

far east



MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES

JULY/AUGUST 2026



FULL CIRCLE

Myanmar and
the Columbans

ST COLUMBANUS BELL

Hong Kong-Ireland Link

BIODIVERSITY IN CHILE

Columbans promote
Laudato Si'

04 A Mission Turns Full Circle

Fr Leo Gopal is a priest of the Diocese of Myitkyina, in Kachin State, Myanmar. On his first visit to Dalgan in Ireland, Fr Pat Colgan spoke to him about his family's many connections with the Columbans.



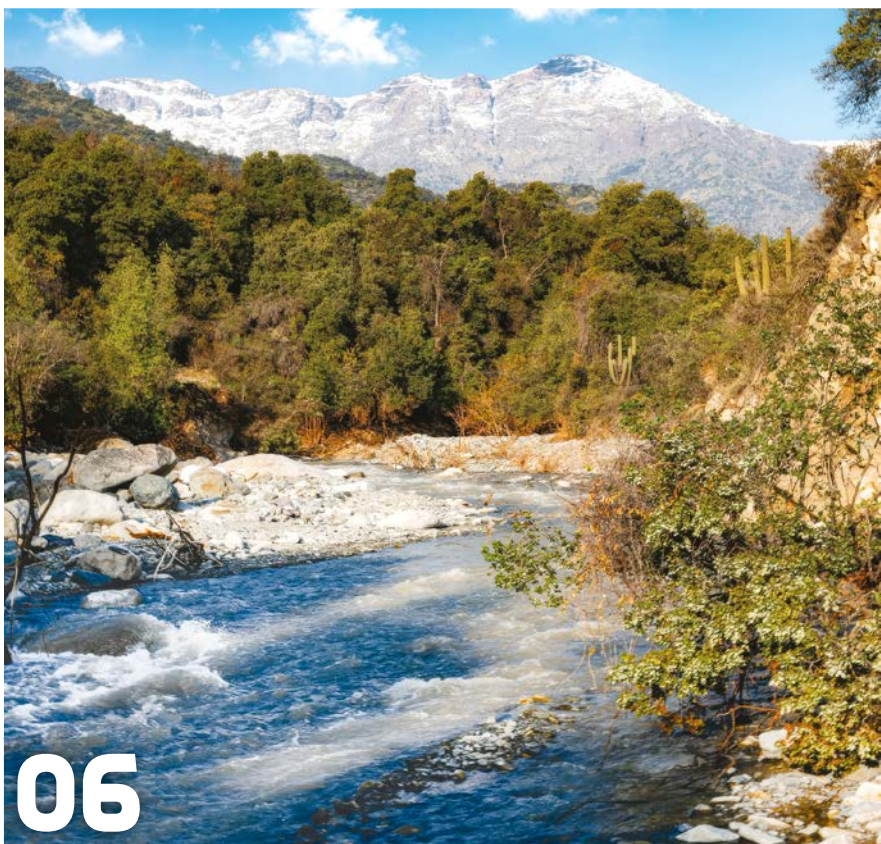
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THE FAR EAST

Published seven times yearly by the Missionary Society of St Columban (Maynooth Mission to China).

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.

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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 Peterborough

Columban Websites

www.columbans.co.uk
www.columbansisters.org

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Missionary Society of St Columban

Widney Manor Road, Solihull,
West Midlands, B93 9AB.

Reg. charity 221594 (England & Wales) and SCO38948 (Scotland)

Columban Sisters

Magheramore, Co Wicklow,
A67 HY02. Tel: +353 (0404) 67348

Front Cover

Replica of the 6th century Columbanus/
Gall bell which was gifted to the
Columban Sisters by Columban
Missionary Fr Seán McDonagh.
Photo: ColumbanMissionImages.



THE FIJI PIONEERS

In October 1964, a group gathered around Columban Fr PJ Kelly in Lautoka Parish and the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart was born in Fiji. From that small beginning, the PTAA spread through all of Fiji and the Pacific. In 2024 the Pioneers gathered at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Suva to celebrate the diamond (60th) anniversary of the movement in Fiji.

