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MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES

DECEMBER 2023



MANUEL DUATO SCHOOL

Special Needs
Under Threat

LET HEAVEN AND NATURE SING!

Celebrating the
Birth of Jesus

THE CHRISTMAS CRIB

Making Space for
the Holy Family

04 Down Memory Lane

Fr Donal McIlraith returned to Kadavu for Christmas last year and was delighted to catch up with old friends and see how people had grown in the faith.

06 Let Heaven and Nature sing!

Fr Tim Mulroy reflects on God's invitation to all creatures, everything in the heavens, in the seas and on the earth, to join in the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

08 Mission to 'The Shire'

Fr John Boles discovers how the author of 'The Lord of the Rings' and a Columban Lay Missionary are linked by the same neighbourhood.

10 A Lifetime of Challenges

Fr Dan Troy has been visiting Li Qiong's family in China for over twenty years and has prayed with and for them through joys and sorrows.

12 Threat to Manuel Duato School

Fr Ed O'Connell writes about the largest special needs school in Peru, which the Columbans have been involved in for almost 50 years, and which is now threatened with closure by the Ministry for Education's decision to put a halt to funding.

14 A Christmas Present from St Joseph

Fr Barry Cairns thanks carpenters, Jesus and Joseph, for a thoughtful Christmas present.

15 The Christmas Crib

After witnessing a touching encounter between some young children and the Infant Jesus in the manger, Fr Kevin Fleming suggests parishes should make their Christmas Crib as accessible as possible.

16 Pilgrimage for the Planet

Columban missionary Sr Kate Midgley writes about a pilgrimage in solidarity with God's wonderful handiwork.

18 The Birth of Jesus

As we prepare for Christmas, Fr Malachy Hanratty invites readers to ponder the birth of our Saviour by reading Luke's Gospel.

20 Reflection

21 Stories from the Bible

22 Children's Section

23 Nature: The Wild Turkey



04



06



18



08



10



12



16

**THE FAR EAST**

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THE GREAT GIFT

As a child, I enjoyed Christmas for the presents. When I went on mission to Chile, I came to celebrate Christmas in a different way. In Chile, Christmas was not about receiving presents but celebrating with family and community. Certainly, we hold family important at Christmas, but in Chile it is extended beyond family to the wider community.

My first year in Chile, I noticed the lack of build-up to Christmas. There were no colourful decorations in the streets or on houses (or they were very minimal). Christmas music was not played continually in shopping centres or on radio stations. It was very subdued.

Initially in my early days of mission I missed the hype. However, in time, I began to appreciate the quietness of Christmas in Chile, much like the humble couple from Nazareth travelling to Bethlehem unnoticed. There was a simplicity in it all.

When Christmas eve came, the Christmas Vigil Mass was packed with a great crowd, many of whom didn't attend church very much during the year, like the shepherds who were considered outsiders by the community but who gathered to share one joyous moment.

After Mass, people departed for their homes for their Christmas meal. It was here that family, neighbours and others would pass from house to house greeting each other. Eventually, at midnight, the slow quiet coming of Christmas erupted

with fireworks in the streets, people laughing, hugging and greeting one another. It was as if the choir of angels had broken open the heavens and began singing, announcing the Good News.

At that moment, all the troubles and worries of daily life disappeared. Only joy and contentment were shared. As the priest in the community, I was invited to several houses, and I spent the evening visiting and greeting the parishioners. It was a joy being received and a joy to give a blessing to those with whom I shared the celebration.

During my many years in Chile, I don't recall presents being exchanged at Christmas. It they were, it was not central to the celebration. In time, I never missed the idea of presents because it became something more profound. The present I came to appreciate was not an object but a relationship - my relationship as a priest to the community. That is what Christmas signifies, God's willingness to enter a relationship with his people by the birth of His Son.

In this Christmas season, I wish all our readers this great gift of a relationship with Jesus Christ, our brother and Saviour. Happy Christmas to all! ●

Fr Chris Saenz

Fr Chris Saenz is regional director of the Columbans in the US.

*Wishing all our subscribers, readers and supporters
a very happy and peaceful Christmas and every blessing for 2024!*





DOWN MEMORY LANE

Fr Donal McIlraith returned to Kadavu for Christmas last year and was delighted to catch up with old friends and see how people had grown in the faith.

From 1990 to about 2015, I served in the islands of Kadavu at Christmas, Easter and for the 15th August because they had no priests. Kadavu is a set of islands about eight hours by boat from Suva, the capital of Fiji. Then my prayers were answered, and they got their own priests. The Vincentian Fathers and the Congregation of the Mission took over Kadavu.

Just before last Christmas the parish priest of Kadavu arrived on my doorstep with a request. "Can you come and help. We are short a priest in Nasalia for Christmas." Now Nasalia was where I had mainly worked in Kadavu and I was delighted with the chance to walk down memory lane. I didn't even mind the eight-hour boat ride and slept right through the night along with nearly one hundred other people sleeping on the floor all around me.

Christmas was very wet last year in Kadavu but nothing could take from my joy at being back and from the people's enthusiasm as they lustily sang us through our Christmas liturgies. It was marvellous to catch up with people I had known for so long.

Nasalia is an amazing Catholic settlement. Over a hundred years ago a certain Elizabeth Johns married Daniel Lockington who had freehold land in Nasalia. She insisted on bringing up their children as Catholics and today there is a thriving village of well over a hundred Catholics not to mention some Catholic families in nearby villages. The two main

families are the Lockingtons and the Seetos. Old Seeto was a Chinese merchant who settled and married in Kadavu and his family eventually ended up in Nasalia and many became Catholic. His grandson, the late Siga Seeto (whom I buried), built the present chapel of St Peter Chanel. Before I left, I was able to bless the beautiful tomb the family erected in memory of Siga and his beloved wife, Bulou Siteri.

On Christmas morning last year I had the joy of baptising Joseph Seeto. This was a very moving moment for me as he was held by his father, another Siga Seeto, whom I had baptised right there thirty years before.

Due to my age, I suppose, they sat me on a low table to preside over the Christmas banquet that we all shared. Thirty years ago, I sat on the ground with everyone else, but the bones get creaky with age.

My week there sped past quickly. The senior catechist, Anare Delaivuna's first anniversary had just passed, and I was able to travel to his nearby village, Ravitaki, and celebrate Mass with his family. There are two other catechists now though the older one, Francis Lockington, is in his eighties and no longer very mobile. The young one, Paul Verebasaga, helped me with everything. When I first came to Nasalia, his late father, Pio Verebasaga was my mentor. My first stop is always at his grave which is on the way to Nasalia.

