

far east



MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES



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(1944 - 2001)
Peacemaker

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THE FAR EAST

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Front Cover

Fr Rufus Halley in Dalgan Park in May 1999 during a home visit. Photo: Fr Alo Connaughton.

In the past editors have often attempted to find a unifying theme for a given issue of our **Far East**. This may well be the first time that almost all those contributing to an issue are focused on just one of our members. The occasion is the twentieth anniversary of the murder of Fr Rufus Halley. We would like to thank **Fr Donie Hogan**, our guest editor on this special issue, for his dedication and vision in bringing this special issue to fruition as well as Mary Joy Rile-Servicio, who compiled the book **Popong: Stories on Fr Rufus**.

Rufus was a very charming man with a great capacity for befriending people. Everybody loved him and everybody was happy and comfortable in his presence. They enjoyed being with him as one who never said anything hurtful to or about people. He talked little about himself but there was another deeply serious side to him. He was always searching for what was really being asked of him in life's unfolding. The searching was invariably a self-searching for that in him which was limiting his freedom to respond creatively. He went through an extended series of retreats and intensive spiritual guidance.

After such "time in the desert", he was ready for a new challenge which came through an encounter with Bishop Bienvenido Tuted, then bishop of Iligan in the Philippines. Bishop 'Benny', on his own initiative, had gone to Pope Paul VI and proposed that it would be good if the largely Muslim upland part of the diocese be separated from the Diocese of Iligan and set up as a distinct Prelature of Marawi. Responding to the Pope's understandable anxiety as to who he could possibly find willing to go to such a tiny and dangerous place, Bishop 'Benny' volunteered himself, assuring the Pope that there would be no difficulty in finding someone to take over Iligan. Rufus was to become part of this new initiative.

Rufus applied himself to learning Maranao, opting to help out as a salesperson in the store of a Maranao businessman in Marawi. This immersion in the living linguistic community was not simply for language-learning. For Rufus and his bishop, involvement in inter-religious dialogue was far from being a matter for professional theologians. The path to life-enhancing inter-religious dialogue for all was to be that of participation in the



dialogue of life with others: what the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck called "the humility of a common task", sharing life with each other.

Rufus was certainly not alone, either in his thinking or in the intensity of his prayer life. The others in the Prelature shared the same vision. And yet, I think it is fair to say that he was an inspiration for the others in creating a pathway in how inter-religious dialogue might be done. It was all about relating with people in profound respect and becoming close to them: only in this way is mutual trust built up at a very deep level.

This was a quite new venture, calling for a different mode of presence to another faith tradition, not with a view to conversion but with a view to creating deep-rooted relationships between two faith traditions. From the viewpoint of Columban missionaries, it seemed imperative to grow into the dynamics of this new initiative. We are present in Asia to vast numbers of people deeply shaped by irreducibly distinct faith traditions. Despite the pluralism, there is to be found a significant commonality of profoundly religious values. These values must be affirmed and revered in mutual appreciation through what we refer to as inter-religious dialogue. It is a necessary part of humanity's journey to the Kingdom of God. ●

Fr Brendan Lovett

Theologian Fr Brendan Lovett was ordained in 1966 and went on mission to the Philippines, where he taught theology for over forty years. His most recent book 'A Dragon not for the Slaying' was published by Claretian Publications. He is now retired in Ireland.

01. A motorbike was Fr Rufus 'Popong' Halley's favourite mode of transport in Marawi. Photo: Fr Donie Hogan.



'TIME TO SAY GOODBYE'



Fr Donal Hogan was a classmate of Fr Rufus Halley's and they both served as missionaries in the Philippines. He recalls the outpouring of grief at the memorial services for Rufus in Mindanao, Butlerstown and Dalgan Park.

On 28th August 2001 in the early afternoon, I received a phone call in Ballymun parish from Fr Tom O'Reilly, our vice-director, to say that my friend and classmate Rufus Halley had been killed in Malabang. He said the family had just been informed through Fr Frank Hopkins, a family friend in Waterford. It seemed that Rufus was killed in a failed kidnap attempt.

Shortly afterwards I called Rufus' brother Gerry Halley, who was still in shock and was wondering what was to be done next. I told him that I would be going to the Philippines for the funeral. He then got in touch with the rest of the family and they decided that the five brothers would also travel to the Philippines for the funeral. Their mother would remain at home and their sister, Evelyn, would come from Canada to be with her. Rufus' father had died several years before.

