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Winter 2020

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As Divine Word Missionaries, the word “mission” is naturally important to us. But “mission” can be a broad term with unlimited meanings. There are more than 6,000 Divine Word Missionaries worldwide and almost as many definitions of mission.

This issue presents several meanings of mission. In Tanzania (“Keeping the Gospel Alive”), Father Lawrence Muthee SVD describes the traditional version of mission: spreading the Word of God. He details the difficulties of ministering to Maasai people in villages that can be reached only by the sturdiest of trucks or the nimblest of motorbikes.

In Colombia (“Facing a History of Violence”) Father Paul Gbortsu SVD also is dedicated to spreading God’s Word as part of his province’s biblical apostolate. He describes the challenges of preaching peace in a nation beset by violence for more than 70 years.

On the Indonesian island of Borneo (“He Speaks for the Trees”), Brother Pius Himaang SVD has fashioned his own mission, one rooted in the importance of God’s creation. He preserves an endangered species of trees in the forests of his homeland.

Our most recent General Chapter stressed that lay missionaries will become increasingly important to our mission. One of the leaders of this movement is Susan Noronha of India (“Called to Serve”). She explains how her parents’ selflessness inspired her to become a lay missionary.

Finally, in “Remember Mike,” Father Thomas Krosnicki SVD shares his memories of Father Francis “Mike” Hughes SVD, who returned from Papua New Guinea with Alzheimer’s disease. The story shows the adaptability of mission, as the author finds a new mission in friendship. I thought about what Fr. Mike’s mission had become in his illness, and I believe that his final mission was to reveal that God values us even in our frailty, and that we should do likewise.

Yours in the Divine Word,

Bro. Daniel Holman SVD
Mission Director

Contact me any time, my email address is:
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DIVINE WORD MISSIONARIES

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2

Keeping the Gospel Alive

Lawrence Muthee SVD

4

HE SPEAKS FOR THE TREES

A. Eko Juliantoro SVD



8

Called to Serve

Susan Noronha

Remember Mike

Thomas A. Krosnicki SVD

12

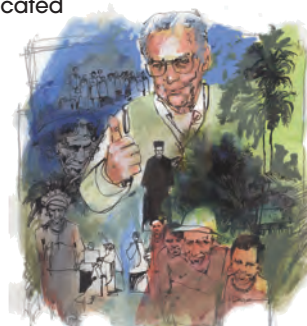
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Facing a History of Violence

Paul Gbortsu SVD

18

Our priority is to train laity who can take up the charge and assist the local churches so that the word of God can permeate the social life of Colombia.



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Keeping The Gospel Alive

By Lawrence Muthee SVD

Five year ago I did my diaconate at Good Shepherd Parish in Tanzania. In September 2019 I was appointed its pastor.

Good Shepherd Parish is one of two parishes run by Divine Word Missionaries that serve the indigenous Maasai community in the remote Simanjiro district in northeastern Tanzania. Divine Word Missionaries arrived here 18 years ago. Before that, this vast parish that covers a radius of 62 miles went about two years without any priests. During that time a few catechists kept the faith alive in the main station and in a few surrounding outstations.

Since the coming of Divine Word Missionaries, a lot has changed. Many local people have embraced the Catholic faith, and we now celebrate Mass in 25 outstations. There are also three Christian communities overseen by deacons. The population of our faithful has grown to about 50,000.

Dedicated Catechists

With only three parish priests and owing to the long distances and bad roads, we are unable to celebrate Mass at every outstation every weekend. Thankfully, we have 25 dedicated catechists who come from their communities and are committed to serving their people. Each of our catechists must take a one-month formation course. With training completed, catechists keep the Gospel alive, preparing people for sacraments and leading Bible services on Sundays and feast days.

Tough roads, tough vehicles

Strong vehicles are the only way to cope with the terrain. We have two Toyota Land Cruisers—one donated by MIVA, a Netherlands-based charity that assists with transportation costs in developing nations. Both are 10 years old and the terrain has not been friendly to them. Due to long distances on rough roads, tires must be replaced every nine months, and frequent servicing is crucial to maintain the body and keep the engine running.





Planning for the future

Here in Tanzania, most of our catechists are pastoralists—nomadic herders of sheep and cattle—this is their only source of income. Every year with a small subsidy from the congregation we are able to provide about \$15 per month to each catechist. This helps cover their transportation to our monthly meetings where we plan for Masses, baptisms and other sacraments at the outstations.

Some catechists travel up to 31 miles to reach the outstation they serve. A few have **motorbikes**, which are the preferred mode of transport due to the state of the roads—or lack of them. Those without transportation will walk for hours to get to their stations. When they arrive, they are tired. Some leave a day earlier and sleep over to make sure they are on time and refreshed for Sunday celebration.

