

# far east



MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES

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is changing

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**THE FAR EAST**

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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**

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**G**reetings to all our **Far East** readers and Columban supporters as we begin our journey through another year.

Journeying is a topic that has been on my mind of late. We recently passed the half-way mark of the Church's Synodal process, that great consultation exercise launched by Pope Francis in October, 2021, which will see a major Vatican assembly at the end of this year.

The term synodal simply means 'walking together'. The Pope invites all members of the Church to journey together and, on the way, to talk and listen to one another so as to plan the route ahead. The catch is, it is the Holy Spirit that is leading this journey, and may lead us in directions we are not expecting! But, if it turns out like that, we will be in good company.

Take the example of our patron, Saint Columban. Some 14 centuries ago this monk left Ireland with the conviction that his mission was to the people of Burgundy, in the east of modern-day France. So it was for many years, until there was a change of ruler in the land and Columban suddenly found himself ejected from the kingdom.

At the time it must have seemed like a disaster, but in fact the Spirit was at work in this, showing Columban that he was to take up the journey once again and

evangelise other areas at the centre of Europe, including parts of what are today Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Italy.

In March I will be meeting with the other local superiors and our Columban Superior General to begin the task of seeing what path God wants the Columban Missionaries to follow in the coming years. What will our future journey look like?

I look back on my journeys undertaken over the last twelve months as part of our Mission Awareness and Fundraising Team here in Britain. It has taken me to Catholic heartlands such as Cardiff, Glasgow, Liverpool and the East End of London, and also to places further afield, such as the gorgeous Orkneys and the Isle of Man. Everywhere I have been amazed and humbled by the kindness of the people I have met along the way. People like you.

Next year the same path will take me to Plymouth, East Anglia, Leeds and who knows where else. But God knows. After all, He is our true "companion on the journey". May he accompany and bless you on your journey in 2023 and, wheresoever it might lead, may it be a very happy one. Happy New Year! ●

**Fr John Boles**

Fr John Boles is regional director of the Columbans in Britain.







# DANCE OF

Columban missionaries are working to foster peace and goodwill between different faiths in the midst of Myanmar's strife. Fr Kurt Zion Pala likens dialogue to a dance in which there is unity but also diversity.

Through dance, we can come together with our different identities but still have a conversation. When we run out of words, we can speak through our bodies. Manau dance is a dance of diversity and unity. The Kachin peoples, composed of seven different groups, perform the Manau dance for different purposes including celebrating victory in war or mourning a death. Taking its inspiration from the circular movements of animals, legend has it that man learned how to dance from the birds, animals and insects.

Last August, 32 young people from five major religions (16 Christians, 5 Muslims, 5 Hindus, 4 Sikhs, and 2 Buddhists) in Myanmar participated in the first Interfaith Youth Camp facilitated by the Catholic Student Action Myitkyina (CSAM). The camp was held at the beautiful Nawng Nang Centre in Kachin State. On the last night of our interfaith camp, the young people ended the programme with the Manau dance led by Kachin Christian youths.

Myanmar is host to the longest ongoing civil war in the world - more than sixty years. Over 135 recognised ethnic groups call Myanmar home, and cultural differences and identities play a significant role in this protracted conflict. Cultural or tribal groups

are attached to a particular religion or spiritual practice which makes religion an important aspect of their ongoing struggle.

The diversity of the people is also a reflection of the diversity in Myanmar's natural treasure - its flora and fauna. But these ongoing internal conflicts have intensified the destruction of the country's natural environment. Against this reality, the Interfaith Youth Camp was organised under the theme 'Let there be Peace on Earth. Let it begin with Me.'

The camp provided inputs for participants not only on interreligious dialogue but also on mental health. Many young people are suffering from some form of mental health challenge. Experts provided simple and practical suggestions on managing stress and self-care. They also cleared up many of the myths about mental health.

The interreligious dialogue session helped the participants understand the definition of true dialogue, and the values and different ways of doing dialogue. The camp allowed participants to share about their own religion through a 15-minute presentation and to bring along some items or symbols of their religion.

On the last night during the Cultural Show, each group gave a demonstration





“ We came together from different backgrounds. We were together to form friendships and learn about other faiths over three days. During the camp, we were able to learn about each other and understand each other. I believe that this Interfaith Youth Camp was helpful for all of us because all participants had a chance to understand and respect one another. This camp helped me realise that we are living under the same sun and we are interconnected and interdependent even though we have multiple faiths. This kind of youth camp is important for Myanmar, my country, because we need urgently to understand each other.”

**Ashin Nandasara**, a Buddhist Burmese monk and speaker at the Interfaith Youth Camp.



# DIALOGUE

of their cultural dances and songs. These included Indian-inspired dances, Lisu tribal dance, Burmese songs, and the Kachin Manau dance.

There was also a cultural food exchange with each group preparing and sharing their traditional food with everyone. The Muslims prepared *samai*, a dish of sweet fine vermicelli noodles mixed with warm milk. The Sikhs brought *barfi* or *burfi*, a basic fudge made using full fat milk, sugar and ghee. The Gurkhas, mostly Hindus, also brought with them different kinds of Indian sweets. The Kachin/Lisu Christians prepared traditional *jap htu* with pounded ginger, chillies, dried fish and other spices. They also prepared a traditional rice wine called *tsa pi*. As they presented their different dishes, they also explained the meaning and significance of each dish.

Every morning we also learned different meditation traditions like the Buddhist and Indian Yoga meditation. Meditating or praying together is also a form of dialogue.

The original plan for the camp included a pilgrimage to the different places of worship - Muslim mosque, Hindu *mandir*, Sikh *gurdwara*, Buddhist temple-monastery and Christian churches. But the political situation in the country made it dangerous

and difficult to facilitate. So the participants were only able to visit a Buddhist temple-monastery, which is quite near the camp venue.

At the Buddhist monastery, the participants met the head monk and his novices. The monk spoke to the participants encouraging them. Then the participants and the Buddhist monks planted some trees. The camp also introduced the participants to the Golden Rule and the Review of Life method (See-Judge-Act). Participants were taught to use the method to look at their present situation. They identified climate change-related issues like drought, damaged farmland, gold mining and other environmental disasters.

The participants asserted that it is wrong to only look at the economic benefits the natural environment brings and not at its innate value. Greed for profit spurred many companies to come to Myanmar, intent on exploiting its natural resources. People throw their waste anywhere and everywhere.

Through the cultural night and the food exchange we have learned to share faith, food and friendship. These three Fs for me are practical ways to do dialogue. The camp ended with each group providing a demonstration of their traditional dance. ●

Fr Kurt Zion Pala was ordained in his native Iligan City, Mindanao on 21 November 2015. After ordination he was involved in vocation work, mission promotion and fundraising before he went to Myanmar in 2017.