We spent New Year's Eve in adoration for peace and concluded with midnight Mass, surely the first in the world for 2023. After this the *Lalis*, the Fijian bells





(hollowed tree trunks), were sounded and people sang and enjoyed the start of the New Year. I was sad to leave but delighted that I had had the chance to catch up and see how people had grown in the faith and how the young people had grown beyond my recognition. The mystery of Christ's birth is taking place in Nasalia. ●

Fr Donal McIlraith is from Macroom Co Cork. He was ordained in 1971 and has served on mission in Japan, USA and Fiji.

01. Christmas morning in Kadavu: Fr Donal McIlraith and parishioners with baby Joseph Seeto, whom Fr Donal baptised, thirty years after he baptised Joseph's father, Siga Seeto, in the same parish.
02. Baptism of Joseph Seeto.
03. Fr Donal with Siga Seeto and his family after the baptism in Kadavu last Christmas.
04. The Christmas banquet in Kadavu.

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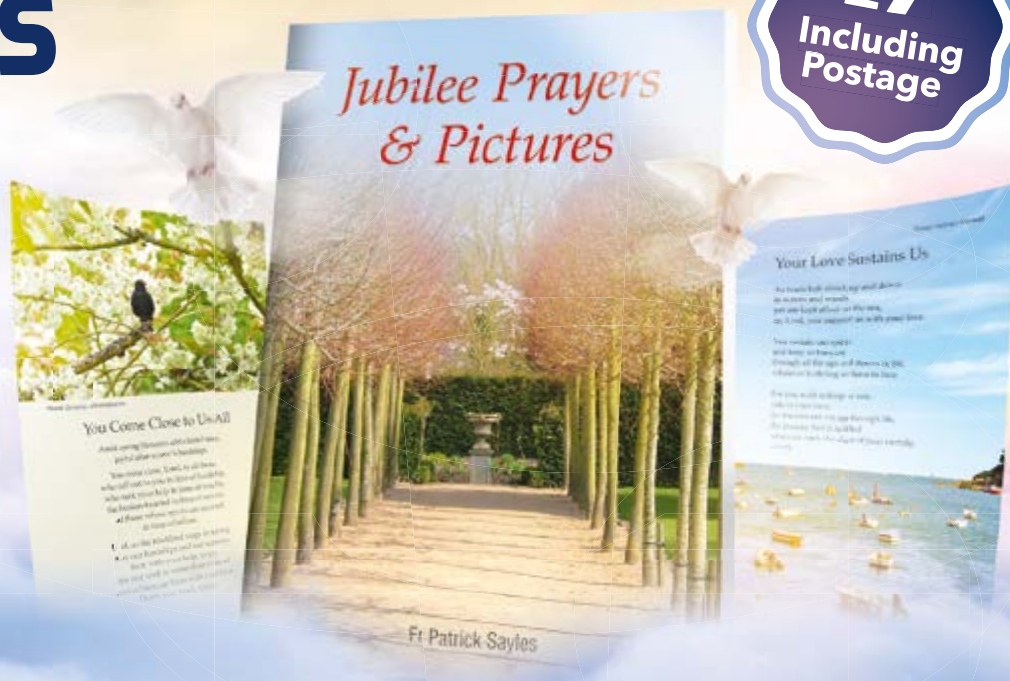
04

PRAYER FOR ALL SEASONS

Fr Pat Sayles is celebrating his Golden Jubilee as a Columban priest. In 'Jubilee Prayers & Pictures', Fr Pat has carefully selected **68 prayers and photographs** lovingly dedicated to all who are called to share prayer everywhere. This hardback book is an ideal gift for any occasion.



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LET HEAVEN AND NATURE SING!

Fr Tim Mulroy reflects on God's invitation to all creatures - everything in the heavens, in the seas and on the earth - to join in the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

Here in Hong Kong, during the final week of Advent, so much of my time and attention is divided between two things: preparing for the Christmas Mass and planning hiking activities for the holidays between Christmas and the New Year.

Each year, as I prepare the homily for the Christmas Mass, I try to find a new insight or develop a fresh perspective on the Christmas story. Likewise, while researching hiking trails, I look for paths that I have not yet explored, for interesting places awaiting my discovery. To my surprise, I came to realise during Advent last year that there was a close link between my preparations for both of these activities.

As I reflected on the psalm in preparation for Midnight Mass, I was struck by these verses:

*Let the heavens rejoice and earth be glad,
let the sea and all within it thunder praise,
let the land and all it bears rejoice,
all the trees of the wood shout for joy,
At the presence of the Lord for he comes,
he comes to rule the earth.*

(Psalm 95: 11, 12)

Here was a heartfelt invitation from God not just to all creatures, but to everything in the heavens, in the seas and on the earth to join in the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Closing my eyes, I tried

to visualise myself standing on a nearby mountain peak and listening to the sea that surrounds the island of Hong Kong thundering with praise of God. I tried to imagine the dense forests that cover the hills on the edge of this city shouting for joy at the coming of Christ.

A few days later, the following verses from a Morning Prayer psalm startled me.

*Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.*

(Psalm 98: 8, 9)

No matter which direction one looks in Hong Kong, a mountain or hill comes quickly into view. Moreover, thanks to such steep terrain, there are more than 200 rivers and streams with several spectacular waterfalls. Just imagine then the festive joy that spreads across Hong Kong when all those rivers clap their hands, and the mountains sing together for joy at the coming of the Lord!

Since some animals can hear very high notes and very quiet sounds that are not accessible to the human ear, perhaps the wild boars, monkeys and water buffalos

Images: Fr Alvaro Martínez SSC.

01. Hong Kong at night.

02. Sunset in Hong Kong.

03. Columban Lay Missionaries, Vida Hequilan and Sai Tamatawale, at the summit of the Dragon's Back, one of the most famous hiking trails at the edge of Hong Kong city.

04. On Top of the World: Columban Lay Missionary, Sai Tamatawale, enjoying both the cityscape and the landscape of Hong Kong.

- that roam the large parklands that surround this city - enjoy open-air concerts provided by the forest and streams throughout the Christmas season!

Towards the close of Advent, the organist sent me the list of hymns that she had prepared for our Christmas Mass. She had chosen ones that were familiar to most people so that the entire congregation could join in singing them. However, as I glanced over them, I quickly realised that not only the congregation, but the surrounding world of nature was also called to join in the festive joy of Christmas.

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.
Joy to the world, the Savior reigns
Let all their songs employ
While fields and floods
Rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*
(Lyrics composed by Isaac Watts, 1674 - 1748)

After reading these verses, I knew right away what the theme of my homily for the Christmas Mass was going to be - since the coming of Christ into our world is a source of joy for all creation, the entire universe celebrates the Christmas season. Therefore, during our Christmas Mass we are called to rejoice with everyone and everything on earth in welcoming our Saviour.

Between Christmas and the New Year, as some of my Columban companions and I hiked through the hills and valleys of Hong Kong, we rejoiced in the magnificence of the streams, the coastline

and the islands. At intervals, we rested on a rock and listened attentively to the wind whistle a Christmas melody as it moved through the forest and stirred the trees into a graceful dance. ●

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 U S.

