Reflections from Pre-COP31

At high-level meetings such as Pre-COP31, it can be easy to feel disconnected from the conversations taking place, particularly when one is representing a faith-based voice in spaces often dominated by policy, diplomacy and technical discussions. I attended the Pre-COP31 Stakeholder Programme in Nadi as the JPIC Coordinator representing the Columban Missionary Society. Throughout the experience, I was reminded that my presence in these spaces was not simply as an individual, but also as someone carrying the *mana* of the people and communities with whom we work.



Caption: Noa (JPIC Coordinator) with youth participants at the Pre-COP31 Stakeholder gathering in Nadi. These two ladies also do work in biodiversity, as part of the Locally-Managed Marine Areas (LMMA) Network.

The week opened with students from Mount St Mary's Primary School performing *Tagi*, the lament for climate change, composed and directed by Archbishop Peter Loy Chong. With few dry eyes in the room the lament called us to confront a painful truth: **we are the ones drowning, we are the ones crying, and we are the ones suffering.** It challenged the dominant narrative of Pacific resilience, reminding us that we must also acknowledge our vulnerability and the injustice inflicted upon our communities by the continued dependence on fossil fuels and the inaction of major emitting states.



Caption: Archbishop Peter Loy Chong reinforces that stories, not only of Pacific resilience, but also vulnerability must be heard. Because the Pacific islands, and her people are suffering the most.

We cannot speak of resilience without acknowledging the forces that make it necessary. The continued dependence on fossil fuels and the inadequate action of major emitting states represent an ongoing injustice against Pacific communities. This opening experience reminded me that our suffering must be heard, acknowledged and taken seriously.

Discussions involving former Kiribati President Anote Tong and Reverend James Bhagwan of the Pacific Conference of Churches reinforced that climate change is not merely an environmental issue, but a moral and human rights crisis. They also reminded faith-based organisations of our responsibility to move beyond institutional walls, accompany affected communities and connect listening with advocacy and accountability. I left these conversations reassured that **we belong in these spaces**, carrying the voices of those who are too often absent from the decision-making table.



Caption: We must listen to communities first, act on what they share, and let our prophetic voice come last, when needed. Moving beyond awareness, to listening and accompaniment.

The "Faith in Action" side event, featuring Reverend Faaimata Havea of the Uniting Church in Australia (NSW/ACT), was another highlight of the programme. The discussion explored the work of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change (ARRCC), a network of which the Columbans are part, in praying and standing in solidarity with Pacific Island communities. It was one of the few sessions where I felt a strong sense of belonging. My key takeaway was that we must listen to communities first, act on what they share, and let our prophetic voice come last, when needed. This reinforced the importance of accompaniment, humility and action grounded in the lived experiences of the people we serve.

My week came full circle on 9 October when I returned to Mount St Mary's Primary School, accompanied by Columban Lay Missionary Sainiana Tamatawale, to deliver a *Laudato Si'* session. The same students who had opened my week at pre-COP31 were now the people with whom I shared its message.





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This was a powerful reminder that conversations in conference rooms only matter when they reach the communities and young people whose futures are at stake. **If the message does not reach our communities and our young people, then who are we doing this for?**

I return with a renewed conviction that meaningful change requires solidarity, collaboration and genuine accompaniment. We must carry community voices into decision-making spaces—and ensure that what happens in those spaces finds its way back to the people we serve.