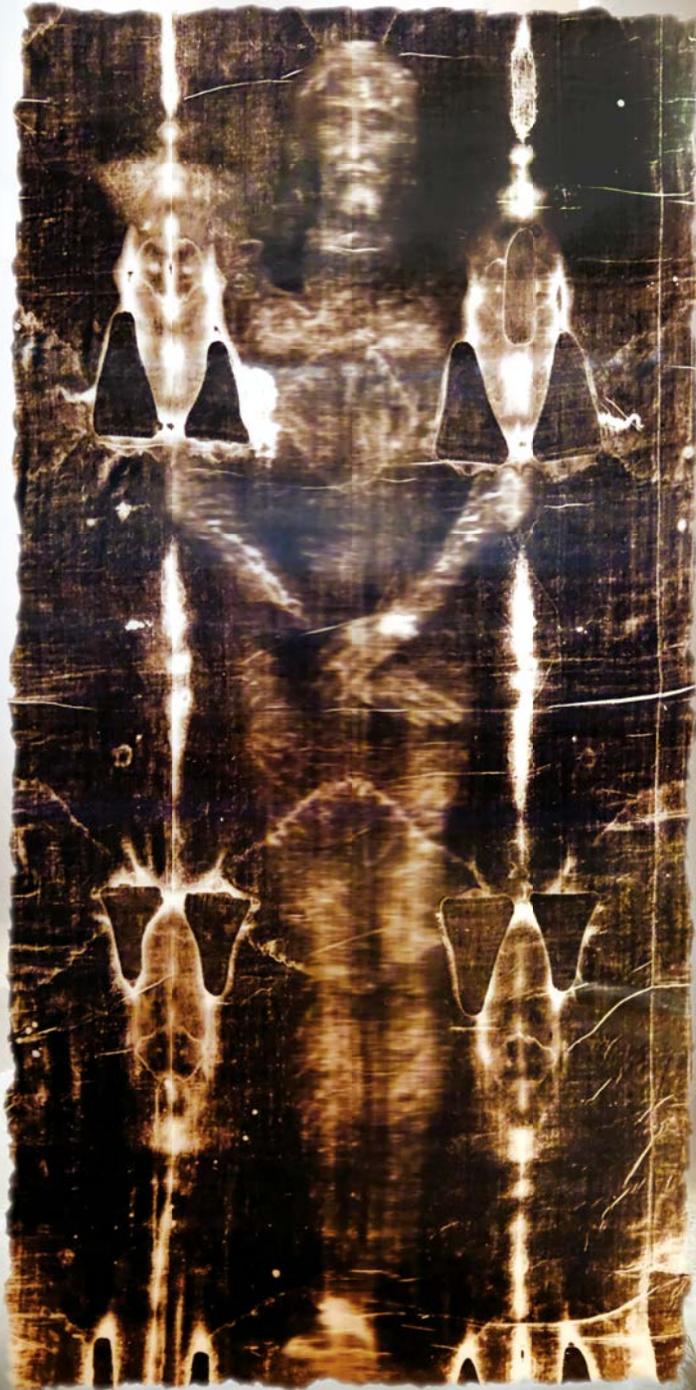


# far east



MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES

MARCH/APRIL 2026



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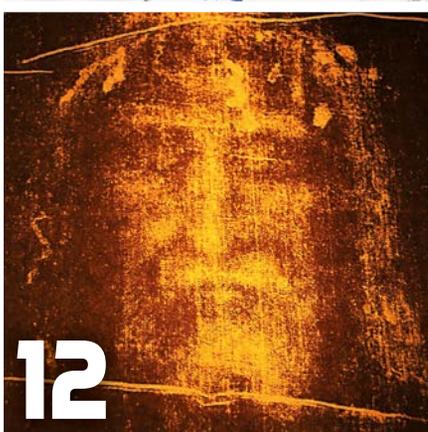
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**THE FAR EAST**

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**THE PURPOSE OF THE FAR EAST IS**

To promote an awareness of the missionary dimension of the Church among readers; to report on the work of Columban priests, Sisters and lay missionaries; and to seek spiritual and material support for missionaries.

