

PAKISTAN MISSION UNIT NEWSLETTER: JULY 2023

FROM THE COORDINATOR: Liam O'Callaghan

Sindh Housing Project for Flood Affectees

"I have seen many humanitarian disasters in the world, but I have never seen climate carnage on this scale", this is a statement of UN General Secretary, Antonio Guterres on September 10, 2022 as he visited areas worst affected by the unprecedented monsoon flooding. The rain continued relentlessly for over two months - mid June to the end of August; it was the worst monsoon in decades and the Government declared a national emergency with almost five times the normal rainfall in Sindh and Balochistan. The scale of the disaster is almost overwhelming – 33 million people out of a population of about 229 million affected, over 1,700 killed, more than 13,000 injured and damage and economic loss estimated at \$30 billion.

The damage to infrastructure in the affected areas was enormous - 13,115 kilometers of roads damaged, 439 bridges destroyed, crops damaged and destroyed and over 1.1 million livestock lost; according to World Health Organization (WHO), around 8 million flood-affected people needed health assistance, including the provision of essential medical supplies and access to essential health care. But probably the worst reality was the loss of about 2.2 million houses which were either damaged or destroyed, 1.5 million in Sindh alone, leaving many poor people homeless and forced to live in temporary shelters provided by government and NGO agencies. As is often the case, it is the poor who are worst affected as their housing was already very fragile to begin with.



As so many poor people whom we work with were affected by damaged housing, and many left homeless, we set about trying to make a small contribution through a housing project made possible by a donation from Columbians in the Oceania Region, through COAF.

In choosing a house design, we were greatly helped by a construction guide jointly produced by the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) of the Pakistan government which provided scientifically tested guidance on low-cost solutions for Sindh that are flood resistant and compatible with vernacular architecture and indigenous construction techniques.

The Construction Guide aims to provide flood resilient, low cost one room shelters to the most vulnerable families through the use of locally available materials that minimise adverse environmental impacts. The materials – mudbricks, clay, bamboo, timber windows and doors – are all sourced locally, with little or no carbon footprint. It was simply ideal and tailor-made for the situation we found ourselves in.



The location of the housing project is in the Mirpurkhas and Umerkot districts of interior Sindh, which were badly flooded and it took a number of months for life to return to anything approaching normality. The families receiving the housing are from the Parkari Kohli indigenous community, among whom the Columbans have been working since 1983 in different areas of Sindh. As an indigenous and religious minority community, the Parkari Kohli face many issues – poverty, discrimination, lack of security as farm workers for landlords, lack of education opportunities, poor health facilities etc. The recipients are Christian and Hindu.

Building on the first house began on February 1; the weeks prior to this were spent identifying locations and communities effected, undertaking an assessment of the damaged houses and compiling a final list based on the assessment report. Meetings with beneficiaries were held to ensure clarity of the process of demolishing the damaged house and building the new house on that site. Also, locating quality materials to be used - mud bricks, clay, bamboo, timber, a contract with a carpenter for windows and doors, straw and hiring of masons, labourers and carpenters and other support staff.

The work is on-going since then satisfactorily and the target is to complete the 100-house project before the 2023 monsoon rain begin sometime in July, if possible. We are grateful for the generous support of donors, whose generosity is helping the poorest of the poor to re-build their lives again. Pakistan is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to the effects of climate change, extreme weather events such as the flooding of 2022 will most likely occur regularly in the future, but hopefully those 100 families at least will be able live securely in their new homes for many years to come.

I was hanging on my phone on the 10th of March few days after receiving the confirmation of the approval of my missionary visa for Pakistan and although my siblings knew it already I haven't been able to talk to my dad about it. A part of me was still wanted to cling on the present but the deeper truth is I was scared of returning back yet another part of me was ecstatic.

It was in 2017 that I first set foot in Pakistan as a seminarian and in spite of all the setbacks and surprises that I experienced in this land I always feel the pull to be back. I am always attentive to it that it fills my thoughts, sharing with close friends, family members, in wider Columban circle as well as in my conversation with God. I am clearly aware what future would possibly hold which led me to be more trusting to God's divine plan. My First Mission Assignment deepened my understanding of Jesus' call to mission in relation to what the Columban missionaries are doing in Pakistan, in what I am studying in books, in what the whole seminary formation is about and in what my continuing vocation journey is up to.

It is good to be back after four years now as an ordained Columban. To be reconnected with the PMU members and be reoriented to the people and language as well as the cultural, religious, political and economic landscapes of the country, all of these are both refreshing and overwhelming in every sense of the word. Worsening poverty brought about by very high inflation rate, peace and order, security and political instability are still the four main concerns that continue to wreck the lives of the people in the fringes of society.

