

far east



MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES



COLUMBAN VOCATION

From Real Estate
to Missionary
Priesthood

CELEBRATING CHANGEMAKERS

Columban Schools
Competition Winners

SYNODALITY: PARTICIPATION

Making Space
for
Grace

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THREE IMPORTANT HALLMARKS

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

Royal Poinciana flowers, more commonly known as the Flame Tree, photographed in Hong Kong by Columban missionary Fr Alvaro Martinez.

Although all Columbans may not agree with me, I think our life as Columbans has three important hallmarks.

Community

The first of these is our community life; despite living quite separately, we are a brotherhood. Many of us have lived alone in isolated places for years; the simple fact is that mission sometimes demands it. On the other hand, we Columbans are sometimes referred to as a 'family'. Although a few of us are in fact related to each other in the normal way as brothers or cousins, and some have had sisters who are Columban Sisters, most of us are not held together by a family connection. Many of our relatives have been generous benefactors over the years, supporting Columban mission, not only by giving a son or a brother, but also by backing us financially and in numerous other ways. To say we are a family does say something about the way we live our lives and about the quality of our community life.

Though I have been in a position to meet nearly all Columbans, there may have been a few I have not met face to face. But for every one of them, there are others that I have met on multiple occasions in multiple places. All this meeting and meeting again means we build up a shared history with each other. To know and be known, to accept others and be accepted by them, to respect others' contributions and be respected for what you have accomplished, is all part of the Columban community experience. A shared history means shared stories, some of them funny, some sad, some understated, some exaggerated.

Spirituality

A life of prayer should both sustain and challenge. Columbans follow a variety of spiritual practices and a variety of spiritualities. The first generation of Columbans decided that fairly early in our seminary career we would all do a form of the 'Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius', the Jesuit 30-day retreat. It continues to be an important part of our training. I think the key to the exercises is listening. Certainly, being on mission in a foreign land provides many opportunities for discerning the will of God, not only by listening to the Word of God in the scriptures, but also as revealed in the circumstances of our lives and the lives of the people among whom we are working.

Walking with the Poor

The third hallmark is a commitment to making the struggles of the poor our struggle. Readers of the **Far East** know this commitment takes many forms in many places. Our work in Pakistan, for example, is with some extremely poor tribal people. Even prosperous 'developed' countries like Japan and Korea were poor and struggling from the destruction of war when we first went there and continue to have pockets of poverty today. In Latin America, the Columbans gravitated to the poor areas on the periphery of the great cities of Lima and Santiago and have remained there year in and year out.

These three hallmarks remind us who we are, what we are about and, I hope, where we are going. ●

Fr John Burger

01. Columban missionaries Deacon Elbert Balbastro (centre) and Fr Tomás King (right) with Franciscan Fr Pervaiz (left) and parishioners in the parish of Khipro, Sindh Province in southeastern Pakistan. Photo: Fr Pat Raleigh

Fr John Burger is originally from the Philadelphia area. Ordained in 1973, he spent many years in Japan and Hong Kong and was Regional Director of the Columbans in the US until 2021.





THE WHEEL IS TURNING

Marking 70 years of Columban mission in Fiji, Fr Frank Hoare underlines how young Pacifican Columbans, who are now taking up the missionary flame, can be proud of their missionary inheritance and training.

Western foreign missionaries, beginning with the Marist Fathers, have nourished the Catholic faith in Fiji since 1844. This era is almost finished. There are no Columban seminarians in the US, Australia, Britain and Ireland now.

But we are blessed that the young Church of Fiji, where Columbans have worked for decades, is now a mission-sending Church. Although there are only about 80,000 Catholics in Fiji, there are now nine Pacifican Columban priests, eight seminarians and five lay missionaries on mission in different parts of the world. Those who were the subjects of mission are now the missionaries. The wheel of time is turning full circle.

But before the sands of time obliterate the footsteps of those who went before, it is appropriate to remember the pioneers and those who followed, and celebrate the legacy they left. Theirs is a legacy of diverse mission service and a tradition of relating closely with the people to whom they are sent.

The first group of 13 Columbans who arrived in 1952 were faced with different challenges - climate, geography, underdevelopment, poverty and a still colonised multicultural country. They immersed themselves in the lives of the people, learning Fijian and Hindi at a time when there were no language schools, and adjusting to the style and rhythm of the cultures and the people. This was a key that facilitated their efforts in the various ministries they were given or took on as the need arose.

The Columbans were very impressed by the indigenous Fijian people - their friendliness, ready smile, fine physique and noble appearance, hospitality, politeness, care for guests, their communal life and willingness to take life as it came. Fijian ceremonial and the solemn silence that accompanied it were impressive. Imposing, too, was the Fijian *bure* (house) with massive posts and beams lashed together with strong twine made from coconut hair.

A few of them remarked on the sure-footedness of the local horses which they rode from village to village over mountain passes and slippery mud and rock.

The young missionaries marvelled at the multi-racial congregations in the towns. They were not put off by buses without windows, the dusty bus journeys and the relaxed approach to time. They were surprised at what an essential piece of equipment for school children the cane knife was - for cutting grass, chopping briars and branches and even peeling fingernails.

The Columbans enjoyed the Fijian feasts at Christmas, Easter and communal celebrations, with the mounds of food cooked in earth ovens followed by *meke* (dance) performances. The young missionaries themselves liked to challenge each other to climb a coconut tree or have a horse race on arrival at a village. They also got great fun out of organising a sports day, with small prizes for winners in the villages.

Columban missionary work in Fiji has developed and changed over the years since 1952. The early Columbans established new parishes and schools. They opened and taught in a secondary school. Later they became involved in the education of teachers, catechists, and seminarians for Pacific dioceses.

From early on they were concerned with the evangelisation of non-Christians in Fiji. After the Vatican Council they saw the need to work for justice, peace and safeguarding the environment. Fiji suffered four military coups and Columban missionaries responded to them by working for

reconciliation through intercultural and interfaith dialogue. They encouraged diocesan seminarians and religious to be partners in this work for peace.

The Columbans also empowered the laity to be active Christians in small communities by listening to the Word of God, sharing faith and engaging in works of mercy. In recent decades they invited local young men to join the Society as missionary priests. They also welcomed young lay people to join them for some years on overseas mission.

Young Pacifican Columbans who now take up the missionary flame can be proud of the missionary inheritance and training they have received. They are aware of the Columban tradition - learning language, respecting cultures, making friends with the people to whom they are sent and working with them for the Reign of God by resisting all kinds of oppression. The Pacifican Columbans will add to this tradition the richness of their own gifts as the wheel of time moves on. ●



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Fr Frank Hoare is a Regional Council member and Student Formation educator in Fiji where he has been working since 1973. He wrote a history of the Columban Fathers in Fiji covering the period 1952 until 2017. It is titled, 'The Turning Wheel'.

01. Archbishop Victor Foley with the first Columban group in Fiji in 1952. On 22nd February that year, Frs Denis Fitzpatrick, Michael Cryan, Martin Dobby, John Doyle, Kevin Fleming, James Gavigan, Gerry Hurley, Patrick J. Kelly, Seamus O'Connor, John J O'Loughlin and Arthur Tierney arrived in Suva. Frs Charles O'Mahony and Fr Rod Hoult had come from Australia and New Zealand a few weeks earlier.

02. Fijian house or *bure*. Image: Fr Frank Hoare

03. Men in formation with the Columbans in Fiji. In 1984, the region of Fiji established its own local formation programme which was greatly helped by the proximity of the Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva. Fr Frank Hoare is on the left. Image: Fr Frank Hoare.

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