Good Shepherd Parish is still in its elementary stage in terms of faith and Sacraments, despite it being in existence for more than 60 years. If the projects we have in mind go forward, we will make great strides in evangelizing the people of God in this remote part of the world.



We hope to buy simple motorbikes for more of our catechists so they can reach the stations on time and alert. The common bikes are highly fuel efficient, running as far as 25 miles on one liter of fuel. The models we are considering cost between \$1,000 and \$1,500 each.

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We hope to build guest rooms in our parish compound. With photographic and safari tourism on the rise, the Simanjiro district is seeing a high demand for guesthouses. Building 10 guest rooms will cost about \$30,000. This project would generate money to pay for our catechists' pastoral needs.



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In Indonesia, Brother Pius works to preserve endangered tree species

By A. Eko Juliantoro SVD

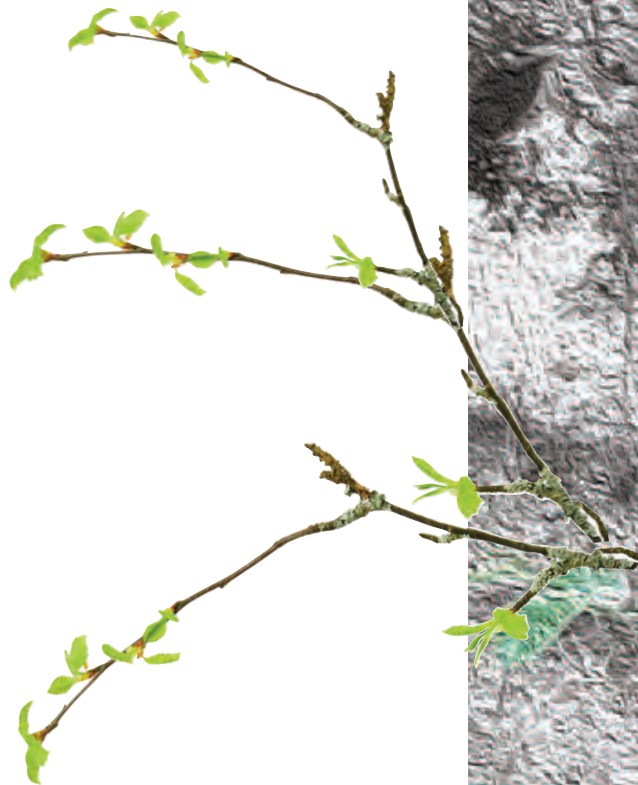
It is an early morning. The sun has just risen, yet the air already is hot and dry. Brother Pius Himaang SVD, on his daily routine, heads to his nursery to check on saplings of the Ulin tree. He inspects and cleans the polybags that contain the saplings, then waters the contents gently. After some time, Bro. Pius joins his confreres for morning prayer and Mass in the chapel of the Divine Word community at the St. Francis job training center in Tayan, West Borneo.



The job training center is located in the West Kalimantan region of Borneo, which is the largest island in the Indonesian archipelago. This region is Bro. Pius' home, so he has reason to pay special attention to the welfare of the Ulin tree (also called the Belian tree).

As an indigenous Dayak, Bro. Pius grew up in a remote area of West Kalimantan surrounded by Ulin trees. As years passed, his heart broke as he watched the tree's population dwindle. It has become rare to find one in the forest. Bro. Pius fears the Ulin tree will be left only as a sweet memory of the Dayak people, as gone as history.

The Ulin is indigenous to Indonesia and much identified with Kalimantan. It is high quality and valuable tree because of the timber it produces, called Kalimantan ironwood. A dense lumber, it is resistant to bacteria, fungi, insects and water. It is called ironwood because it lasts for ages. The timber is so dense because the Ulin tree grows at a glacial pace, around 0.5 to 1 centimeter each year.



Illegal loggers who defy Indonesia's ban on the export of the ironwood timber are the greatest threats to the Ulin tree's survival. Yet even legitimate agriculture businesses are contributing to the tree's downfall because fewer growers want to plant the Ulin tree. They prefer faster-growing species with greater economic benefits, such as the palm oil or rubber tree.

To save these trees, Bro. Pius two years ago joined with students from the job training center to start a "Let's plant Ulin/Belian" movement. Their mission is to educate and motivate the Dayak people on the importance of preserving their local Kalimantan plant and to be proud of it. Bro. Pius gives away Ulin seedlings for planting. He trains people on how to nurse the saplings and find the best place to plant. His dream is that every single village will have at least one growing Ulin tree.

