (girls were not allowed on this trip, in Indian custom), the radio was turned out, a bottle of



A grandson of Sonny Boy being comforted beside the casket by his uncle



Fr. Pat leading final prayers on the sandbank



Funeral lunch back home



A son carrying Sonny Boy's ashes for scattering in the sea



Loading the body of Sonny Boy on to a truck for transport to the crematorium

whiskey produced and all had a nip, with the greatest amount being poured into the sea for Uncle to enjoy.

It was an extraordinary experience for me. While I have boarded boats many times in my mission in Fiji, I had never led a cremation quite like this before. People of all races in Ba shared their grief openly, and had COVID not restricted numbers, I believe the whole town would have shut down in respect.

A poster displayed at the house read: "To all who think of me, be happy

"To all who think of me, be happy that I've gone out to sea; if others wonder why I'm missing, just tell them I've gone fishing!"

that I've gone out to sea; if others wonder why I'm missing, just tell them I've gone fishing!"

And I will end with a poem that I used on the sandbar that I feel sums

up the earthy, loving, sometimes irreverent humor of Sonny Boy:

"I pray that I may live to fish, until my dying day. And when it comes to my last cast, I then most humbly pray: When in the Lord's great landing net, and peacefully asleep That in His mercy I be judged, Big enough to keep!" 

Columban Fr. Patrick Colgan lives and works in Fiji.

A Bridge Across Boundaries

The Magic of Music

By Fr. Frank Hoare

Fiji's Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, like many others, realized the importance of social media when COVID-19 caused all churches to be closed down. English is seen as the bridge language in Fiji where many ethnic groups live. Therefore, Mass in English was quickly arranged for the Archdiocesan Facebook page. Then it was realized that Mass in the Fijian language was needed to cater for the majority indigenous group who, naturally, prefer to worship in their native language.

But the Archbishop was anxious to cater for the minority ethnic groups also. So a Kiribati priest accepted to say Mass in Kiribati for the Kiribati people living in Fiji. He then requested the Indo-Fijian rector of the seminary to be responsible for Mass in Hindi. The rector asked three Columban missionaries to take turns helping out. I was helped by the six Columban seminarians in our formation house in Suva when it came to my turn. None of us was ethnic Indian, and we had various proficiency in the Hindi language – from none to quite good.

Our two guitarists were new to Hindi, but they quickly learned to sing and accompany some Hindi hymns and parts of the Mass. We sang a communion hymn in three languages: Hindi, English and Fijian and included prayers of petition in the same three languages. Two of our seminarians read the first two readings in Hindi very well. I used visuals on share screen during the homily, and we put the words of the readings and hymns on screen too so that viewers would be able to follow.

Two technicians from the Archdiocesan Communications Office



Letawa saying a prayer of petition



Formation Community

did the video and uploaded the Mass from our chapel in the formation house. The technicians didn't understand Hindi so a seminarian who did would signal when to change the screen.

It was the first Sunday of the Season of Creation. We had green plants and small shrubs in the chapel, and the homily emphasized the climate crisis and the need for world leaders to make massive carbon emission reductions.

Although none of us participating live at the Mass were ethnic Indians we all appreciate the beauty and devotion of Hindi hymns. It was a very joyful celebration and hundreds followed it in Fiji and abroad on Facebook. We received many notes of congratulations.

It brought home to me how music is a most valuable path for entering another culture. It helps us learn the

language and appreciate the spirit of its people. Local people appreciate foreigners who take an interest in their culture. Our musicians will have a great advantage when they arrive in a new culture as missionaries. They will quickly connect with the people through their music and song.

I also saw how cooperating in a challenging project helps to build community among those involved. Our little group felt satisfied, indeed overjoyed, to have accomplished the worship of God and service to people who thus felt acknowledged and included in the life of the diocese.

The seminary rector congratulated us and asked when we could do it again! **CM**

Columban Fr. Frank Hoare lives and works in Fiji.



LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

1% of Your Estate Continues the Mission Work

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

Good intentions are important, especially when it comes to giving. And a planned gift—a gift you designate to start after your lifetime—can have long-term impact. By designating just 1% of your estate as a gift to the Columban Fathers, you insure that the work you have supported during your lifetime will continue.

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

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



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Walking to Save the Planet

Young Christian Activists Walking for Climate Justice

By Fr. John Boles

The ripening corn sparkled in the sunlight as we set off. Birds chattered in the bushes around the fields. Two copses of trees perfectly framed the tower of a mediaeval village church. In short, it was a perfect summer's day in the heart of the English countryside.

"But you know, all this could be lost," remarked one of my fellow walkers. "Unless we do something, everything you see now will be wiped away. That is why we have to act. And it is the young who are taking the lead."

My companion was Matt Neville, one of the organizers of this walk – a walk to save the planet.

Matt explained to me the background to this walk. In June, 2021, the U.K. hosted the annual meeting of the world's richest countries known as the G7, at which the subject of global warming and its consequences were discussed. Coincidentally, in November 2021, the U.K. was also the venue of COP

26, so called because it will be the 26th annual United Nations conference of interested parties (governments, world leaders, international organizations) on climate change.

