

# Columban Mission

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May 2021



## Acts of Kindness

# 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.



# In So Many Words

By Fr. Raymond Collier

## Hope Is Bold

I thought I'd share a few of my reflections with you concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. For me it has highlighted the vulnerability of humanity. Yet, it is this vulnerability of humanity, that makes the world safe for humanity, once it is listened to and not ignored. As Pope Francis said in *Laudato Si'*, everything is connected and as he said in *Fratelli Tutti*, his latest encyclical, everyone is connected.

As the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said on one occasion, "A nation is strong when it cares for the weak, it becomes rich when it cares for the poor, it become as invulnerable when it cares about the vulnerable."

For me, it has been a remarkable sign of hope, how a vulnerable people sought security and support in loving their neighbor by volunteering for various projects and groups, reaching out to the others in their need. In doing so they experienced a renewal of their humanity and hope.

While the pandemic did not distinguish between people, it has highlighted great social inequalities, discrimination and environmental degradation which go together, provoked by the forces of inhumanity, who continue to remain profitable and maintain their power through control of the digital media and online communications.

It is those who reach out, seeking to be a counter cultural sign in our times, by crossing divides, boundaries and suspicions to embrace the other in their needs, that build lifegiving relationships and vibrant alternatives to the mainstream versions of the good life.

I'll finish with a quote from Pope Francis' latest encyclical, "I invite everyone to renewed hope, for hope 'speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life

of fulfilment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and life our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love... Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile.' Let us continue, then, on this path of hope." (*Fratelli Tutti*, section 55)

With you all in thought and prayer, may God's blessings be yours as we remember that God emptied Himself to be a human being and we empty ourselves to be Christ-like.

*Columban Fr. Raymond Collier lives and works in Britain.*

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*Yet, it is this vulnerability of  
humanity, that makes the world safe  
for humanity, once it is listened to and  
not ignored.*

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# Missionaries for a Common Humanity

## Selfless Service

By Fr. Michael Hoban

In March 2020, I was enjoying the sabbatical program “Ministry to Ministers” at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas, when the program was suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic. It was a disappointment, but it was also the beginning of a different kind of missionary journey. Because of the pandemic lockdown, I could not return to Chile. Over the next few months, I would drive across half of the United States and pitch my tent in various places: the Columban headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska; a hotel in Chicago; my brother’s home in Portland, Maine; the Columban residence in Bristol, Rhode Island, and finally in St. Agnes Cathedral, Rockville Center, New York. The truth is that I was welcomed and treated well everywhere I stayed!

The Diocese of Rockville Center invited me to help at St. Agnes Cathedral. One of the reasons that I enjoyed being there was the opportunity to meet parishioners who know Columban missionaries and have supported our work over the years. They asked me about Columban missionary priests whom they knew in the past and what had happened to them. I have visited their homes, and they shared their stories of faith with me.

Pope Francis wrote his encyclical “Fratelli Tutti” as a response and reflection on the worldwide pandemic. The pandemic revealed the common vulnerability which we all share. The Holy Father sees the pandemic as the opportunity for us to discover our common humanity and to build a world based on fraternity and social friendship. His call for “universal fraternal charity” builds on Pope St. John Paul II’s description of



missionaries as “universal brothers and sisters.” For me, during my time at St. Agnes Cathedral it was privilege to meet some missionaries for a common humanity so close to home!

Peter and Delia Garrity are active in the cathedral parish as lectors, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist and members of the parish choir. Delia is a retired Assistant Superintendent of Schools in Rockville Centre, and Peter is a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. Peter told me that he was from Hyde Park, Massachusetts, close to Milton where the Columban Major Seminary was located. He remembered meeting

Columban Father Patrick Bastable and walking with him to the seminary on several occasions. He credits Fr. Paddy with awakening in him an interest in the missionary apostolate of the Church. However, he did not respond to Fr. Paddy’s hints about joining the Columbans, but many years later Peter and Delia would make their own missionary commitment.

Robert Silon is a dentist in Rockville Center who had offered dental services as part of a medical team led by H.E.L.P. International in Uganda. He learned of a longer-term project the organization was starting for a refugee village in Masese, Uganda. Masese is a village where



most of the people are refugees from Sudan, Rwanda, and the Congo. They are Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims. The project needed health and education support, so Robert and his wife Diana reached out to their friends, the Garritys. Over a shared passion for service, the two families, with their daughters, Corryn Silon and Trish Garrity, took the first of more than twenty trips that would change their lives. What started as a school in a shed for 40 students in 2010 has grown to a primary school, serving 540 students, nursery to grade 7, and providing two meals each day. Due to high food scarcity and low economic opportunity for adults in the village, it was common for the children to eat only every three days.

A sponsorship program was launched for the families most in need that provides weekend food for the whole family, lessening malnutrition. The school then moved to providing medical treatment for intestinal worms, yellow fever and malaria, in addition to clean water on campus. In time the school would offer vocational training for adults and small microfinance loans for innovative local entrepreneurs, who lacked the capital and confidence to pursue business. The most significant business venture is an artisan cooperative of the mothers of the students called “Bigger Than Beads” where the mothers make jewelry, handbags, bread baskets, rosaries etc. The products are purchased directly from the female artisans at a fair price, sold at markup in the United States, and 100% of the net profit is reinvested in the school.



Peter and Delia travel back to New York with three, 50 lb. bags filled with the products of the cooperative. Their garage has been converted into a shop displaying the handicrafts. Monsignor Bill Koenig, the rector of the Cathedral parish, is an active supporter of their work and helps them organize a handicrafts fair for the parishioners of St. Agnes. Each year between US \$3,000 and \$4,000 dollars is made in the sale of the different handicraft articles.



**Mary Joesten at work at the food pantry**

The first celebration of the daily Eucharist in St. Agnes Cathedral takes place at 6:30 A.M. It is always well attended. Mary Joesten, an elderly parishioner, begins her day with daily Mass, but on Saturdays she heads off to work in an ecumenical food pantry. During the pandemic, the food pantry has helped hundreds of people with food relief. However, Mary has been involved in reaching out to the poor since 1969! Her husband was a permanent deacon of the Diocese



of Rockville Center. His wife took seriously the ministry of service of the diaconate. She tells the story of how her husband got up one morning and walked into the bathroom of their home to find a homeless man using his razor! Mary had invited him in for breakfast and let him shave himself!