Bro. Pius' passion for "Let's plant Ulin/Belian" is remarkable. However, there





are those who question the worth this mission. When I ask Bro. Pius about this, he replies: “I know what I am doing right now has raised many questions, even scorn from people. What are the benefits? It's just a waste of time and money! But, look, when God created this plant, who got the benefits? When our ancestors planted them, for whom? The only answer is *us*! Then what is wrong if I encourage people to plant this tree for our next generations? Otherwise, they will only see the picture of this tree in the internet! I do not want that happen!”

Looking at the sky, he continues, “I don’t think the success of this mission is measured by economic benefits. In the face of ... a crisis for the Ulin/Belian tree, it would be irresponsible for me not to take action seriously. So the “Let’s plan Ulin/Belian” movement is a real action to love, preserve and protect God’s gift to our Kalimantan land! This is, for me, the value of our mission here.”



LORD, grant us Wisdom to
Care for the EARTH

LORD, grant us the wisdom
to care for the EARTH
and till it.

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of future generations
and all your creatures.

Help us to become instruments
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of your love.

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—from *The Cry of the Earth*

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Called to Serve

*Inspired by
her parents,
Susan Noronha
becomes lay missionary*

By Susan Noronha

My name is Susan Noronha and I come from a land of picturesque beauty, India. I love my country because India is a nation with unity in diversity. People from various religions, castes and beliefs live side by side.

As a kid, I grew up watching my father dressing the wounds of a leper in my little village. My job was to pass the cotton swabs to him. For me, my father was a hero and my hero left me soon after I celebrated my 10th birthday. My mother was a teacher in the parish school, and she knew almost every family in the village. She was a kind-hearted giver as well, and I continue to experience the fruits of my parents' generosity in my village. She too left me and joined my father soon after I finished my graduation. God took them before I could say a proper goodbye.

"Keep breathing"—that is what I told myself when I started living in a hostel, buried under fears, trauma and rejection. Days, months, years passed. My strength came from lifting myself up every time I was knocked down. I waited for wisdom.

Finishing with my studies, I started working for a corporation and married a wonderful man,



Tribal children's visit to Mumbai.

Leo Chettiar. He is not only my husband but also my best friend. It was around the time of our wedding that I realized what I had to do. I understood that my parents had left their imprint on me. I wanted to be a missionary!

Disciples of the Divine Word

In 2012 I quit my secure job and joined Divine Word Missionaries' lay partners group, *Disciples of the Divine Word*, in the Mumbai Province of India. In 2015, I was elected president of this group.

Disciples of the Divine Word identifies itself with the Trinitarian and missionary spirituality of

Divine Word Missionaries. This motivates us to be rooted in communion with the Word and committed to Christ's mission. Our regular meetings, recollections, retreats, visits to remote missions and other programs are geared to build us up as a community alongside and with Divine Word Missionaries.

We seek to emulate Jesus' ministry through compassionate service and sharing the Word with others. Through the years, Disciples members have learned to appreciate the wonderful ways God worked in the life of St. Arnold Janssen and in the Divine Word congregation. In this communion of mind and heart, members have discovered God's gifts in their own lives and have generously shared them with others.



Susan Noronha with ING Tripura

Two Journeys to Rome

From my India subzone I was chosen to attend a lay partners' workshop in Nemi, just outside of Rome. During the workshop, we cherished the value of interculturality. We were people from diverse cultures, languages, and nations celebrating this richness through liturgy, songs and fun-filled conversations.



Lay partners: Sophie Wego from the Europe Zone, Len Uhal from the Pan-American Zone, Patrice Rono from the Africa-Madagascar Zone.

Fr. Heinz Kluge SVD, Susan Noronha

This workshop gave me immense enthusiasm to continue my mission work with the spirit of St. Arnold Janssen and as a member of the Arnoldus family. It was an opportunity that was given to me by my group members and my province's leadership team.

In 2018 I was selected from the Asia-Pacific Zone to attend Divine Word Missionaries' 18th General Chapter that ran from June through July in Nemi. This was the first time a general chapter had a representation of four lay partners from Divine World Missionaries' four zones participating throughout the whole chapter. In addition to myself, the other lay partners were Patrice Rono from the Africa-Madagascar Zone, Sophie Wego from the Europe Zone and Len Uhal from the Pan-American Zone.

The lay partners were invited not only to make a presentation on their collaboration with the religious missionaries but also to take part in the agenda of the general chapter in the fullest way possible, with the exception of the voting. From attending all the



2018, Susan with Pope Francis

chapter sessions, to the outings, pilgrimages and watching World Cup soccer, we were received by the confreres as members of the Arnoldus family.

A Missionary's Call

The lay partners publish a newsletter thrice in a year in two languages, English and Spanish. I am the editor in chief, and my editorial team consists of Matilda Anim-Fofie from Ghana, Laura Inés Díez Bilbao from Spain, Fabian Pagaduan from the Philippines, Gianini Sahagun Becerra from México and Sophie Wego from Germany.