I have been in a lot of conversation with my dad and he never ceases to amaze me by how he deeply understood the life of a missionary. He is a man of few words yet he seemed to capture the main point and that helps me not to turn back and be forward looking instead. Knowing that my dad and siblings are one with me in prayers brings out confidence in me of every possible event that awaits me in the coming days and years in my missionary journey. With the support and prayers of the Columbans and with the people I met and encounter at different times and places, I am in good shape to seize the day. In one way or another, it helped dissipate my reasonable and unfounded fears that moved me to abandon everything in God's hands and be truly happy to have this rare opportunity to journey especially with Christians in this Islamic and beautiful country.



For sure both present and past missionaries often asked the magic question: Why Pakistan? There might have been tons of articles that elaborate their reasons yet, for me, if there are two words that capture it all, is this whole idea of God's *synkatabasis* and *kenosis*.

According to the UNICEF Report of 2022, Pakistan's population is about 200 million and 45 percent of this is under the age of 18 and 54 percent of young children are at risk of poor development. **Children are always the most vulnerable and could be considered at the receiving end of poverty.** The Parkari Kohli children have always been susceptible to poor living conditions, malnutrition, and various illnesses.



I happen to meet a child named Angelina in one of the villages. She is three years old. She was frail and could not walk when I first gazed on her. There was a sad look in her eyes, a sense of worry and she could not even bring out a sad grin no matter how they try to cheer her up. I asked her if she feels any pain and she gave me that pained nod. It was visibly urgent that she needed medical intervention. She was confined to the hospital for many days and was treated for severe malnutrition. The doctor told us that it was due to severe malnutrition that hinders her growth and her inability to walk. She was enrolled in a government sponsored feeding program and got well. Now she is able to play and she looks way better than she ever was. Many of the children were not as fortunate as Angelina. If you go to the cemeteries in the villages, you'll see plenty of small graves. This recurring situation will linger on as long as they remain poor and deprived of education.

However, unwary of the poverty around them, whenever we visit the villages, you see children coming to meet us with the most thrilled reception. They are the most receptive of all and the most engrossed with the stories in the Gospel. Most of the celebrations of the Eucharist in the villages are flocked by children and they bring out an ever joyful spirit. Their voices resonate in the open space as we sing hymns. In special liturgical celebrations, they always love to be part of the plays and dances. Our children are the most hopeful and persistent of all. A sense of unknowing is bliss I would say for these children who are innocent to the concept of poverty

nor do they realize the poverty around them. For them, what they have is more than good enough and they are living the good life.

Life is getting more and more difficult with the high inflation rate and the extreme weather conditions affecting the livelihood of the peasant farmers and because of this education for their children have always been at the periphery of the priorities for most families since providing food in itself is extremely challenging already. Unlike the Children, we who do realize what lies ahead if this basic right is unmet should be wary. There is a need to foster in communities the value of education and to encourage parents to send their children to school. Thus schools in the villages are crucial to providing access to education which should be affordable for the struggling families.

As the Columbans take on a new parish in the Diocese of Hyderabad, it is our primary interest to look after the welfare of children in the hope of providing quality education. The new parish has about 300 families scattered in around 12 villages. There are six primary schools that are included in the parish which were handed to the care of the Columbans. We consider these integral to the work of mission. We aim to strive to make learning an interesting journey for the future hope of the community. This is not an easy task. There is a lot of work to be done from providing access to good learning facilities and books, training teachers in the villages to practice standard methods of teaching, and getting the parents involve as stakeholders to invest in their children's education no matter how difficult it may be.

Our vision is that children should not end up in the fields working with their parents. The school is where they rightly belong. We envision that many of our Parkari Kohli children whilst being proud of their identity will be able to get out from the vicious cycle of working as enslaved peasant farmers, be skilled in different filled of work, and uplift their community. Only then can the cycle of poverty and all afflictions that come with it be put to an end.



On the 20th May 2023, the Diocese of Karachi completed 75 years of its existence. In the past, Karachi was a part of the Archdiocese of Bombay (Mumbai). With the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Karachi became the Capital with its population of approximately four hundred thousand people. Karachi was also separated from the Archdiocese of Mumbai. Therefore the Diocese of Karachi was erected on 24th May 1948. The Inaugural Mass of the Jubilee Year was celebrated on Pentecost Sunday, 28th May 2023.