The G7 was in Cornwall, at the south-western tip of England. The COP 26 event will be at the opposite end

"Unless we do something, everything you see now will be wiped away. That is why we have to act. And it is the young who are taking the lead."

of the country, in Glasgow, Scotland. A group of young Christians, inspired by figures such as Pope Francis with his 2015 encyclical "Laudato Si" and Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg, got together and decided it would be a great idea to walk between the two sites, criss-crossing the nation to

publicize the need to act to stem global warming and its disastrous side-effects.

They would time their arrival in Glasgow to coincide with the start of the COP. This would also help put pressure on world leaders to live up to their promises to limit future warming to "manageable levels" and to help poorer nations pay for the consequences of climate change that has already happened.

The walk was designed as a relay, with different teams taking responsibility for each section – arranging itineraries, routes and accommodation. My companion Matt was part of the team in charge of the Oxford to Birmingham stretch. Some youngsters would do an entire section, staying overnight wherever they could.

In addition, others interested in the cause were invited to come along for the day, which is where I and a party of other Columban missionaries came in. Our group consisted of myself, a Columban priest, James and Emma,



On the move



Fr. Boles and the Columban team



At the end

two of our co-workers, and Columban lay missionaries Roberta from Korea and Teresa from Malaysia lent an international flavour to the group.

Matt explained that the response had been fantastic. At every stage, the “climate pilgrims” had been offered food and accommodation in churches,

schools, community centers and private homes. “In fact, sometimes the problem has been that we’ve had TOO MANY offers of hospitality, we just haven’t been able to take all of them up,” he added.

In our case, the “overnighters” had been put up in a property belonging to the local Anglican parish. We were sent

on our way with a prayer and blessing conducted by the vicar. People waved encouragement to us as we meandered along the paths and through the villages of lovely rural Oxfordshire. We arrived in the afternoon at the historic town of Banbury, where we Columban “day trippers” said good-bye to our companions, who were going on to be put up for that night in the local Catholic parish.

Before parting, Matt referred to some of the other goals of these young activists. Not only to press rich countries to increase aid to poor ones, but also cancel the international debts of the very poorest nations.

Maybe these are dreams. But Pope Francis’s latest work is entitled, “Let Us Dream,” and, as his Holiness is fond of pointing out, if enough people share the same dream, dreams can become reality. **CM**

Columban Fr. John Boles lives and works in South America.

Holy Week Reflection

Washing of the Feet

By Fr. Timothy Mulroy



The wrapping on the small parcel resembled a brown paper bag rather than an envelope while Fr. Elmer's name and address were written in bold, clear letters. Perhaps it was a gift for his tenth anniversary of priesthood, which he was going to celebrate with a few parishioners that weekend. Curiously, he began to tear open the wrapping, which seemed to melt between his fingers, suddenly revealing a carefully-folded towel. He unfolded it and quickly sensed that though it was bright and clean, it was somewhat faded from having been used. He held it in the air and shook it, then examined the brown packaging, but there was nothing more. Moreover, there was no sender's name or address.

Puzzled, he sat down and carefully examined once more the packaging

and then the towel itself as his mind raced in circles trying to make sense of this gift. Was it a prank played by one of his former seminary classmates? Yes, Tom might think this funny. Or, was it a rebuke from a member of the pastoral council in his previous parish with whom he had several arguments? No, Linda was often sharp, but she was always direct. Mystified, he sat there on his low, swivel chair, thinking about this person and that person, as well as about their strange and improbable motives, while the slightly worn towel and tattered brown paper lay carelessly on his lap.

A string of weekend Masses and meetings, followed by dinner out with a few parishioners on Sunday evening, meant that he gave the matter no more thought until the following week. Then, once again, he carefully

examined the torn, brown paper packaging, the handwritten name and address, and the towel itself, hoping to discover some hidden clue as to who the sender might be and what was their intent. However, the mysterious gift seemed determined to continue to conceal its meaning from him.

A few months later Fr. Elmer found himself busily preparing for the Holy Week and Easter ceremonies – clarifying the route for the Palm Sunday procession, making a list of designated parishioners for the foot-washing ceremony on Holy Thursday, and ensuring that the small group of catechumens were ready to receive baptism during the Easter Vigil.

During the Mass on Holy Thursday evening, having already washed the feet of six or seven parishioners, he was feeling less self-conscious and began to reflect not just on what he was doing but also on the deeper meaning of the ritual. The humility conveyed by being crouched on the floor at the service of another person. The cleansing and refreshment that was conveyed through pouring crystal-clear water over tired and worn feet. The affection and tenderness expressed by the gentle caress of a towel around another person's toes. Then, suddenly, the scene of his mother bathing his own feet as a child flashed through his mind and he felt an overwhelming sense of well-being and serenity. That memory of his feet having been caressed by his mother's hands stayed with him for the remainder of the Mass. Perhaps, he reflected, the apostles had a similar experience when Jesus washed and dried their feet. Maybe, this was the reason that Jesus insisted on washing and drying Peter's feet: Jesus wanted Peter to experience such real and tender care, similar to a mother's unconditional care expressed in ordinary, everyday chores for her family.

