

far east



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FR NIALL O'BRIEN

Marking
Anniversaries

THE WAKEIN CENTRE

Educating Children
in Myanmar

A PRIEST FOREVER

Columban martyr
Fr Jack O'Brien

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THE FAR EAST

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Subscription

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Contact the Mission Office:
Tel: (01564) 772 096
Email: fareast@columbans.co.uk

Editor

Sarah Mac Donald
editorfareast@gmail.com

Assistant Editor

Sr Ann Gray

Layout & Editorial Assistant

Breda Rogers

Manager

Stephen Awre

Original Design

Gabriel German Carbone

Printers

Walstead Bicester, Oxfordshire

Columban Websites

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www.columbans.co.uk
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Missionary Society of St Columban

Widney Manor Road, Solihull,
West Midlands, B93 9AB.
Tel: (01564) 772 096

Columban Sisters

6/8 Ridgdale Street, Bow,
London E3 2TW.
Tel: (020) 8980 3017

Front Cover

Columban Missionary Fr Niall O'Brien waves as he leaves the provincial jail in Bacolod City on the island of Negros in the Philippines on 3rd of July 1984 along with Frs Brian Gore and Vicente Dangan and six lay leaders.
Photo: Fr Donal Hogan.



Remembering Niall

Father Niall O'Brien
1939-2004

“Blessed are the Peacemakers”

I was blessed to be a classmate and a dear friend of the late Fr Niall O'Brien. He was a wonderful person, artistic, intelligent, an excellent writer, a man of deep spirituality with an infectious sense of humour. He had a gift for learning languages and quickly became proficient in the dialect of Negros in the Philippines. He was zealous in serving people, deepening their faith, helping them make the Bible their own, and organising Basic Christian Communities. He wrote, “You have a Christian Community when you lay down at night knowing that in your village no one is sick who is not being attended, no one is persecuted who is not being helped, no one is lonely who is not being visited.”

Niall learned from the people. He wrote: “... the more I put myself above the people the more I locked myself out of the way of grace, and the more I melded into the community as another human being, notwithstanding my special task as a priest, the more I became a disciple”. Above all, Niall could not turn a blind eye to the widespread injustice and violence which threatened his people. He wrote, “I felt that a lot of talk about prayer, yoked with little justice, was the best formula for producing atheists in the next generation.” The choice seemed to be to either do nothing, or to respond to violence with violence.

Niall advocated a third way: the way of active non-violence inspired by the life of Jesus. He trained his parishioners to do things that were within their capacity, but which stretched their courage even a little. And so, he led them in their thousands to protest against violence and injustice. Embarking on a long protest walk, showing solidarity with the people of a neighbouring

parish, was a way of confronting the authorities which was legal. Many people were reborn to a sense of their own dignity on such protest walks. This led to Niall's own imprisonment and to being falsely accused of murder. He feared that he would be assassinated while in prison.

In prison he wrote, “We asked the Carmelite Sisters to make special stoles for each of us. The design showed a dove hovering over barbed wire, looking for a place to land. A hand has grasped the barbed wire, making a spot for the dove to land. So it is, we feel that in the growing spiral of anger, hate, and war, some people must grasp the sharp barbs and absorb the pain, and thereby give the dove of peace a space to descend upon the earth.”

Niall's major contribution was to a theology of non-violence, spelled out in his three published books. As I reflect on the challenges of our world today, I am convinced that it is this theology, so neglected down through the centuries and yet so central to the life of Jesus, that is the absolutely crucial Christian contribution needed today. Niall's life and his writings show us the way. ●

Fr Cyril Lovett

Fr Cyril Lovett is from Ireland. He worked for many years in the Philippines and then in Brazil. He was Editor of Far East until he retired in 2016.

01. Fr Niall O'Brien on the cover of Misyon, a Columban magazine published in the Philippines. He was the magazine's first editor.

40 YEARS LATER

To mark the 40th anniversary of the release of the Negros Nine and the 20th anniversary of the death of Fr Niall O'Brien, Fr Donal Hogan recalls a miscarriage of justice in the Philippines and the RTE reporter that made the Columban missionary a household name.

01



On 3rd of July 1984 Frs Niall O'Brien, Brian Gore, Vicente Dangan and six lay leaders walked free from prison in Bacolod City on the island of Negros in the Philippines. They became known as the Negros Nine who had sided with the sugar cane workers in their struggle to get better conditions. It suited some local 'sugar barons' to accuse them of murder despite the fact that it was common knowledge that a rebel group, the New People's Army, was responsible for the killing.

