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update

mission stories from around the world  
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Volume 3 • 2024

“Be people capable of living,  
of laughing and crying with  
your people, in a word,  
communicating with them.”

—Pope Francis,  
June 7, 2021







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## EDITORIAL

We had a lot of news over the summer in the world of Divine Word Missionaries!

From late June through early July, the 19th General Chapter of the Society of the Divine Word took place. General Chapters happen every six years at our headquarters outside Rome. Divine Word Missionaries gather from around the world to review the previous six years and set the agenda for the next six years.

This is also the time when we choose our next leadership team. On July 4, Father Anselmo Ricardo Ribeiro SVD of Brazil was elected the 13th superior general of the Society of the Divine Word. He succeeds Paulus Budi Kleden SVD, now serving as the archbishop of Ende in Indonesia.

Fr. Ribeiro joined Divine Word Missionaries in 1998. He was ordained to the priesthood in 2005. Beginning in 2008, he served successively as provincial councilor in the Brazil-North Province, rector of the Juiz de Fora residence, provincial superior of the Brazil-North Province, member of the executive committee of the PANAM Zone and most recently as a general councilor in Rome.

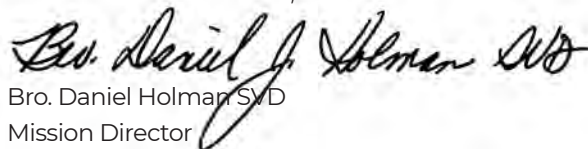
Toward the end of the summer, on Sept. 8, Divine Word Missionaries worldwide celebrated the 149th anniversary of St. Arnold Janssen founding our congregation in Steyl, Holland. The festivities on this day inaugurated a yearlong jubilee celebration that will end joyously with our 150th anniversary next September.

One of Fr. Ribeiro's first official functions was to celebrate the opening Mass of the jubilee year at the place where it all began, Steyl. In his homily he said, "Parallel to the commemorative events and liturgical celebrations that culminate next year, I insist that each one of us, members of Arnold's family, look around us, silence our desires and ask ourselves: What is the [Holy] Spirit creating in me and in our lives, and in our society at this time?"

Please join us in the many ways we will celebrate this jubilee year, and also please join us in welcoming Fr. Ribeiro as our new superior general, and in praying for his success.

Thank you and God bless you for your support.

Yours in the Divine Word,



Bro. Daniel Holman SVD  
Mission Director

Contact me any time, my email address is  
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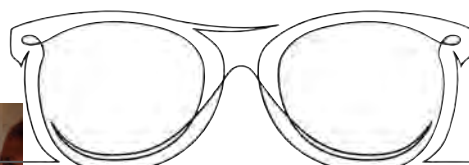
**Thank you  
for your  
prayers & support!**



## Compassion in Action The Odyssey of Brother Douglas Simonetti

2

Reprinted from Arnoldus Nota



## Looking Good

Improvements bring better care  
 at optical shop in Ghana

Andrzej Kedziora SVD



STAY  
 IN  
 TOUCH



14

## Mission in Oiapoque Christmas in the Amazon

Rainforest holiday changes  
 this priest's perceptions

Milan Knezovic SVD

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The Society of the Divine Word is an international Catholic missionary congregation.  
 Divine Word Missionaries work in over 79 different lands on all continents except Antarctica.

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# Compassion in Action

## 13

Thirteen years ago, Brother Douglas Simonetti, a Divine Word Missionary from southern Brazil, seized an opportunity that altered his vocation and his outlook on God's people. It would shape his mission work to this day.

Bro. Douglas's new mission meant embracing a new language, immersing himself in a foreign culture and adopting a way of life distinctly different from his own.

In 2011, Bro. Douglas was sent to the Kenya Province to participate in Divine Word Missionaries' Cross-Cultural Training Program. Here, par-

## The Odyssey of Brother Douglas Simonetti



ticipants immerse themselves in the country's culture, engage with their various communities and learn a new language.