Generally, after Fr. Elmer returned to the rectory at the end of a long day, he would instinctively flick on the television and skim the channels. However, on that particular Holy Thursday evening, he sat absent-mindedly in his low, swivel chair, his eyes wandering aimlessly around the living room. He still had a vague sense that he was caught up in something mysterious. It was then that he noticed the tattered brown bag and the towel still lying in the bottom shelf of the bookcase. He had forgotten about them and felt no inclination now to think about them again. Yet, they seemed to call out with a quiet insistence for his attention.

Wondering why had not done so earlier, he decided there and then to put them in the garbage can. However, as he picked up the towel and looked at it once again, he sensed something strange, yet familiar about it. Though clean and bright, the texture was slightly worn and faded, which made it a strange gift. But what was it that

also made it look familiar? Why did it now seem like his personal belonging? Then it dawned on him: just a few hours earlier he had been using such a towel to lovingly dry the feet of the parishioners.

Once again, clutching the towel in both hands while seated on his low, swivel chair, the mystery suddenly revealed itself. As Fr. Elmer gazed at it, he could see himself just as clearly as if he were looking at his own image in a mirror. Like that slightly worn and faded towel, the stresses and strains of ten years of priesthood had dented some of his youthful idealism and enthusiasm for ministry, but there was still so much more that he wanted to do in the service of God's mission. That towel was also a reminder that his priesthood was a call to be of service to others who felt worn and faded by the demands and suffering of the world. ❏

Columban Fr. Timothy Mulroy serves on the Society General Council in Hong Kong.



Life of a Columban Baby

Coming Full Circle

By Fr. John Boles

Born on St. Columban's Day, baptized by a Columban priest, ordained by a cousin and namesake – it seems I was marked out from the start!

Three days after being born on November 23, 1953, in Stockport, Greater Manchester, deep in the industrial heartland of northern England, I was christened by Irish Columban Father Austin Sands, recently returned from the missions in Burma (now Myanmar).

Thanks to my family I was soon imbued with a joint sense of Catholicism and social justice, and as such from an early age looked for ways of “doing my bit” to make the world a better place, though I never had an inkling of being a priest.

Armed with a Bachelor's Degree in Geography and a Master's in Urban Design from Hull and Manchester Universities respectively, my Wonderful Career began on the bottom rung of local government town planning, vetting porch extensions and new garages in Wolverhampton. However, I retained a keen interest in developments in what was then known as the Third World and was especially fascinated by the involvement of the Catholic Church in campaigns on behalf of the poor in Latin America during the heady days following the Second Vatican Council.

One of my heroes was (now Saint) Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador (in the similarly named Central American republic of El Salvador). His assassination on

March 24, 1980, was a turning point for me. This was the moment when I determined to go to Latin America as a technical volunteer and join in the process Romero had died for.

I applied to the British Volunteer Program, and after several false starts ended up being sent to another Central American nation in conflict, Nicaragua, in 1983, with the task of helping set up emergency relocation areas for peasant communities displaced by fighting during the Contra War (1983-90).

For the first time I saw committed Catholics, both lay people and clergy, working side by side to overcome poverty and injustice, even at the risk of their lives. I was particularly moved by the role of foreign missionary priests and began to feel that maybe this was the path along which God was asking me to travel.

Finally, I consulted with one of these priests, an Irishman with whom I'd become friendly. He encouraged me to try my vocation as an ordained missionary. As I'd no idea about societies or congregations, I asked him if he could recommend one, to which he replied, “John, the only crowd as daft as you are the Columban Fathers” (whose name I'd completely forgotten). “Why daft,” I asked. “Because their specialty is to work in areas where, due to danger or poverty, the local Church can't or won't work”, he explained. As it turned out, he'd originally been a Columban himself, but that is another story. He gave me the name and address of a Columban in Britain, one Fr. Ed O'Connell.

There was just one little snag in all this. During my time of voluntary service I'd started going out with a very nice little Nicaraguan lady. Fortunately for me, Nice Little Nicaraguan Lady was also a devout Catholic and very understanding. She said she'd wait for me for a year while I returned to Britain, contacted the Columbans, had a taste of their seminary and discerned between them and her.

So, off I went, met Ed, visited the Columban seminary in Ireland, liked what I saw and sadly had to write “That Letter” to Nice Little Nicaraguan Lady. She was half-expecting my decision anyway, bore me no ill-will and later married a local chap. We are still in touch, and she and her husband are now enjoying retirement and visits from their grown-up daughter. So, in case you were wondering, that story has a happy ending as well.

I entered the Columbans in 1989 and was ordained in 1996. Most of my training was done in Ireland, with a year in the U.S.A. – wherein lies another twist in the tale.

While studying in the U.S., I visited the Columbans in Boston, where one of them remarked, “Hey John, one of the priests in the diocese here has the same name as you. Could there be a connection?” Now, I knew that when my granddad emigrated from Sligo to Manchester before the First World War some of his brothers went instead to Boston, and it was rumored that the offspring of one had become a priest. Might it be him?

This Fr. John Boles was chaplain to Harvard University. I made an



appointment, went along to meet him and, sure enough, it turned out that his father had been my grandfather's brother. We were second cousins!

Six months later, Fr. John Boles was made BISHOP John Boles, Auxiliary Bishop of Boston. I was invited to the episcopal ordination, had a VIP seat in the front pew, and after the ceremony cousin John promised me that if I made to priesthood, he would go to Manchester and ordain me. I did, and he did! "John Boles Ordains John

Boles," read the headline in the local newspaper that weekend.

