Missionhurst

Volume 72, Number 1, 2020

"He said to them,
'Go into the whole world
and proclaim the gospel
to every creature.'"

Mark 16:15

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The stories we present in the pages of Missionhurst Magazine feature the real-life encounters of our confreres who are working to bring the Good News to our brothers and sisters around the world— especially where the Gospel assurances are not known, or where the support of Christian communities is needed. Our special preference for the poor often means that our missionaries work in frontier situations, among marginalized people and groups.

In our first collection of stories for 2020, you'll find text that touches on themes that Missionhurst priests regularly encounter. If these themes were a cast of characters, they might be written as:

Missioner: the person sent into an area to evangelize or carry out assistance/work

Stranger: the newcomer to a place: not privy or a party to; unacquainted, unaccustomed: not a member of the group or community

Guide: the person who leads others

Visitor: the person who comes to call or see, for reasons of friendship or duty

Witness: the person who, being present, personally sees or perceives a thing; one who beholds or gives testimony

Sometimes our confreres personify these themes: other times the people they encounter do. In each of the stories involving these themes, we find profound experiences and inspiring messages of hope. In sharing them through the pages of Missionhurst Magazine, we hope you will discover a co-missionary spirit and zeal that endorses and embraces this mission as well, both near and far. Please, accompany us on the journey!

Missionhurst Magazine ■

CONGREGATION OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY

(Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae) C.I.C.M.

It was founded in 1862 in Scheut, a suburb of Brussels, Belgium for the conversion of China.

Missioners are now in Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, Mongolia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Senegal, Zambia, Guatemala, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Mexico, Belgium, the Netherlands, the United States, France, and Italy. The American headquarters is in Arlington, Virginia.

The 830 members and their apostolic labors depend entirely on the charity of Christians and others who share our vision.

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"And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

(Matthew 25:40)

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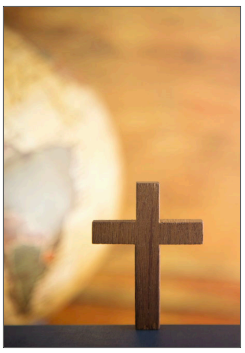


Journey with the CICM missionaries through the pages of this magazine, as they take us around the world to places where the hope and light of the Gospel promises is most needed. Our confreres live and work in communities that thirst for pastoral support, and they are engaged in projects aimed at relieving the suffering of the poor, abandoned, and neglected.

When we visited Malawi in November 2019, the more urgent plea was "...And send them ***as soon as possible***!" This was the message from Christians of the newly established parish of Immaculate Heart of Mary in the diocese of Karonga. The parish is located in Chisankwa, situated in the northern part of Malawi that borders Tanzania and Zambia. The territory around the parish of Chisankwa is mostly hilly and mountainous. The majority of the people in this area are farmers who

Fr. Peter Koh, cicm, is a native of Singapore who joined Missionhurst-CICM in 1989. He was sent as a missionary to Zambia in 1993 and worked there for ten years before being called to Rome to serve as the congregation's Treasurer General. As his Treasurer term comes to an end, he hopes to be working to establish the new CICM mission in Malawi in 2020.

are materially poor. The south of Malawi is where the capital city of Lilongwe, and the financial and economic center of Blantyre, are located. In contrast, the northern part of Malawi is considered remote and undervalued. Chisankwa is located almost in the extreme northern tip of Malawi; the people generally feel forgotten by both the politicians and religious leaders.

In response to the needs of this marginalized region, Bishop Martin Mtumbuka (Bishop of Karonga diocese) decided to initiate a parish at Chisankwa, to better serve the people. However, with the current reality of having only fourteen diocesan priests to serve the vast diocese that covers approximately 7,500 square miles, he appealed to Missionhurst to send CICM missionaries. Missionaries are needed in the diocese, especially in this frontier parish of Chisankwa, near the Tanzanian border.

It is because of accepting this new mission that I recently visited Chisankwa and Karonga diocese. Together with our Superior General, Fr. Charles Phukuta, and Fr. Aubrey Sumbukeni, a CICM missionary working in Kinshasa, Congo, we surveyed the region to gauge the undertaking.

The parish of Chisankwa is extensive, and it is sub-divided into four outstations with 18 substations and 39 small Christian communities. There are more than 3,000 Catholics and

Karonga diocese is vast and Chisankwa is a remote, mountainous farming region.

catechumens out of a population of about 11,500, spread over a massive land area in the mountainous region.