The Men’s Prayer Group in St. Agnes meets on the last Thursday of every month. Kevin Conlon, the coordinator of the prayer group, invited me to speak at one of their meetings. The group was founded by Stephen McDonald, a New York City policeman, who was shot in the line of duty in 1986. The shooting left him quadriplegic and in need of a ventilator. Stephen forgave the youth who shot him and went on to create the “Breaking the Cycle” program which advocates non-violent conflict resolution. Stephen would travel multiple times to Northern Ireland with his friend, Fr. Mychal Judge, OFM, who was killed on September 11, 2001, during the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York. Stephen would spend the rest of his life working to promote the importance of forgiveness. His wife is a lector in St. Agnes Cathedral.

I am sure that if I had spent more time in the parish, I would have heard many more stories of selfless service which recognizes that we are all called to be “missionaries for a common humanity.” **EM**

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After many months in the United States during the coronavirus pandemic, Fr. Michael Hoban is once again living and working in Chile.

# Coping with Quarantine

## A Rich Experience

By Iowane Najo

*“Hola a todas y todos, saludos muy cordiales desde Lima, Perú.”* My name is Iowane Najo, a Columban seminarian from Fiji, doing my First Mission Assignment program in Lima, Peru, with the Columbans. I live in a multicultural and multinational group, one Peruvian (Fr. Gabriel), one Filipino (Fr. Dylan), two Koreans (Fr. Rafael & Fr. Francisco), and we are three Fijians (Fr. Iowane Gukibau, Antonio and myself).

So far, it has been a challenging but rich experience for me even though our participation in the parish activities is very limited due to the pandemic. It has been eight months now since the churches closed, and we hope that they will open up gradually, with the respective and necessary protocols, by the end of November 2020. As of now all the liturgies, novenas and the celebration of the Eucharist are transmitted online through Zoom and Facebook. But we have also been helping out needy families by providing packs

of groceries, both to Peruvians and Venezuelans during this pandemic. There are many people suffering here because most of them do not have jobs. Whilst it is difficult to help them all with the little that we have, we are trying our best to help those who are in most need.

I would like to share a little bit of my experience on how I have been coping with this situation. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was quite calm because I thought that coronavirus will be overcome just like any other disease. But after three months of lockdown, I began to worry about my health, I was afraid that I might catch it as well. I began to worry about my FMA program since the churches were closed, and there was no interaction with the people with whom I was supposed to work. I was worried about how I could witness or experience Columban missionary work here in this new context.

Seeing the vulnerable people suffering around us during this

lockdown really frustrated me as well. I could watch it on television and could also witness it personally in our neighborhood. I began to ask myself questions like: As missionaries why are we not doing more to help these people? This is the time that the people really need our accompaniment. I tussled with this question and as usual offered it to God during my prayer. I could not keep this tension within myself so, I shared it with two of my companions. I found out that they were going through the exactly same experience as well.

This brought me to a deeper reflection, and I came to realize that this situation is new to all of us. None of these priests had ever gone through this experience even though they have been working here for some time. All of us were trying to make sense of the new situation. So, we began to talk about the situation and then decided as a group to meet once a week, just to have a space to reflect on our experiences. These weekly meetings were really helpful for me, and I began to understand that I was not alone in this situation. It helped me to reflect more on my missionary vocation and to identify new ways of being church in this situation. I understood that this situation was really challenging, but at the same time I trusted God was inviting us to be more practical in our faith, maybe we were focusing more on loving God but not so much on loving our neighbor. This situation invited us to find a middle ground, a right balance between our love for God and our love for our neighbors. I realized that we cannot separate these two great commandments which defines true humanity; they coexist in



Iowane the gardener!



**Columban Fr. Iowane Gukibau with donations**

nature just like the two sides of a coin. It is impossible to love our neighbors without experiencing ourselves the love of God.

By the month of July, there was more flexibility in the lockdown, and I began to cycle around some of the places, walking and jogging in the football field close to our house. I also bought some simple exercising equipment just to use at home since all the gyms were closed. During this period, we also gradually, with the help of the chapel coordinators, began to identify vulnerable families and, following all the safety precautions, we began to distribute packs of groceries to them. So, all these activities really enabled me to adjust to this new situation and to settle down gradually accepting new routines. At this stage, I felt a bit more content as I realized that not everything is out of my control. I can at least control some of my simple routines now, unlike at the beginning of the pandemic where I felt really helpless and useless.

Working at the Manuel Duato Special Needs School is one of my favorite experiences during this pandemic. During one of our Zoom

formation meetings with Fr. Lalo (Columban Fr. Ed O'Connell), I was surprised that he suggested the possibility of us doing some gardening in Manuel Duato since they have a lot of empty space there. Upon hearing this, I was really happy and excited about it and so was Atonio, the other Fijian seminarian here with me. We finally began the gardening. The space was quite big, but the soil was not that impressive. It looked really dusty, dry and useless, but it had a water tap installed there which gave us a little bit of hope. First of all, we dug up a few plots, got some manure and on the third day we began planting. The first three plots we planted did not germinate, but we never gave up, we kept on digging up plots, putting manure on them and watering them. There was a ray of hope when we saw the potatoes had begun to germinate. It was challenging but happy time for me, because I was doing one of the things I loved to do.

I love working on the farm, I love working with soil. The soil is very significant for me because, before the seminary, I spent most of my time working on the farm. There are some characteristics of the soil which can

be compared to God. For example: God is so loving and never hates or neglects us regardless of how sinful we are. In the same way, the soil accepts everything we do to her, regardless of good and bad. Whether we spit or pour hot water on to the soil, it never gives us stones when we plant potatoes, she will always give us back potatoes. If we relate well and closely to God, we are always at peace despite the normal ups and downs. Similarly, if we relate well to the soil, if we are closely connected to her, surely, we will have something to harvest despite the ups and downs. The soil never takes revenge on us, and it's the same with God. Working with the soil also teaches us patience, because time is always needed before the harvest. It also teaches us to be more sensitive to things around us, because we have to be mindful of the seasons and the resources available before we start working. With the soil, we need commitment, and we need exactly the same attitude while relating to God. Working with the soil helps us in letting go of the things which are out of our control and to accept what is there and to move forward with it. I believe as missionaries, we need to have the attitude of a farmer. Farmers are always full of hope, and they are people of commitment. They are very considerate, do not surrender, are humble, generous and full of patience. For me, gardening is kind of therapy as well, because it inspired me to look into my own "soil" and work on it while cultivating the real soil. **EM**

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Columban seminarian Iowane Naio is originally from Fiji, currently on his First Mission Assignment program in Lima, Peru.