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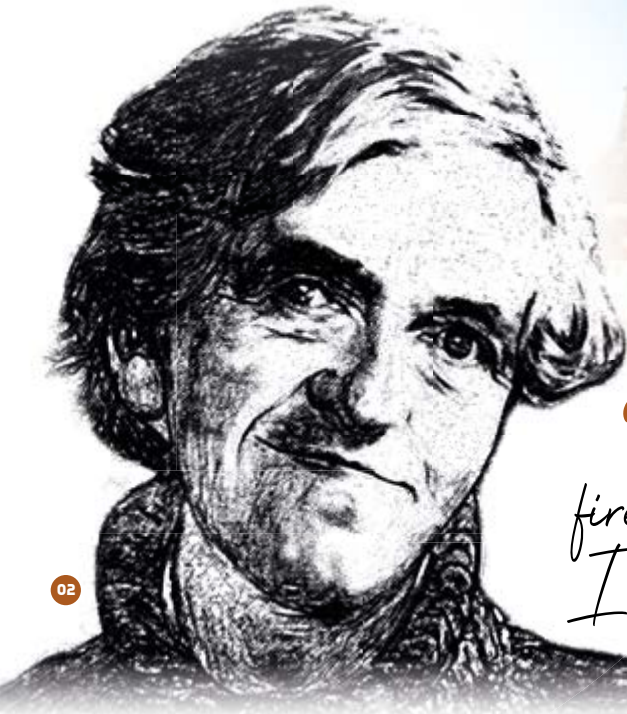
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# ORKNEY

## THE POET AND THE SAINT



*"In the  
fire of images,  
I put my hand."*



On a visit to the Orkney Islands, Fr John Boles learned about the conversion to Catholicism of George Mackay Brown - 'The Poet of Orkney' - and the inspiration the writer drew from the Islands' patron, St Magnus.

These are the words inscribed on a plaque in Edinburgh's Royal Mile. They come from the pen of George Mackay Brown (1921-96), regarded by many as Scotland's greatest writer of the twentieth century. Honoured by various universities, awarded the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth in 1974, shortlisted for the Booker Prize for 'Beside the Ocean of Time' in 1994, he became known internationally as 'The Poet of Orkney'.

What few people realise is that he achieved nearly all this while living as a reclusive semi-invalid within the confines of the tiny Orcadian port of Stromness. Even fewer are aware that in 1961 he created a stir in the staunchly Calvinist islands by becoming a Catholic - and that this conversion drew inspiration from another son of Orkney, the Viking earl known to history as St Magnus the Martyr.

While visiting Columban supporters on Orkney, local parishioners shared their recollections of George Mackay

Brown. They remember a quiet, humble, unassuming member of the Catholic community. Columban benefactor Chris Taylor knew him well. "We never thought of him as this world-famous writer. For us he was just, well, George."

Mackay Brown was born in a tiny cottage on a wharf in Stromness, the youngest of six children. His father became the village postman, his mother was a native Gaelic speaker. At an early age George contracted TB, a condition that was to leave him weakened for the rest of his life. Registered as unfit for wartime military service, he took up journalism with a local newspaper and almost immediately discovered he had a flair for writing. Scattered verses gradually merged into books of poems. By the 1960s he was celebrated as a poet of international stature, at which point he embarked on a similarly successful career as a novelist.

Always his inspiration was Orkney - its stark and windswept scenery, its millennial history, its people, legends and folklore. However, it should also be mentioned that along the way George developed an affinity for the pint as well as the pen. "Stromness voted itself 'wet' in 1947", George wrote. "Thus, I made another joyous discovery: beer". Wikipedia's biographer observes laconically that George's subsequent conversion to Catholicism, "was not marked by any change in his daily habits, including his drinking."





He had been contemplating entering the Catholic faith for some years. Parishioner Alison Gray writes how, "his surrender to Catholicism was... resonant in the wild beauty of Orkney," and in its history, central to which was the figure of Magnus. "St Magnus was a defining influence on Mackay Brown. His life was framed by St Magnus."

Magnus Ellendson (1080-1117) was of Viking stock. This warlike people had settled in Orkney around the year 850. He was a Christian nobleman respected for his piety and gentleness. In 1105, the King of Norway appointed him Earl of Orkney alongside his cousin Haakon. After a while, conflict broke out between the two cousins. Anxious to avoid further bloodshed, Magnus agreed to join Haakon at a peace conference on a neutral island. However, the invitation was a trap and Haakon had him killed. Almost immediately, Magnus was revered as a saint and martyr. His remains were transferred to Orkney's main town of Kirkwall and placed in the magnificent cathedral begun in 1137 and which bears his name.

In 1973 George Mackay Brown published 'Magnus', which some consider to be his masterwork. Into the novel he weaves a traditional belief that Magnus was warned of Haakon's treachery the night before and urged to flee. Searching for divine guidance, Magnus goes to Mass and realises that Jesus could also have fled Jerusalem on Maundy Thursday night

and saved himself, but didn't, because if there had been no Cross there would have been no resurrection, no triumph of life over death. So, like Jesus, Magnus stays. Like Jesus, Magnus even forgives his executioners before they despatch him.

For Mackay Brown, St Magnus embodies the Jesus story. He might also have identified, in the trials of Magnus, struggles with his own 'demons', such as ill-health, alcohol and periods of depression. At any rate, God appears to have blessed the connection between the two men.

When George died in 1996 his funeral was celebrated by Catholics and Protestants alike in the Cathedral of St Magnus. Not only that - but George died on 13<sup>th</sup> April and so the requiem was fixed for 16<sup>th</sup> April - the Feast of St Magnus the Martyr! ●

Fr John Boles is Regional Director of the Columban Missionaries in Britain.

01. The 12<sup>th</sup> Century Cathedral of St Magnus, which contains the Saint's remains. Poet George Mackay Brown's funeral was celebrated here on the Feast of St Magnus in 1996. Image: Shutterstock.
02. George Mackay Brown immersed himself in Orkney's history. Image: Adapted from a portrait by Fred Schley
03. Mackay Brown found inspiration in Orkney's history and dramatic landscapes: St John's Head on Hoy is the UK's highest cliff-face. The famous neolithic Stones of Stenness are over 5,000 years old.
04. Clouston's Pier in Stromness. Mackay Brown was born here in 1921 and the harbour is central to much of Mackay Brown's work.

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# ECOLOGY MINISTRY IN UYONG

Sr Cristita de Leon writes about working with young mothers in the Philippines and helping them discover the interconnectedness of all of God's creation.

Six years ago, Sr Gloria Santos, in collaboration with Lay Associates of the Columbans Sisters, established a small ecology centre in Uyong, Labrador, in the Philippines province of Pangasinan. She had two important goals; firstly to help alleviate the living conditions of the families there and secondly to increase awareness within the community of its environmental problems.

During the second year of the Covid pandemic, I got to know some of the families in the area as I had time to immerse myself in the locality and appreciate nature all around me. The landscape is incredible with the sea on one side and the farms leading up to the mountain on the other.

However, a closer look identified a range of problems. The water in the streams seemed to have changed colour, the creeks were clogged with rubbish, and heavy rains pushed this rubbish downstream to the bigger streams which in turn led to the sea. Along the beach, dead fish were left rotting, along with plastic bottles, and old tangled fishing nets and other rubbish.