As we traveled with the Bishop to Chisankwa, he pointed out some of the challenges that our missionaries would face. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of schools. There is only one school, and it is about eight miles from the town. Due to the distance and the lack of public transport, children have to leave their homes very early in the morning, usually without breakfast, to walk to school. So even for those brave and strong enough to do the daily trek to school, they are often too tired and hungry to concentrate in class to learn. And so many children do not go to school.

When we made a stop at the Songwe River that marked the boundary of the parish and Tanzania, we saw a group of children washing and swimming in the water. The Bishop was immediately moved with compassion for the children. He called to them and personally inquired about their challenges. Another major problem here is the lack of health facilities in the region. The Bishop's voice choked with emotion as he recounted to us that some babies had died because mothers could not reach the nearest clinic in time. Due to an almost absence of motorized transport to town, sometimes the sick are transported on ox-carts.

Meeting the People of Chisankwa

As we drove along the dirt road leading to Chisankwa, I could understand why the people felt they had been forgotten. The area has no electricity or potable water. The Bishop relayed that some people must resort to drinking directly from the dirty Songwe River that runs through the area.

On the day we visited Chisankwa, parish leaders and many parishioners turned out in force to welcome us. Many walked for miles to be present

Left: Fr. Peter and Bishop Mtumbuka with by other priests visiting the region of the new parish. Above: Greeting the villagers eager for a missionary presence.

that day, some even spending the night in villages along the way. The more fortunate ones came on their bicycles.

Arriving before us, the people had formed two lines on the road leading to the church. Seeing our approaching vehicle, they immediately started beating their drums and began singing, dancing, and ululating. We happily got out of our car to greet them.

I was touched and almost brought to tears as I greeted and shook the hand of every single Christian who had lined the road to welcome us. They had been told of our visit—that we were the missionaries who would be coming to serve them. I could sense their happiness that the missionaries had finally arrived, even if it was only to visit for one day. I could also sense their thirst to hear God's word and celebrate the Eucharist. No one seemed to mind that there were no benches in the church and that they had to sit on the floor during mass. Their joy was palpable as they sang and danced during mass: they celebrated that God had heard their prayers, and they were not forgotten.

Our Call to Action

Following the greeting and being formally introduced to the people, one of the leaders representing the parishioners made this passionate plea to our Superior General, Fr. Charles: "Please send us missionaries.... and send them as soon as possible!"

During his reply, Fr. Charles explained that our founder, Theophile Verbist, had left the comfort of Belgium in 1862 to evangelize in northern China and to take care of abandoned Chinese orphans. Our founder was not afraid of the extreme weather of Inner Mongolia, nor was he deterred by the difficult task of learning the Chinese language.

Upon seeing the situation in Chisankwa, we believe that it is entirely in line with our CICM missionary charism to go there; we too will not be deterred by demanding physical challenges. We will learn the local language, customs, challenges, and triumphs. We will learn and walk together with the people we have come to serve.

During our visit, we discovered that parishioners had already begun building initiatives for the parish, and had accomplished a lot on their own. They put up a church structure and are currently in the process of molding and firing bricks to build a clinic and a school. They are now counting on us to journey with them for this mammoth undertaking.

And so YES, we shall go to them!

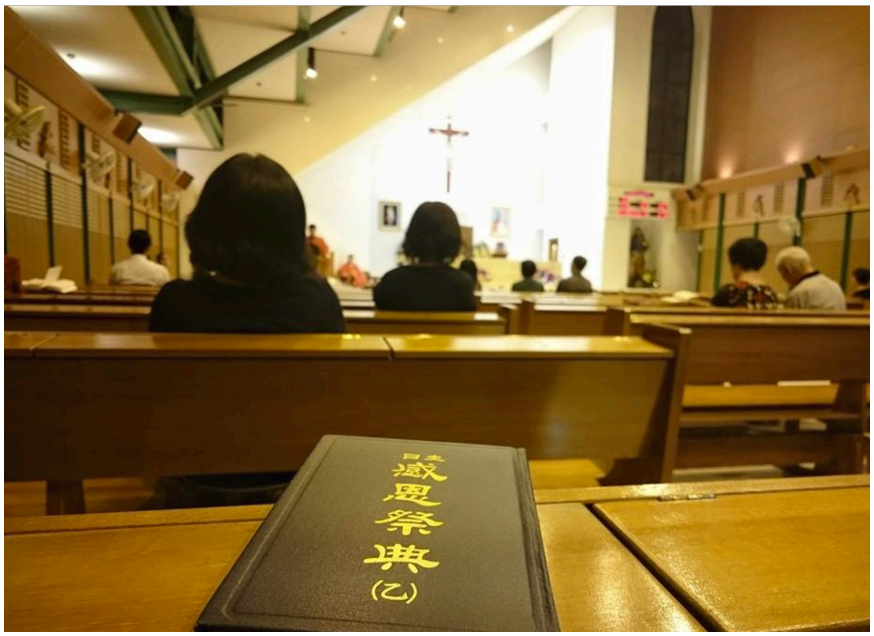
The Missionhurst credo is to preach the Gospel, through word and work, in the remote corners of the world. CICM has committed to sending a team of four missionaries to Karonga diocese, and in particular, to Chisankwa. I am happy to be one of the four missionaries going to Karonga diocese, and I am eager to depart as soon as possible. We are grateful for all our friends, as we embark on this new journey; thank you for your co-missionary support, and for helping us to answer the call from the people of Chisankwa.