His interactions broke through linguistic barriers, and Bro. Douglas discovered that his calling resonated deeply with the landscape and people of Kenya and Tanzania. Serving in this unfamiliar land had expanded his horizons and intensified his missionary calling. Following the profession of his perpetual vows in 2015, Bro. Douglas returned to Kenya to fulfill his vocation as a Divine Word Missionary.

## Cultural

### **Cultural exchange**

Bro. Douglas' journey as a missionary in Kenya and Tanzania has been an odyssey of self-discovery, cultural immersion and spiritual growth. Despite the occasional misinterpretation and misunderstanding of this new language and culture, Bro. Douglas used these encounters as an opportunity to learn. His willingness to engage with people, regardless of the barriers, reflects his commitment to his calling.

Coming from Brazil's lush, green and vibrant environment, Kenya and Tanzania's semi-deserted





landscapes were quite a change for Bro. Douglas. Yet he embraced these differences and allowed this new landscape to become part of him. His approach reflects humility in his willingness to let go of what was once familiar and embrace the new fully.

Bro. Douglas lived in the local community, walked the same roads, ate the same food and shared the word of God while immersing himself in the daily lives of the people he served. Recalling Pope Francis' encouragement to be shepherds with the "smell of the sheep," Bro. Douglas sought to gain empathy for and solidarity with his flock. Grounding himself in their realities enabled him to forge deep and meaningful connections with people across all walks of life.

## Maasai

### *The Maasai widow*

Bro. Douglas often visited with the Maasai tribe in their huts, underscoring his dedication to understanding their everyday realities at the most basic level.



One day, on the outskirts of Arusha, Tanzania, he met a Maasai widow, who invited him into her hut. Once inside, he was moved by the hut's simplicity. A tiny porthole window let a bit of light into the darkened hut. A cooking fire, a sleeping niche with a stretched cowskin bed base, and the few items she owned and treasured dearly filled the room. To Bro. Douglas, these items represented her resilience and faith amid adversity.

Like most in the area, she was poor, with few possessions of her own and little food for herself. When the visit ended, the widow gave Bro Douglas two eggs as a sign of hospitality. He was reminded of the Gospel account of the widow's offering in the temple, which caused Jesus to state, "I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood" (Luke 21:3-4).







Initially Bro. Douglas not want to take the eggs, knowing she needed them more than he did. But he realized the importance of the gift; he agreed to accept it rather than insult her. Her generosity and steadfast faith humbled him.

Holding the fragile eggs in his hand, he cycled 4 miles back to his parish. The next morning, he sat at the breakfast table with his fellow Divine Word Missionaries. They prayed together in gratitude for the two eggs before them, all recognizing the sacredness of the widow's gesture—an embodiment of love and gratitude beyond words.

At that breakfast table—inspired by the widow's selflessness—they began discussing where they could do some good. They made plans to visit the parish's sick and elderly. The gift of those two little eggs moved compassion to action and multiplied the widow's giving above and beyond. Her selfless gift and Bro. Douglas' determination will go on to resonate throughout the community. ●

*Based on a conversation with Bro. Douglas Simonetti SVD*



## Celebration Prayer

Holy Triune God, source of life and communion,  
We thank you for inspiring **Saint Arnold Janssen** to found the **Society of the Divine Word**.  
We are grateful to all who have preceded us, and to those who serve and support our mission today.

United to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, **we are all his missionary disciples** who proclaim the Good News of life and joy, alongside works of friendship and compassion for a wounded world.

With your Holy Spirit, renew us, Lord, strengthen our journey as **pilgrims of hope**, and in the face of new challenges, help us respond with creativity, fidelity and **synodality**.

Holy Mary, Mother of the Divine Word, guide our mission with signs that build communion and promote participation. May the Light of your Son, which overcomes darkness, **illuminate our hearts and all of humanity and creation**.

## Amen.



## We journey together as the People of God.

Synodality is a term that defines the Church's life and mission, expressing its nature as the **People of God** gathered in assembly to proclaim the Gospel. It involves paying attention to those who are often excluded or forgotten, and hearing what God has to say through them.