Archbishop Benny Travas in his homily emphasized the theme of the Jubilee Year i.e. REFLECT-REJOICE-RENEW and with the chosen biblical verse from Ezekiel 36:26 "A NEW HEART I WILL GIVE YOU AND A NEW SPIRIT I WILL PUT IN YOU."

It is believed that St. Thomas the Apostle passed through the territory of the present Archdiocese on his Journey to South India. At about the beginning of the 17th Century Augustinian Missionaries came on mission in the Sindh Province. On account of the persecution they suffered they had to leave and were succeeded by the Discalced Carmelites who remained till 1672. After the conquest of Sindh by the British in 1842-3, the Carmelites returned to this territory as chaplains to the troops. They remained till 1852 when the Capuchin Fathers took charge. In 1856 the Jesuit priests took over till 1935.

There are about 200,000 Catholics in 16 parishes spread throughout the mega city of Karachi with a population of approximately 18 million souls.

Bishop Benny stated, "God granted the Diocese with a generous heart, welcoming many ethnic groups, Goans Anglo-Indians, South Indians, Sindhis, Punjabis, Mangalorians, Parkari Kholis, and many others. Missionaries, foreign and local, built institutions for the needs of these people - orphans, lepers, physically and mentally challenged, those in need of medical care, those with addictions and so on. The Diocese also tries to provide education and healthcare to the people of Karachi through schools, hospitals, colleges, and clinics.

Throughout the years the Diocese has faced numerous challenges, both internal and external. Political unrest, economic fluctuations and social upheavals. The journey has witnessed significant milestones in fostering interfaith dialogue and ecumenism. Recognizing the importance of religious harmony and peaceful coexistence, the Church actively engaged in dialogue with members of other faith traditions. Through these efforts, bridges were built and mutual understanding was fostered leading to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

St. Patrick's Cathedral is situated in the heart of Karachi and was opened in 1878. Irish soldiers who served in the British Army, contributed generously to the cost of its construction. Recently the Sindh Government refurbished and strengthen this impressive Cathedral.

As the people arrived to enter the compound they had to go through solid security checks so that nothing untoward would happen. Start time was given as 5pm and so Mass started at 05:40pm. The Summer's sun at times, pierced through the clouds. People wiped sweat from

their faces and at times a gentle wind blew in from the Arabian Sea, giving a welcome relief. In the church compound five thousand chairs had been arranged for seating. These soon filled up, yet people continued to pour in resulting in about two thousand who had standing room only. Among the congregation were about seven hundred Parkari Kholi Tribal People. At Christmas 2020, I took up an appointment to be on mission with these people.

Over recent years many of them have come from the Interior Sindh to Karachi in the hope of obtaining work in factories and in the hope of a better future for their children. They have fled from the unjust landlord system where they labored as landless peasant farmers. There are also many that still work as peasant farmers on landlord properties in villages situated to the East of Karachi. They were invited to the Jubilee Mass and given the privilege of praying a prayer in Parkari language, as well as a family involved in the offertory procession, and three young women to present a liturgical graceful movement named "Arti", with its accompanying hymn at the time of the doxology. These three young women left their village and farm work so that a teacher could prepare them well for the "Arti".



The Missionary Sisters of Charity are also on mission with the Parkaris. They visited the villages and had a "hair cutting and bathing day", while the buffaloes and goats looked on. Four buses were arranged for transport of about five hundred people including adults, children and infants who happily piled aboard. The travel to the city of Karachi from the villages was a few hours. For the majority of these people it was the first time that they had seen the bustling city and their eyes "opened wide". "We did not imagine in our minds that there would be such high buildings", they declared.

Before the Our Father prayer the commentator invited the Parkari Kholi Catholic young women from the village to perform the prayerful liturgical "Arti". He explained "Liturgy is diverse. It is glorification of God and sanctification of people. When liturgy meets culture we become one with the soil. It is a welcome to Jesus present in the Eucharist. It also acknowledges the presence of the loving Trinity. The Trinity of love encompasses the people gathered here as well as in all of Creation. God is the source of life, everything is in God's hands and without God there is nothing. Jesus is our teacher and we are His disciples."