Peter Koh, cicm
Chisankwa, Milawi ■

Finding Family

My apostolate in Dajia has indeed become a beautiful mission. Recently, the parish has been enriched with many newcomers: migrants from Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Their presence is often seen as both a blessing and a challenge. Most of them are young, generous, and gifted people that can be counted on for parish program participation. They readily volunteer for seasonal decorations and to assist with celebrations and events. This involvement, however, can also present challenges as the local community often prefers to maintain old traditions. When our newcomers offer fresh ideas and new ways of doing things, the differences can make the local community fear that they will

Fr. Stanislas Lukusa Mufula, cicm, is a native of the Democratic Republic of Congo who joined Missionhurst-CICM in 1996. After theological studies, he was sent to Taiwan in 2003 and was ordained a priest in 2007. Fr. Stanislas has worked in Saint Joseph parish in Dajia District (Taichung, Taiwan) since 2013, also serving as diocesan Chaplain for migrant pastoral care and teaching at Providence University in Taichung City.



soon become a minority in their parish; worse, they fear feeling not welcomed anymore.

On this topic, we can rely on the apostolic exhortation and pastoral zeal of our Pope Francis, who encourages us to open the doors of our churches and to build bridges between the Catholics and non-Catholics who live in our neighborhood. For my part, I try to encourage the local community to make our parish more welcoming to the area, to newcomers, and the immigrant population as well. As in Leviticus: "When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, am your God." *(Leviticus 19:33-34)*

Influencing this goal for making our parish a welcoming community, was the challenging experience of a young Vietnamese parishioner that I encountered only a few days after my arrival in the parish. Vinh approached me with a problem concerning his Vietnamese girlfriend, Mai. He expressed their desire for Mai to receive the sacraments of initiation in the Church. Mai had formerly been married to a Taiwanese man, but, sadly, after only a year of marriage, her husband died in a car accident. Mai was pregnant with their first child at the time of her husband's death. She had no relatives here in Taiwan, and no way to support herself and her child, so Mai then moved into her mother-in-law's home. Four years later, Mai met our Vietnamese Catholic parishioner Vinh, and their relationship began with the consent of her mother-in-law.

To initiate the process for Mai to be baptized, I advised her to follow the foundational preparations for the sacrament of initiation. Following that, she would be able to receive the three sacraments of initiation at the Easter vigil mass: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. Unfortunately, Mai's young daughter was not to be baptized with her, as her mother-in-law (the child's paternal grandmother) was vehemently opposed. The mother-in-law wanted to keep her granddaughter in their ancestral religion, following the Chinese practice of venerating and celebrating deified ancestors. She felt that if the child became Catholic, she would not be able to fully worship their ancestors or practice properly the religion that centers heavily on lines of descent.

After Mai received the initiation sacrament, the couple then wanted to prepare for the sacrament of marriage. With much respect for Mai's mother-in-law, who was a surrogate mother to Mai, a small group of us from St. Joseph's arranged a visit with her. Our goal was to politely ask for her approval in allowing Mai to be married in the Catholic Church. Though she had previously been open to Mai's relationship with Vinh and her desire to join our church, to our surprise, the mother-in-law's attitude changed when she learned that Mai was now expecting a second child. The woman was not interested in accepting a child that was not a blood relation. She refused to approve of the marriage, and she delivered an ultimatum to Mai. If she kept the baby, Mai

A young immigrant mother deals with a heartbreaking ultimatum.

and her young daughter would lose the support of the family: only if she terminated the pregnancy would she be allowed to stay. This was indeed a dramatic demand for Mai. She had no other relatives in Taiwan, and Vinh's legal status as an overseas worker gave the couple minimal resources or control over their destiny.