Due to my affinity with Latin America, after ordination I was appointed to the Columban mission in Peru, where I have been for the last quarter-century.

For me, it has been a dream come true, working with the poor in both a spiritual and a humanitarian capacity. Mainly I've been helping develop parishes from scratch in the shanty towns of settlers recently arrived from the countryside. Once the parishes

are self-sufficient, we hand them over to the local bishop and move once more to the new frontier to repeat the process. I also serve as chaplain to our school for the special needs children of poor families. Finally, I have returned to the seminary, this time as formator, and have had the pleasure of seeing half a dozen candidates ordained as Columban missionary priests. 

Columban Fr. John Boles lives and works in South America.



The Influence of Santo Niño

My Formation Journey

By Elbert Balastro

The celebration of 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines was a momentous event that needed to be celebrated and remembered. This commemoration was a good time for the reckoning of insights, graces, and faith that our ancestors cultivated, and passed on to us. From the articles and news that I read about this centenary occasion, the image of the Santo Niño stands out

to me. As an Illongo who grew up as a devotee, I always see the icon at home, in the market, in business offices, restaurants or even malls. St. Niño has always been there guiding me, so I give thanks to God for all the gifts He bestowed on me especially in my seminary formation.

The statue of Santo Niño has always influenced me in my formation journey, as it had guided my ancestors

to grow in their faith when they first received the statue 500 years ago. Now that I have completed my formation journey in the seminary and have embarked on a new one, it is time for me to give back. I could only do that through my loving presence and my lifelong commitment to the service of God, His people and all of creation. As Pope Francis said, “Faith is passed on by contact, from one person to

another, just as one candle is lighted from another.”

Formation in the seminary takes time, effort, and hard work. I remember entering the Columban House of Studies in 2012 and felt like I was so far from the finish line. As time went by, I realized that it is not about reaching the finish line that matters the most, but savoring the journey along the way. It is all worth it for my personal and spiritual growth and the awareness of God’s love in me. After nine years of participating in prayer life, community life, apostolate work, and study, I have been formed and molded into someone ready to commit and offer his life for the sake of the mission.

Reflecting on my formation journey in relation to the celebration of 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines, draws me to the statue of the Santo Niño because it feels like meeting Him again. According to history, the statue of the boy Jesus was a baptismal *gift* to Humaway, the chief wife of *Rajah* Humabon. Of all the material things that Magellan and his group brought, I asked myself, “Why give the image of the St. Niño?”

Thereafter, I realized the importance of the symbol that it represents. St. Niño is an image that best represents my journey as a Columban. The Child Jesus depicted in the statue reminds me of the childlike attitude that I need to cultivate as a seminarian. A child’s heart is sincere and generous. At the same time, his mind is open to learning. Years of immersing myself in the seminary formation made me inculcate several essential values in the long run.

I was taught that like the boy Jesus, I need to be reformed, to have a deeper faith in God, and a wider understanding of mission. After all, I cannot minister to people and share

the joy of the Gospel to others if I am not equipped with the knowledge and awareness of the presence of God in my life. It would be like the blind leading the blind. Furthermore, the virtue of humility is an important quality. Knowing when to apologize, being able to recognize the aspects of our life we are ignorant about, and recognizing our strengths and weaknesses developed me into a person who is in touch with the reality of life.



As Pope Francis said, “Faith is passed on by contact, from one person to another, just as one candle is lighted from another.”

In my journey, there were times when academic studies were demanding and difficult. There were moments when academic papers overwhelmed me, and I was at a loss for ideas. However, my openness to learn aided me in refining my motivation to be a missionary priest. My studies are not only for my personal interests, it is also dedicated to the people of my future ministry.

Open-mindedness is one of the values I developed in formation. I

remember working in the prison and hospital ministry and being confronted with difficult questions. Why does God let these people suffer? Where is the hand of God in the tragedies of their life? As much as I would like to answer them, I am not a messiah; I do not bear the knowledge that could give them sufficient answers. What I could only do, at their times of distress was to be a companion, a brother, friend or pilgrim.

Love always comes from within and from that wellspring, it will overflow to others. I cannot love someone if I do not know how to love and forgive myself. Love is inclusive. My First Mission Assignment (FMA) in Pakistan taught me that every person has dignity and deserves to be loved even if they belong to the lower caste. As a missionary, I must be capable of love for all people regardless of race, color of skin, gender, religion, and culture and for all beings created.

As an ordained deacon, my eyes are open to a wider perspective of God’s mission. Mission involves not merely giving but also receiving insights and the goodness of the people. Further “giving” also involves being present in the life of people in the ministry, rather than just the dole-out form. The best gift I could give in the mission is my effort to reach out to people with love and compassion, to advocate protection for the environment, and to promote equality and peace through mutual respect and dialogue.

My faith gets nourished by my burning desire and commitment to encounter God, and it is through my daily encounters with people that I meet Jesus. Sometimes, I find myself in doubt or lacking in my knowledge of God, but all I have to do is look at the statue of the Santo Niño and draw inspiration from it. CM

Columban seminarian Elbert Balbastro studies in Manila, Philippines.