On those early mornings when I walked along the shore, I often asked myself how many local people had the chance to pause and consider the root causes of the destruction and exploitation of nature around them. Their daily struggle and toil for survival meant most hardly had the chance to stop, look and see that their environment was filling up with filth. Their

lack of awareness was symptomatic of the daily thoughtlessness which resulted in the destruction and exploitation of the rich gifts of the environment.

Finding concrete steps to animate others, specifically a small group of mothers, and getting them engaged in caring for Mother Earth, was a challenge. But gradually we began to work together as a group despite the restrictions of the pandemic. The pandemic taught me to embrace what life was offering each day and find God in each situation and trust in His providence.

There were many days when no one was selling fish because the fishermen came back to shore with empty nets. Going to the market was also unsafe because of Covid. Together with Beth, a Lay Associate of the Columban Sisters, we visited the Barangay leader to share with him our growing concern around waste management. He was very supportive of the aims of our advocacy group and made a commitment to join us in our clean-up of the beach, the canal and the streams.

We also began to work with the mothers and spend time, reflection and prayer with them. This time of personal soul-searching saw my prayer life, lifestyle, decisions and commitments challenged by all that I was experiencing in this small community. I felt I had to go through a personal conversion before I could really invite and animate others to care for Mother Earth.

Working with the mothers, we introduced





the farmers, fishermen, factory workers, vendors, those who transported crops and goods from remote farms to towns and cities. And as we shared the food, we were nourished not only physically - but we also sensed God's grace flowing into each of us and we hoped that this grace would flow out to others.

And when the mothers returned home, they carried with them the desire to continue to find answers to their many questions - how do we now understand the meaning of our interconnectedness with all

of God's creation? How can we pass on to our children what each of us became aware of? How can we encourage our family members to begin to look around and see our connection with God's creation? In what concrete ways can we take care of God's gift of life, shared by all of us? How can we develop mindfulness as we continue to receive God's grace in and through creation? ●

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Columban missionary Sr Cristita de Leon has worked in the Philippines and Peru and is currently on mission in Myanmar where she continues to be involved in ecology ministry.


02 them to mindfulness while working and eating meals. At times we invited them to do each task in silence, allowing themselves to be aware of every detail of what they were doing, fetching water from the pump, cleaning and washing fish and vegetables, gathering firewood for cooking etc. We tried to guide them to think of the origin of every object they were holding - where did this come from? Who made it? How important is it in your daily life? How long did it take nature to take care and produce all these through the sustaining grace of our Creator?

When we were ready to partake of the food that we had cooked, we invited them to think and recall the many hands that laboured before the food reached us -

01. The beauty of Uyong in the Philippines province of Pangasinan.
02. Columban missionary Sr Cristita de Leon caring for the earth.
03. A group of mothers practising mindfulness.
04. Collecting rubbish dumped on the local beach.

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Fr Patrick McMullan considers why Pope Francis is promoting synodality and highlights the dramatic shift in the global Catholic population thanks to missionary activity over the past 100 years.

The Catholic Church has, over the last 100 years, undergone a complex shift in its population distribution, and consequently its institutional identity and place in the world. This shift, largely driven by the institution's response to mission and its understanding of Jesus' command to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19), has created a Church which is not only young, culturally diverse, and dynamic, but also far from the traditional centres of imperial power and finance.

These complex and dramatic population shifts are one important key to understanding Pope Francis' call to synodality, a process which is both as old as the Tradition (Acts 3, 10, 15) and as new as the ecclesial reality of our day. Indeed, understanding these shifts will help, as Pope Francis warned in October 2021, "keep us from becoming a 'museum church,' beautiful but mute, with much past and little future."

In percentage terms, the global Catholic population has, over the last 100 years, remained at about 17% (about 1 in every six) of the world's population. These numbers easily support the claim that the Church is the single oldest and largest institution in the world. A reality which Peter and his companions could not possibly have imagined when they first tentatively walked

## A DIFFEREN

down the stairs on that first Pentecost Sunday. (Acts 2)

Nevertheless, behind these percentages lies a remarkable phenomenon: namely, the dramatic shift in the geographical distribution of the Catholic population: waning in Europe but exploding throughout sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. For example, according to an article by BBC News in 2011, the Philippines is now the third largest national Catholic population in the world and there are more Christians (Catholic and Protestant) attending church on Sunday in China than in the whole of Europe.

In 1910, 65% of all Catholics lived in Europe. Currently, Europeans account for less than 24% of believers worldwide. Today, nearly 70% of Catholics live in what is often called the Global South and of those, approximately 60% live on two continents south of the equator. Sub-Saharan Africa now has the world's third largest Catholic population (21%), after Central and Latin America (39%) and Europe (24%). In contrast, the geographically vast, ethnically and linguistically diverse region of Oceania represents less than 1% of the global Catholic population.





Images: Shutterstock

# T CHURCH

Many commentators rightly draw attention to the dramatic increase in Korean Catholics, but the African story is even more impressive. By some estimates, the number of believers in sub-Saharan Africa has grown by 6,000% in the last 100 years. In the year 2018-2019, for example, the number of Catholics in Africa increased by 8.3 million people. Currently, more than 170 million, about one-in-five or 21% of sub-Saharan Africans are Catholic - a figure which is projected to double by 2050 according to an article by Tia Ghose published by **LiveScience** in May 2022.

An interesting footnote, the Democratic Republic of Congo, with an estimated 31 million believers (47.3% of its total population) edges out Pope Francis' home country, Argentina, in being the 10<sup>th</sup> largest Catholic population in the world.

In launching the Synod process, Pope Francis emphasised that "there is no need to create another church, but to create a different church." (10th October 2021) Indeed, that different church is already reflected in the population shifts which have emerged because of missionary activity over the last 100 years. Contrary to the pessimism of secularity and generally outside the vision

of the traditional hierarchical structure, which tends to be fixated with issues surfacing in the traditional centre (Europe and latterly, North America), our Church, as an organisation, is not only very big but vibrant, culturally diverse, and successful as well.

Just imagine, for example, if bishops' conferences around the world were actively leading their flocks to live and act in solidarity with their brothers and sisters living on small Pacific Islands who are increasingly vulnerable to an unrelenting rise in sea levels.

It is no accident that the first pope from the Southern Hemisphere holds different agendas from some of his predecessors. Francis invites the Church to listen to, not lecture, those on the periphery and reach out to the poor and marginalised. Francis calls this listening the "art of encounter", a process ultimately guided by the Holy Spirit. In its original Greek, the word, synod, means "walking together". Savouring the vibrant diversity of the people of God is a crucial part of that encounter. Knowing who we are walking beside is an important part of renewing our ecclesial vision and sense of mission. ●

*This article is a modified translation of an article was first published in the Korean edition of Columban Mission (September 2022).*

Fr Patrick (Pat) McMullan is from Oamaru, New Zealand. He was ordained in December 1987 and went to Korea in 1988, where he has worked with the urban poor, farmers, people with special needs and in justice and peace work.