The couple was in a vulnerable position, and Vinh was afraid that, if their situation became desperate, he could get into trouble or be sent home back to Vietnam before the end of his contract. He began to have second thoughts about the relationship. As a young person in his twenties, he was afraid of the familial responsibility of caring for a wife, newborn, and step-daughter, all on their own. With no family and nowhere else to go, Mai did not know where to turn. Finally, she asked for my help. We then had three intertwined issues to resolve: the relationship with her mother-in-law, the pregnancy, and the marriage. Everyone involved was concerned about the unknown, but I was not discouraged. I offered everything in prayer, asking for guidance from God.

The first meaningful action was to help them feel safe and hopeful for the future of their unborn child. I initiated a fundraising campaign to assist in getting Mai settled in a new home. Thanks to God, and the generous and helpful parishioners, we were able to rent a house near the parish where we covered the rental cost for one full year. We equipped the house with necessities and helped Mai to move in. Finally, we took care of both their religious and civil marriage arrangements: Vinh and Mai were married in the church, and the parish organized a wedding party for them.

Left: A joyful marriage celebration. Above: A prayer visit to the couple's home.

Sadly, just two weeks after she moved, Mai's mother-in-law, alone in the house, suddenly and unexpectedly passed away in her sleep. Mai dutifully accompanied two other sons and daughters-in-law from the US who arrived to assist with preparations for the funeral and other traditional ceremonies. In the mother-in-law's will, though Mai had been as an adopted daughter to the woman, Mai received nothing. This omission was likely meant as scorn or punishment for her departure. The mother-in-law also claimed Mai's daughter (her granddaughter) should be in the custody of a paternal aunt, and that the child's inheritance would remain in a trust fund.

Fortunately, Mai was able to have her daughter remain with her. With thanks to our pastoral council president's assistance, the child's aunts instead requested a letter of guarantee, ensuring that Vinh would never mistreat the girl. We were able to help broker that agreement, and I am happy to continue to involve myself, paying attention to the child's studies and her overall happiness within the family.

Mai's lack of inheritance and loss of ties to her in-law family were genuine threats to her well-being. She could have succumbed to the pressures of her mother-in-law's ultimatum and lost her relationship with Vinh. But, through the support and involvement of her new parish community, she was encouraged to put her trust and faith in God. She has now gained a new family: the Christian community of our parish. Mai and Vinh, trusting in God's providence, now feel they can face any injustice or hardship.

With thanks to God, Mai recently gave birth to a lovely baby daughter. The remaining funds raised paid for

her maternity expenses, and we were also able to provide passage to Vietnam for Vinh, where he could legally change his work and residence status. Everything went accordingly, and he is now back living with their two lovely children. Upon Vinh's return, we were able to help the couple find work through a former pastoral council president's company.

Recently, we organized a family prayer with them: they are so grateful for the outpouring of help from the congregation. They expressed that our love and hospitality gave them the courage to confront their fear and insecurity. They are now confident in God's providence. They have found a new family, and that has enriched our community.

We endeavor to replace hostility with hospitality

Our local community's generosity and hospitality help our migrant community to meet the future with hope and trust in God's plan. Indeed hospitality is the greatest gift that a Christian can offer, especially to those in desperate situations, crying out for help. While newcomers may bring change, they grow the community and add to the fabric of our tapestry. We respond to the needs of our entire community as best we can, embracing the evolving needs as opportunities to share in the mission to "Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God." *(Romans 15:7)*

Stanislas Lukusa Mufula, cicm
Taichung, Taiwan ■

Christmas cheer with Fr. Stanislas, religious sisters, and the happy family.

Cengelo... A Guiding Light

Cengelo is a little girl in our parish, of just five years old. She is the youngest of a family with three lovely girls. The eldest, Camilla, is 16 years old and just graduated from high school. The second, Gloria, is 14 years old and is currently in the 8th grade. In the Zambian language of Bemba, the name Cengelo means "light." Cengelo's two older sisters are very committed to the Holy Childhood ministry of the parish, also participating in the choir, which performs during mass two Sundays per month. The Holy Childhood group meets every Saturday afternoon and Sundays following the 7 am mass. Additionally, they are integral members of a group of teen girls called the Junior Motherhood of Mary. Cengelo is accustomed to simply following her elder sisters, attending the meetings of both groups. She practices with the choir too. Even if she does not understand what it is all about, she is an enthusiastic participant.