Joy and Blessing

Made to Feel Welcome

By Monalisa Esteban

A few months ago, I had this strange experience of having my hands washed by an old lady in the village. She grabbed my hands and started washing them. I did try to stop her, but in the end I surrendered to the moment.

It was one of the ordinary days of visiting the villages. Our visitation usually includes an ordained priest, a catechist, a lay missionary and/or a Sister. While the priest and the catechist are talking with the village men, I am mingling with the women. This is the usual set up. That day was my first time to meet this old lady.

It was a pleasant day, and everyone seemed happy, going about their business of preparing our lunch before the Holy Mass. I was like a hopper, jumping from one *chulah* (clay stove) to another just to greet and chat a little with these women while they were doing their cooking. Ending my hopping I landed on the *charpay* (stringed bed) where an old lady was



Mona with a village friend

sitting. We had a good chat about her family and life in the village. She was so enthusiastic to tell her story which I enjoyed listening to. We exchanged questions of each other that sparked our interest. I felt she wanted to tell me something – a story of joy and blessing!

We were killing time, laughing and storytelling, when before I knew it, a basin was placed in front of me along with a woman holding a jar of water. Suddenly the old lady grabbed my hands, smiled at me, and started washing them. I tried to pull them away and protested that I could do

We exchanged questions of each other that sparked our interest. I felt she wanted to tell me something – a story of joy and blessing!

it myself, but my defense was not strong enough. She held them with her hands and while she was caressing them, I felt a needle pinch me inside that left me speechless that I could only just gaze at her and smile. I felt a hand that was neither soft nor manicured. A hand that has sown seed and reaped the rewards after long months of patiently nurturing the land. A hand that bleeds during a hard rush harvest season. A hand to be proud of and be grateful for because of their hard work. A hand that tells a lot of stories to learn in life.

I still remember her face smiling at me while saying something which I couldn't make out, even though I was just in front of her. Maybe because I was star-struck with what she was doing. At that moment, deep inside me, I was experiencing mixed emotions. If this were Jesus who was washing my feet, this would possibly be the feeling I was experiencing. I am in awe that I got to witness this kind of love from people I had just met for the first time. Her humble witnessing to a complete stranger really made me feel welcome. **CM**

Columban lay missionary Monalisa Esteban lives and works in Pakistan.





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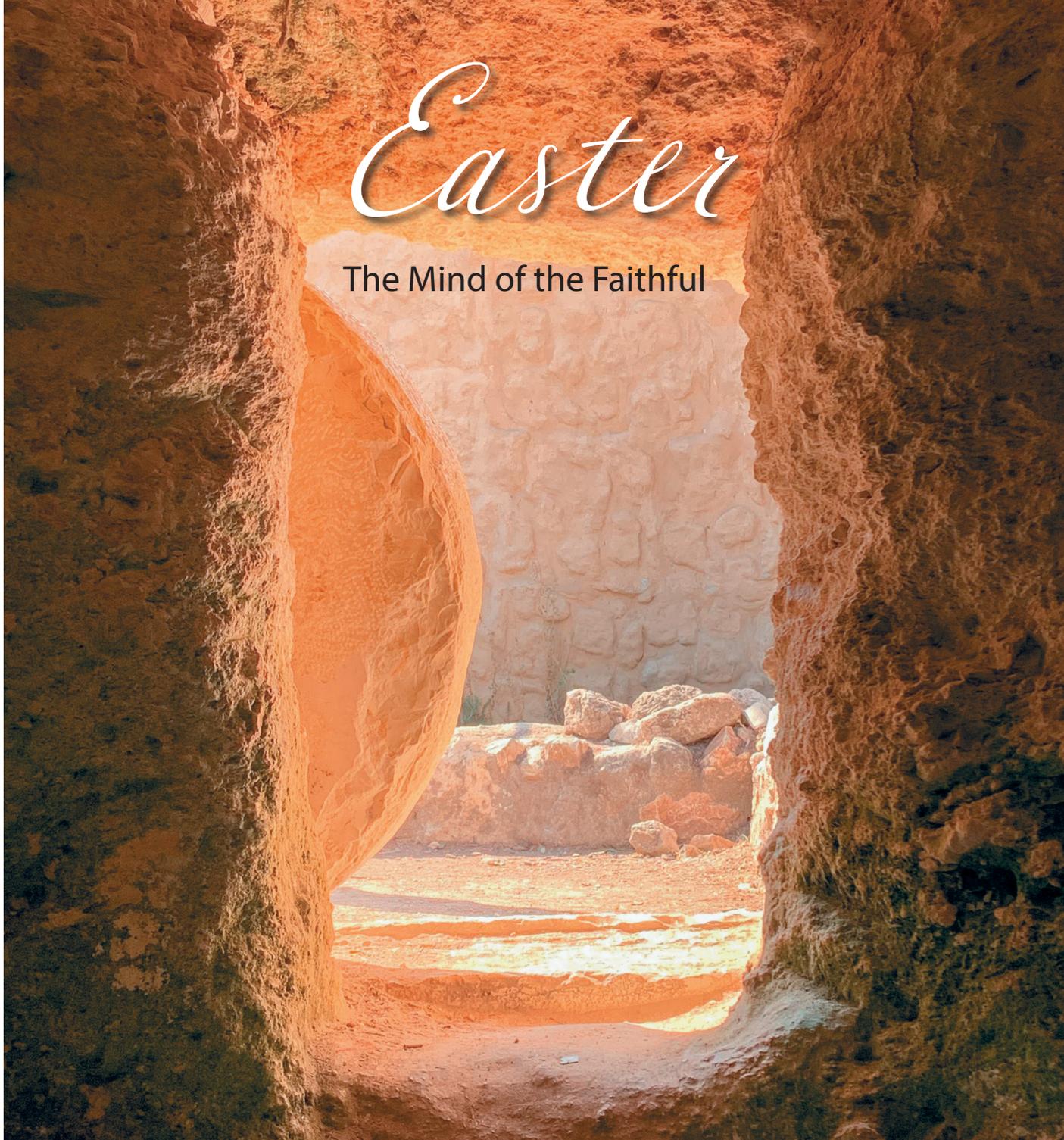