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MISSION TO 'THE SHIRE'

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit... and his name was Baggins."

"My name is Teresa Chuah Hui-Ling. I am from Penang in Malaysia."

Fr John Boles discovers how the author of 'The Lord of the Rings' and a Columban Lay Missionary are linked by the same neighbourhood.

What could possibly connect these two statements? Actually, quite a lot. The first is the opening line of 'The Hobbit', written in 1937 by J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973). This book and its sequel, 'The Lord of the Rings', became two of the most widely read works of English fiction in the 20th century. Their popularity increased a hundred-fold with the release of the Oscar-winning eponymous films by Sir Peter Jackson.

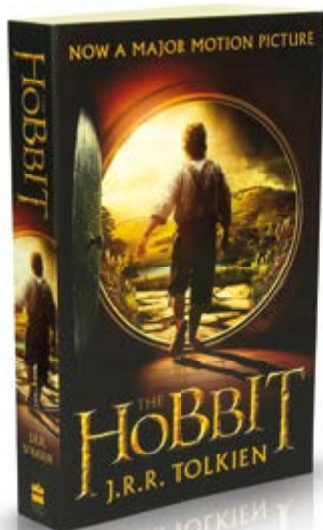
Teresa Chuah is a Columban Lay Missionary from Malaysia who got to know the Columbans while living in New Zealand. She came to Britain in 2021 to join a group of our lay missionaries working with migrants and the disadvantaged. Teresa and her companions live in an area of the city of Birmingham known as Moseley - precisely the same district where Tolkien spent part of his childhood, and from which he drew much of the inspiration for the people and places featured in his books.

Like Teresa, Tolkien had a deep love of nature. He liked nothing better than to wander the woods and riverbanks of Moseley, as does Teresa. He was a Catholic - Teresa is too. He had a profound concern for the poor and humble - Teresa, absolutely so.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 and lived in Moseley with his widowed mother Mabel and his younger brother Hilary from 1896 until 1900. Moseley at that time was a rural hamlet on the edge of rapidly expanding industrial Birmingham. He and his brother adored the place. They constantly roamed the surrounding countryside. It was at this time that the seeds were sown for so many of the episodes that came to fruition in his literature.

Thus, Moseley inspires the concept of 'The Shire'. The house where the Tolkiens lived backs on to a patch of ancient woodland called Moseley Bog, which appears as 'The Old Forest' in 'The Lord of the Rings'. Moseley's River Cole becomes 'the Water'. The area of Sparkhill which rises beyond it sees the light of day as "The Hill".

The tiny crossroads settlement of Sarehole is immortalised as Hobbiton. Recalling Sarehole in a 1966 interview, Tolkien remarked, "I loved it with an intense love... I took the idea of hobbits from the village people and children." The name Baggins comes from the Buggins family who lived at Sarehole Farm. The 18th century Sarehole Mill is "The Old Mill" at Hobbiton. Even the fictional miller "Ted Sandyman" is





04

is Sam Gamgee, a homage to pioneering Birmingham surgeon Dr Sampson Gamgee (1928-86).

Teresa is of the same mind. A kind-hearted and cheerful young woman, she brims over with enthusiasm as she describes the "joy, excitement" she gets, "through serving and supporting people in need." She is an active member of her local parish, and also serves in different centres around the city, working among "people with special needs, asylum-seekers, refugees and the homeless, preparing lunches for the elderly and sorting out donations of clothing for young mums and children."

Tolkien felt a strong relationship with nature. He regretted how his beloved woods were devoured by 20th century suburban sprawl. In later years he recalled his horror as he witnessed the felling of his favourite tree by Sarehole Millpond, a pain expressed at the end of 'The Lord of the Rings' when Sam returns to the Shire and is inconsolable on seeing how, "they've cut down the Party Tree".

Teresa closely identifies with this sentiment. She counts community garden work amongst her ministries. In common with other Columbans, she participated in the build-up to the 2021 UN Climate Conference in Glasgow and accompanied part of the "youth walk for the planet" (when young people marched in stages to Glasgow from the G7 venue in Cornwall). She is immensely proud to share all these traits with JRR - his passion for the Church, the poor and the Earth, as well as his enduring love of Birmingham. ●

Fr John Boles is from Britain. Ordained in 1996, he served on mission in Peru and Chile. He is now Regional Director in Britain.

01. Columban Lay Missionary Teresa Chuah Hui-Ling from Malaysia who got to know the Columbans whilst staying in New Zealand and now lives and works in the Moseley area of Birmingham.

02. Hobbiton. Image: Shutterstock

03. The Hobbit was made into a film by director Peter Jackson.

04. The 18th century Sarehole Mill in Moseley, Birmingham. This old cornmill was a favourite childhood playground of JRR Tolkien and his brother Hilary. It was the inspiration for 'The Old Mill' at Hobbiton. In a 1966 interview with the Guardian newspaper, Tolkien described it as "a kind of lost paradise... an old mill that really did grind corn, with two millers" and "a great big pond with swans on it".

05. The Shire: Tolkien spent most of his early life in Birmingham. After seeing active service in France during the First World War he settled in Oxford, where he passed the rest of his life, although he always referred to Birmingham as "home".

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05

based on the real-life miller's son, who used to chase away JRR and his brother, and was all the more fearsome by his clothes being dusted with white flour.

"When I came to live in Birmingham I was delighted to learn about Tolkien", says Teresa. She'd been a great fan of The Lord of the Ring films, but until then had no idea they'd been based on books. "What an embarrassment. I love these movies, but I only know the director and where he comes from," she laughs. (Peter Jackson is from New Zealand, where Teresa had lived for many years.)

The Tolkiens later moved to another area of Birmingham, Edgbaston, where they attended Mass at the Birmingham Oratory, famously associated with Cardinal (later Saint) John Henry Newman. Behind the Oratory rise two towers - Perrott's Folly (part of an 18th century hunting lodge) and the Waterworks Tower (built in 1870) - allegedly transformed by Tolkien into 'The Two Towers' of Gondor (title of the second volume of 'The Lord of the Rings').

JRR Tolkien had a deep social conscience. He was always concerned about the poor and applauded initiatives to help them. One of his best-loved characters





A LIFETIME OF CHALLENGES

Fr Dan Troy has been visiting Li Qiong's family for over twenty years and has prayed with and for them through joys and sorrows.



“Please pray for us” is a familiar request from Li Qiong’s mother when I visit the family every two weeks in their simple apartment in a densely populated area of Wuhan. Their home is located a short walk from the Yangtze River. The request for prayer is expressed from a family that has known a lifetime of challenges and in which nobody has been baptised.

Li Qiong was born in 1976, when China was a very different country to what it is today. Following a difficult birth, she was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. At the age of ten, with the encouragement of her parents, she began to take her first steps. By that time, she had already missed the opportunity to go to school even though attempts had been made by her family to have her enrolled in several schools.

