One of the great rewards of being a missionary priest is the opportunity to meet and work with extraordinary people. Since I was appointed the Episcopal Vicar of the Southern Zone of the Archdiocese of Santiago, Chile, I have been privileged to meet dozens of extraordinary people: laymen and lay women, deacons, sisters and priests.

They are ordinary people who are inspired by their faith to do extraordinary things in some of the most dangerous neighbourhoods of the city. Over the past several decades, there has been an explosion of violence in the poorer “poblaciones” (housing complexes) fuelled by drug trafficking.

Twenty years ago, José Agustín was returning to his home on a Sunday morning when he was attacked and murdered. He was killed right in front of his home in Lo Espejo, one of the poorest municipalities of the city of Santiago.

For Señora Nancy Orellana and her husband the loss of their son murdered so tragically brought them to the brink of despair. She decided that her faith in the Risen Christ could not allow her to be submerged in her own loss nor live the rest of her life condemning the people who commit such horrible crimes.

For many years she had worked as a volunteer with Sr Roset Garriga, a missionary Sister trying to rehabilitate men and women who suffer from the disease of alcoholism. She knew that a high percentage of crimes are committed by people who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. She knew that the only way forward was to do whatever she could to help them recover sobriety. So in the year 2000 she founded the Casa de
Rehabilitación (House of Rehabilitation) "Jesús de Nazaret" which is located in Las Turbinas, one of the biggest shantytowns in the city of Santiago. Columban missionaries have pastoral responsibility for this area.

The facilities of the Casa de Rehabilitación are very basic: a couple of dormitories with bunk beds, several individual bedrooms, showers and bathrooms, kitchen and dining room, laundry, a living/recreation room, a meeting room, office, storeroom and patio. The entire structure is built with wood and in constant need of repair.
Recently the kitchen nearly burnt down. There was no gas to cook with, so a wooden stove was being used to cook dinner. Too much fuel ignited the back wall, but fortunately the fire was quickly extinguished.

Men of all ages live at the Casa de Rehabilitación but their therapy is conducted outside the home at the Rehabilitation Clinic Monseñor Enrique Alvear. Nancy works closely with Fr Sergio Naser, the Director of the Clinic. He is the founder of the Clinic and has worked for more than 40 years rescuing several thousand men and women from the diseases of alcoholism and drug addiction.

The men go each day to the Clinic where they take part in individual and group therapy. They are supervised by a professional staff of doctors, psychologists and social workers.

When they return from the Clinic, their time is spent in doing the various domestic chores in the Casa.

For many of the men, assuming responsibility for these domestic chores is an important part of their recovery. Many of them have lived on the streets and lost the basic habits of personal hygiene and care. Any repairs to the buildings are also done by the men. The men are encouraged to look after one another. If one of them is sick, another member of the “family” will look after him; take him to the doctor and ensure that his “brother” gets proper care. On the weekends, family members are encouraged to visit the men.
There are not many rules in the Casa de Rehabilitación. No alcohol or drugs are permitted on the grounds and the men are not allowed in the home if they have consumed alcohol or drugs. They can return when they are sober. The normal period of residence at the Casa is nine months. Nancy says, “if it takes nine months to be born, it also takes nine months to be born again”.

A deeply religious woman who has read the entire Bible several times, she believes that restoring faith in God is an essential ingredient in therapy. All the men are required to attend Mass each Sunday and they must do a three-day retreat known as the Conversion Retreat. I have been privileged to hear the confessions of many of the men in rehabilitation during this retreat. I am always struck by the desire of the men to be reconciled with their families and with God.

When a man has been sober for several months, he is allowed to visit his home if he has one. After six or seven months, he is encouraged to look for work. For the last few months, he will go off to work during the day and return to the home in the evenings. Nancy knows that not all the men are capable of rehabilitation.

For that reason, she has never put a limit on the number of times a man can return to the Casa de Rehabilitación. When I visited her she brought me to the room where one member of the family is suffering from chronic cirrhosis. “He will die here”, Nancy said and then added, “he will die sober here”.

I asked her if she was discouraged because some of the men would not achieve sobriety. Her answer was a definite “no”. She pointed out with pride that most of her “sons” have returned to their homes and are working and taking care of their families. A few even have returned to school and among her “graduates” are teachers, lab technicians and other professionals.

Nancy may have lost her son but she continues to be a real mother for many men who are lost. Even though she herself has been close to death on numerous occasions due to her own advanced cancer, she says that she will continue to work for the rehabilitation of these men for as long as the Lord grants her life.

Fr Michael Hoban first went to Chile in 1973.