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Easter

The Mind of the Faithful



By Fr. Robert McCulloch

A holy memory from my childhood remains with me. I was five years old. I remember going with my father through the mud and slush of early 1950's suburban, Melbourne, Australia, to St. Patrick's Church in Mentone. Morning, a long ceremony. Much later on, I realized that I was attending the Easter Vigil ceremonies that were then celebrated

on the morning of Holy Saturday. Was I as a small child experiencing what the Russians felt when they came to Constantinople in 988 AD searching for faith and found it in the celebration of the Divine liturgy? Who says children don't know?

Fast forward to Talisayan in 1972, a smallish but mountainous rural parish of 25,000 Catholics in the southern

Philippines. After the 3 p.m. liturgy on Good Friday the statues of the Passion were outside the Church on small carriages waiting to be drawn in a procession in sadness and tears of mourning through the town.

Each statue was surrounded by its devotees ready to push the carriage, especially the statue of the Virgin Mary draped in black and with her

heart pierced by a sword. The carriage with the statue of the Dead Christ was left alone. But, as the procession moved off, several black-clothed men with bowed heads came and began to push this carriage. They were the thugs, the social trespassers, the havoc-makers of the town. The age-old traditional custom drew them to push the carriage and to publicly ask forgiveness from their Crucified Christ and the townspeople. No one in the procession said anything, but everyone knew that this was the time of soul-healing and forgiveness. I began hearing confessions in the Church immediately after the procession. After about 9 p.m. when the church seemed to be empty and was mostly dark, I am sure that it was these same violent social trespassers who came for the Sacrament of reconciliation. The town had already forgiven them as they pushed the Dead Christ through the town, and now they came to the church to confess and be forgiven by their Christ.

Fast forward again to Easter 1980 in Narowal, a big rural parish in northern Pakistan, up where Punjab meets with India and Kashmir. After three celebrations of the Easter Vigil ceremonies on Holy Saturday night and Masses all through Easter morning, it was then out on a motorcycle for the next eight days of the Easter Octave. Three or four Masses each day, for a few Catholic families in one place and for 100 families in another place. "Thank you, Father, for coming. How could we celebrate Easter without Holy Mass?"

Fast forward again to Easter in the Sindh at Badin in southeast Pakistan in 1985. Most Catholics were agricultural laborers whom the Muslim landlords would allow only one day for an Easter holiday. They were able to come to the Church on Holy Saturday evening and they came in their hundreds with catechumens who would be received

into the Church that night and with many seekers and inquirers.

All through the evening and night of Holy Saturday the ceremonies and events from Holy Thursday until Easter were celebrated in one continuous rite, together with catechesis, film, rest periods (we provided everyone with a thin mattress and a quilt as the night weather was always cold at Easter time in Badin on the fringes of the Thar Desert), and a good meal, as was shared by Our Lord with His apostles on Holy Thursday night, and tea.

Everyone's feet were washed during the commemoration of the events of Holy Thursday, women by the Sisters and catechists' wives, men by the priests and the catechists. Profound silence, tubs of muddy water continually replaced as most people had walked in bare feet. And later, the lighting of the Easter fire and the Easter candle with drums beating and fireworks exploding and shouts of joy. And then the catechumens received into the Church with their commitment and promise to present someone else for instruction during the coming year and reception at the next Easter.

Now fast forward to Rome since 2011. Although I have never much

cared to go to St. Peter's for the Holy Week and Easter Vigil ceremonies, coming on Easter Sunday to St. Peter's Square at noon with hundreds of thousands of cheering Romans and fervent pilgrims to receive the *Urbi et Orbi* blessing from the Holy Father is not to be missed.

I much prefer to go to the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore and join with the ordinary Romans as they celebrate the Holy Days and Easter in "their basilica." The organ seems to play more loudly, the trumpets seem to blast more joyously, and the choir seems to sing with more gusto and verve at Santa Maria Maggiore to celebrate Easter with the people of Rome.

As a consultor since 2016 to the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments at the Vatican, I think this is about the *sensus fidelium*, the mind of the faithful, how the people of God in many places and conditions know instinctively that these Holy Days and Easter should be celebrated and know how to celebrate them. Even a little five-year-old boy knew, now so many years ago. **CM**

Columban Fr. Robert McCulloch lives and works in Rome.