Twenty years ago, when I was studying the Chinese language in Wuhan, a friend introduced me to Li Qiong and her parents. Gradually the friendship grew, and within a couple of years, it led to Li

Qiong participating in a Columban project in which she made Christmas and greeting cards.

Participation in the project was accompanied by an opportunity for me to meet with her and her mother every two weeks. Over the years, several of our visitors to Wuhan have also met Li Qiong and her family, a record of their visits gradually building up through the photos that she has asked me to print following those visits. Her ability to welcome visitors to her home and the laughter that was shared on many evenings seems to have strengthened her self-confidence.

Faced with the challenges of restricted walking, limited strength in her hands and mumbled speech, Li Qiong has to deal with not being understood in local shops and walking on uneven surfaces in her neighbourhood.

During one of my visits to the family home in 2007, it was announced that Li Qiong had some good news to share. Through a series of friends, she had been



introduced to a young man a few months earlier, and plans had just been put in place for a wedding. During the last few days of that year, the wedding took place at a nearby hotel. Li Qiong's parents were delighted that she had found a husband, her long-term security being a big part of how they viewed the celebration. The birth of a baby girl brought unbounded joy for the family, a day that will be remembered for many years.

As life seemed to be moving in a positive direction for the family, they were soon faced with yet another cruel turn of events. Li Qiong's father was diagnosed with cancer, and his condition deteriorated rapidly. Having been a kind father and an active man who swam across the Yangtze River once a week, he was now faced with letting go of what was precious to him in this world. His delight in knowing his only grandchild was short-lived, dying before the child reached the age of four months. That short time he had with his grandchild is still talked about within the family, their sadness at his passing still evident and yet they are grateful that he had met the child who has continued to be a delight for the family.

Meimei is now 12 years of age. Her bright intellect has been noted by several teachers and she has occasionally been

chosen to speak on behalf of her class on formal occasions. One delight for Li Qiong in recent years has been to see Meimei take part in weekend dance classes. As a mother who struggles with walking, Li Qiong has seen her daughter excel in dancing, even featuring on local television on a few occasions.

As the visits to Li Qiong's family continue in the years ahead, we are likely to keep talking about what is important for the family, whether it be the price of vegetables in the neighbourhood or the demands of school for Meimei. Hopefully we will also have reason to celebrate the good things that emerge for them or to reflect together as we find what is good within the daily events of life.

If he were still alive, I think Li Qiong's father would be delighted with how his precious grandchild is growing and contributing to the life of the family. His one photograph on display in the family home provides a convenient way for him to be mentioned when we sit together and talk. In the years ahead Li Qiong's mother is likely to continue requesting prayers for the family. I trust that God will hear these prayers and continue to find ways to care for the humble people who place their trust in these prayers. ●

Fr Dan Troy is from Co Cork. He was ordained in 1999 and now lives and works in Wuhan, China.

01. (L-R): Fr Dan Troy on a visit to Li Qiong, her mother and Meimei, along with Columban missionary Fr Kevin O'Neill and Fr John Zhao, a Chinese priest from the Diocese of Liaoling. Thanks to a Columban scholarship, Fr John studied in Ireland between 2015 - 2018.
02. (R-L): Columban missionary Sr Kathleen Coyle, with Alex Davey, a student from Dublin who was studying at Wuhan University, Li Qiong, her mother and Meimei as well as two Columban Lay Missionaries from Korea, Jihyun Kim and Minah Seo (front) who is now in formation to become a Columban Sister.
03. Celebrating Meimei's birthday.
04. Fr Dan, Li Qiong, her mother and Meimei and friends.

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THREAT TO MANUEL DUATO SCHOOL

Fr Ed O'Connell writes about the largest special needs school in Peru which the Columbans have been involved in for almost 50 years and is now threatened with closure.

The Special Needs School Manuel Duato was founded in 1976 by two diocesan volunteers from England, Fr Austin Garvey from Westminster Archdiocese and Fr Kevin McHugh from Arundel and Brighton Diocese. The school was built on Columban land on the north side of Lima, beside the Columban Centre House. When the two diocesan priests returned home, the Columban Director then took over the role of President of the school. This year the Manuel Duato school celebrates 47 years of educational service to one of the most vulnerable sectors of Peruvian society: children, adolescents, youth and adults with special educational needs and with moderate and severe mental disabilities.

My own association with Manuel Duato School began in 2001 when, on becoming Regional Director of the Columbans in Peru, I also became the Chair of the Board of Governors of the school. I happily continued to do this job until 2022, when in preparation for my return to England, I handed over the Chair to Alicia Dominguez, who had recently retired as headmaster after 23 years. His knowledge of the teachers, parents, students and local educational authority



02

was second to none. Alicia is well known to the Columbans, having contributed to formation programmes in our parishes and in our Mission Formation Centre for the best part of 40 years. The deputy head teacher Carmen Escudero who has been in that role for 20 years took over the role of head teacher.

For over 40 years the Manuel Duato School has had a good relationship with the Ministry of Education. The school is



classed as a public school run privately, like a parish school with State support for the payment of teachers, assistant teachers, psychologists, therapists, and social workers, in all 71 employees. Every three years this agreement with the Ministry of Education has to be renewed.

This year, in July, we got a big shock as the local branch of the Education Authority informed us that the agreement would not be renewed for 2024 and thereafter. This would mean the staff would not be paid by the State and the school would have to close. The decision was appealed by us but was turned down by the local education authority. That was not a surprise as they were the ones who announced the decision to remove the funding. Now an appeal has gone into the Ministry of Education at regional level.

We are not sure why this has happened. There have been changes in the Ministry of Education and the National Board for Disabled People, so maybe people who should know better are not aware of the relationship with Manuel Duato School, which is the largest special needs school in the country and has a fine reputation. In fact the Ministry of Education sends teachers and headteachers to the school to learn from us.

Hopefully the appeal to the regional authorities will work. We are in contact through our local diocese and that of the Archdiocese of Lima with people in the Ministry at a high level to make them aware of the situation. The staff are very worried as they are not sure what will happen to them in 2024. Will they be reassigned to other schools and what happens with their students? The parents have written to their local mayors, to the Ministry of Education and the National Board for Disabled People, to explain that their moderately and severely challenged children will not be able to go to what are termed 'normal' schools and as such will be left abandoned.

In the event that the Regional Education Authority ratifies the decision of the Local Education Authority then we will begin a judicial process, with the help of the State Human Rights Ombudsperson, requesting protection for the school until the final ruling is made in the judicial process. This could last several years. It is all very disconcerting and unsettling for everyone.