**Divine Word Missionaries is an international organization of nearly 6,000 priests and Brothers who are trained with a diverse set of skills and dedicated to ensuring that our mission programs make a positive **IMPACT** on the people we serve.**

With your prayers  
and support  
we do this together  
as the **People of God**.  
Thank you for journeying with us

**Thanks you for a  
150 years  
of missionary success!**



## The New Look Optical Shop in Saboba has undergone major, and positive, changes in the last few years.

Equipment that caused us problems has been repaired or replaced. Purchasing an off-road vehicle has enabled us to resume our twice-yearly visits, bringing optical care to the people of surrounding towns. All this was made possible through the generosity of donors from Poland and other nonprofit organizations.

We began construction in May 2022 on two ophthalmology examination offices and a room where patients can choose their glassframes. Unfortunately, construction costs ran high from May to November 2023 and funds began to run low. During this challenging time, we received unexpected help from two donors—one from South Korea and the other from Poland. When this help





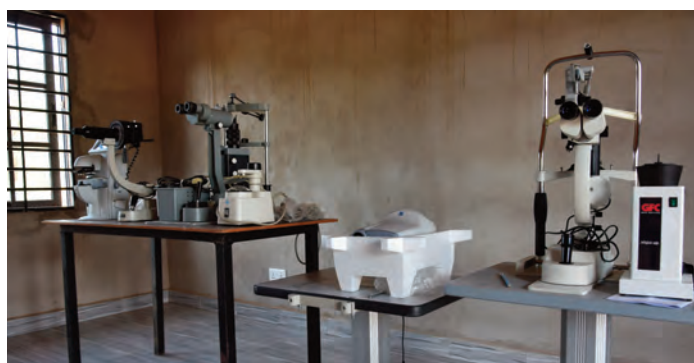
came at the right time and from a place I never expected, I could not resist the strong feeling that the patron saint of our optical shop, St. Arnold Janssen, and my personal patron, Blessed Brother Grzegorz Frąckowiak SVD, had intervened on our behalf.

Today, the first building stands proud, roofed and plastered. The windows, ceiling, electrical system and floor tiles have been installed. The water supply has been connected, sinks in the offices are working and the anti-burglary doors are in place.

The second building is about to have the concrete poured to secure the foundation and walls. Concrete will also be used to make a path between the new and existing



*Equipment from Poland for the ophthalmology clinic*



*Technicians review equipment*



*Transporting across the Oti River*



*School supplies*



buildings. Once the first building is connected to the main electrical supply, air conditioning will be installed to let the delicate ophthalmic equipment work better and last longer. Air conditioning will also ease the doctors' work, especially during the dry season when temperatures reach or exceed 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Finally, walls will be painted, and desks and chairs will be moved in.

In March 2024, we received more donated equipment that will allow us to open our two new ophthalmological offices and significantly improve work in the glasses grinding shop. This shipment also included multiple boxes of notebooks, paints, pencils and other school supplies. We will donate these to the kindergarten next to our parish, St. Charles Lwanga.

Our mission office in Poland provided the equipment and school supplies in cooperation with the Redemptoris Missio Foundation and with the support of the well-known Polish ophthalmologist Professor Edward Wylęgała from Katowice and his friends.





The boxes took a long trip from Poland and finally reached our village of Saboba by a road that ends at the Oti River. The river has a deep and wide bed and no bridge. In the dry season, it looks calm and lazy. You can swim in it, and at certain times of the year you can walk across it. In the rainy season, however, the river swells so much that it roars past the town. We can cross the river only by boat for a few weeks of the year—this was that time of year.

The boxes had to be unloaded on the other side of the river and transported by boat to our side. A group of young men we met on the river helped us. We also received support from community leaders who helped coordinate everything on both sides of the Oti, thus ensuring that the transfer of the equipment went smoothly and safely.

All this help transporting boxes across the river shows how people in Saboba pay attention to what is happening at the optical shop. Their interest and help demonstrate, not for the first time, that the local population is looking forward to the project's completion.