A call to be a missionary is a call from Christ to deepen our own faith and share it with the people around us. Being a disciple is a challenge. Collaboration is not always easy—sometimes among other lay partners and sometimes with Divine Word Missionaries. Keeping the dialogue channels open has helped us in overcoming the communication and relationship blocks.

What has helped us is the strong faith that together we can do much and that in times of difficulties an answer always emerges. To quote Superior General Paul Budi Kleden SVD: “Let us help each other to be true to our name, Missionaries of the Divine Word, because our name is our mission.”

Give a monthly sustainer gift!

Becoming a monthly sustainer is the easiest and eco-friendliest way to provide ongoing, reliable support for our missionaries overseas.

To sustain our mission programs overseas, it is an undeniable necessity to use these two words “plan” and “budget.” Budgeting is the only way to ensure program consistent funding.

Preaching the Gospel, feeding the poor, providing medical attention to those in need and helping families around the world become self-reliant takes a lot of planning. These long-term investments in the future of struggling Catholic faith communities can only be done with consistent and planned monies coming in.

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Remember Mike

Pages from a Visitor's Diary

By Thomas A. Krosnicki SVD



“He returned home that way” is what they said as they observed Father Francis “Mike” Hughes SVD. Some hadn’t seen him for decades, since he went to the Pacific in the early ’50s. At that time he was young, handsome and vibrant with Irish traits of humor and friendliness that served him well during his four-decade missionary tour in Papua New Guinea. Now, he was back home at Techny, where he had been schooled in religious life and educated for the priesthood.

He came home with Alzheimer’s.

Word of Mike’s return crept along the corridors, carried by whispers. The young novices glanced furtively at the stooped white-haired figure. And the senior members, who had followed his career, talked about Mike in the past tense mostly. He was a handsome man. He was a good priest. He was a terrific missionary. All in the past, as if there was no future for Mike. It was almost as if once diagnosed with the “Big A” one was dead. Dead but not buried. But Mike was home. He was here to stay.

The doctors in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, weren’t certain of the correct diagnosis for Mike. Surely, he exhibited signs of serious illness, but what illness? Had he suffered from too much quinine taken regularly to ward off malaria? Perhaps he had contacted dengue fever while working along the Sepik River and it had scrambled his brain. Tropical diseases abounded; they were not always detectable or treatable. The locals knew that as well as the veteran missionaries.

Australian doctors in Sydney confirmed suspicions as test after test pointed to the disease that had claimed Mike’s sister Rose three years earlier. Memory loss, slurred speech, difficulty focusing—Mike had them all. Doctors advised that he return to America where proper attention could be provided. And so he returned home “that way.”

Back at Techny Mike had to adjust to his new surroundings, spartan as they were. Although he came home with practically nothing but the clothes on his back, he made no fuss and certainly no demands on the medical team or community. Comfortable surroundings and material possessions were not important to his now shrunken life. He had been stripped of such mundane demands. All he seemed to take with him was his smile, which he wore with delight.

To a member's query, "How's it going, Mike?" he responded with a thumbs-up. The gesture indicated that everything was on the up-and-up for him. Of course, it wasn't, but he didn't seem to know it. Unfortunately, we did.

Did he know that he would never return to Papua New Guinea? He began to act as if he wanted to walk back there. The infirmary corridors were never long enough. His initial hours of walking back and forth—from nurse's desk to front entrance—eventually spilled into extended walks down the paved path of the front yard, nearly to Waukegan Road and back.

He maintained his daily routine of walks outside as long as the weather permitted. Like a young child, he would sometimes forget to put on his coat, oblivious of the inclement weather or danger to his health. He just wanted to walk and walk and walk. All the while he seemed contented. His walks nourished his appetite and assured him of rest at the end of the day.

One day, unexpectedly, he veered off his routine path. Halfway down his familiar path he turned south and pursued a new route toward the old seminary buildings on campus. What had moved him to do so? A desire to return to the past that he knew? He was brought back by car and carefully put back on track.

Parameters had to be placed upon him. Like a child, he needed to be watched. Otherwise he could wander off, attempt to cross the road and get killed. And if he went east, he would find himself in acres of woods without paths to follow home. Police and search teams would have to be brought in.

Then one day Mike responded with provoked behavior. Someone took the daily paper away from him rather

abruptly. Mike attempted to react with force and frightened the other person. No instructions had been given to the community as how to interact with persons with Alzheimer's disease. Days later, a nurse attempted to prepare him for the evening—perhaps too brusquely removing his clothes. Provoked, Mike turned unruly and disturbed the caregiver.