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# WOULD YOU DO IT AGAIN?



02

Many of us make a resolution to be more grateful at the start of a new year. Fr Frank Hoare considers his decision to become a Columban missionary and, with gratitude, concludes he wouldn't have chosen any other life.

I was standing by the bed of a Hindu ascetic dying of cancer in a monastery in North India. He shared with me the call he heard from God to leave behind his university degree, a girl his parents had chosen to be his bride, and even the monastery he had joined. He felt called to search for God in meditation in a small hut in the high Himalayas where the Ganges River rises.

During the 20 years he lived in Gangotri he and a half dozen hermits scattered throughout the snow-filled valley were completely cut off from the rest of the world for six months of each year. "If you were 21 years old again, would you still choose that life," I asked. "Yes, I would," he replied, "I'm mature in this life now. I am saturated in spirituality. There would be no other way I could live."

Recalling this, I remember as a 17-year-old student trying to decide what to do with my life. I wanted to do something so that, when old and preparing to die, I could feel that my life had been worthwhile - of service to God and to people. Pictures of

African babies on a collection box in a local shop touched me. Money was needed to send missionaries to baptise the children so they could reach heaven. The theology was pre-Vatican II, but my concern was genuine. Later I heard of the millions of Catholics in Latin America who, because of a shortage of priests, could only receive the sacraments once a year. So I thought of joining the Columban missionaries.

But celibacy raised a red flag. It hit me one day at a football game as I noticed a young lady nestling in the arms of her boyfriend in front of me. Would I be lonely for life? Could I live without a wife and family, without a home of my own? Would my life be deprived of warm intimacy with people because of the role, the uniform and the exile from homeland?

I obsessed over the decision for some weeks. Then one evening at dusk, having despaired of thinking through the conflicting ideas, I sat limp at the back of my parish church. The red light in front of the Blessed Sacrament seemed to reach me in the darkening church. I discovered an unexpected peace envelope me. Yes, I would give it a go.

Years later I met Fr Philip Manthara, an Indian Jesuit priest, who was totally committed to justice for the impoverished Dalit (or outcast) people in North India. He was out most nights at meetings helping them to analyse their problems and to overcome the injustices they endured. I asked him if he missed not being married

01. Columban missionary, Fr Frank Hoare.

02. A young Fr Frank Hoare singing with Indo-Fijian parishioners.

03. A Fijian Ceremony of Welcome.



and having a family. "I couldn't ask any woman to put up with my way of living," he said. I was surprised to hear myself say, "I feel the same."

Of course, if we are generous with God, God is more generous with us. "Then Peter spoke up, 'Look,' he said, 'we have left everything and followed you. What will we have?' Jesus said to them, '...And everyone who has left houses, or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake, will receive a hundred times more and will be given eternal life.'" I have experienced the truth of Jesus' promise in many fulfilling relationships with people in Fiji. They have enriched me greatly.

Life is a journey in search of God and of our true selves. Missionaries leave home to share the love of God in Jesus Christ. In meeting the other I come to know myself and I get a glimpse of the Other. Love is experienced in both the giving and the receiving. Human love points to the greater love of God to which we are privileged to witness.

In the pluralistic world of today, most of us have the opportunity to journey with


others who have different rays of the divine truth. Moreover, supporting missionaries in any way makes us part of the missionary outreach of God, the Church and Columbans. We share in its graces.


I remember administering the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick to an old Fijian man. He sat up in his bed then and announced, "Father, I have done my duty to the community, to the government and to the Church." He was looking back on a life in which he had been faithful to his responsibilities.

I hope I can say at the end, "I have done what I could. There is no other way I could live." ●

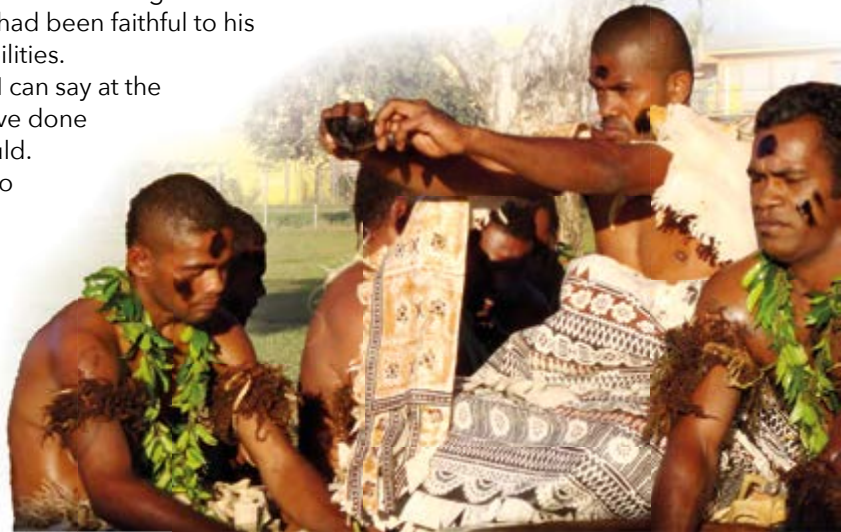
Fr Frank Hoare is from Ireland. He recently finished his term as a regional council member in Oceania. He has been on mission in Fiji since 1973.

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03



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# MY FRIEND YANAGIHARA SHIZUO



Fr Joe Brooder pays tribute to a former member of his parish community, who through his disabilities taught those he came in contact with that he was God's work and God's glory revealed.

**H**is mother was a zealous Catholic and had him baptised before he could walk, which he never did. She called him Michael, but he was no archangel but he became a voluntary seeker. He lived to be 87 and I had the honour of saying his funeral Mass recently. Shortly after he entered this world, his father departed for the other, so the hard-pressed mother had no option but to place him in an Institution for severely handicapped people. You see, he was an almost 'perfect' handicapped person from the day he was born.

He could never walk. One hand had a working power of about one percent. The other hand was totally inactive. He could not feed himself, clothe himself, wash himself or go to the toilet by himself. He could speak a few words but it was almost impossible to understand what he was saying. He could see, he could hear, and he could charm. He was truly blessed.

As a youngster in the institution, he was often very angry with God for giving him his broken body. He wanted to kick football or chase after girls, but no such blessings came his way. The future looked bleak. One day he picked up the Bible and began reading John, Chapter

nine. "As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to be born blind?" "Neither he nor his parents sinned," Jesus answered, "he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

This was like a bolt of light shot down from Heaven upon his dark soul. His eyes of faith were opened. God had spoken to him. "It is ok to be born handicapped even as handicapped as you are. I am going to reveal my glory through you". He was filled with hope and saw a new future open up before him like Moses saw when standing before the daunting Red Sea or like St Patrick running into God while herding sheep on an Irish mountain top.

Against all advice, he decided to depart the Institution and settle in an apartment in the nearby city of Kumamoto where many Columbans worked. He chose to move in the Springtime, just as the University of Kumamoto was opening up for a new semester. Each day he sat outside the main entrance in his wheelchair, passing out leaflets which he had painfully managed to print up with his 'good' hand.