During the Mass there appeared like hundreds of hawks circling in the sky. Some soaring high with others are swooping low. People on roofs of nearby buildings had "bird's eye views" of the celebrations. Boys flying kites in the streets added to the Pentecost Spirit as they fluttered

above. A red kite appeared above the altar at the Consecration time. The distribution of Holy Communion coincided with the setting of the sun and also from the loud speaker of a nearby mosque "Allah-O- Akbar" (God is Great) rang out for all to hear. When the drone camera appeared above, a Tribal commented. "I thought it was Jesus coming down." Karachi, "THE CITY OF LIGHTS," then lit up and Mass concluded with fireworks. "We suddenly ducked down as we thought that a bomb had exploded", declared some of the Parkari people. St Patrick's Cathedral and compound had become the "Bright Shining Light of Karachi".

In conclusion Bishop Benny stated, "I invite each and everyone of you during this Diamond Jubilee Year to REFLECT REJOICE AND BE RENEWED" so that truly we may all have a New Heart and a New Spirit."

The local Christians asked the Parkari people. "Where are you from? Are you from the desert area? What are these clothes and many bangles that you wear? What is this language that you speak? Are you Christians? The Tribal women were very surprised when they noticed that many of the city women were not covering their heads with a dupatta. (head cloth). The Karachi people said. Thank you for coming to the Jubilee Mass. We did not know of your existence and so it was a joy for us to pray together." The Parkaris felt a warm welcome and acceptance from the Karachi Catholics and they reflected. "We felt as one with the City Christians, We saw and now we believe that we are not only a few Christians but very many. A local priest commented. " It is historical that with the Tribal people from the villages present for the first time, the Diocese of Karachi was visible in all of its dimensions." This experience captured something of the Spirit of a Church of Synodality that Pope Francis is calling forth with his vision.

It was wonderful that Columban, Joseph Joyce was present, as a week later he retired from mission in Pakistan and returned to Ireland. Joe had been on mission in Pakistan for 30 years. Joe's humble, loving, kind and committed service to the Church and People of Pakistan had also given new Heart and Spirit to those he journeyed with.

The Parkari Kholi people, full of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit, boarded their buses for the return journey to their simple life in the villages. On the way the Army Rangers stopped the bus and checked them over. On looking inside the bus they noticed many hammocks and inquired. "What are these and who are you?" They replied " These hammocks have our babies sleeping in them and we are Christians and have been to celebrate our feast". Some males traveling on the roof of the bus went to sleep and on arrival at the village had to be woken up. The next morning they were back attending their recently opened village school. Then tilling Mother Earth and talking about the wonderful experiences of the previous day which they treasured "WITH A NEW HEART AND A NEW SPIRIT."



People from different places around and outside Badin District continue to come to our TB clinic every Friday. From 2021-2022 a total of 241 TB Patients was admitted. Most of them had completed their treatment and some are still on their medication. Apart from TB patients we had 1,217 Out Patients. These patients are suffering from different ailments. In some cases the doctor had to refer them to big hospitals as far as Karachi City where there are proper facilities suitable to treat

their condition. This year's high inflation, we are experiencing more out-patients coming. The staff in the clinic are trying to accommodate them every Friday but in some cases we can only give what we can especially when they come within the week where we don't have our doctor.



There was a young patient recently with his parents who came from Jhudo, a far village outside Badin District. They arrived in the church compound late afternoon and were advised to go to the nearest government hospital but unfortunately the patient could not be admitted for lack of accommodation even though they waited the whole night. They came back to the church compound and ask if if they can sleep in front of the school; at least they are safe as they claimed. This kind of situations that we face from time to time is disheartening. We can't blame the hospitals for their limitations. The reality is, it is the situation that they are in. The poor continue to remain or become poorer especially with what is happening nowadays. We continue to thank our benefactors that we are able to continue extending help to these people who are deprived due to their social an economic situation.

Last Autumn, as the catechist and I were returning from distributing aid to flood victims we stopped off at a roadside tea shop for a cup of tea. Dusk was falling. The tea shop was at the end of a large courtyard with a fuel service station and a restaurant. As we were drinking the tea, I noticed a man, some distance away, walking across the courtyard towards the restaurant holding his daughter's hand, who looked around 4/5 years old. They were followed by another girl who I presumed was her older sister. Then the man turned around and shouted something to the girl who was following them. This stopped her in her tracks. For a few seconds she seemed to freeze in position mid-step; then she turned and trotted back to where she came from. It was only then I saw the makeshift camps where some flood victims had moved to higher ground on the roadside. She had obviously followed this man and his daughter to beg, or to reach out a fellow young child for friendship, acceptance, or to play? There was something about the way she paused before turning around and accepted her rejection. One little girl safe and secure in the presence of her father, as it should be. Another, reaching out for help, for acceptance, for inclusion but left to live on the side of the road. How difficult it is for us to reach out to the stranger!!