"He is becoming violent," some said. "We might have to put Mike into a home as we can't handle him." Of course, how he was handled made the difference. He needed to be attended with gentleness, with kind explanations and with plenty of patience.

The House Council met and decided to place Mike in a home where proper supervision could be administered. So, Mike moved from his familiar surroundings and friends—things he knew less about each day. He became a member of a new community, not of fellow missionaries but of his peers in illness. Temporarily lodged in a generic senior citizen health facility, he was several months later moved to a new Alzheimer's unit that opened in a Catholic nursing home about a half hour away. Mike was one of its first dozen patients. I decided that I would visit him as much as my work routine would permit. I kept a diary.

Thursday, Fourth Week of Easter. I was in a melancholy mood, probably from the gray weather we have had for days. As usual, when I arrived at the center, Mike was walking the length of the corridor, lost in his inner thoughts. I came from work and so was still in my clerics. Usually I was not. Mike's reaction was somewhat different. It was like he made a quicker association although



I doubt if he knew who I was or why I was there to visit with him. His mumbling seemed to be more determined and pointed. He was attempting to make conversation, as he was wont to do in the past when he met another member of his community. Yet, as hard as I tried, I understood none of it.

I was distracted by one of the other members of the Alzheimer's community and lost sight of Mike as he paced the corridor. When I spotted him again he was going into the community room/dining room designed for the 12 residents. On the table were two paperbacks, volumes of the popular "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series. Mike circled the table and then, with a look of pleasant surprise on his face, reached for the books. It was almost as if they were something he might have misplaced earlier that day and finally found. Carefully he stacked one on the other, picked them up and carried them around the room and back into the corridor. I watched him as he walked with the two books in hand, just as he must have carried his breviary hundreds of times as an active priest. He looked contented in his newly retrieved priestly identity.

Tuesday, May 12. This day I had been invited to celebrate the morning Eucharist for the residents, so I purposefully arrived early to visit Mike. Usually I would see him in the evening, checking in at least one hour before closing hours at 8 p.m. It was 9:10 a.m. and I found Mike in the small dining room, seated at his place at the table. No one else had remained behind after breakfast. The table was empty except for a vase of yellow flowers. He appeared tired, unshaven, pensive and as gray as the tabletop. I sat down and asked him how he was. "Very well," he responded, making eye contact with me. The latter was not normal. Usually I could not get him to look at me.

I told him that his sister Margaret from the East would be coming to visit him in several weeks. "Yes," he mumbled. I wondered if he still remembered his sister. She has been warned he might not

recognize her. She understood. It was so with her sister Rose in Boston. Sometimes they do; other times they don't.

Mike is not brought to the chapel for Mass as the staff felt he would probably get up and want to walk around the sacred space disruptively. I don't know. Maybe we should try. Would the ritual that he celebrated for some 50 years rivet him to his chair? One day I should ask the nurses to bring him to the chapel. After all, he had spent so much of his life in prayer and as a leader of prayer. Certainly, there must be some residue, some leftover piety of that lifelong religious commitment and practice within him.

I preached briefly on peace during the homily. Does Mike experience an inner peace? If he does, is he aware of it? Maybe in his own way he is more at peace with himself than we might suspect. "Peace, Mike," I said to myself as I drove out of the parking lot.

May 25. It is Memorial Day so I had time to visit Mike a little earlier than usual. At 6:15 p.m. I found him at the table eating supper with his three constant table companions. He was feeding himself, eating soup from a cup with a spoon. None of the four table companions spoke. One sat and appeared terribly angry as she ate. Another was almost finished and sang to herself, rubbing her stomach to a simple melody that I heard her sing on many previous occasions.

Earlier in the year Mike was unable—or at least refused—to feed himself. The nurses began to assist him since he became confused by the presence of the multiple pieces of silverware. From knife, fork and spoon, the nurses reduced the instruments to one multipurpose utensil. That helped him somewhat, but eventually the nurses had to feed him.

Yet, this evening, as I sat on the side of the dining room watching him finish his supper, he managed to feed himself, unconfused by the spoon, fork and knife. He ate everything that was before him and ended up by deftly maneuvering a leafy piece of lettuce across his plate, onto his

fork and into his mouth. Shuffling the dinnerware in some kind of configuration that must have had meaning for him, he pushed himself from the table and walked out of the dining room, right past me without notice. I called out his name. He looked up and, as though he recognized me, nodded in my direction and smiled. That was Mike. He always smiled.

June 22. Over the weekend Mike's sister Margaret and some other relatives came from the East to visit. I was unaware of their arrival and found out about it only today when I saw Mike in the Big A unit. He was, as usual, walking up and down the corridor when I arrived but he looked different. Rather than his usual baggy pants and ill-fitting shirts, this day he was dressed in new clothes. Pants were pressed; sport shirt was of nice material and a good match with his gray pants. I noticed that he had new black shoes and that he wore his wristwatch, something he never did. Time was no longer important to him.