A total of 531 students attended Manuel Duato this year, including 36 in the Friends' Club (for over 18-year-olds) and 33 in Training and Job Placement. The students attend either in the morning or the afternoon. Among them are 226 with autism; 52 with hearing difficulties; 52 with cerebral palsy; 86 with Down Syndrome; 78 with severe mental difficulties and 32 with multiple disabilities. From Manuel Duato we also manage the Inclusion Service for 412 students in 79 local public Institutions covering all levels of education from kindergarten up to university and work placements, where they are supervised in their studies and work situations. Overall, we assist a total of 943 students with disabilities.

Our mission is to work with the family of the student with special educational needs so that they assume co-responsibility in the life of their son or daughter and guarantee better conditions in their family environment, neighbourhood and in the community where they live, to ensure social inclusion. We provide face-to-face training by specialists to help parents learn how to communicate with their child in sign language or comprehension gestures, as well as working on setting limits on disruptive behaviours and autonomy.

The State pays 71 employees: made up of teachers, assistant teachers, psychologists, therapists, and a social worker. The administrative staff: director, cleaning staff, as well as the school manager are paid by the Board of Governors, the *Fe y Esperanza* Civil Association. The Association also covers the operating costs of the Manuel Duato Friends' Club with the payment of three teachers. ●

Fr Ed O'Connell was ordained in 1973 and recently returned to Britain from Peru.



03

01. Outgoing Chair, Fr Ed O'Connell, with the incoming Chair of *Fe y Esperanza*, Alicia Dominguez, and the new head teacher at Manuel Duato School, Carmen Escudero.
02. A member of staff and some students at Manuel Duato School in Lima.
03. A young girl colouring. A total of 531 students this year attended Manuel Duato.
04. The school has 71 employees including teachers, assistant teachers, psychologists, therapists and a social worker.

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04



02

Fr Barry Cairns thanks carpenters, Jesus and Joseph, for a thoughtful Christmas present.



03

A CHRISTMAS PRESENT FROM ST JOSEPH

It was the second week of December. That especially busy time before Christmas was upon me. Besides that, the heavy, grey wintry skies were getting to me. I first came to Japan in 1956 from the Southern Hemisphere (New Zealand). Even after all those years, while adapting to Japan in most areas, I have never really got used to cold weather at Christmas!

For so many of my youthful years Christmas was a time of sun and beach swimming. I have never ever dreamed of a white Christmas! So as the shepherd psalm (Ps 23) puts it so vividly, my spirit was drooping.

My lifelong hobby has been woodwork. At middle school my highest marks were for a class called 'woodwork'. (The lowest were for what was then called 'arithmetic'). I like making things; but as a priest I have lived in aging rectories, so I tend to mend more than I make.

Recently on the internet I looked at a carpenter's bench on Amazon with envy. All I could do was put it into the wish list. The bench was selling at €197. Is that too expensive for me? And if I did buy it, how many years, at 92, have I left? So I went to St Joseph the carpenter asking him to guide me. Joseph had Jesus as an apprentice.

Three weeks after a couple

whom I had witnessed at their marriage seven years previously came to visit me. At the time of their marriage they were both in their 70s. In both cases their former partner had died. They came to tell me that their senior second marriage had given both of them a wonderful and refreshing happiness. Then they handed me an envelope saying: "Here is a gift in gratitude to God. Buy yourself a Christmas present."

Later when I opened the envelope there was exactly €197. So St Joseph had arranged a Christmas present for the birthday of his foster child and his apprentice carpenter, Jesus. These events had the Good Shepherd reviving my drooping spirit.

As a postscript I add this. The carpenter's bench was delivered to the door in a big parcel. The bench was in many parts to be assembled. A parishioner seeing me gaze at the many parts with a worried look said: "Let's assemble it." While his wife read the instructions, four of us put the bench together. We had fun doing it. So I thank the carpenters, Jesus and Joseph, for their thoughtful Christmas present. ●

Columban Fr Barry Cairns is from New Zealand. He was ordained in 1955 and has spent most of his life on mission in Japan.

01. Carpenter at work. Image: Shutterstock.

02. Fr Barry Cairns puts his new carpenter's bench to use.

03. The Holy Family by I. Bellver Delmá (1958) in the Iglesia del Buen Pastor, Valencia, Spain. Image: Shutterstock.

THE CHRISTMAS CRIB

After witnessing a touching encounter between some young children and the Infant Jesus in the manger, Fr Kevin Fleming suggests parishes should make their Christmas Crib as accessible as possible.

Last year I spent Christmas in my hometown of Ferbane, Co Offaly with my brother and his wife. Spending Christmas in the village you grew up in has a special feeling to it. On St Steven's Day I visited the Crib in the local parish church.

The Crib was a lovely oval dark-shaped composition situated near the altar steps. I paid my respects and then went back a few kneelers and sat down for a while to reflect on the great mystery of Christmas. While I was there a few people came in and prayed before the Crib, they also lit a candle or two and went their way.

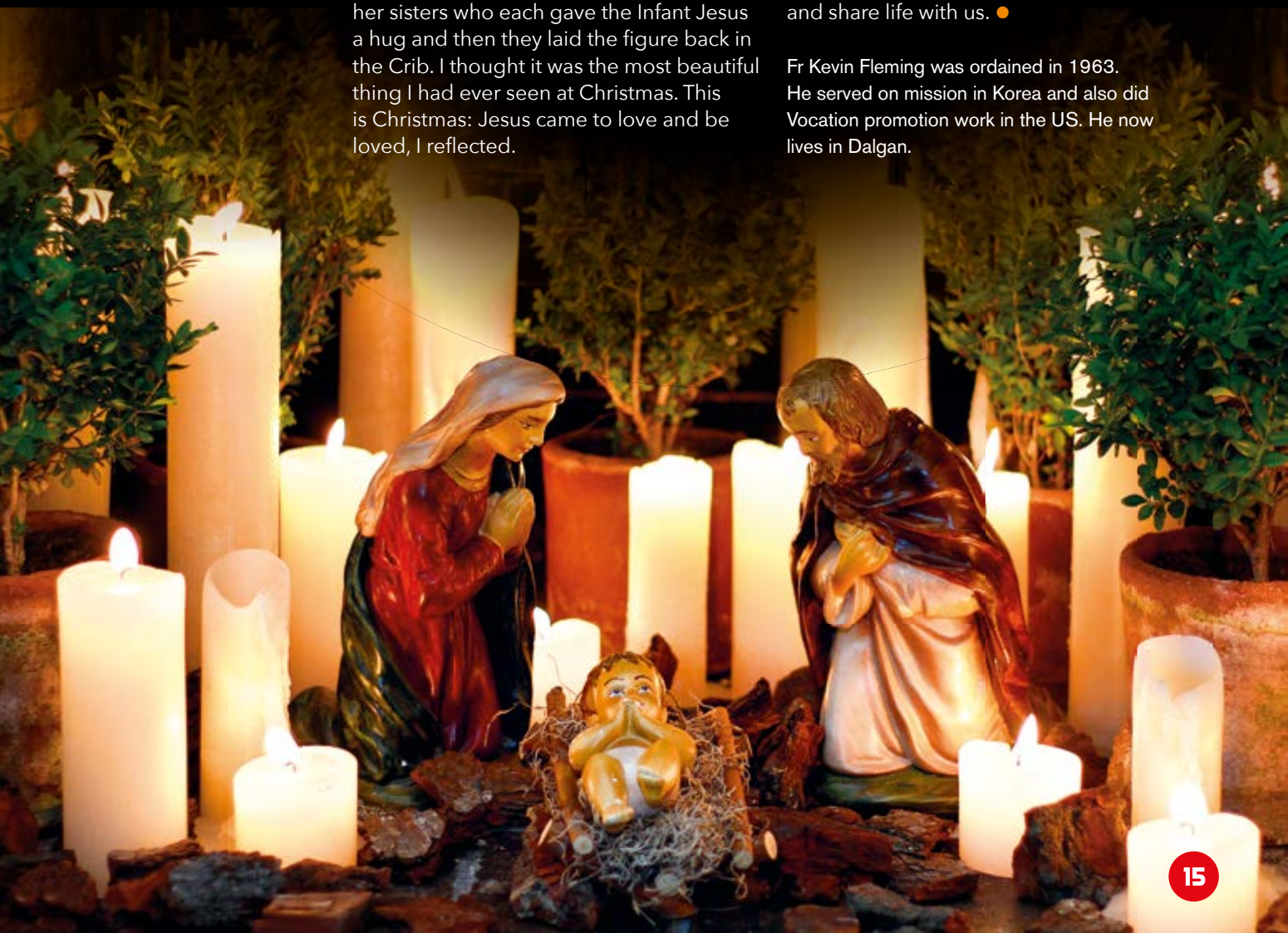
Then a couple came in with three little girls, presumably their daughters. They came before the Crib and bowed. The three little girls knelt down on the step before the Crib. One of the little girls picked up the figure of the Infant Jesus gave it a little hug and passed it along to her sisters who each gave the Infant Jesus a hug and then they laid the figure back in the Crib. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen at Christmas. This is Christmas: Jesus came to love and be loved, I reflected.

