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MAGAZINE OF THE COLUMBAN MISSIONARIES



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CALL TO THE PERIPHERIES

Fr Willie Lee on finding his Columban vocation

MODEST HERO

Tribute to the great Fr PJ McGlinchey

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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.

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Front Cover

Fr Willie Lee on the day of his ordination.



EDITORIAL

“In Krakow, at the opening of the last World Youth Day, I asked you several times: 'Can we change things?' And you shouted: 'Yes!'” - Pope Francis.

The Pope recalled this exchange with the world's youth in his invitation to them to participate in the Synod of Bishops on young people in Rome this October to discuss the topic: 'Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment'.

The synod comes after the profoundly moving visit of Pope Francis to Ireland.

I have been involved in youth work for over 20 years in Ireland and more than ever the cry of 'we can change' echoes in young people's voices. They want change, and they want to be part of the change. That is not an empty slogan but a practical and determined cry. Their ability to organise and respond to local issues like mental health is astounding. The compassion and genuine openness to others are what mark young people today.

There is not a day that goes by when I am not called to look again at my values by a young person who challenges the way I think and believe. On the other hand not a day goes by when a young

person is not challenged by what I think and believe.

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin speaking in Maynooth in July past said, "Irish religious culture is changing. The main body of the membership of Irish Catholicism and its leadership belong to an age and cultural group that is in many ways foreign to the culture of young people. The Irish Church needs to waken itself to the urgency of this situation."

The Church will change as it has in every other generation. There is a new challenge to reach out and build a new relationship. That relationship will be fostered by a willingness to listen and to learn.

There is a great openness to service and equality among young people. There is a great willingness to support each other when a friend is not doing so well. There are times when that support is needed and I have seen first-hand the way that support is given in a quiet and generous way. Let's start the journey from here.

Fr David Kenneally served in Paskistan and also as bursar in the Irish region.



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CALL TO THE PERIPHERIES

Mark Bowling talks to Fr Willie Lee about growing up in Fiji and the missionary challenge to "come down to the grassroots".

Growing up in Fiji, Willie Lee greatly admired the Columban missionaries who travelled across the world to serve the people of his island home. His great-great-grandfather had welcomed the first Catholic priests to Vanua Levu or 'Big Land', the second major island of Fiji.

Little did young Willie know that one day he would become a Columban missionary. "I saw that the Columban missionaries were people-oriented. They were always there with the 'grassroots people', crossing boundaries and cultures and learning another language," he said. "The local people were very happy to see a foreigner speaking their own language. It gave them a feeling of belonging. And that's what caught my attention."

Willie Lee is the fourth child of six boys and three girls. His father expected that he would one day take over the family's kava growing business. He studied farming. However, all the while, there was "a yearning within".

"It was very difficult for my father as he was looking forward to me taking over the family business, but

it didn't happen the way he wanted. It happened the way God wanted," Willie said. "I started communicating with the Columbans, reading their **Far East** magazine, listening to their stories and seeing what they were doing with the Fijian people," he said.

"The sacrifices they made in their calling, in their missionary life, amazed me. If these people can leave their family, come this far, eat the food we eat and drink kava and be happy on their mission, why can't I do this? That's what I was thinking about, looking at the Church, God and missionary life."

At 23, Willie Lee started nine years of formation as a Columban missionary: three years in Fiji, a spiritual year in the Philippines, pastoral work in Peru - where he learnt to speak Spanish - and theological studies at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union.

Finally he was ordained on 2 August 2008, and almost immediately he was assigned as parish priest of San Matias, a sprawling parish of 90,000 people on the outskirts of Santiago, Chile. Fr Lee entered the tough world of the barrio slums, amongst the city's poorest. "All these social challenges were there, drugs, prostitution, murder, gangsters and shootings, suicides and young pregnancies," he said.

The people of the barrio welcomed him. As a missionary, his challenge was to "come down to the grassroots", to listen and understand the daily lives of the people. "I left my country with my suitcase

filled with my own culture, food and other things, but when I arrived, I learnt that I should have left with an empty suitcase. I needed to learn new things from the people there. It was then that I started filling my suitcase through listening," he said.

There were times when Fr Lee feared for his life. Once he was conducting a wake for a drug dealer, in an apartment, protected outside by gun-wielding gangsters. There were fears that a rival drug gang might launch an attack. "Suddenly I heard shooting outside. They were only firing their weapons in the air, but it was frightening," he said. "One thing that struck me is that in the barrio there is a lot of respect for the priest. And when they can see us attending to the people's needs they protect us."

Fr Lee said he learnt a lot about being a priest and holding on to faith during his six years in the parish of San Matias. "It is a challenge for us to respond to Pope Francis who is asking the Church to go to the peripheries, the edges," he said. "I saw the periphery in the barrio because I lived there. I can be preaching about love and reconciliation from the pulpit every Sunday but if I am not practicing it, then I feel in myself that it's nothing."

In 2016, Fr Lee was assigned back to Fiji as the Columban Vocations Director to promote vocations throughout the Pacific Islands. "Our vocations can come from Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga and the Solomon Islands. I promote vocations in schools and parishes and I enjoy this role immensely."

Fr Lee accompanies the young seminarians for the first few years of their training before they move to the Columban seminary in Manila. He said his own formation for missionary life was a great experience and one he could pass on to others.

"Great experience in crossing boundaries and learning another culture and another language has always been the charism of the Columbans in preaching the Good News. We reach out to those people in need within society, especially the marginalised." ●

Mark Bowling is a Multimedia Journalist with the Catholic Leader in Brisbane.

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