*Below: The expanded New Look Optical Shop in Saboba*



With all the positive changes in Ghana, the New Look Optical Shop is slowly resuming its mission to help the elderly, especially from the outlying villages. Older people in Ghana are entirely dependent on the care and support of their children, and not all of them receive this support. It is worth noting that there is no such thing as a pension in Ghana.

The New Look Optical Shop would also like to reach out to students again, especially those who graduate middle school and go to other parts of the country for further education. It has been a long time since we could provide such help. In our village of Saboba, 50 out of 106 middle school students wear glasses.



On the savannah are many villages, large and small, where people work in farming. It turns out that the youth from such villages are very talented. Despite the poor level of education in local schools, they can often be successful when they get the opportunity to continue their education in a small or large city, beating city students hands down. The New Look Optical Shop will help them see the future.



In Ghana, we mark the passage of time by the Harmattans, a strong northeast wind blowing from the Sahara that occurs in the winter season. The 27 Harmattans that have passed us since New Look Optical Shop opened in 1997 show that determination, perseverance and the generosity of friends can bring extraordinary results. All of us who work here believe in our mission and that through it, we are showing the face of merciful Jesus to all our patients, many of whom would never receive optical care or eyeglasses without the New Look Optical Shop. ●





**In many parts of the world people don't have safe, clean water to drink.**

Divine Word Missionaries  
sesquicentennial



It is hard to believe that even today, millions of people still live without clean water. The daily job of collecting water often forces families to travel far from home, making it difficult to earn a steady living. It keeps kids out of school, denying them the education that could eventually lift them out of poverty.

Access to clean water makes a difference. You can help change lives — provide education, income, health and dignity — especially for women and girls.

**In celebration of our 150th anniversary we invite you to help us build 150 new wells.** Your gift will improve lives, restore hope and provide families with a path to a better future.

**[svdmissions.org/water](https://svdmissions.org/water)**





A full-page background image of a tropical beach. In the foreground, there's a sandy shore with some rocks and a small, dark, spiky object. In the middle ground, the ocean is visible with a pier or breakwater extending into the water. In the background, there are palm trees and a clear blue sky with some clouds. The text is overlaid on the image.

# **Mission in Oiapoque**

*By Milan Knezovic SVD*

***Divine Word Missionaries have been present in Oiapoque—considered the northernmost city in Brazil—since 1998. Located on the border with French Guiana, the city of Oiapoque is a border crossing both by land and by the Oyapock River.***





Together with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, we share a border mission project in Oiapoque where Brazil and French Guiana meet. Our focus is to aid migrants and combat human trafficking and child prostitution. Oiapoque's river crossing also brings problems of illegal timber exports, drug trafficking and illegal extraction of precious stones.

Hand in hand with the illegal extraction of precious stones are the garimpos, small-scale informal mining operations found throughout Brazil's interior. Aside from exploiting the labor of impoverished people, the garimpos near Oiapoque devastate the Amazon ecosystem releasing dangerous mercury pollution into the Oyapock River. From 2022 to 2023, 570 children from the Yanomami tribe died of mercury poisoning.

The Sisters of Notre Dame share our former parish house in Oiapoque with the regional office of the Catholic organization CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Missionario), which stands for "Indigenous Missionary Institute."

This pastoral organization was founded in 1972 by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil. Our Lady of Grace, a Divine Word Missionaries parish, and CIMI work together with the same goal: to defend the human rights of Brazil's indigenous peoples and communities—an integral part of our missionary activity here in the far north of Brazil's Amazon region.

A team of Divine Word Missionaries, CIMI representatives and Sisters of Notre Dame visits the tribal communities to learn about their challenges and identify the dangers they face, many of which the outside world simply ignores.

Our Lady of Grace in Oiapoque has 32 parish communities, 22 of which are located within the three indigenous territories of Uaçá, Galibi, and Juminã. These communities are inhabited by three ethnic groups—Kari'puna, Palikur and Galibi Marworno—and cover an area of 1.3 million acres of the Amazon rainforest.