The Crib has a real liturgical meaning during the Christmas season. Though it is only a replica of the stable in which God was born into this world as a human child, the Crib is an attempt to bring that profound moment of history into the present moment. This symbolic replica is a way of drawing us closer to that profound moment of Jesus' birth. The Crib has a power to draw us in and uplift us. It differs from the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist where He is seen and worshipped through the eyes of Faith.

In light of its potential impact parishes should try to have their Crib with the Holy Family in as accessible a place as possible - don't hide it away or keep it in a place that is difficult for people and particularly children to give a little hug to the Infant Jesus. After all God became a human being so that He could come closer to us and share life with us. ●

Fr Kevin Fleming was ordained in 1963. He served on mission in Korea and also did Vocation promotion work in the US. He now lives in Dalgan.

Image: Shutterstock





PILGRIMAGE FOR THE PLANET

In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis writes, "The world sings of an infinite Love: how can we fail to care for it?" Columban missionary Sr Kate Midgley writes about a pilgrimage in solidarity with God's wonderful handiwork.

We hadn't asked God for an extreme weather event for our Pilgrimage for the Planet but we were given one anyway (as if to hammer home the message). It was the hottest day of the year and the sixth day in a row that it was over 30C in London in September. Inspired both by Christian Climate Action and the *Laudato Si* Movement, on Saturday 9th September we set out in pilgrimage along the Thames Path from the Cutty Sark to the Thames Flood Barrier. The theme of this year's Season of Creation was "Let justice and peace flow... like a mighty river" so we decided to walk alongside our "mighty river", the River Thames.

We chose the Thames Flood Barrier as our destination as it has to be used far more often than it was ever intended to be used due to rising sea levels. A very tangible reminder, if it were needed, of climate change. Over 50 people came. Some of us started at our Columban Sisters' parish in Bow, East London where there was a prayer and blessing from our parish priest Fr Howard James. We then joined the rest of the group at the Cutty Sark and we all began our pilgrimage to the Thames Barrier.

We were pilgrims from various local parishes, a big contingent from the Chinese Catholic Community, nine religious Sisters from different congregations - Columban Sisters, Little Company of Mary Sisters, Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa, Sisters of the Holy Cross, Carmelite Sisters -

and Fr Richard Nesbitt and parishioners from White City, including a visiting seminarian from Nigeria, as well as *Laudato Si* animators and members of Christian Climate Action.

We began our pilgrimage with a prayer and an invitation to make the pilgrimage with our five senses wide open to what God may want to show us. As we walked we paused to reflect on Creation's Song, Creation's Cry and Creation's Call and the message of Pope Francis for the Season of Creation. When we reached the Thames Barrier, we had the great joy of being joined by another pilgrimage group, who had walked 17km along the Thames from Shell HQ. It was wonderful for both groups to join together to sing, share reflections and pray for people on all continents, especially those most impacted by climate change in the global south. We then listened to a powerful recording of Ben Okri reading 'The Broken' from his book 'Tiger Work' including the words: "Can't you hear the future weeping? Our love must save the world."

Since our pilgrimage Pope Francis has issued *Laudate Deum* (Praise God) an Apostolic Exhortation addressed, "To All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis". In it, Pope Francis tells us "...the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point" (LD #2). He quotes the African bishops who warn that "climate change makes manifest a tragic and striking example of structural sin" (LD #3).

In *Laudate Deum* Pope Francis invites us



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to have the courage to look at the world as it actually is: the reality of climate change, and the reality and danger of power being held in the hands of very powerful elites. "Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used... In whose hands does all this power lie, or will eventually end up? It is extremely risky for a small part of humanity to have it." (LD #23)

Elsewhere in some very bold words and in a real call to action he writes: "The demands that rise up from below throughout the world, where activists from very different countries help and support one another, can end up pressuring the sources of power. It is to be hoped that this will happen with respect to the climate crisis. For this reason, I reiterate that unless citizens control political power - national, regional and municipal - it will not be possible to control damage to the environment." (LD #38)

In the context of the COP28, which took place from 30th November to 12th December, Pope Francis appeals to us: "Once and for all, let us put an end to the irresponsible derision that would present this issue as something purely ecological, 'green', romantic, frequently subject to ridicule by economic interests. Let us finally admit that it is a human and social problem on any number of levels. For this reason, it calls for involvement on the part of all. In conferences on the climate, the actions of groups negatively portrayed as 'radicalised' tend to attract attention. But in reality they are filling a space left empty by society as a whole, which ought to exercise a healthy 'pressure', since every family ought to realise that the future of their children is at stake." (LD #58) Finally, Pope Francis urges us: "I ask everyone to accompany this pilgrimage of reconciliation with the world that is our home and to help make it more beautiful ..." (LD #69) ●

Sr Kate Midgley has served on mission in Chile, Peru and China. She is now based in London and is involved in the *Laudato Si* Movement as a *Laudato Si* animator and is a member of the Christian Climate Action.