**far east**

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**Front Cover**

The Shroud of Turin is itself a negative image so a photographic negative of the Shroud displays its positive image, allowing people to see more clearly the appalling wounds suffered by the man who was wrapped in the cloth. Image: Shutterstock

In our Easter issue of the **Far East** magazine we are featuring a depiction of the Crucifixion by Fijian artist Peni Vuniceva. The women in the painting are in Fijian attire of *Masi* cloth and white *sulus*, while Christ and the menfolk have Fijian features. The young men in the background (soldiers) who sit casting lots for Christ's garment are all in grass skirts. The background depicts the hills and mountains around Vanuakula and Namosi.

Vatican II explored the relationship between faith and culture in *Gaudium et Spes*. It recognised the Church's historical experience of inculturation, as far back as the Greco-Roman world. The Council emphasised the importance of engaging with cultures in the process of evangelisation. Pope John Paul II stressed that the inculturation of the Gospel enlightens, purifies, and elevates cultures without imposing foreign cultural models.

Inculturation means the Gospel takes root in local traditions, languages, symbols, and ways of life, transforming them from within while also being enriched by these cultures. It makes missionary work more effective, authentic, and respectful. It allows the Gospel to be truly at home in every culture, while also challenging missionaries and local communities to deeper faith and understanding. When the Gospel is inculturated it ceases to be seen as a foreign import and becomes the faith of the local people. This fosters a sense of ownership and authenticity, making the Christian message more credible and attractive.

Columban Missionary Fr John Mahoney was well versed with the teachings of Vatican II and worked tirelessly to impress the importance of inculturation among his catechists and parishioners in the huge rugged interior parish of Vanuakula Parish on Viti Levu (Fiji's main island). He encouraged a local man Peni Vuniceva to paint biblical scenes in the parish church in Vanuakula. Peni had contracted leprosy at an early age and developed his artistic skills while staying at a leprosarium.



01

Fr John wanted these paintings to reflect Fijian lifestyle and culture rather than traditional European artistic expressions. He had long conversations with Peni and read scripture stories to him and showed him Chinese, Japanese and African Catholic art. Peni realised what was demanded of him and engaged in conversations with the village people about why his paintings would not be modelled on traditional European Catholic art.

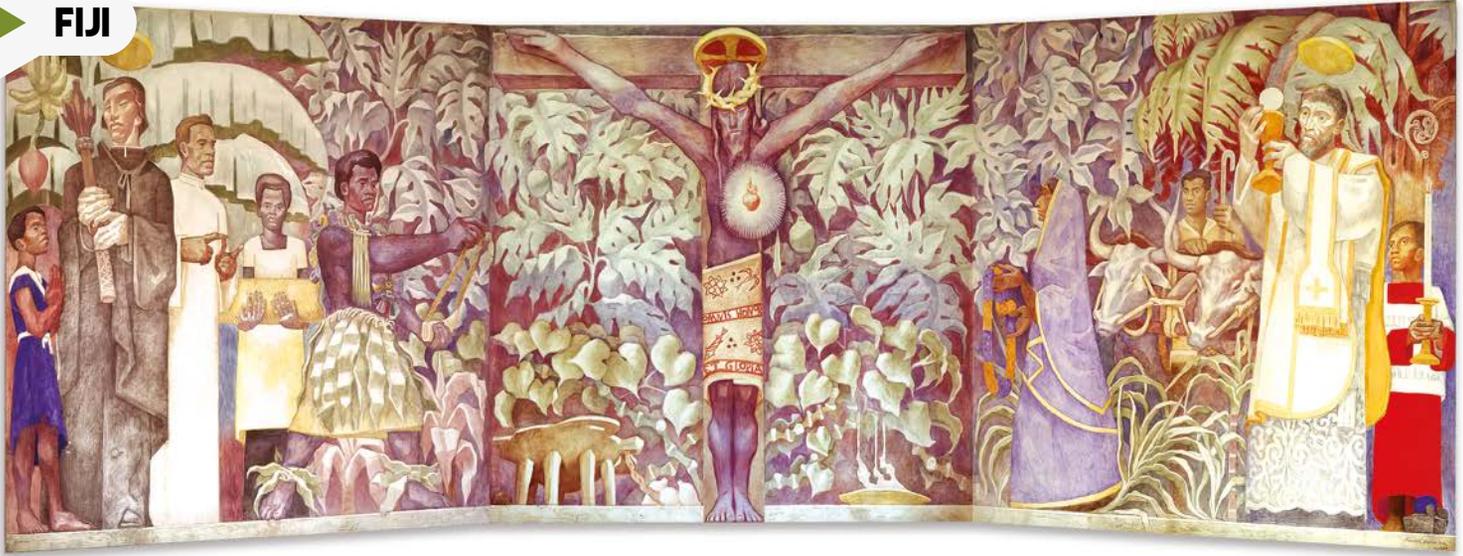
Peni painted four large biblical scenes for Fr John: the Nativity (published on the cover of the **Far East** magazine in December 2024), the Baptism of the Lord in the Jordan, the Wedding feast of Cana and finally the Crucifixion. Peni later wrote to Fr John about what these paintings meant to him: a new artistic experience, a deeper understanding of his faith and the joy of watching the people as they studied his paintings and sat in quiet prayer and meditation before them. Both Peni Vuniceva and Fr John Mahoney have now gone to God, the maker and creator of all. ●

