

# far east



MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES



## **BOMBED BUT NEVER BROKEN**

A parish with a remarkable tale to tell

## **CHRISTMAS VISITORS**

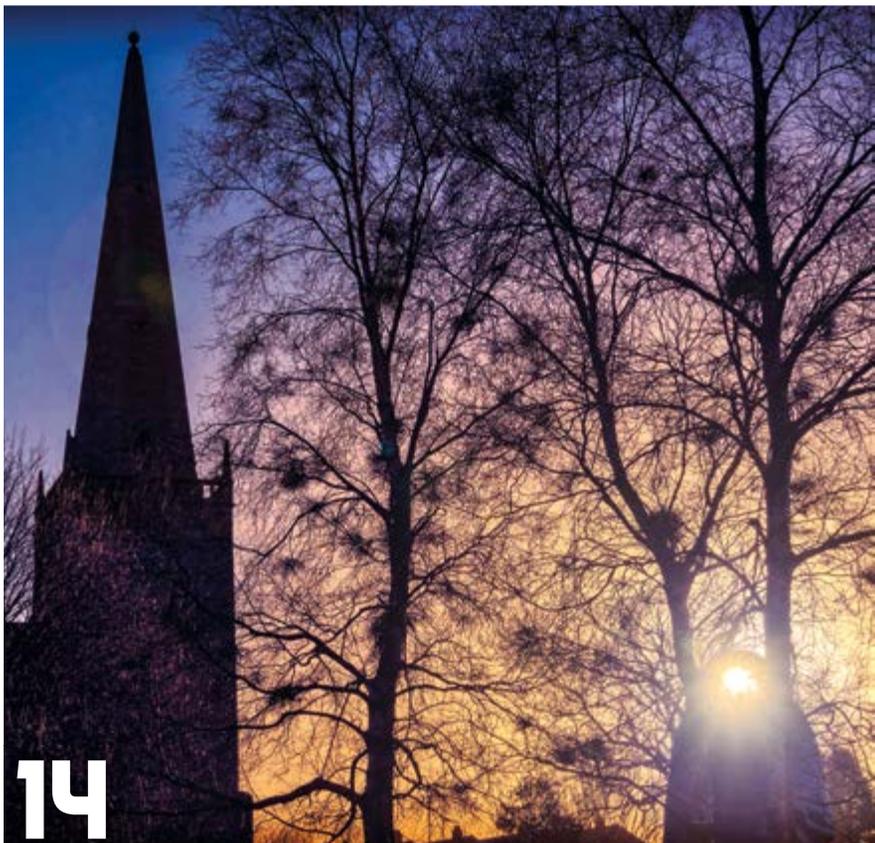
Who is Being Excluded?

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Fr Hugh MacMahon's new book

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# THE SHIMMERING PROMISE OF BETHLEHEM



## THE FAR EAST

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## THE PURPOSE OF THE FAR EAST IS

To promote an awareness of the missionary dimension of the Church among readers; to report on the work of Columban priests, Sisters and lay missionaries; and to seek spiritual and material support for missionaries.

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### Front Cover

Praying and protecting candlelight.  
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In 2013, after twelve years in administrative assignments with the Columbans, I was given the chance to take a sabbatical. I seized the opportunity and chose to do a six-week course at the Tantur Institute south of Jerusalem.

Near Tantur there was a main bus route and along that road were the ruins of an ancient church. One day I stopped to look closely at the ruin that I had spotted from the bus window. I was curious about it because it was the same shape (octagonal) as the last church where I had been pastor, Sts Simon and Jude in Fujisawa, Japan.

I discovered that the site held the remains of a church built in the byzantine period of history (about 1,500 years ago). Its location was also very interesting. If you were travelling from Nazareth, via Jerusalem to Bethlehem as Mary and Joseph did, this would be the spot where you would walk uphill and catch your first glimpse of Bethlehem.

The church was built there on the theory that it would have been a logical place for weary travellers to stop and take a little rest, now that their goal was in sight. Maybe as contemporary Christians, that is where we are in December too. It is a time where we catch a glimpse of Bethlehem and its promise shimmering in the distance.

Like Mary and Joseph, we too are indeed on a journey, a pilgrimage towards heaven. In another sense we are just a short distance from Bethlehem, a short way from Christmas. We can catch a glimpse of it today if we pause and look and drink in the sight, since it is so near.

Our glimpse must include Mary. Mary, as we know, was a young woman to whom an angel appeared to reveal to her God's plan

for her life, chosen by God to be part of the great miracle of God's entering into human history, taking on human flesh. The Son of God would be born to her even though she had never known a man. Thankfully, Mary said 'Yes' to God's plan.