From the outset of my ministry in this parish, I had the opportunity to interact with the eldest sister Camilla.

Fr. François N'sapo Kande, cicm, is a native of the DR of Congo who joined Missionhurst-CICM in 1988 and was ordained in 1998. After working in both the Philippines and the DR of Congo, in 2017 he was sent to work in Zambia, where he is currently pastor of Saint Veronica Parish, in the diocese of Kabwe. Above: Fr. Bantiyan, cicm, assists with the parish Holy childhood youth group.

Surprisingly, although they are baptized Catholics, neither of the parents came to church. Camilla expressed her disappointment concerning the attitudes of her parents. She told me that her mother used to go to church, but that her father would no longer allow her to attend. Camilla understood his reasoning had to do with jealous tendencies: she said the father did not want the mother to be admired by other men in the congregation. Camilla asked me if I could talk to her father, to try and persuade him to allow her mother to return to church. I told Camilla that a conversation like that would be more prudent in time. As I had never met the father before, I felt the topic too sensitive to broach as a stranger. I encouraged Camilla to focus instead on how fortunate she and her sisters were, to be allowed to participate in all the church activities that they enjoyed. Their father never hesitated to allow the girls' participation or to provide their various fees and contributions, even purchasing the uniforms for the Junior Motherhood of Mary group. We determined to give the situation a little time.

A little while later, following a Holy Childhood meeting that I participated in, I was surprised by a spontaneous request from Cengelo. She implored me, "Father, kindly baptize me." It was so touching and heartbreaking at the same time because I sensed that even this young girl was aware of the conflict with her mother not being allowed to come to church. I could also read anxiety in her eyes: a fear that she might not be baptized because of the situation in her family. I felt perhaps her request could be an opportunity to meet with the father and discuss her urgent desire.

Soon after, it so happened that I encountered the family out visiting relatives one day. I greeted them and asked the father specifically if he would allow me to visit their home the following day to speak with him. I could feel his hesitation as he countered: he would let me know when he might be available. I realized I needed to be patient. But soon I was surprised by his visit to my office. He had come to ask for a recommendation letter for the enrollment of his second daughter Gloria to a local school overseen by religious sisters. I thought, "God certainly knows how to arrange things."

Leaving the parents' situation in the background, I leaped at the occasion to show this father how much the church cared about his daughter's formation, and how much their membership was truly valued.

Instead of writing a recommendation letter, I offered to drive them to the school myself. This gave us plenty of time to become acquainted, as we had to wait some time for the headteacher to become available. While we learned that Gloria did not yet possess some of the qualifying courses for this place, I suggested we visit a similar school I knew of, and they agreed. The second school turned out to be a good match for Gloria, and she was enrolled. Everyone was pleased with the outcome, and the father was touched by the church's involvement and assistance to his daughter.

Left: A joyful gathering of the Holy Childhood youth group. Below: Cengelo is pictured with her oldest sister, Camilla.

The next day, Cengelo's father came back to my office to express his gratitude. During his visit, I was able to tell him the reason I'd requested a meeting with him: his youngest daughter wanted to be baptized, and I wanted to ask his permission. He immediately accepted and even promised that he and his wife would participate in the pre-baptismal lessons for family members. And so they did–– regularly and faithfully! Every Saturday, they came as a couple, and their children were overjoyed to see their parents together at church. Cengelo was indeed the symbol of light, leading her parents to church and guiding their journey to peace. The older sisters confided to me that they were even expecting their parents to now seek a religious marriage in the church.

With great pride and happiness, the baptism of "Bernardine Cengelo" took place on June 23, 2019. Cengelo's baptism was a joyous occasion also to celebrate her parents accompanying her to this place of peace. We organized a small party for the family, which everyone thoroughly enjoyed.

After Cengelo's baptism, I left for an extended trip home. Upon returning, shocking news came to me like a thunderbolt–– the family was devastated by the sudden divorce of their parents in court. The eldest daughter Camilla could hardly intelligibly relate the story to me; she was understandably emotionally disturbed at the death of their dream. I quickly remembered some text from Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation "Amoris Laetitia." I sought to understand the situation of this family through the context of the excerpt: "In some cases, respect for one's own dignity and the good of the children requires not giving in to excessive

Left:
The exuberant Cengelo smile.

