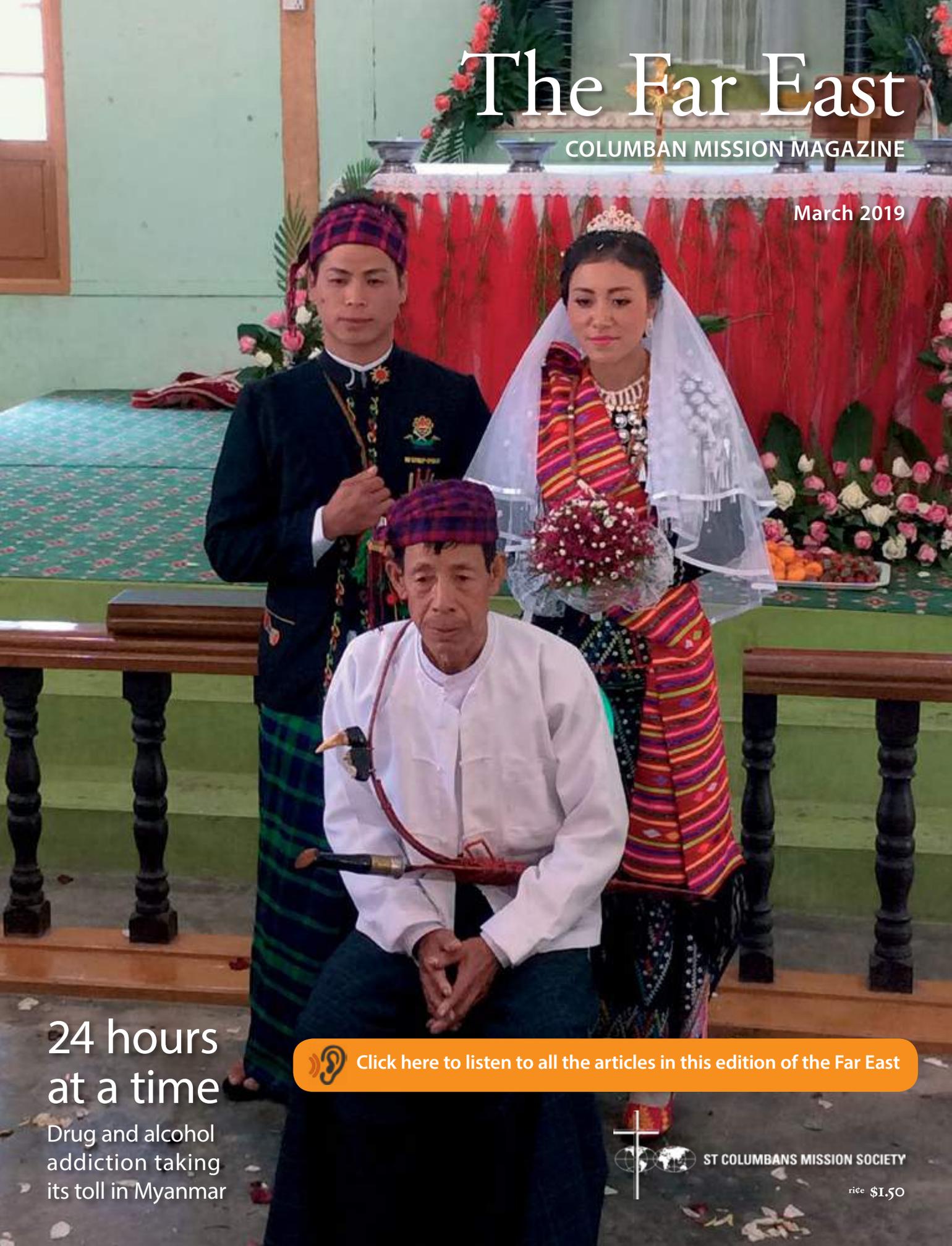


# The Far East

COLUMBAN MISSION MAGAZINE

March 2019



24 hours  
at a time

Drug and alcohol  
addiction taking  
its toll in Myanmar



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# The Far East

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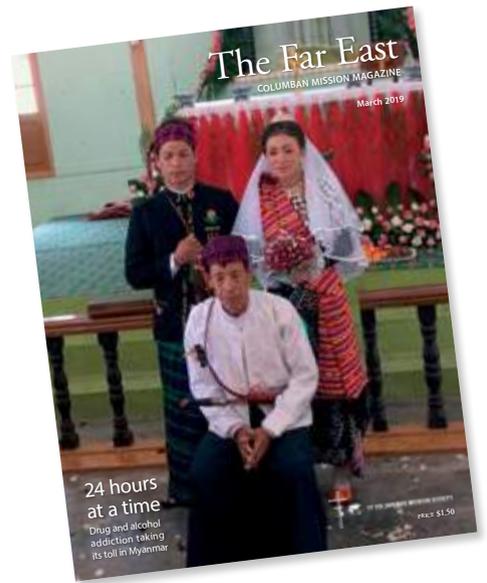
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## Marriage in Myanmar

Photo: Missionary Society of St Columban



# From the Editor

In our first article, a young man from Myanmar tells Fr Eamon Sheridan that he came to the rehabilitation centre because he was tired of using drugs and his family wanted him out of the house. It is a story of hope in a decimated country.

In Pakistan young men from poor backgrounds are given a once in a life time opportunity of securing well-paid careers. Educational classes began in 2007 and over 300 young men have joined the four-year program to date.

Once again Fr Ron Rolheiser OMI gives us much to think about in his reflection, *Snake-bitten*. He challenges us to think about the interconnectedness of everything and every person by telling a delightful African tale.

Workers from the Columban Mission Centre in El Paso, Texas, continue to work tirelessly with asylum seekers crossing the border. Read about Fr Bob Mosher's visits to a young mother who was separated from her son at the border.

For many years three primary schools in Geelong have been buying WoW (Wonders of Waste) bags for their Prep students to use as library

bags. The WoW project offers much needed employment to women living in areas with few work opportunities in the Philippines.

Now on sabbatical, Fr Pat Colgan gives us an insight into what it was like to spend time as a Chaplain in Hong Kong Correctional Services' Institutions. Fr Pat shares how he was overwhelmed when he saw the less-than-basic conditions in the institutions.

In early February Pope Francis took another bold step in visiting Abu Dhabi where he and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar signed a document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together". Let us hope that the Pope and the Grand Imam's words that *'no one is every authorized to exploit God's name to ever justify war'* will come true.

In his column Fr Trevor Trotter addresses the topic of the Good News and the not-so Good News. He advises that Columbans have joined the Federal Government's National Redress Scheme in support of victims of child sexual abuse. He says that if we can know the compassion of God's love we will personally know what the Good News means.

Fr Patrick McInerney explains the connection between Aboriginal spirituality and interfaith dialogue. The article is timely, educative and insightful.

Sport provides a great way of bringing people together in Alto Hospicio, a mining town in the Atacama Desert in the north of Chile. Columban Lay Missionary Oisín Kenny tells us about the challenges of organising a soccer competition for up to 60 kids with parents and parishioners helping out.

