

far east

MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES

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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

A bee collecting pollen in the Biobío region of southern Chile. The area is famous for its honey-derived products from wild flora. But this is now threatened by the proliferation of large monoculture plantations, such as pine and eucalyptus. Photo: Columban Missionary, Fr Alvaro Martinez.



The story of the Columban missionaries who gave their lives in the Philippines and in Korea is not just about loss; it is about the depth of their faith and the quiet power of love. Their lives and deaths remind us of a truth at the heart of being a Christian: real faith is not guided by fear. It does not make safety the highest priority when love and service call us to something greater.

These Columbans did not seek martyrdom. They did not look for suffering or death. They simply lived their faith by staying with the people they were sent to serve, walking alongside them in their suffering, and standing beside them in their darkest times. War was raging, danger was everywhere, but they chose to stay, not because they had to, but because love kept them there. Their safety mattered, but their mission and the well-being of the people they served mattered more. They had given their hearts to the mission and to the people, and no amount of fear or hardship could make them walk away.

Their deaths were tragic, but they were not just stories of violence and loss. They showed something much greater. They showed a love that chooses to remain, even in the face of danger. This love is not reckless or self-destructive; it does not demand suffering for its own sake. Instead, it shows up every day in small acts of kindness, in the willingness to be present, to care, and to stay, even when everything seems hopeless.

Faith is not about seeking suffering for its own sake, nor is it about carelessly putting oneself in harm's way. The Columban martyrs did not throw themselves into danger needlessly. But when faced with the choice between self-protection and remaining true to their vocation to love and serve, they chose to stay. They chose to stand with the people, to share

in their struggles, and to walk alongside them, even when the cost was high. Faith does not ignore fear, but it does not let fear dictate what is worth doing.

The commemoration of the Columban martyrs in Manila and in Korea invites us to reflect on the depth of their commitment. They did not seek to be heroes; they simply chose to love and serve. Their witness speaks to all of us. It reminds us that the strongest love is often the quietest. It is found not in dramatic sacrifices but in small, daily acts of kindness and faithfulness. It is in choosing to be present for others, to give what we can, and to love without asking for anything in return.

As we remember them, we are invited to embrace each day with open hearts, to live with the same quiet but unwavering devotion, and to trust that the smallest acts of love can reveal the true depth of faith. ●

Fr Andrei Paz

Society Leader, Missionary Society of St Columban

DELVE DEEPER

Water scarcity caused by large monoculture plantations in southern Chile is an issue close to Fr Alvaro Martinez's heart. Thanks to his efforts some native trees and wild flora are flourishing and enhancing biodiversity.

Mirrihue Alto is a rural town located five kilometres from the village of Antuco in the Biobío province of southern Chile. Some of its inhabitants work in the production of honey and honey-derived products. One of the major challenges facing the area is the lack of native trees and wild flora, primarily due to the proliferation of large monoculture plantations, such as pine and eucalyptus.

Trees like eucalyptus can consume between 20 liters of water per day for a three-year-old tree and up to 200 liters a day for a 20-year-old tree, which damages the ecosystem, draining away all the water and rendering these hectares highly vulnerable to forest fires. Furthermore, pine trees cause significant harm to the soil, and this has a knock-on effect on the local wildlife and the ecosystem generally.

Water scarcity is one reason it is difficult to maintain and support native trees and wild flora. In order to maintain floral diversity, deep irrigation wells are often necessary because monoculture directly impacts the lives of bees, pollination, honey production and its by-products, and thus negatively impacts the area's wildlife. That is why, years ago, when I discovered this particular part of my native Chile, I began dreaming of digging a deep well that would enable me to plant native trees which would in turn directly benefit the local ecosystem.

The digging of the well was a long and complex journey in coming to fruition

because the soil is very rocky, the water is deep down in the ground, and this makes well-construction expensive. Over the years of waiting and searching, a satellite survey revealed that the land where I wanted to dig was unsuitable. This discouraging revelation didn't deter me from dreaming and continuing my search.

A few months ago, a small company informed me they could drill a well, so we resumed the hunt for a suitable location. The search for water was carried out using an ancient technique used by the local Mapuche people: they used wooden rods while today pieces of copper wire are used. This method of searching for the "eye of water" or the location of deep water is called *zahorí*. Thanks to this technique, we identified the perfect spot to dig and create a well that would provide water.

I worried about the cost, but with the help of a few friends, I managed to cover the expenses. The man

01. A bee collects nectar from some wild flowers in Chile.

All photos: Fr Alvaro Martinez.

02. Digging for water which was found at a depth of nine metres.

03. The Biobío province of southern Chile where many are involved in the production of honey, but which is threatened by the proliferation of large monoculture plantations, such as pine and eucalyptus.

04. Biodiversity encompasses all living organisms, including plants, animals, fungi, and microorganisms, and the ecosystems they form.

overseeing the project revealed that the water was at a depth of 11 metres. His calm demeanour encouraged me to take the risk, though I hadn't said a prayer or sprinkled holy water nor brought a holy medal to the chosen spot.

The initial digging was challenging as the ground was filled with rocks. As we became a little unnerved by the fact that we were only encountering rock, a local man (digging a well is a community effort where all the neighbours help) asked me if I had sought Mother Earth's permission to dig and draw water. This question, "Did you ask Mother Earth's permission to dig and draw water?" lingered in my mind.

Early the next day, I returned to the site to pray. I sprinkled holy water from Lourdes, and placed a blessed medal of the Virgin Mary in the soil, and I also sought Mother Earth's permission to continue digging



for water. Soon afterwards the ground began to give way and water gushed from a depth of nine metres. By 13 metres, a steady flow was assured for the trees that will be planted this winter. These native trees will be donated by those supporting this contribution to biodiversity.

This experience has taught me to continue searching even when the 'studies' are unfavourable; it encourages me to trust the dream that drives my search. It reveals the wisdom in "asking permission" which implies recognising our interconnectedness rather than seeing ourselves as owners of Mother Earth or *Ñuke Mapu* in the language of the Mapuche people. It reminds me to trust what others share (the small businessman, the man with the copper rods, the neighbour who accompanied me), and urges me to delve deeper, motivating me to remove the obstacles. Arduous work but one that offers an encounter with life: water! ●

Fr Alvaro Martinez is a Columban Missionary from Chile. He was ordained in 2003. Based in the US region, before that he worked for the Society's General Council in Hong Kong. He was also Vocations Co-ordinator and Regional Director in Chile. His photographic work can be seen here: www.missionlens.cl

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