Fr James Cullen SJ started this association in Dublin in 1898. There was a lot of alcoholism in Ireland at that time. Fr Cullen asked people who did not have a problem with drink to abstain freely from all alcohol. They pledged this through the Sacred Heart of Jesus for those addicted or in other difficulties with alcohol. The Sacred Heart is a symbol of Christ's love for us, human and divine.

Fiji has 34 parishes and the Pioneer Association exists in each parish. Besides abstaining from alcohol, Pioneers wear a pin featuring the Sacred Heart of Jesus. They also repeat their Pioneer pledge to abstain from alcohol each day.

I became a permanent member of the Association as a teenager but broke my pledge in the Seminary. However, either in 1976 or 1977, when helping to give a parish retreat in Aghina, my uncle, Fr

Seamus Corkery's parish, near Macroom, I felt myself being called back. Permanent Pioneers get one reprieve and so, after a year's discernment, I joined again and have no regrets.

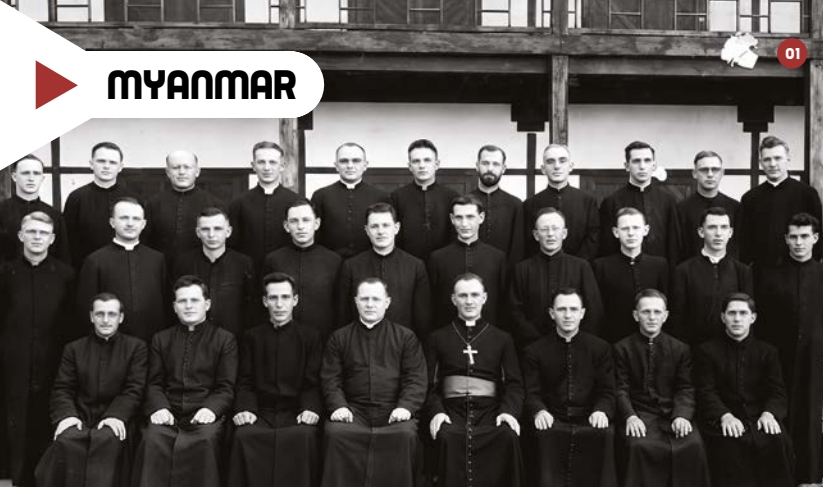
God often uses us in unexpected ways to help others who are struggling.

On my first day in Vienna and I was coming out of a bank. I said hello to someone and discovered he was from Liverpool. His mother had died and he asked me if I would offer Mass for her. I said I would be delighted. It was his birthday and he invited me to join his birthday gathering. Knowing nobody in Vienna, I was happy to go along. As I got to the beer garden late, everyone was well on in their cups. Why was I not drinking? I tried to explain that I was a 'Pioneer' as I sipped my *Spaetsi*, a Coke and Fanta concoction.

Months later I got a letter from my Liverpool friend. "Dear Fr Donal, Thanks for sharing that you too were an alcoholic. This helped me to face my alcoholism and now I am organising AA for central Europe." ●

Fr Donal McIlraith

Fr Donal McIlraith is from Macroom, Co Cork. Ordained in 1971, he taught scripture at Suva Seminary for over 35 years. He has twice been National Chaplain of the Pioneers in Fiji.



A MISSION TURNS FULL CIRCLE

Fr Leo Gopal is a priest of the Diocese of Myitkyina, in Kachin State, Myanmar. On his first visit to Dalgan in Ireland, Fr Pat Colgan spoke to him about his family's many connections with the Columbans.



Fr Leo Gopal's great-grandparents were brought from Tamil Nadu, India, to work as civil servants for the then British colony of Burma. His grandmother, 'Teacher Frances', uncle Lucas and aunt Monica were all teachers at St Columban's High School in Myitkyina, while his grandfather, Francis U Ngunt, was a police officer in the newly independent Union of Burma.