The message was simple. "I am totally handicapped. Can you help me live like a human?" Many students saw him and rendered their assistance. They became his hands, his feet, his cook, his washing machine, his shopper, his beautician and his daily partners in life. When they graduated, others offered their gifts of time and labour. These were all non-Christians. They had no contact with the Church until then. Part of their duty was to take Michael to Sunday Mass in his motorised wheelchair.

That is where I first met him. We became instant friends. With one or two student helpers, he would drive to the bottom step of the church. Six steps to the top. I would lift his body out of the wheelchair and the students would carry the heavy wheelchair up the church steps and then I would put him back again into the wheelchair so that he could motor into Mass.

We built a special ramp for him so that he could drive in on his own steam. The cutting of the ribbon ceremony was a day to remember. In the presence of church members and university students he managed to cut the ribbon and majestically entered the church. After Mass I asked him how he felt. "Sad," he muttered. He conveyed how up to this, being lifted up and dumped back into his wheelchair was the delight of his week, but from that day on there would be no such joy. Then he beamed and said, "I am delighted". He chuckled.

So he lived. Always at Mass. He held Rosary prayer meetings in his home. He used to come to me for confession every month. I never knew what he confessed but when the great silence came, I was able to confidently absolve him.

In time we parted as I moved on, but he always remembered me. He even




made the 400-mile journey to my new parish with the aid of a university student. He just landed at my place and chuckled when he saw me. In time, he was able to fully thank God for the gift of being born handicapped. He might never have done an honest day's work in his life, but he became God's work in life, and God revealed his glory through him. The bed of Heaven to him. ●

Fr Joe Brooder is from Woodford, Co Galway. After ordination in 1969, he went to Japan in 1970 where he has served since in parish ministry apart from four years on promotion in Britain between 1995-1999.

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**MAKING YOUR WILL?** **MAKE A DIFFERENCE!**

Please remember the needs of Columban missionaries and their missions.

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Your gift could help some of the most marginalised and neediest.

Missionary Society of St Columban, Widney Manor Road, Knowle, Solihull, West Midlands, B93 9AB.



# FR BERNARD'S VALENTINE

St Valentine's Day will see millions of love letters dispatched around the world. Fr Tim Mulroy recounts the heart-warming tale of one priest's love letters.

“I won't be buying green bananas again!” was Fr Bernard's greeting as I approached his hospital bed. He had phoned me earlier that day, requesting that I come to visit him. After we exchanged a few pleasantries, he informed me that the doctor had told him that he had just a few more days left on this earth, and so he now wanted my help to bring his life to a smooth close.

I was shocked and saddened. Fr Bernard had been not just a colleague, but also a dear friend. Just a few days previously, he had been admitted to hospital with a seemingly minor ailment. However, as the results of various medical tests were analysed, it emerged that he had a critical underlying condition. As I listened to him describe the diagnosis in a matter-of-fact manner, I felt numb with disbelief.

Once Fr Bernard had completed his medical report, he began to outline the various concrete ways in which he needed my assistance. He wanted to go to confession, receive Holy Communion, and be anointed in preparation for his final journey. He asked me to contact members

of his immediate family and inform them about the seriousness of his condition: if possible, he would like them to come for a farewell visit. These and a few other requests concerned matters that many people would wish to attend to as they approach the end of their lives.

Having reassured Fr Bernard that I would promptly attend to his various requests, we sat together in silence for a few moments. Then, he spoke again. “There's one other matter. You will find a package of love letters in the second drawer of the closet in my bedroom, please shred them.” I simply responded, “Sure!” and then we continued sitting together in silence, though I struggled to conceal my surprise and curiosity.

Fr Bernard must have read my expression because a few moments later he started to talk about his early life before he entered the seminary. “Ellen and I had grown up in the same town and fallen in love as teenagers, but she went out east to college, while I moved west. Back in those days, we could only meet each other when we went home for holidays, which was only



a few times a year, such as Christmas and summer. There were no computers or cell phones, so we had to rely on snail mail to keep the flame of love alive. We wrote to each other once or twice a month, and whenever I got a letter from Ellen, I felt like I was walking on air for a week afterwards."

However, during his final year in college, Bernard found a tug of war going on inside himself between his love for Ellen and a mysterious desire to do something extraordinary with his life. He had always valued his faith, but now to his own surprise he discovered a yearning to dedicate his life to God. Then, during the months that followed, he began to wonder if God was calling him to become a missionary priest. By the time his graduation came around, he had made up his mind: he would go home and explain to Ellen his decision to end their relationship and he would apply to enter the Columban seminary. To his surprise - and disappointment - that conversation with Ellen seemed to cause her less pain than it did him!

After completing seminary training, Fr Bernard spent the next forty years on overseas mission. While he had no direct contact with Ellen, he did hear occasional updates about her from family members and neighbours: she seemed to be happily married to Paul, had become a mother, and then a grandmother.

Then, a few years after Fr Bernard retired back home from the missions, he received a phone call out of the blue from Paul who told him that Ellen had died some months previously and asked if he could come to visit him.

After spending some time reminiscing together over coffee about Ellen, Paul said, "I had thought about blackmailing you ...." and then with a cheeky grin handed Fr Bernard a plastic bag. With a mixture of curiosity and trepidation, Fr Bernard opened it to discover several neatly tied packs of his love letters to Ellen from fifty years previously. The envelopes were yellowish, and the ink had faded, but the handwriting was unmistakably his own. For the next several moments he was overcome with a mixture of emotions as memories of Ellen came flooding back. Paul sat in the silence.

Later, Paul explained to Fr Bernard that, after Ellen's death, he found the love letters among her personal belongings and that he "didn't have the heart to throw away something that was so precious to her." He was glad to discover, therefore, that he could return them to their author, Fr Bernard.

Fr Bernard soon came to realise that he too didn't have the heart to destroy those love letters, so he kept them in his bedroom closet. However, some years later, as I sat by his deathbed, I promised him with a tinge of sadness in my heart that I would shred them.

However, Fr Bernard, having just shared with me his love story, was still in a jovial mood. I dared, therefore, to ask him, "And what about those love letters from Ellen that had you walking on air as a college student? Where have you stored them?" Without pausing, and with a smile that stretched from ear to ear, he simply replied, "Within my heart!" ●

Society Leader, Fr Tim Mulroy, is from Meelick, Swinford, Co Mayo. Prior to his appointment to this leadership role in the Columbans he worked on mission in Japan and in El Paso, Texas. He was also Regional Director in the US.

Image: Shutterstock

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## THE LETTER: A MESSAGE FOR OUR EARTH

**Caring for our common home starts with you!**

Pope Francis published his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* in 2015. It encourages us to see how "everything is connected." The way we treat the Earth, our common home, is a reflection of how we treat each other. Caring for each other means caring for the home we share. 'The Letter' is an incredibly moving documentary about Pope Francis' call to action on climate change. His message is even more urgent today.