# Zoom Life

## Presence and Participation

By Atonio Saulo Seeto

The pandemic impacted everyone; I saw it as a crisis, because it limited my experience in Peru. I was here for my First Mission Assignment (FMA) program, and I was just getting to know my way around the parish when the lockdown started. As days passed by it became a new normal.

I had a lot of expectations about the FMA experience that I was going to have before the pandemic started. I wanted to know more about Peruvian culture, music, people, food, places, customs, activities and traditions in the parish, and Peruvians in general. However, it was limited because of the lockdown. I had to accept this reality. Most of the changes had to do with respecting health and safety, not only for myself but also for other people as well. The new reality came with its protocols that had to be respected, including staying indoors for one's own safety. Maintaining one's distance in public and when leaving the house; and masks, gloves and alcohol sanitizers were the accessories everyone was obliged to use. Everyone had to be aware and mindful of these restrictions during the lockdown.

The lockdown took us all by surprise and made a big impact on how things were to be carried out. The parish of "Los Santos Arcángelos" had to adjust to this new reality as well. Part of it was helping out those who were in need and vulnerable in the parish communities. During the lockdown part of our work was to distribute the donations accordingly to those that really need help and support. We organized giving out *canastas* (food baskets) to families in need, and we also tried to help support the communal kitchens of

various poor communities in the peripheries of the parish.

Regardless of not being able to be with the people, I was able to participate in the daily Masses that were broadcast on Facebook. I also took up an online course on the contemporary reality in Peru which was very informative and interesting. Most the meetings were done on a virtual platform. Zoom is an app that was most commonly used. There were a lot of meetings, conversations, chat groups, novenas and even hymn practises created during this time, in trying to keep up with the communication. The adjustment to this new reality was something that had to be taken seriously and considered with great responsibility.

Since most of the platforms of communication were carried out virtually, I would like to share my experience of participating in the daily online Mass which was celebrated live via Zoom and Facebook. At first, I felt nervous because of the pronunciation of the words during the readings and having to sing the hymns whilst playing the guitar. I found these aspects challenging, because I had not practiced my Spanish during the lockdown. Also I had just started to learn the guitar in 2018 and was still trying to find my rhythm. The only thing that kept me going was that I knew that the community needed this help. As days went by I felt it was another experience gained and an opportunity to share the gifts I

had been given. I also found out that during the online daily Masses, even in such difficult times, we were still one at heart. And it was meaningful to me, because people responded with a lot of faith and hope. Most of faithful were grateful to the priests for nourishing them with the word of God and for remembering them during these trying times. I also saw it as a call to communion, although through virtual platforms, it still meant a lot to the people. Sometimes I complained about technology, but through these difficult times it has served us well in keeping us in contact with the community. Therefore, I would say that through my challenges I have learned that one's gifts are meant to be shared, and one's presence and participation is of great importance to the whole community.

Change came to us, and whether we liked it or not, it was there. The COVID-19 crisis presented us with this situation, and I personally had to accept it and move forward. I would honestly say that it was not easy experiencing a situation like this. But all I can say is that it became an opportunity for me to grow and be able to survive on the mission during difficult times. It was a call for me to be aware of my surroundings, know my capabilities, and act accordingly to what was needed in assisting others. **EM**

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Columban seminarian Atonio Saulo Seeto is on his first mission assignment in Lima, Peru.





# 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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# Remembering “Father Fix-it”

## Helping Those in Need

By Fr. John Boles

*“When we arrived in the ‘barrio,’ there was nowhere for us to live. There was nothing to rent. There wasn’t a home for us. There wasn’t a church or a chapel. There was absolutely nothing.” –Fr. Michael Fitzgerald*

This was the scene when the first three intrepid Columbans arrived from Ireland in 1952 to start our mission in Lima. The words are those of one of this gallant band, an extraordinary individual by the name of Fr. Michael Fitzgerald, universally known as “Fitz.”

They’d been invited by the bishops of Peru to evangelize a swathe of territory on the edge of the capital, an immense expanse of desert and farmland containing one *barrio* (neighborhood) and 15 *haciendas* (neo-feudal estates). The resident population was estimated to be about 40,000, which was swollen by some 20,000 seasonal workers at harvest time with cotton being the main cash crop. The area was designated as “The Parish of Blessed Martin de Porres,” in honor of one of Lima’s most beloved sons. It only became “SAINT Martin” in 1962 when the man was canonized.

Today, scarcely 70 years later, this same area forms the bulk of the Diocese of North Lima, which teems with 2.7 million inhabitants and contains 47 parish churches. Around half of these have been established by the Columbans, and many of them built by the incredible Fr. Fitz.

Fr. Fitz continued to live in Lima right up to his death half a century later, and is fondly remembered as a man of astonishing energy. His

specialty was to secure assistance, not only in finding land and building churches, but also in aiding the thousands of poor people that made up most of the Columban parishes. To do this, he realized early on the value of making contacts. As Fr. Dermot Carthy (who knew Fr. Fitz for over 45 years) recalls, he was an expert at getting help, “He was ‘Mr. Fix-it’ for the whole area.”

Eventually having found accommodation and set up a temporary church in the built-up area of this first parish, Fr. Fitz went out “on the road,” ministering to the rural populations dispersed around the haciendas. It was here that he had his first opportunity to make contacts. Several of the estate owners contributed funds towards the purchase of a pair of cars for the parish. It was an encouraging if modest beginning, but any hopes of taking a “slow but sure” approach to expanding the mission were soon dramatically overtaken by events.

Around this time, a process of mass migration of people from the countryside to the city had begun, with peasant farmers crowding into Lima in search of a better life. The government did little in the way of house-building, so the people started to take matters into their own hands by organizing huge land invasions around the urban periphery. Many of these invasions occurred on Fr. Fitz’s doorstep. The records carry this quote from him, describing an event in the late 1950s:

“Literally overnight there was an invasion of I don’t know how many families, maybe about ten thousand.