Of those 22 parish communities, 17 can be reached only by water navigation on the Caripi and Uaçá rivers. The most remote parish communities along this waterway are in Galibi and Juminã, where we have seven communities. It takes five hours of travel by motorboat and about 32 gallons of gasoline to reach them. Our parish has one small motorboat purchased with a donation from our benefactors.



## Fr. Milan's Christmas in the Amazon



I spent last Christmas in one of our poorest and most faraway missions deep in the Amazon along Brazil's northern edge. My time in this challenging terrain, shared with the indigenous people who live in the rainforest, will remain a part of me forever.

Before I can share that story, though, I need to share how I found myself in the Amazon at Christmastime. In my role as coordinator for mission animation for Divine Word Missionaries' Brazil subzone, I spent December 2023 to January 2024 visiting this country's northernmost mission in the city of Oiapoque, located on the border with French Guiana.

With a population of about 25,000, Oiapoque is called the place where Brazil begins. A key part to our mission here is outreach to the indigenous people in the surrounding region. Numbering roughly 6,000, these people live in tribal communities in three indigenous territories: Uaçá, Galibi and Juminã. The Uaçá territory is the largest in this part of the Amazon rainforest, extending over 1.2 million acres.

Our Lady of Grace parish is the hub of our mission. Located in Oiapoque, it is the only Catholic church within a 93-mile radius. The parish priest is Father Augustine Mevor SVD from Togo, who was visiting his family in Africa during my stay. The parish vicar, Father Gregorio Fobia SVD from Indonesia, met me at the bus station. We spent four weeks together. As the parish cook was also on vacation, Fr. Gregorio and I cooked for ourselves, planned the menu daily and traveled miles together, visiting the various territories.

Of the 22 parish communities within the three indigenous territories, we could visit only four during my brief stay. One was Manga, the biggest of the 10 tribal communities that are home to the Karipun people. They are the region's largest ethnic group. The Karipuns have more than 3,200 members spread





along the Caripi River, and 1,000 live in Manga, a small port on the Caripi River.

Manga is where I spent Christmas. The quiet and warm friendliness of the Karipun people welcomed me. They had bright smiles but spoke very few words, if they spoke at all. As I experienced their calm hospitality and saw the happiness in their eyes, the flow of time seemed to stop, allowing me to enjoy every moment to the fullest.

They asked me to celebrate the evening Christmas Eve Vigil Mass. I was honored and wanted to do my best, so I arrived half an hour early. As I drove past the porter's office at the entrance to the indigenous reserve, I couldn't help but notice that the man who lifted the gate was wearing a Croatia national soccer team T-shirt. As I lowered the car window and introduced myself, I told him, with a smile, that I was a missionary from Croatia.

I saw no light at the front door as I approached the chapel. In the darkness, I was greeted by the laughter of a group of children sitting on the stairs with Leony, the leader of this parish community.

We walked up the stairs to a

modest, tidy chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Several bare light bulbs illuminated the chapel interior. We began discussing the Christmas Mass. We spoke first about the songs the worshippers had prepared and then about the moment one of the children would bring the figure of the child Jesus to the manger. I suggested to Leony that the Mass could start with the lights turned off, then lit at the chant of "Gloria" as the figure of the baby Jesus was brought to the manger.

She said, "We never did it that way, but we can do it very nicely." She called her daughter, who listened to my ideas attentively and said, "Well, I'll put the chair here in the middle of the room so that I can be ready to turn the lights on."

I looked at her, a bit confused, and asked why she needed the chair.

She answered, "Father, we don't have light switches in the church." She explained that they turned on the lights by screwing the bulbs into the sockets dangling from the ceiling. "We use the bulbs only during the Mass," she continued, "and after the Mass we take them home."

I blushed with shame and quietly

said, "Let's celebrate as you always celebrate."

The Mass drew the community: young people, couples and the elders. Together, we sang and celebrated the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ with humbleness and kinship. The joy of the human heart and the openness to God and each other were almost palpable.