Right:
Fr. François with Cengelo and her sisters, Gloria and Camilla.

demands or preventing a grave injustice, violence or chronic ill-treatment. In such cases, 'separation becomes inevitable.' At times, it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference." *(n° 241)*

This event has devastated the three girls and their mother

The family is now forced to fend for themselves in challenging circumstances. They feel lost and cannot see clearly what their future will hold. But we are accompanying them. We remind the children, in particular, to focus on their own futures, rather than being overly concerned with what happened to their parents. It will take time for them to adjust to their new way of life, but the Lord never abandons his children. While it is a big blow for them, they are grateful for the bonds, fellowship, prayers, and support of their church family. Indeed, we are comforted by the psalmist: "Though my father and mother forsake me, Yahweh will gather me up." *(Psalm 27:10)*

Cengelo lighting her parents' path to church was not in vain. She guided her parents toward one of the most important and joyful moments in her faith journey. Baptism is a rite of admission and adoption into the Catholic faith. It is an indelible mark on her soul. Regardless of what happens to her parents, Cengelo never has to worry that she will be un-baptized. She and her sisters and mother will continue to find strength through their faith. We're grateful for the little light of Cengelo, and congratulate and encourage her always: "Put your hope in Yahweh, be strong, let your heart be bold." *(Psalm 27:14)*

François N'sapo Kande, cicm
Kabwe, Zambia ■

Joy & Strength: Ministry to the Sick

"We urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the idle, cheer the faint-hearted, support the weak, be patient with all." *(1Thes, 5:14)*

In a recent district retreat, Monsignor Sabino Vengco, Jr., STD (renowned Catholic lecturer, professor, writer) reflected on the observation that the sacrament of reconciliation is becoming the most under-attended practice by Catholics of this millennial. He discussed the paradox of diminishing participation in a time when reconciliation could be incredibly helpful in the face of the problems in this modern world.

Beyond confessions heard in the church setting, I have a lot of experience with the sacrament of reconciliation as a component of my pastoral work with the sick. I have spent more than three years now engaged in a robust ministry involving our local hospitals. In our parish, we have three large government hospitals: Dharmais Cancer Hospital, Harapan Kita Cardiac Center Hospital, and PELNI Seafarer Hospital. There is also Bhakti

Fr. Lasbert Livinus Sinaga, cicm, is a native of Indonesia who joined Missionhurst-CICM in 1993, and was ordained in 2003. Fr. Lasbert is currently working as parish priest of Kristus Salvator parish, Petamburan-Slipi, in the diocese of Jakarta.

Mulia, a small private hospital within the parish. Attending to these institutions entails of lot of interaction anointing the sick, distributing communion, and counseling the infirm.

It has been wonderful to have a pastoral service arrangement with these hospitals. We are welcomed and made comfortable to perform our ministry and address the needs of the people we serve. Of course, we respect certain rules and ethical matters, and in return we are well appreciated and helped by the staff.

My Thursday ministries with the sick are specifically in Dharmais Hospital, which is the center for patients with cancer. This ministry is very time consuming, demanding and often emotionally challenging. The first time I set out to bring communion to this hospital, I was quite scared, anxious and somewhat overwhelmed. I observed many people struggling to bear their illnesses, with multiple types of diseases related to cancers. Hospital ministry exposes you to some graphic situations and realities surrounding wounds and disease processes. In light of these realities, it is not always easy to give encouragement. In such situations, foremost in the patient's mind is relief. We must understand that mental position and provide guidance or counsel with compassion and sensitivity. When patients are receiving palliative care, or their condition is late-stage or ter-

minal, the psychological burdens and fears can be clearly seen in their eyes and expression.

As a pastor, I must be patient and listen. It is not wise to spontaneously offer the sacrament of anointing: instead we support, listen, and wait for prompts. First we hear their struggles, then we offer prayers, communion, and the assurance that God is present with them. Attentive listening and deep empathy helps us to know we are not alone. Trust and respect are essential to build the kind of interaction and spiritual nourishing that a patient in this position most needs. Once we have built that connection, patients take it upon themselves to request and welcome the sacrament of reconciliation, communion, counseling and anointing.

I believe that my task in this work is to represent Christ. This is no simple feat! But I listen, and like Paul said, I endeavor to channel God's grace for them. "For God was pleased to dwell in Him in all fullness and through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross." *(Colossians 1:19-20)*

Fr. Lasbert at work in the hospital: "But I listen, and like Paul said, I endeavor to channel God's grace for them."

It is a joy when someone can release and express all their burdens to you, especially when they are feeling and understanding the impact of the sacraments they have received. In the midst of hopelessness, often times they experience and voice a transforming wish–– that, whether they recover or remain in the same condition, they will live their remaining lives serving the Lord. It is sometimes difficult to stifle my emotion when I see such gradual, new hope grow in a person as they confess.