The *Pedalling to Live* and *Green Shelter* project in the Philippines has assisted a young boy who suffers from cerebral palsy. A customised wheelchair has made all the difference in transporting him to school each day. In the past his mother carried him to and from school.

As we move through Lent, let us pray for the victims of child sexual abuse and for all those working in the church with good intentions and good hearts.

Janette Mentha  
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## 24 hours at a time

Every family in Kachin State in Northeastern Myanmar seems to be affected by drug and alcohol addiction.

The wedding of Naw Lat.

For over 60 years this area has known only war as the Kachin Independence Army and the Burmese Military battle for control of this resource-rich state. As in all military conflicts it is the ordinary poor people who suffer most as they struggle to make a living. People are poor and live mostly by subsistence farming or by working in the jade mines. Many people are killed each year in landslides in these unregulated mines.

After the latest upsurge in the conflict in 2011 over 130,000 had to flee their villages and now live in camps for internally displaced peoples. This area is also the greatest source of heroin in south east Asia with many poppy plantations in remote areas. The drug and jade barons get rich while many poor young people become addicted to heroin and opium. These drugs are cheaply and easily available.

I first met Naw Lat just over a year

ago. He was a volunteer at the Rebirth Rehab Centre in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin state. The Centre was founded in 2015 by the Catholic Diocese of Myitkyina to try and respond to the drug epidemic.

Naw Lat like many young people started experimenting with drugs and alcohol when he was a teenager. He had no work and his options were to help his family in making traditional alcohol or work in the jade mines.

At 26 years of age, he came to the Centre because he was tired of using drugs. His life had become unmanageable. His family were tired of him and wanted him out of the house. At the Centre he received the medical treatment he needed and started taking the anti-retroviral drugs that he would need to deal with his HIV+ status. He ate well and attended all the sessions; he began to gain weight and strength. He relapsed shortly after finishing that

first program but returned for the third program. When it was over he volunteered at the Centre. That is when I met him. He looked strong, however he was still using secretly and his addiction still had control of him.

That first day I met him he looked at me a little suspiciously. I remember him because he ran over to take my bag but he didn't speak. I guess he was wondering who this strange big foreigner with a beard was.

I began to meet with him and six other recovering addict volunteers. Of course my language is very limited but by the grace of God one of them spoke good English and helped me with translation. Our meetings were in the afternoon at 2.00pm. It was June and it was hot and everyone struggled to stay awake, including me. Naw Lat in particular struggled. One day as I was talking his head suddenly hit my shoulder as he

had fallen fast asleep. It was not very encouraging. If they were to have any chance of receiving the message the time of our meeting would have to be changed. We moved to 7.00 am in the morning. It was much cooler and people were awake but they were not sober.

At these meetings they shared their stories of addiction and the hopeless place it had led them to. They shared their fears about the war and about feeling they had no future. There was a lot of pain and hopelessness in their sharing. Naw Lat also shared with me. "Wajau (Father) I have messed up my life. I am 27 years of age and I have been a heroin addict for more than 10 years. I have no job. My family don't trust me and want me out of the house and I am HIV+. I came here because I have nowhere else to go and I am afraid I'm going to overdose and die. But I can't seem to stop" he told me. "If you are really tired and are willing to do anything to stop then there is a solution" I told him.

I began to introduce him and the others to the spirituality of the 12 step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, to the concept of powerlessness and the need to surrender to a higher power. I told them that they only had to stay sober for this 24 hours and that tomorrow was another day.

The Centre offers programs such as self-awareness, personal leadership and cognitive behavioral therapy. Naw Lat and some of the others started to stay sober one day at a time.

Three months ago Naw Lat celebrated one year of sobriety. His life has changed dramatically. In this year he joined a Karate Club and has reached brown belt status. He has been employed by the Centre as a staff member. He has made amends to his family. His mother was recently diagnosed with terminal cancer and he

has taken leave from the Centre to be at home to care for her. In the midst of her illness she is so happy that her son is sober. Last week he got married and continues to come to the meetings and is staying sober.

A year ago none of this was possible for him. Now there are over 10 people with one year or more of sobriety. Recovering addicts are helping other recovering addicts and the message of recovery is spreading. Even in the midst of war and hopelessness recovery is possible for those who really want it.

Financially we operate month to month depending on the generosity of local people who are already poor but who give from the little they have because they want to do something about the scourge of drug addiction.

*Fr Eamon Sheridan is the Columban Mission Unit Coordinator and Myanmar Chaplain to the Rebirth Rehab Centre in Myitkyina.*

I am 27 years of age and I have been a heroin addict for more than 10 years. I have no job. My family don't trust me and want me out of the house and I am HIV+. I came here because I have nowhere else to go and I am afraid I'm going to overdose and die. But I can't seem to stop."



**Fr Eamon Sheridan with Naw Lat and his best man.** Photos: Missionary Society of St Columban

# A game-changer

A four-year program paves way for well-paid careers while strengthening Christianity's future in a divided Islamic Republic.

Like many Pakistani men who struggle to gain an education, the future looked bleak for Shoaib Ilyas – until he discovered the Catholic Centre of Academic Excellence (CCAЕ) in Hyderabad, Pakistan, and his horizons widened.

The facility began offering educational classes in 2007 in collaboration with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, in the second-largest city in Sindh province.

Now Ilyas has a diploma in associate engineering under his belt and has math, English and Urdu.

"I'm so grateful to my teachers at the CCAЕ for helping me to overcome my weaknesses," he told Ucanews. "The

extra effort that the teaching staff put in, and their motivational input, encouraged me not to give up."

He later decided to become a seminarian and is now training for the priesthood in Hyderabad Diocese.

"The CCAЕ's goal is to help academically talented but disadvantaged young Catholic men attain high academic grades, obtain a tertiary education and gain admittance to university," said Columban Fr Robert McCulloch, the director of the Centre.

"The coaching we provide is very intensive. English is also a high priority and we upgraded our computer centre last year to give them the tools they need."

He said anti-Christian discrimination and poverty were the two main obstacles the Centre was "fighting to overcome."

"We want our students to be able to live and work effectively in Pakistan's multicultural and multi-religious society. Their success over the past decade shows we're on the right track. Their results have far exceeded our expectations," said Fr McCulloch.

Over 300 men have joined the four-year program to date. They can choose from a wealth of courses including software engineering, fine arts, business administration, automotive engineering, mass communication, information technology, hotel management, agricultural engineering, pharmaceutical sciences and dentistry.

Most attend a regular state-run school or college in the morning and head to the CCAЕ for four hours each afternoon.

Fr McCulloch set the facility up with a clique of Catholic professionals, not only to give young people a future but also to lay a stronger foundation for the church in Pakistan.

"We were equally concerned about the future of the church in Pakistan as we were about the future facing many of its young people," he said.

"We started with a great idea but no funds. We had a core team of teachers and just 13 students in the early days. Many of them weren't quite sure what they were getting themselves into."