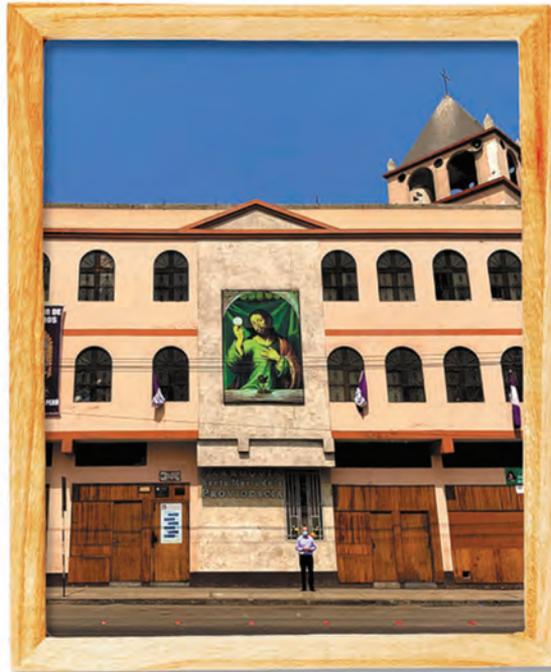
I climbed a little hill to see where the night before there had just been a dry river bed, nothing, apart from rocks and bushes. Now, the morning after, it felt like a scene from ‘Exodus’ in the Bible, all these people and their wicker-work shelters.”

This turned out to be merely the first of a wave of land invasions that continued over the ensuing decades. The Columbans needed to react fast. Not only did they have to obtain land and build churches in double-quick time, but also they had to try and provide social assistance to these people. In particular, there was an urgent need for the squatters to legalize their plots and so be protected from eviction. This is where Fr. Fitz’s gift for contact-making came into its own.

Among the “high society” people he’d been introduced to was a lady called Clorinda Málaga. In 1958, as fortune would have it, Clorinda married a gentleman by the name of Manuel Prado, the man who just happened to be President of Peru! Suddenly, Fr. Fitz’s friend was the nation’s First Lady, with special responsibility for social welfare.

Clorinda was only too happy to support the social service initiatives of Fr. Fitz and his Columban colleagues, and to put in a good word with potential private benefactors. Even better, she smoothed the path to the President himself. Fr. Dermot recalls how Fr. Fitz ended up with almost free access to the presidential palace: “He could get in at any time. Just used to walk in through the back door.”

Fitz used this influence to try and solve the issue of legal title for the



squatters' plots in the land invasions. Thanks to his intervention, huge numbers of families secured right of tenure. Where the areas in question were barren they could be declared "State property," and so Fr. Fitz persuaded the government that in these cases titles should be given out for free.

Even where private property was involved, the problem wasn't insurmountable. Once, Fr. Fitz reported in the archives, he met with the President and the Prime Minister.

"The Prime Minister said there'd been a fund set up using contributions from businesses to finance housing schemes, and it hadn't been touched. The President said, 'Alright, why don't we just use that money?' So, it was decided to use the fund to buy titles from the landowners."

Of course, such a paternalistic approach was no substitute for true social justice, and Fr. Fitz always supported calls for comprehensive land reform. Meanwhile, however, his

motto was, "never look a gift horse in the mouth," especially when there were so many people in need.

Not that he limited his contacts to Peru. In 1961 he scored a publicity coup by getting the visiting Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy (brother to the then-President of the United States, John F. Kennedy) to stop by the Columban parishes in Lima. It is doubtful whether Ted brought any cash along with him, but the resulting "photo op" provided a great boost to Columban mission promotion.

The following year, Fr. Fitz made the most of the Irish-American connection once more, this time in relation to Cardinal Cushing of Boston (one of the world's wealthiest dioceses). Fr. Fitz was in the process of building a new parish complex, "La Virgen Dolorosa." His words in the archives continue the story.

"I was doing 'la Dolorosa' when Cardinal Cushing came on a visit to Peru. As he was from an Irish background, he offered to help with the new church. He gave me \$10,000

(which was big money in those days) to pay for the roof." Cushing even stayed on to perform the opening ceremony.

And so it continued, year after year. As the city grew, so did the number of Columban parishes, and so did Fr. Fitz's land-acquiring/church building/social welfare providing exploits in Condevilla, Palmeras, Naranjal, Mesa Redonda, Covida, Villa Sol, Huandoy. The list goes on.

Fr. Fitz served as Columban Superior in Peru from 1984 to 1988. His final role was that of Vicar General ("Bishop's right-hand man") in the new Diocese of North Lima when it was set up in 1996. He died peacefully in the Columban Center House in Lima on December 21, 2006.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul remarks that, for the Church to flourish, you need the apostle, the prophet, the teacher, the healer, the helper, and more. It seems that he also might have added, the "fix-it!" **CM**

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Columban Fr. John Boles lives and works in Peru.

# Sema Turned One

## Its Beginning and Name

By Marjorie Engcoy

**T**he Sema Livelihood Program began as a recycling project for the interested women in the parish during the 2019 Season of Creation observation at St. Pius X Parish-Raiwaqa (Fiji). It started with two women coming until it grew its membership to twelve. We used to meet every Tuesday of the week; later we added Thursday. The sessions were then held at the meeting room in the parish. It was filled with chatter and laughter as they learned how to weave their first project—a photo frame—using newspaper tubes. After a few weeks, they moved to weaving baskets and vases using the same recyclable material. After weaving, the product will be painted with two coats of light tan cloth paint. To finish it, it will be glazed with eco-friendly glue to give it a slight shimmer.

As we were preparing for its formal launching in the parish, we got stuck with how we would name the program. Most of the ladies had trouble in connecting or joining one newspaper tube to another while weaving a basket. When the joining is not properly done, the whole thing collapses, so one would have to start again to where the problem began—connecting tubes. It was because of this that the members unanimously decided to name the program Sema Livelihood Program. “Sema” is a Fijian word, which means, “connect.” As we were discussing this, a member shared her reflection on the chosen name, saying that it is more than just the physical meaning of the word which we do every day. Deeper than connecting newspaper tubes while



**Anniversary Celebration**



**Sema ladies completing a small order**

weaving, the ladies also were able to connect with each other as they share their life stories. They’ve also grown more conscious about the value of caring for creation.