As the worshippers embraced each other at the end of the Mass, I noticed Leony was putting away the small Nativity scene in front of the altar. Knowing they would celebrate Christmas Day Mass the next morning, I approached her and said, "You know that you can leave the Nativity scene set up until the feast of the Baptism of the Lord."

Leony smiled and said, "If I do not put it away now, tomorrow I won't find anything here because the dogs will carry it out."

Confused, I looked at her and repeated, "Dogs?"

She laughed and responded, "Yes, wild dogs, because we don't have doors or windows in our church yet."

Only then did I notice empty wooden frames all around. The



chapel had neither doors nor windows. For the second time, ashamed of myself, I silently asked forgiveness for my rash and insensitive behavior.

After Christmas, my next trip was to the tribal community called Espirito Santo. It, too, was a memorable experience. The tribe's chief is a Catholic. When Fr. Gregorio and I arrived, he recognized our boat from a distance and met us with two young people who helped us walk on palm logs that served as a path in the river's low water level.

When we arrived, it was lunchtime, and the chief's wife graciously prepared us the fish he had caught in the morning. She boiled the fish in water with lemon and two types of herbs. I have never eaten a tastier or more simple fish soup. Out of respect for the adults, the couple's six children waited quietly and sat down to have lunch only after we were done.

The people of Espirito Santo get their protein by fishing in the river, hunting in the rain forest and raising poultry. Because they don't have refrigerators, they must consume everything on the same day. Their huts are constructed of wood, which helps the people to bear the high humidity and extreme heat. The huts are built with one large common space. Everyone sleeps in their own sleeping net stretched between the pillars and the walls.

At first glance, the indigenous people who live in the rainforest of the Amazon look like they have nothing, but they live a life wealthy with fellowship. They are hospitable and unpretentious, and I learned a lot from them. I went to the Amazon to assist the indigenous, but the Amazon people helped me see people in a new light!