Produced by Oscar-winning producers Off the Fence (My Octopus Teacher) and the Laudato Si Movement. It was directed by the Emmy and BAFTA-winning documentary film director, Nicolas Brown. The Letter explores indigenous rights, climate migration, and youth leadership in the context of climate action. The highlight of the film is the dialogue the protagonists have with Pope Francis.



# CLERICALISM

## - CURING THE 'DISEASE'

Fr Bernard McDermott examines why clericalism is a problem and who is guilty of it.

As the synodal journey continues, I often get 'feedback' on the state of the Church from lay people, including members of my own family. Their comments sometimes question the lifestyle of priests and why so many continue to wear black clerical shirts and "big white collars".

My experience in the Philippines was that I never wore a clerical collar. I never owned one! The local custom of clerical dress didn't include the wearing of a "big white collar". On formal occasions priests are commonly seen in a white shirt with a small medal cross. White cassocks are worn around the church and take the place of the alb for liturgical use.

Since I have been home, I have been influenced by my missionary experience in the Philippines and generally I don't wear a clerical shirt with collar unless the occasion demands it, for example at a wedding or a funeral or where it seems important to be recognised as a priest out of respect for those hosting such events.

The practice in the UK and Ireland has traditionally been for priests to wear a clerical collar and shirt for most occasions, formal and informal. But for some priests this practice has gradually changed.

I have felt for some years that the image of the priest is in need of reform and that 'clericalism' has been the root of this need for reform. The clerical collar is just one symbol of the clericalism that represents so much of what is wrong with the Catholic priesthood.

What is clericalism? The Association of US Catholic Priests published a paper on clericalism in June 2019. It defines clericalism as "an expectation, leading to abuses of power, that ordained ministers are better than and should be over everyone else among the People of God." If the priesthood is to be reformed, we must tackle the disease of clericalism. It won't be easy.

Clericalism is so deeply ingrained in our structures and way of thinking that we almost can't imagine how things could be otherwise. In his 2018 'Letter to the People of God,' Pope Francis condemned the sins of sexual abuse and the abuse of power in the Church. He linked those sins to clericalism. "To say No to abuse is to say an emphatic No to all forms of clericalism."

There now seems to be a widespread belief that clerics (bishops and priests) are sometimes trained to think that they are set apart from, and set above, everyone else in the Church. That their word is not to be questioned, their behaviour is not to be questioned, their lifestyle is not to be questioned, ruling over the Church as if they were feudal lords in a feudal society, with all the perks that go with 'superiority.'

According to this line of thinking, it is not just clerics who are clerical; the laity often fosters clericalism by always deferring to 'Father' and putting 'Father' on a pedestal, with clericalism being experienced in thousands of words and deeds that add up to a 'culture' or an atmosphere.



We need to ask ourselves is clericalism being shown:

- when we say, "Nothing is too good for "Father"?"
- when the priest says, "This is my parish. My way or the highway"?"
- when young aspiring seminarians wear clerical garb to set themselves apart?
- when parents tell their children, "Never question a priest"?"
- when people say that "priests are 'next to God'"?"
- when bishops prioritise avoiding scandal over protecting victims of abuse by priests?

- when thriving parishes are closed because there is a shortage of priests but where there are deacons and lay people readily available to keep the community going?

Pope Francis sadly has experienced much opposition to his reforms from many bishops and priests who are reluctant to acknowledge that the 'times they are a changing'. Perhaps it is now time to put an end to clericalism and recognise the gifts and talents of the laity, and particularly women, to take our Church forward to a new and brighter future. ●

Fr Bernard McDermott has worked in the Philippines, Taiwan, Australia and the UK as a Columban missionary. He was Regional Director in Britain for 12 years. He lives in the Columban house in Birmingham.

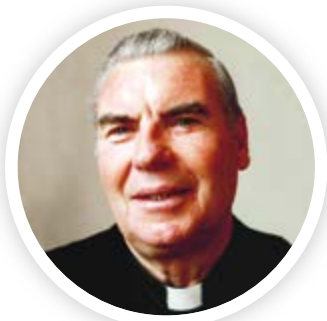
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## OBITUARIES

# REST in PEACE



Fr Sean Francis Corr



Fr Gerald (Gerry) McNicholas

**Fr Sean Francis Corr** was born on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1934 at Lower Aunagher, Coalisland, Co Tyrone. He was educated at Annaghmore PS and St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon. He came to Dalgan in 1952, and after Probation Year and Philosophy studies, he was sent with two others to our seminary in Boston, MA as an exchange student for his first three years of Theology. He was ordained in Dalgan on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1958. Sean was appointed to Japan in 1959 and after language school studies in Tokyo his early appointments were to Kamakura in Yokohama Diocese, Kumamoto and then his first appointment to Sakitsu, both in Fukuoka Diocese. After his first home vacation he returned to Sakitsu. This was a small, isolated island parish, where French missionaries had ministered for many years before the arrival of the Columbans. It seemed to suit Sean's quiet, gentle temperament and he ministered there for twelve further years until 1978. He spent the following twenty years in various parishes in Osaka Diocese, in Imafuku, Wakayama City and Kainan while also serving as District Superior and District Bursar. In 2008, after almost fifty years in Japan, he retired to Ireland and lived in Coalisland where he helped in the local parish until his health began to fail. He took up residence in the Dalgan Retirement Home in January 2020 where he died on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

**Fr Gerald (Gerry) McNicholas** was born on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1941 in Kiltimagh, Co Mayo. He was educated at Craggagh NS, and St Colman's

College, Claremorris, and came to St Columban's, Dalgan Park in 1959. He studied at UCD from 1960 to 1962, completed his studies in theology at Dalgan and was ordained a priest on 21 December 1966. His first appointment was to post-graduate studies in Rome where he studied Church History. In 1971 he was appointed to Fiji where he served as assistant and later parish priest of Samabula Parish. He also taught Church History at the Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva and served some time as Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Suva. In late 1976 he was appointed to the Dalgan staff where he initially taught Church History, served as Vice-Rector and later as Rector. In September 1980 he transferred the initial formation to Maynooth and also taught Church History in Maynooth College. In 1986, Gerry was appointed again to Fiji where he would serve for the following 29 years. During that time he served as Vicar General of the Archdiocese, parish priest of Raiwaqa, and was involved in the Mission to Seafarers, the Fiji Council of Churches, the Archdiocesan Council of Priests, adviser to Columban Lay Missionaries and the Columban First Mission Programme. As his health began to deteriorate, Gerry returned to the Dalgan Nursing Home in June 2015. He died on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2022. Gerry was a dedicated missionary, a talented teacher, and a gentle, pleasant man who served the mission with all his many talents.

May they rest in peace.

**A**s we look back on the past year and begin a new year, it can sometimes be quite a challenge to put into practice the saying of the former UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjöld: "For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be, yes!" The year we are leaving behind has shown us how precarious life can be. So many wars have displaced thousands of people and sent them fleeing in search of safety. The continued destruction of the planet resulted in drought, flooding, famine and untold suffering for those living in the southern hemisphere.