We have now completed establishing its four sub-programs, which are weaving, sewing, urban farming, and cooking. Each sub-program has its own program in-charge to help its development. For their weaving program, they mainly use newspaper tubes to weave photo frames and fruit baskets.

On the other hand, their sewing program makes use of material cuttings (from local tailoring shops) which are sewn into tote bags or shopping bags.

For their urban farming program, we have a tiny laboratory garden where they learn how to grow vegetables in the urban setting. This is located at the back of the parish hall. This is where they grow seedlings such as tomatoes, chilies, cabbages, beans, okra, capsicums, marigolds, sunflowers, taro, and passion fruit. On top of that they also make their own compost from scrapped vegetables from the nearby market.

Lastly, the fourth program is cooking. Last July, we had Evangeline “Jinky” Ucol, another Columban lay missionary assigned here in Fiji teach the members a few recipes for desserts and candy.



Emily



Milika



Maria rolling newspaper into tubes

All of Sema's four sub-programs aim to provide income-generating ideas for unemployed mothers in the parish of St. Pius X-Raiwaqa. For months now, it is trying to sustain itself through its small sales from the products (baskets, bags, steamed cakes, yema candies, plants, and seedlings) that they sell occasionally. From their first public market, they were able to buy the small things like tables, electric kettles, irons, etc., which they need for when they come for sessions.

Sema was formally launched on International Women's Day, March 8, 2020. This was done so to show and celebrate the giftedness of women and their strength as persons in the society and in the family.

But a couple of weeks after that, COVID-19 hit Fiji marking its first case of border transmission. We had to cancel all parish activities and this included Sema's weekly sessions. After three weeks of lockdown in the capital, we slowly resumed our sessions. This provided the mothers the avenue to share their experience of lockdown—how they coped with domestic stress like being cramped up in a tiny home with a large number of people in the house, restless school children, etc. And on top of that, they were not able to attend Sunday services. One of them shared, "During the lockdown, the rolling

of newspaper tubes and weaving of baskets helped me a lot. It provided me the distraction, and it made me productive." She was able to weave at least eight baskets.

Another member used the lockdown opportunity to sew more bags; and another concentrated on her own backyard garden. As they were sharing, they were able to show support to one another which tightened their bond. Soon enough, laughter came back in the scene with these strong women. These are some of their stories:

*"When I was young I never bothered to learn how to weave even though my mother was an excellent mat weaver. Now that I am at this age, I am learning this skill which is part of my Fijian culture."*—Melika Nabou

*"Sema is the place where I come to be me; to share the God-given talent I have and to learn from other women who surprise everyday with their knowledge as they teach and share their passion too. Time seems to go by very fast when we come together on Tuesdays and Thursdays. A smile as we come in the mornings and a wider smile as we leave in the afternoon."*—Cecilia Vatuloka

*"I am happy to be given this opportunity with Sema. I get to know and connect with these women individually through sharing life stories, sharing and appreciating*

*our God-given gifts and skills and supporting one another. Finally, the highlight for me would be the dose of laughter when we come together relieves me from stress."*—Maria Qaranivalu

*"When I heard about this program, I said to myself, 'Why not give it a try?' as I was always interested in learning craft work and also learning other life skills. Now, I have never regretted. I get to share with others the skills I learned especially weaving baskets out of old newspapers. I am thankful for this program and I encourage other ladies out there to come and join us. This is one way of making yourself self-reliant, resourceful, and creative."*—Emily Tabou

We began the relationship as women with the same interest in hand craft and then expanded to commitment to care for creation. From the basic skills that were shared, they gradually pitch in their own creativity in making their products. They have grown as their relationship with each other evolved—with compassion and love for one another. The program is not just a livelihood program, but it has also become their own support group whenever they need it. But for me, this is the miracle of five loaves and two fish in action right before my eyes. ☑

Columban lay missionary Marjorie Engcoy lives and works in Fiji.



# 30 Years on Mission

Columban Lay Mission, 1990-2020

By Vida Hequilan

2020 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Columban Lay Missionary (CLM) program. Looking back on the past three decades has made me realize how far we have come to where we are now, the progress made, and the contribution to the mission, the Missionary Society of St. Columban and the Church.

As I was preparing for this reflection I came across an article about the metaphysical properties of a pearl. Knowing that the pearl is the gemstone that marks a 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I wanted to delve into whether or not there is a connection between the CLM history and the gemstone pearl.

## The Beginning of a Pearl and CLM

When a pearl is created, it is the result of an irritation to the soft body of its host mollusk. This irritant can be a grain of sand, but is more often a parasite. Because of this unique

process, pearls are the only jewels created in partnership with living creatures.

Since the beginning, the Missionary Society of St. Columban has been blessed with generous lay people who worked side by side with the priests in mission. The Society's 1970 General Assembly participants,

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*I developed a deeper understanding of my vocation and God's mission. The experience of collaboration and partnership inspired and encouraged me as a layperson.*

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in response to the Second Vatican Council, stated that the lay missionary movement might be the beginning of something even bigger than our dreams. During the 1976 General

Assembly, the Columbans decided to initiate the participation of lay people in their missionary work. In the succeeding years, Columbans explored and worked toward the greater involvement of lay people in the Society's cross-cultural missionary experience. Between 1981 and 1988 there was an interchange of groups of lay missionaries between Regions and Mission Units: lay missionaries from Ireland, Australia, Philippines and the United States were sent to the Philippines, Chile, Britain, Pakistan, Japan and Taiwan.

This experience prompted the Society, in the spirit of collaboration and partnership, to establish the Columban Lay Mission Program in 1990. The program continued to develop through the years, and in 2005 became the Columban Lay Missionaries.

Pearls are considered to be the only gems born from a conscious nurturing process, as their origin is

a result of a living-being choosing to self-nurture. Similar to a pearl, CLM was created through a nurturing process of partnership. The 1994 General Assembly document stated that partnership is the preferred way of being on mission today, and the 2012 General Assembly document stated that partnership between ordained and lay missionaries is our way of being on mission. We, Columban lay missionaries, continue to seek opportunities to strengthen partnership among ourselves, with the ordained, students, priest associates and co-workers.