Advent is a time for anticipation, but also a time to remember some important basic truths. Each time the Gospel is preached to us, we are reminded that God has a plan for our lives. He plans for us to know Him. He plans for us to serve Him by serving others, and He plans to forgive our sins.

But God does not force Himself on us. Just as He waited for Mary's yes, God's plan for each of us involves an invitation and our response. Will we accept God's forgiveness? Will we love and follow Jesus?

For many people, Christmas is a joy-filled time with family and friends, but for others (perhaps someone reading this) it can be a difficult time due to illness, or the recent death of a loved one. Some carry with them high expectations of "the perfect Christmas" only to be disappointed when things don't work out as they had hoped and planned.

The problems of this life can sometimes be overwhelming. Yet isn't this the reason Jesus came? At Christmas we celebrate that the sinless Lamb of God came to this earth to offer His life in our place, and for our sinfulness. Pause, sit, take a breath, look up... Bethlehem is near. And may this be a peace-filled Christmas for you. ●

Fr John Burger

Originally from the Philadelphia area, Fr John Burger was ordained in 1973 and spent many years on mission in Japan and Hong Kong. He was regional director in the US until 2021.

01. Bethlehem at night. Image: Shutterstock.

*Wishing all our subscribers, readers and supporters  
a very happy and peaceful Christmas and every blessing for 2022!*



# “BOMBED BUT NEVER BROKEN”

Deep in the industrial heartland of northern England, Fr John Boles encountered a parish with a remarkable tale to tell.

“Every picture tells a story,” the expression goes. However, it could just as well read, “Every parish tells a story.” That is certainly the case with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Birkenhead, a town set on the opposite side of the River Mersey to its more famous neighbour, Liverpool.

Visiting the parish as part of the fundraising and mission promotion programme for the Columban Fathers, I was captivated by the story of the place, recounted in detail by secretary Carol Covers and former parish priest, Fr Phil McGovern.

Originally a sleepy riverside harbourage, Birkenhead exploded into prominence in the nineteenth century with the Industrial Revolution. It quickly developed into a major port and one of the world's biggest shipbuilding centres. Many of the workers were Irish Catholics, their homeland a short hop across the Irish Sea.

The Irish population here swelled as a result of the Great Irish Famine of 1845-48, and in 1854 the parish of Our Lady was founded to serve them. The church dates from that time and is an exuberant celebration of the ‘neo-Gothic revival’. It was designed by Edward Pugin of the famous Pugin church-building dynasty, who pioneered that style.

The church was surrounded by endless rows of terraced housing, hemmed in between Camell Laird’s naval dockyard and Birkenhead Park. The park was laid out by Joseph Paxton in 1847 and is reputedly the first municipal park in the world - certainly in Britain. Among its admirers was eminent American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who used it as an inspiration for his Central Park in New York.

However, dark days lay ahead. The area bore the brunt of the Great Depression and was the scene of the notorious three-day “unemployed men’s riot” in 1932. Worse was to follow. In 1941 Birkenhead became a target of the Luftwaffe’s blitz campaign. On 12<sup>th</sup> March 1941 the parish took a direct hit. The church was badly damaged and the presbytery was completely destroyed, leaving the parish priest and housekeeper dead under the rubble.

Rising from the ashes of war, the parish complex re-opened in a spectacular show of devotion ten years later, with a torchlight procession of 30,000 of the faithful parading through the streets amidst an estimated 135,000 onlookers.



01

Recent history has brought more changes. The size of the congregation has fallen markedly. Many people moved away from the area in the 1970s as swathes of old housing was demolished and unemployment reared its head once more, the result of declining activities in the port and shipyards.

However, now merged with two nearby parishes, things are looking up again. The parish community might be smaller than hitherto, but in spite of that - or maybe because of that - it is ever more intimate and vibrant, and remains a great friend of the Columbans. Carol and Fr Phil assured me that Our Lady's has endured worse, and always bounces back. "Bombed, not broken," indeed. ●

Fr John Boles is a Columban missionary from England who worked in Peru from 1994 until earlier this year. He is the newly appointed Director of the Region of Britain.

01. Columban missionary Fr John Boles and former parish priest Fr Phil McGovern outside the neo gothic Pugin facade of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Birkenhead.
02. Firemen fighting a blaze on a bombed street in London after a Luftwaffe night raid in 1941 during the blitz. Image: Shutterstock
03. Fr John Boles meeting parishioners before Mass.

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