**Fr John McEvoy**

Fr John McEvoy was ordained in 1972. He served on mission in Fiji and is now based in Ireland.

01. Depiction of the Crucifixion in Vanuakula Parish by Fijian artist Peni Vuniceva. Photo: Fr John McEvoy.





Fr John McEvoy writes about St Francis Xavier Parish in Fiji where the Gospel has been inculturated through the medium of art.

# THE CHURCH OF THE BLACK CHRIST



01. The mural of the Black Christ in Naiserelagi, Fiji.

02. View of the mural from a pew in the Church of St Francis Xavier.

03. St Francis Xavier Church in Naiserelagi

04. Fr Denis Fitzpatrick, First Superior of the Columbans in Fiji, Bishop Foley, Monsignor Frans Wasner and Fr John Clerkin SM.

Image courtesy 'The Turning Wheel' by Columban Fr Frank Hoare.

05. Columban Fr Kieran Moloney.

06. Nakauvadra Mountain Range.

Travelling on the King's Road between the cities of Lautoka and Suva in Fiji one passes the daunting Nakauvadra Mountains in Ra province on the northwestern side of Viti Levu, Fiji's largest Island. This mountain range is a cultural and spiritual site considered to be the 'cradle of the Fijian people'. It is therefore deeply important to the country's identity. According to legends, gods and ancestors walked here. This is the resting place of their ancestral spirits.

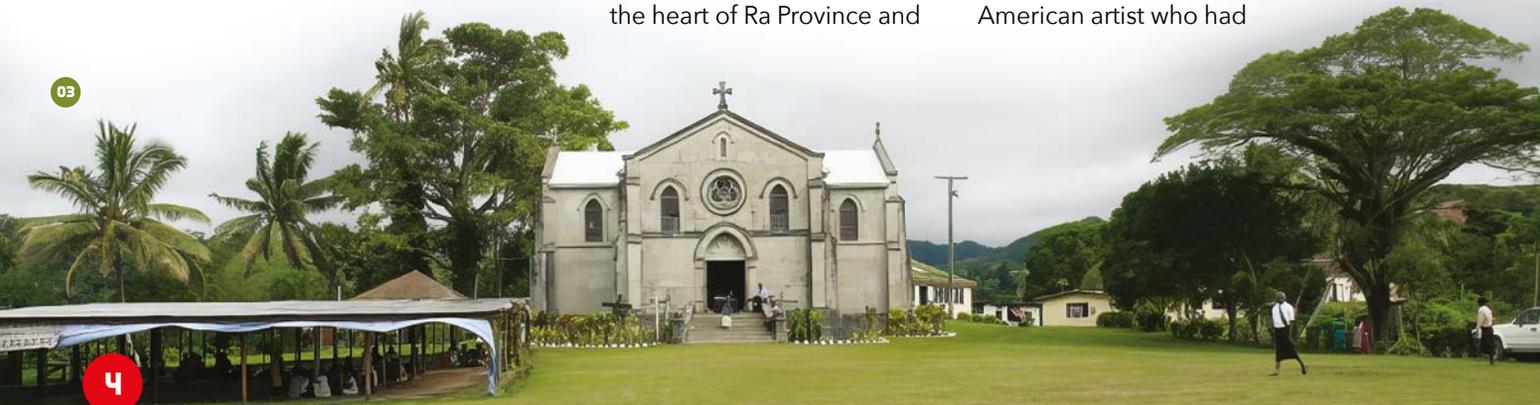
Nestled under the Nakauvadra Range is the Parish of St Francis Xavier, with its church and school. An Indian-born priest named Fr Claudius Lurkhur, who was ordained in 1922, recognised the spiritual and communal needs of the local population, and purchased land beneath the sacred Nakauvadra Range. His vision was to create a foundation for Catholic pastoral ministry and education and this led to the setting up of the parish.