On Christmas morning last year, as dawn was breaking, I set out to celebrate Christmas Day Mass in a few distant villages, I noticed a young boy about 9/10 years old with a large nylon bag on his back. He was on his way to the various municipality sites where rubbish is dumped. He would search through the rubbish hoping to find something that is recyclable. He is one of the many



boys and men who walk the streets of the cities every day in search of rubbish of value to sell to recyclers. They eke out a living from the left overs of a throw-away society. Maybe these are the people of the future, teaching us how to live on little, how not to waste, and how to make the most of the earth's resources.

Two moments in mission; in reality there are many such moments. They happen all the time. So much so that one can stop 'seeing' them. But sometimes their poignancy breaks through. As the poet Seamus Heaney puts it in his poem, 'Postscript'

"And catch the heart off guard and blow it open."

Such mission moments catch the heart off guard and blows it open, and draws it into a little deeper solidarity, more compassion and awe of people who suffer much but continue to strive and live for themselves and their loved ones.

LEAVING ON A JET PLANE: Joe Joyce

In less than a month, I will be leaving Pakistan and going to Ireland to retire. Now that I am 80 years old, this move will most likely be the last one of many in my missionary life. However, I feel ready to take the big step. As I await the day of my departure, I have adequate time to reflect on my missionary history and on the various processes it has involved. One process in particular stands out – that of transition.

Over the past 56 years, since my ordination to the priesthood in 1967, I have been through many transitions. During those years, I lived and worked in a variety of countries and cultures: Peru, Chile, The Philippines, Ireland, The U.S.A., and Pakistan. At the beginning, I didn't understand much about transition and how to deal with it, but later I found a formula that was most helpful, and still is. It came from an article written in 1986 by an American Maryknoll priest, Jack Sullivan, M.M., who was serving in Hong Kong. It was called "Reentry Revisited," and referred to a three-stage process of transition. I would like to share some of the insights I got from it.

The process referred to is simple in words but profound in practice. It concerns the stages of letting go, letting be, and letting begin. I have moved through these stages so many times over the years, and now I am about to do so again.

I worked in Lahore for about 25 years, and then came to Karachi seven years ago. This was a major transition, and it involved a lot of "letting go." I had to leave house, friends, fulfilling work, and the greenery of Punjab. However, there was no choice, because we were ending our contract in Lahore and everyone else had gone south to Sindh.

When I arrived in Karachi, I felt very much a stranger, and didn't know what I was going to do, or with whom. My companions told me that I need not worry, because, in my role as spiritual director I would be quickly sought by many people, especially in seminaries and religious communities. They were correct, of course, but initially for me, this was a period of "letting be" and waiting to see what would emerge. Our Columban group was committed to the Diocese of Hyderabad, so that is where I 'belonged.' However, I was to reside in the Archdiocese of Karachi and take care of our rest residence there. That gave me time to get accustomed to my new surroundings.

Our residence was a rented apartment from the Franciscans, and they showed me all kinds of hospitality and kindness. I shared in their Masses, and they invited me to meals, and to their community celebrations as well. I enjoyed very much 'being' with them. Then they asked me to teach some of their seminarians, and to be available for spiritual direction. Before long, the "let begin" stage of my transition was well under way, and it advanced even further when the Bishops' Conference of Pakistan appointed me to be spiritual director of the Major Seminary, and the rector of the Minor Seminary invited me to teach and give spiritual direction there. With that the cycle of let go, let be and let begin was completed.

Now, I am facing a new cycle of the same process, and this time it will be to "let go" of Pakistan in general, and Karachi in particular. My life in this country and in this city has been most fulfilling,

because it is here that I have come to maturity in a ministry that has given the most meaning to my life, namely spiritual direction. Letting go will not be easy. However, when I have gone through my letting go, and then when I get to Ireland, I feel that I will be well ready to “let be” my new life, and “let begin” whatever emerges there over time, though as yet I don’t know what that will mean for me. Already I have begun to prepare for the transition.



My best preparation for what is to come is a spiritual one, in which I am following the pattern of a scripture passage from Philippians 2:5-11 where St. Paul describes the stages that Jesus passed through. He let go of being like God and let himself be human, and thus let begin his journey among us. Then he let go of his human life, and let his suffering and death be, and let begin his return to the Father. Finally he let go of death and let his resurrection be, thus letting begin his new life of glory and honor with the Father. I feel that this text is helping me to join with Christ as I pass through my own letting go, letting be, and letting begin, and I’m quite sure that this, my latest transition, will be a successful one.