01. 02. 03. Pilgrimage for the Planet along the Thames River in London.
All images: St Kate Midgley.

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As we prepare for Christmas, Fr Malachy Hanratty invites readers to ponder the birth of our Saviour by reading Luke's Gospel.

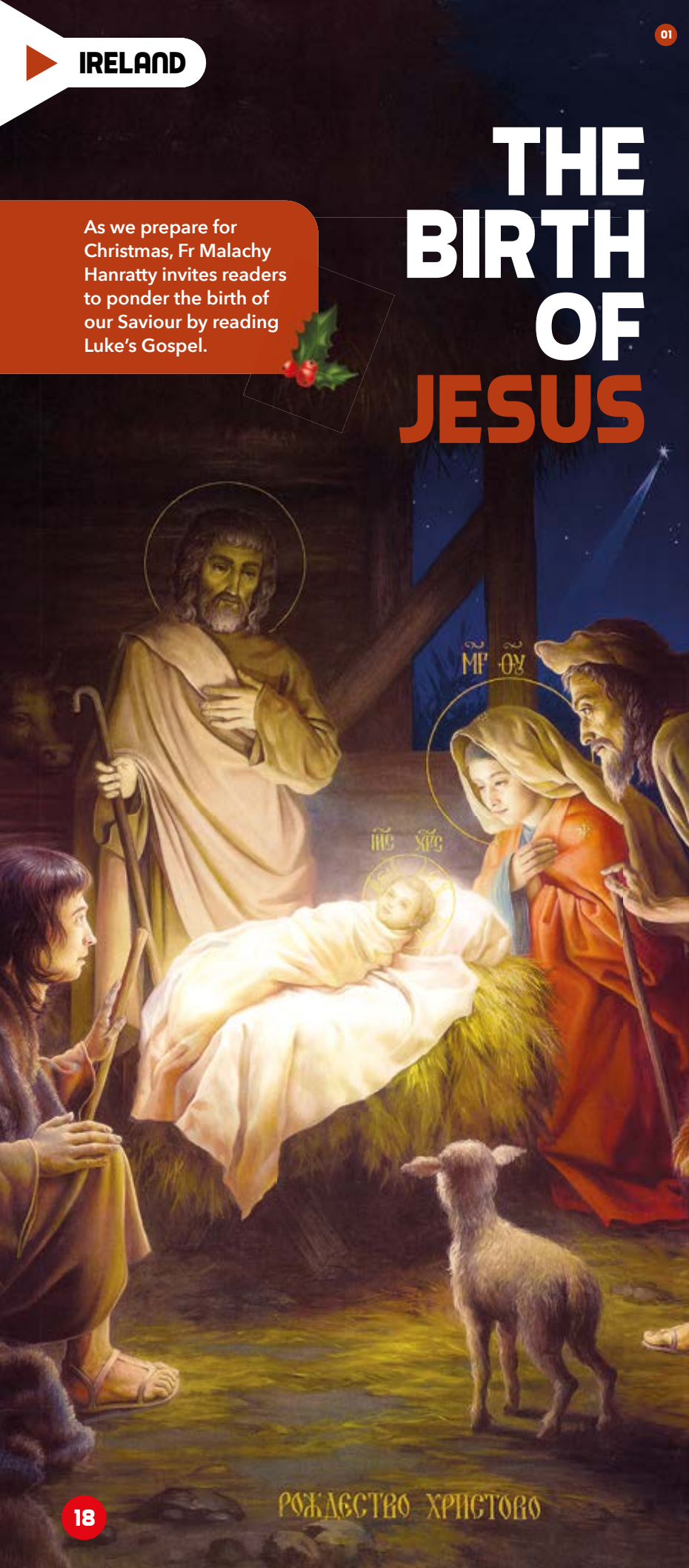
THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Joseph and Mary set out in trust

Let us increase our thanks and pray for courage as we think about Joseph and Mary setting out in trust into the unfamiliar and unknown. I pause at, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." I ponder the implications. Augustus, a peace-leaning Emperor controlled so many diverse and distant countries and peoples. Thus communications, travel, interaction were advanced. But seeing, "All went to their own towns to be registered" makes me realise it causes hardship for Joseph and Mary. They "went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David, called Bethlehem". Joseph will not leave Mary's side. But I imagine hardships on that difficult journey, especially for a pregnant woman away from family, friends and surroundings. Yet here we see them journeying on doggedly in trust. Next, finding the shock of "no place for them in the inn", I see them with trustful prayer and stamina searching for a place to stay. And finally they find a stable they are allowed to use. In it Mary gives birth to Jesus the Saviour of the World. With loving care she "wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger."

God inviting 'unsuitables' to share the Good News

Next I ponder God again doing the unthinkable. He does not show special signs of His power and presence. The chosen messengers of this 'Good News' are Shepherds who 'lived rough' - in the fields. In their ragged, smelly, grubby clothes, they were always treated with suspicion and unwelcome in towns. They were even forbidden to enter synagogues. However here we see them as attentive, reliable workers "keeping watch over their flock by night". But they lacked every other quality for an ideal messenger. An "angel of the Lord stood before them", and "the glory of the Lord shone around them" and "they were terrified." The angel gives them this message: "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."



РОЖАЄСТВО ХРИСТОРО

Meeting the Baby

So with trust and courage they step out; "Let us go and see." They go searching. I imagine them quietly looking here and there and then cautiously approaching a possible place - a stable. I hear a shepherd diffidently, politely calling out, "Excuse us but we have been sent." Mary and Joseph with awe, gratitude, trust and happiness are prayerfully trying to face the mystery this special Child brings. Now they are surprised by the shepherds' arrival. But they welcome them. They listen with wonder to the shepherds' story and usher them up close around the Baby. I notice the shepherds' awkward shyness and embarrassment at their own unkempt appearance disappearing. They are so reverent in their approach to the baby. This also increases the wonder, gratitude and joy in Mary and Joseph. The shepherds' presence is a sign of God's mysterious working in hearts quietly behind the scenes. And as the shepherds gaze at the baby, Mary and Joseph see the change that is taking place in these rough, awkward men - a new softness, a deepening gratitude and a desire to help. I see them gradually

filling with excitement, thankfulness and the desire to run out and spread the news.