### My Own Development in CLM

I joined CLM in 2005 and was assigned to the Taiwan Mission Unit for my first mission assignment. Through my experience in Taiwan, I developed a deeper understanding of my vocation and God's mission. The experience of collaboration and partnership inspired and encouraged me as a layperson. I witnessed how Columban mission had evolved in the Mission Unit when the new Mission Unit structures, approved by the General Council, allowed for the appointment of a lay missionary to the role of Mission Unit coordinator. In my seventh year on mission, I was appointed as the first lay missionary Mission Unit coordinator in Taiwan. I was initially overwhelmed to take on this role and responsibility, however I was profoundly grateful for the patience and support of the Columbans in the Mission Unit. With their guidance and trust, I was able to thrive in my role. It was an affirmation that through our baptism, all of us are called to be missionary disciples, to be sent by Jesus and to speak on His behalf, not on our own.

The 2018 General Assembly recommended that, in order to



Columban Lay Missionaries

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*Pearls have long been considered beacons of light for those who see the world through spiritual lenses. May the gemstone pearl be our inspiration.*

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enhance our model of partnership, the coordinator of the CLM Central Leadership Team be the CLM delegate to the General Council. Since the current General Council started their term in office I have been joining their meetings and participating in Society discussions within my role as the CLM delegate. This is a further affirmation of how CLM has developed within the Society.

### With Gratitude

We give thanks to the Missionary Society of St. Columban for the gift of the opportunity to work in partnership for God's mission; for all the CLM leadership (CLMs, former CLMs, ordained Columbans, priest associates and co-workers) who tirelessly dedicate themselves to find ways to develop CLM; for those lay missionaries before us who paved

the way for us all; to our benefactors and supporters for their generosity and enthusiasm; and for those people among whom we live and serve for their warm welcome and allowing us to touch each other's lives.

### A Year of Challenge and Opportunity

The past 30 years of the Columban Lay Missionaries, and in the face of this year's COVID-19 pandemic, has shown how we have stood together, and in solidarity with the people to whom we have been called to serve on mission, particularly in testing times, and how we continue to be open to bright prospects for our future service in mission.

Pearls have long been considered beacons of light for those who see the world through spiritual lenses. May the gemstone pearl be our inspiration as we continue to respond to our baptismal call and work in partnership among ourselves, ordained, students, priest associates, co-workers and with the people in our ministries with whom we work and serve for the life of the world. **CM**

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Columban lay missionary Vida Hequilan provided this 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary reflection.

# Keep on Walking

## Walking Across Half a Continent

By Fr. John Boles

The Covid pandemic instigated hardship and tragedy to countless numbers throughout the world. However, it also has had the effect of bringing out the BEST in many people. Additionally, it has connected remarkable individuals who otherwise might never have met.

Such has been the case with two young men from totally different backgrounds but with one thing in common: WALKING. One is Fr. Dylan Tabaco, a Columban priest from the Philippines. The other is Rafael Yovera, a Venezuelan refugee. Their unlikely point of contact was the city of Lima, Peru.

Fr. Dylan hails from the island of Mindanao in the far south of the Philippines. His father was a fan of Western folk music, hence “Dylan,” after the famous singer/songwriter Bob Dylan. He grew up in a Columban parish, where generations of Columbans helped inspire his own vocation to missionary priesthood. Chief among them was Columban Fr. Gerry Markey, now working in

England, who gave the young Fr. Dylan a rosary and taught him the word, “missionary.” The author notes that Fr. Dylan carries the rosary with him to this day.

While in our Philippine seminary he lived an event he describes as, “unforgettable.” His spiritual director, Irish Columban Fr. Mick Mohally, decided to send the students off on a

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*“I felt the struggles of those who have less in life, not knowing if they could still survive for another day with a starving stomach and no place to stay.”*

—FR. DYLAN TABACO

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six-day hike, with no money in their pockets apart from their return bus fare.

“It was a 160-kilometer (99 miles!) walk. We had no food for the journey and just relied on the providence of locals we met on the way. That experience helped deepen my vocation as a missionary. I felt the

struggles of those who have less in life, not knowing if they can survive for another day with a starving stomach and no place to stay.”

Memories of Fr. Dylan’s epic trek were revived a dozen years later. By that time, he had been ordained and appointed to the Columban parish of “Santos Arcangeles” in Lima. It was here he met Rafael.

Rafael was born in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, in 1995. At that time, Venezuela was the richest country in South America. Today, it is the poorest. Ruined by years of mismanagement, corruption and authoritarian rule, the economy has collapsed, and the rate of inflation is the world’s highest. Furthermore, unemployment has soared and the shops are empty of food and other necessities. Rafael is one of over two million Venezuelans who decided they had to emigrate in order to survive and to support family members back home. In Rafael’s case, his family includes an aged and infirm father.

Half a million Venezuelan refugees turned up in Peru. Many settled in Lima, including Fr. Dylan’s parish. “A lot found jobs washing cars, selling things on the streets or doing other menial tasks,” Fr. Dylan recalls. Slowly they managed to improve their lives and send more and more money back home.

Then Covid struck! “Soon, they were in an unimaginable situation. Hunger and homelessness became daily realities for them.” The parish began organizing an emergency relief program to help cover some of the refugees’ basic needs.

One day, as Fr. Dylan remembers, “On my way home after doing food distribution, I met a young



Parishioners helping Fr. Dylan distribute food



Fr. Dylan and Raphael



Fr. Dylan at the market



Fr. Dylan visiting with Angela and Alhai



Distributing food

Venezuelan father with his baby girl, sitting outside a shop and trying to sell biscuits. He was cold and starving. I saw in his eyes how desperate he was to have something for his daughter.” This was Rafael.

Fr. Dylan bought them a meal, and they began talking. Rafael explained how he’d left home a couple of years before, but as soon as he’d crossed the border out of Venezuela he discovered the “travel agency” that he’d paid to get him to Lima had swindled him. They’d kept his money, all that he’d had for the journey. Broke, he’d WALKED most of the way through Colombia, Ecuador, and the north of Peru, hitch-hiking when he could, sleeping rough (outdoors) and surviving by begging and selling the odd bag of sweets.