We arrived in Manila airport on the evening of Friday 31st August and were met by reporters from the national newspapers and TV stations. From there we went to the Columban HQ in Singalong Street in Manila. The next morning at dawn we got a flight to Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao. We arrived at the church where a crowd of over 2,000 had gathered inside and outside. Loudspeakers were set up for the overflow so that they could follow the Funeral Mass. The people, both Muslim and Christian,

had held an overnight vigil in the church. As we approached, the song that was ringing out around the plaza was 'Time to Say Goodbye' sung by Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman. Rufus had brought this CD back with him from Ireland about six weeks previously. According to his assistant Fr Yrap Nazareno, Rufus had been playing this song in Malabang many times during the weeks ahead of his death. "It was as if he had a premonition that he might be killed," he related.

During his homily, Bishop Ephrem de la Pena of Marawi Prelature said, "We have laboured for 25 years with little fruit. But now the seed that was planted has been watered by the blood of Fr Rufus and we see the two communities of Christians and Muslims becoming one in their grief for their friend. What he laboured for in life has been accomplished in his death."

At the end of Mass, Connie Balindong, a Muslim, spoke of her friend Rufus (or *Popong* as he was fondly called by the people of Malabang). She said, "We have lost a man of peace, a man of love, but his vision will continue. His legacy will never die." She was treasurer of Our Lady of Peace High School in Malabang, of which Rufus was director. Gerry Halley then spoke movingly on behalf of the family. He thanked the people, Christians and Muslims, for their kindness to Rufus in life and their care for him in death as shown in the outpouring of





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grief and love during the previous few days. "I know Rufus would forgive those who killed him and so do we, while letting justice take its course," he told them. "As much as we would have liked to bring him back home, Rufus wanted to be buried in Mindanao, his home."

Finally, a message from Pope John Paul II was read offering "his heartfelt condolences" to Rufus' family and to the Columbans. The coffin was led from the church with a guard of honour formed by Rufus' Columban classmates in the Philippines. Then on to the burial in the Divine Shepherd Memorial Park in Cagayan de Oro with many people accompanying the hearse. The last to leave the graveside with the brothers were students from Malabang parish school, both Christian and Muslim.

Then we travelled back to Ireland for the memorial Mass on 8th September in Butlerstown, Co Waterford with Rufus's mother and Evelyn his sister and all the Halley family. Bishop Lee and many diocesan priests as well as Columbans concelebrated. Again, loudspeakers had been erected for the overflow outside the church.

Dalغان Park hosted a final memorial Mass on 11th September with Columbans and the Halley family. Dalغان is the home of the Columbans in Ireland and the place where Rufus spent seven years training for missionary life and where he was ordained in 1969. The Mass was scheduled for 7pm but as we were preparing, word came through of the tragic events in the US. It was hard to grasp what we were hearing about planes crashing into the Twin Towers. Adding to the sense of tragedy was the fact that Gerry Halley's father-in-law, an American, was en route that evening to the US.

The principal celebrant at the

Mass was Rufus' friend and co-worker in Marawi Prelature, Fr Kevin McHugh. The homily was preached by Fr Des Hartford, another close friend of Rufus and former Apostolic Delegate in Marawi, who had himself been kidnapped in 1997. He said, "Rufus was a person of total presence. Wherever he was he was fully alive and present. He loved nothing more than to sit down at a meal and converse with others. Rufus loved his family dearly and he knew that his family loved him. It was in the family that Rufus became the person that he was. In a situation of violence and injustice he stood with people in their pain and their powerlessness. And he became a source of life for them in the midst of darkness."

The people of Butlerstown loved Rufus and were determined to keep his memory alive. The old school was refurbished and became the Fr Rufus Halley Memorial Centre. Over the years under the leadership of octogenarian, Billy Walsh and the parish team, the people fundraised for Malabang parish through fun runs, raffles and even an auction of handicrafts donated by parishioners. Walter, Rufus' eldest brother, who was an auctioneer, oversaw the proceedings. Sadly, both Walter and Billy passed away in 2018. ●

Fr Donal Hogan was a missionary in the Philippines for 30 years. He is now based in Dalغان where he is Deputy Safeguarding Officer for the Columbans in Ireland.

01. September 1969 in Bayside New York. Frs Rufus Halley, John Brazil and Donie Hogan on their way to the Philippines for their first time. Photo: Fr Donie Hogan/ Columban Missionaries.
02. Rufus Halley and Des Hartford's last meeting in Carlow in June 2001, a few weeks before Rufus returned to the Philippines for the last time. Photo: Columban Missionaries.
03. The Funeral Mass in Cagayan de Oro as Rufus' brothers grieve before his coffin. (From left) Walter, Eamonn, John, Gerry and Emmet, with a friend of Rufus, Tzoi Tanzo. Photo: Donie Hogan.
04. The class of October 1962, a month after arriving in Dalغان Park. Rufus Halley is seated in the front row, second from left. Donie Hogan is immediately behind him and Sean McDonagh beside him. Photo: Michael Diamond.

To make a comment on this article go to:



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