How challenging it is to put into practice what Pope Francis tells us, "We must fan the flame of hope that has been given us and help everyone to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart and a far-sighted vision."

For the last several months, our trees have been stripped of their leaves and our gardens have displayed few, if any, flowers. Our days have been short, with darkness falling early in the evening. But already the days are gradually brightening with darkness slowly decreasing by the length of a cock's step as the old Irish saying reminds us: *Tá coiscéim coiligh ar an lá*. Winter is now giving way to Spring and although we may not

feel it ourselves there must be some heat in the earth as the snowdrops are beginning to appear and brighten our days.

According to one legend about the Garden of Eden, the snowdrop was connected to Eve's shedding of tears when God banished her. To comfort Eve in her despair, an angel picked up a snowflake and threw it on the earth to cheer her up. As the snowflake shattered, it became a symbol of new beginnings and of hope because everywhere the snow landed, snowdrops grew.

The appearance of the snowdrop is usually our first sign of Spring. Despite its delicate appearance, the bulbs often sprout flowers when snow still lies on the ground. They are a symbol of rebirth and the ability to overcome challenges in life, a great sign of hope, a sign and gift that our world today is in desperate need of.

As we wish one another 'Happy New Year', let us do our best to put into practice the words of Jean Pierre de Caussade, "The past must be left to God's measureless mercy, the future to his loving providence and the present must be given wholly to his love through fidelity to his grace." ●

Sr Ann Gray





# JESUS VISITS NAZARETH

Illustration by Val Biro from One Hundred Bible Stories for Children. Published by Award Publications Ltd.

**J**esus left the desert and went down into Galilee, where he started to tell people all about God and how they should live their lives in order to please him.

One day he went into Nazareth, the town where he had grown up and worked as a carpenter.

It was the Sabbath, the holy day of the week, and he went to the synagogue with the other Jewish men.

During the service, Jesus stood up to read and he was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He opened it and read a passage which told of the coming of the Messiah or Saviour.

Then Jesus said, "Today, these words have come true. God has sent me to bring you the good news of his

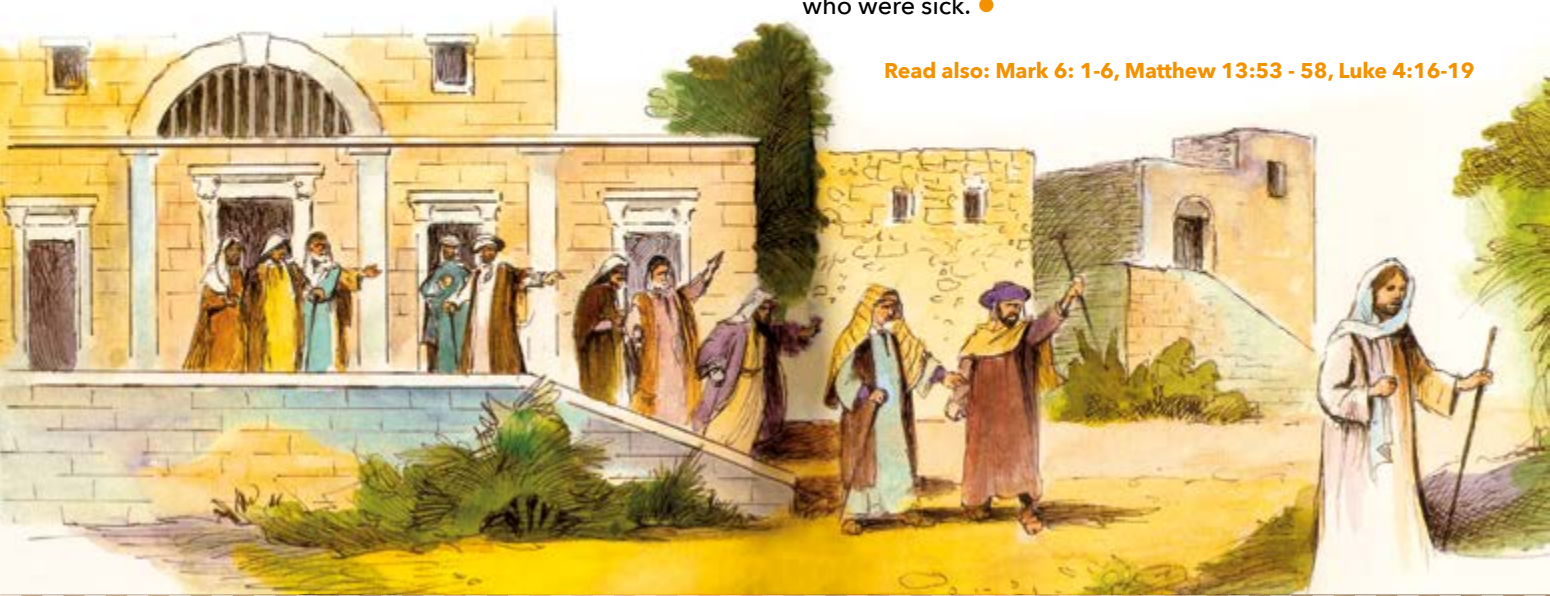
kingdom."

At first everyone listened to him. Jesus spoke well, and they were astonished at the things he was saying to them. Then gradually they began to whisper to each other, "This is the carpenter's son, isn't it? Who does he think he is? How can he say such things!"

"A prophet is never believed by his own people," Jesus said to them.

The crowd became angry then, and they seized Jesus, intending to do him harm. Jesus, however, managed to slip away to safety. He never went back to Nazareth. Instead, he went to other towns and villages, telling the Good News about God's kingdom, and healing people who were sick. ●

**Read also: Mark 6: 1-6, Matthew 13:53 - 58, Luke 4:16-19**



## BIBLE QUIZ

NUMBER 104

**1** In John ch.2, who instructed the servants "Fill the jars with water"?

---

**2** In Exodus ch.2, who was afraid and said, "What I did must have become known"?

---

**3** In I Kings ch.19, who said to Elijah, "let me kiss my father and mother goodbye"?

---

**4** In Acts ch.6, who said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry to wait on tables"?

---

**5** In Daniel ch.3, which three men agreed, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it"?

---

**6** In Acts ch.2, who explained to the crowd at Pentecost, "These men are not drunk, as you suppose"?

---

**£15 vouchers for the first three correct entries received!**

Consult your Bible, answer the questions above and send your entry to: Bible Quiz N° 103, St Columban's, Widney Manor Rd, Solihull, West Midlands, B93 9AB, before 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

Bible Quiz N° 102 Winners: Margaret Davies, Lancashire • Sheila Fagan, Suffolk • Isla Shanley, Coventry.