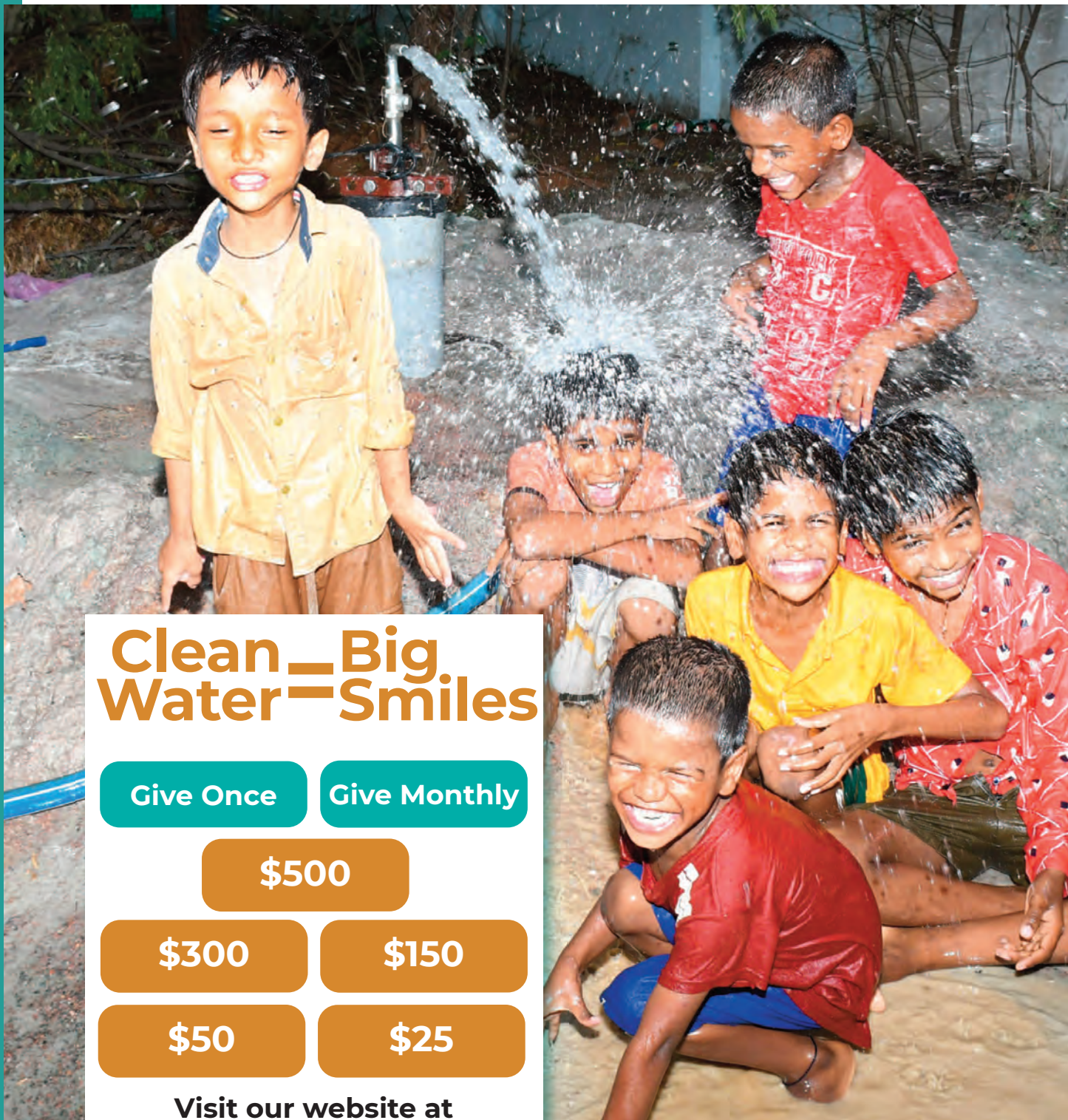
I returned to Manga to celebrate Mass on the feast of the Epiphany. At the entrance, I met the same porter who had worn the Croatian national team T-shirt on Christmas Eve. He asked if he could ride with me to the center of Manga, about a 12-mile drive down a dusty road from the entrance.

As we talked in the car, I asked him where he got the Croatian T-shirt. He told me he is part of a men's handball team where everyone wears the same shirt. (In Brazil, handball is a sport that is a cross between basketball and soccer.) The locals have an annual handball tournament called the Olympics of Oiapoque, where every participating team defends the colors of another world country.

Only God's surprising providence can cross the life's path of a Croatian missionary during a short visit to the heart of the Amazon rainforest with an indigenous Christian who wears the colors of the Croatian national team during a handball tournament. The life of a missionary is often a wondrous thing. ●







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“Go  
and Invite  
Everyone to  
the Banquet”

Message for

World Mission Sunday

2024

**World Mission Sunday is a special day that unites Catholics worldwide in prayer, solidarity and support for the Church’s mission efforts.**

This year’s theme, chosen by Pope Francis, is rooted in the Gospel of Matthew: **“Go and Invite Everyone to the Banquet,”** reflecting the inclusive and urgent call to bring God’s love to everyone. Join Divine Word Missionaries in this universal mission to spread the Gospel and invite all to experience the joy of Christ’s message!

***Excerpts the Holy Father’s Message for World Mission Sunday 2024***

*I take this opportunity to thank all those missionaries who, in response to Christ’s call, have left everything behind to go far from their homeland and bring the Good News to places where people have not yet received it, or received it only recently. Dear friends, your generous dedication is a tangible expression of your commitment to the mission ad gentes that Jesus entrusted to his disciples: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). We continue to pray and we thank God for the new and numerous missionary vocations for the task of evangelization to the ends of the earth.*

*The mission for all requires the commitment of all. We need to continue our journey towards a fully synodal and missionary Church in the service of the Gospel. Synodality is essentially missionary and, vice versa, mission is always synodal. Consequently, close missionary cooperation is today all the more urgent and necessary, both in the universal Church and in the particular churches.*



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