

Missions and Charities Office – Submitted by Dee Ramp

Who are the Columban Sisters you ask. They are the most wonderful, prayerful, committed group of missionary religious women and Sisters and the most God fearing group of Sisters that travel the continents in eight different countries and live in very dangerous situations to help those that are so deprived of everything. These Sisters are walking daily in the footsteps of our founding women, embracing the mission of Christ in our world with enthusiasm and hope.

They are inspired by St. Columban's prayer. "Lord, kindle our lamps that we may always shine in your presence and always receive light from you, the Light Perpetual, so that our own darkness may be overcome and the world's darkness driven from us."

"As missionary religious women, we commit ourselves to be witnesses of God's love at compassion at every stage of our lives wherever we are. We commit ourselves to be contemplative and prophetic in all we are and in all we do".

We accept that this will often entail a journey through the darkness of letting go and taking risks, so that we may promote life together work for the transformation of our world. Below is the most wonderful article by Sister Bernadette Lee.

An inspiring article by Sister Bernadette Lee, Missionary Sister in the Philippines. "It has been a year since I started my ministry with the children living in the cemetery. It has been a fruitful year for me in many ways even if I speak very little of their language, which is Tagalog and they speak almost nothing of English. Strange as it "sounds" we have become very good friends because I think we have let our hearts speak to one another. Whenever I teach them how to play the recorder I feel a connection with them that speaks of love and friendship.

An unforgettable experience I had with the children happened on All Soul's day. In the Philippines people go to the cemetery to visit their dead. On November 1st and 2nd all roads lead to the cemetery. We have the same practice in Korea but in a very different way. That day I decided to go to the cemetery to meet the cemetery children since I couldn't visit my ancestor's cemetery which is in Korea. When I got near the place, I was shocked to see crowds and crowds of people inching their way to get inside the cemetery grounds. It was a shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow walk to get inside the gate of the cemetery. It took me hours to get in and once inside it took me a few more hours to look for my little friends who live there. All the time I was pushing my way around the cemetery grounds.

And then I saw the children and I couldn't believe what they were doing. They were at work! They were very busy going from tomb to tomb scraping the wax from the burned-out candles; they were picking empty bottles and cans here and there, they were furiously cleaning the tombs. I was wondering why they were doing all this hard work on All Soul's day only to learn later on that a kilo of wax drippings would sell for ten cents; the empty bottles and cans would sell for less but cleaning the tombs would pay them.

As I watched them working I noticed that there was joy in what they were doing. The little friends dragging plastic bags which looked bigger than themselves had a lovely smile on their faces. They were chatting away while they were scraping, polishing, picking up the throw away of the crowd of people who came to visit their dead. Many thoughts were racing in my mind and many feelings were beating in my heart. Suddenly I just found myself joining the children in their work. We were scraping the wax, we were picking up empty bottles and cans and cleaning as many tombs as we could clean that day.

So engrossed in our work we did not notice that darkness had fallen. It was very dark in the cemetery. The only light came from the flickering candles. I had difficulty seeing in the dark; I couldn't see well even just a meter away but my little friends were jumping from tomb to tomb with no problem at all. They reminded me of bats who can clearly see in the dark".

"Sister, this is the time of the year that we do not sleep"

"Why? Is it because of so many people around?"

"No, Sister. Our houses are gone."

Weeks before All Saints/Souls Day, the cemetery people dismantle their own makeshift houses because the owners of the tombs where they live would come and visit their dead. The demolition is done by the cemetery people themselves. Once this November events ends, then the cemetery people can rebuild their makeshift houses again. In the meantime there is no regular place for them to sleep.

The makeshift houses are unbearable to look at. They are very, very small for families of seven or nine members. They don't have toilets, no water or electricity. There is no space for chairs or a table. The children with whom we share and live our faith as Columban Sisters live in makeshift houses located in the cemetery grounds on top of tombs or beside the tombs. They have no "house address", so to speak, no living-room, no dining -room, no kitchen, no bedroom. The floor is the ground which could be cemented or covered with hard cardboard.

Two of us have our ministry with the cemetery people. We take care of the children. Sister Julie and I are Columban Sisters and we are from Korea. We have seen the poverty suffered by our people who live in the cemetery. We have prayed for them and we believe that God knows their needs and God will provide what is necessary for them to survive. Last December our prayers were answered. Miraculously we found a house near the cemetery. It is now a learning center for the children and we have named it "Mosaic Center". Mosaic in art means putting small pieces together to create a masterpiece. Our hope is that each of our cemetery children can be a masterpiece of God.

We involved the help of their parents, especially their fathers, to make book shelved for the children. Julie and I helped with painting and the other thousand little things to make the center a comfortable learning place for the children. The signboard “ Mosaic Centre” was done by the children and we put it outside the house.

The children were extremely happy to know that they have a place which they can call their own. A lot of “wow’s, “fantastic” and other superlative in Tagalog were heard the day the Learning Center was opened. They couldn’t believe that they have now a space for themselves.

“Sister, can I sleep here tonight?”

“Sister, can I take a shower here in the Center?”

“Sister, can I read a book?”

“Sister, can I study here instead of going to school?”

The Learning Center has been operating regularly since its opening day in December. It is open every day. There are two shifts; the morning shift and the afternoon shift. The activities we have lined up for them are the following; homework, research, book reading, eating a good meal before going to school, taking a shower and other little concerns of those who come to the Learning Center. Every Saturday we teach the children music and art. We hold catechism class for 70 children every Sunday after the children’s mass in the Parish.

One might think we have a big Center for all these activities. The truth is we only have a small place but we are happy. We appreciate what God has given to us and we are thankful for all the blessings God has showered upon us. We have now a shelter from rain, flood and heat. Before our classroom was among the tombs in the cemetery and we were exposed to all natural elements. Now God’s great love for us, especially for the children, has given a “Bethlehem stable” where little miracles happen each day”.