One Thursday at Dharmais I met beautiful little girl named Melany, who was suffering from leukemia. At first I was unsure how to begin a conversation with her, but then I saw some colorful drawing pens on her bedside table, and I offered to teach her how to draw some images. She was so happy she spontaneously forgot her pain. Her mother, who was always beside her, could not hold back her tears. She told me that Melany hadn't experienced such joy in the whole time she'd been confined to the hospital. Melany had been in pain, suffering and crying for three months. With this new activity, Melany and I quickly became best friends. She shared with me her wishes and she whispered to me one day that she believed God was so kind—

Fr. Lasbert enjoying a visit with his young artist friend Melany.

that He had sent so many good people to take care of her. I was so sad that our friendship only lasted for a month. But happy that Melany felt well cared for, as she went to meet her Creator.

Another remarkable patient I encountered was Mr. Basuki, who had been confined in the same hospital three times with different kinds of cancers. He shared that nine years ago, he had been here for treatment and was totally cured. Four years later he was diagnosed with another cancer, and was cured again. He did not mention the painful chemo or radiation therapies. He just told me that in gratitude he had surrendered everything—his life, his wealth—for the service of the church. When he got sick for the third time however, he almost lost his faith. He considered God to be unfair. He said, "Father we don't have any more riches; we sold our house and we live here in Jakarta in boarding room. We offered everything to Him. My wife too is rendering her service as lay minister in our church." I knew his fear: that he would not be as fortunate this time. His anger and disappointment were great, making it difficult to accompany him. I simply kept showing up. I prayed over him without daring to make small talk. Finally one day he

asked me for confession, and then for anointing with holy oil. He said, "Father, I am sorry for neglecting your precious presence. I blamed God and the Church for all the sickness that burdened me." He realized in his suffering he had stopped trusting God, and forgot His goodness. He then said he was ready to meet God face to face, and two days later he died.

I have learned many things from this ministry of visiting the sick

There are so many stories that I want to tell, and many of them center on the transformative power of the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing. I am encouraged by these experiences, as they illuminate and revitalize the grace and purpose of these sacraments.

This ministry challenges me to help people who are struggling and evolving in their faith experiences, and that strengthens me in mine. I am evangelized through their perseverance and deep trust in God.

Lasbert Livinus Sinaga, cicm
Jakarta, Indonesia ■

Introducing MercyWorks — a New Initiative of Missionhurst CICM

MercyWorks is an initiative of Missionhurst CICM that is focused on bringing dignity to the world's most marginalized children by meeting their basic educational, psychological, and physical needs. MercyWorks is made up of mission ministries serving children at every stage of life, from building schools in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to providing medical care to infants in Guatemala.

As we launch this new project focused specifically on meeting the needs of children through targeted projects, we hope we can count on your continued support and encourage you to share about it widely with your family and friends. Every penny donated to MercyWorks projects goes directly to those most in need.

Join us in these works of mercy by visiting www.missionhurst.org

Hope for School Children

"Father, we have no choice; we want to be like other children who have better schools. But we want to study. If you don't have what you love, you just have to love what you have."

When I visited the Ntambue Saint Bernard School in the Democratic Republic of Congo last year, those are the words the children said to me.

While the constitution in the country states that primary school should be free and compulsory, corruption and the erosion of public systems there are endemic, and parents are forced to pay at the school gates for the education of their children. Those who do not have the means must leave their children at home. There are an estimated 3.5 million children of primary school age who are not attending school. The children in remote areas far from towns and cities have even less chance of attending school. Resources in the region are slim, so even local projects for building schools can only go so far. Communities may have a school structure, but no benches, desks, or other rudimentary materials. Without considerable outside assistance, these items are not within reach. Poverty not only prevents the parents from being able to provide basic school furnishings and supplies, they also don't have the

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money to pay for tuition or the monthly salaries of the teachers. In this desperate situation, the victims are the children, who are forced to wait as years of this enduring situation pass.

Located in the suburbs of Kananga city, Ntambue Saint Bernard is one of several villages in the Kasayi-Central province where poverty and the lack of infrastructure have contributed to the high rate of uneducated children. For many years, the central government has neglected to ensure education for children across the country. This is a systemic problem dating back to the 1990s, primarily due to some three decades of internal crisis faced by the DR of Congo.