The staff informed me that Margaret had purchased a new wardrobe for Mike. I was embarrassed, as we should have done so at Techny, but Margaret was more perceptive than we were in recognizing the need to replace Mike's clothes from Papua New Guinea and those things that had been given him, second-hand, by the community. It takes a woman to notice such things, maybe. The clothes make the man, some say. I think that they certainly made Mike look better. Maybe they made him feel better, too. I greeted Mike and invited him to shake hands. Slowly and rather sheepishly he dug his right hand from his

pocket and extended it. "Nice to see you again, Mike," I offered. He smiled.

The unit where Mike and the other patients with the Big A live is self-contained. No one is to leave the unit without an escort—nurse, family or friend. Mike seems to know the limits of his housing. He walks up to the exit door but doesn't attempt to go beyond.

On occasion I take Mike out of his quarters and beyond that ominous NO ENTRANCE sign for a walk. Weather permitting, we even go for a stroll on the spacious and well-groomed campus. As we stroll past the other rooms, I notice he tends to stay to one or the other side of the corridor, letting his right hand glide along the government-required handrail. He is not interested in looking about and doesn't appear to notice what is around him. Curiosity has been drained from him.

I point out pictures on the wall and provide a commentary about their composition. "Here are two boys and a girl fishing," I lecture. He looks but doesn't appear to see. People greet Mike—he is so lovable—but he hardly notices. He is in his own closed world; he talks his own language; he walks his own walk. "Do you like it, Mike?" I ask. "Suuura," he replies with his unhidden Bostonian accent as he shuffles along the long corridor to nowhere.

June 30. Tuesday. Mike was midway down the corridor when I finished punching in the magic number that gained me access to his ward. 1-2-3-4-*. It is as simple as that to turn the red light to green and gain entrance to the mysterious life of 12 persons with the Big A.

Mike, I noticed, was carrying something in each of his hands. In his right hand he gripped a woman's white sweater and in his left was a face cloth. He released the sweater without objection, as I gently took it from his hand and placed it at the nursing station knowing that eventually it would find its way back to its rightful wearer.

He gripped at the washcloth tightly so I

let him hang on it like a miniature Linus blanket. It wasn't something to make a scene over. Why did he tote it about? Who knows? In his shirt pocket I noticed he had folded up a small American flag—the kind that decorated all the doors in the corridor. Some staff members were preparing a visual atmosphere for July 4th. I took the felt Stars and Stripes from his shirt, unfolded it and pressed it flat on my leg. Two gobs of putty were attached to the back, intended to hold it firm to someone's door as reminder of the nation's birthday.

The irony was that neither Mike nor any



of his small community was experiencing freedom. No matter how much we wished otherwise, or were willing to fight for it, these elderly persons were held prisoners by a strange disease no one really understands. There is no militia available to set their minds free. No one at this time knows the key to open the door and make the flag of liberation a reality in their lives. I found the door where the homemade flag had been removed—or fallen—and with a little effort stuck it back into place.

Mike began to fold the facecloth and force it into his empty shirt pocket. Why did he want to save it? Did he have some idea how he would use it or was it simply one of the many things that gets picked up, embraced and discarded as he moves aimlessly from one space to another, from one room to another?

July 1. I entered Mike's room by pushing the door gently, never knowing what or whom I might encounter inside. I knew Mike wasn't inside because he trailed behind me. There in Mike's assigned room was a female patient standing at the sink holding a bottle of hand lotion and ready, it appeared, to wash for bed. She had taken off her skirt and, as I noticed later, carefully hung it in Mike's closet among his shirts and pants as she might have done routinely back in her home. Blouse and petticoat provided an ample, even modest covering for Alice. Her undressed state didn't bother Mike in the least. As he followed me into his room, he didn't even seem to notice his uninvited "houseguest." He registered no concern that someone of the opposite sex was playing house in his closet.

The "open room" policy for the residents permits each of them, without reprimand, to roam freely throughout the quarters as if each and every room were his or her own. It was their home—their last home. It was like innocent children living freely in one big, 10-bedroom family home.

I took Alice's skirt from the hanger and handed it to her with a gentle suggestion that she might like to return to her room. She held tightly to the bottle of hand lotion as if it might be laundry detergent or shampoo, ready to wash herself, her hair or maybe even her skirt with it. Foolishly, I asked if she intended to wash her clothing in Mike's sink. "What's it to you?" was her acerbic response, which sent both Mike and me down the corridor!