However, the project has proved to be a roaring success. Some of the graduates have joined the priesthood,



Fr Robert McCulloch, founder of the Catholic Centre of Academic Excellence congratulating students at graduation.

Photos: Missionary Society of St Columban

some have gone on to establish careers in the armed forces, and others now have well-paid jobs.

Based on the early success of the CCAE, Fr McCulloch and his team launched the Catholic Youth Development Centre (CYDC) as an offshoot of the facility in 2008. It started as a morning program but quickly expanded.

The CYDC provides an accelerated learning program for young male Catholics. Many are illiterate when they arrive, having dropped out of school at a young age.

In just two years, however, they cover the complete government syllabus for primary and high school education. After that, they are sent to technical institutes to further hone their skills in their chosen vocation or profession.

"Illiteracy is a huge problem among young Catholic boys in Pakistan," Fr McCulloch told Ucanews.

"Many have a cultural responsibility to leave school early and start providing for their families, for example by raising money for a dowry so that their sisters can marry. Life for them is a long dark tunnel with little light for hope."

The CYDC enrolls about 60 students a year and now has more than 50 of its graduates working in professions ranging from hospitality to healthcare.

Junaid Christopher, 25, is one of the program's success stories.

"I was lucky I got the opportunity to enrol," he told Ucanews.com. "It allowed me to dream big and build myself up, personally and professionally. Apart from the academic stuff, I learned about ethics, etiquette and what it means to have a professional attitude in life."

Christopher used to have a menial bank job but now runs his own educational Centre in Karachi and is studying for a degree in chartered accountancy.

"I always remember the core values I



"We want our students to be able to live and work effectively in Pakistan's multicultural and multi-religious society. Their success over the past decade shows we're on the right track. Their results have far exceeded our expectations," said Fr McCulloch.

learned at the CYDC when I teach my students, who are mostly poor and require a lot of guidance," he said.

Fr McCulloch said religious and moral formation play a key role in the work done at the CCAE. The students are encouraged to pray, work on skills like public speaking and debating, and develop an interest in art, for example learning a traditional Pakistani musical instrument.

After they complete two years of studies, they spend a month attending a Christian faith formation course at a pastoral institute in Punjab's Multan district.

"Young Christian Pakistanis grow up confronted by discrimination. The students and graduates of CCAE and

CYDC have been able to overcome and move confidently beyond these barriers" Fr McCulloch said.

As the facility doesn't charge its students any fees, it relies on the financial support of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and other benefactors, operating on little more than \$42,000AUD a year.

Naseem Akram said he owes his life to the CYDC. A high-school dropout, he now runs his own auto-repair shop after the program showed him what he was capable of.

"Before I went there, I had no hope," he said. "I want to thank Fr McCulloch for giving me another chance at life."

[www.ucanews.com](http://www.ucanews.com)

Ayyaz Gulzar, Hyderabad, Pakistan

# Snake-bitten

January 21, 2019

Everything is of one piece.

Whenever we don't take that seriously, we pay a price.

---

**T**he renowned theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar gives an example of this. Beauty, he submits, is not some little "extra" that we can value or denigrate according to personal taste and temperament like some luxury that we say we cannot afford. Like truth and goodness, it's one of the properties of God and thus demands to be taken as seriously as goodness and truth. If we neglect or denigrate beauty, he says, we will soon enough begin to neglect other areas of our lives. Here are his words:

"Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name, as if she were an ornament of a bourgeois past, whether he admits it or not, can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love."

Here's a simpler expression of that. There's a delightful little African tale that highlights the interconnectedness of everything and illustrates how, if we separate a

thing from its sisters, we soon pay a price. The tale goes this way:

Once upon a time, when animals still talked, the mice on a farm called a summit of all the other animals. They were worried, they lamented, because they had seen the mistress of the house buy a mousetrap. They were now in danger. But the other animals scoffed at their anxiety. The cow said that she had nothing to worry about. A tiny little contraption couldn't harm her. She could crush it with her foot. The pig reacted in a similar way. What did he have to worry about in the face of a tiny trap? The chicken also announced that it had no fear of this gadget. "It's your concern. No worry for me!" she told the mice.

But all things are interconnected and that soon became evident. The mistress set the mousetrap and, on the very first night, heard it snap. Getting out of her bed to look what it had caught she saw that it had trapped a snake by its tail. In trying to free the snake she was bitten and the poison soon had her feeling sick and running a fever. She went to the doctor who gave her

medicines to combat the poison and advised her: "What you need now to get better is chicken broth." (You can guess where the rest of this is going.) They slaughtered the chicken, but her fever lingered. Relatives and neighbors came to visit. More food was needed. They slaughtered the pig. Eventually the poison killed her. A huge funeral ensued. A lot of food was needed. They slaughtered the cow.

The moral of the story is clear. Everything is interconnected and our failure to see that leaves us in peril. Blindness to our interdependence, wilful or not, is dangerous. We are inextricably tied to each other and to everything in the world. We can protest to the contrary but reality will hold its ground. And so, we cannot truly value one thing while we disdain something else. We cannot really love one person while we hate someone else. And we cannot give ourselves an exemption in one moral area and hope to be morally healthy as a whole. Everything is of one piece. There are no exceptions. When we ignore that truth we will eventually be snake-bitten by it.



Once upon a time, when animals still talked, the mice on a farm called a summit of all the other animals. They were worried, they lamented, because they had seen the mistress of the house buy a mousetrap. They were now in danger.



I emphasize this because today, virtually everywhere, a dangerous tribalism is setting in. Everywhere, not unlike the animals in that African tale, we see families, communities, churches, and whole countries focusing more or less exclusively on their own needs without concern for other families, communities, churches, and countries. Other people's problems, we believe, are not our concern. From the narrowness in our churches, to identity politics, to whole nations setting their own needs first, we hear echoes of the cow, pig,

and chicken saying: "Not my concern! I'll take care of myself. You take care of yourself!" This will come back to snake-bite us.

We will eventually pay the price for our blindness and non-concern and we will pay that price politically, socially, and economically. But we will even pay a higher price personally. What that snake-bite will do is captured in Von Balthasar's warning: Whoever ignores or denigrates beauty will, he asserts, eventually be unable to pray or to love. That's true too in all cases when we ignore our interconnectedness with others. By ignoring the needs of others we eventually corrupt our own wholeness so that we are no longer able to treat

ourselves with respect and empathy and, when that happens, we lose respect and empathy for life itself – and for God – because whenever reality isn't respected it bites back with a mysterious vengeance.

*Fr Ron Rolheiser OM*

*Permission given by Fr Ron Rolheiser, President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas.*

[www.ronrolheiser.com](http://www.ronrolheiser.com) or  
[www.facebook.com/ronrolheiser](https://www.facebook.com/ronrolheiser).



Photos: Bigstockphotos.com



# From the US Mexico border

Fr Robert (Bob) Mosher, from the Columban Mission Centre in El Paso, Texas, reports on visits to an asylum seeker from Honduras. In mid-last year she was separated from her son at the US/Mexico border. She is trying to request asylum and is currently in detention in El Paso.