A few years ago, an ongoing rebellion instigated by the Kamuina Nsapu militia against state institutions worsened the already fragile socio-economic situation in the province of Kasayi-Central. Made up of several different factions fighting for various purposes, bands of the militia could be brutal in their methods to further their causes. They often intimidated families by forcing children into their ranks. One of their tactics upon entering a village was to demand that parents hand over all their children: boys and girls aged 7-13 were called upon to battle against governmental forces. Parents who resisted were beheaded publicly. Children were essentially drafted and forced to take part in magical rituals supposed to render them invincible. Unfortunately, they were simply victimized and brainwashed.

Ironically, one of the militia's demands was the amelioration of social infrastructures, including schools and other municipal facilities in the province. However, a violent

Dirt floors and no desks, but at least these children have the use of some old benches.

crackdown was the governmental response, and multiple casualties of militia children the sad result. The school of Ntambue Saint Bernard was deeply affected by this unfortunate civil war. The children who formerly attended school had to stay away for fear of kidnapping and forced membership in the militia. In time, though the rebellion is ongoing in other regions, the civil unrest in Kasayi-Central province stabilized, and children who were able to attend school were allowed back.

Last year during my home-leave to Kasayi-Central, I got the unexpected opportunity to visit an elementary school in Ntambue Saint Bernard. There was a course completion program underway for the children who had fled the violence and were unable to finish their prior school year. I was interested to see how this program was being carried out.

It is customary, when a visitor enters a classroom, for the pupils to stand to greet him/her. They will sit back down when the visitor acknowledges them with "asseyez-vous" (sit down). Frankly, my voice trembled as I said it because it meant they'd return to the cold, dirt floor of their classroom. From the moment I set foot inside the first room, I was moved to tears by the conditions.

A diocesan congregation, the Sisters of Mary, Mother of Hope, oversees the school I visited. This local congregation cares for orphans, abandoned children, and underage or unwed mothers. Their facilities are

Below: Fr. Honoré tours the incomplete school site with one of the Sisters of Mary.
Right: Inspecting the work that the school children must complete on the floor.

equally as meager as the children they care for. A clergy member who was concerned about the increasing number of truant children in the area initiated the school building. The funding only covered construction, though, and the community did not have the resources to provide other equipment or supplies. Thus, the school without desks or benches was entrusted to the Sisters, in the hopes they would find a way to use it to assist hundreds of children who were willing to study. The Sisters provide the volunteer teachers, and they vow to continue searching for solutions and support to help the children coming to this school. Sharing our same preference for the poor and abandoned children, the Sisters rely substantially on assistance from Missionhurst-CICM.

While there was no doubt that the children I encountered were studying, the conditions were deplorable. The school had no essential equipment: no source of drinking water, no bathroom facilities. Inside the classrooms, there were no desks. Children sat on the floor, using their knees as a writing surface. Having been a teacher myself, I could not believe what I was seeing. Teachers confided in me that they were concerned about the physical development of these children, considering their years of studies in these conditions.

Children suffered daily aches and fatigue from note-taking while hunched over to write on the floor. Sitting on the ground, they cannot keep their uniforms clean, and without proper hygiene, they are vulnerable to illnesses. Even so, the Sisters told me that the children came faithfully from distant villages: they are so eager and willing to study, they push past the conditions. Some walk more than five or six miles a day to attend

school. Many are barefoot because they can't afford shoes or uniforms. They are motivated by their parents, who consistently push them toward an education that will open doors for them in the future. It is, however, physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging.

I also spoke with some of the parents as well, to gauge their thoughts about conditions in the school. They unanimously told me that they want education for their children at all costs, because they do not have any other alternative. They spoke of their own limitations and feeling marginalized by the lack of proper education. They all want a better future for their children. Also, they still face the threat of the militia and gangs, who prey upon the children who are not in school. The parents I spoke with will do whatever they can to avoid that fate.

Obviously, the future of this community is a missionary priority for our confreres in Kasayi-Central province. The hunger these children have for a brighter future is inspiring to us all. Their willingness to pursue education despite their sufferings demonstrates their God-given potential and indomitable spirit. They may not have everything they would love, but they are willing to love what they have. Your kindness and co-missionary support allow us to continue accompanying these little brothers and sisters of Ntambue Saint Bernard.

"Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect." *(Romans 12:2)*

Honoré Kabundi, cicm
Tokyo, Japan ■

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Thank you for your interest in this issue of Missionhurst Magazine. God's Blessings.

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"The specific goal of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is to commit itself entirely to the proclamation of the Good News wherever a missionary presence is most needed, especially among the peoples where the Gospel is not known or lived."
(Decretum by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, May 31, 1988)

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