As the late Charlie Bird of RTE wrote in the **Far East** magazine on the 30th anniversary of the Negros Nine's release in 2014: "The Marcos regime was clearly sensitive to pressure coming from the governments of the US, Australia and Ireland. But that was not the only pressure. Tens of thousands of ordinary people wrote letters and campaigned tirelessly for their release."

Thanks to all of this pressure from abroad the Marcos government ordered the case to be dismissed. There was a condition, however, that Columbans Frs Niall O'Brien and Brian Gore had to leave the Philippines. They reluctantly agreed to this in order to secure the release and safety of their Filipino co-accused. Two years later in 1986, President Reagan withdrew his support for the Marcos regime which immediately led to Marcos and his family fleeing the Philippines. Fr Niall returned to Negros that year and Fr Brian followed two years later.

In 1984, I was present in Tabugon parish in the mountains of Negros, where Niall was parish priest, when the Negros Nine were welcomed on their release. A huge crowd accompanied them as they walked the last kilometre to the parish house. The mood was euphoric. It was truly a triumphant return as they were greeted with great joy. Later these scenes were repeated in Ireland and Australia.

I mentioned Charlie Bird above. In 1984, as a young reporter for RTE, he was assigned to cover the court case in Bacolod City. He reported almost nightly from the prison and remained in the Philippines for over a month. He became a close friend of Niall. He wrote, "I can vividly recall sitting in that prison cell on St Patrick's Day 1984 with Niall as he sifted through thousands of cards he had received from all over Ireland, Britain and Australia." This was due in large part to Charlie himself for his dramatic on-the-scene coverage for RTE.

Charlie Bird died on 11th March this year. At his memorial Service in the Mansion House, Dublin, one of the keynote speakers, broadcaster Sean O'Rourke



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said that covering of the case of Fr Niall O'Brien and his companions was a significant moment at the beginning of Charlie's reporting career.

This year too we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the death of Niall on 27th April 2004 in the Italian city of Pisa, where he was undergoing treatment for a rare blood disease. His funeral Mass took place a few days later in Dalgan. His ashes were taken for burial by his brother, Fergus, to his beloved Island of Negros, in the Philippines.

On the morning of Niall's funeral, I went into the chapel in Dalgan thirty minutes before the Mass to check all was ready. I saw a man sitting alone on one of the chairs brought in for the expected overflow crowd. It was Charlie Bird. I went over to greet him - it was 20 years since we had met each other in Negros. That morning he wasn't on duty for RTE, he was just there to say a final farewell to his friend. Joe Little, another friend and neighbour of Niall's, was covering the funeral for RTE.

I remember visiting Niall and his companions in 1984 in that overcrowded cell. One of the first things that caught my eye was the large white stole hanging from a six-inch nail in the wall. Written on this stole in large letters were the words in Ilongo, the local language in Negros, "*Indi kamo magkahadluk. Ako ini.*" Another stole had the English version, "Do not be afraid. It is I." In prison they continued to bear witness to the presence of the Lord. It reminded me of the words of the Lord to Paul in prison in Jerusalem, "Take courage ... for you must bear witness to me also in Rome." (Acts 23:11)

Just before Niall left Negros we held a Mass in our Columban headquarters in Batang. One of the readings that day was also from the Acts of the Apostles (20:13-38), when Paul was saying farewell to the community at Ephesus as he departed for Jerusalem. He said, "Now I know that none of you will ever see my face again... There was much weeping among them all. They embraced Paul and kissed him. Then they led him to the ship." That final Mass with Niall was very moving for all present. ●

Columban Fr Donal Hogan was ordained in 1969. He spent 30 years on mission in the Philippines. He is now based in Dalgan.



01. Fr Niall O'Brien is welcomed back to Ireland with garland. Cover of the Far East magazine September/October 1984.
02. Fr Niall O'Brien (1939-2004)
03. Frs Niall O'Brien, Brian Gore, Vicente Dangan and six lay leaders in prison in Bacolod City.
04. Fr Niall O'Brien, Bishop Myles McKeon, Fr Brian Gore and Fr Vicente Dangan at Mass in jail. Photo: Fr Shay Cullen.
05. Fr Niall with sugar cane workers on the island of Negros in the Philippines.
06. RTE reporter Charlie Bird in jail beside Fr Niall. Photo: RTE.
07. Homecoming of (l-r) Fr Brian Gore, Fr Niall O'Brien and Fr Vicente Dangan in Origao. Photo: Far East magazine.