**W**hat follows is an account of two of their visits, told from Fr Bob's perspective.

## First visit

I'm just back from visiting a mother separated from her 9-year-old son who turns 10 on Tuesday. She gets to talk to him over the phone once a week. He's in New York, she's here in the El Paso camp for detained migrants.

"There's no greater pain," she tells me, tears creeping out from her eyes, slowly running down her cheeks, "than to be apart from your child. We all feel it,

all the mothers here who have been separated from their children. It's terrible. There's nothing worse."

We talk about her life before trying to enter the U.S., her murdered husband, her fears for her child if he is forced, with her, to return to Honduras. "I don't want him to grow up there," she tells me. "I'd be afraid for him, for how he would turn out, with so much gang activity there, in every part of my country."

"I'm not here looking for a good time," she added, "or just to travel. I'm not here to sponge off the government or anyone. I work hard, I have a degree that

I earned at nights, and I'm willing to do any kind of work in order to get ahead."

She has no idea when she will get to see a judge and explain to him what drove her to leave her country. She's been told that accommodation is being built at the nearby military base, Fort Bliss, for reuniting children with their parents, while keeping them imprisoned, awaiting their day in court. "As if we were criminals," she says, her fingers playing with the plastic identification band that is part of her prison wear, along with the prison suit, the lace-less sandals.



But then she smiles. "At least we'll be together again. I believe that God will help us. God will answer my prayers."

I tell her that she's not alone, that many people are praying for her, and contributing their resources to the groups that fight to free her and reunite her with her son.

She smiles, gratefully. But then a shadow crosses her face again. "I wish I could make him a cake. I'm going to try to call him and talk to him on Monday, before his birthday."

"If I can't, I'll try again on Wednesday." She already knows that she is not permitted to call anyone on Tuesday. All these obstacles and cuts are made excruciatingly huge by people trying to make other people like her suffer, to punish her for the crime of looking for humanity, and help.

"There's no greater pain," she tells me, tears creeping out from her eyes, slowly running down her cheeks, "than to be apart from your child. We all feel it, all the mothers here who have been separated from their children. It's terrible. There's nothing worse."

### Next visit

When I visited the young mother once again at the detention camp she was smiling. We picked up the telephones on either side of the glass partition, surrounded by painted cinder-block walls, and sat down to talk. "I saw the judge a few days ago," she said. No, she didn't get to tell the judge the account of what drove her to the U.S., she said. Specific questions were directed at her, and she was required to only answer them, and not to go on at length. But the judge did not rule on whether or not she was to be "removed," or deported, so the worst-case scenario was avoided: immediate deportation, without her son.

For now, she can stay at the detention facility, which means the possibility of being reunited with her child has improved. She feels fortunate, although she still has vivid nightmares of losing her child forever. Sustained by her faith during the day, and clinging to hope, her fears nevertheless come alive, unbidden, after dark.

More visits from our local Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Centre personnel, including from the director, Ms. Linda Rivas, also buoyed her spirits. She has located a close relative in the U.S. that could take them in, which might also improve her chances of staying with her boy.

I was afraid that ICE – the US *Immigration and Customs Enforcement* agency – might have already deported her when I arrived for my visit at the detention camp, located ominously near the airport for quick deportations.

The security guard managing the visits wasn't sure where she was at first. He gave me the impression that a lot of disorganisation was running through the camp, as the roughly 2,000 men and women held there were moved around, deported or transferred to other camps, and even federal prisons. Overcrowding must be a problem these days.

We prayed together at the end of the visit, grateful for the solidarity with her, expressed from within and even beyond the borders of the U.S. Our Columban personnel in the U.K., protesting the visit of the US head of state, shared her case with many others in the demonstrations, and they, in turn, sent their prayers and wishes for her freedom.

A week after my visit she was able to call her son, and found out that he was given a small birthday cake by his caregivers in New York, which made her happy. But her anxiety for their future – hopefully to be faced together – was evident in the lines on her face, and in the awkward way she held the heavy phone piece in her thin hands during our exchange. She finds the whole process unwieldy, and perhaps beyond her. She may well wonder if her message is getting to the right people at all.

But how grateful she is for the support of concerned friends in at the *Columban Mission Centre in El Paso, Texas!* She always mentions that as she says goodbye.

*Fr Robert (Bob) Mosher  
Director of the Columban Mission Centre  
in El Paso, Texas*

# Wonders of Waste Bags

Ellen Teague reports on an innovative ecological livelihood project in the Philippines which the Columbans support and is the brainwave of a lay missionary.

**B**AGS – isn't that a great name! It refers to an inspirational livelihood and recycling project in the Philippines, *Wonders of Waste* bags. WoW is coordinated by Helen Mitchell, an Irish woman who went to the Philippines as a lay missionary in 2002, and together with a group of local women started WoW in 2006. WoW, which links care for the Earth with care for the poor, demonstrates in a very practical way how by simple gestures we can 'live' the message of the ecological encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

WoW began in Pampanga, a rural area a few hours north of Manila. With Helen's guidance, a group of women began to collect and wash discarded empty juice packs and experimented with making them into bags. They tried out many designs and shapes and learnt the hard way what worked and what didn't. Over the years since then, roles and routines have become more formalised, with some of the women collecting, washing and sorting the packs by size and colour. Once this is done they are passed on to the sewers who transform them into wonderful bags. These are

then passed on for further quality control prior to starting their second life in another country.

For many years three primary schools in Geelong, Australia have bought WoW bags for their Prep students to use as library bags. A group of 8 teachers has visited the WoW project on several occasions and spent time with the women who make the bags.

A network of volunteers in Britain, Ireland and other places, sell WoW bags to their family, friends and work colleagues, at churches, in schools and universities, summer fairs and Christmas bazaars. The international links are vital, creating new relationships and opportunities for people to become involved in working for justice for people and the planet.

In 2009, Helen was invited by Columban Fr John Leyden to begin an extension project in Malate parish, Manila. WoW rents an office in the Columban parish's social services building and many juice packs are collected in the surrounding area. I visited the Malate office four years ago, and the bags I brought back as gifts were made by Mari, a sewer in

Malate. Just seeing her name on each bag reminded me of her skill and what the project means for her and her family. Since then, I have regularly ordered bags and taken them to sell at Columban events, alongside books and DVDs.

The bags are very popular and stand out with their bright colours and good quality workmanship. I should say "workwomanship" because the bags are made by women. They come in all shapes and sizes. I have in front of me a small bag made out of 11 apple-drink pouches and a medium sized one made from 36 orange juice pouches. Both are flawlessly sewn together and trimmed with a coloured strap. They are strong and useful, especially the designs with additional pockets inside.

During my visit to WoW, I was taken on a walk through Area 9, part of Malate parish, near Manila Bay. My guide was Helen, along with two of the women who work with WoW. Helen, Edith and Marivic led me through a maze of dark and narrow alleyways, making our way over broken paving stones covering sewers. Babies were being rocked by grandmothers outside doorways and tiny children hung around the alleys, without access to fresh air, natural light or green spaces.