A Shared Fraternity

United in Doing Good

By Fr. Shay Cullen

The latest letter of Pope Francis, the Encyclical, Fratelli Tutti, Brothers and Sisters All, should touch every heart, stimulate all minds, awaken consciences, warm our emotions and motivate us all to do good and make this a happier, more just and better world.

Can we humans ever unite as one humanity to change the world and reach out to our downtrodden and poor? Can we work together to lift the wounded, the excluded, the marginalized and the rejected in our neighborhood, community, town or city? That is the challenge posed by the letter of Pope Francis.

The letter is one of enlightenment, encouragement, hope and love. It is a mighty challenge for us to be true believers and followers of Jesus of Nazareth. It brings us back to the human and Christian values that establish the dignity of humankind. It is a call to embrace and live out daily the values and principles that Jesus taught and lived and died for. It is the heart of Christian faith, a personal relationship with Jesus of Nazareth and a shared fraternity with each other as brothers and sisters in our one human family.

As members of this universal family, we will embrace unselfish concern, love and service for one another. Jesus gave Himself no titles, but others did. They called Him Rabbi, Teacher, Master, and Son of God. What Jesus called Himself was “a member of humanity,” a “son of humankind,” as every one of us are members of the human family.

In this, Jesus was revolutionary and Pope Francis is repeating what Jesus taught: that we must love all others irrespective of whether they are members of our special group or not. All persons are to be our neighbours. He calls us to put aside group loyalty, to leave elite fraternities, to cast away membership in sects, clubs and dynasties, upper and lower classes, tribal bonds, nationality, social status and prestige. We are to abandon all the bias and prejudices that go with such select, closed groups that exclude

We are to abandon all the bias and prejudices that go with such select, closed groups that exclude and fear outsiders. We must leave our group and join all others in a single family based on equality, justice, truth and service for others.

and fear outsiders. We must leave our group and join all others in a single family based on equality, justice, truth and service for others.

If personal family ties would cause us to reject, exclude or oppress others and separate us from the values of Jesus, we must cut such family ties. A shocking challenge for anyone who would be His true disciple even to the point where we must love even our enemy. “Do good to those who hate you,” He said. It seems impossible, yet

that is the idea that Jesus taught, that we are all one humanity in one world. He lived and died for all of us.

As members of God’s single-family, we share a common humanity, dignity, justice and respect. This is what Pope Francis is reminding us, that as human beings we must be caring and responsible for each other irrespective of skin color, citizenship, religion, gender, status or situation in life

We must also be caring for the planet, the environment, all living creatures. The universality of the loving fraternity that Jesus taught demands we love one another and do to others as we would want them to do to us. This is the heart of the Christian message.

The world today with its many problems of injustice, racism, inequality, crime and corruption, is a world in the darkness of evil. Yet the hope and love that Jesus of Nazareth shared with us can save humanity from self-destruction, hatred, violence and nuclear war and even save us from extinction.

It is by sharing life in a universal community and working together helping the poor and the oppressed that change will come. By standing and speaking out against violence, killings, child abuse and evil, we will make Jesus and His spirit present and change the world. We just need to persuade enough people to choose to do it.

In his Encyclical, Pope Francis takes the story that Jesus told to illustrate the welcome and acceptance and the help we should have for the outsider, for the stranger, the migrant, the excluded.



These are the people who are treated with rejection, apathy and indifference by the elite institutionalized clergy and uncaring politicians.

As Pope Francis interprets it in today's world, suffering humanity has been beaten and robbed by the uncaring powerful robbers and left to die on the roadside. The victim was a stranger, an unknown. A member of the clergy and then a member of the ruling elite walk by on the other side of the road. They ignore the wounded, dying person. A man comes along, perhaps a trader with a donkey. He is different. He is like an untouchable, an unclean, rejected person, being from Samaria. He does not walk past. He is moved with compassion and concern. He hurries to help the victim, cleans and treats his wounds

“Who among the three was a true neighbor to the dying man and saved him?” Jesus asked.

“The one who helped him” was the answer He received. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus said. (Luke 10:25-37)

and takes the victim on his donkey to the nearest inn. There, a humble, kind innkeeper agrees to care for the victim. The trader pays him and promises to return and pay more as needed.

“Who among the three was a true neighbor to the dying man and saved him?” Jesus asked. “The one

who helped him” was the answer He received. “Go and do likewise,” Jesus said. (Luke 10:25-37) The message is clear. When asked to state the way to eternal life, the man in the Gospel answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, life and strength and love your neighbour as you love yourself.” This story, as repeated by Pope Francis, teaches that we are challenged to share with and to help, without discrimination, everyone: strangers, migrants, refugees, the poor, the hungry, the wounded, people of any color and all suffering humanity. CM

Columban Fr. Shay Cullen has been a missionary in the Philippines since 1969 and is the founder of PREDA (People's Recovery, Empowerment, Development Assistance Foundation).