Finally arriving at his friend’s house in the Peruvian capital, things looked up. He got a job, met and married a

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*What really touched Fr. Dylan was that Rafael rounded off his tale with the words, “Life is difficult but beautiful.”*

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local girl (Angela), had a child (little Alhai), rented a small home, started sending money back to his father until the pandemic came along. Suddenly he was destitute again, but now with THREE mouths to feed, not just one.

What really touched Fr. Dylan was that Rafael rounded off his tale with the words, “Life is difficult but beautiful.”

“Then,” Fr. Dylan recalls, “he smiled at me. It was such powerful statement coming from someone who’d gone through so much but never succumbed to hopelessness.”

This was the moment when Fr. Dylan remembered HIS walk and

HIS poverty all those years before. Recognizing in Rafael a “fellow traveler” in more senses than one, Fr. Dylan used the parish network to get the family back on their feet again. By the time I met them, Rafael and Angela were working in a tele-sales office and had moved into a small flat.

“If there is one good thing that happened to me during this pandemic,” Fr. Dylan told me, “It would be my encounter with our Venezuelan brethren. I remembered those stories in the Gospel where the marginalized of those times were so grateful when Jesus helped them.”

Rafael was more succinct in his summing up: “Fr. Dylan saved my life.” CM

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Columban Fr. John Boles lives and works in Peru. *Columban Mission* magazine uses Fr. Dylan’s full name, Fr. Erl Dylan Tabaco, in his byline.

# The Day I Met Her

## Strong Faith

By Monaliza Esteban



Monaliza, G and her dad

It was one fine Friday morning on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August when a young Hindu couple arrived to the parish's tuberculosis clinic with their tiny baby. When their turn came to meet the doctor, I was curious to see the baby's situation so I went inside the doctor's room. I had never seen such a disease as that. Her body, including her head, was covered with a skin infection. The cloth that was used to wrap her was even stuck to her bottom. Her eyes were affected as well.

I couldn't imagine how hard it must be for a baby like her having all the pain inside and outside. She was crying the whole time the doctor examined her. As I gazed on her parents' worried faces, I felt so much compassion for their tiny gift from God. I assumed she was their first, perhaps only, child.

At the end of the day I still couldn't stop thinking about that child. Perhaps the situation was similar to the scenario when the lepers were asking Jesus to heal them. They must have been in pain, crying for help like her. And perhaps the only free medication for them was to turn to Jesus with faith.

She was admitted that day because the doctor discovered that she had a pulmonary problem. The parents were also told to bring their baby to the clinic every other Friday for medication apart from her skin problem. And so, our journey began.

I started to be a friend to her and her mother after that first meeting. The family belongs to a tribal group whose language I do not speak or understand, but with a few words I was able to build a rapport with them. On the second Friday there

was an improvement in our little patient, and she was a little bit friendly. I offered her toffee, but she was still quite shy to take it from my hand. I continued to inquire about her situation and if she was getting better with the medicine the doctor prescribed. The mother showed me her daughter's body where the soft baby skin was returning to normal.

As they continued to come for her medication, I saw the changes on her skin. Every time they came, her skin got better and better. Like the leper's faith, I also believed that this tiny baby fought with her strong faith and will to recover from that disease.

Sometimes it is hard to know what to think about society here. I sometimes also wonder about this group of people who were deprived from health privileges.

Not because they cannot work in order to provide good health for their children or for themselves, but because of the kind of society they are in.

This experience has challenged me again and again to be more compassionate with the little ones, the destitute in the society whoever they are. I am just thankful that we have generous people around the world who continue to help their brothers and sisters in Christ. Now, I am very happy to see finally this little tiny one on fully recovered from her skin problem and praying that she will also recover from her other ailment in time. I will always remember the day I met her, the day I met Gangga. 

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Columban lay missionary Monaliza Esteben lives and works in Pakistan.

### **Multidrug-Resistant Tuberculosis (MDR-TB)**

Pakistan, with an estimated 510,000 new tuberculosis cases emerging each year and approximately 15,000 developing drug resistant tuberculosis cases every year, is ranked fifth among high-burden countries worldwide, and it accounts for 61% of the tuberculosis burden in the World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean Region. The country is also estimated to have the fourth highest prevalence of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) globally. Key reasons for emergence of drug resistance form of tuberculosis include: delays in diagnosis, unsupervised, inappropriate and inadequate drug regimens, poor follow-up and lack of a social support programs for high-risk populations.



# “Take my yoke upon you ...”

## A Reflection

By Fr. Barry Cairns

In the parish of Hodogaya in Yokohama City, Japan, I was reaching a class of ten who were preparing for Baptism. I presented the “Come to me...take my yoke” text to them for prayerful reflection. Hodogaya is a ward in the very center of Yokohama, a city of 3.7 million. There is little farmland left. One person came in with: “Father, what is a yoke?” I asked the other nine - all were below 50 and city dwellers. All had only the vaguest idea as to what a yoke was!

I came to Japan in 1956, so 65 years ago! For ten years I was stationed in country towns and villages. At that time there was no machinery, as now, to cultivate the rice paddies. In early spring the paddy was flooded, then ploughed. A cow pulled the plough. On the cow’s shoulders was the yoke made of heavy, straight-grained wood from

which came two chains connected to the plough itself. A yoke in the time of Jesus was similar.

Yokes of their very nature are exceptionally heavy and burdensome. Yet, Jesus says: “My yoke is easy!” Here “easy” means it fits well. That is, in the concrete, the carpenter takes the measurements and notes the contours of each cow’s neck and makes the wooden yoke to fit snugly. There is a non-biblical legend that Jesus, as the carpenter of Nazareth, was known as a skillful yoke maker.

Another very important point for us to understand what Jesus is telling us is this: the yoke Jesus refers to is a double harness yoke. So even though the yoke was heavy, when it is carried by two, the load becomes light and easy to carry. The important point is this: It is Jesus Himself who is teamed up with us. This gives a deep and encouraging meaning to the text.

Having given this background to my Japanese class of city dwellers, I asked them in the quiet of their hearts to ponder Jesus’ living words to each of them this day. “Everyone who is tired, and weighed down with heavy burdens, come to me. I will cause you to be refreshed. Take my yoke upon you. My yoke is easy to carry and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:29 giving a literal translation of the text in Japanese and which is true to the original Greek text.