Edith and Marivic showed us their 'houses' – damp rooms without basic services where they have raised seven children between them, yet spotlessly clean; outside were hanging rows of empty drinks packs, pegged and drying. The discarded packs had been collected from the local school, checked for damage and then washed. The women had bought water – (all water has to be purchased for a community of over 5000 people)



Photos: Missionary Society of St Columban

to wash and to sort them, ready to be turned into various shapes of bags.

Helen says the project aims “to change lives one pack at a time” and this is slowly but surely happening. Each bag is handmade with the work done in a way which allows each woman to manage her time, her output and her income.

WoW offers much needed employment to women living in areas with few work opportunities available. In addition, all are mothers and need to be able to combine earning an income with the responsibilities of parenting. WoW works to fair-trade criteria and members are paid promptly, receiving a living as opposed to a minimum wage. There are a number of bonuses throughout the year and the opportunity to join a saving scheme which pays out at two key moments back to school time and Christmas time.

This has enabled some to break ties with moneylenders and also to have a little more control over their lives as they can plan what they want to do with their income. Some have added small extensions to their houses. One bought her first set of furniture after 17 years of marriage. Another got a set of dentures 32 years after having her teeth removed and another has visited her elderly parents in a far province for the first time in 15 years.

As well as providing an income for 12 women, WoW helps to care for the environment. Plastic is a big problem in the Philippines, it is discarded everywhere and among the many forms of plastic which clog up rivers and drainage systems are the brightly coloured drink packs.

Helen says, “WoW Bags has received a lot of support and encouragement from the Columbans here in the Philippines, in Ireland, Australia and in England for which we are very grateful”. In the Philippines there are good links between WoW and the work of Columban Missionaries, Sr Kathleen



Melia in Mindanao and Fr Brian Gore in Negros. WoW uses some of its profits each year to support the educational work of Sr Kathleen with the Subanen people. This enabled a young woman to complete a four-year education degree. She now teaches Subanen children in a remote community.

Currently WoW supports the travel expenses for eight Subanen girls who are attending High School. In 2019, WoW hopes to begin a new collaboration with the Negros Nine Weaving Project of Fr Brian Gore. This project offers a livelihood to skilled weavers in a remote area. WoW plans to develop a new range of bags incorporating both weaving and plastic packs.

Working in partnership with the Columbans and others enables a wider audience to hear the story of WoW, a story of hope and change for people and planet... one plastic pack, one bag, one woman at a time.

More information at :  
[recycledjuicepack@hotmail.com](mailto:recycledjuicepack@hotmail.com)

*Ellen Teague is the Media Coordinator for the Columban Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation (JPIC) team in London, England*



During my visit to WoW, I was taken on a walk through Area 9, part of Malate parish, near Manila Bay. My guide was Helen, along with two of the women who work with WoW. Helen, Edith and Marivic led me through a maze of dark and narrow alleyways, making our way over broken paving stones covering sewers. Babies were being rocked by grandmothers outside doorways and tiny children hung around the alleys...



# They read me like a book

As I come to the end of my time as a member of the General Council, I have been thinking to put on paper a few thoughts and feelings as I also leave many friends who happen to be prisoners in Hong Kong's Correctional Services' institutions.

I first became interested in prison ministry in Fiji where I often celebrated Sunday Eucharist with inmates at Korovou (Suva) Jail. I also occasionally went to Naboro Maximum Security and then Nukulau Island prison (on a small and often rickety prison boat) where the 2006 Fiji coup leaders were being held.

One, a Special Forces soldier, was the brother of one of our seminarians. Another was the (in)famous George Speight (Leader of the Fiji coup of 2000, in which he and an elite unit of Fiji's military detained 36 members of parliament and held them hostage from May 19, 2000 to July 13, 2000).

Conditions in all these places were basic or less-than-basic. Generally, relationships between prisoners and guards were friendly and informal. Paradoxically, this existed with bouts of extreme torture. I remember bringing my disgust and anger at the beating to

death of a Catholic inmate to the Acting Commissioner of Prisons which led to some resignations and staff transfers.

Coming to Hong Kong in 2012, knowing that my ignorance of Cantonese was going to limit quite radically my ability for pastoral outreach within the diocese, I thought to volunteer for prison work in the expectation that I might meet three or four English speakers – local or foreign – with whom I could converse and perhaps minister to.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, when I encountered not three or four, but almost 1,000 foreign inmates spread over the five prisons I was authorized to visit, many of whom, having heard I was a Catholic priest, came crowding around me, shaking my hand vigorously, telling me they hadn't seen a padre for years.

They had a lot to say, "When are you saying Mass? Can you hear my confession? Can you phone my wife? Can you buy me a dictionary? Can

you sponsor my child's studies?", and much more, not necessarily in English but Spanish, French, Hindi, Indonesian, Tagalog and various dialects of Chinese!

I came home to the General Council house quite overwhelmed and wondering if it was wise for me, given my other duties, to go any further with this ministry.

How could I possibly do it? Where would I find time? Maybe these peoples' concerns were really "not my problem."

I wrestled with these thoughts for a number of months, and eventually decided, "Well, if I am going to do this, I will do it whole heartedly." One of the first tasks was to try to learn some Spanish, as almost a half were Colombian, Mexican, Peruvian and other Latin and Central American countries – drug mules. The other half (with some Asian exceptions) were African, so I had to get my high school French out of a much forgotten corner.

Because it is such an open-for-business global hub, Hong Kong attracts wealth, with all its glamour and corresponding underbelly of money laundering and people trafficking.

Also unique among its South East Asian neighbours, it has no death penalty and is a signatory to the United Nations' Declaration Against Forcible Return to a Location of Persecution. Both factors, allied with the desperation of many millions of African and Latin American poor, contribute to the high incidence of drug trafficking.

There are syndicates in most South American nations – often headed by Igbo Nigerian, with locals who send mules to Asia via Johannesburg, Dubai, Addis Ababa and Bangkok. They arrive in Hong Kong with their stomachs or suitcases loaded with capsules.

The chaplains' group, *No Mas Mulas (Voice for Prisoners)* to which I belong, has gathered much evidence that a significant minority of immigration officers and Hong Kong airport police are complicit in this ugly industry, to the extent that they accept tip-offs from the local drug lords about who will be arriving with illicit drugs on what plane.

Good press and promotions follow, everyone, of course, knowing that for

each mule apprehended, nine more walk through undetected. Efforts to meet the Security Bureau or the Hong Kong Legislature on this issue have so far proved unsuccessful.

Three years ago, Fr John, an Australian Oblate, began a campaign, whereby if a foreign drug mule writes his/her story and assents to having it uploaded to [www.v2catholic.com](http://www.v2catholic.com), along with Facebook/newspaper blogs of his/her country, as a way of warning others not to fall into the same trap, he or she may receive a reduction in sentence.

If one of our group then produces this evidence in court, some judges give a reduced sentence. Fr John has also personally visited most South American nations, three South African and four East African nations and ten in Latin America, to press home the same message to any media outlet or government official who agrees to meet him.