August 7. [Father] Elmer [Elsbernd SVD] returned to the States on home leave from Papua New Guinea. As the mission's major superior, he wondered what had happened to Mike. After Wednesday night's community summer picnic, we drove together to Mike's place for a visit. I pushed the code panel to let ourselves into the Big A quarters. Mike was not in sight. As we moved slowly, greeting his housemates, Mike emerged from another person's room oblivious to our presence or anyone else's. He was off in his world—almost reflective or contemplative

in nature. No distractions, no desires. Only his now.

We greeted Mike in Pidgin English, the language he knew well and had used for four decades as a missionary. He looked at me with some slight hint of recognition. He did not register any recognition of Elmer, who was not disappointed because he knew that recognition was more than he could have expected.

With some coaching, I helped Mike to focus, to look at me, and respond. He shook hands with his former mission superior as if he had just met him. Elmer had become a complete stranger to him. Alzheimer's affects not only the patient but all his relationships. It renders others nameless and faceless.

In mid-September I made a three-week trip to Moscow and Irkutsk in Siberia. When I returned I visited Mike to see how he had fared during the past month.

September 25. A significant change had occurred in the life of my friend Mike. His disease was moving in on him in ways that were predicted. I entered the Alzheimer's unit and did not find him walking the corridor as expected. A nurse approached me with his updated medical situation. "Fr. Mike is not walking alone anymore. He has grown too weak and has taken several falls. He could hurt himself. Now we assist him to walk, or he moves about in a wheelchair." In the course of three weeks, Mike's speed declined, his gait became heavier, his independent movement more burdensome for him. It was like he had forgotten how to walk. The progressive debilitation effects of the disease had become more manifest. That day, I found him lying on his bed, fully dressed.

January 10, 2001. Mike has taken a serious turn. He has forgotten how to swallow. No extraordinary means will be used to keep him alive. He is being kept as comfortable as possible.

January 19, 2001. I made my scheduled annual retreat at the Trappist monastery outside of Louisville, Kentucky, but cut it short as I had a feeling Mike was not doing well. I got home at about 5:15 p.m. The superior told me Fr. Mike had taken a turn for the worse and was not expected to live much longer, possibly not the day. I ate supper with the community before driving down Harlem Avenue as fast as the speed limit would permit and arrived at the nursing home a few minutes after 6.

I was six minutes late. Fr. Mike had just died. I stood alone in his barren room. Mike's body was still there but he had taken his last walk—his final journey home.

January 23, 2001.

This evening at the wake service, Fr. Mike was eulogized by a missionary from Papua New Guinea. Margaret, his sister, came from Boston for the funeral liturgies.

I was asked to preside and preach at the funeral liturgy the next day. What could I say? Should I talk about the "vanishing self" Alzheimer's disease that abducts the personality, consumes the essence of self and leaves behind only the shell of physical proof of the person? Should I point out that as a culture obsessed with memory, we are shocked by an illness that destroys memory? Sadness overcame me as I pondered Mike's death. He was and will remain my friend.



January 24, 2001. The Church now serves as Fr. Mike's memory. In sacred word and act the worshiping assembly activates its collective memory and recalls the mystery of both suffering and resurrection. Those saving events give reason for Christian hope. Ecclesial memory replaces the human. It was such thought that I developed in the morning funeral homily. I ended with a poem composed during a sleepless night:



Remember Mike

Mike probed the pockets of his memory
For remnants of past events—
Names, places and faces
That formed the contours of his heart.

What sinister thief had looted
The crevices of his mortal mind and
Left it barren, unable to recall his
Sister's face or family name?

What design, O Creator God,
Have you now for this tortured man
Stripped even of the memory
Of your eternal Holy name?

Awesome God of living and dead,
Remember your Word of kindness and
Receive your smiling servant and
Hold him tight in the garments of your
Eternal embrace and so satisfy
The reason for our hope.

Divine Word Missionaries participate in Alzheimer's research

When Father Francis "Mike" Hughes SVD returned from Papua New Guinea with signs of Alzheimer's, several of his confreres at the Techny residence already were participating in a study into the mysterious disease for medical research.

Conducted by Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, the study calls upon volunteer members of religious orders such as Divine Word Missionaries to participate. "We're looking into Alzheimer's disease as well as other age-related neurological disorders," said Tracey Nowakowski, research study supervisor at the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center. The Religious Orders Study began in 1994 and continues today.

Brother Matthew Zemel SVD is one of the participants. He has been part of the research for about 10 years, since he turned 65—the minimum age to join. Bro. Matthew explained that Rush researchers were looking for an elderly population group with an "easy going" lifestyle that they could test annually for signs of Alzheimer's. Perhaps more importantly, the researchers learned that religious were not as squeamish as laypeople about donating their brains for study when they pass away. "They guarantee us an open-coffin funeral," Bro. Matthew noted.