It anchored the Catholic faith within the heart of Ra Province and

fostered a sense of belonging among the local Fijian community. This early commitment by Fr Claudius paved the way for future pastoral leaders to build upon his legacy and further develop the parish as a centre for faith and culture. These included Monsignor Franz Wasner, an Austrian priest who was music director and spiritual advisor to the 'real' Von Trapp Family as well as Columban priests such as Fr Martin Dobey and Fr Kieran Moloney who spent many years as pastors of this huge rural parish.

After his time with the Von Trapp family, Monsignor Franz Wasner chose to devote himself to missionary work in Fiji. He served at the Catholic mission in Naiserelagi in the 1960s, which was in fact the parish of St Francis Xavier. Sometimes nowadays it is called the Church of the Black Christ. It was Monsignor Wasner who invited the artist Jean Charlot to Fiji and commissioned him to paint the iconic Black Christ mural.

Jean Charlot was a French-American artist who had



painted murals throughout Mexico and in Hawaii. His wife Zohmah and his son Martin assisted and helped him with fresco technique and wall preparation. In Fiji, Monsignor Wasner oversaw the theological direction of the artwork and ensured the murals reflected Fijian culture, landscape, and people.

He believed strongly that: Christianity should be inculturated, not imposed; the local Fijians should see themselves reflected in sacred art; and that art could serve as a form of catechesis, teaching the faith visually. This was radical and revolutionary for its time, challenging Eurocentric religious imagery long before Vatican II. The Vatican Council later encouraged exactly this approach.

The mural in St Francis Xavier Parish consists of three panels. The central panel depicts the Crucified Christ on the cross with dark skin and Melanesian features. The mourners and worshippers are Fijian villagers, and the setting reflects local vegetation and village life. The Black Christ on the cross is wearing *Masi* cloth around his waist - *Masi* is an important Fijian traditional symbol. Behind him are breadfruit trees and his heart is a breadfruit. (The Fijian word for breadfruit is *Uto*, but it is also the Fijian word for the heart). At the bottom of the cross is a kava bowl or *Tanoa* where the kava is mixed and served. People sit around the kava bowl and drink in turns from a common cup. It has often been compared to the Eucharist or the one cup of the Eucharist.

Fijian figures pay homage to Christ. On the left-hand side there is a Fijian girl in a blue school uniform - she was attending the parish mission school at the time of the painting. Next to her is the figure of St Peter Chanel who was martyred on the Island of Futuna and is the patron saint of the Pacific. Next to him in white is Fr Petero Mataca, who was the first Fijian Catholic priest to be ordained. He was stationed in Naiserelagi after his ordination for some time and

became the first indigenous Fijian Bishop of Suva in 1974 and in 1976 the Archbishop of Suva. A Fijian woman brings Christ an offering of woven mats, and a Fijian man with arms outstretched is offering Christ a bowl of kava.

To Christ's left, an Indo-Fijian woman in a sari is offering a garland of flowers. Behind her is an Indo-Fijian man with two oxen (very symbolic for the Indo-Fijian community who worked the sugar cane fields for years). In the foreground is the figure of St Francis Xavier offering Mass and an acolyte who serves his Mass. Of course, the parish is called after this Jesuit missionary who is also the patron saint of Goa in India. Fr Claudius Lurkhur would have learned all about St Francis Xavier when studying for the priesthood in India.

The mural clearly teaches us that when 'Christ is lifted up on the Cross' he draws everyone and all things to himself. This is important in Fiji where the two main races are Fijians and Indo-Fijians, who are often suspicious of each other's ways, cultures and customs.

The mural of the Black Christ at Naiserelagi is part of a global tapestry of images that locate Christ within the life of a particular people. It is not merely about skin colour, but about representing Christ as truly present in the world's many cultures - a theme shared across Latin America, Africa, Asia and beyond, yet expressed uniquely in each culture's art and devotion.

When the mural was complete the entire parish of St Francis Xavier, Naiserelagi held a feast in honour of Jean Charlot. Cows were slaughtered and the traditional kava or *yaqona* ceremony took place at which the artist was presented with Fijian mats as depicted in the mural. ●



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