The results of this campaign, which should be funded and executed by Interpol and not Catholic clergy, have been impressive. The number of apprehended African/South American mules has decreased year by year since 2014, even as arrivals from Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh have



mushroomed. No doubt, the cartels have adapted to changed circumstances and will continue to do so.

In leaving this work and these relationships, there is sadness. I have been enriched, challenged, frustrated, infuriated by prisoners and guards and the *system*.

Mostly, I have felt humbled by the faith and humour in adversity of this marginalized group of people. I have laughed with them, sometimes cried, had my broken foreign languages patiently corrected and been asked for a blessing by Pakistani Muslims, Orthodox Jews and Ethiopian Copts.

Once or twice, at a time perhaps when dealing with difficult General Council decisions, a prisoner would say to me, "Father, you are not happy today. Something is wrong. Would you like a prayer?"

They read me like a book and I loved them. May God protect them, send them better people than me as ministers and help all of us to work for a world where poverty, migration and violence do not force people into carrying substances that harm countless other lives.

*Fr Patrick Colgan was a member of the Columban General Council until August, 2018 and is currently on sabbatical.*



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# Mission World

**We ask your prayers:** The prayers of our readers are requested for the repose of the souls of friends and benefactors of the Missionary Society of St Columban who died recently and for the spiritual and the temporal welfare of all our readers, their families and friends.

## Mission Intentions for March

### Recognition of the Right of Christian Communities

That Christian communities, especially those who are persecuted, feel that they are close to Christ and have their rights respected.

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## Historic Document Signed by Pope Francis and Grand Imam of Al-Azhar 'Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together'

Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar signed the Document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" on February 04, 2019. The signing followed the Holy Father's speech to the Global Conference on Human Fraternity in Abu Dhabi, a key element in the Holy Father's February 3-5 apostolic visit to the United Arab Emirates.

"The document represents an important step forward in the dialogue between Christians and Muslims and is a powerful sign of peace and hope for the future of humanity," said a statement from Alessandro Gisotti, Interim Director of the Vatican's Press Office.

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin told journalists that the importance of this day is dialogue among religions, especially Christianity and Islam, promoting peace and combatting fundamentalism.

He said, "The Document is a vibrant appeal to respond with good to evil, to reinforce interreligious dialogue and to promote mutual respect in order to block the road to those who add fuel to the fire of the clashes between civilizations. At Abu Dhabi, Francis and Al-Tayyib have together indicated a way



of peace and reconciliation on which not only Christians and Muslims can walk, but all people of good will.

It is a courageous document and prophetic because it confronts, and calls by name, the most urgent issues of our day on which those who believe in God are encouraged to question their own conscience and to confidently assume their own responsibility so as to give life to a more just and united world.

With unambiguous words, the Pope and the Grand Imam declare that no one is ever authorized to exploit God's name to justify war, terrorism or any

other form of violence. In addition, they affirm that life must always be safeguarded and, at the same time, that the rights of women are to be fully recognized, and every discriminatory practice in their regard rejected.

Before humanity, wounded by so many divisions and ideological fanaticism, the Pontiff and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar demonstrate that promoting a culture of encounter is not a utopia, but is the necessary condition for living in peace and leaving for future generations a better world than the one in which we live."

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# From the Director

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## What does the Good News mean?

I am writing this on the feast day of the Conversion of St Paul. The liturgy keeps repeating the phrase “Go out to all the world and tell the Good News”.

It is a great feast for any missionary group, any missionary people. All of us in the Church are missionary people. All of us have Good News to tell. This can be in our home, at work, in the school or to anyone we meet. As Columbans we and those who support us feel the call to “go out to the whole world and share this Good News”.



Unfortunately as we have seen very clearly in recent years, the news about the church has not been good. The abuse of children, especially by priests in the Church, has been horrific. The cover up of what has happened has been appalling. In response, leaders have apologised and efforts are being made to make sure our Church is a place of safety for children and all those who are vulnerable. Many people are undertaking training programs at all levels of the Church in the hope that the abuse and cover ups will not be the story of our Church in the future.

As the Columban Society in Australia we have started the process of joining the Federal Government’s National Redress Scheme. I see it as part of our Columban support for victims of child sexual abuse. It can take up to six months to do the paperwork and to get the final signature of the Federal Minister for Families and Social Services.

The setting up of this Scheme by the Federal Government followed on from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Victims of child abuse are encouraged to go to the Scheme’s website to seek redress for what they have suffered. The scheme is not all about money and there are links to many different support services. It is friendly and compassionate and the people whom we have worked with in the government offices have been very helpful.

For us as believers we can be asking “Where is God in all this?” We believe in God’s constant love and compassion but that can be tested when confronted with the pain and suffering

If we have the courage as a Church or as an individual to admit the truth about ourselves and if we can share that truth with God we will know his compassion and love. We will personally know what the Good News means.

of those who have been sexually abused. People suffer the effects of such abuse for a long time. One sign of God’s presence is seen in the courage of those who have spoken up about this. Such strength is a work of the Spirit. To be so open with some of the most devastating experiences of one’s life requires the help of God.

To ponder the truth about ourselves as Church is to know that our community is good in many ways but it is also to know that it has failed in many ways and is in need of change, of repentance. We can wonder, “How can such a community be a source of Good News? Why look to the Church for answers for my life?”

The season of Lent has a lot to teach us about sin, repentance and forgiveness. One of the biggest difficulties for all of us, I think, is that we deny what we have done. To be honest with ourselves is not easy.

If we have the courage as a Church or as an individual to admit the truth about ourselves and if we can share that truth with God we will know his compassion and love. We will personally know what the Good News means. It means freedom and healing. It means that we ourselves can be Proclaimers of Good News. We too can be missionary. This is the power of the Resurrection in our own lives and in our own Catholic community.

# Connection between Aboriginal Spirituality and Interfaith

I used to think that the Aboriginal “Acknowledgement of Country” was outdated and irrelevant. I have changed my mind.

I now believe that this ancient Aboriginal protocol has profound connections with our contemporary work in interfaith relations. Allow me to explain.

- Aboriginal people have inhabited this land for over 65,000 years. They are the world’s oldest continuous living culture.
- They formed many societies and

nations with a variety of cultures and spiritualities shaped by the various landscapes and climes – coastal, mountain, plain, island, desert and so on.

- They spoke more than 250 languages and 600 dialects.

Consequently, cultural and religious diversity is deeply imbedded in Australian history. It is part of our national DNA.

Overlaid on this ancient aboriginal diversity is our current multi-cultural, multi-religious diversity:

- More than a quarter of Australians (26%) were born overseas, just over 6 million.
- Add one or both parents born overseas and the figure jumps to nearly half (49%).
- As a result of this migration, Australians identify with more than 270 ancestries.
- Over 300 languages are spoken in Australian homes.
- We follow over 120 different religions or spiritualities.