Tiredness of both body and heart are endemic in our modern society. We are so competitive! We get so busy! We all have burdens. We all need the rest, the encouragement, the meaning and new energy that Jesus gives. Slowly pondering the words of Jesus, “Come to me...,” let us go to Him with confidence. 

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Columban Fr. Barry Cairns lives and works in Japan.



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# God Seems to Be Quiet

## Rescuing Elements

By Angie Escarsa

For months, my family has been faithful in praying the rosary as requested by Pope Francis after the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic. Since March we pray the rosary as a family and offer it for the whole world, especially for many people who have been infected and affected by the virus. I am now back in Ireland, and we continue to pray the rosary as a family. Thanks to social media it is still possible for me to join them online every day

However, recently I suddenly thought that God seems to be very quiet. Every day we bring forth our petition of healing for the whole world, to have an end to this pandemic and that one day we will wake up with some normality of life. We entrust everything to God. Our faith teaches us to believe that “with God nothing shall be impossible.” (Luke 1:3-7)

But why then does God appear to be silent? The pandemic still imposes a certain fear within people and a sense of anxiety due to the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

Then I realized that God always speaks to us and indeed more than ever during this pandemic. I remembered what Jesus said to His disciples “If your faith were the size of a mustard seed you could say to this mountain ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move, nothing would be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:22-27) Perhaps, in this time of pandemic, we are being given the opportunity to rediscover our true selves in relation to God and to each other.

Dr. Gaven Kerr, a Philosophy lecturer in Maynooth College, Ireland, states in his reflection that, “God permits human beings the dignity of



coming together and acting in such a way that we can deal with this crisis. This is manifested not only in our turning to God but also in turning to our neighbor.”

We are in uncharted waters; this crisis is real, unpredictable and also dangerous. But rather than despair, he encourages us to search for a “rescuing element.” Friedrich Holderlin in his poem Patmos says “Where there is danger, a rescuing element grows as well.”

So then, what are our “rescuing elements?” Dr. Gonzales offers us the following thoughts, which I believe are true and can be practiced during this pandemic.

First, we need to accept that all things are not negotiable. To be human is to live with and accept non-negotiable truths such as...I will die, those I love will also die, and thus to love is itself the risk of our fragile human existence.

Second, to belong to a shared humanity is to be fragile, in need, and not self-sufficient. When I open

myself to others, when I choose to love, I am allowing both suffering and compassion into my life.

Lastly, as Jesus teaches us, we must become as little children again. Here hope lies, not in the power of independence, but in the weakness of codependence which is our sustaining strength.

Columban Fr. Sean McDonagh in his article published in *The Tablet* magazine on June 27, 2020, believes that Covid-19 pandemic shows it is not true that what we do to the natural world will not have a negative impact on human health and well-being. Either we drastically change our ways of relating to the natural world, or we must get ready for the next pandemic.

We believe that God is the great healer, the source of all beauty and love. By coming together in faith, we are also invited to participate in God's healing activity in our world today. This choice is in our hands. **cm**

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Columban lay missionary Angie Escarsa lives and works in Ireland.

# Philosophy of Life

**H**ave you ever thought about whether you have a philosophy of life? For most people it would probably sound pretentious to say you have one. But whether we are conscious of it or not, most of us so live according to a set of values that guide what we do and how we do it.

For example, we can agree that to exist is a valuable thing. We haven't committed suicide and want that person in the ambulance to make it to the emergency room, so we pull our car out of the way.

We Americans grew up hearing these "self-evident" lines from the Declaration of Independence, "We hold ... that **all men are created equal**," and we know that this implies that treating people with equal dignity is doing the creator's will.

We know that for human beings, growth requires time and effort. Our parents and to some extent our teachers put in the effort in the early years, but gradually each human person takes over the decision making about his or her human development toward becoming all we can be.



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FROM THE DIRECTOR

By Fr. John Burger

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I think most of us know instinctively that our relationships with our fellow men and women are what make us truly human. We are social creatures and others and their reactions to us are not just important to us, they make us who we are.

Of course, we have another major dimension to our identity, we are created in God's own image. This reality is summed up succinctly and beautifully in Genesis 1:27.

"God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female – he created them."

This Divine image describes our unique awareness and rationality. That *we are made by*

*God in the image of God enriches and expands our nature.* Indeed, we differ from the animals in that we have some of God's own qualities. We search out and reflect on joy, truth, justice, beauty, and meaning. Our personality can relate to God's person in ways that other created beings cannot. *That point underpins God's interaction with humans throughout the Bible and should underpin our respect for each other.* In the letter of St. James, for example, cursing another is not to be done precisely because we are made in God's image. (James 3:9)

For the Christian, the person of Jesus Christ is the one model and teacher that we should emulate above all others. Certainly, we can learn from the saints and great historical figures, but we Christians, if we are to be worthy of the name, need to make Jesus' way our way. His sermon on the mount, should be on our minds and in our hearts.

As limited human persons, whatever we do in life, each of us should offer a "living sacrifice" of him or herself to the Creator, the God who made us. Worship is not merely an emotion, it is more

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***We search out and reflect on joy, truth, justice, beauty, and meaning.***

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about a recognition of who God is. Only God and I know what goes on in my heart.

If the things mentioned in these few paragraphs are what characterize your way of life, I admire your philosophy of life.

Fr. John

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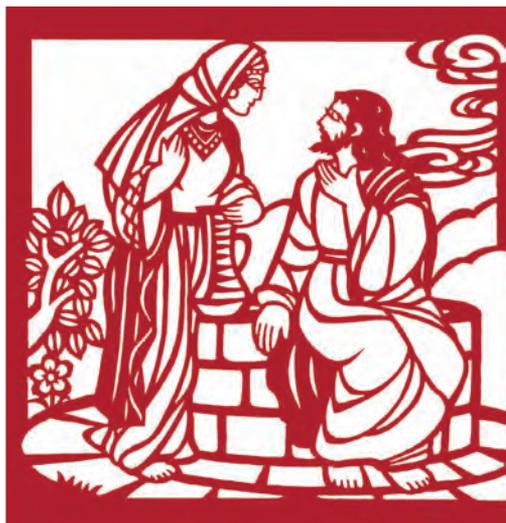
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***If you are interested in becoming a  
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