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# WORD SEARCH

Find these words in the puzzle. They can be found across, backwards, up or down:

- ARROW
- BALLOONS
- CARD
- VALENTINE
- KISS
- LOVE
- HUGS
- HEART
- PINK
- CUPID

H	C	R	L	K	I	S	S	P	Z
U	N	Z	E	O	S	S	B	R	D
G	A	B	E	C	A	R	D	Z	T
S	B	A	L	L	O	O	N	S	H
V	A	L	E	N	T	I	N	E	E
R	P	B	G	B	P	I	N	K	A
C	U	P	I	D	V	F	N	L	R
W	A	R	R	O	W	E	R	O	T
R	J	A	I	M	I	S	W	V	Z
L	I	I	C	G	G	K	Z	E	K

# Valentine's Day

I Love You!  
meow

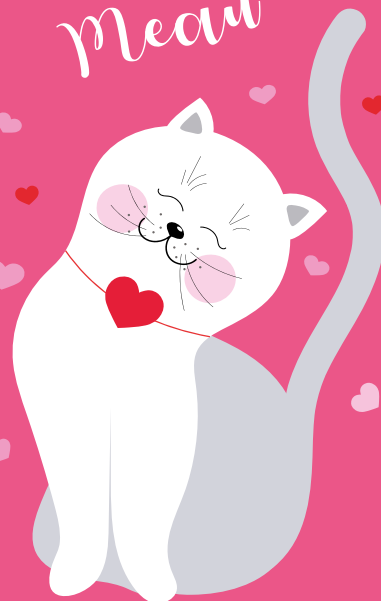


Image: Shutterstock

## PUDSY'S DIRTY - FIND THE 10 SPELLING MISTAKES

Imagine we are back at school already and the hols are miles away cept we have plenty to talk about. Like the World Cup and all the things we had to do for Christmas and everything. I was thinking about all those fab matches and how I would love to have been there cheering and waving flags and how great I'd feel telling them all about it at school. But all I could do was watch on the T.V. But cuzzin Ger who's football mad got there and guess what he brought me but this luvly shirt cept it only showed a camel in a desert and

sand and more sand and I was wondering cud I show this at school. And when I was telling my pal Bump he thought desert was something you might get after Sunday dinner if you were good. And I sed no this is where all the football was except it was'nt wrote on the shirt and I said what'll I do? And he said just say the action was over that hill and when the camel fella gets over it all the football is there and I betcha they'll all say wow cool man.... and I am just thinking that'll be great altogeter... well mebbe...



Help Pudsy correct his spelling to win a £15 voucher.

Rewrite the story and send to Pudsy's Dirty, St Columban's, Widney Manor Rd, Solihull, West Midlands B93 9AB, before 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

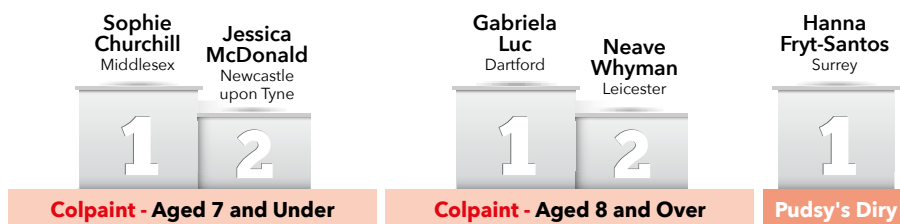
## HA! HA!

1. What did the painter say to her sweetheart?
2. Why would you want to marry a goalie?
3. Who always has a date on Valentine's Day?
4. What did the one sheep say to the other?
5. Why was the rabbit happy?
6. What did the farmer give his wife for Valentine's Day?

1. I love you with all my art.
2. Because he (or she) is a real keeper!
3. A calendar.
4. I love ewe!
5. Because somebunny loved him!
6. Hogs and kisses.

## COMPETITION WINNERS

NOVEMBER 2022





# Razor Sharp Ravens

By Elizabeth McArdle



**R**avens are playful birds and have a mischievous and gregarious nature. Despite their reputation for being birds of the dark side, they are quite the contrary. When it comes to animal intelligence, they have razor sharp minds and rate up there with chimpanzees and dolphins. As we shall see, their pranks and carry-on would make a cat laugh!

Ravens make a variety of calls, which include sounds like "croooaaak", "cr-r-ruck", "tok", and "wonkwonk". Their talent for mimicking everyday sounds is legendary. Car engines, honking horns, toilets flushing, house alarms, barking dogs, plus bird and animal sounds are all included in their repertoire. Ravens have been known to imitate wolves and foxes to attract them to carcasses that the ravens cannot tear open. When the wolf or fox have eaten their fill, the ravens can then partake of the 'bill of fare'.

Flocks of young ravens form gangs that live and eat together until it is time to mate and pair off to form their

own families. Interestingly, living among other teenage ravens seems to be stressful for a young raven. Scientists have found higher levels of stress hormones in teenage raven droppings than in the droppings of mated adults. It's never easy being a teenage rebel!

Ravens even make toys which is a very a rare animal behaviour. Sticks, pinecones, golf balls, or rocks are commandeered to play with each other or by themselves. Despite their mischievous nature, they appear capable of feeling empathy. When a raven's friend loses in a fight, the friend will seem to console the losing bird.

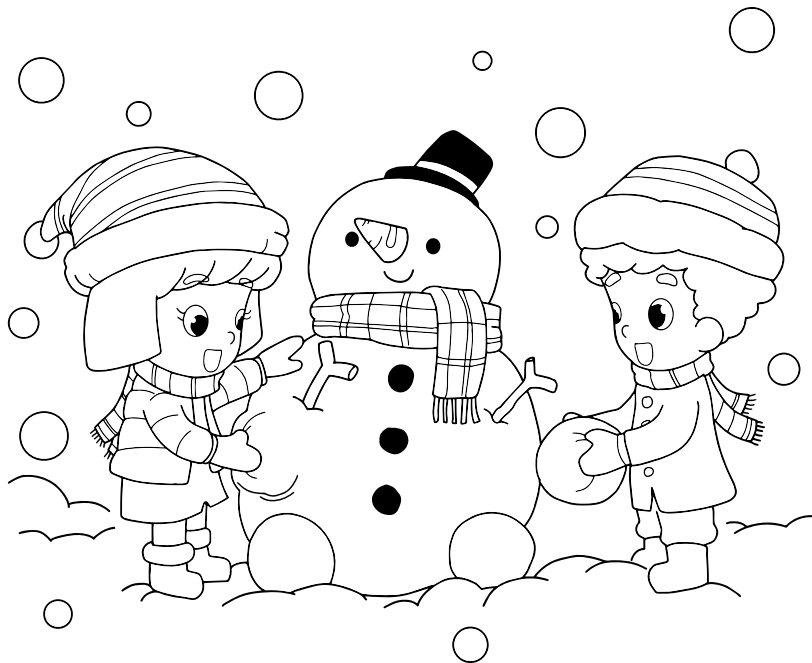
No matter how much we know about the creatures with which we share planet earth, we will never know them as God knows them. To God they are infinitely precious as He is their creator. As a new year dawns, and change is in the air, let us do our best to ensure that all of creation can flourish the way God would have intended. ●



Image: Shutterstock

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Age:

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And he said to them,

**“Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”**

Mark 16:15

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