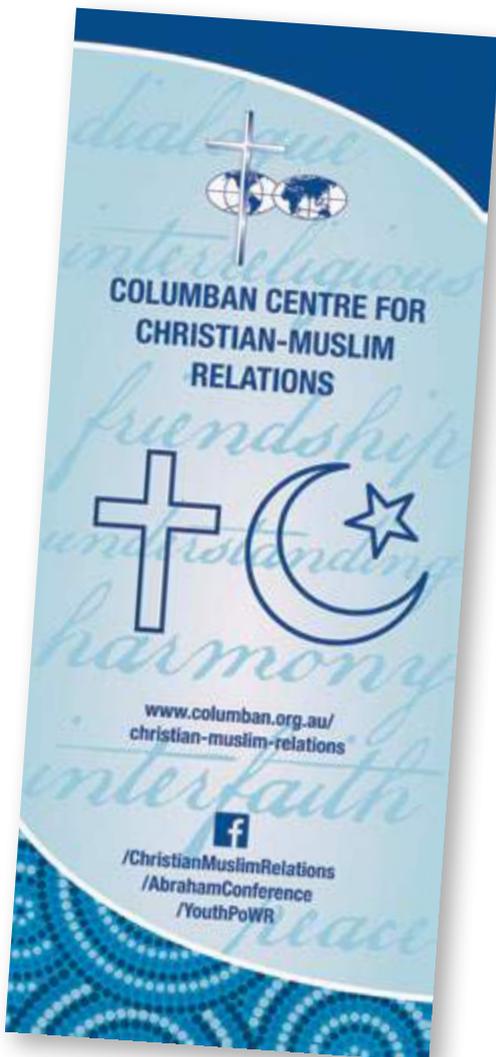
Seeing these layers of diversity, I now believe that we cannot successfully address the issues of our current multi-religious society until we reconcile with the multi-religious diversity of the Aboriginal peoples whom we dispossessed and whose lands we

colonised. Reconciliation and interfaith go hand-in-hand.

To make this connection, the *Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations* has done the following:

- We placed an Aboriginal Acknowledgement on the front and back of the entrance door to our Centre, so that every time anyone enters or exits our office, they are reminded that they are stepping on Aboriginal land.
- An Aboriginal elder, Uncle Lexodious Dadd, carved a “message stick” especially for our Centre that conveys the message of people coming together in peace and harmony.
- We have a map of Aboriginal Australia displayed prominently on the wall of our office.
- We included an Aboriginal dot painting motif on our Centre’s promotional banner, signalling that reconciliation is foundational to our work in interfaith.
- We have included an Aboriginal Acknowledgment on our e-mail signature, so that all our communications include the message of reconciliation.

I cannot say any more than this, as this little is as much as we have done. But I suggest that Aboriginal protocols provide a treasury of resources that could fruitfully transform interfaith relations in Australia. For example:



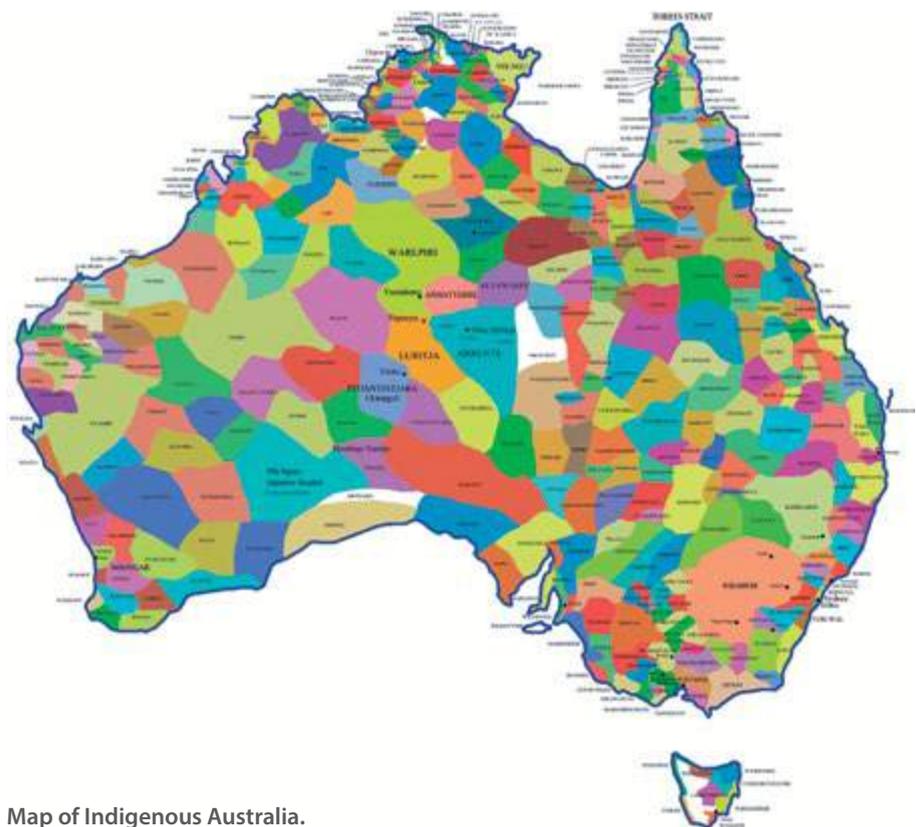
- Acknowledgement – how different our interfaith landscape would be if we truly acknowledged believers from other religions! It would mean that we no longer see them as bereft of salvation or competitors for members or potential converts, but accept them fully in their uniqueness, similarity and difference.
- Welcome to country – how different our interfaith relations would be if we extended welcome and hospitality to others! It would mean treating others as sent by God, rather than as threats or trespassers – “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Heb 13:2) It would mean recognising them as fellow pilgrims, travelling together, sharing our respective gifts to make easier our common journey to the same heavenly destiny.
- Welcome includes waiting patiently to be received onto land, rather than trampling on others’ sensitivities

– how different our multi-faith society would be if we practised patient respect for others! It would mean allowing others to speak for themselves, rather than be spoken for. It would mean not heeding negative stereotypes that give false witness (cf Ex 20:16). It would mean giving others time and space to express their faith in their own way rather than requiring them to assimilate to some pretended norm.

- ... and much more.

Drawing from the ancient wellspring of Aboriginal wisdom in dealing with differences could help bring the overlaying modern multicultural, multi-religious diversity and the underlying Aboriginal multi-cultural, multi-religious diversity together into a harmonious and reconciled unity.

*Fr Patrick McInerney  
Director  
Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim  
Relations in Blacktown, NSW.*



Map of Indigenous Australia.



Photos: Missionary Society of St Columban



# The ministry of sport

Irish Columban Lay Missionary, Oisín Kenny, tells us about the important ministry of “Sports” in an impoverished area in Alto Hospicio, a mining town in the Atacama desert in the north of Chile.

Sport is always a great way to bring people together. This is especially important when you live in a *barrio* where there are migrants from different countries. With that in mind the young and not so young from the various Catholic churches in Alto Hospicio gathered for a soccer tournament last year.