Volunteers do not have Alzheimer's when they join the program, and Fr. Hughes was not a part of it. The research allows doctors to collect data on the cognitive abilities of this aging

population group in the final years of their life.

Nowakowski said the study looks at several factors in the test subjects' profiles, including their lifestyle and genetics. "What we're really trying to figure out is prevention," she said. "We're trying to figure out what's protecting people and what's putting people at risk." She said the research has already revealed several preventative measures, including a healthy diet and maintaining physically and cognitively active.

Brother Matthew is one of 12 Divine Word Missionaries at Techny and the residence in East Troy, Wisconsin, currently enrolled in the research. Since the program began, 37 participating Divine Word Missionaries have passed away. Overall, the program now has 560 living participants in religious communities across the United States, including Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters (SSpS). More than 1,500 participants are now deceased.

Nowakowski said the participants view volunteering for the program as a way to continue their service. "This really is about helping future generations," she said. "We make it clear from the beginning that this is about service to others . . . and that is the appeal to the people in religious orders, that they're able to help others even after they pass away."

—Jeffrey Westhoff



Facing a History of Violence

Biblical Apostolate Aims to Transform Attitudes in Colombia

By Paul Gbortsu SVD

I am a member of the biblical apostolate team in Colombia, and we face a formidable task. We must contend with the nation's history of violence in order to offer a pathway to peace and healing through God's Divine Word.

Colombia has seen more than 70 years of uninterrupted violence, which has contributed to devastating poverty rates—especially in Colombia's urban areas. While conflicts related to land tenure have always been part of Colombia's history, today's violence can be traced back to the 1948 assassination of the liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán.

His death set off a decade-long wave of conflict called *La Violencia*, a series of bloody encounters between liberal and conservative political parties. This in turn set up the 1960s consolidation of FARC, a Marxist-Leninist guerilla movement that remained active until 2017.

Photo credit: elepeyui



About the author

Father Paul Gbortsu SVD is from Hlefi, Ghana. He professed first vows as a Divine Word Missionary in 2002. After ordination in 2007, Fr. Gbortsu was assigned to Colombia, where he was assistant pastor of Divine Word Parish in Bogotá. Later he was pastor of St. Bartholomew Parish in Murindó. From there he went to study biblical theology in the Pontifical University of Mexico. He is currently a member of the biblical apostolate team of the Colombia-Venezuelan Province and at the same time doing his doctorate in biblical theology in the Pontifical University of Mexico (by distance).

In November 2016 the government signed a peace accord with FARC. But another rebel group that did not sign the peace accord called ELN (the name translates to “National Liberation Army”) took FARC’s place in many areas where it was active.

On July 16, 2019, the Center for Popular Research and Education, a Jesuit foundation in Colombia, published a communique revealing that between January 2016 and May 2019, 702 social and community leaders were assassinated and close to 142 former FARC combatants who signed the peace agreement were “vanished.”

The Need for God’s Word

This is the environment in which we conduct our biblical apostolate. So many years of conflict have bred a phenomenon of vengeance. The violence continues even after the peace agreement because many people feel compelled to seek vengeance for the deaths of



relatives. As Divine Word Missionaries, we know and believe that the Word of God can purify the situation and transform the society.

The Colombia-Venezuela Province's SEBIVE—which stands for *Servicio Biblico Verbo Divino* or “Divine Word Biblical Service” in English—consists of myself and two other priests. We dedicate ourselves full time to the work of formation and biblical animation. Our headquarters is in Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city. Our modest house serves as a depot for needed equipment and materials such as Bibles, books and other items for the workshops.

The Apostolate in Action

This apostolate is geared towards the strengthening of biblical pastoral training of community leaders in Colombia's dioceses and vicariates. We help train pastoral agents, catechists or others involved in the Church who are interested in biblical training at the personal and community level. Our objective is to train people in their local church who have the desire to engage in the study of sacred Scripture to carry out the mission of the evangelization of the world.

In 2018 SEBIVE conducted biblical workshops in four archdioceses (Cali, Cartagena, Ibagué and Medellín), eight dioceses (Apartadó, Engativá-Bogotá, Florencia, Garagoa, Giraldoa, Quibdó, Malaga-Soatá and Montería), and three apostolic vicariates (Mitú, San Vicente de Cagúan and Tierra Dentro).

The team communicates with the bishops as well as directors of various religious and educational institutions. In two cases the bishop asked us to present our biblical training to all their priests before training the laity.

We help to establish biblical teams in the dioceses while helping to train directors of biblical animation in various institutions. Our priority is to train laity who can take up the charge and assist the local churches so that the word of God can permeate the social life of Colombia.



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