Stations of the Cross

Good Friday 2021, Seoul, Korea

By Fr. Donal O'Keefe

On Good Friday 2021, the Columban formation community in Seoul participated in the Holy Friday Liturgy organized by the Korean Branch of the Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM). Formally inaugurated in January 2020, GCCM Korea is now a national movement coordinated by a team of lay people, religious and priests. The liturgy was organized by the Coordinating Team of GCCM where one of the key persons is Columban lay missionary Noh Hyein Anna. In fact it was the invitation by Anna which spurred us to participate.

On Good Friday morning, about 70 persons gathered in Seoul city center dividing into teams of seven, the maximum allowed to move as a group in line with the Covid regulations. The fourteen Stations of the Cross were set up ahead of time at various places in the business heart of the city with the final one at the steps of Myongdong Cathedral. The Way of the Cross highlighted the passion, suffering and death of God's creatures in our world today.

The participants, a mixed group of young and old, lay and religious, and priests came prepared with placards and posters highlighting the suffering world and displayed those while walking the way of the cross. For example, at Station 9, Jesus falls again, we reflected on the plight of organic farmers driven to their knees by competition from the industrial sized GMO farming. At Station 6, Veronica wiping the face of Jesus, we focused on the Korean solidarity with the present passion of Myanmar, a nation and its natural resources sacrificed due to



The Columban Group

greed of the Generals. At Station 12, Jesus dies on the Cross, we mourned the loss of diversity and life due to greed.

We started at 11:30 a.m., and the stations finished at about 1:30 p.m.. Walking through the business center of the city at this time we were constantly meeting with office workers coming and going to lunch. The placards and posters caught the eyes of the passersby, and although engrossed in conversations, it was clear that they were glancing at the content and reading the messages. One or two persons joined for the short prayer at the different stations.

Back in the formation house we shared about the event. It certainly was a Stations of the Cross with a difference! Some felt that the noise of traffic, people chatting as they went past, did not facilitate reflection on the event. For others this noisy,

chaotic city center atmosphere was probably closer in reality to the original way of cross than any liturgy in the silence and prayerful atmosphere of a Church.

Walking in a public place carrying a placard was a new experience for most of our community and was a challenge in itself. Again, the action of carrying a poster highlighting the suffering of the earth caused us to question more deeply our own consumer lifestyle, our unconscious acceptance of the modern convenient way of living which keeps the exploitative system in place. This was and is a very uncomfortable thought, a serious challenge and invitation to us as disciples today. All in all, it was one of the most meaningful times of Holy Week for us in Seoul in 2021. 

Columban Fr. Donal O'Keefe lives and works in Seoul, Korea.

Hope and Beauty

Often, we missionaries are assigned to areas that are poverty stricken and lack the basic needs that many are accustomed to such as employment, water, food, housing and more. One might think that when we encounter such gloom and doom that it would crush our spirits. Yet, the joys of mission are discovering that in spite of the many difficulties, we find much hope and beauty in the mission.

As a seminarian, I received my first assignment to a small coastal town in Chile where I was struck by the rampant alcoholism amongst the people. Amongst them was a man called Ronnie. I never saw him sober. As a drunk, he was aggressive and loud. I heard that when sober, he was meek and quiet. Personally, I had to throw him out of the church twice because he began destroying property and frightening people. Truly, I believed he would die in the streets like a stray dog.

However, God thought otherwise. I left the area for three years on another assignment and then returned. When I celebrated my first Mass, I noticed a well-dressed, clean, groomed man coming to the altar to read. As he genuflected at the altar, the man looked at me timidly as if I was going to throw him out. When he spoke, I recognized the voice, it was Ronnie! Dumbfounded, I inquired about him after the Mass.

The people told me that one day, Ronnie drank so much that he fell into an alcoholic

FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. Chris Saenz



coma for three days. Upon awakening, he vowed never to drink again thus breaking a 19-year addiction. He decided to dedicate his life to God and church. He began to visit the infirm, take food to the poor, and more. Ronnie's recovery became so noted that he won a spot to attend the canonization of St. Alberto Hurtado, Chile's second canonized saint, in Rome. Ronnie flew with a delegation that included the president of Chile



and other notable people. He had the honor to see Pope Benedict XVI. Ronnie couldn't believe how his life changed so much. This poor little man from a small town was standing with popes and presidents. Truly he was living the Resurrection after 19 years on the cross of alcoholism.

Hope flourishes anywhere if someone is ready to receive it. Often, it is those less fortunate than ourselves who teach us what we lack.

What Ronnie's testimony taught me was that nothing is impossible with God. Hope flourishes anywhere if someone is ready to receive it. Often, it is those less fortunate than ourselves who teach us what we lack. I had given up on Ronnie, but God did not. In this, I was very glad to be proven wrong. That is hope.

Fr. Chris Saenz

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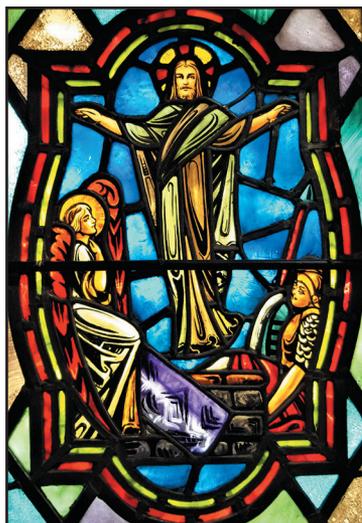
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– St. Luke 24:46-47

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