Teams from the Columban Parish of *Sagrada Corazón* and *Doce Apóstoles* both participated. I work in the *comedor* (a soup kitchen), in the shanty town near the main parish church of *Sagrada Corazón* (Sacred Heart).

A soccer pitch has been created behind the church. Given that we can have up to 60 kids in attendance for meals at the *comedor*, we were confident that we could form teams from different age groups of boys and girls. And what better way to run

off the day’s lunch cooked by the local mothers!

Cars packed with enthusiastic children, we set off to the school designated for the days activities. Undoubtedly we were a multinational force with not only Chileans but also Bolivians, Columbians, Peruvians and an Irish trainer who was nearly getting as excited as the kids.

We arrived on time but seemed to be the only ones to do so. Was it cancelled without notice? Stranger things have happened here. However, in typical Chilean style, participants began to arrive in dribs and drabs until eventually a good sized crowd had assembled. The kids persisted with impatient questions while I tried to find out what was going on.

A couple of hours after the start time – at last, we started! Teams were registered and three small soccer

pitches eventually sprung into life. The only synthetic one was reserved for the ‘*niños*’ and ‘*ninas*’, the smaller boys and girls which signified anyone up to 12 years old within grabbing distance. The higher age groups took their skills to the concrete pitches.

Our first game was with the young girls and, despite a valiant display, the greater size of the opposition combined with our lack of training resulted in a loss. No matter. A Bolivian mother vowed to take them in hand in the future for further development.

Next up was our teenage boys. Somehow we were paired against a team of grown men who looked like they had just arrived from the mines after a hard day’s work. Upon reasoned protestations from myself about this ‘*David and Goliath*’ contest it was decided to rearrange things and we



The new pitch behind the church of Sagrada Corazón. Photos: Missionary Society of St Columban

were matched with more suitable opponents. Our team made up mostly of Columbians and a couple of Bolivians, had skills that Pele himself would have been proud of. Unfortunately, the beautiful game wasn't enough against a more direct Chilean side and we suffered a narrow defeat.

The day took a turn for the better when the young boys took to the field and combined both skill and discipline to produce a well-deserved win and a place in the final. However, before that, our team of women had to compete. Our opponents were from the main parish church so there was a keen sense of competition. It was a bruising affair with injuries, yellow cards and a besieged referee. Games don't come much tighter than this as players clashed and fought for every ball. Unfortunately our opponents took the spoils in a testy affair.

However, now we had to focus on the final for the boys. Given that it was the last game of the day a crowd circled the pitch and the kids of the shantytown of Sagrado Corazón were ready for action.

Once again they produced a magnificent display as our supporters

urged them on, the excitement building. Our opponents were no match for our multinational force and we succeeded in bringing home the win. Hands were shaken and celebrations began.

We were the final team to receive the cup at the presentations and the kids enthusiastically embraced their trophy and raised it in the air to shouts of joy. With heads held high we packed everyone into the cars again bound for

home. Due to the late start we didn't get to enjoy the planned 'completos' which are the Chilean version of hot dogs and one of the kids' favourites snacks. Not to worry. That would be left for another day and nothing was going to dampen their spirits for that night at least. Now with our new soccer pitch behind the church hopefully we have a good platform to progress in the future.

*Oisín Kenny is a Columban Lay Missionary in Chile.*



Girls team.

# A reason to live

Virgenia O. Vidad runs the *Pedalling to Live* project which was set up by Columban missionary Fr Oliver McCrossan. She relates how the project has helped Felmar, who has cerebral palsy, to continue his education.

I started working for children with disabilities during my college days back 1994 in Ozamiz City. At that time, many children with disabilities did not go to school as school buildings were not adapted for wheelchair users and some of the children were bullied because of their disability.

I continued to visit children with disabilities in the different barangays of Ozamiz City and helped their parents lobby the city authorities to allocate funds for children with disabilities.

Columban Fr Oliver McCrossan set up

the *Pedalling to Live* and *Green Shelter* project and one of its programmes was specifically aimed at identifying and helping children with disabilities.

The goal of the programme is to train health workers and day care workers to undertake basic interventions as well as to create a referral system to the different agencies that provide education for children with disabilities as well as rehabilitation and medication.

In 2011, I met Felmar Tano from Annex, Ozamiz City, who has cerebral palsy. He is one of those who has

benefitted from our rehabilitation and education programme.

Felmar was born on March 15, 2003. He has two brothers. Felmar's mother told us about some of the challenges she has encountered as a mother of a child with cerebral palsy. Felmar cannot walk, but he can move the upper part of his body.

Elma Tano is married to Fedil Tano who is a taxi driver. They live with their family near the coastal area in Annex, Ozamiz City.

Elma gave birth to Felmar in the local



Virgenia O. Vidad and Fr Oliver McCrossan with Felmar.



Photos: Missionary Society of St Columban

Fr Oliver McCrossan and Felmar reading together.

hospital. Sadly during the delivery, Felmar had suffered a lack of oxygen to the brain. The doctors told his parents "Don't expect your child to be normal." They were devastated.

Over time, Elma observed that the palm of Felmar's hand was always closed and he did not move his body like other children. He was very sickly and regularly hospitalised.

When Felmar was six, a neurologist diagnosed him with epilepsy and mild cerebral palsy. He was prescribed medication but due to the cost Elma had to stop giving it to him. The *Pedalling to Live* project was able to help Felmar with daily therapy but after a year it too had to be discontinued due to the cost.

However, Elma enrolled Felmar at Special Education (SPED) School and carried him there and back as he did not have a wheelchair. Elma's hope was that Felmar would learn to socialise with other children and to learn how to read and write and to take care of his personal hygiene which he has now achieved.

After a couple of years Felmar was transferred to a regular school so that he could be graded and finish his elementary schooling. There was some hesitation from his teachers at first but after a couple of months they reported that Felmar was doing well in his class and was an inspiration to his classmates.

Felmar is now in Grade 4, has been given a customised wheelchair from

His mother says she has great faith in God and hopes that Felmar's dream to finish college will come true.

*Wheelchair for Education* in Australia and doing as well as he can to write with his stiff arms. Felmar has trialed an iPad which he finds so much easier than writing but his parents cannot afford to buy one for him.

His mother says she has great faith in God and hopes that Felmar's dream to finish college will come true.

*Virginia Vidad is the Programme Manager for the Pedalling to Live project, Philippines.*



## Your Columban Legacy

"Do what you can" Bishop Edward J Galvin

### Remember Columbans in your Will

*We cannot take our earthly possessions with us, but we can so dispose of them that our good works will continue after we are gone.*

*By leaving a Gift to Columban Missionaries in your Will you become a partner in our work and you are leaving a lasting legacy for the future.*

*Why not speak to your lawyer about it?*

#### FORM OF WILL

"I give and bequeath the sum of \$..... to the Regional Director for Australia (NZ Wills: **The Superior of New Zealand**) of St Columbans Mission Society to be used for that Society's general purposes as the Regional Director (NZ Wills: **The Superior of New Zealand**) sees fit.

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