Reflection

This reminds me of a memorable experience. In Japan I had a 'praying-Scripture' group of mostly newly baptised Christians. For fifteen minutes I would tell them of the awareness I got from pondering and praying a section of Scripture. Then we would all, in silence ponder and reflect on it for another fifteen minutes. Then in groups of about three they would share for fifteen minutes on 'discoveries' each had experienced. Finally, the whole group was invited to recount an unusually impressive experience or discovery that pondering this Scripture had generated. I remember one rather shy and quiet lady excitedly exclaiming, "But He had to be born in a stable. How else could the shepherds visit Him; they would not have been allowed into the Inn." I had never myself thought or even heard it expressed like that before. Pondering and sharing with others always helps. This is what this Scripture said to me; but what is it saying to you? ●

Fr Malachy Hanratty was ordained in 1955. He served on mission in Japan and is the author of **Discoveries in Prayer Vol I & II**; **Praying Scripture Vols I & II**; and **Resurrection Gifts**. These can be downloaded for free from the Columban website. See: www.columbans.ie/spirituality/publications-by-fr-malachy-hanratty/

01. Icon of the Nativity from 2012 in the Village of Petrodolinskoe, Odessa, Ukraine. Image: Shutterstock.
02. A shepherd and his sheep. Image: Shutterstock.

02

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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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As I reflect in our small Columban community of three sisters living in the heart of Mandalay, Myanmar's second largest city, the words of the hymn, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness' come to mind. We live in a situation where this longing for light is very real and where both the longing and the hope are given vibrant expression all around us.

Beginning in October with *Thaningyut*, the end of Buddhist Lent and in November with *Diwali*, we participate with our neighbours from different faith communities in celebrating our belief and hope that light always overcomes darkness. Then in our Catholic community we move towards Christmas.

A number of years ago, I was teaching English in a Buddhist monastery school. The majority of the students were Buddhist monks. One day the students asked me to tell them the story of Christmas. I began to tell the story of a young girl from a small village who was visited by a heavenly messenger. This was familiar territory for my students who are very tuned into the world of the spirit. I described how this young woman was asked to make space in her heart and mind and body for the birth of a child.

I told of the bewilderment of this simple young woman and of her question 'how can this be?' Then the answer: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you.' And then of her 'yes', her surrender to and trust in a Mystery, a presence,

a reality beyond human understanding. 'Here am I, let it be done to me'. I told them of the birth of Jesus in a humble dwelling place, of the heavens opening and being filled with light, of the joy and amazement of the shepherds who were the poorest and most alienated in that society and yet were the first to recognise the birth of this King of Kings.

I told of the wise people who came from the East, these men who studied the stars and who followed the star until 'they found the child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger'. Yet they recognised him and falling down they worshipped him. As I finished the story these young monks put their hands together in reverence and said this is truly a noble person and we pay respect to Him.

As I told this story I was caught up in the wonder and amazement of my listeners. The story, so familiar to me began to radiate with life and light. I began to hear with new ears and see with new eyes. My prayer is that this Christmas we may experience anew something of the wonder and radiance I saw on the faces of those young monks. May we experience the Word who became flesh living among us now, a light shining in the darkness of our world, a light that can never be extinguished. ●

Sr Kathleen Geaney

01. A Buddhist Christmas in Myanmar. Photo: Sr Kathleen Geaney



WISE MEN FROM THE EAST

After Jesus was born, three wise men came to Jerusalem from the East, guided by a star. They were looking for the promised Messiah. As soon as they had seen the brilliant new star in the sky, they knew that this was the sign they had been waiting for.

"Where is the infant king of the Jews?" they asked. "We have come to worship him. We have followed his star and have gifts for him."

When King Herod heard of the strangers looking for a king, he sent for them and listened to their story, pretending to be as deeply religious as they were and carefully concealing his anger and fear.

"Go to Bethlehem," he told them, "And when you have found the child come and let me know, so that I

may go and pay him homage too."

As the wise men left Jerusalem, the star they had seen appeared before them and led them to Bethlehem, to where Jesus and his parents were staying. They knew they had found the one they were looking for.

They knelt down in front of Jesus and gave him their gifts: gold for a king, frankincense for the worship of God, and myrrh, an oil used when burying the dead.

Afterwards, they returned home a different way. They had been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, as he only wanted to kill Jesus.

It was the wise men who brought the good news of the Saviour to the world beyond Palestine. ●

Read also: Matthew 2:1-12

BIBLE QUIZ

NUMBER
110

- 1 In Genesis ch.48, whose final words of blessing include the words, "May the angel who has delivered me from all harm bless these boys"?
- 2 In Luke ch.24, who asked "Are you the only person staying in Jerusalem not to have heard the news of what has happened there in the last few days?"
- 3 True or false? In Acts ch.28 Peter protested, "Although I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans".
- 4 In Genesis ch.45, who said, "I'm convinced that my son Joseph is still alive. I will see him before I die"?
- 5 In Genesis ch.24, who asked Rebekah, "Please give me a little water from your jar?"
- 6 In Matthew ch.25, in Jesus' parable, who said "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out?"

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PUDSY'S DIRTY - FIND THE 10 SPELLING MISTAKES

far away he doesn't have time. But they kept saying mebbe he could get a jet plane or a rocket to make him go faster...and all I could say was we can ask Fr John next time he comes. And while I was thinking these things I forgot about Ms Flinn's spellings and then she sed time! any volunteers please. And I said to my fren Bump go for it man first and then we'll be free!...and mebbe that's what Grandad meant when he said the cute fox always goes for the nearest gap in the fence...and gets away... that's really smart...



Rewrite the story and send to Pudsy's Diry,
St Columban's, Widney Manor Rd, Solihull,
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1. The turkey - it's stuffed.
2. Hamazon.
3. Ice krispies!
4. Santa Paws.
5. They have too many needles.
6. Wrap.

COMPETITION WINNERS

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The Wild Turkey

By Elizabeth McArdle



When the word 'turkey' is mentioned, what comes into your mind? For most of us, our thoughts turn to eating turkey at Christmas. Does it ever occur to us that there is so much more to these super birds than we might give them credit for? To start with, they are very intelligent, have unique personalities and over 20 different calls. These calls, which can be heard from over a mile away, help the turkeys to recognise and find each other in the woodlands where they forage.

The turkey we buy for Christmas has been bred and raised to provide as much meat as possible. Consequently, these domesticated turkeys are much heavier than wild turkeys and cannot fly. Wild turkeys do not look like fast-flying birds, but surprisingly they are terrific flyers and can reach speeds of 80 km/hour (50 mph). These short bursts of flight are enough to help them escape from predators or to reach a high tree branch to roost for the night. Wild turkeys live in the United States, Canada and Mexico. They have been around for a very

long time, in fact 10 million years. Imagine they lived when great woolly mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers roamed the earth.

Baby turkeys, called turkey chicks or poults, flock with their mothers for the first year. The poults are unable to fly for the first couple of weeks, so the very attentive mother turkey stays with them on the ground to keep them safe and warm until they are strong enough to roost in the safety of the trees.

This Christmas when you visit a nativity scene you will see animals surrounding the manger with the holy child. The cow, the donkey and the sheep all have their rightful places there. Let us not forget to include the wild turkey which is also part of Christmas because after all, the domestic turkey, which we eat has been bred from it. ●



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Fr Tim Mulroy, Society Leader



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