Columban Missionary Bishop John Howe was a close family friend and baptised the young Leo. By the time he reached secondary school age, all church schools had been nationalised as the military had taken over in 1962, and ordered all post-1948 missionaries out of the country in 1966. The last Columbans departed in 1979.

Fr Leo recalls a retreat given by the Columbans during which "a passion [was ignited] for the faith within me, illuminating my path and shaping my sense of vocation. It was a pivotal moment that inspired my journey towards the priesthood, serving as a testament to these retreats' profound spiritual renewal".

The Columbans had in fact entered

Upper Burma in 1936 (the Columban Sisters in 1947), focusing on the Kachin and Shan peoples. Fifty-one Columban priests served there, enduring "green hell" conditions (like malaria, war, challenging jungle and mountain terrains). Eight Columban Fathers, including Msgr Patrick Usher, and one Columban Sister gave their lives in Kachin Land.

During World War II, figures like Fr James Stuart supported the local Kachin people and Allied forces (like 'Merrill's Marauders') against the Japanese, aiding in the rescue of Allied pilots. After the war, the British government made Fr Stuart an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE) and the US government awarded him the Medal of Freedom.

The Columban Sisters focused on education, health (in more recent years, especially those living with HIV/AIDS), and rural community support. In 1965, Bishop Howe ordained the first Kachin priest, Fr Paul Grawng, and in 1977 he ordained him as the first local Bishop of Myitkyina.

All these events, and more (such as Columbans opening schools, clinics and

running for their lives from lions!) are described in Fr Leo's book 'Illuminating Kachin Land' which he began after recovering from heart surgery in 2022. It also covers the work of the Columbans' predecessors, the Paris Foreign Missionaries, who worked in Kachin Land from 1856-1936.

Fr Leo has spent most of his priestly life teaching in St Columban's Minor Seminary and St Luke's Socio-pastoral Centre for Catechists in Myitkyina, and believes passionately that the stories and sacrifices of the French, and then the Columban missionaries, should not be lost to the new generations of seminarians and lay catechists.

His time in Dalgan Park was spent refining his research about the Columbans and getting to know more about Ireland. He told me that he and many others are deeply grateful that the Columban Sisters restarted their mission in Kachin State in 2003 and the Columban Fathers in 2006, focusing on pastoral work, education, health (especially drug addiction among the youth) and peace-building.

This latter is particularly important

because, after a further brief period of democracy in Myanmar, led by Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party, following its landslide wins in 2015 and 2020, the government operated in a fragile power-sharing arrangement with the military until the 1st February 2021 coup. It occurred just before the new government's inauguration; civil strife has raged ever since.

At present there are four Columban priests, two seminary candidates, seven Columban Sisters, two postulants and one lay missionary, working in various ministries in Mandalay and Myitkyina. Fr Francis Xavier Nbwu La Aung became the first Kachin to be ordained a Columban on 1st May 2024, and Sut Nam Bok became the first local to profess First Vows as a Columban Sister last year.

All these are great signs of solidarity with and commitment to the Church and people of Myanmar in this time of conflict and suffering. The vision of Monsignor Usher and Bishop Howe and Sr Ita O'Mahoney have in a sense come full circle, and locals such as Fr Leo Gopal are living testimony to the people's gratitude to them. ●

Fr Pat Colgan is from Belfast. He was ordained a Columban in 1994 and spent 18 years in Fiji before he was appointed to the Society's General Council in 2012. He returned to Fiji in 2018 and is now based in Ireland.

01. Msgr Usher with Columban priests in Myanmar in 1947.

02. Present members of the Columban Mission Unit in Myanmar: Lay Missionary Michael Javier, Fr Kurt Zion, Fr Verano Lee, Fr Jee Hoon Augustine, and Fr Eamon Sheridan.

03. Fr Leo Gopal at the grave of Bishop John Howe, the Columban who baptised him.

04. Early Columban Sisters in Myanmar.

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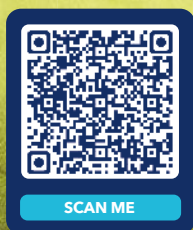
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